



## **Report to the Legislature: Audio-Digital MCAS Pilot Program**

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7061-0012  
November 2008



This document was prepared by the  
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Commissioner

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Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.  
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# Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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November 17, 2008

Dear Members of the General Court:

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education respectfully submits this Final Report on the Audio-Digital MCAS Pilot Program pursuant to Chapter 182 of the Acts of 2008, line item 7061-0012 addressing the following:

*“... the continuation of a pilot program for Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic to provide the tenth grade math and English language arts MCAS tests in audio digital format; provided further, that no funds shall be expended for the MCAS pilot program until the department of education examines all security issues related to the pilot program and certifies to the legislature that the pilot program may be carried out without jeopardizing the security of the MCAS exams...”*

The Department and Recording For the Blind & Dyslexic (RFB&D) have collaborated to provide audio-digital read-aloud editions of the Grade 10 English Language Arts and Mathematics MCAS tests for a small number of students with disabilities such as dyslexia and/or vision impairments who use this technology routinely and whose IEP or 504 teams feel it is the most appropriate assessment method.

The Department certifies that the RFB&D audio-digital format MCAS test project will be carried out without jeopardizing the security of the MCAS tests. All materials used in production and post-production, including the recording laptop hard-drive(s), desktop duplication system, and actual print copies of the test, remained in a secure location at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; no test materials remained at RFB&D's studio. The Department continues to provide oversight during all phases of this project and will make its curriculum specialists available, as before, to answer questions that arise during production.

Provided the funding for this project continues to be available, the Department will work with RFB&D to explore opportunities to increase awareness of this testing option for students with disabilities. The Department will monitor test results to determine trends in student performance as a result of using the RFB&D edition of MCAS tests.

Sincerely,

Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.  
Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Pursuant to Chapter 61 of the Acts of 2008, Section 2, line-item 7061-0012, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education respectfully submits this Final Report on the Audio-Digital MCAS Pilot Program addressing the following:

*“not less than \$25,000 shall be expended for the continuation of a pilot program for Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic to provide the tenth grade math and English language arts MCAS tests in audio digital format; provided further, that no funds shall be expended for the MCAS pilot program until the department of education examines all security issues related to the pilot program and certifies to the legislature that the pilot program may be carried out without jeopardizing the security of the MCAS exams; provided further, that the report shall be completed not later than November 15, 2008 and shall be forwarded to the house and senate chairpersons of the joint committee on education and the chairpersons of the house and senate committees on ways and means.”*

## **BACKGROUND**

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, in conjunction with Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic (RFB&D), developed audio-digital compact disc (CD) versions of the grade 10 MCAS English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics tests for use with RFB&D’s “books on CD” specialized software and players. These recordings are intended for use by students with disabilities who regularly access curriculum using RFB&D technology and who require this format in order to participate in the MCAS tests, as determined by their Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 team. Use of RFB&D editions of the grade 10 tests is an allowable test accommodation when specified in a student’s IEP or 504 plan.

The FY 2008 program to produce these tests was continued from the FY 2006 pilot and FY 2007 operational test, based on \$25,000 allocated for this purpose in line item 7061-0012 of the FY 2008 budget. Implementation of this project was contingent upon RFB&D’s ability and willingness to meet all requirements for maintaining test security and a high level of production quality during all phases of development, production, and distribution.

The Department has made schools and districts aware of the availability of grade 10 MCAS tests in RFB&D format through its publication entitled *Requirements for the Participation of Students with Disabilities in MCAS*, which is updated and mailed to Massachusetts schools annually, and in its annual Online MCAS Enrollment Survey, which school principals use to request all test materials.

## **SECURITY ASSURANCES FOR THE PRODUCTION OF GRADE 10 RFB&D MCAS TESTS**

In accordance with the provisions in line item 7061-0012, the Department certifies that the RFB&D audio-digital format MCAS test project will be carried out without jeopardizing the security of the MCAS tests. All materials used in production and post-production, including the recording laptop hard-drive(s), desktop duplication system, and actual print copies of the test, remained in a secure location at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; no test materials remained at RFB&D’s studio. In 2008, each RFB&D staff person and RFB&D volunteer reader signed a Non-Disclosure Agreement certifying that secure test materials would not be released, duplicated,

discussed, or distributed to unauthorized persons. RFB&D also provided information to the Department regarding the qualifications of staff and volunteers to ensure that no person with a connection to a Massachusetts school would be involved. The Department continues to provide oversight during all phases of this project and will make its curriculum specialists available, as before, to answer questions that arise during production. Actual recording of spring 2009 grade 10 ELA and mathematics tests will be scheduled for January 2009 at the RFB&D's recording studio in Cambridge, contingent upon RFB&D's assurance that test security measures will again be met.

#### **PLANS FOR PRODUCTION OF 2009 MCAS TESTS IN RFB&D AUDIO-DIGITAL FORMAT**

The Department will produce CD editions of the spring 2009 grade 10 ELA and mathematics MCAS tests and will distribute these in March and May 2009 to schools that have requested them. Recording of each test will occur in January 2009, with reproduction of CDs for schools in early February. Schools will be required to place their orders for RFB&D MCAS tests by late January 2009.

