

DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION (ESE) IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Research Findings

Identification

- Differences in rate of low-income students being found eligible for special education (more than 2.6 times as likely to be found eligible than non-low income) reflect over-identification of low-income students in Massachusetts, much higher than would be expected (expected rate of .5 more likely to be found eligible).
- ESE data show the highest referral rates to special education are for 3-5 year olds. As with the K-12 population, 3-5 year olds who are low-income are more likely to be found eligible for special education than non-low income students.

Access to the General Education Curriculum and to High Quality Instruction

- Students with disabilities in inclusive settings (including vocational schools) have better educational outcomes and graduate at higher rates and on time, compared to students in more restrictive settings (substantially separate classrooms and out-of district placements).
- There are disparities in enrollment of students with disabilities in vocational-technical schools such that certain students with sensory impairments (deaf, hard of hearing, blind, deaf/blind) or emotional impairments are under-represented in the various career/technical education programs and schools.
- Data from the state's Special Education Performance Plan show poor outcomes regarding preparing 3-5-year-old students with disabilities for age-appropriate social and emotional skills prior to entering kindergarten.
- Students with disabilities, particularly those with learning disabilities and those with behavioral issues, have a much higher likelihood of dropping out of school than their nondisabled peers (roughly twice as likely). These students experience poorer education outcomes and are less likely to return to education.

Placement in the Least Restrictive Environment

- Students with disabilities in full inclusion settings outperform similar students who are not included to the same extent in general education classrooms. There is significant variability of inclusion practices, with significantly fewer inclusion options at the secondary level.
- A substantial majority of students in out-of-district settings never return to a more inclusive setting. Special education administrators report that student behavior is the single biggest reason for out-of-district placements at all ages.
- Low-income students, black students, and Hispanic students with disabilities are more likely than other students with disabilities to be placed in substantially separate or out-of-district settings. (See also the finding above regarding identification of low-income students.)
- Strong outcomes and persistence of students with disabilities in vocational-technical schools suggest that alternate organizational structures help secondary school level students to be successful.

ESE Responsive Strategic Actions

Provide early interventions to improve student outcomes

- **ESE will focus technical assistance on eligibility determinations at the pre-kindergarten level to address the highest rates of initial referral.** Starting technical assistance Sept. 2015. (Lead: Special Education Planning and Policy partnering with Department of Early Education and Care and the ESE Early Childhood Team)
- **ESE will improve pre-kindergarten focus** on providing young children with disabilities with opportunities for positive social-emotional skills/acquisition and use of knowledge and skills, and use of appropriate behaviors in pre-kindergarten as a means of improving overall access to education throughout the grades. This work will be done in coordination with ESE's Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports initiatives. Ongoing. (Lead: Special Education Planning and Policy partnering with Department of Early Education and Care, ESE Early Childhood Team, and the Office of Tiered Systems of Support)

Increase the capacity of general education classrooms to meet the needs of diverse learners.

- **ESE will promote use of the Massachusetts Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)** in identified districts. Ongoing. (Lead: Office of Tiered Systems of Support)
- **ESE will identify high schools** that have demonstrated effectiveness in serving students with disabilities. Identify and promote model practices. Begin identification activity Dec. 2014. (Lead: Special Education Planning and Policy, partnering with the Office of College and Career Readiness)
- **At the secondary level** ESE will explore available data on students with disabilities' access to Title 1, AP courses, and other high school options and cross-reference with disability and income status to evaluate access opportunities for students with disabilities. Starting September 2015. (Lead: Office of Planning, Research, and Delivery Systems with Special Education Planning and Policy)
- **ESE curriculum materials will be reviewed and updated** to include Universal Design for Learning approaches at every opportunity. Ongoing. (Lead: Office of Teaching and Learning with the Office for Tiered Systems of Support)
- **ESE will continue to promote** access and equity in charter schools through promotion of best practice in special education. Consider development of secondary schools without traditional organization structure, to provide broader opportunities for students with disabilities to succeed. Ongoing. (Lead: Office of Educational Redesign partnering with Special Education Planning and Policy)
- **ESE will continue to promote best practices** in statewide dropout prevention programs, including targeted interventions for high risk students and use of the Early Warning Indicators System. Ongoing. (Lead: Offices of College and Career Readiness and Career and Technical Education).

Reduce inappropriate identification of low-income students as eligible for special education

- **ESE will revise** eligibility guidance documents. Completion by July 2015. (Lead: Special Education Planning and Policy)
- **ESE will create** self-assessment tools for districts to review policies, practices, and procedures for referral and identification. Create tools by Sept. 2015. (Lead: Special Education Planning and Policy)
- **ESE will identify** districts with identification risk ratios for low income students of over 2.6 and with high referral rates. Initially districts will receive technical assistance. If warranted, corrective action will be initiated, which could include using federal authority to direct spending of up to 15% of the district's special education entitlement grant funds to address the problem. Technical assistance begins September 2015. (Lead: Special Education Planning and Policy)
- **ESE will develop** additional training opportunities and information for low-income and non-English speaking families of students with disabilities. Ongoing. (Lead: Special Education Planning and Policy and the Office of English Language Acquisition and Academic Achievement)

Increase inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings

- ***ESE will provide*** targeted support to Level 3, 4, and 5 districts by promoting use of the Massachusetts Tiered System of Support. Ongoing. (Lead: Office of Tiered Systems of Support partnering with Office of District and School Turnaround)
- ***ESE will foster*** stronger public school programs through continued focus on developing districts' use of the Mass Tiered System of Support and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports. Ongoing. (Lead: Office of Tiered Systems of Support in partnership with Special Education Planning and Policy)
- ***ESE will model*** effective partnerships between general education and special education within the Department and with other agencies and school districts. Ongoing. (Lead: Center for Accountability, Partnerships and Targeted Assistance and Center for School and District Improvement)

Reduce inappropriate use of substantially separate settings and out-of-district placements

- ***ESE will identify*** districts with high placement rates in substantially separate classrooms or out-of-district for low-income, black, and Hispanic students with disabilities. ESE will work cooperatively with outlier districts to identify practices resulting in placement in less restrictive settings, will develop a self-assessment for districts to use, and will provide technical assistance. If warranted, corrective action will be initiated, which could include using federal authority to direct spending of up to 15% of the district's special education entitlement funds to address the problem. Self-assessment to be developed by June 2016. (Lead: Special Education Planning and Policy)