



MCAS Scores and the Adams Scholarships: A Policy Failure

A Policy Brief for The Civil Rights Project
at Harvard University

March 2006

By

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In 2004, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts created the John and Abigail Adams Scholarship Program. First proposed by Governor Mitt Romney in his State of the Commonwealth Address at the beginning of that year, the scholarship program was approved in the fall by the Board of Higher Education. The first scholarships were awarded to students graduating from high school in 2005, based on their performance on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests.

This Policy Brief analyzes data from the Massachusetts Department of Education to project the qualification rates for the Adams Scholarships of different categories of students. The findings of the analysis indicate that there are large gaps in these qualification rates – driven by large differences in performance on the MCAS tests – with racial minority, special education, second language learners, and poorer students being much less likely to qualify for the scholarships.

The Adams Scholarships

The Adams Scholarships are awarded to students in public high schools based on their performance on the 10th grade Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, and are awarded without consideration of the financial need of the student and her family. To qualify for the scholarship, students must meet two criteria:

- Their combined scores on the English and math MCAS test must be in the top 25 percent in their school district; and
- They must score at a performance level of advanced on one of the tests and advanced or proficient on the other test.¹

The Adams Scholarships are awarded using MCAS test scores, and unlike most financial aid, are awarded without consideration of financial need.

While students are allowed to retake one or both tests in their junior or senior years of high school, the retests are only for determining eligibility for high school graduation, and cannot be used for purposes of qualifying for the Adams Scholarships.²

Students awarded an Adams Scholarship are granted a tuition waiver at any public college or university in the Commonwealth. As long as the student maintains a college grade point average of at least 3.0, the waiver can be used for up to four consecutive years (eight semesters). In the 2005-2006 school year, average tuition at community colleges in the Commonwealth is \$734, \$954 at state colleges, and \$1,714 at the University of Massachusetts. It is important to note that the Adams Scholarships provide a tuition waiver only, and do not cover mandatory fees which exceed tuition at public institutions in the Commonwealth. For example, while tuition at UMass Amherst for resident undergraduates is \$1,714 this year, mandatory fees total \$7,564.³

Because the Adams Scholarships can only be used at a public institution in the state, not all students who qualify for the scholarships actually use them. Governor Romney's office reported that approximately 25 percent of the students who qualified in the first eligible cohort of students (those graduating in 2005) used their scholarships.⁴

Methodology

Data on all 10th grade students in the Commonwealth who took the MCAS tests were used for the analyses in this study. Data were obtained from the Massachusetts Department of Education for the cohorts of students who were in 10th grade in the years 2002 through 2005. The data files are anonymous data files, with no names or other identifiers of individual students. Only students who had valid test scores on both the English and math MCAS tests were included in the analysis.

To determine eligibility for the scholarships, students’ scale scores on the math and English tests were combined, and then ranked within their school district from highest to lowest within each district. Students in the top 25 percent in each district, and who had the requisite performance scores on each test, were deemed to be eligible qualifiers.

Results

Figure 1 shows the qualification rates for Adams Scholarships by race over the four cohorts of students. For all students in the state, the scholarship qualification rate increased from 17.8 percent in 2002 to 22.2 percent in 2005. While the top 25 percent of students in each district are at the outset eligible, the need to score at the level of advanced on one test and advanced or proficient on the other eliminates some of these top 25 percent students from qualification.

