

**Position Statement
on the use of the MEAP
for High Stakes Decision Making
(Executive Summary)**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Michigan Association of School Psychologists Position Statement
on the use of the MEAP for High Stakes Decision Making

Purpose statement: In April 2003, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) adopted a position statement on the use of Large Scale Assessment for High Stakes decisions. The Michigan Association of School Psychologists (MASP) subsequently formed a subcommittee to review the NASP position statement and specifically relate it to the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) and Education YES! accountability system. The following position statement serves as a guide to critical stakeholders including teachers, parents, administrators, policy makers and legislators involved in high stakes decision-making in Michigan.

Federal Legislation. The Elementary and Secondary Educational Act (ESEA) of 2001, known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), has redefined the federal role in K-12 education. NCLB requires that all states assess all children in grades three through eight and produce report cards that inform parents about their school's progress. NCLB has set rigorous goals and timeframes to have students achieve 100% reading and math proficiency across the county within the next 12 years. A cornerstone of NCLB is that all students must be proficient, including students with diverse ethnicity, low socioeconomic status, disabilities, and students who have limited English proficiency. Each year, schools must demonstrate their progress towards the pre-established proficiency goal. Schools either make Adequate Yearly progress (AYP) or do not make AYP based on meeting all three of the following criteria: a) 95% of the school must participate in the assessment program, b) All groups of children (i.e. entire grade level and associated subgroups) need to meet the proficiency threshold c) and schools must meet either an attendance or graduation threshold. Failure in any one of the three criteria will result in the school being labeled as not making AYP. Sanctions, which may include requiring the school to offer supplemental services such as tutoring, restructuring, closing schools, transferring students, or loss of funding are associated with the number of consecutive years a school fails to make AYP.

MEAP, Education YES, and AYP. The MEAP was initially created by Michigan teachers and local curriculum specialists in Michigan, to monitor how large groups of students were progressing against Michigan's Curriculum Benchmarks and Standards. In addition, the Michigan Department of Education implemented Education YES!- A Yardstick for Excellent Schools as an accreditation system that issues a letter grade to all schools to inform parents on how schools are performing, based partially on the MEAP performance. In order to meet the new legislation requirements, the Michigan Department of Education has linked performance on the MEAP to establishing AYP. Because of the serious consequences for schools who do not meet pre-established proficiency thresholds set by the federal government, the original purpose of the MEAP program has drastically changed. MEAP is unequivocally being used in Michigan as a "high stakes" assessment.

Unintended consequences of high-stakes tests. There are reports throughout the country of narrowing of the curriculum to increase test scores, teaching to the test, outright cheating, exclusion of students who are likely to do poorly, chronic teacher dissatisfaction, and poor teacher retention (Haladyna, 1992). Teaching time that might have been afforded to struggling students is now given to test preparation. Some states, including some districts in Michigan, have turned to retention as a consequence for poor academic performance. This is in spite of the fact that research has shown retention to be a failed strategy to improve performance, and is extremely costly to implement. Further, disadvantaged children have less literary exposure in the home, so they enter school already behind. Low-income schools have lower test scores than others because the gap is persisting, not because of faulty teaching (Myers & Curtis 2003). As minorities tend to score lower on such tests, a school's diversity can be viewed as a liability, which is directly in conflict with the spirit of NCLB.

MEAP reliability. Based on published data, the MEAP has sufficient internal consistency to be used in group decision making and limited screening decisions about individual students, but falls short of the threshold necessary for important decisions about individuals. There is no empirical data on the reliability of scores of various subgroups such as minorities or the disabled. In addition, the normal variation in scores of school populations makes it difficult to draw conclusions about a teacher's instructional practices based on a single set of scores. Conclusions on the MEAP continue to be difficult to discern without being provided a technical manual by MDE.

MEAP validity. The published test construction procedures suggest that the tests in the MEAP are well constructed and related to the curriculum. However, no criterion validity (comparing to other measures) or construct validity (making correct inferences about traits) has been published by the state. Independent studies have found that MEAP scores are significantly related to such background variables as mobility, non English-speaking home, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and only moderately related to grade point average. This means that the difference in scores between two groups could be related to their differences in background rather than differences in instructional effectiveness. Finally, it is important for Michigan to improve MEAP validation, since national research in other states (Amrein & Berliner, 2002) has found that improvement on high-stakes tests is not necessarily shown on other tests such as the NAEP. This implies that students are not improving in mastery of content but in ability to take the test.

