



The Republican.

Teachers assess part of MCAS

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NORTHAMPTON - Area social studies teachers got a peek at the state Department of Education's guidelines for the new history and social science portion of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test yesterday afternoon.

About 45 educators gathered at Hampshire Educational Collaborative for a presentation by the Department of Education, which was also attended by teachers at remote video sites in Warren and Dalton. The state Board of Education approved new regulations for the MCAS test in October that will require high school students to pass exams in history, starting with the Class of 2012.

Kevin M. Dwyer, lead developer of the MCAS history-social science test for the Department of Education, warned that State Education Commissioner David P. Driscoll has not signed off on the new guidelines yet.

"This is a pretty stable document," Dwyer said. "We might need to revise and check our facts."

Current seventh-graders are members of the first class who will have to pass this portion of the test to graduate. Students will be taking the history-social science portion of MCAS in grades five and seven, and high school. It will be up to local school districts to decide whether to test in the 10th or 11th grade.

In 2005 and 2006, the state performed question tryouts for the new topic. This year and next year, pilot tests will be administered to students. In 2010, it will be the first time the test will count.

In the fifth grade, students will be tested on North American geography, American history, and civics, government and economics. In the seventh grade, they'll be tested on world geography and ancient classical history. High school students will be tested on U.S. history and civics, government and economics. The test will include multiple choice and open response questions.

A series of sample test questions for the three grade levels were reviewed. The questions are based on learning standards established by the state.

For example, a photo of the U.S. Capitol was shown and fifth-grade students were expected to choose from the multiple choice answers: the White House, the Lincoln Memorial, the U.S. Capitol and the Smithsonian Institution. Under state standards, students in that grade are supposed to be able to identify those, and other, major monuments and historical sites.

Participants in the presentation were not afraid to speak out about the questions. One teacher said she didn't think fifth-graders needed to know what the Smithsonian Institution looked like.

Dwyer stressed that the exam is a "content test."

"We try not to do 'close, but no cigar' answers," he said.

He also urged the teachers to share the test booklet with their students.

"By all means, let your students see this so they know what to expect," Dwyer said.

Before the meeting started, Monson High School history and English teacher Philip R. Murray said he can already see ways to improve the test.

"I think there's too much of an emphasis on U.S. history and not enough on global studies," Murray said. "I think living now with issues that confront our country, whether it's the Middle East or understanding Islam, or China, there is such a need for more global awareness."

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