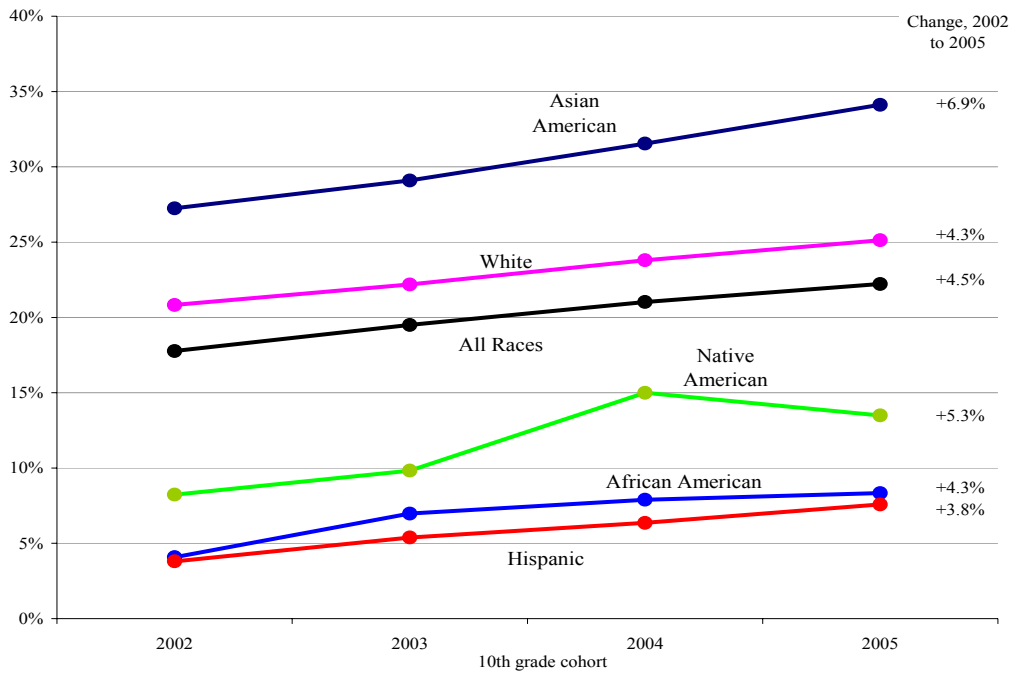


Figure 1: Adams Scholarship Qualification Rates by Race, 2002 to 2005

White students qualify for Adams Scholarships at rates at least three times greater than those of African American and Hispanic students.

The differences in qualification rates among students in different racial groups is highly evident in Figure 1. While in 2002 20.8 percent of White students and 27.2 percent of Asian American students met the eligibility criteria, only 4.1 percent of African American, 3.8 percent of Hispanics, and 8.2 percent of Native American students did. While all groups saw their qualification rates increase during the four years, the rates of increase were similar for all groups. Thus, the gap between White and African American and Hispanic students –

which stood at 16.8 percentage points and 17 points, respectively, in 2002 – were roughly the same as in 2005. While African Americans and Hispanics together represented 19 percent of the 10th graders completing the MCAS tests statewide in 2005, they would represent fewer than 7 percent of the scholarship qualifiers.

These gaps are not merely a reflection of the racial segregation of school districts in the state. For example, if you combine Boston, Springfield, and Lawrence – three districts in which African Americans and Hispanics represent approximately three-quarters of all students – the gaps noted above are even larger. In 2005, while 32 percent of White and 53 percent of Asian American students in these three districts would qualify for Adams Scholarships, only 9 percent of African American and 8 percent of Hispanic students would do so.

Figure 2 shows the qualification rates by students’ educational and free/reduced lunch status. The MCAS data indicate whether students are disabled (physical, learning, or other disability), have limited English proficiency (LEP), and are eligible for free or reduced price lunch under the Department of Agriculture’s National School Lunch program.⁵ Over the last four cohorts of 10th graders, fewer than 5 percent of disabled or LEP students would qualify for an Adams Scholarship based on their MCAS scores. In contrast, the proportion of students who were not disabled nor LEP qualifying for a scholarship increased from 20.5 percent in 2002 to 26.7 percent in 2005.

