

Briefing Paper
Massachusetts System of Support for Level 3, 4, and 5 Schools and Districts
October 2014

Introduction:

As part of the education budget request for FY 2016, we propose to seek an increase in the state Targeted Assistance line item (7061-9408). This account supports a portion of the accountability and assistance that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) provides to the Level 3, 4 and 5 schools and districts in the state. The briefing paper is designed to provide an overview of the design and implementation of ESE’s system of assistance to these districts, including:

1. The legal framework
2. The delivery system and rationale for the delivery approach
3. Assistance strategies and methods
4. Evaluation findings and examples of results
5. Resource use and impact of declining federal resources to support assistance work.

1. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is committed to, and obligated under state and federal law to, provide assistance to schools and districts that are not adequately meeting the needs of their students to reach their full academic potential. Under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), states are required to classify schools based on their performance and each state must establish a “Statewide System of Support” that prioritizes financial supports and targeted assistance to help schools that are not meeting performance goals to raise student achievement. In addition, under the Massachusetts “Act Relative the Achievement Gap” enacted in 2010, the state is, responsible for identifying schools that are underperforming and for assisting them to take the actions they need to rapidly improve student performance. The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education has adopted Regulations on Accountability and Assistance for School Districts and Schools, [603 CMR 2.00](#), that govern the review of the educational programs and services provided by the Commonwealth’s public schools and the assistance to be provided by districts and the Department to improve them.

2. THE DELIVERY SYSTEM AND RATIONALE FOR THE DELIVERY APPROACH

Framework for Targeting Schools and Districts: The ESE framework for District Accountability and Assistance classifies schools and districts on a five level scale, with the highest performing in Level 1 and the lowest performing in Level 5. With the exception of Level 5, each district is classified into the level of its lowest performing school(s). Districts with schools in the lowest 20% of performance in their grade-span are classified in Level 3. The lowest performing, least improving schools among this lowest 20% are candidates for Level 4 and 5.

ESE uses this framework to focus its accountability and assistance resources on the schools and districts with the greatest need. The Statewide System of Support is structured to deliver the assistance required under this framework for those in Levels 3, 4 and 5 and tiers its support based on accountability level. For schools and districts in Level 3, ESE assistance is voluntary and districts may choose to take advantage of resources based on their needs and interests. Schools and districts in Level 4 must collaborate with ESE to develop and implement clear and coherent plans to rapidly accelerate student performance.

Assistance Delivery Structures: In School Year 2014-2015, there are 70 districts in Levels 3, 4 or 5. The vast majority (70%) of students living in poverty in Massachusetts go to schools in these districts. Over 408,000 students or 43% of the state’s student population attend schools in these districts; while 21% of these students attend schools that are in Level 3, 4, and 5 in the districts. Aggregating the data in these 70 districts, 62% of the students are low-income, 18% are students with disabilities, and 15% are English language learners.

To address the range of needs in these districts, ESE uses two inter-related but different structures for providing assistance, so that supports can be customized to various districts’ contexts. These structures are as follows:

- **The Office of District and School Turnaround (ODST)** focuses its support on the 10 largest highest poverty districts and their schools. These ten districts (often known as the “Commissioner’s Districts”) are designated in Levels 3, 4, and 5. The districts are Boston, Brockton, Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn, New Bedford, Springfield and Worcester and they serve over 192,000 students or 20% of the state’s population. Eighty percent (80%) of these students are low income and 24% are English language learners.

The assistance delivery is designed around the theory that each of these large districts has considerable content and leadership infrastructure and ESE’s assistance should focus resources and support to enhance the operation of the district systems so they, in turn, will be well positioned to support the needs of their lowest-performing schools. Assistance is provided through ESE deployed liaisons and program coordinators from within ODST who also coordinate within the ESE with Curriculum and Instruction, Educator Effectiveness, College and Career Readiness, and Language Acquisition and Academic Achievement. In addition, assistance is provided by turnaround partners and consultants recruited by ESE with track records in improving outcomes for high needs and urban students in a variety of areas essential to school and district turnaround and improvement.

- **The District and School Assistance Centers (DSACs)** focus support on small and medium sized districts in Levels 3 and 4. Support is delivered through 6 “virtual” regional assistance centers that divide the state geographically. In School-Year 2014-2015, DSACs are offering services to over 60 districts that serve over 216,000 students or 22% of the students in the state.

The DSACs serve a broad range of struggling districts that sometimes lack sufficient infrastructure and human resources to deliver the complex array of support necessary to further their educational improvement efforts. To respond to these needs, DSACs are staffed by part-time former superintendents (known as Regional Assistance Directors) and principals (known as Support Facilitators), as well as specialists in mathematics, literacy, data, and vocational technical education.

