

## Level 4 Schools - Frequently Asked Questions

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### **Q1: What is a Level 4 school?**

A: A Level 4 school is an “underperforming” school and is both low performing on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) over a four year period (in both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics) and not showing signs of substantial improvement over that time. “Level 4” refers to the placement of those schools in the state’s [Framework for District Accountability and Assistance](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sda/framework/default.html) (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/sda/framework/default.html>).

Level 4 schools are often referred to as “turnaround schools” since designation as a Level 4 school requires them to undertake an accelerated process for rapid and sustainable achievement within three years.

### **Q2: How are Level 4 schools identified? What data are used?**

A: Level 4 Schools are the state’s lowest performing schools based on an analysis of four-year trends in absolute achievement, student growth, and improvement trends as measured by MCAS. ESE used the following mathematics and English Language Arts MCAS results: Composite Performance Index (CPI) and the percentage of students scoring at the Warning/Failing level on MCAS over four years; annual student growth percentile for the years available; and improvement as measured by the change in CPI over four years.

The [Framework for District Accountability and Assistance](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sda/framework/default.html) and state law both call for the use of multiple indicators to identify schools as candidates for Level 4 accountability, assistance, and intervention activities. ESE identifies schools that are both low performing on MCAS over a four year period and not showing signs of substantial improvement or strong positive annual student growth over that interval. For high schools, dropout and graduation rate indicators are also incorporated into the calculation.<sup>1</sup>

### **Q3: How many Level 4 schools are there currently?**

A: There are now 40 Level 4 schools in 10 school districts. 35 of these schools were identified in 2010 (one of which has since closed); 6 additional schools were identified in 2011. 22 are elementary schools; 9 are middle schools; 3 are K-8 schools; and 6 are high schools. A list of Level 4 schools can be found at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/sda/framework/level4/>.

### **Q4: Why is ESE only identifying 6 additional Level 4 schools in 2011?**

A: ESE is committed to only naming a number of schools for which it can provide meaningful assistance. Given that 34 Level 4 schools are only in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year of “turnaround”, ESE is continuing to provide significant targeted assistance to these districts and schools to build district capacity for rapid acceleration of student achievement. Based on an analysis of the data, the 6 schools identified in 2011 represent the lowest performing and least improving schools in the Commonwealth, and are, therefore, most in need of intervention.

By law, the state can have no more than 4% of all schools (currently 72 of all schools) identified Level 4 (or 5) at one time.

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<sup>1</sup> For high schools identified in 2011.

**Q5: What happens when a school is designated as Level 4? What will be different in a Level 4 School?**

A: Designation as a Level 4 School begins a process for school turnaround designed to support the accelerated improvement of student achievement and a high-functioning learning environment for students within three years. State statute requires that districts with a Level 4 school/s develop a Turnaround Plan for the school, subject to the Commissioner's approval. This Plan takes the place of any existing school improvement plan and becomes the basis for any federal grant funding, namely School Redesign Grant (SRG) funds.

**Q6: What is required in the Turnaround Plan?**

A: A Turnaround Plan requires Level 4 districts/schools to identify priority areas for turnaround, strategic initiatives at both the school and district level to address the priority areas, and benchmarks for achieving measurable annual goals that will be used as the basis for exiting Level 4 status.

**Q7: Are Level 4 Schools identified last year showing progress towards the goal of accelerating student achievement?**

A: Yes. 2/3 of Level 4 schools identified in 2010 have seen significant improvements over the last year. Students in these schools are benefiting from decisive and bold action and are experiencing rapid improvement of educational conditions that are leading to accelerated student growth and achievement.

**Q8: How are stakeholders (i.e., teachers, parents, students, and the community) involved in decisions regarding a Level 4 school?**

A: Each Level 4 school is required to have a Local Stakeholder Group make recommendations to the superintendent on the school's Turnaround Plan. Each stakeholder group must have representatives from the following groups: parents, teachers, district administrators, school committee members, teacher unions, social service agencies, the Department of Early Education and Care or the Department of Higher Education, community members, and ESE.

**Q9: Will parents have the right to transfer their child to another school from a Level 4 school?**

A: Parents with children in Level 4 schools maintain the same rights to request a transfer to another school in the district as they did prior to the Level 4 identification.

**Q10: What happens to teachers in Level 4 Schools?**

A: ESE is committed to helping districts work with teachers in a collaborative way that values their expertise and commitment to children. Some teachers in these schools should be encouraged to play a role in the planning and implementation of the school's redesign. However, this call to action may not be the right fit for every teacher in the building. State law establishes conditions by which all staff in the school may be required to reapply for positions in the school. (MGL CH.69 Section 1J (d))<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The full text of MGL CH.69 Section 1J: *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap* can be found at <http://www.malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter69/Section1j>

**Q11: How does a school exit Level 4 status?**

A: Level 4 schools have three years to demonstrate dramatic and sustainable improvement and can be moved out of status by fulfilling three criteria:

- a) Meeting Measurable Annual Goals for student achievement for three years for students overall and for each subgroup of students, as shown by:
- MCAS proficiency and student growth
  - Reduction in proficiency gap
  - (for high schools) higher education rate and a greater percentage of graduates enrolled in higher education within one year of graduation
- b) Evidence that the conditions are in place at the school level to sustain that improvement.
- c) Evidence that the conditions are in place at the district level to sustain that improvement.

