District and School Assistance Center (DSAC) Evaluation:

Findings Regarding Implementation & Preliminary Outcomes of the DSAC Initiative

December 2011

Summary

In late fall 2009, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) established six regional District and School Assistance Centers (DSACs), with the goal of helping districts and schools improve instruction and raise achievement for all students. The Initiative marked a significant shift in the state's system of support to schools and districts—one that had at its core a regional approach to service delivery that would target a significant number of low-performing districts and schools across the Commonwealth. Historically, ESE provided coordinated targeted assistance to ten urban districts (otherwise known as the Commissioner's Districts), and with the DSAC Initiative, created specific infrastructure to extend its offerings to a broader number of high need districts. DSACs may serve all non-Commissioner's Districts in a region while giving first priority to Level 3 and Level 4 districts, as outlined in the ESE Framework for District Accountability and Assistance.[1] Data made available by ESE show that during the 2010-2011 school year (SY11) this included 51 identified DSAC priority districts, comprising more than 176,000 students and approximately 13,000 educators in 340 schools. As estimated by ESE, nearly half of students in the target districts were classified as low-income, 17% receive special education services, 22% have a native language other than English, and 7% have limited proficiency in English.

Following are selected findings from an evaluation of the Initiative conducted by the UMass Donahue Institute that highlight the key accomplishments, satisfaction and initial impacts, organizational milestones, and critical considerations for the DSAC Initiative as it enters its second full year of implementation (SY12). These findings, which reflect on the Initiative from its launch through the end of its first full year of operations (SY11), were informed by a number of key evaluation activities, including: interviews with DSAC staff and program managers, focus groups and interviews with school and district leaders, feedback from participants at DSAC-sponsored events and trainings; and a review of DSAC prepared progress reports initially implemented in spring 2011.

Key Accomplishments

During the launch year of the DSAC Initiative, DSACs prioritized and invested heavily in conducting district outreach and made substantial progress in building relationships with district and school leaders. As a result of these efforts, DSAC teams (despite extended vacancies and some turnover in DSAC staff) engaged in some capacity with all 51 DSAC priority districts during SY11, with district and school leaders generally appearing to be moving toward more frequent and intense engagement with their DSAC.

In SY11, DSACs assisted all 51 priority districts in accessing ESE Targeted Assistance and Improvement Grant funds, totaling more than $3.4 million.[2] With planning work underway, DSACs delivered assistance using three primary approaches that reflect the Initiative's underlying theory of action: in-district targeted assistance to priority districts, cross-district and regional networks; and professional development course offerings. Significant progress was made in the delivery of services, as follows:

- ✓ DSACs delivered in-district assistance in the following core service areas: data use and data teams (37 districts); Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments (32 districts); literacy (17 districts); Learning Walkthroughs (12 districts); and mathematics (10 districts).

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[1] Commissioner's Districts receive direct ESE assistance through the Office of Urban District Assistance. The Commissioner's Districts are Boston, Brockton, Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn, New Bedford, Springfield and Worcester.

[2] In SY12, Targeted Assistance and Improvement Grant funds available totaled $2 million due to a reduction in ESE funding.

✓ Progress was observed in the establishment of regional networks, which reflected another significant aspect of DSAC work. Networks were developed in mathematics, data use, literacy, and leadership, although not all regions supported networks in all areas. At the time of the interviews, most networks were in their beginning stages.

✓ All 51 priority districts used at least some of their SY11 grant funds to purchase slots in ESE-sponsored courses. Enrollments for priority districts totaled 2,198 with literacy and mathematics having the greatest number of enrollments. District participation was highest for these courses, but also for special education offerings.

While DSACs engaged with all priority districts in some capacity, the intensity of district engagement can be described as being on a continuum. More specifically, the level of engagement ranged from periodically meeting with district leaders about the DSAC and its work (ongoing outreach and planning); to a combination of meetings and the initial delivery of services such as presentations or trainings (moderate engagement); to the delivery of ongoing targeted assistance services (intensive engagement). While a majority of districts were moderately engaged—an expected finding given the relatively new nature of the Initiative—those districts that were most intensively involved with their DSAC highlighted the following factors as fostering this level of engagement:

✓ understanding of district needs;
✓ relevant service offerings to address district improvement priorities;
✓ job-embedded approach to service delivery;
✓ the expertise and field-based experience of DSAC teams; and lastly,
✓ DSAC's accessibility and responsiveness.

Satisfaction and Initial Impacts of the Initiative

District and school leaders expressed varied levels of satisfaction with the DSAC Initiative and its services. Often, those who were most engaged tended to be most satisfied. Further, among educators who participated directly in DSAC-sponsored events and trainings, feedback tended to be overwhelmingly positive. Overall, 95% of participants submitting feedback forms (n=752) described the quality of the DSAC event or training they attended as either "excellent" or "good."

At this relatively early juncture, district and school leaders offered insights into some preliminary impacts of the DSAC Initiative. Positive changes commonly cited across the Initiative, regardless of whether a district engaged intensively with the DSAC, included an increased understanding of Level determinations and a new sense of urgency related to school-level and/or district-level improvement. Leaders noted that DSACs serve as providers of critical information regarding the status, its implications, and opportunities that that designation could afford. Others cited increased access to resources, services, and information from ESE in particular as relates to the new Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks integrating the Common Core Standards and the Education Data Warehouse. To some extent this was viewed as consistent with and supportive of a trend toward improved responsiveness within ESE more generally.

In districts reporting intensive engagement with a DSAC, leaders cited some preliminary impacts in their district or schools that they believed could be attributed to their work with the DSAC. These outcomes included: the establishment of structures and processes for effective data use and improved capacity to analyze and use data; the development of new capacity for self-reflection and planning; an increased sense of shared responsibility for improvement and increased opportunities for teacher leadership; and early changes in classroom practices, although a need to disseminate these practices more broadly within districts was noted.

Organizational Milestones

The establishment of robust regionally-based teams with the capacity to deliver identified services reflected an important developmental priority during SY10 and SY11 for this new ESE initiative. Important milestones in the evolution of the Initiative and features that appeared to support its progress include the following:

✓ Six regional DSAC teams were established and staffed with former practitioners, including superintendents and principals, content-area and data specialists, and professional development coordinators. This staffing model, in particular the use of former practitioners, was cited by leaders in targeted districts as an important factor in the DSACs' ability to establish credibility in the field and deliver relevant services.

✓ The Initiative and its partners developed a suite of tools and resources to support service delivery and provided essential training to DSAC teams. Many of these tools were developed by or with input from partner organizations or were adapted from those used in the Commissioner's districts and reflect field-tested strategies. DSAC team members received essential training and foundational support from ESE and its partners in the use of key tools, resources, and strategies central to the Initiative's goals.

✓ The vision, mission, and role of the DSACs was further clarified, a challenging task in light of the diverse districts they are charged with serving, which translated to increased clarity within teams and in some cases, to prospective clients.

✓ Given the complexity of school and district change, DSACs increasingly relied on a team-based and collaborative approach to service delivery, drawing upon the varied and unique expertise and skill sets of DSAC staff to provide increasingly integrated services.

Critical Considerations for SY12

As the Initiative progressed, DSAC leaders acknowledged having learned important lessons and district and school leaders have been forthcoming in regards to initial concerns. These insights are reflected in the overarching areas for improvement described below, which are a subset of the full set of considerations contained within the body of this report.

✓ Turnover and extended vacancies in key roles complicated team capacity-building efforts and limited service delivery in those areas. Lacking specialists in mathematics and literacy due to turnover or long hiring timeframes significantly impeded teams' capacity to provide these services in high-need districts.

✓ The use of patchwork funding mechanisms may pose challenges to maintaining continuity and capacity. The use of short-term grant resources created concern in the field about the ability to maintain staff in key positions—an important priority in terms of sustaining the momentum of the Initiative. Additionally, this created a logistical burden related to managing transitions from one funding source to another.

✓ Finding the appropriate balance between standardization and flexibility in the DSAC approach warrants ongoing dialog at the Initiative level. To meet the diverse needs of districts, DSACs need to customize their services and approach, although maintaining a level of consistency across regions is also valuable. Recognizing this, ESE has begun convening regional assistance directors and organizational partners to discuss the cross-regional integration of the work.

✓ While engagement was moving in a positive direction, concerns about "initiative overload" and the need to better align services with district needs emerged. District leaders described feeling overwhelmed by a complex array of new initiatives and mandates which left them with limited time and attention to consider DSAC services in their own improvement efforts. Clear articulation of DSAC offerings vis-à-vis these needs will likely be critical to ongoing outreach efforts.

✓ Uncertainty regarding DSAC long-term commitments may complicate efforts to engage with priority districts. Given the multi-year nature of the school improvement process, the year-to-year nature of DSAC

commitments—including changing priority status and grant eligibility—contributed to hesitancy in some districts. To some extent, concerns also extended to questions about whether the DSACs would be sustained long-term given the transient nature of some educational initiatives.

✓ As DSACs engage more intensively with districts, the need to access additional expertise, resources, and capacity may emerge. In some cases, this may warrant an Initiative-level response as when emergent needs are common across multiple districts. For example, many interviewees saw a need for specialists in English language learning. In other cases, one-time access to expertise may be required, possibly through the use of pre-qualified external specialists, to address a district's unique needs. Additionally, as districts become increasingly engaged with DSAC teams, more DSAC staff time and capacity will be needed to respond to those needs.

