

District Review Best Practices Summary (2022-23)

**Purpose:**

This report summarizes some of the strengths, areas for growth, and recommendations included in the 2022-23 district review reports issued by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). These findings highlight key practices in the areas of district leadership and governance, curriculum and instruction, assessment, human resources and professional development, student support, and financial and asset management that support strong district systems and student outcomes. This fulfills DESE’s statutory requirement to disseminate a report on best practices identified in each district review cycle (M.G.L. ch.15 §55A).

**Format:**

This document highlights themes across our findings in each of the district review standards. These themes are matched to an indicator and a key practice drawn from DESE’s [District Standards and Indicators](https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/district-standards-indicators.pdf). Beneath each key practice, there is a table with excerpts from district reviews in which a district implemented the practice well (strengths) and a chart with examples from reports that identified relevant areas for growth. These areas for growth are paired with DESE’s corresponding recommendation to the district around how they might operationalize the key practice. Finally, below the tables, there is a short summary explaining why the key practice should be prioritized. Although these strengths, areas for growth, and recommendations are taken directly from district review reports issued in 2022-23, all district names and other identifiers have been removed.

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# Leadership and Governance

**Stakeholder engagement in district and school improvement planning** and **data-driven resource allocation** were commonly identified areas for growth under the Leadership and Governance standard among districts reviewed in 2022-23. The following section highlights key practices that districts can leverage to strengthen their work in these areas.

## District and School Improvement Planning

**Key Practice**: District leaders, school leaders, teachers, students, families, and community are engaged in developing and implementing the district’s plan/strategy and annual action plan.

*Some districts implement this key practice already. Below are selected strengths identified in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Strengths** |
| Stakeholders at all levels are engaged in the development of clearly aligned district and school improvement plans. |
| District and school plans are developed in a clear, thoughtful process that is grounded in data and incorporates representation and input from staff, families, and students. |

*However, many districts are still working to implement this key practice. Below are selected growth areas related to this key practice and DESE’s corresponding recommendations issued in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Areas for Growth** | **DESE’s Recommendations** |
| Outreach to families and staff to leverage school councils for meaningful participation in policy development and decision-making | The district should seek to better leverage parental involvement in policy development and decision-making by first identifying existing barriers to participation in school councils where activity and inclusivity are lacking, and then adjusting engagement accordingly. |
| Meaningful engagement of families and school staff in school and district improvement planning | The district should identify meaningful opportunities for teachers, students, and other stakeholders to have a greater voice in district-level decision-making and School Improvement Planning. |

*Collaborative decision-making processes result in higher levels of stakeholder buy-in and can strengthen program and policy implementation. Additionally, engaging students and families in decision-making increases the likelihood that school and district improvement plans represent and address the community’s needs.*

## Budget Development

**Key Practice**: Resources including funds, staff, materials, and time are allocated to ensure improved performance, opportunities, and outcomes for all students, with an emphasis on equity and effectiveness to close achievement, access, and opportunity gaps for students of color, economically disadvantaged students, English learners, and students with disabilities.

*Some districts implement this key practice already. Below are selected strengths identified in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Strengths** |
| The district consistently considers student data and high needs populations when developing the budget. |
| The district has a well-defined, clear, and transparent process for financial planning and budget development. |

*Below are selected growth areas related to this key practice and DESE’s corresponding recommendations issued in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Areas for Growth** | **DESE’s Recommendations** |
| Using data to inform budget decisions, in particular disaggregated student data | The district should establish consistent expectations for using data to inform budget decisions, in particular disaggregated student data, to better evaluate whether the programs or initiatives that receive funding are resulting in positive impacts at the school or district level. |
| Using data, particularly disaggregated student data, to identify student needs and incorporate those needs into budget decisions | The district should directly connect its budget plans and decision-making to data around student opportunity and achievement gaps, and should reallocate existing resources where necessary to ensure its limited resources are used equitably and efficiently. |

*By connecting resource allocation decisions to student needs and evidence-based practices, district leaders can strategically allocate resources to support equitable outcomes. Doing so, however, requires strong district data practices, enrollment forecasting, and clear expectations for all budget owners. Therefore, budget development, like all district processes, is deeply connected to data collection and use, district and school improvement planning, stakeholder engagement, and the implementation of district initiatives.*

# Curriculum and Instruction

**Curriculum selection processes** and **instructional coaching** were commonly identified areas for growth under the Curriculum and Instruction standard among districts reviewed in 2022-23. The following section highlights key practices that districts can leverage to strengthen their work in these areas.

