

Vocational School Admissions and Lotteries
Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators (MAVA)
Frequently Asked Questions
January 15, 2024

1. **Are admissions policies new to vocational technical education in Massachusetts?** No, they have been in place for many decades. In fact, some of the criteria used in current admissions policies date back to the opening of the first vocational high schools in Massachusetts more than 100 years ago. Over the years, schools have consistently sought to identify students with “the ability to benefit” from vocational education.
2. **What’s typically included in an admissions policy?** Admissions policies can differ from one school to the next. But generally, the policies include four measures: student attendance, discipline record, grades, and a recommendation from the student’s middle school. Many schools also include a personal interview with the student. Each of the factors is weighted and totaled. Students with the greatest number of points are accepted first.
3. **How’s an admissions policy developed?** School districts offering Chapter 74 state-approved vocational technical programs adopt locally developed policies based on state guidelines and templates. However, for many decades, the state education department also approved the policies. This is why many admissions policies across the state look similar. The state no longer approves admissions policies. Instead, it requires school committees to annually approve admissions policies and school leaders to attest that the policies follow state and federal law.
4. **You said the state no longer approves admissions policies. What else has changed with state regulations regarding Chapter 74 admissions?** The [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#) revised its regulations several years ago, following claims from advocates who suggested that admissions policies weren’t fair to low-income students, students of color, special education students, and English language learners. Among other things, the new regulations said schools could only use “unexcused” absences in their admissions decisions. The new rules also narrowed the kinds of disciplinary matters that a school can consider in deciding whether to accept a student.
5. **What types of discipline offenses can be considered in the admissions process?** Discipline issues can still be considered, but they need to be serious offenses, like possession of a gun or drugs – or physical assault on a teacher. Schools can no longer penalize students for minor offenses such as cutting classes or using obscene language, but they still may use discipline as a criterion in their admissions process.
6. **What data are collected by the state on Chapter 74 admissions?** This started only recently, in 2021, when the [state began collecting and posting information](#) on the demographic makeup of applicants – and those enrolled. It also started keeping track of various steps in the process: applications, offers, and acceptances.

7. **What does the data show?** Statewide, the percentages of students in each of the four groups in the pool of applicants closely mirrors the percentages in each group that end up enrolled in the schools. In two groups, the ninth-grade enrollment is higher than the percentage in the applicant pool. In two groups, it's lower. The **greatest** difference – only 2.4 percentage points – is in the low-income group where the percentage of enrolled students exceeds the percentage of students in the applicant pool.

	Pool of Eligible Students	Students Actually Enrolled
Students of Color	43.9%	42.3%
English Language Learners	7.5%	6.6%
Students with Disabilities	18.8%	19.3%
Low-Income Students	44.0%	46.4%
Source: DESE 2023 “CTE Chapter 74 Admissions & Waitlist Analysis State” – 9 th Grade Class		

8. **What are the numbers at the individual school level?** In some schools, students from at-risk groups are represented at a higher rate than those populations in the sending schools' application pool. And this is happening in schools with admissions criteria. In some schools, students from at-risk groups are represented at a lower rate. This is particularly true in the smallest of the four groups, English Language Learners.
9. **What are vocational schools doing to reflect on data and make changes to their admissions policies and processes?** Virtually every regional vocational technical high school and agricultural high school in Massachusetts has made major changes – in its written policies, procedures, staffing, training, and recruiting. Most have reduced the weight placed on grades and attendance to address barriers for students in one or more of the protected classes. Many schools have placed more emphasis on personal interviews to determine whether a student is genuinely interested in attending a vocational school. Others have placed more weight on middle school recommendations to give the student's hometown school more of a say.
10. **Why not simply go to a lottery in all vocational schools?**

First, there's no statistical basis for it. In the aggregate, students enrolled in our schools already mirror the pool of potential applicants.

Second, a lottery won't solve the underlying lack of capacity problem, too few seats to meet growing demand, and longer waiting lists. The state estimates there may be 6,000-11,000 students on wait lists. A lottery won't add a single seat.

Third, a one-size-fits-all statewide lottery will penalize schools whose enrollment of at-risk students already exceeds the percentages in the pool of potential applicants.

Finally, there's no guarantee of success. At some schools, a lottery may actually **reduce** the number of students from a protected class.

