A MIXED-METHODS SEQUENTIAL EXPLANATORY STUDY: ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF THE MASSACHUSETTS COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM TESTING CULTURE ON THE SIX CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

There has been much debate regarding the impact of state-mandated assessment in schools. Most of the literature on this topic has been gathered from studies focused on teachers’ perceptions (Hungerford, 2004). The effects, typically perceived to be negative, indicate reduced quality of teaching and learning in schools. The purpose of this study was to investigate elementary school principals’ perceptions of the impact of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) testing culture on the six conditions for effective learning (Tyler, 1992) within their schools. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach was used. A total of 225 principals in Massachusetts responded to the Principal Perception Survey. Qualitative data were then gathered from 15 of these respondents through telephone interviews guided by the Principal Perception Interview protocol.

Examination of the data gathered led to the following conclusions:

- Principals perceive the MCAS testing culture has had a positive impact on all six of the conditions for effective learning. Findings suggest that feedback and purpose are most positively impacted.
- Principals value the momentum established in creating a “data culture” within schools. They feel this is a direct result of the sense of urgency felt by all staff to consistently monitor student progress and use data gathered to make informed decisions about how to teach individual students.

- Principals believe MCAS testing has been critical to the emphasis that school districts have placed upon implementation of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. They feel this has led to greater clarity of purpose at the classroom level, as well as to greater consistency throughout the Commonwealth.

- Principals have many concerns about MCAS testing and its impact on their schools. Qualitative findings revealed that principals were far more positive when talking about the impact of the MCAS testing culture than they were when talking about specific shortcomings of MCAS testing.

Up to this point, the perceptions of elementary principals pertaining to state-mandated testing systems have been underrepresented in the literature. With major changes being discussed and formulated at the national level pertaining to mandated assessments in schools, the perspective added by school leaders within this study should be of great value.