Conclusion

As stated previously, the DSAC Initiative reflects a significant shift and expansion of the state's system of support. In a relatively short period of time, the DSAC system built a foundation for this work by outlining a specific staffing approach, and developing tools and training to establish new capacities within the organization. In SY11 and with planning underway, DSACs delivered a core set of services to high need districts. In terms of the Initiative's reach, all 51 high-need priority districts were engaged with their DSAC in some capacity, with many districts anticipating accessing services more frequently and/or in more areas. It should also be noted that although it may be too early to observe specific in-district impacts at this early stage, leaders in the most highly engaged districts did share some initial impacts they believed were a result of their work with the DSAC. Others expressed optimism that because the services provided were often high-quality and evidence-based, they are likely to contribute to improvement efforts. As the Initiative progresses, it will be important for DSAC leaders to continue to refine aspects of the Initiative much as they have in the past, both in light of the above critical considerations and with respect to emerging needs.

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Introduction

This year-end evaluation report synthesizes findings from all data collection activities conducted as part of the evaluation of the DSAC Initiative. It was prepared by the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI), which serves as statewide evaluator for the DSAC Initiative. Evaluation findings reflect a focus on providing utilization-focused feedback in order to guide ongoing support for the Initiative as it enters the 20011-2012 school year. As such, the findings demonstrate a strong formative component designed not only to accurately describe organizational development and progress of key activities, but also to explore preliminary outcomes, client satisfaction, and critical considerations for continued implementation.

Throughout this report, the 2009-2010 school year (SY10) is referred to as the Initiative's launch year. The 2010-2011 school year (SY11) is referred to as the Initiative's first full year of implementation.

The DSAC Initiative

In late fall 2009, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) established six regional District and School Assistance Centers (DSACs), the goal of which is to help districts and schools improve instruction and raise achievement levels for all students. In collaboration with partner organizations, DSACs use a regional approach that emphasizes the development of district capacity to accelerate and sustain improvement and leverages the knowledge, skills, and expertise of local educators to address shared needs.

This initiative marked a significant shift in the state's system of support to schools and districts—one that had at its core a regional model of service delivery. By design, the DSAC Initiative was also intended to be a demand-driven model, with participating districts and schools accessing relevant services to address their own needs and improvement priorities. Each of the six DSACs comprises a team of staff and content area specialists that operate in the field under the direction of a regional assistance director, who coordinates the team's efforts. The team provides a range of customized targeted assistance services to districts and schools. Assistance services are offered to support district and school self-assessment and improvement planning, as well as in the implementation of effective practices designed to address targeted strategies in improvement plans.[3] Additionally, the team plans and implements professional development, networking, and training events designed to build regional capacity. Staff roles include support facilitators with expertise as former principals, math and literacy specialists, and professional development coordinators. In addition, each team has at least one full-time equivalent data specialist.

DSACs may serve all non-Commissioner's Districts in a region,[4] but give first priority for assistance to Level 3 districts, as outlined in the *ESE Framework for District Accountability and Assistance*. Level 4 districts not identified as Commissioner's Districts—Gill-Montague, Southbridge, and Randolph in SY11—also receive priority for assistance. Other districts are eligible to participate in regional networks and, within resource constraints, other DSAC activities.

Data made available by ESE show that in SY11, the 51 DSAC priority districts comprised more than 176,000 students and approximately 13,000 educators in 340 schools. As estimated by ESE, nearly half of students in

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[3] The effective practices are aligned with the Conditions of School Effectiveness and District Standards and Indicators. The Conditions of School Effectiveness (CSE) and District Standards and Indicators articulate what schools and districts need to have in place in order to educate their students well. These conditions and district standards were voted into regulation by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in 2010.

[4] Commissioner's Districts receive direct ESE assistance through the Office of Urban District Assistance. The Commissioner's Districts are Boston, Brockton, Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn, New Bedford, Springfield and Worcester.

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the target districts were classified as low-income, 17% receive special education services, 22% have a native language other than English, and 7% have limited proficiency in English.

Report Content and Organization

This report summarizes findings from data collection efforts conducted during SY11. It is organized into six sections covering the following topics:

- *Organizational Development*, which addresses the building of capacity for the new Initiative;
- *Engagement with Targeted Districts*, which describes district outreach and resulting engagement among priority districts;
- *DSAC Assistance Activities*, which describes activity within the Level 3 and Level 4 districts that are the focus of the work;
- *Client Satisfaction,* which presents data regarding client satisfaction from the perspective of educators participating in DSAC events and leaders in priority districts and schools;
- *Preliminary Impacts*, which describes perceptions of the preliminary impacts of the DSAC Initiative at this relatively early point in its development and operations; and,
- *Conclusion,* which offers some summary conclusions and additional context with regard to the evaluation findings.

The findings presented in this report were supplemented by a series more detailed briefings and reports issued by the UMass Donahue Institute following the completion of major evaluation activities, including DSAC team interviews, interviews and focus groups with leaders of district and schools engaged with their region's DSAC, and periodic analysis of data from client feedback forms.

As the evaluation findings are considered, it is important to bear in mind that the DSAC Initiative represents a new and ambitious initiative within ESE's *Framework for District Accountability and Assistance*. Accordingly, findings reflect the Initiative at what remains an early juncture and highlights accomplishments that were both foundational and crucial to its launch, momentum, and progress to date.

All findings are reported on a summary level, which is intended to protect the anonymity of respondents, who were told that they would not be identified for the purposes of this study. Although quotes are used throughout the report for the purposes of illustration, these statements are not attributed to any individual, district, or school.

Key Data Sources

Under the direction of ESE, UMDI designed and implemented a comprehensive evaluation of the DSAC Initiative since January 2010. This evaluation report emphasizes progress as of the end of SY11, and focuses on documenting the Initiative's ongoing implementation, as well as gathering formative feedback from the field. Evaluators also supported ESE in establishing structures and systems to support an evaluation of the Initiative's long-term impacts on district and school improvement, and the collection of summative data reflecting the Initiative's short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes is expected to become an increasing focus of the evaluation moves into SY12.

Key data collection efforts informing this report include interviews with DSAC team members, focus groups with district and school leaders in DSAC target districts, and the collection and analysis of point-of-service feedback at DSAC-sponsored events. Following is additional detail related to each of the data collection efforts.

DSAC team interviews were conducted between December 2010 and April 2011 and involved all six regional assistance directors, a sample of seven support facilitators, and all nine data specialists. Interviews, which varied in length from 75 to 120 minutes, were conducted by phone using semi-structured interview protocols. Given that the DSAC Initiative was in its early stage of implementation at that time, conversations focused primarily

on process, exploring the work in broad terms and understanding team members' roles and responsibilities, progress in key focus areas of work, and lastly, support provided by ESE and its partners.

District and school leader interviews and focus groups were conducted in each region between April and July 2011. At ESE's request, the format of this engagement (i.e., interview or focus group) differed by region, at the discretion of the regional assistance director to minimize the burden on potential participants. Ultimately, focus groups were held in three regions (Greater Boston, Northeast, and Southeast) and onsite district interviews were held in three regions (Berkshires, Central, and Pioneer Valley). The process engaged 75 district and school leaders, including superintendents (15), assistant superintendents (12), school principals (20), and other district- and school-level leaders (28), including, but not limited to, curriculum coordinators, coaches, Title I directors, and grants managers. In total, 29 of the 51 DSAC target districts were represented in some capacity, including 28 designated Level 3 status and one district designated Level 4 status. All interviews and focus groups conducted for the evaluation were transcribed and analyzed.

Point-of-service feedback forms were developed for administration by DSAC staff at DSAC-sponsored professional development, training, and other events. Feedback forms were developed collaboratively by the Institute, ESE program managers, and regional assistance directors from the six DSAC regions. From March 2011, when events feedback forms were first administered, through June 2011, 752 feedback forms were collected from 30 DSAC-sponsored events.[5]

These primary data collection activities were supplemented by a review of DSAC-prepared progress reports piloted in spring 2011, ESE training materials, and content from DSAC-maintained websites and blogs, which also informed the findings.

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[5] A second version of the feedback form was developed to collect similar data regarding ongoing, in-district technical assistance services such as data team facilitation and support, although this form was not widely used by DSAC teams in the 2011 school year.

I. Organizational Development

The DSAC Initiative reflects a relatively complex, regionally-based effort to support improvement in targeted districts and schools across the Commonwealth. As such, the establishment of robust regional teams with sufficient capacity to deliver services to targeted districts reflected an important developmental priority for program managers in the Initiative's launch and first year of operations. Since the Initiative's launch in late fall 2009, with the support of partner organizations—including SchoolWorks, Public Consulting Group (PCG), and the Education Development Center (EDC)—ESE established DSAC teams; clarified the vision, mission, and role of the new assistance organization; trained staff members in key strategies and approaches; and developed and refined toolkits to support the delivery of assistance service to targeted schools and districts. Progress in this regard reflects important groundwork for this new ESE support initiative.

Key Areas of Progress

Key milestones related to the development of regional capacity to deliver assistance services are discussed in brief below. Findings presented in this section are drawn primarily from interviews with DSAC staff and program managers, although information collected in district and school interviews is also discussed, to the extent that it reflects on organizational capacity.

DSAC teams were established and operational. In the Initiative's launch year (SY10), a substantial focus for ESE and its partners was the hiring of individuals to lead and staff the new organizations. In the Initiative's launch year, regionally-based teams comprised: a regional assistance director with field experience as a recently retired superintendent, one or more support facilitators with experience as former principals, one or more data specialists, and a literacy specialist from ESE's Office of Literacy. In spring 2010, coordinators were added to the teams to assist in the implementation of DSAC-sponsored professional development, while mathematics specialists were hired the subsequent year to support an increasing emphasis on mathematics improvement and planning, related to the implementation of Massachusetts' new Common Core-aligned state standards.

