Accountability and Assistance Advisory Council (AAAC) Meeting Notes
May 17, 2023 (9:30 – 11:00am)
Virtual Meeting (Zoom)

*AAAC members in attendance:* Mike Barth, Noah Berger, Tamatha Bibbo, Kerry Donahue, Heidi Driscoll, Barish Icin, Ed Lambert, Craig Martin, Tim Piwowar, Ron Sanborn, Marc Smith

*DESE staff in attendance:* Lindsey Bryant, Charmie Curry, Erica Gonzales, Robbie Havdala, Kara Higgins, Alison Stevens, Yu-Mui Wan

The following notes were recorded during the whole-group discussion between Council members, and a copy of the presentation can be found at https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/councils/sda/.

# Welcome, Introductions, and Review of Discussion Norms

Council Co-Chair Tim Piwowar called the meeting to order at 9:33 a.m. Council Co-Chair Piwowar referred members to the slides that were shared with the Council prior to the meeting. He reviewed meeting courtesies around using video, muting when not speaking, and monitoring airtime.

Council Co-Chair Piwowar asked members to introduce themselves and their affiliation with the Council. Erica Gonzales, Associate Commissioner of Data and Accountability, and Charmie Curry, Associate Commissioner of the Statewide System of Support (SSoS) introduced staff from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) who were present.

Council Co-Chair Piwowar thanked Council members Craig Martin and Mike Barth for their service to the Council, as they are stepping down from the Council. Council Co-Chairs Piwowar and Heidi Driscoll then reviewed the discussion norms and meeting protocols. Ms. Gonzales reminded the group that DESE staff take notes during the meeting.

# Assistance Updates: Progress Monitoring Pilot

Dr. Curry opened by discussing DESE’s coherence guidebook. The guidebook includes systems-levels paths to deeper learning which leaders can use to promote equitable outcomes for students. The work which SSoS has been focusing on provides schools that are requiring assistance with a progress monitoring system that aligns supports that focus on deeper learning, culturally and linguistically sustaining practices, and that are centered on equity and racial equity. The SSoS team plans to use this progress monitoring system to communicate the impact of its work – particularly for those districts and school that require assistance.

In terms of process and timeline, Dr. Curry noted how DESE staff spent a lot of time observing classrooms in underperforming schools and engaging in student focus groups, and has also used previous site visits to undergird this work. She identified some of the individuals and vendors supporting the work, as well as parents, a researcher, and others. The goal of this chief stakeholder group is to serve students equitably, and to be the voice that ensures the pilot and tools will meet the needs of schools.

Dr. Curry mentioned the underperforming school site visits this year – there are 17 guidebook-aligned indicators which focus on equity. Some of the sample indicators included effective instructional practices, the existence of data systems, and a data-informed culture.

Dr. Curry then asked the Council about the types of information that the Council wishes to see to ensure that schools are serving students equitably – particularly students of color, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities. She also asked Council members what type of information and feedback would be most helpful to receive through an external site visit and feedback process.

A Council member asked how this interacts with the statewide accountability system. The list of indicators and measures, they noted, is very different from how the state accountability system measures success. They wondered whether these are two separate metrics and asked how the progress monitoring system interacts with the accountability system the state uses. Dr. Curry responded that, from the perspective of SSoS, in terms of how schools are equitably serving students, the data could have implications for performance, and indicators give a clearer sense of teaching and learning specifically. The aims of those two systems are similar, according to Dr. Curry, and on the assistance side, their model is used to provide support and specificity of information to schools that are identified as low performing. The Council member replied that they found it helpful that Dr. Curry’s system is starting from the question around equity.

One Council member stated that the previously speaking Council member’s question got at the heart of their own question: it sounds like there will be a continued reliance on MCAS scores and data, but also thinking about expectations for students. As a follow-up question, they asked if, outside site visits and discussions, SSoS is thinking about how those expectations can be assessed. Dr. Curry replied that one of the important values for SSoS is the triangulation of data. There are multiple values and one of the aims is to gather as much information, not just for status, but to improve the learning environment. Focus groups, gathering information about student sense of belonging, and the conditions that need to be in place in school to thrive provide an opportunity for triangulation, so there is no reliance on one data source.

