Accountability and Assistance Advisory Council (AAAC) Meeting Notes
October 4, 2023 (9:30 – 11:00am)
Virtual Meeting (Zoom)

*AAAC members in attendance:* Noah Berger, Erin Cooley, Kerry Donahue, Heidi Driscoll, Barish Icin, Brandi Kwong, Ed Lambert, Glen McKay, Andrew O’Leary, Tim Piwowar, Yves Salomon-Fernandez, Marc Smith

*DESE staff in attendance:* Komal Bhasin, Charmie Curry, Erica Gonzales, Robbie Havdala, Tess Murphy, 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 9:32 a.m. The meeting agenda was reviewed, and new Council members were introduced:

* Erin Cooley – Massachusetts Policy Director, Democrats for Education Reform
* Glen McKay – Principal, J. Turner Hood Elementary School, North Reading Public Schools
* Andrew O’Leary – Interim Superintendent, New Bedford Public Schools
* Yves Salomon-Fernández – President, Urban College of Boston

Returning Council members and staff from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) introduced themselves. Council Co-Chairs Heidi Driscoll and Tim Piwowar reviewed meeting norms and protocols.

# Educational Vision

Komal Bhasin, Chief of Schools, provided the Council with an overview of DESE’s [Educational Vision](https://www.doe.mass.edu/commissioner/vision/default.html). She explained that the Vision came from the themes outlined in Commissioner Riley’s [*Our Way Forward*](https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2019/2019-06/item2.docx) plan. It represents DESE’s hopes for public education in Massachusetts and is intended to provide organizational clarity for DESE’s work. The Vision has been revised based on stakeholder feedback and DESE’s Racial Equity Decision-Making Tool (REDT) and now centers on culturally and linguistically sustaining practices. To support the Vision, DESE identified strategic objectives and core functions and took stock of over 450 projects, programs, and initiatives to create a catalog of aligned supports that will help districts and schools provide students with high-quality, equitable learning experiences. Ms. Bhasin posed the following questions to the Council: *What resonates with you from the Educational Vision as you envision AAAC's charge this year? One of the charges of our Educational Vision is to center the needs of students from historically underserved groups and communities. How does our council do this well currently, and how can it improve in doing so this year?* Council members shared the following feedback:

* We should celebrate achievements but also recognize glaring deficiencies (for example, in achievement gaps). Use resources from the Student Opportunity Act (SOA) to close gaps and further the Vision.
* How are we doing in preparing students for college and career? Consider entertaining goals in that area and identify ways to support districts in meeting those goals.
* The Vision is powerful, especially for students whose needs have not been met in the past.
* Does the accountability system include the Vision? Have changes been made to the system to include the Vision? DESE staff and the Council Co-Chair responded that this work would begin this year and that even the design of this meeting’s agenda was intentional so that the Vision could be used to frame discussions.
* Are there examples that help districts and schools understand how the Vision and its goals can be met? Ms. Bhasin responded that other presentations of the vision include examples, simulations, etc., that help the Vision come to life, and that the type of presentation given depends on the venue. She also noted that the resources in the catalog are organized by strategic objective and that the catalog is updated periodically.
* The Vision is robust but remember to think about rural communities that are also economically marginalized. We often think of urban settings, but these communities can be very isolated and marginalized as well.

# Prioritization of Schools that Require Assistance

Dr. Charmie Curry, Associate Commissioner of the Statewide System of Support, led a discussion about the ways that DESE supports schools that are identified as *requiring assistance or intervention* via the state’s accountability system. She explained that the values are rooted in the Vision and in principles: DESE should prioritize the neediest communities in its assistance work and support the school communities that experience marginalization in their context. It is an opportunity for DESE to live into its values.

She explained that the Statewide System of Support (SSoS) operates within the Center for School and District Partnership (CSDP), which takes a center-based approach to assistance based on a continuum of needs. Supports are differentiated based on need, and not all support looks the same (e.g., some schools receive more than others). Dr. Curry said that by running the full accountability system this year, DESE can specify assistance for schools with low-performing student groups. She described two examples of support that DESE might provide to these schools and their districts:

* Direct assistance from SSoS to develop and sustain district leadership support, to procure and adopt high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), and ensure that their implementation is congruent with the Educational Vision. This type of support occurs in districts where several schools are identified as requiring assistance, and/or one or more of its schools is identified as *Underperforming*. These districts and their identified schools are supported with Targeted Assistance Grant (TAG) funds and receive progress monitoring visits.
* Support from the Office of Effective Partnerships and Integration (OEPI) in districts that have schools that are newly identified as requiring assistance and/or have schools with low performing student groups. These districts and schools may be eligible for TAG funds.