ESE's decision to staff DSACs primarily with former district and school leaders was viewed positively by leaders in targeted Level 3 districts. During focus groups and interviews conducted in spring 2011, several superintendents and principals cited the fact that DSAC staff "come from the actual workplace" as an important factor in the DSACs' ability to establish credibility in the field and deliver relevant and useful services.

Regional teams displayed high levels of shared commitment and cohesion. In interviews, DSAC staff from all roles conveyed a passion for, and deep personal commitment to, the work of school change, as well as to the mission and work of their DSAC team. In many cases, team members underscored the crucial role that the leadership of their region's assistance director played in setting the tone for the team and conveying important cultural values and priorities. This sense of commitment and shared values helped to ease some of the concerns initially expressed about managing staff hired and trained by other partner organizations. As one interviewee noted:

> *The key to all of this—it isn't unlike running any other organization or running a school district—is that you have to develop a team that understands the work and holds each other accountable and has a level of trust and is focused on what needs to be done.*

In addition, regional assistance directors felt that ESE and its partner organizations had been able to work with them on staffing issues, particularly when a team member did not share the vision and/or did not fit the culture of the team. This, they noted, helped to reinforce and facilitate team cohesion.

The vision, mission, and role of the DSACs were further clarified—a challenging task in light of the diverse districts they are charged with serving. In fall 2010, ESE collaborated with its six regional assistance directors to develop a list of foundational services.[6] The document, which describes assistance priorities for SY11, addressed concerns, from both DSAC staff and prospective clients, that the role and strategies of the new support initiative needed to be further articulated. Key priorities outlined in the document include supporting self-assessment and planning, enhancing regional opportunities to learn about and share effective practices, and providing technical assistance in the use of ESE assistance tools and practices, namely, the Data Team Toolkit, Learning Walkthrough tools and guidance, Professional Learning Community resources, and Tiered Instruction self-assessments.

In interviews, DSAC team members described an increased level of understanding regarding the work of their individual DSAC team. This was often attributed, at least in part, to each region's assistance director, who conveyed important cultural values and priorities, as described above. Further, interview data indicate that, in many though not all cases, this increased clarity had begun to translate to the field (e.g., districts and schools).

Given the complexity of school and district change, DSACs increasingly relied on a team-based approach. In addition to describing an increased level of clarity within their DSAC team, nearly all DSAC interviewees described an increased level of intra-team collaboration. This shift was partly attributed to the complexity of the work and the need to bring multiple personalities, perspectives, and expertise to bear in order to address issues and challenges. As one interviewee noted, "given the magnitude of what we're trying to do here, we rarely, rarely go in [to districts and schools] alone." Team members described the need to strategize with one another in many facets of the work, from gaining entry into initially hesitant districts, to identifying problems and opportunities facing clients, to providing directed assistance designed to address those issues. In particular, several teams described adopting a model for supporting districts in the development and implementation of data teams, whereby the data specialist collaborated with a support facilitator and/or other team members when engaging with data teams. This approach allowed DSACs to combine the technical skills of data analysis with a "firsthand sense of what the work in schools is," particularly as it relates to instructional leadership. Increased teaming appears to have been coupled with an increased frequency of team meetings, as a means of conveying information, coordinating the work, and discussing common challenges.

The Initiative and its partners developed a suite of tools and resources to support service delivery. To support DSAC teams, ESE developed and refined a suite of resources in the form of toolkits, including: a Learning Walkthrough protocol, a toolkit to support the establishment and operation of district data teams, guidance regarding the operation of professional learning communities, and a common planning time self-assessment. Many of these tools were developed by or with input from partner organizations, or adapted from those used in the ESE Commissioner's Districts, such that they reflect field-tested strategies. Interviewees from DSAC teams described these resources as high-quality, but often stressed the need to adapt them when working with districts and schools to address specific needs or contexts. Many indicated that increasing flexibility from program managers with regard to the implementation and use of tools was a positive development.

In addition, a substantial focus of SY11 involved development of self-assessment tools aligned with ESE's Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessment. These resources, which include a rubric and related data collection and analysis resources, were developed by ESE and the DSACs to help schools identified as Level 3 satisfy a statutory requirement to complete a self-assessment. Key tools and resources are described in brief in Table 1 below.

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[6] As articulated in the *Summary of DSAC School Assistance Priorities: 2010-2011*

Table 1: Summary of DSAC Tools and Resources Referenced in the Foundational Services

Tool	Description
Conditions for School Effectiveness (CSE) Self-Assessment Rubric	Rubrics against which schools can gauge their practice in key areas; based on ESE's Conditions for School Effectiveness conditions, which have been identified by the Department as necessary for educating students well. Includes sub-tools that can assist districts in administering assessments and analyzing results.
District Data Team Toolkit	Provides resources to support districts as they learn to use multiple forms of data to inform system-wide action planning. Six modules progress from establishing a District Data Team, to launching an inquiry process, analyzing data, taking action, and monitoring results.
Learning Walkthrough Implementation Guide	Resources to support the implementation of Learning Walkthroughs, which reflect a systematic and coordinated method of gathering data to inform district-and school-level decision-making. Walkthroughs involve establishing a focus and then engaging strategically-selected teams of individuals in collaborative observation of classrooms.
Professional Learning Communities Framework	A reference tool to frame the work of developing and strengthening instructional teams at the school level. Based on the Conditions for School Effectiveness, it outlines six stages in the development of Professional Learning Communities, along with the roles and responsibilities of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders at each level.
Tiered Instruction Self-Assessment	A rubric intended to support districts and schools in assessing the status of their efforts to develop robust, effective systems of tiered instruction.

Source: Tool descriptions taken or adapted from ESE materials and resources, including the DSAC Tools and Resources webpage, available at http://www.doe.mass.edu/sda/regional/tools.html. This focuses on tools specifically referenced in the *Summary of DSAC School Assistance Priorities: 2010-2011*, which articulates the DSAC foundational services for SY11.

DSAC team members received essential training and support from ESE and its partners. Throughout the year, ESE and its partners provided DSAC team members with professional development and training in the use of key tools, resources, and strategies. In interviews, many DSAC team members noted the importance of these activities to their ability to develop new capabilities and a common understanding of the work, particularly as it related to the rollout of new tools and practices, such as the Learning Walkthrough protocol. Although at the time of the DSAC team interviews, not all regions felt they had developed sufficient capacity in this area, nearly all interviewees expressed confidence that professional support provided by SchoolWorks, including co-facilitation of initial Learning Walkthroughs, would allow them to develop this capacity.

Further, cross-regional meetings for support facilitators and data specialists—which were guided by SchoolWorks and PCG, respectively—were often cited as particularly valuable. These meetings provided opportunities for discussion of common issues, sharing strategies and tools, and reaching out for timely advice. Given the decentralized structure of the DSAC Initiative, these meetings were viewed as critical for fostering ongoing collaboration and helping to promote consistency across regions. The need to keep working toward consistency at the initiative level was viewed by a majority of interviewees as not a developmental need, but rather as one that was ongoing. This may be particularly true as DSAC team members begin to work more deeply with districts and schools as they enter their second full year of operation. As new challenges and issues arise, providing opportunity for collective sharing, learning, and trouble-shooting across regions may become all the more critical.

Challenges and Strategic Considerations

While these findings suggest that the Initiative has developed important new infrastructure and capacities, program managers and staff acknowledged concerns that may be of interest while planning for the Initiative's ongoing operation and evolution. Several of these are highlighted below.

Turnover and extended vacancies in key roles complicated team capacity-building efforts. By the end of SY11, all DSAC teams had hired a dedicated mathematics specialist. However, the hiring process was time-consuming, and in some cases, the position remained vacant until the spring. Further, two regions lost their literacy specialist, and despite ESE efforts to replace these staff, in both cases, the regions spent the remainder of the year without a specialist. Lacking specialists in targeted content areas, it was noted, significantly impeded teams' capacity to provide services to districts in these key areas, and in some cases, was noted by district and school leaders in the interview process as an important concern.

In part, extended vacancies in these positions may relate to the complex organizational structure of the DSAC Initiative, which comprises a team of staff hired and supported by other partner organizations or units within ESE. Literacy specialist positions, in particular, are assigned across units within ESE, with responsibilities both to their DSAC region and to the Department's Office of Literacy. The complexity and scope of the role may have contributed to greater difficulties recruiting and retaining staff in this position.

The use of patchwork funding mechanisms may pose challenges to maintaining continuity and capacity. During the Initiative's launch and first year of operations, ESE invested heavily in recruiting and training qualified staff with relevant experience who have built relationships with districts. In this context, retaining core staff is an important priority in terms of sustaining the momentum of the Initiative. However, the use of short-term grant resources created concern among program managers, staff, and clients about the ability to maintain staff in key positions. Additionally, this created a logistical burden for program managers related to coordinating transitions from one funding source to another. The identification of a stable funding stream could alleviate many of these concerns, while reinforcing ESE's commitment to sustaining the Initiative.

In addition, relying heavily on retired superintendents and principals limited the extent to which regional assistance director and support facilitator roles could be expanded.[7] At least one regional assistance director cited concerns that, as the DSACs have increased their level of engagement with districts and schools, these limits have become and will continue to become increasingly problematic. It is notable that the staff's field experience was viewed as critical to the new organization's credibility in the field, but the additional challenges created as a result of this staffing model must also be acknowledged and planned for.

Operating in a virtual setting posed challenges for DSAC teams. In forming the DSACs, ESE made a deliberate decision not to create regional offices of the Department or invest heavily in physical infrastructure. Although this approach was intended to maximize resources and capacity in support of districts, as DSAC team members began to collaborate more, several conveyed ongoing challenges related to operating in a virtual setting, including collaborating, scheduling and coordinating the work. Given that this approach reflected a new way of working for the Department, the technology infrastructure to support this work was still being developed and refined, and some DSACs were also beginning to experiment with alternative resources as a result. It was noted that training and guidance in the use of these and other tools could be of particular benefit.

