

# Overview of the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA) and Descriptions of 2003-08 EQA Reports and the Examination Process

---

**NOTE:** This document gives information that is no longer current. Prior to 2008, the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA), an independent sister agency of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE), had lead responsibility for performing district reviews. By legislation effective August 14, 2008, the Massachusetts Legislature created a Center for District and School Accountability (CDSA) within ESE. See [Mass. Gen. Laws. c. 15, § 55A](#). CDSA now has the function of reviewing school districts.

## General Information

Created by the Massachusetts Legislature in July 2000 ([M.G.L. c.15, s. 55a](#)) and in operation until August of 2008, the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA) served as an independent mechanism to verify the efforts of schools and school districts to promote a higher level of academic achievement by students. Working in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE), but not subject to its control, EQA held lead responsibility for reviewing and evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of the Commonwealth's public school districts in promoting student achievement. Through its general and in-depth monitoring of schools' and districts' educational performance, EQA prepared reports and findings on the Commonwealth's schools and districts, with a special focus on low performing systems.

EQA worked under the direction of a five-person citizen council, appointed by the Governor, known as the Educational Management Audit Council (EMAC). This governance structure allowed the EQA, while part of ESE, to be independent and not subject to its control. EMAC had a number of functions including the selection of districts, approval of standards, and review of district reports. The findings of this board were reported to the Governor, Legislature, and the public. EMAC members were appointed by the Governor for four-year terms. These terms were staggered; each year one member joined EMAC to replace an exiting board member.

**EQA technical reports** are in-depth studies rating schools on all aspects of their performance. These are written with the school district administration in mind and combine data, ratings, supporting evidence, and examples of practice at the various levels in the district.

**EQA general reports** are summary reports prepared for members of the public. These are much shorter than EQA technical reports and show key findings by area, overall trends, and patterns in the district data. This type of report has been prepared for districts reviewed after 9/2005.

## EQA Examination Process

### Selection of Districts for Review

Each year district data were analyzed for all school districts in the Commonwealth. Approximately 40 to 50 districts were then selected for further review and on-site visits. Those selected included: urban, suburban, and rural districts; regional, vocational, and single community K-12 districts. The majority of districts (60%) selected were 'low' performing, or below the state average performance level on the MCAS assessment. The remainder (40%) was selected at random.

### Team Selection

Each of the visiting teams was individually constructed with the specific district in mind and typically had approximately 150 combined years of experience in public education. All districts were notified ahead of time as to the membership of the visiting team. The superintendent also was provided with biographies of the examiners detailing their experience and background, and could request a change in the team's composition.

A visiting team was typically composed of five to seven examiners, selected based on their extensive district experiences. Once selected by EQA, examiners were given rigorous training and are sent on reviews as an observer to see experienced examiners in action. Most examiners completed five to eight reviews per year, participated in a spring symposium, and received additional professional development during the summer.

## Data Analysis

All schools' and districts' annual MCAS results are subjected to an intensive analysis aligned with the requirements and standards of DOE regulations and federal statutes from the 'No Child Left Behind' legislation of 2001.

The data are analyzed in several different ways to make sure that the EQA has a solid basis from which to raise questions and concerns or reach preliminary findings. This includes factors such as competency determination rates, attendance rates, MCAS performance data, MCAS participation rates, and adequate yearly progress data. These data are disaggregated to show performance of the district over time, of the district relative to state averages, for schools relative to each other, and for subgroups relative to each other.

The EQA review of the MCAS results is framed by five essential questions:

- **Achievement:** To what extent is the MCAS performance of all the district's students meeting or exceeding state proficiency standards?
- **Equity of Achievement:** How does MCAS performance vary among the district's student subgroups?
- **Improvement:** How has MCAS performance for all students in the district changed over time?
- **Equity of Improvement:** How has MCAS performance for the district's student subgroups changed over time?
- **Opportunity and Access:** Are all eligible students attending and participating in all required programs and assessments?

Data are provided to EQA directly from the Massachusetts Department of Education. These are then analyzed by EQA, with additional statistical analyses conducted on EQA's behalf by the Merrimack Education Center and Cape Ann Economics.

Once the district data have been analyzed, they are provided to the district prior to the on-site visit. The data are included in the final published district report.

## Document Review (Desktop Analysis and Examination)

EQA requests 12 documents from the district for the period under examination – generally three years. EQA does not require any documents or reports that are required by the Department of Education, from which EQA acquires those deemed necessary.