## Curriculum Selection and Use

**Key Practice**: Curriculum reviews are regular, rigorous, transparent, consistent, and inclusive.

*Some districts implement this key practice already. Below are selected strengths identified in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Strengths** |
| The well-documented curricular review process is thoroughly structured to ensure regular, rigorous, inclusive curricular reviews for all core content areas, including the planning and implementation of curricula. |
| The district has a well-defined process for critically reviewing and adopting high-quality curricular materials that includes teacher input and feedback. |
| There is clear alignment between the curriculum selection process and district’s strategic plan, including an emphasis on DEI. |

*Below are selected growth areas related to this key practice and DESE’s corresponding recommendations issued in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Areas for Growth** | **DESE’s Recommendations** |
| A need for support in implementing curricular initiatives, including instructional support | The district should consider ways to collaborate with its teachers when implementing new curricular initiatives to ensure fidelity and instructional support. |
| Transparency of processes used to review and select curricula | The district should revise its curriculum review process to incorporate teacher input and feedback in decision-making and ensure transparency in curriculum selection decisions with staff. |
| Documentation of curricular review and selection processes | In future curriculum decisions, the district should explicitly link final decisions to pre-established criteria and feedback from teachers – and then disseminate that rationale. |

*High-quality curriculum is foundational to providing students with high-quality instruction. However, the ways in which teachers implement curricula are as important as the content and materials provided. To elicit teacher buy-in and promote strong implementation, districts should ensure that their curriculum review processes center on teachers, as these professionals have deep knowledge of the content and the instructional methods that will be most effective and culturally relevant for their students.*

## Classroom Instruction

**Key Practice**: Instructional decisions are informed by high-quality feedback from students, peers, coaches, and evaluators.

*Some districts implement this key practice already. Below are selected strengths identified in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Strengths** |
| Curriculum coordinators support the implementation and alignment of curricular materials at the elementary level. |
| District provides multiple forms of support for initiatives, including professional development, book clubs, and staff surveys. |
| Teachers collect student feedback to inform adjustments to instructional practice. |

*Below are selected growth areas related to this key practice and DESE’s corresponding recommendations issued in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Areas for Growth** | **DESE’s Recommendations** |
| Increased district level support for instructional coaching to support high quality instruction along a continuum of student need | The district should consider increasing district-level support for instructional coaching to support high quality instruction along a continuum of student need. |
| Access to nonevaluative coaching across all school levels to support differentiation and high-quality instruction | The district should expand non-evaluative coaching across school levels, whether with curriculum coordinators, other administrators, or fellow teachers. |

*Feedback is essential to improving one’s instructional skills. Teachers who receive regular coaching can become more effective instructors because they receive personalized feedback in a supportive environment. Because instructional coaching is job-embedded and differentiated, it can be more effective than traditional professional development. Therefore, many districts are working to organize their resources around effective coaching models.*

# Assessment

**Using assessment data to inform instruction** and **sharing student progress with families** were commonly identified areas for growth under the Assessment standard among districts reviewed in 2022-23. The following section highlights key practices that districts can leverage to strengthen their work in these areas.

## Data Use

**Key Practice**: District leaders oversee systems and structures that support the regular use of data to inform decision making at the classroom level.

