*****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:** | September 15, 2022 |
| **Subject:** | Supporting Students’ Mental and Behavioral Health and Wellbeing |

At the September 20, 2022, meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board), Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department or DESE) staff will present an overview of DESE grant funding, professional development and highlight a few partners collaborating with the Department in this work to support schools and districts in building and expanding comprehensive, multi-tiered systems of support for students’ mental health and wellbeing. The Board will also hear from one or more school districts that are using the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) & Mental Health Grant funding (see below for more details) to support promising practices and challenges they continue to face during this school year.

As noted in the May 2022 Board memo, work in this realm helps further the Department’s [strategic priorities](https://www.doe.mass.edu/research/StrategicPlan-Summary.pdf), including [strengthening social emotional competencies, health, and safety](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/sel/heart-strategy.pdf). This work is also aligned with the ***Holistic Support and Enrichment*** theme described in my report, [Our Way Forward](https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2019/2019-06/item2.docx).

As we heard from district leaders at the Board’s April 2022 meeting, and from students at the May 2022 Board meeting, students as well as teachers, school staff, and families are continuing to cope with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors that can impede learning. Some students who experience mental health challenges may be exhibiting more significant behaviors and could benefit from more intensive supports and interventions.

Our educators are committed to supporting students and increasing their understanding of effective practices. In the 2020 School Health Profiles questionnaire, 93 percent of teachers reported that they worked to increase students’ knowledge about both emotional and mental health, 83 percent worked with mental health or social services staff to support students, 83 percent attended professional development on emotional wellbeing, and 87 percent wanted even more professional development on this topic.

Though concerns are prevalent, particularly related to anxiety and depression, many students do feel supported and hopeful. The 2019 (pre-pandemic) Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey ([YRBS](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/yrbs/)) results found almost three-quarters of high school students (74 percent) felt there is a teacher or other adult in the school they can turn to for advice. A similar number of students (73 percent) reported they are confident about their future and have plans to complete a post-high school training program such as a vocational program, military, or college. The latest Massachusetts YRBS data (collected in fall 2021) is anticipated to be released soon by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and will give us additional information about changes since 2019.

Below are some examples of support the Department is providing to help schools and districts strengthen their multi-tiered systems, focus on preventing problems and promoting mental health and wellbeing, and strengthen partnerships to meet students’ varied needs. We will continue to listen to what students, families, and educators are telling us they need and adapt our supports where possible.

**Funding**

* Districts are encouraged to leverage **new and existing federal allocation funds** to support this work (e.g., [ESSER](https://www.doe.mass.edu/federalgrants/esser/) I-III, ARP [I](https://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2022/301/) and [II](https://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2022/302/) for Homeless Children and Youth, Title [IVA](https://www.doe.mass.edu/federalgrants/titleiv-a/default.html)).
* Districts have expanded capacity to address SEL and mental health needs of students and families through [**Student Opportunity Act**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/soa/) plans and amendments.
* More than $8 million is supporting approximately [70 districts and collaboratives](https://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2022/awards/613-311-332.docx) through a continuation state and federally funded FY23 [**SEL and Mental Health continuation grant**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2023/613-332/) to:
  + Develop comprehensive, integrated multi-tiered systems for student, family, and educator social-emotional and/or mental health supports;
  + Build sustainable infrastructure to facilitate integrated coordination between school and community-based services and/or providers.
* An additional $5 million will support more districts in FY23 through a competitive state funded SEL & Mental Health grant to be awarded this fall.

**Professional development (PD), coaching, and other resources**

Many of the Department’s PD offerings are part of a series that provide educators and school-   
or district-based teams with support to build sustainable, comprehensive systems for meeting students’ needs at all levels.

* [**PD Series to support Comprehensive Mental Health Systems:**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/mental-health.html) In partnership with Walker Therapeutic Programs, the Rennie Center, and their respective partners, DESE conducted nearly **40 sessions** with over **1,100** participants in FY22.
* [**Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Academies**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfss/prof-dev/default.html)**:** The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), SEL/Mental Health, and Systemic Student Support (S3) Academies engaged **152 teams** with **1,600 team members** in PD and coaching in FY22.
* [**Youth Mental Health First Aid**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/ymhfa/) **(YMHFA)**: The Department offers this training to help teachers and other school staff to recognize, support, and refer to professional mental health services, if needed, students who may be experiencing mental health or substance use challenges and/or may be in crisis. With partners, DESE delivered trainings to over **2,000** participants from approximately **55 districts** inFY22.
* [**Promoting Student Engagement, Learning, Wellbeing and Safety — School Year 2021-2022 (Released Summer 2021)**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/promoting-wellbeing.docx)**:** ([Power Point slides](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/mental-health/promoting-wellbeing-slides.pptx) / [eLearning Module](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/mental-health/promoting-wellbeing/index.html)) This guidance and resource document can help districts develop, strengthen, and implement comprehensive systems for engaging with students and their families, connecting students and families with additional supports they may need, and promoting student safety. This document also includes racial equity and cultural responsiveness considerations to support districts in promoting the wellbeing of all students.

For the FY23 school year, the Department and our partners are planning professional development opportunities similar to those described above. The trainings will support educators and school- or district-based teams to continue to build and implement sustainable, comprehensive systems for meeting students’ needs at all levels.

**Department partnerships with state and local agencies**

Building comprehensive mental health systems is key to coordinating supports and resources for students, families, and school districts. Working with outside partners, including statewide organizations such as the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, is critical to helping schools and communities address racial inequities, expand access to behavioral and mental health services, and promote student health and wellness. The Department continues to engage with state agencies and local advisory groups to discuss research and identify challenges and promising practices. Examples of these organizations and groups include:

* + State agency partners, including MassHealth and the Departments of Mental Health, Public Health, Children and Families, Early Education and Care, and more.
* Advisory groups, such as:
  + Children’s Behavioral Health Advisory Council
  + School-Based Behavioral Health Advisory Board
  + Safe and Supportive Schools Commission
  + Coalition of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (representing the Massachusetts School Mental Health Consortium and the Massachusetts associations of school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, and social workers), and more.

**New mental health legislation**

On August 10, Governor Baker signed [Chapter 177 of the Acts of 2022](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2022/Chapter177)(An Act Addressing Barriers to Care for Mental Health), which will go into effect on November 8, 2022, 90 days after it was signed into law. The Department is working with state agencies and other partners to address provisions in the legislation that pertain to K-12 schools and will provide more information in the upcoming weeks.

Behavioral and Mental Health Specialist Chris Pond, Student and Family Support Assistant Director Kristen McKinnon, and Associate Commissioner Rachelle Engler Bennett, as well as Chelsea Public Schools’ Social Work Department District Administrator Brenda Pena, and Holliston Public Schools’ Director of Social Emotional Learning and Equity Jariel Vergne, will join us for the discussion on September 20.