Introduction

In the fall of 2011, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE), the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) and the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS) launched the District Governance Support Project (DGSP). The project is designed to help school committees focus on improving student achievement in collaboration with their superintendents. It is one of a suite of three initiatives—with the New Superintendents Induction Program (NSIP) and the District Capacity Project (DCP)—intended to jointly support implementation of effective leadership practices in participating districts. The partners have articulated the following goals for the project:

1. School committee members, in collaboration with the superintendent and other educational personnel, will develop a clear understanding of student achievement and the curriculum, and instructional practices in the district.
2. School committee members will develop and implement a plan to structure meetings and other practices so that together they remain focused on student achievement.
3. School committee meetings will be productive; the roles of each participant will be clearly understood, and the committee will adhere to the accepted processes and procedures.
4. School committee members will develop a reflection rubric to use to measure the success of the school committee in demonstrating collaborative practices and focusing on student achievement.

DGSP began to engage its first cohort in early 2012 and a second cohort about a year later. To date, committees from 23 districts have received some training as part of DGSP. ESE has allocated funding to support the project’s delivery through December 2013. Beyond that point DGSP is not likely to be sustained as a formal, structured program. However, the curriculum and materials developed have already been integrated as part of MASC’s general member services program and will continue to support school committees through that structure, likely for many years to come.

Program Evaluation

The University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute (UMDI) has served as DGSP’s external evaluator since the project’s inception. The evaluation has had a strong formative focus with the goals of documenting the project model and supporting project improvement through timely formative analysis and feedback. As of August 2013, ESE is discontinuing funding for the DGSP evaluation. This final evaluation memo summarizes findings and lessons learned in relation to program delivery through the end of the 2012-2013 school year. It focuses on core findings emerging from analysis of coaches’ implementation logs and interviews, as well as informal observation of coaches meetings.

Curriculum Development and Refinement

The original DGSP curriculum was organized around seven training modules offering up to 15 hours of content. Specific elements of the curriculum drew heavily from The Essential School Board Book by DGSP coach Nancy Walser, as well as existing training materials from other sources including MASC and the National School Boards Association. Most of the modules provided an abundant collection of
related materials from which coaches were encouraged to pick and choose as opposed to a well-defined and sequenced training curriculum with some flexibility for modification based on committee-specific needs. Coaches reflected that this resulted in significant variations in program delivery across districts and substantially increased the amount of preparation time needed for each school committee workshop. At the same time this variation allowed for testing a broader range of resources across districts, generating valuable insights about what aspects of the initial curriculum were more or less effective.

Beginning in late spring 2012, DGSP applied these insights to an effort to refine the program materials into a more coherent and prescribed curriculum documented in the DGSP Workbook. A key objective of the effort was to streamline service delivery and thus reduce the time commitment required of participating committees, which was discovered to be a significant challenge to full program implementation in many districts. The revised curriculum workbook has guided the program’s work with the second cohort of districts. The workbook is organized around the metaphor of a school house containing five basic elements: a foundation, a frame, systems, walls and a roof. Each of the elements maps to a two-hour workshop as follows:

- **The Foundation: Operating Protocols** (workshop 1) – Participants begin by taking a self-assessment using a governance rubric focused on the essential aspects of a high-functioning governance team. The coach then defines roles and responsibilities of committee members and the superintendent to set the stage for collaborative development of written operating protocols defining how members and the superintendent will work together.

- **The Frame: Overarching Goals** (workshop 2) – Committee members and the superintendent work together to broadly define a vision and overarching goals for the district that can guide the formulation of the district’s annual SMART goals for making strides toward that vision.

- **The Systems: Monitoring Progress** (workshop 3) – Committee members and the superintendent jointly decide which data and evidence will be tracked and presented in order to monitor progress against the agreed upon goals.

- **The Walls: Effective Meetings** (workshop 4) – Participants work to develop a year-long agenda focused on student achievement and the district’s identified goals. They review three tools for making meetings more effective and adapt them for their own district.