A Council member thought the metrics are spot-on, and then asked what DESE is looking at to assess, what do they see as enrollment trends, and what would be most helpful for an external visit. They wondered what DESE sees from an external perspective that leads to disproportionality, what are systems-level changes that could be made, and how can districts get the leverage to make those changes – in the same ways that a NEASC report helps moves a community forward. They reminded the group that, sometimes, school staff get mired in the details, so these reviews help districts look at the systems-level.

One Council member asked whether DESE is assessing the curriculum, whether the books resemble the student body, and whether data is used. A lot of aspects in a school are opt-in, according to the member. Other important factors they cited included hiring practices, a belonging survey, culture-climate surveys to identify gaps, participation rates (what are students getting involved in?), discipline practices, restorative practices, attendance rates, screeners for academics or mental health, and what counseling services are available. Those are some of the data that they would want to triangulate. To the second question, the Council member thought having those “look for’s” – what equitable schools look like, according to research – would be helpful, to see if those qualities are visible when you walk the halls, the cafeteria, the classrooms, and look at the level of questioning in classes.

One Council member thanked Dr. Curry for thinking about high-quality schools for all students. They asked how the criteria would be used in a planning process, particularly if a school received an accountability designation, and how it interacts with flexibilities in statute. Dr. Curry responded that, on the assistance side, historically schools have used a district submission to develop an instructional priority that is concrete, narrow, and addresses equitable outcomes. Dr. Curry said they intend for those reports to be clear and helpful for the community, and including ingredients for success, so educators understand what they might have to shift in their practice. Dr. Curry described how DESE is currently in the middle of that work right now with districts, to be closed out by June 30, to be in alignment with the guidebook which informs planning processes.

A Council member appreciated Dr. Curry’s work, regardless of whether a school is underperforming or not. They asked, with all the data that is collected, what are those measurable action steps that get districts where they need to go? They thought that some concrete action steps that have proven to show growth would be the area where the data can be most beneficial.

# Accountability Updates: Accountability System Redesign Process

Ms. Gonzales shared updates on what is happening in the short-term and in the long-term with regards to the accountability system. She shared that DESE is planning to run the full accountability system in 2023, the first time since 2019. This means that there will be more information made available than in recent years, including data on lowest performing students, a criterion-referenced component, normative components, overall classifications, and schools of recognition.

Ms. Gonzales then shared an image of a 2019 accountability report, which the 2023 report will resemble. This public-facing report will include information related to targets, point assignments, and tables with detailed data for each student group and indicator. This, as she noted, is the short-term work which will take place in the late summer and early fall this year, like past years.

Ms. Gonzales then noted that this system was designed in 2017 and 2018, when the state was just transitioning to the new MCAS. She then posed questions to the Council for conversation around how DESE might begin the process of redesigning the current accountability system. The conversation, she said, is *not* about what the system should be – but rather the process for redesigning an accountability system. Ms. Gonzales reminded the Council that the AAAC’s role is to advise the Department and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education around accountability and assistance policies and practices. The AAAC’s membership is intentional; each member represents a different position, and there is a wide range of opinions around this work. The Department understands that not everyone will agree, but there is room for healthy discourse around goals. And, as final guardrails, for today’s discussion, the Council should try to focus on process and avoid discussing the design of the system or its indicators as there will be opportunities to discuss system design in the future. The questions Ms. Gonzales posed were, “How should the redesign process be structured?,” “Who should be involved? Which stakeholder groups should we engage with?” and, “What timeframe should we be considering for implementation?”

One Council member said they were glad to see an opening to this conversation. They said that they were curious about the impetus for the redesign. They asked about why, why now, what DESE might think the deficiencies are, and how often accountability systems get revised. Ms. Gonzales replied that recent times have been extraordinary; teaching and learning look different now than they did before the pandemic, when we designed the system. She also noted that we have new data that we did not have when designing the current system, and these are modernizations that we can consider. She also noted that when Commissioner Riley came to DESE, he inherited a new system that had been designed before his appointment.

A Council member asked if, prior to the pandemic, if there was a plan to redesign the system. They also said that so many things have happened since the pandemic, that folks will need time to reacclimate themselves to the accountability system and reground themselves in the expectation. They expressed concerns about the redesign work getting clouded in the confusion of getting re-acclimated to the current system. Ms. Gonzales affirmed this latter concern, given that DESE needs to get back into its accountability reporting process. She shared that, when the MCAS test and the accountability system were so new, the plans were to tweak and modify the system, adjusting weightings, and DESE began some of that work in 2019. Some of the fine tuning that DESE intended to do in subsequent years was not possible because of the challenges of the pandemic. Now, she said, DESE is trying to meet state and federal requirements, but recognizes a need to modernize the system.