Dr. Curry posed the following question to the Council: *As we take a Center-based approach to assistance, what are some questions we can answer to assess the impact of supports to schools and districts?* Council members shared the following feedback:

* *Chronically underperforming* was not included in the category of schools receiving support. Is that no longer a priority and those punitive tactics are not going to be employed in the future? Dr. Curry responded that DESE looks at schools that are persistently stuck and is trying to be innovative in the ways we support those schools.
* Will DESE continue to use state takeover? Dr. Curry noted that receivership is managed by another DESE office outside of SSoS, so it is not included in this presentation.
* Are you looking for questions that the Council might ask to understand whether the provided supports are effective? Without understanding what is currently being done, it is hard to propose changes or new areas of inquiry or to know whether the current assistance is effective. You can look at student outcomes to get clear data on whether schools can shift their implementation around priorities, HQIM, etc. Dr. Curry shared that DESE looks at indicators like progress monitoring data.
* What does it mean? What is DESE hoping to see in terms of changes in practice? What progress has been made? What are prioritized student outcomes? This will look different based on every school’s needs. DESE needs to be able to roll data up at the center level (e.g., dollars spent, resources provided, what changed or did not change).
* Do the interventions have disparate impacts on student populations? In other words, when disaggregated by student demographics, are all students achieving better outcomes because of the Center’s work? Is there a statistically significant relationship between increased resources offered through the Center and better student outcomes, especially as compared to other schools with similar baseline performance but no intervention?
* At the end of the day, it needs to come down to some achievement measure. It is about the kids. Equity is about the kids. DESE must monitor the outputs somewhere in the system. Changes for kids must be in the system or the actions are just actions.
* Support equals dollars, and a lot of funds have been filtered to all kinds of districts (e.g., ESSER, ARPA) – not just in urban districts. We all have similar visions and strategic plans. We take advantage of grants and resources, but what happens in a year, when the funds and opportunities go away? Districts worry about the funding cliff and the opportunity cliff and the impact on all district types. Momentum with the Vision and strategies needs to keep going.
* How do you ensure sustainability after an influx of dollars?
* Are the interventions sticking? DESE should have a long-term vision and assess whether schools are sliding backward after funding and assistance go away.
* Dr. Curry did a great job explaining what supports are available. We sometimes have the curse of knowledge. Sometimes, schools that need support might just need to know what exists. We need to know where to put our efforts and use the tools that are available. Maybe, when we are providing feedback to DESE, we can think about barriers that prevent us from getting to those high levels (e.g., student attendance (social-emotional support, sense of belonging) or teacher attendance (frustration, feeling overwhelmed or not supported)). Efforts are lost if kids or teachers are not coming to school. It is great to be able to come to these meetings to learn what is available.

# 2023 MCAS and Accountability Results

Erica Gonzales, Associate Commissioner of Data and Accountability, presented the 2023 MCAS and Accountability results. She provided a high-level overview of state-level results, noting that a return to pre-pandemic levels of achievement has begun. State-level results, though, do mask varied results across and within districts. She also drew attention to Grade 3 results, which represent students who were in Pre-K in 2020 and are now being assessed on MCAS for the first time. She then presented MCAS results by subject and by race/ethnicity, highlighting changes since 2019 in certain subjects and among different student groups.

Ms. Gonzales then shifted to discussing accountability results. She reminded Council members that this was the first time since 2019 that DESE ran the full accountability system, including reporting on progress towards targets. She also shared that DESE identified 66 schools of recognition this year. She reminded the Council that the Commissioner has not made entry and exit decisions for underperforming or chronically underperforming schools yet and plans to do so in October. She shared more information about overall accountability classifications, identifying that 226 schools had insufficient data, and of the remaining 1,607 schools, 17 percent required assistance or intervention while 83 percent did not. She also described how many schools demonstrated progress toward improvement targets set by DESE earlier in the year.

Ms. Gonzales posed the following questions to the Council: *To what extent do the measures reported on via the accountability system reflect the Educational Vision and the Strategic Objectives? Which aspect(s) of the system (results, reports, etc.) could be better aligned?* Council members shared the following responses:

* If groups have fewer than 20 students, their data is suppressed. This can hamper a district’s understanding of who needs more support. The need to protect student identities is understandable, but it makes it difficult to see if schools are serving all students well.
* The biggest disconnect is timing. This information comes late when the school year has started and the planning period (summer) has passed. We are not teaching to test, and results give us good information, but the results come late. Why can’t we have an assessment in the fall so we have the information in the spring? We want the data to be meaningful, so the timing makes it challenging.
* The timing of assessments is challenging in that schools cannot adjust students’ course schedules.
* Accountability results are challenging to understand. It is not always clear how DESE assigns points. To this comment, another Council member shared the [School Leader’s Guide](https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/lists-tools/default.html) with the rubric for awarding points for progress toward targets.
* All students are known and valued for who they are and what they bring to the school community, and the Educational Vision speaks to this. These things are hard to measure and are missing from the accountability system at present.
* Is a standardized test the best way to measure the things in the Vision? Some maybe yes, but others, no.
* Are there lessons to be learned from the improved ELA MCAS achievement results we saw among grade 10 African American/Black students this year?
* Note the importance of assessment and common standards – it is important to be able to measure how those things are affecting what is happening in schools.

# Next Steps and Closing

The Council was reminded of the 2023-2024 meeting schedule:

* December 6, 9:30am – 11:00am (Virtual meeting)
* February 28, 9:30am – 11:00am (Virtual meeting)
* April 10, 9:30am – 12:00pm (Likely in-person; time/location TBD)
* June 12, 9:30am – 11:00am (Virtual meeting)

To help build future meeting agendas, Council members can use a form to suggest ideas, or connect with DESE staff or the Co-Chairs.

The meeting adjourned at 10:59 a.m.