



Massachusetts ESSA Plan: Executive Summary

Draft for discussion: January 18, 2017

Introduction

With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Congress maintained the Elementary and Secondary Education Act's original focus on advancing equity and excellence for all students, particularly disadvantaged and high need students. ESSA's priority areas—academic standards that represent readiness for the expectations of post-secondary education and employers; accountability, support, and improvement for schools; ensuring effective educators; supporting all students; and academic assessments that form the backbone of accountability for results—align closely to the Commonwealth's existing strategies.

Massachusetts has much to be proud of in K–12 public education. Our schools are recognized as best in class among the states, and our students perform at academic levels commensurate with the highest performing education systems in the world. Yet despite our overall success, substantial gaps in student outcomes persist in our state, and too often, those gaps are correlated with students' racial/ethnic identification, family economic background, disability status, and English language proficiency.

The goal of the Massachusetts public education system is to prepare all students for success after high school. This means that all students will be prepared to successfully complete credit-bearing college courses or certificate or workplace training programs, enter economically viable career pathways, and engage as active and responsible citizens in our democracy. Our work is to broaden students' opportunities and close gaps so that all students, regardless of background, are ready for the world that awaits them after high school.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education employs five strategies to advance towards this goal:

- 1) Strengthen standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessments
- 2) Promote educator development
- 3) Support social-emotional learning, health, and safety
- 4) Turn around the lowest performing districts and schools
- 5) Use technology and data to support student learning

Our particular focus is using these strategies to strengthen the quality of the instructional program students experience, as that is our major lever for ensuring success after high school for all students. This focus includes special attention to two areas where state performance has been stagnant—early grades literacy and middle grades mathematics—to ensure our students are well prepared with strong literacy and mathematics skills. It also includes special attention to students that have historically struggled to attain our proficiency standard— including English language learners, students receiving special education services, and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds—to ensure that we reach all students.

Massachusetts intends to use its ESSA implementation to refine, deepen, and accelerate our work on our five strategies and to promote coherence across our strategies through our focus on instructional quality. We will strengthen the design of our system of accountability to better identify those districts

and schools making the most and least progress towards our goals, and we will improve our assistance for those farthest behind. And we will help districts reconsider how they use their people, time, and fiscal resources in support of these objectives.

We have great confidence in the ability of our educators and our education system to successfully tackle the gaps in performance that exist. Our success in turning around schools and districts convinces us that low achievement in high poverty communities and neighborhoods is not pre-destined. We look forward to using the opportunity that Congress has provided through ESSA to build on what is working in Massachusetts, to curtail what is not working, and to accelerate our progress, particularly in our lowest performing schools and districts.

Our successes so far and the challenges that remain

By any measure, Massachusetts public school students are among the strongest performing in the nation and the world. Our students have scored at the top of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (“the nation’s report card”) tests in grades 4 and 8 English language arts and mathematics for over a decade—a result unparalleled in any other state. In the most recent international PISA test of 15 year olds, none of the 72 participating countries or territories performed higher than Massachusetts in reading, only one performed higher in science, and only 11 performed higher in mathematics. Our four-year high school graduation rates have improved steadily each year to 87.3 percent for the graduation cohort of 2015, and fewer than 5,400 students dropped out in the 2014–15 school year, down from nearly 10,000 in 2007–08.

While we have made strong strides in providing an excellent education in Massachusetts, we have still not attained our goal to prepare all students for success after high school. A few facts highlight the broader story:

- Although most economically viable career pathways today require at least some postsecondary education, about one-quarter of Massachusetts public high school graduates do not enroll in a college or university in the fall immediately after their high school graduation.
- Among Massachusetts public high school graduates who go on to enroll in Massachusetts public colleges, more than one-third take at least one remedial, non-credit-bearing course in their first semester in college.
- Student performance overall is strong compared to other states and nations, but some subjects and grade spans have not shown improvement. For example, proficiency in grade 3 reading has lingered at approximately 60 percent of students for more than a decade, as has proficiency in grade 6 mathematics.
- Students who are absent from school are not experiencing the curriculum and instruction that will help them become prepared for success. Yet 12 percent of students were chronically absent last year, meaning that they missed 10 percent or more of their days of enrollment in a public school.
- Exposure to a broad curriculum is an important part of a student’s overall educational development. Yet at the high school level, only 72 percent of students completed MassCore, the state’s recommended curriculum for college readiness. About 6 percent of elementary and

middle school students took no arts course in 2015–16; at the high school level, more than 50 percent took no arts.