*Some districts implement this key practice already. Below are selected strengths identified in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Strengths** |
| The district has formalized opportunities for school staff to review and discuss student data (e.g., data meetings, PLCs, SIT process). |
| District and school leaders review student performance data to identify goals for closing achievement, access, and opportunity gaps. |
| School leaders collaborate with curriculum coordinators to use student assessment data to systemically improve instruction at the school and classroom levels. |
| The district provides professional development and specific protocols designed to inform educators’ data use practices, especially using iReady data. |

*Below are selected growth areas related to this key practice and DESE’s corresponding recommendations issued in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Areas for Growth** | **DESE’s Recommendations** |
| Insufficient time allotment for data review, especially at the secondary level | The district should review secondary staff schedules and, where logistically possible, expand time for departments to review data, identify student gaps, and target future instruction. |
| Providing adequate time for teachers to analyze and collaborate around student data | The district should establish structures that allow teachers the opportunity to analyze their own student data and collaborate with peers to identify patterns and adjust instructional practices. |
| Improved systems and structures that support the regular use of data to inform decision making at the classroom level | The district should aim to incorporate all student service providers, such as ESL specialists or interventionists, in data-team meetings, so that all staff working with a student can reflect on student data and align on strategy. |

*Advancing student achievement requires that educators identify gaps in understanding and implement instruction to remedy them. Without strong data practices, however, teachers cannot perform this task effectively. Therefore, districts should create data habits and provide educators with the necessary data analysis tools.*

## Sharing Results

**Key Practice**: The district provides timely and effective information to families about their students’ progress toward attaining grade-level standards and whether they are on track to being college and career ready.

*Some districts implement this key practice already. Below are selected strengths identified in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Strengths** |
| The district makes student data (classroom assignments, assessments, and progress reports) available to parents online and during conferences, providing translation when necessary. |
| The district regularly communicates with families of elementary school students regarding student progress, including providing updates on benchmark assessments and accomplishments related to positive behaviors. |

*Below are selected growth areas related to this key practice and DESE’s corresponding recommendations issued in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Areas for Growth** | **DESE’s Recommendations** |
| Sharing data and assessment results with students and families consistently and effectively | The district should shift to a more proactive approach to sharing data with students and families, including establishing school-wide structures, staff expectations, and timelines for communicating student performance data, including attendance and credit-earning information. |
| Need for earlier communication to parents about student performance declines and data availability | The district should set expectations around proactively communicating with parents when students' gaps are identified through progress monitoring, so that families can collaborate with teachers to quickly address any challenges in student learning. |
| Systems for disseminating data to parents and students not well known to these stakeholders | The district should support schools in intentionally spreading knowledge about their existing systems for parental communication at multiple points throughout the year to ensure parents are regularly pushed information about student progress. |

*As students recover academically from the pandemic, families want to understand their children’s progress so they can track growth and provide supports at home. However, many districts only share academic updates a few times each year. To keep parents and guardians better informed, districts should set clear expectations around sharing data and support schools and teachers in making data accessible for families.*

# Human Resources and Professional Development

**Evaluation feedback** and **teacher** **leadership development** were commonly identified areas for growth under the Human Resources and Professional Development standard among districts reviewed in 2022-23. The following section highlights key practices that districts can leverage to strengthen their work in these areas.

## Supervision, Evaluation, and Educator Development

**Key Practice**: Supervision and evaluation systems prioritize opportunities for educators to receive high-quality feedback (specific, timely, and actionable) that improves their practice.

*Some districts implement this key practice already. Below are selected strengths identified in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Strengths** |
| The district invests in professional development for evaluators to increase equitable practices and effective feedback through the evaluation process to improve teaching and learning. |
| Consistent documentation of multiple sources of evidence to support progress toward evaluation goals across educators is occurring. |

*Below are selected growth areas related to this key practice and DESE’s corresponding recommendations issued in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Areas for Growth** | **DESE’s Recommendations** |
| Need for more consistently actionable feedback on teacher evaluation reports | The district should aim to increase the level of actionable, constructive feedback provided in evaluations – particularly offering areas for improvement for all administrators and offering actionable feedback more consistently for educators. |
| Providing educators with specific, actionable feedback on strengths and areas for improvement | District and school leaders should ensure that evaluators are consistently providing educators with specific, actionable feedback on strengths and areas for improvement, and that educators are aware of the supports and opportunities available to improve this practice. |
| Addressing challenges with evaluator caseloads so that teachers receive high-quality, actionable, and timely feedback on strengths and areas of improvement | The district should review its evaluation and performance processes and ensure that they provide administrators with sufficient time to give teachers frequent, actionable feedback that allows them to improve their instruction. |

*Specific, actionable feedback on areas for growth is essential to educator and administrator improvement. The teacher and administrator evaluation systems provide opportunities for evaluators to provide this information and to steer their staff toward resources and professional development that can improve their practice.*

## Recognition, Leadership Development, and Advancement

**Key Practice**: The district provides differentiated roles and opportunities for growth, including distributed leadership opportunities and an articulated career ladder, such that it can effectively build leadership skills and retain effective professional staff and maximize their impact.