3. ASSISTANCE STRATEGIES AND METHODS

Foundations: In 2010, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted regulations to support the implementation of *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*. These regulations authorized two related sets of standards for schools and districts: the *Conditions for School Effectiveness* and the *District Standards and Indicators*. These standards articulate essential elements for school and district practices and are source documents for the content and organization of ESE’s assistance.

Our research has shown that schools and districts that are most effective at improving student performance focus on a small constellation of these standards that are mutually reinforcing and carefully executed. ESE's assistance is designed to use a variety of methods to help support districts' and schools' movement along the continuum toward high performing implementation of the Conditions for School Effectiveness and the District Standards and Indicators.

In addition, the assistance is designed to support Level 3, 4, and 5 districts and schools in their implementation and integration of the new resources and tools that are the cornerstone of ESE's major goals and initiatives. As such, assistance providers foster the implementation of the 2011 Curriculum Frameworks and model curriculum units, the use of the Educator Evaluation system to improve the quality of leadership and instruction, and the use of data and resources accessed through Edwin Teaching and Learning and Edwin Analytics.

Both the ODST assistance liaisons and the DSAC regional teams work in partnership with districts. They analyze data from a variety of sources, collaborate with district and school leaders to identify and focus on high leverage needs, and develop annual plans to implement assistance strategies that will best promote and stimulate rapid and sustained student performance gains. They can choose from a range of resources and strategies that support research based approaches and respond to a variety of districts' requests and contexts.

Examples of Assistance Strategies and Methods: The intensity and focus of assistance is based on district and school needs, their interest and capacity, as well as their accountability status (as described in #2 above). The following are examples of the kinds of assistance strategies that are used across the Statewide System of Support (each example is preceded by the target audience for the assistance activity).

- **Building Capacity to Implement and Sustain Effective Practices:**
 - Level 3 and 4 School and District Leaders: Conducting research on exiting Level 4 and other high performing schools to isolate, describe and share practices that have led to rapidly improved performance
 - Level 3 and 4 School and District Leaders: Providing professional development on conducting Learning Walkthroughs to gather information on the implementation of instructional practices
 - Level 3 and 4 School and District Leaders: Providing professional development, networking, and organizational support to enable schools to implement structures for professional collaboration to support improved and targeted instructional practices

- **Leadership Development for Turnaround and Instructional Leadership:**
 - Level 4 School Leaders: Support the design and implementation of a Turnaround Leadership Academy to create a pipeline of principals with the training and practical experience to lead turnarounds in challenging schools
 - Level 2, 3, and 4 District Leaders: Partner with the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents to implement a New Superintendents Induction Program to build capacity of new district leaders to be instructional leaders
 - Level 3 School Leaders: Coaching for principals to facilitate and calibrate common understanding of instructional practices

- **Data Analysis and Plan Development to Support Rapid Improvement:**
 - Level 4 School Leaders: District liaisons from ODST and DSAC staff support Level 4 schools to analyze data and develop strong Turnaround Plans that meet the Conditions for School Effectiveness. They also facilitate access to significant federal School Improvement funds to support implementation of the plans.
 - Level 3 and 4 District Leaders: Addressing areas of need identified in the District Reviews of the *District Standards and Indicators* through district-wide plan development and capacity building to track implementation and impact (both directly and using consultants)
 - Level 3 and 4 School Leaders and Educators: Conducting assessments of the implementation of the *Conditions for School Effectiveness* either by facilitating self-assessments or deploying independent review teams

- **Professional Development and Networking to Build Capacity of Leaders and Teachers:**
 - Level 3 and 4 District Leaders: Urban Superintendents Network brings together leaders from the 10 “Commissioner’s Districts” as well as 15 of the superintendents in the medium-sized urban districts served by the DSACs. This long-standing network is a primary source of information sharing and problem solving.
 - Level 3 and 4 District Content Leaders: Urban mathematics, literacy, science, school culture and student support, and English language learners’ networks convene to build the capacity and knowledge of urban content leaders to access and use the professional development and resources from ESE such as the Model Curriculum Units and wraparound practices. These networks also create opportunities for urban content leaders to share best practices and implementation strategies. ESE content specialists from the Curriculum and Instruction units facilitate many of these networks.
 - Level 3 and 4 District and School Leaders: DSACs facilitate content and leadership networks within their regions to provide opportunities for professional learning and capacity building using current research on best practices as well as the Curriculum Frameworks, Model Curriculum Units, and implementing Educator Evaluation District-Determined Measures.
 - Level 3 and 4 District and School Leaders: Facilitating a Turnaround Principals’ Network, and a “Thought Partnership” for urban district leaders for professional learning and problem solving

- **Identifying, Vetting and Deploying Expert Partners:**
 - Level 4 Schools and Districts: Soliciting and vetting turnaround partners that provide expert direct assistance to Level 4 schools in the implementation of key *Conditions for School Effectiveness*
 - Level 4 and 5 Schools: Recruiting and matching schools with proven Operators or Receivers to lead the implementation of a turnaround that produces rapid improvement in student performance

