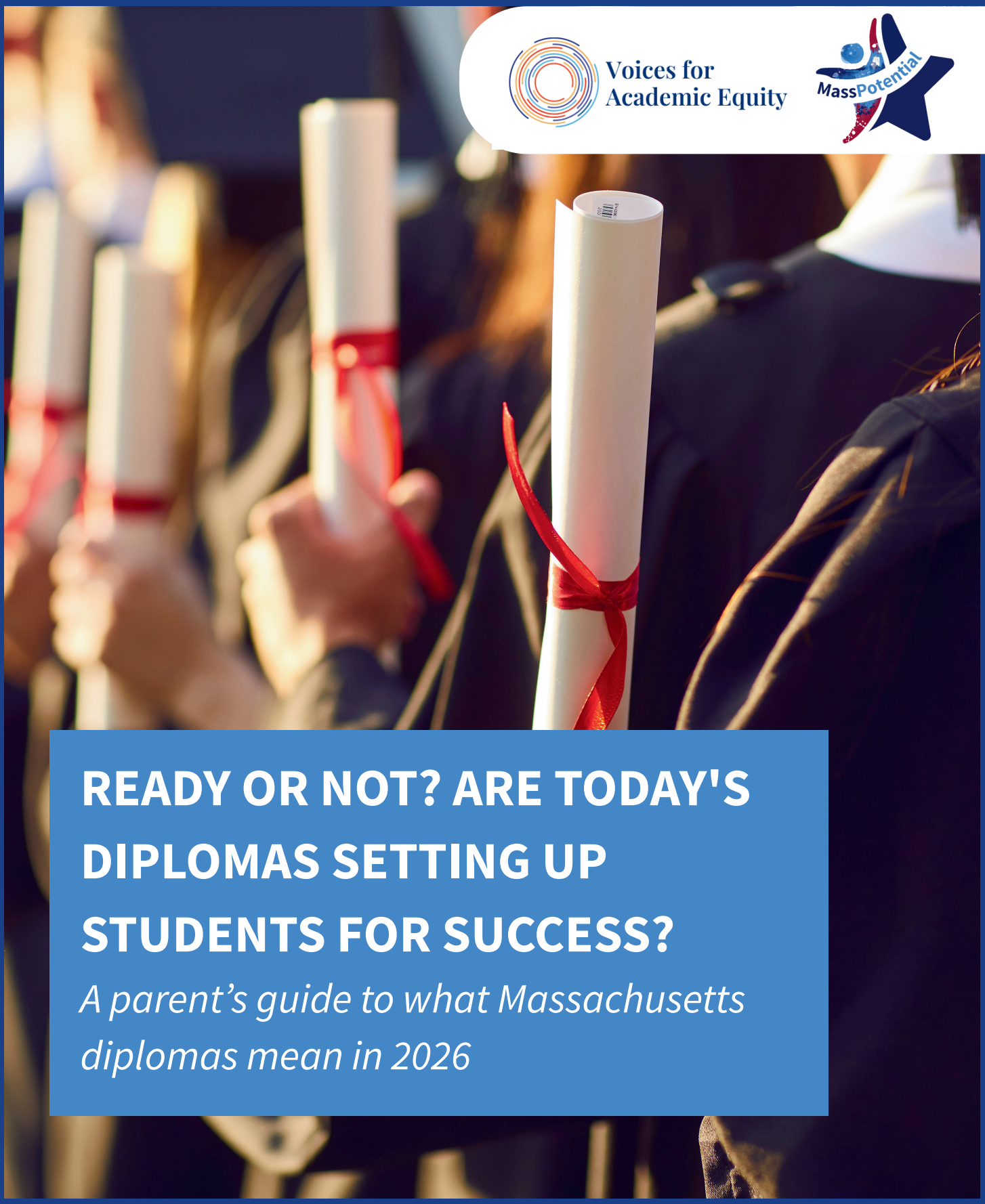
Voices for Academic Equity

MassPotential



READY OR NOT? ARE TODAY'S DIPLOMAS SETTING UP STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS?

