# Minutes of the Regular Meeting

# of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education

# Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

# 75 Pleasant Street, Malden, MA 02148

#  Tuesday, November 24, 2020

# 10:03 a.m. – 12:55 p.m.

**Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Present:**

**Katherine Craven**,Chair,Brookline

**James Morton**, Vice-Chair, Boston

**Jasper Coughlin**, Student Member, Billerica

**Amanda** **Fernández**,Belmont

**Matthew Hills**, Newton

**Darlene Lombos,** Boston

**Michael Moriarty,** Holyoke

**James Peyser**,Secretary of Education

**Paymon Rouhanifard**, Brookline

**Mary Ann Stewart,** Lexington

**Martin West**, Newton

**Jeffrey C. Riley**,Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Chair Craven convened the meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) at 10:03 a.m. Board members introduced themselves.

**Public Comment**

* **Karen Blumstein**, MA Certified Elementary, Special Needs, and Gifted and Talented Educator, Massachusetts Association for Gifted Education (MAGE) Vice President and Parent Liaison, addressed the Board on Update on Gifted Education in Massachusetts
* **Gerry Mroz**, parent, addressed the Board on an Update on Gifted Education in Massachusetts.
* **Robert Howard**, 8th Grade Math Teacher, Brockton West Middle School, Team Leader in the Biggest Winner Math Challenge Summer Pilot, addressed the Board on Update on Gifted Education in Massachusetts
* **Isha Hassan**, 8th Grade Student, Rumney Marsh Academy, Revere, Participant in Biggest Winner Math Challenge Summer Program, addressed the Board on Update on Gifted Education in Massachusetts
* **Montserrat Diaz**, 8th Grade Student, Plouffe Academy, Brockton, Participant in Biggest Winner Math Challenge Summer Program, addressed the Board on Update on Gifted Education in Massachusetts
* **Christine Spelman,** Graduation Coach, Springfield High School of Science & Technology, addressed the Board on MCAS Update
* **Heidi T. Riccio, Ed.D.,** Superintendent-Director, Essex North Shore Agricultural and Technical School,addressed the Board on vocational school admissions
* **Paloma Rodriguez,** Business owner, Isla Spice, Graduate of Greater Lawrence Technical High School,addressed the Board on vocational school admissions
* **Jaiden Arroyo,** Student,Beverly, MA, addressed the Board on vocational school admissions
* **Sheila M. Harrity,** Ed.D., Superintendent, Montachusett Regional Vocational-Technical School,addressed the Board on vocational school admissions

**Comments from Chair Craven**

Chair Craven welcomed the newest Board member, Jasper Coughlin, who has been elected by his peers to chair the State Student Advisory Council (SSAC) and serve as a member of the Board through June 30, 2021. Chair Craven noted Mr. Coughlin is a senior at Billerica Memorial High School and has been involved in student government since he was a freshman; he has been president of his class since his sophomore year and is a representative to the Billerica School Committee. She added that in his spare time, Mr. Coughlin enjoys playing the violin and has played for 13 years. Mr. Coughlin thanked the Board and Commissioner for their warm welcome.

Chair Craven announced that the Commissioner’s performance evaluation committee for FY2021 is comprised of Vice-Chair Morton as chair of the committee and Ms. Fernández and herself as committee members.

**Comments from Secretary Peyser**

Secretary Peyser welcomed Mr. Coughlin to the Board. The Secretary commented on the need for students to be in school as much as possible. He said remote learning falls short for too many students. Secretary Peyser added this is especially true for younger children and high needs students and is a growing problem at all grade levels. He noted that families with more resources can do more to support remote learning than low-income families and those where parents must work outside the home, widening the achievement and opportunity gaps we have been striving to close.

Secretary Peyser said remote schooling is also having a negative impact on students’ social-emotional development and mental health. He said while health and safety considerations for children and adults must come first, there is growing evidence the schools are not significant sources of COVID-19 spread when the standard protocols are followed, namely mask-wearing, social distancing, hand hygiene, and most importantly staying home when you feel sick. Secretary Peyser added this is true even in communities with higher COVID-19 caseloads. The Secretary mentioned the administration's initiatives to support safe in-person schooling, including mobile testing units, the new rapid antigen tests that will soon be distributed, and contact tracing. He noted that home and community environments may not be as compliant with health and safety protocols as schools are. Secretary Peyser said for all these reasons, it is time to double our efforts to reopen classrooms for in-person instruction now and as we prepare for the new year.