- In 2016, 79 percent of grade 9 students completed and passed all their courses; 21 percent did not. In Massachusetts, students who do not pass all their grade 9 courses are 14 times more likely to not complete high school in four years.
- Exposure to college-level coursework while in high school has been demonstrated to increase the likelihood of success in college. Yet only 36 percent of Massachusetts public high school juniors and seniors took at least one Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate (college-level) course in 2016.
- Critically, the students who are not experiencing these opportunities are disproportionately our historically underserved student groups: students who are English language learners, receiving special education services, economically disadvantaged, and/or members of racial and ethnic minority groups.
- As a result, the cohort graduation rates for disadvantaged students in Massachusetts are 10 to 20 percentage points lower than our state averages, and these students are two to three times more likely to drop out.

Advancing and accelerating our state strategies will help us close these gaps and move closer to our goal of success after high school for all Massachusetts public school students.

Our state strategies and connections to ESSA

1) Strengthen standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessments

2) Promote educator development

Our expectations for student learning, the instructional program that students experience, and student success depend on the effectiveness of our educators. Thus, our first two strategies are fundamentally intertwined, and we benefit from their synergy when we tackle them together. Our aim is that all students attain ambitious academic content standards as outlined in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks by participating in an instructional program that well prepares them for the transition after high school, provides support for them as individuals, and ensures access to great teachers and administrators. To accomplish this, our priorities are to:

- Increase the effectiveness of first-year teachers to have an impact on students on day one and accelerate teacher impact in years two and three.
- Increase the quality of instruction such that instruction is aligned to the high expectations of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.
- Increase student access to the supports they need to be successful in achieving the standards in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

ESSA will help us advance this work by:

- **Increasing student access to an ambitious, engaging, well rounded curriculum.** We will support educators to understand the curriculum frameworks and employ high expectations for instruction. We will encourage districts to increase student access to high quality curriculum and enrichment opportunities that include the core subject areas, civics, the arts, foreign languages, career development education, and alternate pathways to preparation for success after high

school. We will provide guidance, technical assistance, and professional learning networks to support implementation of these initiatives, for both pre-service and in-service educators. This support will include targeted support for educators working with students with disabilities and English learners.

- **Focusing statewide efforts on early grades literacy and middle grades mathematics: areas where student performance is relatively weak or stagnant.** The early literacy focus of our state plan will ensure that students reach upper elementary grades with strong literacy skills. The middle grades mathematics focus will ensure that greater numbers of students reach high school ready to succeed in higher level mathematics. The state will prioritize these areas for supports and assistance for districts so that we can shift our trajectory upward.
- **Implementing more effective programs to serve the students farthest behind.** ESSA provides us with many opportunities to improve results for student groups that have historically struggled to meet proficiency standards: students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, English language learners, and students receiving special education services, in particular. Through grant funding, prioritized access to resources, and program initiatives at the state and local levels, we will accelerate their improvement.
- **Implementing the new MCAS test and supporting districts to develop common assessments.** The state will upgrade the MCAS to better measure the critical thinking skills students need for success in the 21st century. The new test, informally called Next Generation MCAS, will build upon the best aspects of the MCAS assessments that have served the Commonwealth well for the past two decades. The tests will be administered entirely online for grades 3 to 8 by 2019. We will also work with districts to develop assessments that are common across schools, grades, and subjects so that they can more effectively compare progress and provide consistent feedback to teachers on their students' performance.
- **Directing greater attention to students' learning experiences and their access to effective educators.** We will provide reports to districts that identify and compare rates at which student subgroups are taught by inexperienced, out-of-field, and ineffective teachers. Accompanying these tools will be support to districts in use of this tool through technical assistance, comprehensive video tutorials, and other resources.
- **Expanding the principal pipeline and promoting principal development.** The state will also provide support for all principals' understanding of the curriculum frameworks and will promote strong implementation, high instructional expectations, and effective feedback for educators. We will also work to build our cadre of principals prepared to serve in turnaround schools, so that we can accelerate the improvement of those schools through effective school leadership strategies.
- **Supporting implementation of an educator evaluation and development framework that provides educators with meaningful feedback.** The state will continue to work with districts to support strong implementation of the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework by providing guidance and resources, such as a calibration instrument that promotes shared understanding of expectations for strong instruction and conversations about effective feedback.
- **Strengthening educator preparation programs** to ensure the effectiveness of first-year teachers. We will continue to refine our educator preparation program review process to focus on outcomes rather than inputs, including implementing performance-based assessments for teacher and principal candidates. We will also encourage educator preparation programs and school districts to create structured partnerships that benefit the preparation program, the school district, and the first-year teacher.

