*****Massachusetts Department of***

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

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| Jeffrey C. Riley  *Commissioner* |  |

# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner |
| **Date:** | May 14, 2021 |
| **Subject:** | School Reopening Update: Recent Developments and Anticipated Next Steps |

Since our meeting on April 20, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) has continued to inform districts of new developments related to COVID-19 and to support schools and districts as they bring more students into classrooms.

All of the Commonwealth’s elementary schools are now offering full-time, in-person learning, and the deadline for middle schools to do so was April 28. The vast majority of middle schools met that deadline, with a small number of districts receiving waivers to start slightly later. I expect that most high schools will be offering full-time, in-person learning by Monday, May 17, the deadline that I set on April 27.

To continue to support students, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced on April 20 that it has extended free school meals for all students over the summer and through the end of the 2021-22 school year. We are grateful to all the school nutrition workers who continue to provide meals to students who are learning in school and to remote learners.

We continue to revise previous guidance as we learn more about COVID-19 and as more people become vaccinated. On April 26, we issued an FAQ with updated information on close contacts, who must quarantine, and under what conditions. On April 28, in collaboration with the Department of Labor Standards, we issued updated graduation and commencement guidance that allows graduates to sit 3 feet apart if they are outside and masked.

We are increasingly turning our attention to the summer and fall, to the supports that students will need, and to the massive infusion of federal funds that is on its way.

**A. Academic Excellence Roadmap and Other Plans for Summer and Fall**

While school and district leaders, educators, students, and families have demonstrated ingenuity and perseverance over the last year and have gained many new skills and experiences, school and district leaders are grappling with many questions, from how to create an instructional plan that meets students’ varied needs to how to keep equity at the center of all decisions.

Schools and districts, along with the Department, need to take the lessons learned during the 2020-21 school year and create a clear vision and plan for what teaching and learning will look like moving forward. To support schools and districts in this process, the Department plans to release an Academic Excellence Roadmap this month that will include easy-to-navigate guides and resources, as well as training opportunities for school system leaders and educators.

The Roadmap identifies three key priorities for the 2021-22 school year: **creating a sense of belonging for students and families, monitoring student understanding, and ensuring access to grade level content**. These priorities are centered on the research-based approach of *acceleration*: providing “just-in-time” scaffolds to create access to grade-level assignments rather than focusing exclusively on the prior year’s content. The Roadmap contains a teacher guide and a leader guide designed for building leaders and those at the district level who support them.

Grounded in evidence-based practices, the Roadmap is designed to help schools and districts create an academic plan for the 2021-22 school year, and it provides month-by-month priority actions to implement the plan and monitor progress.The Roadmap also directs users to DESE resources for acceleration, such as literacy screeners, math acceleration programs, a family engagement guide, and resources for establishing a multi-tiered system of support.

Key upcoming milestones in this work include:

* Roadmap release – May
* Webinars/training for leaders and educators on how to navigate and utilize the Roadmap – May and June
* Associated professional development on Roadmap – summer and fall

While creating the Roadmap, we piloted the Department’s Racial Equity Decision-Making Tool to ensure the process for the Roadmap reflected our focus on equity and racial equity. We developed the Roadmap in partnership with TNTP, a vendor selected for their knowledge of the Massachusetts educational landscape, national scope, and prior work with culturally responsive practices. Highlights of this ongoing process include:

* **A robust stakeholder engagement process**. Student, family, and educator focus groups gave feedback on all stages of the process, including vendor selection and content.
* **Synthesis of research-based practices** specific to K-12 learning acceleration. TNTP conducted a research review and synthesis in April, and the design team also met with Department leaders to seek input and resources for the guide.
* **Focus on internal accountability.** We will collect user data and feedback throughout the summer in order to analyze the Roadmap’s impact.

In addition to the Academic Excellence Roadmap, DESE is offering programs in specific areas this summer, including:

* The [Summer Acceleration to College Program for Students Earning the Modified Competency Determination](https://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=26423), a partnership with community colleges to help students prepare academically for college-level English and mathematics, and
* Free access for districts to digital programs and high-quality instructional materials designed to [accelerate mathematics instruction](https://www.doe.mass.edu/stem/accelerating-math/) over the summer and during the coming school year.