- **The Roof: Sustaining Progress** (workshop 5) – This workshop provides tools to sustain the committee’s newly established practices into the future. A final self-assessment helps to illustrate the progress made thus far. Work products completed in the previous workshops are assembled into a handbook that can be used for new member orientation and engaging the community.

The revised curriculum does not include workshops on educator evaluation or collective bargaining, which were addressed in the original seven module curriculum. The original materials will continue to be available as optional add-on workshops for interested committees. Additionally, ESE is providing significant direct support in the area of educator evaluation, and the newly formed Massachusetts Education Partnership (to which both MASC and MASS belong) is serving as a resource on collective bargaining issues.

### Coach Preparation and Support

Program coaches are experienced current or former school committee members selected by MASC. All have backgrounds as presenters in adult education settings. Some also were involved with the Leadership in Transition program, which in some ways was a precursor to DGSP. There are currently
nine coaches available to provide DGSP training. Despite the lack of a formal job description, coaches generally indicate that they feel comfortable in their role. They describe the role as being a “jack of all trades”—part presenter and part facilitator. Though some coaches shy away from the title of “expert,” they do acknowledge that infusing their own experiences and examples into the curriculum creates authenticity for the participants.

Opportunities to formally prepare and support coaches are somewhat hampered by real limitations of time and availability. Many coaches have regular full-time jobs and are participating in DGSP as an additional responsibility. In the program’s first year, coach preparation generally took place in monthly coaches meetings. However, in the second year those meetings have not occurred as regularly. The new curriculum workbook has served as an important resource for coaches’ independent efforts to prepare and deliver each workshop. In cases where coaches have questions about the curriculum and/or how to best present it, many have taken the initiative to reach out to fellow coaches for support.

As recommended in our previous evaluation report, MASC would benefit from thinking creatively about how it can make the most of the coaches’ limited time to address workshop-specific content and delivery as well as to support coaches in developing their skills as trainers and facilitators. Establishment of the DGSP listserv was a step in that direction. However, thus far, use of that tool has been somewhat limited, as was coach utilization of its precursor, the DGSP Wiki. Even once DGSP comes to an end, MASC can benefit greatly from having a cadre of skilled presenters who have a deep familiarity with these training materials and experience delivering them effectively.

**Delivery Model**

While school committees are given literature related to the program and often speak with a DGSP representative prior to their participation, coaches indicate that orientation to and understanding of the program and its requirements varies across committees. Coaches report some difficulty in getting committees to schedule meeting dates and/or commit to the full 10 hours required to deliver all five workshops. Some committees have wanted to select from the workshops or condense them into shorter sessions. In other cases, coaches have found themselves unable to effectively cover the workshop material in the allotted time and have scheduled additional sessions to complete the training. In effect, despite the more prescribed scope and sequence laid out in the workbook, coaches do customize delivery by selecting elements of the curriculum based on their understanding of the committee’s needs and what they can deliver in the time available.

Furthermore, coaches report that some committees have made requests for additional technical assistance, frequently on topics that are beyond the scope of the DGSP core curriculum or available workshop extension materials. Coaches do their best to address specific requests either through integrating the topic into the curriculum being delivered, setting aside time within a meeting to discuss the request, or scheduling a separate meeting. The extent to which coaches address these requests varies based on each coach’s level of expertise and comfort with the specific needs identified. Ultimately, coaches make real efforts to be responsive to their committees’ needs, while ensuring delivery of the curriculum they believe to be the foundation of effective school committee practices.

As new committees sign on to DGSP, it will be important for MASC to communicate clear expectations that the curriculum content and sequence outlined in the workbook is important to achieving the desired program outcomes while maintaining some flexibility to adapt to district-specific needs and interests. Committees who are interested in a more customized pick-and-choose approach can access the same
materials through their MASC field rep without becoming official DGSP participants, which now comes with the following expectations and participation requirements:

- Conduct an initial self-assessment (Effective Governance Continuum) as a board-superintendent team.
- Participate in five two-hour workshops, typically one workshop every four to six weeks.
- Commit time between workshops to develop specific work products.