One Council member said they need more time to think about process, but one initial step to consider is that someone would need to do the research on what effective school systems are. That, after all, should be what we are measuring and monitoring – what does the research base say? A second piece is, for this group to have a solid understanding of what data DESE has ready access to – there is probably far more than we could understand. A third piece, they shared, would ask what would be helpful from a continuity perspective – especially when communicating with external stakeholders, like school committee members, when showing progress over time, with all the frequent changes.

A Council member said they want to differentiate between DESE’s accountability system and the public accountability system – the media, cottage industry. There is a real opportunity here, according to the member, to have a public communication component of this that describes “This is why we’re doing this.” Before we get to metrics, there needs to be a conversation about values and design and non-negotiables. They noted that the current system leads to test prep factories, which is not great instruction and does not help kids – but it addresses “accountability” and “Accountability.” Regarding timeframe, they said that there is an urgency – but fall of 2024 is too soon. If DESE wants to go through a robust process, the values conversation, and doing the research, even a year plus from now is too quick.

One Council member stated that the first part is a broad conversation, with appropriate stakeholders about what the vision is: what are we holding ourselves accountable for? What kind of education do we want? The member pasted an excerpt from the assistance system in the chat: *We believe that great schools create the conditions for students to regularly engage in Deeper Learning. In these schools, students are known and valued, learning experiences are relevant, real-world, and interactive, and individualized supports enable students to excel at grade level or beyond. This approach builds on the research of effective instruction, with an emphasis on culturally and linguistically sustaining practices.* They argued that we should start with that why, that end point first.

A Council member said we should be transparent about the fact that we have a system that started five years ago, but we have also barely used it – it was phased in. They said we have an old system that still feels new to people, but to many of us who are more familiar, it does not seem to be fitting right for the time that we are in and where we want to go. They believe we should start with the clarity and purpose of the “why” – what do we want the system to do? Why do we have accountability? What is the purpose? How do different stakeholders see the purpose of an accountability system? It is great to look at examples from assistance side, but accountability has a different purpose – it is saying that here are schools where we need to do more and provide more support, and the system is identifying that for us. Timing-wise, the Council member feels like more than a year is needed for the process – and they would like to understand how we even got to the current system, and what those processes were. That system, they believe, feels so highly technical – and wonders how many stakeholders were able to weigh in on it and understand it. They want to know what a broader process might look like. It might be helpful to think about the design, but it would require a long timeframe to get to a point where we are getting to look at metrics and reassessing the purpose of the system. They would be interested in DESE staff’s opinions and the Commissioner’s opinion on refining or tweaking a system that we have been using.

A Council member added that something to consider is to celebrate growth and celebrate communities that are improving upon their practice. They encouraged DESE to celebrate those who are accelerating their performance – not necessarily just Blue Ribbon schools. It would be powerful to highlight schools and districts that experience intense challenges but have found ways to make noticeable growth – and signal that as a factor – and to amplify those pieces that already exist.

A Council member encouraged the Council to think about the goal of DESE to help every child meet their potential. When as thinking about the accountability system, if there are things or laws that are major obstacles, not just say, “There’s nothing we can do about it,” but to have that conversation. Our formal role is to advise DESE and advocate for legislative changes – but not to have too narrow of a conversation to achieve the ultimate goals.

A Council member then summarized things that they heard: it is important advice from members of the group for DESE not to consider this work for 2024, because that is too short of a timeline. A longer timeline would allow for engagement with people who are teaching and learning right now.

One Council member then added, regarding stakeholders, that the Council has not talked about kids or students. They wondered whether the state student advisory council, or their perceptions, were considered. They wanted to ensure that their direct experience was included. Ms. Gonzales shared that last time the State Student Advisory Council was involved, but she agreed that students are a key stakeholder group to be considered in the future as well.

# Next Steps and Closing

Council Co-Chair Driscoll then said the meeting schedule for next year schedule will be sent over the summer, noting that the Council may consider resuming in-person meetings. Ms. Gonzales said that over the summer she would solicit potential discussion topics (including accountability system design and assistance work), poll for scheduling (including preference for in-person or virtual meetings), and remind the Council of open seats.

Ms. Gonzales thanked the exiting members again for their service and wished them well. Council Co-Chair Driscoll then called the meeting to a close at 10:39 a.m.