Documents are provided to EQA to be reviewed prior to the on-site visit. This allows examiners to get a snapshot of the district prior to arrival on site. The documents that are required are specified in the Document Checklist. This checklist should be interpreted broadly as EQA understands that in most cases no statewide standard exists

for the organization of information or the naming of documents. The expectation is that the district will not need to create any new documents especially for the visit, with the exception of the five attachments provided with the checklist.

As a result of this extensive review, a series of preliminary questions and concerns are generated in preparation for the on-site visit.

### On-site Visit

An EQA review is primarily a survey of management practices in the district and as a result the onsite visit is the most important part of the whole process. This on-site visit portion typically lasts four days. During this time EQA examiners meet with the majority of a district's administrators including the superintendent, assistant/deputy superintendents, business manager, directors, principals, and district-wide program coordinators. Additionally, interviews take place with the school committee and municipal officials. Finally, EQA examiners meet with groups of teachers and the president of the local teachers' association, as well as parents on school councils.

### Report Writing

After the EQA team leaves the district each examiner writes a report on the particular standard area he/she was the lead on. This report details how the district performed relative to each of the indicators contained within the particular standard. Approximately one week later the team reconvenes for a corporate session where each examiner presents his/her report to the group. These draft reports are subjected to intense critique and scrutiny by the team. Edits are made based on the consensus opinion of the group.

The report is then forwarded to the EQA's technical writing team which subjects the report to further editing. A contextual background piece and data section are added, a executive summary is prepared, and the report is then forwarded to the executive director for final review. The report is then sent to the superintendent of schools for a review of factual accuracy. Final edits are made and the report is sent to the EMAC for its review. In some cases further edits may be made.

### Presentation and Review by EMAC

The EMAC board meets on a regular basis to review the reports generated from the EQA visits. The districts on the agenda are notified in advance and are welcome to attend the meetings.

Initially the executive director of EQA presents the report to the board and points out the particular highlights in each case. The superintendent of the district in question is permitted to address the board and respond to any issues that had arisen. The board then will ask questions of the superintendent. Once discussion has ended the board will vote on report and make a recommendation.

The possible recommendations:

- accept the report with special commendations for the district;
- accept the report with no further action;
- accept the report and recommend that a management letter be sent to the district to express concerns;
- accept the report and place the district on 'watch' status;

- accept the report with a recommendation that the state Board of Education declare the district 'underperforming'; or
- reject the report and request modifications be made.

The EMAC will transmit its findings and any resultant recommendations to the Governor; the Board of Education; the Attorney General; the President of the Senate; the Speaker of the House of Representatives; and the Clerk of the House of Representatives who will forward the same to the Joint Committee on Education, Arts, and the Humanities. The report is released and copies are distributed in accordance with M.G.L. Chapter 15, section 55A.

### Publishing

Once reports have been approved by EMAC, they are placed on the EQA website. These are organized by the calendar year the district was reviewed. In addition, printed copies are sent to the superintendent of the district, the local legislators, and the state library.

For districts reviewed during 2002 to 2005 the report produced is in the form of a technical document. Each one is approximately 120 pages in length and contains an executive summary, overview of the EQA review process and the district, an analysis of student achievement and MCAS test data, the standard findings and summaries, evidence pertaining to each indicator, an explanation of the proficiency index (PI), and the district's chapter 70 funding and net school spending history.

Starting in school year 2005-2006, districts reviewed receive a general report in addition to the technical report detailed above. This general report is approximately 22 pages in length and is designed with the general public in mind. These general reports present the district data and highlights of the technical report in a more accessible and user-friendly format.

### Evaluation of the EQA Process

As an agency, EQA is looking for districts to be data driven to allow them to better respond to the needs of their students. EQA understands that district personnel are already working hard, but are they utilizing their financial and staff resources as effectively and efficiently as possible? This agency asks the same questions of itself.

Over time the EQA has revisited every aspect of the examination process, from the standards, the format of the report, the on-site examination schedule, interview protocols, team configurations, etc. This has been done by conducting symposia, focus group interviews of examiners, feedback from school districts, and analysis of district data over time. The EQA's goal has been to better serve districts and provide them with the most meaningful and accurate information possible to inform their improvement efforts and promote higher levels of student achievement.