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To: Mitchell Chester, Commissioner, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

From: Tammy Battaglini, Chris Librizzi and Kate Dobin, Parthenon-EY

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Re: Organizational assessment: final recommendations

Overview

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) faces the complications of a challenging fiscal environment – the end of Race to the Top funding and potentially flat budget growth in the foreseeable future – as well as leadership vacancies due to MA retirement incentives and a hiring freeze. Parthenon-EY was hired to perform an assessment and research procedures, provide advice to help DESE leadership assess the way DESE is organized to meet its responsibilities, and understand the needs of the field.

Over the course of a multi-week engagement, Parthenon-EY provided advisory services to Commissioner Chester and the senior leadership team by conducting an organizational assessment with the following goals:

- ▶ Assess and advise on the balance between leading the state vs. supporting/enabling local efforts
- ▶ Assess and advise on the balance between service and compliance
- ▶ Assess and advise on the balance between depth and breadth of services
- ▶ Recommend a structure and level of capacity intended to support ongoing needs

With those goals in mind, Parthenon-EY gained insight by engaging stakeholders both within and outside of DESE and benchmarking against other state education agencies who have recently thought about organizational design (see Appendix A for full list of engaged stakeholders). Through this effort, Parthenon-EY assessed that MA DESE has a foundation of internal capacity upon which to build, and is well positioned to make some adjustments to improve its capacity. Additionally through this effort, we assessed some areas of opportunity for better alignment, analyzed the potential feasibility of alternative organizational structures, and provided assessment of scenarios to inform the potential organizational design, which is ultimately to be determined by the Commissioner.

We have structured our assessment in two sections:

1. **Guiding principles:** informed by DESE, provides a foundation upon which all recommendations were made
2. **Key areas of opportunity and recommendations:** evaluates the role units could play and the potential implications on organizational design



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Guiding principles

DESE leadership sought to identify guiding principles to help provide foundational parameters for any decisions regarding organizational priorities and design. Based upon conversations with DESE leadership, staff, and the field, Parthenon-EY recommends the following guiding principles for DESE consideration:

- A. The Commissioner's direct report structure should reflect the agency's strategic priorities and reinforce the areas of work that require strong coordination
- B. DESE's Instructional Support functions should be more tightly linked with each other so as to draw on the intrinsic connections between standards, curriculum and assessment, and educator development
- C. DESE should seek to be data-driven in identifying relative points of strength and weakness in the system, prioritizing pursuit of direct interventions when capacity exists, leveraging partners if/as appropriate to address key needs in the field
- D. DESE should continue to focus on helping educators implement existing policies and make stronger connections between ongoing strands of work, minimizing the creation of new initiatives as possible
- E. DESE should organize to deliver differentiated services and supports based on differentiated need, as identified by DESE, and a tiered system of support
- F. DESE should seek to better integrate compliance functions within the agency to streamline the burden for districts and emphasize support over enforcement

Potential key areas of opportunity and recommendations

1. **Support for the Commissioner: How can integration and alignment across the agency's work be fostered by senior leadership?**

Currently in MA, the responsibility of integrating the agency's work is often taken on by the Commissioner, creating challenges in bandwidth, especially in light of recent transitions within the Executive Leadership team. In addition, the responsibility of strategic integration could use stronger focus and emphasis to support this field in connecting the many ongoing strands of reform and implementation. After assessing other states' models and their successes, we have found that most depend on a key player who works closely with the Commissioner and has the following responsibilities:

- ▶ Strategic integration of all key priorities and initiatives of the agency (including ensuring that senior level meeting time is spent on the most important elements)
- ▶ Aligning and prioritizing communication efforts within the agency and with stakeholders
- ▶ Prioritizing the Commissioner's time so that time is spent on the highest value elements
- ▶ Team building across the senior leadership

Thus, based on procedures performed, our recommendations include:

- ▶ Specifically position and enable one person to take a stronger integration role in making connections across the agency
- ▶ Better leverage the delivery function across the agency to be a driving force in strategic integration
- ▶ Consider restructuring direct reports to the Commissioner to bring together related strands of work that are separate today, focused on streamlining the integration needs

2. Instructional support: What is the role for the state related to providing instructional supports to the field? Related, what is the potential alignment of functions related to instructional support?

When Commissioner Chester arrived in Massachusetts in 2008, DESE had no unit charged with supporting the instructional practice of districts, schools, and teachers. He developed the current department of Teaching and Learning, and progress has been made to harness some of the capacity of the content specialists within the agency to support the field. However, many within DESE have voiced that there could be more clarity on the state's role in improving instructional practice. The work of the agency today is a combination of setting standards, providing direct support to the field, coordinating curation of resources from the field, and other elements in between. The field articulates that the instructional support coming from the agency is of mixed value.

The agency's key functions related to instructional support are currently spread across Teaching & Learning, Educator Effectiveness, and Assessment. Our research and assessment indicates this division of resources reduces clarity regarding responsibility/ownership and accountability for initiatives, and potentially prevents the agency from benefitting from the natural connections between these areas of work. Additionally, based on our research, the division has, at times, led to the field feeling that there are siloes when communication is not aligned and coming from multiple sources.

In light of the rising standards and expectations within Massachusetts (and across the country), research indicates there is a need for DESE to clearly articulate 1) its role in providing instructional supports to the field and 2) the resources that it will provide to support the field.

