

Mass. irked by colleges' willingness to accept non-MCAS diplomas

By Michele Kurtz

GLOBE STAFF

Several New England colleges and universities that require high school diplomas for admission say they may accept students who fail MCAS but receive "local diplomas" that state education officials have declared illegal.

The prospect that some four-year colleges may consider a non-MCAS diploma to be as good as one with MCAS credentials could undermine a central tenet of education reform.

"They are doing a disservice to the goals of education reform and to the principles many of them claim to hold dear," said James A. Peyser, chairman of the state Board of Education, adding that he doubts the move would have broad impact.

It is unclear how many students who do not pass MCAS would have the grades and other qualifications to get into four-year colleges, and federal officials said last week that students with non-MCAS diplomas would not be eligible for financial aid.

A handful of school committees, including Cambridge, that disagree with the MCAS requirement have said they may award diplomas to students who meet other local criteria but have not passed the test.

For several months, FairTest, a Cambridge-based group that opposes the MCAS requirement, has surveyed colleges and universities — many of which require students to have a diploma to qualify for possible admission — to see if they would consider students with the so-called local diplomas.

Many have said they would.

"If Cambridge says it's a diploma, it's a diploma," Gary Cilley, acting co-director of admissions at the University of New Hampshire, said in an interview. Admissions officials at Wheaton College in Norton, Western Connecticut State University and Southern Connecticut State University also told the Globe they would accept local diplomas. FairTest officials say they have contacted many more universities that will accept local diplomas.

Earlier this year, several prestigious universities that do not require diplomas, including Stanford University and Dartmouth College, told five Brookline students that their boycott of the MCAS would not bar them from admission.

Last week state Education Commissioner David P. Driscoll blasted the colleges that require diplomas but would accept local ones, saying they should make sure that all students have state-approved credentials.

"They are in fact accepting an illegal document," he said last week. "I would urge colleges and universities, whether they be in Massachusetts or beyond, to know our system and ask the right questions."

It's difficult to determine how many students would be affected: A tiny number of districts have voted to give local diplomas. Officials in some of those districts say they're not sure whether they will ultimately award them, and last week Bobbie D'Alessandro, soon to leave the post as Cambridge superintendent, said she does not plan to award local diplomas but that the school committee could order her to do so.

State officials vow to fight any effort to give diplomas to students who haven't passed MCAS. A pending lawsuit is expected to decide whether the state has a legal right to insist on passing MCAS for graduation.

This year's scholars are the first students who must pass the 10th grade MCAS in English and math in order to graduate in Massachusetts. Roughly 12,000 students — or 19 percent — have not passed both sections. Results of the latest retest are due in February.

The MCAS requirement was intended to raise standards and give real clout to diplomas in a state where districts' local graduation requirements and standards have varied widely. But some opponents have said it is not fair to deny diplomas to students based

on their performance on a test, leading school committees in Cambridge, Falmouth, and Hampshire Regional to vote to offer diplomas to students who do not pass MCAS.

Driscoll insists the committees do not have the legal authority to do that, but they have said they do. And as graduation approaches, the question of what lies ahead for students who don't pass MCAS has become increasingly urgent.

Higher education officials have said the state's public four-year universities will not admit students who haven't passed the MCAS. The state's public community colleges plan to offer MCAS remediation and other courses to students based on their performance on placement tests.

To help pay for tuition, Driscoll is also seeking approval by federal education officials to make students who failed the MCAS but are awarded "state-endorsed certificates" — a new credential that is not a diploma — eligible for financial aid for community college.

But some private colleges in Massachusetts — and some public universities in other states — have said they would treat a student with a local diploma just like any high school graduate. An admissions officer at one college said the college doesn't require SAT scores for admission and would not consider MCAS a requirement either. Others said they defer to local communities in defining a diploma. And some said they hesitate to make any testing a unilateral hurdle to admission.

"We know how to look at standards and competitive test scores," said Sharon Brennan, director of admissions and enrollment management at Southern Connecticut State, which accepts about 100 to 150 Massachusetts students a year. Brennan said she

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Mass. education
commissioner

they're smart to judge the whole student, and their whole portfolio of work, and the [state] doesn't take that away from them," said Price, whose district has 171 seniors who have not passed MCAS.

But some college admissions officers — and several MCAS backers — say it's unlikely many of the students who persistently fail the MCAS and are denied waivers of the requirement would meet other admissions criteria at most four-year schools.

"Our suspicion is that a very high percentage of the students who qualify for admission are going to have passed the MCAS," said Cilley of the University of New Hampshire. "We're thinking that for most of the students that end up putting in an application here, this whole question is moot."

Last week the local diploma suffered a blow when the US Department of Education said it would not consider awarding financial aid to local-diploma students, because "the state has said that the local diploma is illegal," said Stephanie Babyak, spokeswoman for the US Department of Education.

Without financial aid, some argue, many students who fail MCAS would be unable to attend college. "It's really disappointing," said Christina Perez, university testing reform advocate at Fair-Test. Perez says she knows of

would consider students with local diplomas but probably wouldn't accept students with state-endorsed certificates. "I see students who don't do well on standardized tests and have exemplary high school records."

Alan Price, a Cambridge School Committee member who voted to give the superintendent authority to award local diplomas, praised that attitude. "I think

about a dozen colleges and universities, most of them in New England, that now require students to have a diploma or an equivalency certificate, but said they would consider students with local diplomas.

For now, Driscoll seems confident that districts considering awarding local diplomas will change their minds once more students pass the MCAS, some receive waivers of the requirement, and the benefits of a certificate become known. If not, he says, he'll battle them.

"We'll have to take action and it might be the legal variety," he said. Peyser said the state could also withhold funding or declare the districts underperforming on the basis that they violated state law — an allegation Price of Cambridge disputes.

None of this is lost on William G. Erickson, superintendent of the Hampshire Regional School District, whose school committee last year became the first to decide to award local diplomas. Five seniors have not passed the MCAS.

"We are wondering what the ramifications are, either financially or citing the district, and so on," he said recently. "We are left worrying what's going to come of it."

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