*Some districts implement this key practice already. Below are selected strengths identified in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Strengths** |
| There are differentiated roles and opportunities for growth, including distributed leadership opportunities to build leadership skills and retain and maximize the impact of effective professional staff. |
| The district offers lead teacher positions, mentor teacher positions, and teacher of the year awards for high-performing teachers. |
| District staff are continually encouraged to participate as professional development session facilitators or mentors to build leadership skills. |

*Below are selected growth areas related to this key practice and DESE’s corresponding recommendations issued in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Areas for Growth** | **DESE’s Recommendations** |
| Raising teachers’ awareness of the leadership opportunities available to them | The district should actively promote opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles and consider additional ways for teachers participate in decision-making processes. |
| Opportunities for growth through leadership development and advancement | The district should establish additional pathways for teachers to take on new leadership opportunities, to develop a pipeline of future leaders and to benefit teachers’ personal growth. |
| Creation of an articulated career ladder | The district should develop a formal leadership pipeline that provides staff with opportunities for career advancement within the district. |

*Great teachers are assets to schools, and districts should leverage teachers’ talents to help solve the complex challenges they face. Teacher leadership supports a culture of continuous improvement in which educators invest in their development outside of the classroom so they can be more effective when working with students. Furthermore, meaningful teacher leadership and development opportunities can promote teacher retention by making teachers feel valued and invested in their collective responsibility to serve students.*

# Student Support

**Creating safe and affirming learning environments** and **evaluating tiered systems of support** were commonly identified areas for growth under the Student Support standard among districts reviewed in 2022-23. The following section highlights key practices that districts can leverage to strengthen their work in these areas.

## Safe and Supportive School Climate and Culture

**Key Practice**: The district ensures that all school and classroom environments are supportive, culturally responsive, welcoming, respectful, trauma-sensitive, gender- and sexuality-inclusive, reflective of the community and students’ cultures and identities, and well-maintained.

*Some districts implement this key practice already. Below are selected strengths identified in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Strengths** |
| The district values and provides opportunities for student voice, especially related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. |
| The district demonstrates a strong commitment to developing the cultural competency of its staff. |
| The district has implemented restorative practices, mindfulness, and other positive behavioral approaches. |
| The district prioritizes student support, well-being, and belongingness as critical to academic success. |

*Below are selected growth areas related to this key practice and DESE’s corresponding recommendations issued in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Areas for Growth** | **DESE’s Recommendations** |
| Improving the high school’s culture and climate so that all students feel safe, supported, and welcomed | The district should diagnose and address issues of school culture and climate at the high school, so that all students feel safe, comfortable, and welcome – regardless of their background. |
| Providing staff with more professional development on diversity, equity, and inclusion | The district should further develop its professional development programming to include focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. |

*When students feel seen, heard, and affirmed at school, they are more able to build academic and social-emotional competencies. For students of color, English learners, and LGBTQIA+ students this is especially important because these children and youth are often marginalized by the dominant culture. By incorporating culturally responsive teaching strategies and actively building safe and supportive school communities, districts can help ensure that all students receive an equitable education and thrive in school.*

## Tiered Systems of Support

**Key Practice**: The district ensures that school leadership teams systematically evaluate the effectiveness of tiered systems of support, including evaluating the effectiveness of Tier 1 instruction, to inform planning.

