MEMORANDUM

To: Superintendents, Principals, Administrators of Special Education, Test Coordinators, and Other Interested Educators

From: Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

Date: November 2, 2018

Subject: Important information about the MCAS Alternate Assessment (MCAS-Alt) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

This memo updates the important information and resources originally posted in March 2017 that will help districts make decisions about assessment of students with disabilities in light of the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which went into effect in the 2017-2018 school year. Thank you in advance for carefully reviewing the materials attached to this memo, as well as the information presented below.

ESSA and Alternate Assessments

ESSA states in part that

a State may provide for alternate assessments aligned with the challenging State academic standards and alternate academic achievement standards...for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, if the State...ensures that, for each subject, the total number of students assessed in such subject using the alternate assessments does not exceed one percent of the total number of all students in the State who are assessed in such subject.

ESSA also requires that parents/guardians of students with disabilities who take alternate assessments be clearly informed as part of the IEP process that

- their child's academic achievement will be measured based on "alternate achievement standards;" and
- participation in an alternate assessment may delay or otherwise affect their child's completion of the requirements for a diploma

ESSA also requires that districts address any disproportionality of students in any subgroup taking the alternate assessment, per 34 CFR 200.6(c)(4)(iii)(B)

To assist districts in administering the MCAS-Alt appropriately and effectively to students with significant disabilities, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) has attached the following materials:
• guidance and a decision-making tool for assigning students to take alternate assessments where appropriate
• data on 2017 and 2018 MCAS-Alt participation in each district, including the number and percent of students in all grades, and in each subject
• a sample parent notification letter that may be copied onto school or district letterhead that must be sent to parents of students taking the MCAS-Alt
• a training presentation that can be used to train IEP teams on an annual basis

Determining Which Students Should Be Alternately Assessed

It is the Department's goal to provide as many students as possible with an opportunity to learn (and be assessed on) grade-level curriculum and to ensure that students with disabilities in high school are not deprived of the opportunity to earn a diploma.

While we affirm the authority of IEP teams to act without undue external influence to make final determinations about how (not whether) students with disabilities should be tested, it is reasonable to assume that some students who were designated for the MCAS-Alt in the past may be more suited to either

• taking the standard next-generation MCAS test, either with or without accommodations, now that new accessibility features and accommodations are available; or
• preparing a "grade-level" or "competency" portfolio designed for students with significant disabilities who are performing at or near grade-level expectations but are unable to demonstrate knowledge and skills on a paper- or computer-based test. (Note: Additional details on these assessment options are available in the attachments.)

The Department is not asking IEP teams to "take students off the alternate assessment" in order to meet the one percent statewide requirement. Nonetheless, the one percent ESSA cap is an opportunity to revisit decisions for assigning students to the basic MCAS-Alt who may be able to access either the standard assessments with accommodations or submit a "grade-level" or "competency" portfolio.

Annual Training for IEP Teams

• the requirement to notify, during IEP team meetings, parents/guardians of any student in grade 4 or higher who will be taking the MCAS-Alt that participation in an alternate assessment may affect the student's eventual ability to earn a Competency Determination (CD) and receive a high school diploma

Request for District Calculation of MCAS-Alt Participation

Districts should examine the data provided as an attachment to this memo and anticipate the percentage of students that will be designated by IEP teams in their district to take the MCAS-Alt in the current school year. Note: "Grade-level" and "competency" portfolios do not count in the district's total of students who take alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards.

If a district anticipates that it will administer the MCAS-Alt in a given school year to more than one percent of students who will participate in MCAS, I am requesting that the district provide the following assurances:
- IEP teams will receive the annual training described above.
- The district will collect, disaggregate, and review the MCAS-Alt participation rates for students within the following subgroups: male, female, English learners (ELs), African-American, White, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and economically disadvantaged. Districts are encouraged to review the available data found in the attachment to this memo and in the Department's School and District Profiles. If the district determines that disproportionality exists, the district must develop a plan that includes professional development for staff who make decisions during IEP team meetings regarding assessment participation for students with significant cognitive disabilities.
- Students who take the MCAS-Alt will continue to receive instruction in the general curriculum beyond what is necessary to collect materials and data for the student's MCAS-Alt.
- Students with significant disabilities who are performing at or near grade-level expectations, but who are unable to demonstrate knowledge and skills on a paper- or computer-based test, even with accommodations, will be considered for a "grade-level" or "competency" portfolio.

If you have additional questions about the MCAS-Alt, or about statewide assessment for students with disabilities, please contact Student Assessment by email or phone at 781-338-3625. Thank you very much for your attention to this matter.