A parent's guide to what Massachusetts diplomas mean in 2026

VOICES FOR ACADEMIC EQUITY COALITION | 2026

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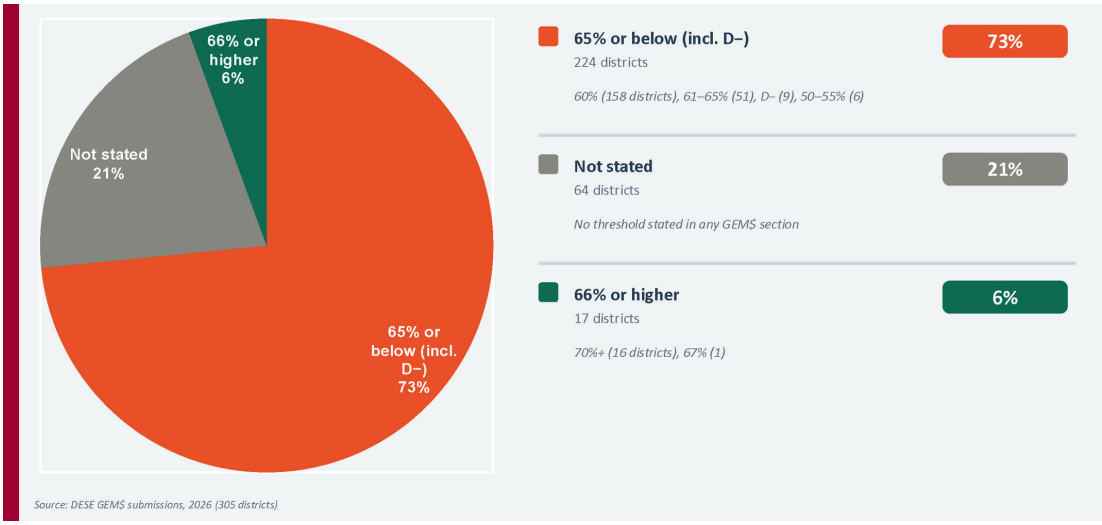
READY OR NOT?
ARE TODAY'S DIPLOMAS SETTING UP MASSACHUSETTS STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS?

In November 2024, voters eliminated the use of Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) as a graduation requirement. As a result, each of Massachusetts' school districts set its own standards for a student to earn a high school diploma starting with the graduating class of June 2026. Until a new graduation framework is passed legislatively, there is no longer a single statewide standard for Massachusetts graduates, but rather a patchwork of local district requirements. To understand the range of local requirements across the Commonwealth, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) required all district leaders to submit their graduation requirements by completing a December 2025 survey in the state's Grants for Education Management System (GEM$). This brief summarizes those responses and explains what that means for your child — and why it matters for their future.

QUESTION 1: WHAT COURSE GRADE DOES MY CHILD NEED TO EARN CREDIT TOWARD THEIR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION?

While this may seem like a simple question, it isn't. Under the Commonwealth's new interim graduation requirements, students must earn "full credit in accordance with the district's grading policy." The state does not say what that means in terms of a specific course grade or percentage. Each district decides on its own.

THREE IN FOUR DISTRICTS SET THEIR PASSING SCORE AT 65% OR BELOW



In the districts reviewed, passing course grades range from 50% to 70% — with no statewide standard. Boston Public Schools — which educates over 44,000 students, the majority from low-income families and communities of color — explicitly set its passing threshold at D– (with no percentage given), which is the lowest possible passing grade. Springfield Public Schools, serving nearly 24,000 students in the Commonwealth's third-largest city, defined passing as "a grade of D (60%–69%)," effectively setting a 60% floor. In Mashpee, the school committee debated the question openly and voted for a minimum of 65% to earn full course credit, with one member stating, "60 in my book was failing." (Cape News, January 2025). All three of these districts have set different benchmarks, yet all award the same Massachusetts high school diploma. In the 20% of districts without a stated passing standard, students and families have no way to know whether a "D" grade in their class means they're on track to graduate, or just on track to slide by.

It is important to note that – regardless of districts' interpretation of interim regulations – state law still requires that a high school competency determination (diploma): "shall represent a determination that a particular student has demonstrated mastery of a common core of skills, competencies and knowledge … by satisfactorily completing coursework that has been certified by the student's district as showing mastery of the skills, competencies, and knowledge contained in the state academic standards and curriculum frameworks…" Setting a passing grade of 60% or a D- calls into question whether districts are in fact ensuring that the high bar of "mastery" is attained.

GRADES ARE NOW LESS RELIABLE AS GRADE INFLATION INCREASES

Over the past decade, Massachusetts students have been receiving higher grades across all core subject areas than in the past, even as test scores have declined statewide. When students earn high grades without attaining the learning those grades indicate, it sends misleading – and harmful – messages about what students know and are prepared to do. Students who experience lenient grading can be less likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college, and can earn less over their lifetimes. A statewide system that relies predominantly on grades, which are increasingly inflated, can leave students and families with a false impression of their readiness for postsecondary success.







QUESTION 2: HOW DOES THE SCHOOL KNOW MY CHILD LEARNED WHAT THEY'RE SUPPOSED TO LEARN?

Under the interim requirements, a school can certify that a student has "mastered" a subject by having them pass a final exam, complete a portfolio, finish a capstone project, or "an equivalent measure" — whatever the district decides that means. There is no common rubric, no objective check, and no independent validation.