However, even with additional training and support, concern was expressed in at least one case that DSACs will always have need for a physical, shared office space with work and meeting spaces, as well as bookcases and storage areas, something not all DSACs currently have access to through their relationships with educational collaboratives or other partners. Given the lack of resources to support regional offices, program managers may need to consider all possible avenues to securing some level of physical space and equipment for teams.

Finding the appropriate balance between standardization and flexibility in the DSAC approach and service delivery model warrants ongoing dialog at the Initiative level. DSAC staff consistently highlighted the need to adapt their approach to meet the diverse needs of districts, in part because of the negotiated nature of their engagement, and in some cases, the unique capacities within DSAC teams also appeared to affect the

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[7] Pursuant to Massachusetts General Laws c. 32, § 91, individuals collecting a retirement allowance from the Massachusetts Teachers' Retirement System or other public source may work for a public employer in Massachusetts for a maximum of 960 hours in a calendar year.

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team's approach and prioritization of the foundational services. The need to customize services was further underscored by district and school leaders engaged with the DSAC, who noted that services need to be "individualized" and adapted to align with the district's particular needs and context.

However, a competing concern relates to the need to maintain a level of consistency across regions, and ensure that services align with statewide priorities. How to balance these two important concerns is a question that requires additional attention, particularly as DSACs begin to work more intensively with an increasing number of districts with unique assets and challenges. In fall 2011, ESE began periodically convening regional assistance directors and organizational partners, who provide leadership from different vantage points, to engage in substantive discussions regarding cross-regional integration of the work. Given the complexity of the task, these meetings may benefit from external perspective and facilitation.

II. Engagement with Targeted Districts

During the Initiative's launch year, teams described their work as focused substantially on the development of new capacities, resources, and relationships; in essence, laying important groundwork for the Initiative. In the first full year of operations, teams indicated that they were able to begin to leverage these foundations to engage with districts and provide an array of planning and support services. By the end of SY11, DSACs reported that they had engaged in some capacity with target districts. While not all targeted districts had yet to substantively engage with and receive assistance services from their DSAC, interviews with district and school-leaders suggest that engagement was moving in a positive direction.

District Outreach and Relationship-Building

The establishment of strong working relationships with district and school leaders reflected an important first step with regard to working with districts. In many cases, interviewees noted that the process of relationship-building—which required establishing a level of trust and mutual understanding between the DSAC and prospective client district—involved a significant, but valuable, investment of time. Evaluation data suggest that substantial progress was made in this area, as highlighted in the following findings.

DSACs engaged in a significant outreach and engagement campaign involving both regional meetings and direct outreach with DSAC priority districts. Initial outreach efforts involved regional launch meetings, which were held in both the launch year and in the first full year of operations. Events typically involved an overview of the DSAC, its staffing, approach, and its role, as well as the larger context for its efforts, including a discussion of ESE's newly established *Framework for District Accountability and Assistance* and Conditions for School Effectiveness. In addition, regional assistance directors and their teams sought to establish professional connections with educator leaders in DSAC-target districts by participating in existing regional networks, such as NISL or regional curriculum director meetings, and/or ESE meetings held in their regions.

In many cases, these large-scale meetings were supplemented by direct outreach to DSAC priority districts, which involved meeting with district leaders to inform them of the DSAC and its services. One DSAC team member described this process as a "listening tour" of sorts, intended to gain an understanding of the district's strengths, weaknesses, and challenges, from the perspective of its leaders. In preparation for these meetings, most DSAC teams developed a process by which they would review publically-available student demographic and performance data, often with the help of their team's data specialist, to obtain background information about the district and its schools. Although regions varied initially in terms of whether these meetings involved full DSAC teams or only the regional assistance director, by the beginning of SY11, all regions had shifted to a team-based approach, which, it was noted, allowed the DSAC to frame services holistically by integrating content, district/school improvement, and data expertise.

This level of outreach was reportedly aided by the reduction in the number of DSAC-priority districts resulting from new ESE accountability regulations—which made increasingly personalized, focused, team-based outreach more feasible.[8] To some extent, the availability of professional development grants for DSAC-priority districts also appeared to facilitate DSACs in their ability to gain entry in some initially hesitant districts.

As a result of these efforts, DSAC teams were engaged in some capacity with all 51 DSAC priority districts. The level of engagement varied, however, ranging from periodically meeting with district leaders

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[8] In 2009-10, Level 3 districts were identified as those with schools in Corrective Action or Restructuring under No Child Left Behind. In 2010-11, due to the approval of new ESE accountability regulations adopted by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, Level 3 districts were identified as those in the bottom 20% of performance in the state.

about the DSAC and its work (i.e. ongoing outreach or planning), to a combination of meetings and the initial delivery of services, such as presentations or trainings (i.e. moderate engagement), to the delivery of ongoing targeted assistance services (i.e. intensive engagement). DSAC activity reports suggest that approximately one quarter of priority districts were engaged intensively, while nearly two-thirds were engaged to a moderate extent. Engagement at the moderate level may reflect the beginning of more intensive work. For example, in-district presentations on Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments or Learning Walkthroughs may have been done as a foundation for the more direct assistance services characterizing engagement at the intensive level.

A set of common factors supportive of more intensive engagement emerged. As one regional assistance director noted, the recipe for success in terms of moving a district from outreach, to moderate engagement, to intensive engagement involved "listening closely for the need, filling it, and being timely." Professional relationships and connections established by team members at initial meetings were also highlighted. As one leader of a district that was initially hesitant to work with the DSAC described:

I think that some of us came to the table [at the initial meeting] thinking maybe it was going to be more of the same, like [our experience with another school improvement partner]...[but] our DSAC partners sat back and listened and let us story-tell. That was a huge shift.

Consistent with this, in focus groups and interviews, leaders who felt their districts or schools had established a strong, positive relationship with their DSAC often cited common factors that led to their engagement, including:

1. The DSAC's deep understanding of a district or school's particular needs
2. Availability of a set of relevant services to address a district's or school's needs and improvement priorities
3. The responsive, practically-oriented, job-embedded approach to service delivery
4. The expertise, experience, and depth of knowledge of DSAC teams
5. The accessibility and responsiveness of DSAC teams

A handful of interviewees, however, attributed their engagement to a sense that working with the DSAC was mandatory due to their Level 3 designation, a finding that runs contrary to the demand-driven service delivery model on which the Initiative is based.

Evidence suggests that the level of district engagement with DSACs was moving in a positive direction. In interviews and focus groups, many district and school leaders indicated that they were engaging more frequently with their DSAC and anticipated increasing their level of involvement in the future. To a large extent, they attributed this to relationships they had established with their DSAC, but also increased clarity about the DSACs' role and perceived improvements in its approach as it moved into the 2011 school year.

District leaders noted that it takes time to learn about, consider, and ultimately engage with a DSAC and make use of its resources, tools, and approaches. Ultimately, there may be a number of steps along the path to engagement with a DSAC, which may reflect important intermediate progress or milestones.

Challenges and Strategic Considerations

In focus groups and interviews DSAC staff and district and school leaders were forthcoming about specific challenges encountered in the engagement process, which include the following:

While engagement was moving in a positive direction, concerns about "initiative overload" and the need to better align services with district needs emerged. Many district leaders pointed out that a complex array of new initiatives and mandates would need to be addressed in the upcoming years, and described feeling overwhelmed by the scope of information and new initiatives. They noted that this limited the amount of time and attention they could dedicate to integrating DSAC services into their own improvement efforts.

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In addition, a few leaders expressed concern regarding the extent to which DSAC capacities and resources were aligned to the specific needs of challenged districts and schools. To some extent, these concerns extended more broadly to ESE's overall mix of assistance offerings, and the role of the DSAC in that mix.

> *We've got [new information and initiatives] coming at us from all directions. So, we're just doing this balancing act all the time, trying to satisfy all the compliance around all those issues and then get our teachers somehow…to take the help that's being offered. I appreciate the approach of the DSAC…[But] it's not clear yet to me, anyway, how it fits in with the other things.*

In this context, clear communication to districts from the Department about its own strategic framework, with an emphasis on connections between mandates and assistance, could help to better frame DSAC efforts. Leaders noted that if the framework were more clearly articulated and disseminated, connections between district needs and Department resources would be more readily apparent, while gaps between mandates and offerings would also be more evident, and thus, more easily addressed.

Uncertainty regarding DSAC commitments over the long-term may complicate DSACs' efforts to engage with priority districts. Interviewees underscored that school improvement is a long-term process spanning multiple years, and noted that the current structure of DSAC commitments was not always well-aligned with this reality. For example, several leaders noted that because services are tied to a district's designation as Level 3 or Level 4, commitments from the DSAC and grants to support professional development and/or DSAC assistance services were provided on a year-to-year basis. This caused some to question whether services received from the DSAC would be sustained over the long-term. This reportedly factored into leaders' decisions about whether and to what extent to engage with their DSAC.

> *That might lead to something interesting for us…Will we be a Level 3 next year, and therefore, if you're all of the sudden not, does everything that you've been working with them [on] end? That doesn't mean that you're ready to take it over independently from there, so what type of service is that really providing from ESE?*

To some extent these concerns stemmed from what some perceived as the transient nature of educational initiatives, which again contributed to hesitancy.

