

A View from the Bottom: What Happens When Your School System Ranks Last?

When the superintendent of the Lawrence Public Schools decreed that test scores must be raised, the district added two time-consuming test-preparation programs to the curriculum. Mr. Vogler and Mr. Kennedy recall the difficult choices that their school had to make in order to accommodate the additions to an already-crowded schedule.

BY KENNETH E. VOGLER AND ROBERT J. KENNEDY, JR.

WITH FEAR, apprehension, and foreboding, we opened our morning papers. Were they in there? Sure enough, the test results were right on the front page. As we quickly scanned the results for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) for 2000, our fears were confirmed. Once again, our school system was ranked last in the state, the third year in a row.

Today, one of the most controversial issues in public education is the use of standardized tests as the focal point of state accountability programs, specifically, the use of state-mandated, high-stakes tests. The most vocal opposition to such testing programs has focused not so much on the tests themselves but on the "high stakes" attached to the outcomes. These high stakes sometimes involve incentives, such as cash awards to schools or individual teachers whose students demonstrate high levels of performance. But they have also taken the form of the public reporting of test results, the prevention of grade-to-grade promotion and high school graduation, and the possible takeover of schools that continue to demonstrate low levels of student performance.

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Although the debate surrounding high-stakes testing programs continues, the reality for most public school administrators, teachers, parents, and students is that the tests are here, they do count, in some cases students must pass them to graduate, and in almost all cases the quality of a school system will be judged by how well students perform on the tests. In public school systems where students perform well, the results will be taken as "proof" that the schools are providing a high-quality education. But what happens to a public school system in which the students don't perform well on these tests? Are these schools *not* providing a high-quality education? What is a poor-performing school system to do?

As a teacher and a former teacher in the Lawrence (Mass.) Public Schools, we have the dubious distinction of having been part of a school system that ranked either last or second to last in terms of student performance on the MCAS in every year since the test scores were reported to the public. But before we discuss the programs implemented to improve the students' MCAS scores, we'd like to offer some background on the community, the student population, and the Lawrence public school system.

- Although there is a strong regional economy, Lawrence is the 23rd-poorest community in the country with a population of more than 50,000. Its unemployment rate in 2001 was 8.8%.

- The most recent waves of immigrants to the city are from the Caribbean, Central and South America, and South-east Asia.

- Forty-three percent of adults in Lawrence did not finish high school.

- Eighty percent of parents in Lawrence identify a language other than English as the primary language used in their homes.

- The pre-K-12 student population of 12,562 is 86% minority (primarily Latino); the district has the highest percentage of Latino students in the state.

- Seventy-seven percent of the students enrolled in the

Lawrence Public Schools live below the federal poverty level.

- About one-third of the students receive some form of federal assistance.

- Almost one-third of the students drop out.

- The Lawrence Public Schools have had five superintendents in the last eight years

(two were interim).

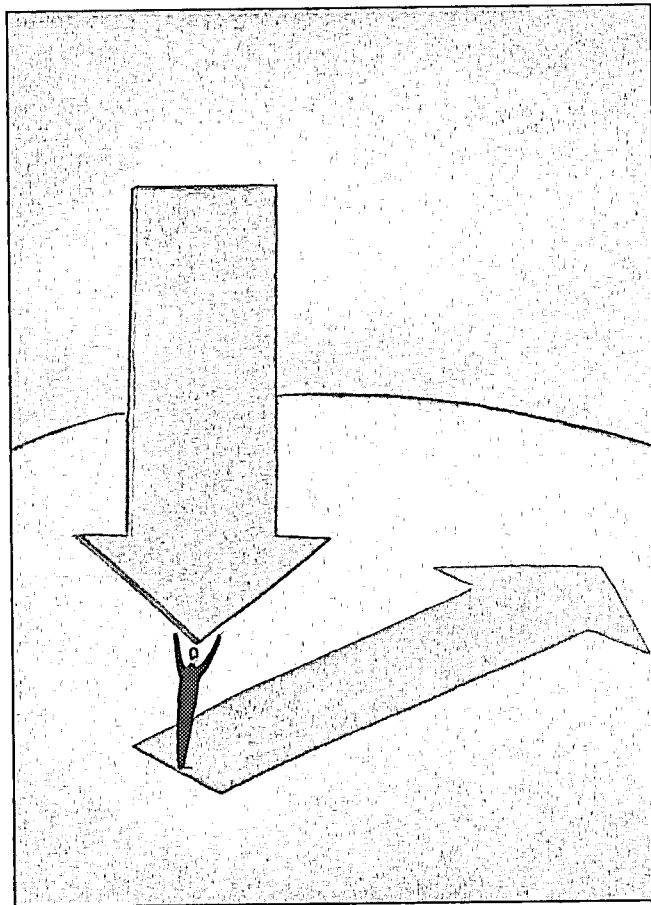
- Lawrence has the only nonaccredited public high school in Massachusetts.