*Some districts implement this key practice already. Below are selected strengths identified in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Strengths** |
| District staff use data to identify student need for supports, particularly at the classroom level. |
| The district’s MTSS process actively involves parents to get their input and feedback |
| Professional development is aligned with district initiatives such as UDL and social-emotional learning. |
| A committee of school-based educators led the most recent DCAP revision. |

*Below are selected growth areas related to this key practice and DESE’s corresponding recommendations issued in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Areas for Growth** | **DESE’s Recommendations** |
| Clear structures to evaluate tiered systems of support at the school and district levels | The district should initiate and establish a regular review process of its tiered system of supports to ensure that students’ needs are being addressed effectively. |
| Implementation of intervention plans in-line with district WIN training | The district should refine the implementation of its WIN block to ensure consistency across schools regarding the implementation and follow-up of interventions. |
| Ensuring that the IST focuses on all areas of students’ needs (e.g., academic, attendance, behavioral, and social-emotional) at the secondary level | The district should review its IST processes at the secondary level to ensure equal focus on all areas of students’ needs. |

*While tiered systems of support can ensure that all students receive what they need to achieve, districts and schools should regularly evaluate the extent to which their tiered supports are successfully doing so. Therefore, schools need systems in place that will allow them to provide students with the most relevant and effective instruction within each of the three tiers.*

# Financial and Asset Management

**Aligning district budgets with improvement plans** and **planning ahead for budget shortfalls** were commonly identified areas for growth under the Financial and Asset Management standard among districts reviewed in 2022-23. The following section highlights key practices that districts can leverage to strengthen their work in these areas.

## Budget Documentation and Reporting

**Key Practice**: Budget documents are explicitly connected to district and school improvement planning.

*Some districts implement this key practice already. Below are selected strengths identified in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Strengths** |
| The district maintains consistency between school goals highlighted as driving budget requests and district improvement goals. |
| The budget has explicit connection to school improvement planning. |

*Below are selected growth areas related to this key practice and DESE’s corresponding recommendations issued in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Areas for Growth** | **DESE’s Recommendations** |
| Alignment of publicly available budget documents to the district’s strategic plan | The district should align each of its budget requests with priorities from its strategic plan, to better get a sense of which priorities are funded and which are not. The district may also want to consider conducting program evaluations on its investments, to ensure that is getting a strong return on investment. |
| Reference to strategic plan initiatives in budget documentation | The district should include reference to its strategic priorities in its FY2025 budget documentation. |
| Connecting budget priorities explicitly to school and district improvement planning and student performance data | In FY25 and beyond, the district should engage in a process of strategic budgeting that is rooted in student data and priorities from the Strategic Plan or Strategic Improvement Plans. |

*Connecting district and school improvement plans to the district budget helps leaders ensure that strategic goals are funded and prioritized for resource allocation. Additionally, this practice helps districts communicate their priorities with the public, showing that district leaders are taking their district and school improvement plans seriously and are prepared to resource key initiatives.*

## Adequate Budget

**Key Practice**: The community provides sufficient general appropriation funds each year to meet or exceed required net school spending and cover other costs such as transportation.

*Some districts implement this key practice already. Below are selected strengths identified in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Strengths** |
| The district has a strong working relationship with town leaders, as exemplified by the first-ever passing of a debt-exclusion override to fund the building of a new middle school. |
| There is increased funding for school safety, academics, cleanliness, and organizational efficiency. |
| The district recently obtained an increase in funding to support high needs students through a variety of sources. |
| The district effectively procures and uses funding sources outside the budget to support student performance, opportunities, and outcomes. |

*Below are selected growth areas related to this key practice and DESE’s corresponding recommendations issued in 2022-23 district reviews.*

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| **Areas for Growth** | **DESE’s Recommendations** |
| Planning for when ESSER funds conclude as the district anticipates that the town appropriation will not be enough to cover the current level of programming | The district should collaborate with town officials and community groups to proactively plan and budget for the 2025 fiscal year, when ESSER funds will be exhausted. |
| Increased collaboration between district leaders, the school committee, and the city to plan for and address potential changes and/or shortfalls within the budget | With its new budget grounded in student need, the district should work with its municipal counterparts to collaborate early and prepare for any anticipated shortfalls. |
| Developing a budgeting system that accounts for changing market conditions after the budget is finalized | The district should consider examining its resource allocation practices for potential funding inequities between schools, specifically focusing on ensuring that school funding levels equitably support the staffing and programming needs of each school. |

*When ESSER funding ends in 2024, many districts will face a funding cliff that could affect their programming. While some districts have other revenue sources that can help fill the gaps, all districts must think strategically about how they will allocate limited funds while maintaining high-quality programs.*