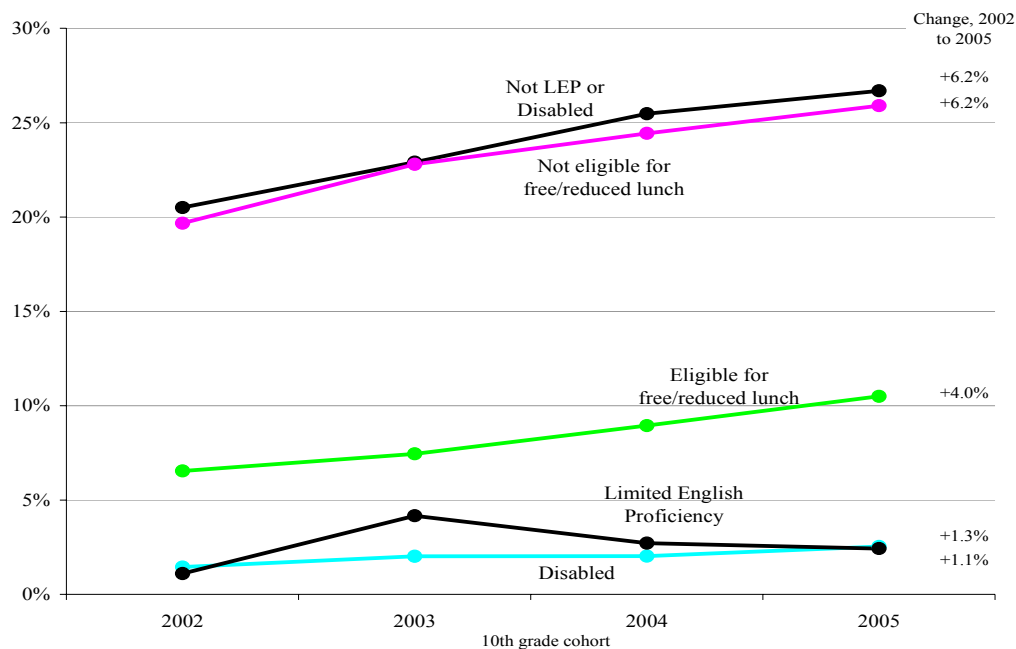


Figure 2: Adams Scholarship Qualification Rates by Student Status, 2002 to 2005

The proportion of students eligible for the federal free or reduced price lunch program who would qualify for an Adams Scholarship increased from 6.5 percent in 2002 to 10.5 percent in 2005, an increase of four percentage points during this period. However, the proportion of students qualifying for an Adams Scholarship who were *not* eligible for the school lunch program increased 6.2 percentage points during these years, from 19.7 percent to 25.9 percent.

Poorer students were much less likely to qualify for Adams Scholarships than students from wealthier families.

Conclusions

The use of the 10th grade MCAS tests has important implications for determining who will qualify for an Adams Scholarship. This study has demonstrated that there are large gaps in the proportion of students who would qualify

for a scholarship. These gaps exist between White and Asian American students on the one hand, and African American, Hispanic, and Native American students on the other. They also exist between students from wealthier families and those from families who are poor enough to qualify for the national School Lunch Program. And the largest gaps exist between disabled or limited English proficiency students, and those who are not. What is particularly troubling is that these gaps have not lessened, and for some groups are actually increasing, over time.

The problem with the Adams Scholarship program is that the use of the MCAS tests targets the scholarships away from many of those students who are most in need of financial assistance to attend college. The 2000 Census found that White families in Massachusetts had incomes 69 percent greater than their African American counterparts and more than twice that of Hispanic families. Yet it is exactly these students from poorer families who are *least* likely to receive an Adams Scholarship.

The students who are most in need of financial assistance to pay for college are those who are least likely to qualify for an Adams Scholarship.

In an era of skyrocketing college costs – tuition and fees at UMass and the state colleges have increased 78 percent over the last four years – and declining financial aid – the Commonwealth’s need-based aid program has been cut by \$25 million in the same period – it is critical that the state make the most effective use of its limited resources to promote college access and attainment. The use of the MCAS tests as a mechanism for doing this is flawed.

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Notes

- ¹ The 10th grade MCAS test scores are converted to one of four performance levels: failing, needs improvement, proficient, and advanced.
- ² The only circumstances under which a student can take the MCAS tests for Adams Scholarship qualification for the first time during their junior year is 1) if the student moves into Massachusetts from out of state; 2) moves from a private school (where the MCAS tests are not given) to a public school; or 3) had a documented medical excuse from the 10th grade administration of the tests. Otherwise, the 10th grade MCAS test administration presents the only opportunity to qualify for the scholarships. For more details on the regulations for the Adams Scholarships, see “Commissioner’s Update, December 5, 2005,” Malden: Massachusetts Department of Education.
- ³ “Romney Awards Free Tuition to 14,000 Massachusetts Students, December 15, 2005,” Boston: The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Executive Department. The Governor’s press release listed tuition as \$1,618 at UMass this year, but this was different from the figure of \$1,714 presented on the UMass website (University of Massachusetts Amherst, Office of the Bursar Fee Schedule, <http://www.umass.edu/bursar/fee1.html>).
- ⁴ *ibid.*, “Romney Awards Free Tuition to 14,000 Massachusetts Students, December 15, 2005.”
- ⁵ The guidelines for the school lunch program are that the income of the student’s household must be below 130 percent of the poverty level to qualify for free lunch, and below 185 percent of the poverty level to qualify for reduced price lunch. In the 2004-2005 school year, these income cutoffs for a household of four people were \$24,505 and \$34,873, respectively (Federal Register, Vol. 69, No. 60, page 16226).