- **Improve program and instructional quality in early learning.** In an effort to strengthen developmental and learning outcomes for our state’s youngest students, the state will continue to address program and instructional quality for public school programs in preschool through third grade. Additionally, the state will continue to build partnerships and alignment between public schools and community-based preschool and after-school and out-of-school time programs.

3) Support social- emotional learning, health, and safety

Academic and social-emotional skills and competencies are mutually reinforcing. Thus, preparing all students for success must include attending to their social emotional and health development. We will accomplish this by promoting systems and strategies that foster safe, positive, healthy, and inclusive whole-school learning environments that address students’ varied needs in order to improve educational outcomes for all students.

ESSA will help us advance this work by:

- **Ensuring a positive school climate** and providing safe, healthy and supportive learning environments for all students. We will provide training, technical assistance, access to resources and guidance to schools and districts as they consider using Title IV, Part A funds in this realm. We will provide support through the following initiatives and resources: Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Self-Assessment Tool, Rethinking Discipline, Bullying Prevention and Intervention, Substance Use and Abuse Prevention, and others.
- **Promoting social and emotional learning (SEL)** with the goal of creating conditions that will support statewide implementation of SEL in preschool through high school. Through participation in the Collaborating States Initiative facilitated by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), we will update and expand guidelines for implementing SEL curricula and explore ways to incorporate SEL into the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.
- **Promoting family engagement** as a key lever that contributes to positive outcomes for students. We will continue to find opportunities to provide training, technical assistance, resources, and guidance to schools and partners on effective family engagement strategies that promote the development of strong working relationships with families and appropriate community organizations to support students’ success.

4) Turn around the lowest performing districts and schools

The state’s lowest performing schools require evidence-based interventions and strong educators to support rapid improvement in their ability to prepare their students for success. Over the past seven years, Massachusetts has implemented an aggressive system of identification, support, and intervention in the lowest performing schools and districts. Under ESSA, we will continue to work with districts as they work to advance underperforming schools. Where districts are unable to implement effective improvement initiatives, we will utilize our authority under state statute to intervene.

The new accountability system, described below, will help us prioritize which schools most need state assistance to improve student outcomes. The accountability system will identify the lowest performing 5 percent of schools, schools with the lowest performing subgroups, and high schools with four-year graduation rates below 67 percent so that those schools can be put first for assistance.

We will support the lowest performing schools by:

- Establish a school-wide community of practice through leadership, shared responsibility, and professional collaboration;
- Employ intentional practices for improving instruction;
- Providing student-specific supports and instruction to all students; and
- Providing appropriate social, emotional, and behavioral supports in order to create a safe, orderly, and respectful learning environment for students and teachers.

Research demonstrates that formerly low performing schools in Massachusetts that have changed their trajectories implement these four practices with fidelity. They are the cornerstones of our turnaround strategy and guide all our interactions with our lowest performing schools and districts.

ESSA will help us advance this work by:

- **Providing direct expert assistance, funding and research-based resources, and preferred access to professional development.** These might include coaching, professional development focused on instructional leadership and curriculum development, planning and program implementation support, and data analysis assistance.
- **Intervening in chronically underperforming districts and schools.** In instances when all other avenues to implement ambitious and accelerated reforms have been exhausted in turnaround schools and districts, and when it is in the best interest of students, the state will place districts and schools under state receivership. At present, three school districts and four schools are under receivership.

5) Use technology and data to support teaching and learning

ESE seeks to improve the state’s data infrastructure and promote a culture of effective data and technology use in districts and schools. We will accomplish this by investing in efforts to increase access to technology, streamlining reporting requirements, and providing resources and tools to advance effective data use and personalized learning.

ESSA will help us advance this work by:

- **Shining a light on equity and access concerns through data reporting.** ESSA requires additional reporting on school-level expenditures and access to effective educators that will provide districts with valuable information and comparisons about how they allocate resources to their lowest performing students and schools.
- **Building technological capacity and infrastructure.** ESSA funds will supplement existing state efforts to bridge the digital divide that exists among schools across the Commonwealth and expand access to high quality digital learning opportunities, particularly for students in rural, remote, and underserved areas. We will also continue to implement the Schools Interoperability Framework to streamline and automate data reporting for districts.
- **Updating and improving our Edwin Analytics tools.** Edwin Analytics is the system by which the state provides data reports to districts and schools. We will update the Edwin Analytics reports to report on data from the state’s Next Generation MCAS test and will continue to add to the bank of reports available to help districts better understand their student data. We will also add and update reports for educator preparation programs to strengthen their support for aspiring teachers and administrators.
- **Supporting high-quality professional development for educators to personalize learning and improve academic achievement through technology.** Through a public-private partnership, we will catalyze personalized learning in the Commonwealth to better prepare students for their future. Among other activities, the partnership will help schools pilot projects that allow

students to progress through the curriculum based on demonstrated competency on the expectations set forth in the curriculum frameworks.