The program might be further strengthened by finding some ways to bring participating committees together in statewide or regional sessions, if not in person then perhaps virtually. This would serve to reinforce the notion that they are engaged in a special project, not just receiving ongoing support from MASC. It could also provide a chance for committees to learn from each other more directly instead of through the coach as an intermediary. One example of such an opportunity could be bringing committee chairs together for training on topics related to leadership and facilitation. Experience with the original curriculum modules also suggests that there are certain topics that require more in-depth, specialized knowledge on the part of the presenter (i.e., interpreting data, educator evaluation, interest-based bargaining) that would be best delivered by an expert facilitator. It would be interesting to see whether committee members would be willing to travel to statewide or regional sessions designed to provide more in-depth training on these or other more technical topics.

Cross-Program Alignment and Coordination

As described in the introduction, DGSP is one of a suite of three initiatives—with the New Superintendents Induction Program (NSIP) and more recently launched District Capacity Project (DCP)—intended to jointly support implementation of effective leadership practices in participating districts. With the exception of strong cross-program collaboration between DGSP and NSIP coaches in a couple of districts, efforts to align the programs’ curricula and establish expectations for mutually supportive engagement have been limited. This is particularly important in cases where districts are participating in more than one of the programs, but certainly not limited to those cases. There are definitely areas where the goals of the three programs overlap or intersect and undoubtedly it would be far more productive for there to be explicit alignment and mutual reinforcement in those areas. As a starting point, coordinators of the three programs could meet to share information about their respective programs, identify areas where there is opportunity to improve alignment, and work collaboratively to realize that alignment.

Findings and Some Recommendations

- **DGSP’s curriculum development and refinement efforts have created a coherent suite of training and development materials focused on improving school committee processes and practices.** However, even the refined curriculum appears to be a bit overly ambitious for many committees to cover in the proposed format of five two-hour workshops. MASC should consider whether there is additional content that could be moved into optional workshop extensions and/or whether it may be necessary to increase the expected delivery time for some, if not all, workshops.

- **Moving committees from general interest in DGSP to committed, active participation continues to be a challenge.** It is clear that limitations in the time that committee members have to
devote to this additional work is a hurdle to full engagement. Another critical factor may be the challenge of getting committees to objectively view their own weaknesses and recognize how DGSP can help to address them. In many cases the “easiest sell” is to committees that are the healthiest and yet still striving for improvement. Those with more serious issues often don’t fully realize the extent of their problems. Nevertheless, some coaches appear to have more success engaging and moving their committees through the program. There could be valuable lessons in better understanding how they are able to succeed when others do not.

- **It is difficult to find the right balance between adherence to a prescribed program curriculum and flexibility to address committee’s self-identified needs and interests.** Despite efforts to create a coherent program core, DGSP leadership is not particularly committed to following that curriculum closely. It is not clear whether MASC has really wanted to create a formal program as much as they’ve been interested in leveraging the available resources to develop improved tools and increase their capacity to provide support to a larger number of districts than can be effectively reached by their existing field staff.

- **The promise of the “3-legged stool”—NSIP, DGSP, and DCP—addressing effective district leadership has not been realized.** Although the programs share an overarching objective and engage many of the same stakeholders, they have been developed largely in isolation from each other. As a consistent partner and funder in each project, ESE did not set explicit expectations for coordination or collaboration among them. As a result, they operate in parallel, but generally not in concert. At a minimum, efforts should be made to develop effective collaboration among coaches with districts participating in more than one of the programs. A worthwhile, though significantly more ambitious, effort would be to work to ensure cross-program alignment of curriculum, activities and work products. This would ensure that areas of intersection across the efforts are addressed in ways that are mutually reinforcing and consistent with ESE’s objectives for improving district leadership practices.