> *I feel like there's been a lot of [ESE] initiatives that kind of disappeared…so I think maybe, some of our district's hesitation is that we don't want this to be something that we invest lots of time and effort in and then it just disappears.*

Maintaining and reinforcing the distinction between DSAC assistance and ESE monitoring and accountability may reflect an ongoing need. Although most interviewees felt that their DSAC had been clear that the organization is not involved in accountability or monitoring, some felt as though its staff have an "implied authority," given their affiliation with ESE. To some extent, this appeared to be related to a concern that any information that might be shared with a DSAC may be relayed back to ESE through either formal or informal means. As one interviewee noted:

> *When you invite them inside to the supper table, there should be a lot of trust that it doesn't go anywhere else…what's said at the supper table should stay at the supper table, and you work together to solve the problems…that isn't quite the feeling I get from DSAC.*

In some instances, it was noted that this led them to work with the DSAC in areas they did not view as a priority out of concern that lack of interest in an offered service might reflect poorly on them within ESE. While leaders engaging with the DSAC for these reasons generally expressed satisfaction with the quality of the services they received, they often did not express the same expectation that the services would to be transformative as those who had engaged in a purely voluntary manner.

III. DSAC Assistance Activities

As described in the previous section, DSACs engaged with priority districts to understand their strengths, challenges, and weaknesses, and helped identify DSAC assistance services that could be leveraged to address district needs. This initial planning work reflected a necessary first step in the delivery of DSAC assistance and as part of this work, a substantial focus of DSAC effort in SY11 involved assisting districts in accessing and planning for the use of resources made available to priority districts. More specifically, DSACs were asked to help districts think strategically about the use of Targeted Assistance and Improvement Grant funds, and to this end, regional assistance directors met with leaders of priority districts to review the grant process, offering assistance in further assessing district needs, and identifying appropriate targeted assistance and/or professional development opportunities. These grants could be used to access seats in ESE-sponsored courses in literacy, mathematics, Sheltered English Instruction (SEI), special education and inclusive practices, and leadership. Alternatively, with the approval of the regional assistance director, funds could also be used to support other professional development or targeted assistance—including participation in DSAC improvement services—and staff collaboration activities in support of district improvement initiatives. In total, DSACs helped all 51 priority districts access ESE targeted assistance grant funds totaling more than $3.4 million.[9]

With planning work underway, DSACs could offer support to districts using three primary approaches—(1) in-district targeted assistance vis-à-vis the foundational services, including training and assistance in key DSAC tools and resources, (2) cross-district regional networks and training, and (3) professional development course offerings. In some cases, services provided in these formats were integrated or planned to be integrated. For example, in instances where region-wide conferences or launch meetings were used to introduce new strategies, more focused support was made available to priority districts on an as-requested basis.

Focus of In-District Targeted Assistance to Priority Districts

Reports submitted by DSACs show progress in several core service areas (
Table 2). Within these areas, the intensity of the service varied, with some districts receiving ongoing assistance and others receiving more planning support. While this does not represent an exhaustive list of the services DSACs offered, it does represent those emphasized at the Initiative level during SY11.

Table 2: Focus of DSAC Services, Estimated Number of Districts

Core Service Area Provided In-District	Priority Districts	
	#	%
Assistance, training, and support related to data use and data teams	37	73%
Outreach and support for Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments	32	67%
Content-area support in literacy	17	33%
Assistance, training, and support in the use of Learning Walkthroughs	12	24%
Content-area support in mathematics	10	20%

Source: UMDI analysis of DSAC progress reports submitted by each of the six regions. Includes only districts identified as DSAC priority districts. As of spring 2011, the progress reporting system was in the early stage of implementation and figures should be viewed as estimated counts.

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[9] In SY12, Targeted Assistance and Improvement Grant funds available totaled $2 million due to a reduction in ESE funding.

Data-related services were provided to approximately 37 priority districts, including 17 (or approximately one-third of districts) which were in the process of forming data teams. In fact, most DSAC-priority districts were engaged with a DSAC in some form of data-related assistance (see Table 2), which included training and support to existing or newly established data teams; training in the use of ESE's Education Data Warehouse; and technical support in data analysis, management, and reporting. These services were intended to support districts in the development of new skills and capacities to access and use data for strategic planning efforts. It is notable that previous evaluation findings indicate that data-related services provided a key point of entry for initiating work with districts, in part because of the nature of this assistance, which may have been perceived as specific, concrete, and immediately relevant to district needs.

With respect to the data team work, DSAC teams provided training, facilitation and support to existing or newly established teams, which, depending on local needs and DSAC approach, were focused on district-level concerns, school-level concerns, or a combination of both. Work with district-focused teams typically involved support in the establishment of district-level structures, team norms, and the development of collaborative inquiry capacity to support planning related to resource allocation, professional development, district-wide curriculum, and instructional priorities. Work with school-focused teams, on the other hand, often centered on promoting the use of data to address curriculum or instructional concerns at the school, and sometimes, at the classroom level. Similar to district-level teams, DSAC support at this level often involved establishment of teams or new norms for existing teams and facilitation, although technical services and training to facilitate teacher access to data was also an identified focus in many cases.

In terms of the Data Warehouse assistance, DSAC teams worked extensively to increase familiarity, access, and use of the state's longitudinal data system by disseminating information through multiple venues, developing user-friendly tools, and providing regional trainings and courses. Additionally, DSACs provided both in-district, job-embedded assistance to promote district capacity-building and highly specialized replacement services. Although the Data Warehouse—which was still under development at the time of the interviews—was described as a valuable and promising resource, many users cited concerns that the system did not yet provide the capabilities, speed, and level of access required to support long-term use.

Conditions for School Effectiveness (CSE) self-assessments were a focus of DSAC engagement in approximately 32 priority districts. The self-assessment and related tools were developed to assist identified Level 3 schools in implementing self-assessments which are aligned with ESE's Conditions for School Effectiveness[10] and are required under the ESE Framework for Accountability and Assistance. While schools are expected to use these results to inform ongoing improvement planning, they are not required to report these results to ESE.

In SY11, DSACs provided targeted assistance and support for the implementation of the CSE self-assessment in a variety of ways, including: in-district planning meetings (in part used for identifying process steps and key focus areas); in-school planning support and facilitation; development of data collection tools; data analysis support; and meetings to discuss progress.

The CSE self-assessment was described as "an effective planning tool" that is "based on good practice, good research, and everything else." It was noted that the tool could be particularly useful in helping new principals develop improvement priorities. DSACs have taken a variety of approaches, and some of the differences were attributed to district and school preference, including whether the instrument was administered district-wide or only in Level 3 schools, and whether the entire set of conditions or only a subset were used.

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[10] ESE's Conditions for School Effectiveness reflect 11 conditions identified by the Department as necessary to education students well. Conditions addressed in the assessment include: effective school leadership; aligned curriculum; effective instruction; student assessment; principal's staffing authority; professional development and structures for collaboration; tiered instruction and adequate learning time; students' social, emotional, and health needs; family-school engagement; and strategic use of resources and adequate budget authority. The eleventh condition, effective district systems for school support and intervention, is addressed in a separate district assessment instrument under development during SY11.

Learning Walkthroughs were a focus of DSAC engagement in approximately 12 priority districts. Another area of work for the DSAC teams during SY11 involved providing training and support in the use of Learning Walkthroughs—a process of collaborative inquiry designed to engage teams in a systematic method of gathering data through the use of classroom observations. The goal of the Learning Walkthroughs is to help schools and districts establish a culture of organizational learning focused on monitoring progress on key improvement efforts and gathering information to inform decision-making at the school and district levels.[11]

By the end of SY11, most districts engaged in this work appeared to be in the initial stages, which typically involved district- or school-based informational meetings and trainings in the use of the Walkthrough protocol, although some districts were planning or had implemented Walkthroughs with DSAC facilitation and support. DSAC team members acknowledged a number of challenges to engaging with districts around Learning Walkthroughs, particularly in the early stages of the relationship. These included existing classroom observation practice, perceptions of walkthroughs as potentially evaluative, concerns among teacher unions, and the need to respond to other priorities district leaders felt were more immediate. Despite these concerns, DSAC team members expressed a commitment to further engaging with districts around Learning Walkthroughs; and though they were optimistic about eventual progress, they saw this, ultimately, as a more long-term effort.

Finally, the extent to which specific service areas were emphasized differed by DSAC region. Utilization patterns appear to have been shaped by district needs and context, but also, by DSAC capacity and approach. For example, Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments were a focus of outreach and service activity in one region that made these the cornerstone of their work, but were not an explicit focus of the work in another region, which emphasized Learning Walkthroughs and other aspects. Similarly, content area work in literacy was a commonly offered service in most regions, whereas few districts in two regions received these services. It should be noted that these two regions spent a large portion of the year without a literacy specialist assigned to their team, as described below.

Cross-District Regional Networks and Training

Progress was also observed in the establishment of regional networks, which reflected another significant aspect of DSAC work. Networks were developed in mathematics, data use, literacy, and leadership, although not all regions supported networks in all areas. At the time of DSAC team interviews, most networks were in their beginning stages, and participation reportedly varied, depending on the network, region, and other factors. However, in district and school leader interviews, content-area networks were often cited as important avenues to remain apprised of new developments in the implementation of the state's new Common Core-aligned Curriculum Frameworks in mathematics and literacy. In addition to networks, several DSACs also provided cross-district trainings regarding a variety of service areas, including Learning Walkthroughs, Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments, and other areas of interest. Point-of-service feedback forms collected at all of these events, discussed in more detail in the section describing client satisfaction, suggest that networks have also been well received by participants.

These large-scale networks and trainings provided a venue for involving many districts, and appear to have been one forum by which DSACs engaged legacy districts. Furthermore, it was also noted that these types of events increased the visibility of the DSAC and helped to establish it as a "force" in the region, particularly with respect to core aspects of DSAC work such as leadership, curriculum and instruction, and data use.