Other work to support success after high school

The agency also undertakes a number of other initiatives designed to support student success after high school. These programs improve the quality of students' high school experiences, including increasing graduation rates, exposing students to career and technical skills, and promoting postsecondary access.

ESSA will help us advance this work by:

- **Supporting use of our Early Warning Indicator System.** The state produces reports that predict the likelihood of students successfully attaining their next academic milestone throughout their K–12 and postsecondary careers. ESSA will allow us to continue to help districts identify students that are likely to be off track and provide resources to implement effective interventions.
- **Providing graduation supports for student subgroups.** ESE is developing specific tools and supports to help schools and districts increase graduation rates for students with disabilities and English learners, whose graduation rates have historically lagged behind state averages.
- **Expanding postsecondary access.** ESE continues to promote the development of early college models and partners with organizations across the state to increase the number of graduates that enroll in postsecondary education or training.
- **Expanding access to career development education.** The agency provides funding and technical assistance to schools, districts, and workforce investment boards to increase the number of students who participate in meaningful work-based learning while in high school.

Accountability

The state's accountability system is our primary way of measuring each school's and district's progress on attaining the state goal of success after high school for all students. ESSA provides us with an opportunity to refine our accountability system to better align it with the agency's goals and strategies. This will allow us to broaden the dimensions of performance we consider, as well as to improve our system for assisting those schools and districts farthest behind in attaining the state's goals.

Our state's existing accountability system rests primarily on student achievement and growth and graduation data, with an emphasis on closing gaps for historically low performing subgroups. These data are fundamental to the educational enterprise. If students are not proficient on grade-level material and are not graduating, then schools and districts are not doing their jobs. And if not all students are performing well, the accountability system should highlight those gaps.

In our proposed new accountability system, these data remain core measures of school and district results, and opportunity gaps for high needs students remain of paramount consideration. In addition, we are expanding the measures included in the system to create a more comprehensive picture of student opportunity and outcomes, and we are increasing the value placed on improvement. By doing so, we intend to promote a more well-rounded view of school performance and to encourage schools and districts to focus on increasing equitable access to educational opportunities. These measures also more strongly connect to our agency strategies.

In keeping with the focus on excellence and equity, our proposed new system will prioritize strong outcomes for all students and closing gaps for high needs students. High needs students are defined as

students who are current or former English language learners, receive special education services, and/or are economically disadvantaged. Proposed measures to be included in the system are as follows.

	Status for ALL students	Gap closing for HIGH NEEDS students
Core measures	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ELA and math scaled score 2. Science performance index 3. ELA and math student growth percentile 4. ACCESS progress (English language learners) 5. Graduation and dropout rates 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ELA, math, and science gap reduction 2. ELA and math student growth percentile 3. ACCESS growth (English language learners) 4. Graduation and dropout rate gap reduction
Additional measures	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Chronic student absenteeism 2. Grade 9 course passing 3. Access to advanced coursework 4. Access to the arts 5. Breadth of curriculum 6. School climate 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improvement in chronic absenteeism 2. Improvement in grade 9 course passing 3. Improvement in access to advanced coursework 4. Improvement in access to the arts 5. Improvement in breadth of curriculum 6. Improvement in school climate

These measures would be aggregated into an overall school performance index. Per the federal law, the core measures outlined above would be given much greater weight in the index than the additional measures.

This index would be used to create a school percentile, which the state would use as the first step for classifying schools into performance levels. Each level would have an associated percentile range. But, the system for designating performance levels would not be entirely relative. Every year the state would also set out performance targets based on the measures in the index for each of the school performance levels. If a school met or exceeded those targets, it could attain that level even if its percentile would have otherwise placed it lower. In this way the expectations for performance are clear and known ahead of time for all schools, and performance level designations do not depend solely on the performance of other schools.

A district’s level would be determined by the overall performance of its students, rather than the level of its lowest performing school as it is currently. Additional measures of school and district performance beyond those in the formal accountability system would be included on a public report card to provide further insight and comparative data to the public.