In 2009, the Department will base its production of RFB&D CDs on the *actual* number of requests from schools, rather than on RFB&D's estimates, due to the large disparity between estimates and actual requests in the first two years of the project. Still, in 2006, 2007 and 2008 the number of students who actually used these tests fell short of even the number requested. The Department has requested that RFB&D staff research the possible reasons why actual use falls short of requests, and why requests fall short of RFB&D's estimates.

#### **SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF SPRING 2008 GRADE 10 MCAS TESTS IN RFB&D AUDIO-DIGITAL FORMAT**

Recording of spring 2008 grade 10 ELA and mathematics tests occurred on January 22 and 23, 2008 at the RFB&D recording studio in Cambridge, MA. Duplication, labeling, packaging, and shipping of CDs to Measured Progress, the state's test contractor, occurred on February 6, 2008 at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

RFB&D had estimated that tests would be ordered for approximately 100 students. Therefore, 100 copies of each spring 2008 grade 10 test were produced in the RFB&D audio-digital format. Estimates were based on RFB&D's familiarity and experience with the Massachusetts student population currently served by their products.

The decision as to whether or not a student would take the test(s) using the RFB&D accommodation was made locally by his or her IEP or 504 team, as required by federal law. As in past years, this student population primarily included students with learning disabilities and a few students with vision impairments.

Table 1 shows the total number of grade 10 students in spring 2006, spring 2007, and spring 2008 who took the RFB&D edition of the grade 10 tests. Our data indicate a decrease in the use of the RFB&D audio-digital format and show that the number of students using the RFB&D edition of the tests is significantly lower than the estimates provided by RFB&D.

Table 1: RFB&D Format Test Usage in Spring 2006, Spring 2007, and Spring 2008

| MCAS Test (RFB&D)         | Number Used<br>(2006) | Number Used<br>(2007) | Number Used<br>(2008) |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| ELA Reading Comprehension | 15                    | 20                    | 16                    |
| ELA Composition           | 1                     | 30                    | 7                     |
| Mathematics               | 9                     | 13                    | 10                    |

Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Student Assessment Services

Table 2 compares the number of RFB&D format tests produced with the number ordered by schools and the number actually used by students.

Table 2: Spring 2008 MCAS RFB&D Format Test Production Compared to Usage

| MCAS Test (RFB&D)         | Number Produced | Number<br>Ordered by<br>Schools | Number Used |
|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| ELA Reading Comprehension | 100             | 47                              | 16          |
| ELA Composition           | 100             | 47                              | 7           |
| Mathematics               | 100             | 46                              | 10          |

Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Student Assessment Services

### **PRODUCTION COSTS FOR THE RFB&D FORMAT**

Total costs to produce and distribute the 2008 grade 10 RFB&D format tests were \$8,334.64. Accordingly, the RFB&D FY 2008 contract was amended to reflect actual costs, rather than the budgeted amount of \$25,000.00. The Department will continue to closely monitor expenditures for this purpose in the FY 2009 budget.

The Department has evaluated the cost-per-student for RFB&D tests compared with another test option, Kurzweil 3000 text reader software, which also provides the student with an electronic read-aloud option. While Kurzweil software is more costly to purchase than the RFB&D player, Kurzweil software features a range of applications including an onscreen, highlighted edition of the print test as it is read aloud to the student with a customized “electronic” voice. RFB&D, by comparison, provides audio only, as recorded in a studio by a volunteer human reader, and the student must follow along with the audio edition using a standard print edition of the test. Note: Kurzweil editions of MCAS tests have been produced annually since 2002 and are made available in all subjects and grade levels to Massachusetts students. Approximately 275 students with disabilities take the Kurzweil format MCAS tests each year. The nature of a student’s disability, and his or her personal preference and learning profile, will dictate which electronic text reader, if any, his or her IEP or 504 team selects for the student’s test participation.

The following is a comparison of the cost-per-student for the RFB&D edition and the Kurzweil edition MCAS tests, based on production costs and the number of students who used each format in spring 2008:

RFB&D edition MCAS test, played by the student using a pre-purchased proprietary RFB&D CD player (VictorReader) with headphones : \$252.00 per student  
Kurzweil edition MCAS test, viewed on a personal computer (not including approximate \$2700.00 cost of Kurzweil 3000 software purchased by the school): \$15.77 per student (based primarily on CD reproduction costs)

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The Department and RFB&D have collaborated to provide audio-digital read-aloud editions of the Grade 10 English Language Arts and Mathematics MCAS tests for a small number of students with disabilities such as dyslexia and/or vision impairments who use this technology routinely and whose IEP or 504 teams feel it is the most appropriate assessment method. Most students who require the read-aloud accommodation, however, appear to be accessing these tests in other ways, either through human readers or through the Kurzweil 3000 software that permits the student to view the test onscreen while it is read aloud electronically.