Here is a comparison: Imagine your child's pediatrician decided what a "healthy" temperature was, designed their own type of thermometer, took your child's temperature, and reviewed the results of their DIY thermometer themselves — with no benchmarking, quality control, or oversight from anyone outside their office. That's close to how Massachusetts high school diplomas are awarded right now for most students.



The practical result: "Mastery" in Massachusetts can mean passing a rigorous exam aligned to state standards. It can also mean completing a short presentation graded by the teacher who wrote the lesson plan, with no pre-defined rubric and no objective validation. Both requirements satisfy the same legal mandate. Both produce the same diploma. But both do not necessarily prepare a student for postsecondary success in the same way.



More than a dozen districts reported that MCAS remains part of their graduation requirements after voters eliminated it — some as a continuing requirement, others as an alternative pathway. Most of these districts retain the "passing score" that is established by DESE. These communities have voluntarily retained the objective, valid standard applied statewide. These students are held to a bar that exists independent of any single teacher or school. Their diplomas indicate something different than their course grades.

QUESTION 3: IF MY CHILD GETS A DIPLOMA, ARE THEY READY FOR COLLEGE OR A CAREER?

There is a straightforward way to measure this: compare how many students graduate to how many scored proficient on an independent, objective academic assessment. In a system where the diploma truly certifies learning, these numbers should track each other reasonably closely. When we compared 2025 graduation rates to 2026 MCAS results across the state, the Commonwealth's 26 Gateway Cities — which are home to the largest concentrations of students of color, multilingual learners, and low-income families — demonstrate gaps in preparedness that are stark.

This isn't criticism for any teacher, school, or district. It is the reality of what happens when there's no statewide objective check on whether grades honestly reflect what students have learned. Students who graduate without the academic preparation their diploma implies are most likely to discover that gap when it's already too late to address it: when they arrive at college, apply for a job that requires a skill they don't have, or take on student debt they can't cover because they lack the preparation for the postsecondary program they've selected. The students most likely to face this challenge are those from lower-income families who have the least financial margin to pay for the additional training they need to pursue the future they envision.

PERCENTAGE OF 10TH GRADERS NOT MEETING EXPECTATIONS VS. PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO RECEIVE A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA

In some districts, as many as 53% of students are not meeting expectations in grade 10 English language arts, yet over 80% receive their diplomas.



When students receive a high school diploma but don't have the skills to be ready for success after high school, it sends misleading signals to graduates and their families.

QUESTION 4: IS THE DIPLOMA MY CHILD EARNS WORTH THE SAME AS A DIPLOMA FROM OUR NEIGHBORING CITY OR TOWN?

The most concrete way to see how cities/towns compare across Massachusetts is to look at neighboring communities. These pairs of adjacent towns each award a Massachusetts high school diploma. What it takes to earn that diploma — and what the diploma actually reflects about academic learning — is not the same.

The table below shows neighboring districts' passing grades/scores, alongside the percentage of students who are not meeting grade level expectations (Not Meeting%) on the English Language Arts and Math 2026 MCAS. Next, the table shows the 2025 high school graduation rate, the percentage of a district's graduates who attend any college after high school, and the earnings of 2013 high school graduates in 2023, ten years after graduating.

District	Course passing score (CD policy)	Mastery required?	2026 MCAS ELA Not Meeting %	2026 MCAS Math Not Meeting %	2025 4-yr High School Grad Rate	2025 Attend Any College	2013 Grad Avg Earning in 2023
Lawrence (Gateway)	65%	Final exam, final project, or portfolio	47%	42%	82%	18%	$49K
Andover	60%	Exam, portfolio/ capstone, PBA	6%	4%	98%	76%	$79K
Springfield (Gateway)	60%	Final exam	31%	30%	82%	34%	$44K
Longmeadow	Not stated	Coursework only	9%	8%	97%	82%	$73K
New Bedford (Gateway)	60%	Exam, PSAT/SAT, portfolio/ capstone	44%	41%	80%	24%	$47K
Dartmouth	65%	Exam or portfolio/ capstone	18%	19%	92%	72%	$59K
Worcester (Gateway)	60%	Tests, performance tasks, projects/ presentations	30%	29%	86%	41%	$50K
Shrewsbury	60%	Final assessments	8%	7%	95%	76%	$78K

TABLE: Neighboring district CD policy comparison with 2026 MCAS Not Meeting % (not meeting grade expectations). CD policy data: DESE GEM$ submissions, 2026. MCAS data: DESE 2026 School and District Profiles. Income data: DESE Employment and Earnings of High School Graduates.