This work is part of broader investments in summer learning. On April 30, the Baker-Polito Administration announced that it would provide more than $70 million for school districts and community organizations to offer summer learning and recreational programs.

**B. Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund Planning (American Rescue**

**Plan ESSER/ESSER III)**

Since March 2020, the federal government, through the Department of the Treasury, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. Ed.), has provided vast resources to school districts and municipalities to help respond to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of May 2021, Massachusetts public schools will have been allocated approximately $2.9 billion in federal relief funding. These resources serve as an acknowledgement of the significant efforts of educators since the beginning of the pandemic, and the work that remains to continue to safely reopen schools in accordance with CDC and state public health guidelines, support sustained access to in-person instruction, and address the needs of all students. The latest and largest of these funding streams comes from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP), signed into law on March 11, 2021.

The ARP Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER III) Fund, available through September 30, 2024, provides approximately $1.8 billion to DESE, at least $1.65 billion of which will be sub-granted directly to districts to meet the urgent needs of schools and students. ESSER III, like its two predecessors, is distributed using the ESSA Title I formula, which weights funding in an equitable manner toward districts that serve large concentrations of students from low-income households.

In late March, U.S. Ed. made available to each state the first two-thirds of its ESSER III allocation, or about $1.22 billion to Massachusetts in immediate support. To access the final third of the funding, states must provide to U.S. Ed. a comprehensive plan that provides details for the effective use of ESSER III funds to reopen schools safely this spring and support sustained access to in-person instruction throughout the spring, summer, and into future school years; and to address the academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of students. DESE must describe the current status of education and the greatest needs that emerged from the pandemic, how we plan to maximize the use of the funds in coordination with other funding streams, and how we will continue to support students and educators in Massachusetts with evidence-based programs and practices. This plan, due to U.S. Ed. on June 7, is an opportunity to describe how we can use this unprecedented infusion of federal funds with transparency, research-based effectiveness, equity, inclusive engagement, and strong fiscal safeguards.

Importantly, U.S. Ed. calls on all states to engage in meaningful consultation with stakeholders and the public to develop these ESSER III plans. Over the last several weeks, DESE has organized a robust stakeholder engagement process, meeting with students, families, Tribes, civil rights organizations (including disability rights organizations), school and district administrators (including special education administrators), superintendents, charter school leaders, vocational school leaders, teachers, principals, unions, other educators, and stakeholders representing the interests of children with disabilities, English learners, children experiencing homelessness, children in foster care, migratory students, children who are incarcerated, and other underserved students. By way of an [online survey](https://survey.alchemer.com/s3/6333740/ESSER-III-Statewide-Stakeholder-Outreach), as well as the May 25, 2021 Board meeting, DESE is providing further opportunity for public input into the development of the plan. Notably, while the window to conduct consultation and develop this plan has been relatively short, the June 7 submission deadline does not signal an end to stakeholder engagement around pandemic relief funding. ESSER III funds extend through the next three school years, so as priorities shift and unforeseen needs arise, DESE will continue to engage with stakeholders in an ongoing manner and exercise flexibility with these plans.

I will update the Board further at our May 25 meeting.

Attachments:

* [USDA Issues Pandemic Flexibilities for Schools and Day Care Facilities through June 2022 to Support Safe Reopening and Healthy, Nutritious Meals – April 20, 2021](https://www.fns.usda.gov/news-item/usda-007521)
* [April 26, 2021 Installment of FAQs (about notification requirements, including sample communication to families, for close contacts who are exempted from quarantine)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/faq/2021-0426faq-installment.docx) *(download)*
* [Guidance on In-Person Learning Requirements — April 27, 2021](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/in-person-learning-guide.docx) *(download)*
* [Commencement and Graduation Guidance from the Department of Labor Standards and DESE — March 22, 2021 (Updated April 28, 2021)](https://www.mass.gov/doc/commencement-guidance/download)
* [Baker-Polito Administration Launches Summer Learning Programs, More Than $70 Million in Funding for Schools and Community Partners Across the Commonwealth – April 30, 2021](https://www.mass.gov/news/baker-polito-administration-launches-summer-learning-programs-more-than-70-million-in-funding-for-schools-and-community-partners-across-the-commonwealth)