Provided the funding for this project continues to be available, the Department will work with RFB&D to explore opportunities to increase awareness of this testing option for students with disabilities. The Department will monitor test results to determine trends in student performance as a result of using the RFB&D edition of MCAS tests.

## APPENDIX

### Chapter 61 of the Acts of 2007

**7061-0012** For the reimbursement of extraordinary special education costs under section 5A of chapter 71B of the General Laws; provided, that reimbursements shall be prorated so that expenses of this item do not exceed the amount appropriated in this item; provided further, that upon receipt by the department of education of required special education cost reports from school districts, the department shall reimburse districts based on fiscal year 2007 claims; provided further, that not more than \$9,250,000 shall be used to continue and expand voluntary residential placement prevention programs between the department of education and other departments within the executive office of health and human services that develop community-based support services for children and their families; provided further, that of this \$9,250,000, not less than \$8,000,000 shall be made available to the department of mental retardation for the voluntary residential placement prevention program administered by that department; provided further, that \$800,000 shall be expended for Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic to provide books in accessible synthetic audio format made available through the federal NIMAS-NIMAC book repository, to do outreach and training of teachers and students for the use of NIMAS-NIMAC and human speech audio digital textbooks, and for human voice recording of MCAS exams; provided further, that, of this \$800,000 \$285,000 shall be expended for the costs of borrowing audio textbooks by special education students; provided further, that \$200,000 of said \$800,000 shall be targeted toward underserved communities in Barnstable, Bristol and Plymouth counties; provided further, that of this \$800,000, not less than **\$25,000** shall be expended for the continuation of a pilot program for Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic to provide the tenth grade math and English language arts MCAS tests in audio digital format; provided further, that no funds shall be expended for the MCAS pilot program until the department of education examines all security issues related to the pilot program and certifies to the legislature that the pilot program may be carried out without jeopardizing the security of the MCAS exams; provided further, that the report shall be completed not later than November 15, 2007 and shall be forwarded to the house and senate chairpersons of the joint committee on education and the chairpersons of the house and senate committees on ways and means; provided further, that \$300,000 shall be expended for the continued funding of the costs of 3 incentive start-up grants to educational collaboratives to provide partial funding for transportation coordination, administrative support, software updates, maintenance and training; provided further, that the funding shall be expended for the purpose of implementing a pilot program to demonstrate that transportation of students to out-of-district special education placements can be accomplished at a lower cost and with improved quality of service by delegating the planning and contracting for such transportation to education collaboratives which would be responsible for the transportation of students to all out-of-district programs located within the pilot program collaborative catchment area; provided further, that \$300,000 shall be expended for the start-up costs for no more than six inter-collaborative transportation networks to provide funding for transportation coordination, administrative support, software upgrades, maintenance and training; provided further that the funding shall be expended for the purpose of replicating the pilot program model of delegating the planning and contracting for student transportation to educational collaboratives for the transportation of students to all out-of-districts programs located

within the transportation network catchment area; provided further that the special education transportation task force shall submit a report, detailing the reduction in routes, vendors, and savings for participating districts and also a cost model for regions served by the collaborative network, by June 30, 2008 to the Joint Committee on Education, and the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means; provided further, that not more than \$1,000,000 shall be expended for the monitoring and follow-up activities of the department's complaint management system, review and approval of local educational agency applications, and local school districts' compliance with the part B requirements of the federal Special Education Law, known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, in the provision of special education and related services to children with disabilities; provided further, that these monitoring activities shall occur in each school district in cycles of not less than 3 years; provided further, that in order to facilitate such monitoring, the department may allocate funds from this item to item 7061- 0029, as necessary, pursuant to allocation plans submitted to the house and senate committees on ways and means 30 days prior to any transfer; provided further, that not more than \$500,000 shall be expended to administer the reimbursements funded herein; provided further, that notwithstanding said section 5A of said chapter 71B, the department, at the discretion of the commissioner, may expend up to \$5,000,000 to reimburse districts for extraordinary increases in costs incurred during fiscal year 2008 which would be reimbursable under said section 5A of said chapter 71B; provided further, that reimbursements for current year costs shall be limited to school districts which experience increases of greater than 25 per cent from costs reimbursable under said section 5A of said chapter 71B and incurred during fiscal year 2007 to costs reimbursable under said section 5A of said chapter 71B and incurred during fiscal year 2008 or other cases of extraordinary hardship where special education costs increase in relationship to total district costs as the department may define through regulation or guidelines; provided further, that reimbursements for current year costs shall be allocated as one-time grants and shall not decrease reimbursements in the following fiscal year; provided further, that the department shall conduct audits of fiscal year 2007 claims; provided further, that if the claims are found to be inaccurate, the department shall recalculate the fiscal year 2008 reimbursement amount and adjust the third and fourth quarter payments to the districts to reflect the new reimbursement amount; and provided further, that the department shall file a report with the house and senate committees on ways and means not later than February 15, 2008 on the results of the audits

..... \$220,000,000