11. What else is wrong with imposing a lottery?

- a. Timing: Our schools are aggressively trying to improve their admissions process, and they haven't had much time to do it. One or two admissions cycles don't make a trend.
- b. Incomplete Data: The data collected by DESE does not include demographic information of all students in terms of the numbers of applications (6.7% unknown), offers made (5% unknown), and offers accepted (2% unknown). Only the pool of applicants and students enrolled have zero students who are "unknown." We should not base major statewide decisions on flawed or incomplete data.
- c. Absence of Criteria: It is not unusual to have criteria in place to make determinations, especially when demand exceeds capacity (e.g. college admissions, employment, placement on sports teams). A blind lottery removes any and all criteria from consideration. The idea that attendance (unexcused absences), major disciplinary incidents, interviews, and recommendations are an unfair means of evaluating candidacy of students seems contradictory to models used throughout both public and private education.

12. What else? Vocational schools can't effectively change their demographic makeup in the four student groups if they are not provided access to all students. Our schools need unfettered access to seventh- and eighth-grade students to inform them about the value of vocational education.

DESE published an "Admissions Policies and Practices" guidance document which says in part that "[s]ending districts **must** [bold text included]:

- Offer opportunities to CVTE schools/programs to provide students with information on-site at their middle schools, as well as through mail and email.

And that "[s]ending districts **must not** [bold text included]:

- Count middle school student tours of CVTE schools/programs during the school day as unexcused absences.
 - Provided that the CVTE school/program confirms the student's participation.
- Unreasonably withhold student access to CVTE school/program tours during the school day.

Yet despite this guidance mandating access, many middle schools still impede our ability to make presentations, host student field trips to our schools, or send information to students' homes. We need better access to reach the very students some say are being excluded.

Finally, the admissions process in our schools cannot be conducted in a vacuum. The process cannot ignore the cities and towns that formed these regional schools and help pay the bills. In some cases, there are Regional Agreements or admissions policies or long-standing practices that allocate seats to member towns so all of them get at least minimum numbers. A blind

lottery – that is, the type being promoted by advocates – would undermine these agreements, create budget volatility, and potentially threaten the very existence of these regional districts.

13. **I’ve heard that lotteries have been a success at Assabet Valley Tech and Worcester Tech. Is that true?** First, it’s important to remember what advocates are seeking: a statewide, one-size-fits-all “blind” lottery. In this context, “blind” means that interested students would simply submit their name and the middle school they’re from, and there would be a random selection. Nothing else. No review of attendance or discipline or grades or recommendations. No personal interview.

Neither Assabet nor Worcester Tech use such a system, contrary to what you might have heard. Both schools still require students to apply for admission. Both still use selective criteria in their admissions process.

Assabet uses what it calls a “minimum criteria” lottery that still requires all students to apply for admission. It requires a letter of recommendation from a non-family member; considers serious disciplinary offenses such as long-term suspensions or expulsions for assaults on school personnel, possession of weapons or controlled substances, or other felonies; and apportions seats for each sending community within the district. Assabet also requires an interview.

Like Assabet, Worcester Tech requires all students to apply for admission. It uses two criteria – attendance and discipline – in its “tiered” lottery system. In addition, it apportions seats based on where applicants live in the City of Worcester.

In both instances, Assabet and Worcester Tech are still using criteria to determine a student’s eligibility for admission and for including them in a lottery. This is not the same as the interest-only, criteria-free blind lottery being proposed.

Finally, as the leaders of both schools will tell you, two years of data is simply not sufficient time to determine (1) if enrollment is actually increasing across all four protected classes and (2) if any increase is actually the result of the selective criteria-based lottery.

14. **What’s the solution? How do we get more students, including students from these four groups, into vocational-technical and agricultural high schools?**

- Reject the idea of a blind lottery. It doesn’t get to the root cause.
- Continue to thoughtfully review data and revise admissions policies annually based on access to complete admissions data sets.
- Make long-term investments in infrastructure to increase capacity. Create more seats in vocational schools, agricultural schools, and traditional academic and comprehensive high schools.
- Support legislation filed by Senator Paul Feeney, Rep. Frank Moran, and Rep. Adam Scanlon, “An Act to improve access, opportunity, and capacity in Massachusetts vocational-technical education.” This legislation, S.274/H.538, would provide the resources we need to add more seats by expanding existing schools and adding new ones. It would also ensure unfettered access to our middle schools so that we can

inform students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, about the value of vocational education.

15. **Is there support for S.274 and H.538?** Yes. Both bills appear to enjoy broad, bipartisan support in the Massachusetts Legislature. S.274 has 19 Senate sponsors and co-sponsors. The Senate has 40 members. H.538 has 55 House sponsors and co-sponsors. The House has 160 members. Both bills are awaiting action by the Joint Committee on Education.

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