THREE THINGS STAND OUT:



FIRST, the MCAS results tell a story the diploma doesn't. In every pair, far more Gateway City students score at a "Not Meeting Expectations" level on MCAS than in the neighboring suburban community. In Lawrence, 47% of students do not meet grade level expectations in ELA. In adjacent Andover, just 6% fall below grade expectations — a 41 point difference.

Common sense dictates that the high school graduation rates in these districts would also show a wide disparity — how could a high percentage of Lawrence students earn diplomas when so many are not meeting expectations? Yet, the districts' graduation rates are only 16 points different: Lawrence graduates 82% of students while Andover graduates 98%. Both towns award a Massachusetts high school diploma, yet most families are unaware it indicates starkly different achievement levels depending on the district.



SECOND, the implications of lower scores on MCAS last well beyond high school. Though these district pairs hold relatively similar expectations for course passing and graduate large percentages of their students, those in Gateway Cities with lower MCAS scores are far less likely to attend college and they earn far less a decade after graduating from high school.



THIRD, Gateway City districts are sometimes more demanding than their affluent neighbors: Lawrence requires students to earn a 65% average to get course credit, while Andover requires just 60%. Lowell requires 65%, while Chelmsford requires 60%. The problem is not that urban schools have low expectations — it's that our state system allows profound variation with no accountability and no floor.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR FAMILY — AND WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

Your child is entitled to a high school diploma that actually certifies what they know and can do — one that holds up when they apply for college, walk into a job interview, or try to obtain a professional license. Right now, across Massachusetts districts and schools with myriad standards, there is no guarantee that is happening. Here is what state and local leaders need to do, and what you can ask them:

1

The state must establish a minimum passing score of C (70%) or better to set up students for success.
A rigorous minimum passing score would tell every family in Massachusetts what their child is working toward. The state Board of Education (BESE) can require a statewide minimum passing score now — no new law is needed.

2

Diplomas must include a meaningful, objective check that demonstrates their readiness for their next step.
The Governor's K-12 Statewide Graduation Council report recommends end-of-course assessments (EOCs) that are designed, administered, and scored by the state — which other states, like Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia have required for years. These external exams objectively verify what students learned and matter to students when their scores count toward their academic record and path to graduation. The assessments would replace a teacher-developed final exam and satisfy federal requirements so MCAS would no longer be administered.

3

Families and students are counting on the state to set consistent standards for every student, regardless of zip code.
Every child's diploma should indicate they are ready for success after high school, whether you live in Boston or Belmont, Worcester or Westford. Two-thirds of young people think Massachusetts should have a statewide graduation requirement for all high schools and 67% agree that lowering standards for a high school diploma will lead to graduates being less prepared for the future. State leaders have a constitutional obligation to ensure a quality education for every child across all schools and districts – and individual districts cannot fulfill this mandate.

WHAT CAN YOU DO? QUESTIONS TO ASK — AND ANSWERS TO EXPECT

This brief is intended to equip families with information about what's happening with Massachusetts diplomas. This section gives you, as family members, the tools to do something with the information that will lead to better outcomes for your students.

At your child's school: Ask teachers

"What does my child actually need to know and be able to do to pass this course?"

- What is the minimum score to 1) pass the courses required to graduate, 2) pass the final exams in those courses, and 3) meet the requirements to earn a diploma?
- What does that score represent in terms of mastery? Does it certify that my child has mastered the content and is ready to be successful in the next course, in college, or in a workplace?
- What percentage of my child's grade comes from tests, homework, participation, or projects?
- Is there a final exam or capstone project? Who creates the rubric it's scored against?
- If my child is passing your class but scoring below grade level on the state assessment, how do you explain that gap — and what should we do to help close that gap?

At your school and district: Ask leaders and school committee members

"How do you know our diplomas reflect what students have actually learned?"

- What passing grade did our district set — and why that number? What does it say about students' levels of skills and knowledge?
- Who designs and scores the assessments used to verify student mastery? Is anyone outside the classroom involved?
- What share of last year's graduates tested below grade level on MCAS? What supports did they receive in high school?
- Where can I find our district's full graduation requirements policy?

At the state level: Ask your legislators and state board members

"What are you doing to make sure every Massachusetts diploma means the same thing?"

- Will you support a statewide minimum passing score for high school credit — and if not, why not?
- When will the state require end-of-course assessments so that an objective measure verifies what students have learned?
- How will you ensure all students have access to a diploma that carries the same weight across all the Commonwealth's communities?

To find your State Representative and State Senator, visit malegislature.gov. The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) meets monthly — meeting agendas and member contact information are posted at doe.mass.edu.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Voices for Academic Equity

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Data:

- DESE GEM$ CD Policy and Local Graduation Requirements submissions, 2025
- DESE 2025 graduation rates (updated March 2026)
- DESE 2026 MCAS results