Our current superintendent, a former administrator in the New York City schools, is quite familiar with high-stakes testing programs (the Regents Examinations). He reasoned that, because of the high stakes attached to the test results — especially high school graduation — and because of the public perception that the quality of a school system can be judged by MCAS scores, the district's scores had to be raised and raised rapidly.

The public schools in Lawrence, like those in many other school systems in Massachusetts, were already us-

ing MCAS test-preparation materials as part of the curriculum. Two series of MCAS-preparation workbooks, titled *Sharpen Up* and *Soaring Scores*, offer a collection of short lessons based on the topics and subtopics listed in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for each subject and grade level tested. They constitute a sort of "Cliff Notes" for the MCAS. Last year, the typical teacher spent at least part of the 25 to 35 days just prior to the administration of MCAS teaching lessons contained in both series of workbooks.

In an effort to help meet the superintendent's goal of rapid improvement in MCAS scores, in December 2000 two additional programs were mandated by the central office and added to the curriculum of all Lawrence schools: Literacy Enhancement Test Sophistication (LETS) and Numeracy Enhancement Test Sophistication (NETS). As the names imply, both the LETS and NETS programs are essentially MCAS-preparation courses. Each contains 15 weeks of scripted lessons to be taught to students in grades 3, 4,



6, 7, 8, and 10 just prior to the spring administration of the MCAS exam. The LETS program uses past MCAS English language arts exams and is to be taught for 45 minutes to an hour, five days a week. The NETS program uses past MCAS mathematics examinations and is to be taught for 45 minutes to an hour, three days a week.

Whereas *Sharpen Up* and *Soaring Scores* focus on the content tested, the LETS and NETS programs focus on the test-taking skills required to be successful on MCAS. In a typical LETS lesson, a reading selection is passed out to the students (e.g., a passage from "A Rose for Miss Emily," by William Faulkner). The students are told the title of the selection, the author, the focus of the lesson, and that the selection is from a previous MCAS examination. The first lesson of the LETS program deals with previewing, predicting, and activating prior knowledge, so the teacher reads the selection to the students and then asks a series of scripted questions about it. The lesson concludes when the students answer a number of multiple-choice questions and an open-response question about the reading selection. A scoring rubric for the open-response question is included with the materials.

The NETS program follows a similar format. Each NETS lesson is broken down into "days," and each day covers a particular math concept (e.g., mean and median). The students are given a number of problems, and the teacher, following a script, asks a series of questions about the problems and ways to solve them. Each NETS lesson concludes with a "checkup" section consisting of both open-response and multiple-choice questions.

According to the superintendent, the LETS and NETS programs were not supposed to interfere with any other existing academic programs, and the decision on when the programs would be taught was left up to building principals. The principal of our K-8 school left the decision up to the individual teachers of the elementary grades and to the grade-level teams in grades 6, 7, and 8. However, the principal did establish one criterion: the LETS and NETS programs would not be allowed to interfere with such courses as music and art, because the annual exhibitions and performances generated by these courses helped forge connections with the community.

Each sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade team includes four teachers — one each from English, mathematics, sci-

ence, and social studies. In addition to teaching a section of his or her certified content area, each of these teachers also teaches one section of reading. The teaching of reading is very important because most of our students speak English as a second language.

The problem for our eighth-grade team, as well as for the sixth- and seventh-grade teams, was how to fit approximately six hours a week of LETS and NETS into an already-packed academic schedule and still not interfere

with elective courses. After much discussion, we came up with three possible solutions. First, we could shorten the five core subjects — English, mathematics, science, social studies, and reading — to 30 minutes a day. Second, we could create a "drop schedule," eliminating one core subject each day or each

week; then we could shorten the remaining four core subjects to approximately 40 minutes each day. Third, we could eliminate one core subject — reading — for the 15 weeks and shorten the four remaining core subjects to approximately 43 minutes a day. We chose the last option.

As you might imagine, eliminating the reading class, especially since most of our students speak English as a second language, was a very difficult decision to make. But it was the only way we could teach the test-preparation materials and continue to teach English, mathematics, science, and social studies every day for long enough to "cover" all the topics and subtopics listed in each Massachusetts Curriculum Framework. (There is no MCAS exam or curriculum framework in reading.) In short, we tried to make the best of a bad bargain.

The Lawrence Public Schools might not have created and implemented the LETS and NETS test-preparation programs had the system not been ranked last in the state. But in today's climate of standards and accountability, the reality is that the results of a single high-stakes test determine student promotion, retention, and high school graduation. The public also uses these tests to judge school systems and communities. The pressure is great, and few options are left for a community with low test scores. For Lawrence, there seemed to be no choice but to implement the two additional test-prep programs, regardless of their impact on the rest of the curriculum. Unfortunately, such "test sophistication" programs are becoming more and more common, and implementing them always comes at some cost.

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WN: 0303201226006

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