Professional Development Course Offerings

To support district-wide change, ESE-sponsored courses required administrator involvement and encouraged the use of cohort model.[12] Reflecting the view that, "school improvement is more effective when teams of teachers plan and work together," ESE recommended that at least three teacher colleagues would participate in a course.

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[11] Description of the goals of the Learning Walkthroughs adapted from ESE materials, tools, and resources.

12 Taken from ESE's DSAC Course Parameters 2011-2012.

To this end, course offerings included guidelines as to the minimum number of teachers attending from a school, and in some cases, encouraged coaches, teacher leaders, curriculum specialists and others to attend in order to support implementation at the district- and school-levels. Additionally, each course offered an accompanying administrator support module so that school leaders who supervise participating teachers have sufficient knowledge of the course content to monitor and support implementation. Further, during SY11, to the extent possible, these modules occurred during the actual courses to create opportunities for administrator and teachers to work collaboratively on developing plans for supporting implementation of new skills and strategies acquired during the course. Previously, administrator modules provided general course overviews and were typically delivered as stand-alone sessions involving only administrators.

In total, all 51 DSAC priority districts used at least some of their SY11 grant funds to purchase slots in ESE-sponsored courses, as shown in Table 3 below. These courses were offered in a variety of formats, including but not limited to face-to-face trainings, initial trainings with follow-up on site professional development and guided practice and/or modeling, online instruction, and hybrid courses. In total, literacy and mathematics courses had the greatest number of enrollments. District participation was highest for these courses, but also for special education offerings.

Table 3: ESE-Sponsored Course Topics, Estimated Number of Enrollments (SY11; Summer 2011)

Course Offering Topics	DSAC Priority Districts		Other Districts	
	Districts	Enrollments	Districts	Enrollments
Literacy	36	979	6	12
Mathematics	39	621	20	145
Special Education/Inclusive Practices	36	364	1	9
National Institute for School Leadership (NISL)	22	121	22	78
Sheltered English Instruction (SEI)	22	113	19	172
Total	**51**	**2,198**	**40**	**416**

Source: Professional development course enrollment worksheets provided by ESE. Reflects the number of seats purchased; actual numbers of participants may have differed.

Thirty-six priority districts (approximately 70% of all priority districts) used funds to purchase seats in literacy courses. Courses covered key areas of literacy as reflected in the following selection of titles: Reading and Writing Informational Text, Oral Language and Vocabulary Development, Keys to Literacy: The Key Comprehension Routine, Keys to Literacy: The Key Vocabulary Routine, and Reading in the Content Areas. Some courses were designed primarily for teachers, while others were designed primarily for district and school leadership teams and/or literacy coaches.

Thirty-nine priority districts (approximately 76%) accessed courses in mathematics. Course offerings covered a range topics, as reflected in the following selection of titles: Developing Algebraic Thinking for Middle School and High School Math Teachers, Foundations of Mathematics: Numbers, Increasing Accessibility to Algebra and Geometry for All Students, Understanding Rational Numbers, the Massachusetts Intel Math Initiative, the Mathematics Coaching Cycle. A majority of mathematics courses were designed primarily for classroom teachers, although one course targeted mathematics coaches.

Thirty-six or approximately 70% of all priority districts accessed courses in special education and inclusive practices. Related trainings were offered exclusively online and covered a range of topics such as lesson plan design, collaborative teaching practices, the development of positive school and classroom environments, and collaborative partnerships with families, all of which focused on helping educators promote the success of special education students both within the school setting and beyond. Titles of courses accessed include: Universal Design for Learning I and II, Implementing Collaborative Teaching, Creating and Sustaining Positive Secondary Learning Environments Part I, General Transition Planning I, Differentiated Instruction,

How to Partner with Families of Middle and High School Students with Disabilities, and Youth Development and Self-Determination (Middle School and High School).

Twenty-two priority districts (approximately 43%) accessed Sheltered English Instruction Trainings. These courses, which are often referred to as Category trainings, were offered as a series, with the first course (Category I training) designed for a broad-based audience of educators (K-12). This course focused on the foundational knowledge important to organizing responsive classroom environments, and planning effective curriculum, instruction, and assessment, for English Language Learners. Subsequent courses (Category II, III and IV) were differentiated by level and focused on implementation of this knowledge in the classroom.

Twenty-two priority districts (approximately 43%) accessed ESE-sponsored National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) training. The NISL course was designed to give leaders the critical knowledge and skills needed to be instructional leaders. As such, the curriculum focused on: standards based instruction systems aligned with Massachusetts Curriculum frameworks; taking learning theory into practice by emphasizing skills and knowledge that would enable principals to be instructional leaders in literacy, math, and science; and training principals in distributed leadership strategies.[13]

Although the process of accessing funds and signing up for courses was described as challenging, many district leaders viewed the courses as high-quality experiences for their teachers and administrators and participating teachers found the experiences valuable. As noted by one interviewee:

> *There's no question, because of the PD providers and the time and effort that they are placing on assistance, it's of higher quality than what we would be able to provide ourselves.*

This sentiment was not universal however, as some interviewees expressed concern about the extent to which course offerings met their needs. For example, some of the smaller districts felt that the size of the grant limited them in their ability to send cohorts of teachers to statewide and regional trainings, in which case, in-district trainings were viewed as a more viable strategy. District and school leaders also saw the need for improvements in terms of the timeframes and process for administering these grants. In response to this feedback, ESE focused on streamlining the grant process for SY12 and made materials available to districts earlier in the year.

Planning and implementation of DSAC professional development reflected a joint effort of the DSAC office and other units within ESE and provided a venue for cross-unit collaboration and sharing. Staff from ESE's literacy, mathematics, special education, and English language learner units were heavily involved in the development, design, and oversight of the ESE-sponsored professional development courses—a collaboration that required significant communication between the DSAC office and these other ESE units. Although not a focus of inquiry during the SY11 evaluation, focus groups conducted with ESE leaders and staff representing various units in SY10, suggest that the DSAC initiative has been a catalyst for improving cross-unit collaboration and communication. In addition, it was suggested that the DSAC model of professional development, which extended ESE professional development practices—specifically the use of a cohort model and administrator modules in use in the state's ten large urban districts—to a greater number of districts, may also have influenced professional development delivery in other ESE units more broadly.

Challenges and Strategic Considerations

As DSACs worked with an increasing number of districts with unique needs, challenges were acknowledged that may warrant consideration at the Initiative level. Key concerns included the following:

Extended vacancies in content-area specialist positions appear to have limited service delivery in these areas. DSAC team members and many school and district leaders described high demand for content-area

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support in mathematics, although this service was only identified as an explicit focus of the work in approximately 20% of priority districts by the end of SY11. This may be attributable, at least in part, to the fact that in many regions mathematics specialist positions were filled late in the school year. Despite this late start, specialists had provided some services, including presentations of the new Common Core-aligned curriculum frameworks at their regional mathematics networks, which were hosted and supported by math content specialists and their respective teams. By the end of the year, all six regions had hosted at least one meeting of their respective mathematics networks.

Similarly, while content-area support in literacy was a focus in approximately one-third of districts, in two DSAC regions, turnover in the literacy specialist position resulted in an extended vacancy in that role. As a result, few, if any, districts in these regions received services in this area, which was cited by district and school leaders as a particular concern given their need for this service.

As DSACs engage more intensively with districts, teams may need access to additional resources, capacity, and expertise. By design, the DSACs were intended to be demand-driven assistance organizations, with participating districts accessing relevant services to address their own needs and priorities. In this context, matching DSAC resources and capacities with client demand reflects a crucial organizational consideration. As mentioned previously, evaluation findings suggest that priority districts are becoming increasingly engaged with their DSAC and anticipate using in-district assistance services with greater frequency. As this occurs, it will likely have implications for staffing levels and resources, which will require either expansion of capacity or a need to ration services. Although this report only covers the period through June 2011, preliminary evidence for the SY12 evaluation suggests that workload has become a growing concern for regional assistance directors.

In addition, emergent needs at the district level may require additional expertise, either on an ongoing or one-time basis. In some cases, where needs reflect widespread concerns across multiple districts, an initiative-level response may be warranted. For example, interviewees noted that data from many of their target districts reveal a particular challenge with regard to students classified as English language learners (ELL). Although DSACs have coordinated with ESE's ELL office, teams did not have embedded specialists in this area, and it was suggested that having ELL specialists either as part of DSAC teams or the DSAC organization more generally could help teams to better respond and address district needs. Similarly, several leaders of DSAC-engaged districts anticipated a future need for assistance with implementation of the planned educator evaluation system, while others noted an ongoing need for formal or informal principal mentoring and support.

In other cases, districts may have unique and specific needs that, although related to the overarching DSAC mission, are not common enough to warrant the development of a new capacity. Having access to specific expertise on an as-needed basis, either through the Department or through the engagement of outside specialists, could help DSACs provide targeted and "laser-like" support in these instances. As one interviewee noted:

> *Every once in a while, you've got to go outside your organization and pull in some specialist to further address the issue, and I think building that kind of referral model and having some funds and resources to support it would make sense.*

Although professional development grant funds offered by the Department to priority districts could be used to address these needs, it was noted that the resources require a fairly substantial planning horizon.

When responding to district requests and/or emergent needs, it will be important to consider the DSAC capacities and mission. As part of this process, it may be necessary to periodically review the foundational services to ensure that they remain responsive to emerging needs. One important consideration in this regard may be whether and to what extent DSACs have or could acquire sufficient capacity to deliver a high-quality service in the area. In addition, the likely impact of new programs or initiatives on workload will need to be taken into account, to ensure that new aspects of the work do not detract from the DSACs' ability to fulfill their core mission.