The Secretary advocated staying the course on administering statewide assessments in spring 2021 to provide accurate, timely, and actionable diagnostic data on student learning and learning loss during this unprecedented school year. He said by doing so, the state can better target extra help for students and communities that need it the most.

Chair Craven informed the Board that Item 5: Amendments to Educator Licensure Regulations, 603 CMR 7.00, Re: Staffing Flexibility for 2020-2021, would be moved up so Vice-Chair Morton, who needs to leave early, can vote on the matter.

**Comments from the Commissioner**

Commissioner Riley welcomed Mr. Coughlin to the Board.

**Approval of the Minutes**

**On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:**

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approve the minutes of**

**the October 20, 2020 Regular Meeting.**

The vote was unanimous.

**Amendments to Educator Licensure Regulations, 603 CMR 7.00, Re: Staffing Flexibility for 2020-2021**

Commissioner Riley stated the Board and Department have instituted various flexibilities to help schools deal with the pandemic. Among the changes are amendments to the educator licensure regulations relating to staffing flexibility for the current school year. The Commissioner said these amendments have gone out for public comment and the Department made minor changes based on the comments. The amendments increase the amount of time a teacher may teach outside of their certification field and increase the length of time an individual can be considered a long-term substitute.

Commissioner Riley, Senior Associate Commissioner Heather Peske, and Brian Devine, Director of Educator Licensure, responded to questions from Board members. They confirmed that the provision on substitutes applies only to long-term and not periodic day-to-day substitutes, and that the changes the Board would vote on today apply only to the current academic year. Mr. West asked if there would be opportunities this academic year to assess the merits of these flexibilities. Ms. Peske said the Department has issued a request for proposals seeking a research group to study the impact of the pilot MTEL alternatives, and the RFP includes a section on evaluating licensure flexibility through the new emergency license. She added that depending on the responses and available funding, it might be possible to broaden the research study.

Assistant General Counsel Lucy Wall called attention to the handout that Board members received today, which is a corrected copy of the regulatory amendments. She explained that this copy corrects a typographical error (relating to emergency licenses) that was in the version that was included in the Board packet. Ms. Wall confirmed that the Board is voting on the corrected version of the amendments.

**On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:**

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, in accordance with M.G.L. c. 69, § 1B, and c. 71, § 38G, and having solicited and reviewed public comment in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act, M.G.L. c.30A, § 3, hereby adopts the proposed amendments to the Regulations on Educator Licensure and Preparation Program Approval, 603 CMR 7.00, as presented by the Commissioner. The amendments allow greater staffing flexibility for the 2020-2021 school year in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.**

The vote was unanimous.

**School Reopening Update, Enrollment Trends, and Proposed Next Steps**

Commissioner Riley updated the Board on the Department’s ongoing work to inform districts about new developments related to COVID-19 and to support schools and districts as they serve students during this pandemic. He cited some key actions, including the Abbott BinaxNOW rapid diagnostic tests and updated school guidance that continues to prioritize in-person instruction. Commissioner Riley said the Department is considering expanding career pathways through connecting activities initiatives that could include a teaching internship project for selected high school seniors who are in good academic standing and interested in doing a placement in an elementary or middle school or a learning pod. He said this could give high school students greater exposure to teaching in the hope that they would endeavor to become teachers in the future. Commissioner Riley noted this would be tied to our educator diversification initiative.

Senior Associate Commissioner Russell Johnston provided an update on student enrollment data and trends for this school year. He gave an overview of the data collection process. Mr. Johnston said the official October 1 enrollment for the 2020-21 school year is 911,432 students in 400 school districts, which is a decrease of 37,396 students or 3.9 percent compared to the October 1, 2019 enrollment of 948,828 students. He noted that significant enrollment decreases have been in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, with 46 percent of the total statewide decrease coming from those two grades. He added that PreK-K enrollment has decreased 17.9 percent in one year as compared to a decrease of 2.4 percent for grades 1-12, which may indicate some parents are choosing not to enroll the youngest children in public school this year. Mr. Johnston reviewed the three large categories of traditional exit and continuing education (as opposed to graduation and dropout): transfer to an in-state private school, transfer to out-of-state public/private, and transfer to homeschooling.

Mr. Johnston went over the enrollment of high-needs subgroups for 2020-21, reviewing numbers and percentages of English learners, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students compared to October 1, 2019. He added that for the first time, a majority of public-school students in Massachusetts are “high needs,” that is, students in one or more of these three subgroups. Mr. Johnston answered Board members’ questions, noting today’s report is based on an initial review of the data from schools and districts. He said the Department plans to further analyze the data.

