MCAS offers new gauge of a student's progress

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Thursday, November 12, 2009

For nearly 10 years, school officials, teachers and parents have repeatedly voiced a particular reservation about the Massachusetts Comprehension Assessment System test: it doesn't measure how individual students progress over time.

Every spring MCAS tests students in math and English. Their results are kept on file and factored into school improvement plans that provide action steps to strengthen class instruction, curriculum and test scores.

But there is one big problem: this year's fourth-grade students are not the same fourth-grade students who took the test last year. In other words, the needs of one class do not necessarily fit the needs of incoming classes.

"Right now you can't really compare scores from year to year," said Allison Rebello, principal for White Brook Middle School in Easthampton.

Released to the public last week, a new growth model compares each individual student's progress on MCAS to that of other students with similar past performance, creating a greater, big-picture understanding of student education. Officials say looking at the data this way will allow schools to determine whether a student's learning has accelerated between one year and the next, and by how much.

The method is expected to point districts and schools to why results differ for certain groups of students. David Olsson, an education data engineer, said he hopes the data will eventually uncover what does or doesn't engage students, including school programs, technology advances and outside experiences.

It should give a sense of whether students learned at a typical pace with their academic peers, or if something unusual engaged them and stimulated their learning, he said. On the other hand, it also unveils factors that might slow a student's academic growth.

The model "adds a lot more power to look at how well we're serving each kid," said Bill Dornbusch, technology director for Northampton schools.

"This gauges where they were academically the last couple of years instead of gauging them to an absolute set of criteria," said Olsson, who works for the Center for Education Data Use at Hampshire Educational Collaborative. The collaborative assists member schools in fulfilling the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks through the use of technology.

Olsson analyzes the growth data with two dozen school districts, including Hadley, Easthampton, Northampton, Amherst and Hatfield.

The model, he said, "is probably a better measurement of how schools do their work than the MCAS test itself."

Each student is compared to students across the state with similar MCAS test score histories. The

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median growth is 50 percent, and typical student growth ranges from 40 to 60 percent, according to the Department of Education.

"It's going to give us more information about our students who might not be at the proficient level," said Rebello, who taught teachers about the model in a professional development workshop at the school Tuesday.

"We know they're not proficient in meeting the standards, but are they making progress toward the proficient level or are they just staying the same?"

In the coming year, Olsson speculates that some potential conclusions might be drawn from the new way of interpreting the MCAS numbers.

"You may hope you see a relationship between scores and a new math program and find in fact there wasn't any change," Olsson said. "It's going to make a difference in how people teach in the coming years."

At White Brook Tuesday, Easthampton teachers discussed why academic growth might be slower in fifth grade than other middle school grades. Teachers wondered if it was due to fifth-grade student transitions from elementary school to the middle school or due to a large amount of progress in the fourth grade that leveled off growth in the fifth grade, Rebello said.

"Teachers wanted more information from the growth model," Rebello said. "They're looking to answer such questions as, how can we use this in the future to look at whether students are growing or not?"

Rebello will host a forum for parents to learn more about the growth model Nov. 17 at 6:30 p.m. at White Brook Middle School. Parents can also access their own child's growth data, Dornbusch noted.

Dornbusch offered an illustration of how a piece of data might help a school system. In Northampton, special education students at the high school progressed by 70 and 80 percent, Dornbusch said. The data, he added, raises questions about particular services that might have helped them succeed.

"Even though they may not be proficient, they did gain a lot of ground in terms of learning the curriculum," Dornbusch said. "I think the value for this is interesting."

The greatest challenge, Dornbusch said, is finding the best use of this information to improve results, in part because it is so new.

The model is based on only two years of data. The 2008 growth percentiles were calculated for students in grades 4 through 8 who took MCAS tests in the same subject in 2007.

"Administrators and educators are working to understand this data right now," Olsson said. "Some people are already leaping to conclusions, but we're trying to slow them down a bit."

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More data

In Northampton, about one-third of special education students at the high school were above the 70th growth percentile in math, and around one-fifth exceeded the 70th percentile on the English test, according to Bill Dornbusch, technology director.

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