Finally, the potential for mission conflict must also be considered, particularly in light of the DSACs' field-based structure, which may create a tendency to view them as a potential vehicle to administer or implement a variety of new Department initiatives and programs. The need to maintain a clear distinction between the assistance provided by the DSACs and the Department's accountability functions was seen by both DSAC team members and their clients as critical to the viability of the DSACs. As such, the nature of potential new aspects of DSAC work, and the extent to which being involved in the work might cause a DSAC team member to be viewed as evaluative or involved in accountability, must be considered.

DSAC clients saw a need for improved timelines and communication from ESE. In many cases, these concerns related to the relatively new nature of the Initiative. For example, the need to implement practices and services before underlying resources and processes were fully developed created challenges in the field. As one example, the Education Data Warehouse was still under development as DSAC data specialists were engaging heavily with districts and schools to promote the use of this resource. User frustration and concerns about system capacity led some clients to consider alternative tools and request data specialists' help evaluating these alternatives—something that could create conflict between DSAC's broad assistance mission and the data specialists' charge to increase use of the Data Warehouse. Improvements to the systems interface and processing speed made during summer 2011 may help to ease this concern moving forward.

This also appeared to manifest in terms of limited turnaround times and late release of information to districts, particularly with regard to professional development grants and Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments. Further, changes to timeframes, questions about the DSAC role, and other logistical considerations were also viewed as challenging. Although in some respects, these issues related to ESE's desire to be flexible, more timely and consistent communication would likely be viewed as beneficial. In light of this and other feedback, ESE provided districts with latitude in the implementation of self-assessments and made changes to the grants for SY12, releasing them earlier in the school year and making efforts to simplify the process.

The experience of DSACs in SY11 suggests that flexibility in the implementation of key strategies and tools may be critical to working effectively with districts. District and school leaders appeared to see the most value in DSAC offerings when they viewed them not as external or, as they described, "an add-on," but rather as tied in to their own priorities and initiatives for their district or school. Generally, perceptions of alignment appeared to be related to the extent to which the DSAC was able to customize the service to meet a district or school's particular needs and context. Many underscored what they saw as increasing customization in the DSAC approach over time as a positive improvement, and several even expressed a need for further flexibility.

This was particularly true with regard to professional development grants, as leaders who felt that they were given greater flexibility in the use of professional development funds often described higher levels of satisfaction with the grants and the grant process. DSAC team members described a similar need to adapt the Learning Walkthrough process, Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments, and approach with regard to data teams in order to respond to differences in local structures, resources, capacities, and needs.

Given the demand-driven nature of the Initiative, increased customization will likely result in higher utilization among targeted districts. Although decisions with regard to adaptation of tools and strategies must be made in the field, in collaboration with district and school leaders, the need to retain core elements of practice is also an important concern. Clear articulation of what the core elements of each tool are, (i.e., the aspects of tool or strategy that should be common) and when, how, and to what extent tools and strategies can be adapted, could better support staff in the field as decisions need to be made.

IV. Client Satisfaction

The DSAC initiative is designed to build district capacity to support and accelerate instructional improvement and, ultimately, student achievement in challenged districts. At this early stage in the Initiative it is important to gauge the perspectives of the field regarding the Initiative's progress and direction. This section summarizes data regarding client satisfaction from the perspective of both educators participating in DSAC events and leaders in priority districts and schools.

Feedback from Participants in DSAC Events and Trainings

To measure educator satisfaction with DSAC events and trainings, including both those held on a regional basis and provided in-district, point-of-service feedback forms were designed and administered. From March, when forms were first used, through June 2011, 752 feedback forms were collected at 30 DSAC events throughout the state, reflecting an estimated response rate of 71%.[14] Events include trainings related to Learning Walkthroughs, Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments, data use and tools, and the new Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, as well as regional networks related to data use, literacy, and mathematics.

Participants in DSAC-sponsored events and trainings were overwhelmingly positive about the experience. As Table 4 shows, nearly all respondents indicated that with regard to organization, quality of materials and/or resources, and the clarity, relevance, and usefulness of the information, events were either "excellent" or "good." For example, 95% of participants described the overall quality of the event they attended as either "excellent" or "good," including 58% who rated the experience "excellent." Ratings of individual aspects were similarly positive, with all participants rating organization (97%), relevance (96%), usefulness (94%), and clarity (94%) of the information, as well as quality of materials/resources (94%), either "excellent" or "good."

Table 4: Participants' Ratings of DSAC-sponsored PD, Networking, and Training, March through June 2011

	Valid N	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Organization	733	66%	31%	3%	1%
Quality of materials/resources	727	54%	40%	6%	1%
Clarity of the information	729	52%	42%	6%	0.4%
Relevance of the information	726	65%	31%	4%	1%
Usefulness of the information	726	60%	34%	5%	1%
Overall quality	713	58%	37%	4%	0.3%

Source: UMDI analysis of feedback forms submitted by DSAC teams at events held between March and June 2011. The ratings for overall quality may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Excludes respondents who selected a "don't know/not applicable" option.

In general, networks or trainings related to data and mathematics received higher overall ratings. Nearly two-thirds of educators participating in data- or mathematics-related events and trainings rated the overall quality of the event as "excellent," whereas for events focused on other areas, this proportion ranged from 40% (those focused on literacy) to 54% (those related to Learning Walkthroughs). For events of all types, however, the vast majority of participants rated the events "excellent" or "good."

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[14] Estimated response rates were calculated using the standard formula: total number of forms processed divided by the total number of event participants, as estimated by DSAC staff members. DSAC teams estimated total participation at these events at 1,062.

Nearly all respondents indicated that they were likely to use what they learned at DSAC-sponsored events. In fact, as Table 5 shows, 660 participants, or 97%, indicated that they were likely to use new information gained at DSAC events, including 471 (69%) who indicated that they were "very likely" to use what they had learned. The proportion of respondents saying they were "very likely" to use what they learned was particularly high at events related to literacy (82%), mathematics (79%), and data use (75%).

Table 5: Participants' Reported Likelihood of Using Learning from DSAC-Sponsored Events

	Valid N	Valid %
Very likely	471	69%
Somewhat likely	189	28%
Somewhat unlikely	15	2%
Very unlikely	5	1%
Total	680	100%

Source: UMDI analysis of feedback forms submitted by DSAC teams at events held between March and June 2011.

Finally, participants reported favorable opinions of their regional DSAC and its approach. With regard to six aspects identified by program managers as critical to the DSACs' ability to effectively collaborate with and support districts and schools—accessibility, responsiveness, respect in interactions, collaborative approach, basis in evidence, and commitment to quality assistance—event participants also responded favorably (Table 6). For example, 81% of participants strongly agreed that their DSAC was respectful in its interactions, 71% strongly agreed that their DSAC was committed to providing the highest quality assistance, and 70% strongly agreed that their DSAC was collaborative in its approach. This positive sentiment was slightly less strong with regard to accessibility, responsiveness, and basis in evidence, although even in these cases, a majority of respondents strongly agreed that their DSAC displayed these attributes.

Table 6: Participants' Overall Perceptions of the DSAC, March through June 2011

	Valid N	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Readily accessible	467	62%	35%	3%	1%
Responsive to school and district needs	466	58%	39%	2%	1%
Respectful in its interactions	529	81%	18%	0.4%	0.4%
Collaborative in its approach	510	70%	27%	2%	0.4%
Evidence-based	496	66%	32%	2%	0.4%
Committed to providing the highest quality assistance	492	71%	27%	1%	1%

Source: UMDI analysis of feedback forms submitted by DSAC teams at events held between March and June 2011. The ratings for overall quality may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Excludes respondents who selected a "don't know/not applicable" option.

Feedback from District and School Leaders

Focus groups and interviews with district and school leaders provided an opportunity to gain preliminary feedback regarding overall satisfaction with the Initiative and its services. A survey planned for June 2011 was unable to be implemented due to concerns about evaluation fatigue. Gathering additional satisfaction data from a broader array of district leaders will reflect an important evaluation priority for SY12.

With regard to overall satisfaction, findings from district and school leader interviews and focus groups were mixed. Although many interviewed leaders felt that the DSAC had added value to their local improvement efforts, others expressed caution with regard to the organization and its approaches, which they viewed as new

and, in some cases, relatively untested. Leaders in district and schools who were most engaged with their DSAC tended to be those who were most satisfied with the organization and its services. This is not surprising, given the demand-driven nature of the model.

In cases where interviewees expressed dissatisfaction, they were often careful to separate their experience with individual DSAC representatives from structural elements of the Initiative. In general, most interviewees described their interactions with DSAC team members as positive. The most common sources of dissatisfaction appeared to relate to the implementation of professional development grants and to concerns about alignment of Initiative resources with their district's needs.

V. Preliminary Impacts of the Initiative and its Services

As the Initiative moves into its second full year of operations, the evaluation will focus increasingly on the measurement of intermediate and long-term outcomes through data collection using standardized instruments and surveys. Instruments will be developed collaboratively with ESE, with input from regional assistance directors and representatives from DSAC teams.

Regarding the Initiative as a whole, district and school leaders most commonly emphasized that it is "far too early" to see changes as a result of their work with the DSAC. Many attributed this to the early stages of engagement with the DSAC, which was viewed as continuing to refine its approach. However, many did express optimism that collaboration with DSACs would ultimately contribute to long-term change and improvement. In many instances this sentiment appeared to be based on a sense that DSAC services were "research-based," such that "the probability for potential success is high."