Vice-Chair Morton commented that the increasing diversity of the student population underscores the importance of diversifying the educator workforce to address student needs more effectively. He commended the Commissioner’s plan to initiate a teaching internship program for high school seniors, noting it would be a great opportunity for community service, build students’ leadership skills, and activate students to be equity mentors.

Vice-Chair Morton left the meeting at 11:20 a.m.

Chair Craven commented that the October 1 student enrollment report is one data point and we will know more about trends when we see next year’s data.

Commissioner Riley expressed concern about the increased incidence of mental health issues among students who are in remote learning and have been out of school for many months. He said the Department is reviewing student learning time and the extent to which schools are staying connected with their students and keeping them engaged with learning, mitigating isolation and depression. The Commissioner said he plans to bring specific proposals to the Board at the December meeting.

**Update on Gifted Education in Massachusetts**

Senior Associate Commissioner Ventura Rodriguez presented on the work the Department has been doing since the release of the report on gifted education in August 2019. Mr. Rodriguez discussed the recommendations in that report. He said the Commissioner has reconstituted the Advisory Council on Gifted and Talented Education to advise the Commissioner and Board on key issues including reviewing and proposing definitions of giftedness and advanced achievement, determining effective ways to collect data and expand research, and considering best practices of other states and districts.

Bob Lee, the Department’s Chief MCAS Analyst, presented data on the excellence gap, noting the decline in the percentage of Black, Hispanic, and low-income students who are performing at academically advanced levels on MCAS tests in grade 6 compared to grade 3. Mr. Lee said the summer 2020 pilot program was designed to address this excellence gap. Tyrone Mowatt, founder of Ed Inquiry, presented on *The Biggest Winner Math Challenge*, the pilot program that the Department and Ed Inquiry ran for 4 weeks this summer for 116 students in grades 5-7. Mr. Mowatt explained that the pilot project was based on prior work in New Orleans, Newark, and here in Massachusetts to test feasibility of actions to address the excellence gap and help students stay on an advanced trajectory. He said the project used a multi-pronged, data-driven approach to identify and support advanced learners from across the Commonwealth, building a community of learners and reducing isolation, particularly for students and educators of color. Mr. Mowatt thanked Commissioner Riley for supporting this pilot project and for his commitment to addressing the excellence gap.

Chair Craven asked about cost and Mr. Rodriguez said the 4-week program cost about $1000 per pupil. In response to a question from Ms. Stewart, Mr. Rodriguez said the Advisory Council on Gifted and Talented Education will make its recommendations around June 2021. Ms. Fernández said she appreciates focusing on giftedness within and beyond academics and suggested the objectives of the pilot program could apply to all students. Mr. Moriarty commented that when MCAS data show more than 50 percent of 3rd graders in a school or district are not yet proficient in reading, that indicates the core programs in the school or district are remedial. He suggested schools could expand their use of multi-tiered systems of support, including elements such as in the summer pilot program. Ms. Lombos said she would like to know more about other states’ practices in gifted education and she appreciates the connection to educator diversity and focus on equity. Chair Craven thanked Mr. Rodriguez, Mr. Mowatt, and Mr. Lee for the presentation and their ongoing work.

**MCAS Update**

Commissioner Riley reviewed actions taken since last spring which included obtaining waivers from the federal government and relief through the state legislative process in order to cancel all spring 2020 MCAS testing, and providing emergency contingencies to high school seniors who missed testing opportunities and were not able to make up the tests. He noted that the Board approved a process for districts to certify that students in the class of 2020 had earned credit in a relevant course and demonstrated proficiency in that subject. Commissioner Riley said as a result, 2,300 more students in the class of 2020 earned their competency determination (CD) in one or more subjects through August 2020. He added that in May, the Board extended that process to the classes of 2021-2023 for science only, acknowledging the wide variety of course- and test-taking patterns in the state. The Commissioner said he will update the Board on the science certification process for these students as it moves forward.

Commissioner Riley said we assume MCAS will go forward this year, including spring testing for students in grades 3-8 and high school, as well as opportunities for high school students to take tests and retests to make up for missed opportunities last spring, so they can earn the CD required for graduation and also qualify for scholarships. The Commissioner said he believes it is crucial to understand the pandemic’s effects on student learning and achievement and provide that information to schools and parents, and the MCAS test is one of the best tools to gather this information. He added that federal guidance issued this fall indicated that states should not expect blanket waivers for testing this year, although this could change with the next administration. Commissioner Riley said the Department is continuing to review options for the testing that would occur in the winter. He said he is not announcing changes today regarding the tests that are scheduled for January through March, but he will monitor the situation closely and decide soon if changes are needed. Commissioner Riley said with all the logistical work that schools and districts are doing to plan for MCAS and ACCESS tests, he wants to announce any changes as soon as possible.