Appropriate use of assessment in education. MASP supports educational policies that are geared toward improving achievement for all students, respecting diversity of skills as much as we applaud intensity of effort. MASP unequivocally believes in accountability, program evaluation, and monitoring the progress of students. Large-scale assessments are helpful, as a part of a broader evaluation system, in understanding the educational needs of large groups of students. However, it is not helpful to assess students globally and sanction individually (i.e., retention). Large-scale assessments are only valuable when followed with additional instructional interventions for diverse groups, comprehensive professional development and needed resources so that all students can make appropriate progress.

MASP believes in the following basic assumptions about education:

- All children can learn
- Student performance should increase for all students, including those students who are most vulnerable, such as students with disabilities, those not native speaking, those whose families lack economic resources, or those who come from unstable homes and suffer frequent mobility.
- Educational instruction, assessment, and values should accommodate diversity in children.

RECOMMENDED POLICIES REGARDING HIGH STAKES ASSESSMENT IN MICHIGAN

Retain the MEAP if applied in the specific manner noted in the items below: While MASP has concerns regarding the developmental appropriateness of the Michigan Curriculum Benchmarks for all students, MASP believes that tests within the MEAP can be better tools than using a nationally normed test that is unrelated to the state's curriculum expectations. However, the MEAP needs further refinement and a technical manual. Our recommendation to keep the MEAP is made with caution and the MEAP should only be applied in the specific manner noted below.

- **Use the MEAP at this time for group, not individual progress:** MASP believes that at this point in its development, the MEAP should be linked only to its original purposes: align district curriculum with the Michigan Curriculum Benchmarks and to assess overall progress of groups of students towards meeting those benchmarks. The MEAP is not yet an appropriate assessment measure to determine instructional decisions for individual students. Separate validation studies must be conducted to support such further uses of the MEAP in Michigan.

- **Add vertical scaling, yearly testing, and use rate of growth as a measure of progress:** MASP opposes cross-sectional comparisons (comparing groups across the same grade) because the groups are often unequal and normal fluctuations in a school's sample do not reflect instructional variables. We endorse the development of vertical scaling (expanding the MEAP so that there is a sufficient item range to reflect the curriculum across multiple grade levels) to enable scores to be compared longitudinally. MASP supports following groups of students to determine instructional needs based on their rates of growth, rather than their progress toward a fixed standard. Research has shown that rate of growth is not affected by background influences after second grade. MASP recommends an eventual system using each individual's rate of growth (value-added method) as a basis for determining Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).
- **Do not use single scores for *student* sanctions or rewards:** MASP opposes such high-stakes practices as linking performance on a single test score, such as MEAP, to individual student decisions such as grade promotion, retention, instructional placement, graduation, or eligibility for scholarship. Consistent with best practice, MASP supports the use of converging, multiple sources of data to make any individual student decisions. Such variables may include, but are not restricted to grades, curriculum based measurement, teacher evaluations, and parent input.
- **Do not use scores for *school* sanctions or rewards:** MASP opposes using rewards or sanctions for staff, school or district based on their students' performance on a single test, because schools have little control over non-instructional influences such as student background that significantly impact achievement. Further, incentives have tended to occur in affluent communities and are strongly associated with ethnicity and income.
- **Give and score the test in the fall so instruction can be adjusted:** MASP recommends the MEAP be given *and scored* in the fall, which allows teachers to make instructional adjustments during the second semester with the same group of students. Early administration of the test will also limit the inordinate amount of time some schools spend in MEAP preparation.
- **Report Mobility Rates** Although moving once or twice during the public school years may not be particularly detrimental, most research shows that high mobility lowers student achievement, especially when the students are from low-income, less-educated families (Sewell, 1982; Straits, 1987). Since mobility rates are a non-instructional influence on achievement, schools should be required to report the mobility rates for each grade level assessment.
- **MDE should regularly caution the public about misuse of test results:** MASP supports a stronger role by the Michigan Department of Education to distribute information about the appropriate use of large-scale assessments, including cautions to educators, media and parents about the misuse of such test scores in demographic and district-by-district comparisons. If the state wishes to contract these services, the contractor should provide full disclosure regarding appropriate use of test scores.

MASP respectfully submits this position statement as a guide to critical stakeholders including teachers, parents, administrators, policy makers and legislators involved in critical decisions that will be made regarding the use of the MEAP in Michigan. While the recommendations contained in this document do require action by the Department of Education and the Michigan Legislature, the recommendations are supported by research and are consistent with policies being implemented in other states. In addition, it should be noted that while this executive summary serves to quickly highlight key points for consideration, it does not supplant the full document. Readers are encouraged to review the full document, which contains a review of the research supporting the recommendations in the paper. The position statement can be obtained from MASP at www.masponline.org.