Per the requirements of the federal law, the lowest performing 5 percent of schools and high schools with four-year graduation rates below 67 percent will be identified for comprehensive support and improvement. Schools above the bottom 5 percent overall but that have very low performing subgroups will be identified for targeted support and improvement. These schools, along with schools nearing those categories, will implement a turnaround plan to improve student performance and will be eligible for a wide variety of supports and services aligned to our evidence-based practices for school turnaround, as described above.

An important caveat to this section of our plan is that we do not currently have state data on several of the indicators we have proposed. Most notably, we are just beginning a new statewide assessment

program in the 2016–17 school year so do not yet have data on student performance under the new assessment system. Until we have data and can conduct simulations for combining multiple indicators to generate the summary measures of school and district performance, we present this section as a conceptual framework for the accountability system we plan to launch at the end of the 2017–18 school year. The academic and other indicators that we generate at the close of the 2016–17 school year will serve as a baseline for the new system.

Strategic resource use

In an era of increasing demands for public services as the state’s population ages, it is unlikely that new financial resources will be coming to the education sector in future years. Districts must find ways to get more out of the people, time, and fiscal resources they already have to help improve outcomes for students, including by reducing inequities in the allocation of resources to different types of students. To this end, the state has created a new Office of Resource Allocation Strategy and Planning to develop new tools and supports for districts to rethink how they use their resources.

ESSA will help us advance this work by:

- **Allowing a consolidated district application for federal education grants consistent with state and local priorities.** Currently districts apply separately for each of the funding sources provided for under ESSA. By creating a consolidated application connected to our state strategies, we will encourage districts to use their federal resources more strategically towards improving outcomes for all students.
- **Enhancing reports on school-level expenditures.** Massachusetts already collects school-level per-pupil data and reports on them in a limited way, but we will use ESSA as an opportunity to advance our work in this area. We have already begun pilot-testing Resource Allocation and District Action Reports that use these data to provide comparisons and insights on how districts use their resources. These reports will be available statewide during the 2017–18 school year.
- **Requiring resource use reviews in the lowest performing schools.** The turnaround plan for schools identified for comprehensive or targeted support and intervention will include an analysis of inequities in access to resources for students in those schools, to inform the strategies included in the plan.

Ongoing review and refinement

In developing this state plan, we benefited greatly from the voluminous feedback we received from our stakeholders. We collected feedback over the course of nearly 12 months, during which we connected with nearly 200 stakeholder groups, along with hundreds of educators, parents, and students. We also conducted five public forums in fall 2016 with more than 250 participants; participated in close to 100 community meetings and presentations; and received more than 1,500 responses to our stakeholder feedback surveys. We made numerous revisions to our plans as a result of this engagement. We are confident that we have developed a plan that is both responsive to our stakeholders’ interests and ambitious in its goals for our state’s students.

However, a plan is only as good as its implementation. Our Office of Planning and Research (OPR) will take the lead on ESSA implementation for the agency. Over the past six-plus years, OPR has employed a sophisticated approach to monitoring and improving the quality of our implementation and refining our improvement strategies over time. This approach identifies key initiatives that support each agency strategy and develops specific plans, benchmarks, and outcomes for each. We dedicate three ESE staff to monitoring the implementation of these plans and assisting program offices with analytical and

strategic capacity to extend their work. We will continue to use this method of review and continuous improvement to advance our work.

We will promote continuous improvement in districts by taking advantage of new resources we have already developed for district strategic planning, along with the consolidated federal grant application described above. Our Planning for Success model for district strategic planning involves three steps: creating a plan, aligning systems to the plan, and implementing the plan (including evaluating and monitoring progress). We will encourage districts to use this planning model as the structure underlying the plan we will require as part of their annual federal grant application, which will begin to help districts to establish local evaluation practices where they do not already exist. Over time we will add in more supports to help districts evaluate their progress, particularly in conducting formal evaluations where needed as part of the language throughout ESSA that requires evidence-based interventions. This work will be driven by our new Office of Resource Allocation Strategy and Planning within OPR, which has responsibility for promoting strategic resource use and grant coordination in districts.

As we refine our implementation of our plan, stakeholder voice will continue to play a prominent role. We already hold regular meetings with many of our stakeholder groups, including superintendents, principals, teachers, union leadership, school committee members, state board members, state legislators, parents, students, and so forth. We will continue these conversations and also offer additional opportunities for stakeholders to provide input, particularly at key junctures when we are considering significant changes to an element of the plan.