4. EVALUATION FINDINGS AND EXAMPLES OF RESULTS

While there is considerable work ahead to accomplish our goals of closing the achievement gap and raising the performance of students in Level 3, 4 and 5 schools across the state, there is emerging evidence that the resources and assistance provided through the Statewide System of Support are rated as relevant and supportive by recipients and some student outcomes are improving. Some 2014 data that point to improvement across the system include:

- 18 or **54.5%** of the 33 schools in the first cohort of **Level 4 schools have exited** Level 4 status because they met their performance targets. (Two of the original cohort of 35 closed.)
- Recent studies across several cohorts of Level 4 schools are **showing significantly greater student performance gains over state or comparison schools** in both English Language Arts and Mathematics. For example, over the 4 years since the first cohort of schools were named Level 4 in 2010, the state has improved .1 percentage points in the students that were proficient or advanced on the ELA MCAS, while those Level 4 schools improved, in aggregate, 4 percentage points.
- **60%** of the 25 districts in the Urban Superintendents Network have increased the number of their schools in Levels 1 and 2.
- **25% of Level 3 and 4 elementary schools** significantly raised 3rd grade reading proficiency scores between 10 and 55 points in one year.
- The Composite Performance Index (**CPI**) improvement trajectories in **mathematics and science in Level 3 and 4 districts** are outpacing the CPI trajectories in Level 1 and 2 districts.

Are the efforts and resources delivered through the Statewide System of Support contributing to these results? External evaluations on both ODST and DSACs conducted and point to positive findings. However, because of the complexity of the conditions and interventions at the school, district and state levels, these evaluations cannot draw causal relationships between the assistance provided and student results. Nevertheless, key findings from the DSAC and ODST evaluation reports share insights from the school and district recipients of the assistance who find it highly relevant and useful to their improvement efforts. Notable findings include:

Key Findings from the 2014 DSAC Evaluation¹:

- 93% of eligible districts engaged voluntarily with DSAC teams in ongoing, sustained participation around a portfolio of integrated services – this percent has steadily grown over the past three years and shows significant confidence with the relevance and quality of DSAC teams’ support. The integrated, customized, and differentiated model of assistance, as well as the DSAC’s position within ESE, were cited as particularly valuable.
- Over 75% of eligible districts used DSACs to support: self assessment and planning, effective data use and accessing ESE data sources, implementation of professional development and monitoring impact of the training, coaching leaders to establish conditions for implementing turnaround strategies and developing effective standards-based curricula.

¹ UMass Donahue Institute, Final DSAC Evaluation Report: September 2014

- DSACs played a critical role in connecting ESE initiatives to districts' own improvement priorities, deepening districts' understanding of the initiatives and helping educators integrate the initiatives into their own improvement efforts.
- DSAC assistance was cited as helping districts and schools accelerate their improvement efforts, and implement improvement strategies more consistently and effectively for better results. DSACs helped promote consistency and continuity across schools in their districts by supporting the use of Learning Walkthroughs and Professional Learning Communities.
- DSAC assistance was also cited as helping build principals' capacity as instructional leaders and shift toward distributed models of leadership in schools.
- DSACs teams supported the alignment of mathematics and ELA curriculum and contributed to the improvement of instruction, the use of effective instructional approaches, and teachers' content knowledge.

Key Preliminary Findings from Several Recent Evaluations about ODST Assistance²

- Respondents from all of the 9 districts surveyed rated the District Liaison as effective in supporting school turnaround and improvement.
- District and school respondents reported liaisons served as a resource for and provided access to information; facilitated communication and understanding between the state and the district/schools; and provided hands-on support to schools through planning support and participating in learning walks.
- The vast majority of district personnel reported that Priority Partners (expert partners vetted by ODST to support the *Conditions for School Effectiveness*) were effective in supporting school turnaround and improvement.
- Over three-quarters of principals of Level 3 or Level 4 schools that worked with a Priority Partner reported the partner effectively supported school improvement.
- 65% of principals of Level 3 or Level 4 schools with a School Redesign Grant (federal funds supporting turnaround) reported the grant resources and process supported school improvement. Respondents noted the opportunity to identify and implement individualized solutions for schools, as well as the process of developing a plan and direction for the school.
- Districts that engaged in planning and implementation of district-wide focused plans (known as Accelerated Improvement Plans) to address findings from an ESE District Review of the *District Standards and Indicators* reported that they had improved systems and structures for using data, collaboration, and school and district leadership team operations.
- Districts with Accelerated Improvement Plans also noted that the strategies they implemented as a result of these plans resulted in a greater focus on developing principals' capacity to serve as instructional leaders, instructional shifts related to the Common Core State Standards, increased

² American Institutes for Research, Selected High Level Findings from ODST Evaluation, October 2014; and Summary of Preliminary AIP Findings to be Presented at 2014 NERA Conference, and Wraparound Zone Preliminary Evaluation Findings

data-based decision-making and increased focus on differentiation, literacy, and student engagement.

