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## **Manchester Essex posts MCAS gains**

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**By Jack Zietman  
Correspondent (<http://www.gloucestertimes.com>)**

MANCHESTER — Students across the Manchester Essex Regional School District showed continued improvement over past years and posted scores almost universally higher than the state averages on the annual MCAS assessment tests, according to scores released Tuesday.

But just being good is not enough, though, Scott Morrison, the district's curriculum director, suggested.

"We've improved according to the MCAS people," he told the School Committee Tuesday night, "but it's not enough for us."

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests are administered each year in schools across the state in Grades 3-8, and again in Grade 10. The exams, divided into English, mathematics, and science sections, is standard across the state and is used to evaluate school as well as student performance.

As per the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the MERSD met its Adequate Yearly Progress goal, but that goal will be increasingly difficult to meet as time goes on, Morrison suggested.

The No Child Left Behind Act is aimed at ensuring that 100 percent of students, regardless of learning disability or whether or not they speak English fluently, be proficient in English and math by 2014.

As the Manchester Essex district gets closer and closer to this goal — and it's very close in several cases, the data shows — further improvement will become harder and harder.

On the English exam, 53 percent of regional district's students scored at the "proficient" level, while 34 percent scored "advanced." By contrast, while 52 percent of Massachusetts students scored "proficient," only 17 percent achieved "advanced."

Math scores were also higher than the state totals, with 42 percent of students achieving "proficient," and another 38 percent "advanced."

Indeed, while Morrison highlighted specific areas of the English and math tests where the district should concentrate its efforts, these were hardly areas of failure. Manchester Essex scores were consistently higher than the state averages in almost all categories.

The subjects and disciplines in need of improvement fall behind the district's high standards for itself, not behind state standards.

While the English and math scores were generally positive, the district remains concerned about its science scores, which Morrison indicated shows a systematic weakness in the elementary through high school curricula.

"We've spent a lot of time on this in the past few years, but scores have been abysmal," Morrison said.

In that vein, Morrison said he is holding the MERSD to its own standard rather than comparing itself with the rest of the state. The Science and Technology exam is given only to fifth-, eighth-, and tenth-graders, and each of these groups performed well in comparison to the state average.

For instance, 75 percent of last year's eighth grade students scored "proficient" or "advanced" on the science test.

However, that left 25 percent with a "needs improvement," "warning," or "failing" grade — troublingly high for the MERSD, Morrison indicated.

Morrison noted that the Manchester-Essex eighth grade science scores ranked 10th in the state. "We can do better," he said.

Looking to improve both its science and math curricula, MERSD will phase in a new system called KnowAtom across all grade levels over the next few years.

The new curriculum has a strong emphasis on the engineering design process and the scientific method, Morrison said, catering not only to the MCAS test, he said, but also preparing students for future jobs in the so-called "STEM" fields — science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Superintendent of Schools Pamela Beaudoin said the new science curriculum will drastically alter how science is taught to elementary grade students.

While elementary school teachers often lack strong science training and thus far have not worked with a systematic science curriculum. KnowAtom will change that, and elementary students' science scores should improve accordingly, she said.

"You have to teach it for the kids to learn it," Beaudoin said. "We have been playing catch-up with the science issue."

Morrison and Beaudoin also stressed that, while larger curriculum changes are a significant undertaking, individual students will still get the attention they need to improve.

Over the coming weeks, the district will analyze all the new MCAS data to identify specific areas in which individual students need help, and then do what they can to provide that help.

Meanwhile, while the new curriculum is introduced, it might take some time for the true benefits of the program to manifest themselves in MCAS scores.

"We ask a little time for this to take a hold," Beaudoin said.

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