At this relatively early juncture, district and school leaders did offer some preliminary impacts they felt could be attributable to the DSAC Initiative. These included increased access to information and resources available from the Department; increased understanding of the new *ESE Framework for District Accountability and Assistance* and sense of urgency related to improvement; and, among districts working on an ongoing basis with a DSAC, some preliminary indicators of change. As these preliminary impacts are considered, and further changes in district, school, and classroom practice are pursued, the role of other district initiatives and contextual factors must also be considered, as DSAC efforts reflect one factor among many that may be contribute to these changes.

One of the most often-cited impacts of the DSAC initiative was increased access to resources, services, and information from ESE. Several interviewees noted that because DSACs often act as a "liaison between [educators] and ESE," the organization helps increase the accessibility of ESE. "We can get answers through [the DSAC]," one interviewee explained, whereas others noted that they could more readily navigate relevant information and resources. This appeared to be particularly true with regard to information pertaining to the new Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks integrating the Common Core State Standards and Education Data Warehouse. To some extent, the increased access to ESE facilitated by the DSAC was viewed as consistent with, and supportive of, an overall trend toward improved responsiveness within ESE more generally.

DSAC staff, it was noted, can also draw leaders' attention to particular ESE offerings that are relevant to a district's needs and situation, acting as intermediaries between the Department and its clients:

> *The DSAC cues us into things that are happening within the larger ESE. [Our DSAC] informs us of meetings and things that we probably wouldn't otherwise have access to.*

This appeared to be particularly true with regard to professional development, as DSACs informed districts of ESE offerings, and in the case of priority districts, provided grants to support participation. Although the process of accessing funds and signing up for courses was described as challenging, district leaders often viewed the courses as high-quality experiences for their teachers and administrators.

> *There's no question, because of the PD providers and the time and effort that they are placing on assistance. It's of higher quality than what we would be able to provide ourselves.*

Interviewees specifically highlighted National Institute for School Leadership training, the Special Education Leadership Academy, mathematics networks, and a handful of offerings on ESE's professional development menu. This sentiment was not universal, however, as many interviewees expressed concern about the extent to

which what was offered through the Initiative was relevant to their needs, and felt that in-district activities would be more directly applicable. This tension is discussed in more detail later in this section of the report.

Another commonly-cited impact involved increased understanding of Level determinations and a new sense of urgency related to improvement. In many—though not all—cases, leaders described the DSAC as their first face-to-face point of contact regarding their determination as a Level 3 district or school; thus, the DSACs served as providers of critical information with regard to that status and its implications. In some instances, interviewees credited DSAC staff in general, and the regional assistance director in particular, with helping to refocus attention away from the potentially negative aspects of the designation and towards the opportunities provided as a result of the designation, such as grant resources and access to assistance. In addition, several noted that the presence of DSAC staff in school buildings helped to increase the sense of urgency among educators, although it is notable that this may have also contributed to the tension with regard to assistance and accountability.

> *I think just the presence of the DSAC coming in...even though they are not intimidating people in and of themselves, but their presence [in schools] did make people say 'this is really serious; we need to really look at our practice and see what it is that we're doing and how we can improve'. And you can just feel the difference in the educators within our district.*

In several instances, the administration of Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments provided the venue for this more direct engagement with educators. "They had a lot of roles," one leader noted, "but it was that role—being seen alongside the principal talking about the Conditions for School Effectiveness at every staff meeting in the fall—that really brought it home to people."

Although it is still early, in districts reporting ongoing and sustained engagement with a DSAC, leaders did cite some preliminary impacts on their districts or schools that they believed could be attributed to DSAC involvement. These generally related to the establishment of new processes and structures and/or changes in district or school culture, and included the following:

- *The Development of New Capacity for Self-Reflection and Planning.* In many cases, leaders described how having the DSAC as a resource often brought new ideas and ways to better implement existing strategies. Similarly, in a couple of instances, leaders indicated that the implementation of Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments, once complete, could help better identify professional development needs, although it was noted that implementing these self-assessments later in the year limited the extent to which they could be used to inform professional development grant and improvement planning for SY11.

- *Establishment of District-Level Data Teams and Related Processes and Systems for Supporting Effective Data Use.* Although progress with respect to these teams was described as gradual, it was noted that several highly engaged teams reached important process benchmarks. These included: the establishment of structures, processes, and norms for collaborative work; clear articulation of team member roles and responsibilities; adoption of effective team practices; the development of a written vision statement for data use; and definition and articulation of questions to focus inquiry.

- *Improvements in Use of Data.* In many cases, school-level data teams and the highest-functioning district-level teams were described as having increased planning capacity and improved data analysis and reporting skills. This was particularly true with respect to school-level data teams, where the establishment of structures and focus was less complex, such that use of data and development of a common language were more easily achieved. Another preliminary impact relating to data use pertained to the use of, and access to, qualitative information. In part, this appeared to be related to conversations about school self-assessments and/or Learning Walkthroughs, as well as the data teams' role in participating in these activities and/or using the data generated through them.

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- *Increased Opportunities for Teacher Leadership.* In some cases, DSAC engagement helped empower teachers and facilitate an increased sense of shared responsibility for improvement. These types of outcomes were typically associated with teacher participation in school self-assessment studies, Learning Walkthroughs, and instructional study groups. In fact, it was noted that in some schools, teachers have little or no common planning time, such these activities represented one of the few opportunities for teachers to engage with colleagues and discuss practice and/or school-wide challenges. Further, the DSAC role in facilitating those discussions was often viewed as critical. "We wouldn't have the openness between the administrators and the buy-in from teachers if they [the DSAC] weren't directly involved," one superintendent explained.

- *Classroom-Level Changes.* Although less commonly cited, some interviewees provided anecdotal evidence of changes in classroom practice. These tended to be described in relation to individual teachers' participation in DSAC-sponsored professional development or services: most often, Category training, regional mathematics networks, and/or in-district support received from a literacy specialist. In many cases, interviewees expressed a need to further disseminate the practices beyond a handful of classrooms, but some identified a concern that, with coaching positions being eliminated, their capacity to do this on their own had been substantially diminished.

Ultimately, it may be impossible to disentangle the impacts of the DSAC from local initiatives. As discussed previously, where DSACs had formed successful relationships with districts and schools, services were typically integrated with broader district initiatives and adapted to meet the particular needs of the district. Further, program managers may want to be cautious about how they frame conversations about impacts so as not to minimize the role of districts and schools in their own improvement. In fact, some interviewees suggested that an overemphasis on the DSAC role in improvement may run contrary to the DSAC engagement philosophy and the types of partnerships they are trying to create. "DSAC is not fixing us," one district leader noted, "they are guiding us, so we're fixing ourselves."

VI. Conclusion

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's District and School Assistance Center (DSAC) Initiative reflects a significant shift in the state's system of support to schools and districts. Launched in fall 2010, the Initiative reflects a complex, regionally-based effort to support improvement in high-need districts across the Commonwealth, with priority given to the 51 districts designated as Level 3 and Level 4 under the state's *Framework for District Accountability and Assistance*. [15]

In a relatively short period of time, the DSAC system built a foundation for their work by outlining a specific staffing approach; hiring experienced individuals, including a cadre of former superintendents and principals, to fill those roles; and developing tools and training to establish new capacities within the organization. Program managers and staff have also sharpened the focus of their mission and approach, a challenging task in light of the diversity of high-need districts and schools that they are charged with serving.

Since the organization's launch, DSACs have reached out to DSAC priority districts using a variety of methods, including regional launch meetings and in-district meetings with leaders. Evaluation data suggest that, as a result of these efforts, all 51 priority districts were engaged with their DSAC in some capacity. As of the end of the 2010-2011 school year, in a majority of districts this engagement would be described as moderate, although in several cases engagement has become fairly intensive, with districts accessing DSAC assistance services on an ongoing basis. Evidence suggests that engagement is moving in a positive direction, with many of these districts anticipating accessing services more frequently and/or in more areas.

In terms of services delivered, some of the major areas of progress during the 2010-2011 school year were the establishment of regional networks, including those related to mathematics and literacy, and the provision of targeted assistance services, especially with regard to professional development grants, data-specific support and training, and Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments. Progress was also achieved with regard to Learning Walkthroughs, although use of this protocol is still in its initial stages, due to varying levels of district readiness and prior district practice vis-à-vis classroom observation, among other factors. Other services, such as content-area support in mathematics and literacy, did not show as high an overall rate of utilization as might be expected, although this may be due to specific challenges with regard to staffing and turnover.

As the Initiative has progressed, DSAC leaders have acknowledged learning important lessons, and district and school leaders have been forthcoming in regards to initial concerns. These issues often related to capacity and logistics, which would not be unexpected, given the relatively new and complex nature of the initiative. What is clear is that districts were engaged most frequently and with greatest satisfaction when services were relevant to district needs, timely in their provision, and provided by vendors perceived as high-quality.

Reflecting on the Initiative as a whole, district and school leaders noted that DSACs have contributed to increased access to ESE resources, services, and information, as well as to a greater understanding of Accountability and Assistance Level determinations in the field. At this relatively early juncture, it was noted that it may be too soon to observe specific in-district impacts, although among leaders of the most highly engaged districts, some preliminary impacts were described, including: the establishment of systems to support data analysis and new related capacities; the development of new capacity for self-reflection and planning; increased teacher engagement; and, in some cases, early evidence of change in classroom practice. Others expressed optimism that, because the services provided are often high-quality and evidence-based, they are likely to contribute to their own improvement efforts.

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[15] An additional 10 Level 3 and 4 districts are identified as Commissioner's Districts, and, as such, receive direct ESE assistance through the Office of Urban District Assistance, a separate initiative; Commissioner's Districts are not reflected in the 51 priority districts.

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