After speaking with representatives from the field and with leaders from other states, and with the procedures performed, Parthenon-EY's recommendations include:

- ▶ Define the role of the agency as one that sets standards, and then acts as a clearinghouse for the resources and supports already available to support the field in meeting those standards
- ▶ Identify instructional leadership at the district and school levels and find ways to engage with that leadership on an ongoing basis around common issues of practice
- ▶ Explore the integration of core instruction-related elements of the agency
 - ▶ To include key components of Curriculum & Instruction, Educator Effectiveness, and Assessment
 - ▶ Coordinate professional development supports of Curriculum & Instruction and Educator Development
- ▶ Confirm that any areas related to instructional supports that are not formally integrated (e.g., services for students with disabilities and English language learners, etc.) have strong, well-established cross-functioning relationships and processes (including goal-setting, implementation, communications, etc.)

3. Communications: How can communications, both internally and externally, be more streamlined?

Currently within DESE, communications with the field (districts, schools, educators) can come from many different units. The field has articulated that it is confusing for many messages to come from many different touchpoints, and it makes it difficult to understand what is most important. DESE can become more proactive in confirming that messages are aligned across channels, prioritized for the field, and in-line with the agency's overall message, externally and internally. Additionally, DESE can be more proactive about what messages need to be communicated and when. Based on this feedback, observations, and benchmarking other states' recent modifications to this approach, our recommendations include:

- ▶ Consider implementing a greater degree of central coordination to confirm coherence, clear and consistent prioritization of initiatives and supports, and streamline messaging to the field

- ▶ Differentiate communications for two related but distinct constituent groups: educators and leaders in the field vs. policy makers and other key external stakeholders
- ▶ Enable one direct report to the Commissioner to serve as an external proxy for the Commissioner

4. Student support: How might the agency best structure the Student Support unit to respond to the needs of the field?

DESE has a strategic priority around supporting the social and emotional needs of students, but based on research, it appears to lack a clear plan on how best to support the field and build capacity in these areas. Some district leaders have noted this as their number one priority going forward and one where they could utilize stronger support from the state. Although some of these functions are currently housed together, others are scattered, and there is potentially room to add some capacity to address some of the missing areas and help develop a strong plan. Finally, other states we benchmarked have recently been able to find efficiencies within their compliance functions in order to reallocate towards other impactful priorities. Thus, based on our research and procedures performed, our recommendations include:

- ▶ Consider bringing functions related to special education closer together to force connections between compliance and support work
- ▶ Encourage DESE leadership to find efficiencies and improve coordination within compliance functions
- ▶ Use savings to potentially reinvest in areas where districts feel under-supported today, and in alignment with the agency's strategic priorities
- ▶ Determine scope, goals, and resources allotted to the agency's strategic priority of supporting the field's social and emotional health needs

5. Educational options: How can the state help to assess existing school options and identify where there is need for additional capacity?

MA has a variety of school options within the state in traditional district schools, charters, vocational schools, school choice, and others. Yet in many areas of MA, there is a need for high-quality options and a rethinking of existing models (e.g., in how to connect school to work). Several key questions come to the fore that a state education agency can meaningfully address: What school options are available in different parts of the state? How equitable is this distribution of pathways for students? Which options are high performing, which are not, and what type of additional capacity is needed? What type of emerging technologies are successful and in which school options? Yet, based on our research, it does not appear that anyone within DESE today is well-positioned to address these questions comprehensively. Thus, based on our research and procedures performed, our recommendations include:

- ▶ Consider aligning all functions related to range of school options
- ▶ Focus the efforts of the group on:
 - ▶ Understanding the needs of students across the state
 - ▶ Identifying gaps in equitable distribution of access to high quality educational options
 - ▶ Identifying and disseminating promising uses of emerging technologies to support school design, curriculum, and instruction

Conclusion

DESE has the opportunity to consider a set of changes so that a) its work is integrated more systematically in supporting the field, and b) makes the appropriate use of its resources in tight fiscal times. The above recommendations reflect feedback from a wide range of stakeholders inside and outside DESE, as well as from

other states' examples in implementing organizational changes. We hope that these recommendations inform DESE leadership as the agency considers any potential decisions related to organizational design and leadership alignment.

In considering how DESE will implement changes to align with the findings in this document, we acknowledge and appreciate the constraints that DESE, like many other state education agencies, faces. These could include the following areas that are beyond the scope of the Parthenon-EY project activities: compliance with statutory/regulatory requirements and legal obligations, absence of targeted funding streams for some priorities, limitations on the use of certain funding streams, and limitations on the amount of personnel allowed. It may be appropriate for DESE to work with other state agencies to identify ways of gaining additional flexibility to best align personnel resources with the needs of the field. Some flexibilities that may be needed include: maximizing flexibility in funding streams; reclassification of existing and new positions; and consideration of moving beyond strict FTE caps where the need and funding are identified. We defer to both DESE and its partners in the state on the specific feasibility of any of these steps.

Appendix A: Stakeholder engagement list

Internal DESE staff

- ▶ Multiple 1:1 conversations with Commissioner and Executive Senior Staff
- ▶ Focus groups with ~30 manager- and non-manager-level staff
- ▶ Web-based survey to all staff

External Massachusetts elementary and secondary leaders

- ▶ Educational Personnel Advisory Council
- ▶ M.A.S.S. Executive Committee
- ▶ Principals Advisory Cabinet
- ▶ Secretary of Education
- ▶ Superintendents Advisory Cabinet
- ▶ Teachers Advisory Cabinet

Current and former senior-level leaders at other U.S. state education agencies

- ▶ Connecticut
- ▶ Delaware
- ▶ Kentucky
- ▶ Louisiana
- ▶ Maryland
- ▶ New Jersey
- ▶ Tennessee