Commissioner Riley also addressed spring 2021 MCAS testing, currently scheduled to begin in April. He said the Department is exploring various options, including the potential for at-home testing, which might be available in limited cases. The Commissioner said he would like to reduce the burden on students and schools in terms of the amount of time each student spends on the test.

Commissioner Riley added that this fall, the U.S. Education Department indicated they would be open to states rethinking their assessments for this year and developing creative ways to assess students while generally meeting the overall testing requirements. He said the Department’s assessment team has been working on several contingency plans and alternative approaches. Commissioner Riley said while we do not know what the pandemic will look like in January, March, or April, we want to be prepared for various scenarios. He said he will update the Board again at the December meeting, and earlier as needed.

Ms. Lombos commented that it might be helpful to communicate better about how MCAS test results are used to identify and address gaps. Mr. West concurred that we need to communicate accurately about the purpose of MCAS, especially this year. Mr. Hills said he appreciates the Commissioner’s comments and believes a common assessment is vital. Ms. Fernández agreed it is important to assess learning loss and to clarify the purpose of MCAS. Mr. Rouhanifard thanked the Commissioner for his thoughtful approach, including on reducing testing time. He said he is glad the Board is talking about how to communicate about MCAS because there is so much misinformation about testing and we need to know how students are doing. Mr. Moriarty commented that MCAS has been the state’s system for 25 years and it has revealed gaps and weaknesses that used to be overlooked. He added that we need to maintain the assessment system and make good use of it. Mr. Coughlin agreed with the comments about MCAS and said he believes students this year are less prepared than ever.

**Early Literacy: Update on Department Initiatives**

Commissioner Riley introduced Senior Associate Commissioner Heather Peske and Katherine Tarca, the Department’s Director of Literacy and Humanities, who presented on the new [*Mass Literacy Guide*](https://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy/)and other initiatives the Department has undertaken to promote early literacy*.* Ms. Peske said this work is designed to address deep concerns about grade 3 reading achievement in Massachusetts: only 52% of third graders met or exceeded reading expectations on the 2019 MCAS test, and the percentage was even lower for Black and Hispanic/Latino students (38%) and students with disabilities (22%). Ms. Peske listed three key components of the early literacy initiatives: provide information about reading and writing acquisition and instruction based on current evidence, describe evidence-based literacy practices that should be used in schools and taught in educator preparation programs, and compile quality instructional resources and useful references to support educators.

Ms. Tarca briefly described the process of compiling the [*Mass Literacy Guide*](https://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy/)*,* and the Department’s collaboration on it with the MA Reading Association, Massachusetts teachers, district administrators, educator preparation faculty, and an advisory group of local and national literacy researchers. She introduced two of the Department’s Literacy Champions, Lisa Hanifan, first grade teacher in Malden, and Brent Conway, assistant superintendent in Pentucket, who discussed their role in this work and why they believe it is important from their perspective as educators. Ms. Tarca concluded with an overview of supports the Department is providing to districts, schools, educators, and educator preparation programs.

Secretary Peyser commended the Department’s leadership on this issue, noting that effective, evidence-based teaching for early literacy is critically important to closing achievement and opportunity gaps. Mr. Moriarty thanked the presenters for their work and said the *Guide* is a very persuasive document. He encouraged the team to keep the momentum going.

Mr. Rouhanifard left the meeting at 12:45 p.m.

Mr. Hills asked about the report on turnaround work in underperforming schools that the Board received this month. The Commissioner said these reports are informational and the Department will follow up if members have questions.

**Update on Education Budget Matters**

Senior Associate Commissioner/CFO Bill Bell provided an update on the current fiscal year (FY2021) budget, which he said the Legislature is likely to finalize through a conference committee in the next week or two. He noted that the House proposed an additional grant program for COVID-19 relief to schools to be administered by the Department. Mr. Bell said the Department continues to deliver all the other COVID-19 state and federal grant funding that has been authorized for schools and districts. He added that the Department is monitoring whether the federal government will provide further relief and is also starting to work with the Secretary and Governor to develop the FY2022 state education budget proposal.

Chair Craven wished everyone a happy Thanksgiving.

**On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:**

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adjourn the meeting at 12:55 p.m. subject to the call of the Chair.**

The vote was unanimous.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeffrey C. Riley

Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

and Secretary to the Board