- Districts participating in the Wraparound Zone initiative enhanced their capacity to support the implementation of strategies focused on a positive school climate, identifying and addressing student needs, and creating and maintaining meaningful school–community partnerships.

5. RESOURCE USE AND IMPACT OF DECLINING FEDERAL RESOURCES TO SUPPORT ASSISTANCE WORK

Summary of Expended Revenues for Accountability and Assistance

Funding Source	2013 Expenditures		2014 Expenditures		2015 Projected Expenditures based on revenue		Net Change FY13 to FY15	
	Amount	% of Total	Amount	% of Total	Amount	% of Total	Amount	% Change
State (Targeted Assistance)	\$8,026,989	19%	\$7,608,478	21%	\$8,256,297	26%	\$229,308	3%
Federal (Title I, SIG, IDEA, Perkins, RTTT)	\$33,872,484	81%	\$28,488,805	79%	\$22,905,734	74%	-\$10,966,750	-32%
TOTALS	\$41,899,473		\$36,097,283		\$31,162,031		-\$10,737,442	-26%

As the summary chart above shows, funding available over the past three years for Level 4 and 5 school and district support and District and School Assistance Centers (DSACs) came from a variety of state and federal sources. The state 7061-9408 account and the federal Title I account funding levels have remained relatively constant since FY13. Most of the additional dollars to support Level 4 and 5 assistance came from the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) and Race to the Top grant (RTTT). The Department received the 5-year Race to the Top grant of \$250 million in FY10. These funds supported key functions in support of Level 3, 4 and 5 schools and districts, and it expires at the end of the current fiscal year, FY15.

While the necessity for ESE assistance to the highest need schools and districts has grown with the implementation of *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap* and with requirements under the federal ESEA, as the chart above shows, the federal funding has been steadily declining over the past few years. Key functions in jeopardy include:

- Support to Level 4 and 5 Schools: SIG funding received a big increase in FY10 due to extra funding under the *American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA)*. That increase of \$49.7 million was spent over the last 4 years (at about \$15 million per year) and will end in FY15. These funds primarily supported grants to the first three cohorts of Level 4 schools (39 schools) to support the implementation of their 3-year turnaround plans; grants averaged \$1,500,000 per school for 3 years. Starting in FY16, the annual SIG spending will be reduced to

\$7.2 million and will substantially limit the size and number of grants to Level 4 schools unless additional funds are raised.

In 2010, with the implementation of *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*, ESE first devoted considerable effort to Level 4 schools to implement the law and strengthen districts' capacity to meet the law's goals. In 2013-2014, at the end of the three-year term of the first cohort of Level 4 schools' implementation of their Turnaround Plans, the Commissioner designated four of these schools Level 5. This additional work stream required considerable attention and ESE was able to devote RTTT resources to staff and fund the plan development, operator recruitment and development, program monitoring, and other related work in this area. The continuing support for expert assistance in both Level 4 and 5 schools and districts is a major objective for the agency and will require funds to maintain these functions as follows:

- **\$5,000,000** (grant funds to supplement SIG grants for 7-9 eligible schools)
 - **\$490,000** (to maintain current staffing capacity)
 - **\$2,000,000** (to support additional grants and expert assistance for districts and schools)
- DSAC Literacy and Data Specialist functions: Also in FY10, with the establishment of the DSACs in response to ESEA/NCLB requirements, ESE funded two key positions in the DSACs with available RTTT resources – the Data Specialists and the Literacy Specialists. RTTT was designed to build district capacity and, indeed, these positions have worked with district and school leaders to build their capacity to use data and to implement effective literacy practices. But, their work is not done and to sustain this high priority capacity, the following funds are needed:
 - **\$ 600,000** (to support 6 Regional Literacy Specialists)
 - **\$ 600,000** (to support 6 Regional Data Specialists)

ESE has been analyzing its budget projections and looking for cost savings across a range of funding resources, and has identified projects and activities that are likely candidates for elimination or reduction. Further, ESE is reserving \$2.5 million of the Title I funds allocated to the state in FY15 for use in FY16 to address the anticipated reduction in revenue next year. However, the loss of this significant amount of funds could have considerable impact on the quality and breadth of services available to support the array of assistance needed by Level 3, 4 and 5 districts and schools. The projected FY16 funding for Level 4 and 5 district and school assistance and DSACs will be reduced by over \$10 million over the FY15 projected spending level due to these federal funding decreases. We are seeking additional state funding as described above to help maintain the level of support to Level 3, 4 and 5 schools and districts that was provided in the last 3 years.