More information about Measurable Annual goals is available at  
[http://www.doe.mass.edu/sda/framework/level4/MAG\\_ExitCriteria.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sda/framework/level4/MAG_ExitCriteria.pdf)

**Q12. How will ESE assess a school's progress in meeting the exit criteria?**

A. Each Level 4 school is required to participate in an annual monitoring site visit. The two-day visit is scheduled in coordination with district and school leadership. The visits typically occur in February, March, or April. An outcome of the site visit is a Monitoring Site Visit (MSV) report that provides ESE with information on the progress of the school in implementing the turnaround plan, organized around the conditions for school effectiveness. The MSV report also provides information that the school can use to refine turnaround strategies for the coming year. Additional guidance on the process to be used at the end of the 3-year turnaround timeline will be provided by ESE during the 2011-12 year.

**Q13: When does the clock start for the 3-year timetable for improvement?**

A: The three year timetable for rapid and sustainable improvement begins when the Commissioner approves a Turnaround Plan for the identified school. For schools identified in 2010, the three years of improvement could end in June 2012 or 2013, since some schools were eligible to submit an expedited Plan that accounted for turnaround efforts already underway before Level 4 designation.

For schools identified in 2011, the district has the option of choosing school year 2010-2011 or school year 2012-2013 as their baseline year. Schools choosing a baseline year of 2010-2011 may be eligible for exit after the 2013-14 school year. Schools choosing a baseline year of 2011-2012 may be eligible for exit after the 2014-15 school year.

**Q14: What if the district/school is unsuccessful in meeting Level 4 exit criteria?**

A: If the school has made little or no progress and is unable to meet the three exit criteria outlined above, the Commissioner may designate it as a Level 5 school. This would result in "co-governance" of the school with joint ESE-district decision-making and governance in the hands of a receiver appointed by the Commissioner. If the school has made progress but not met all benchmarks, the Commissioner may decide to keep the school in Level 4 status.

**Q15: What resources are available to support Level 4 schools?**

A: **Funding:** In February 2010, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) awarded states funding to use as competitive grants to intervene in each state's lowest performing schools, called School Redesign Grants. A district applying for a School Redesign Grant will be required to choose one of four federally-prescribed intervention models and demonstrate its capacity to implement that model effectively over three years. (A summary of the four models can be found at [http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/grants/grants11/rfp/doc/511\\_767\\_j.pdf](http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/grants/grants11/rfp/doc/511_767_j.pdf))

A school's Turnaround Plan serves as the foundation for its School Redesign Grant application, to ensure that turnaround planning efforts are clearly aligned with the application for this competitive redesign grant. Funding is not guaranteed and depends on the quality of the plan submitted.

Level 4 schools also have access to Race to the Top Turnaround Initiatives, including Priority Partners for Turnaround, Turnaround Teacher Teams, and Turnaround Leaders.

**Assistance:** Level 4 schools receive priority for support and technical assistance from the Office of District and School Turnaround or District and School Assistance Center (DSAC).

**Q16: How much money can each Level 4 school receive, and for how long?**

A: The local school district may apply for a competitive grant with an average of \$500,000 for each Level 4 school, to be awarded on an annual basis for up to three years. The amount of the award depends on the size of the school and whether the content and promise of the plan warrants more funding.

**Q17: Did all of the Level 4 Schools identified last year receive School Redesign grant funding?**

A: Twenty-eight of the 34 Level 4 schools identified in 2010 successfully applied for School Redesign Grant funding. The remaining 6 schools are eligible to reapply this year.

**Q18: How much School Redesign Grant funding will be available to support the 6 additional Level 4 Schools identified this year?**

A: School Redesign Grant funds are highly competitive. There is currently enough funding for 6 schools (approximately \$8 million) to receive new School Redesign Grant awards this year. Based on federal projections, there may be additional funding for future grants.

**Q19: What if a district can't commit to choosing one of the four federal intervention models?**

A district with a Level 4 school must commit to choosing one of the four federally-prescribed intervention models in order to receive federal School Redesign Grant funding. If a district chooses not to implement one of the four federal models, they are still required to turn around the school in 3 years.

**Q20: Does a principal need to be replaced in order to receive the grant?**

A: Federal requirements mandate that no individual appointed principal of a Level 4 school prior to July 1, 2010 may remain as principal of that school. S/he may be reassigned to another position in the district if, in the judgment of the superintendent, there is an appropriate match elsewhere. If a principal has served for fewer than two years at the school, then the superintendent can propose to retain him/her if there is evidence that improvement is underway at the school.

**Q21: Are federal grant funds for Level 4 schools considered an entitlement for low performing schools?**

A: No, these are competitive grants that local school districts can apply for on behalf of their eligible schools. Districts must commit to implementing one of the four federally-prescribed intervention models and demonstrate their capacity to do so.

Section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) enables states to administer grants to school districts to “enable the lowest-achieving schools” to meet accountability requirements. The U.S. Department of Education requires that states administer these grants *not as entitlements*, but rather on a *competitive basis* based on the district’s “capacity to effectively implement the models and strategies outlined in the (grant) application.”

**Q22: Is this grant renewable?**

A: Grants are renewable for up to two additional years, contingent on the school achieving annual benchmarks of progress. If a school does not make adequate progress on the goals and benchmarks in their grants, it is possible they may lose funding for remaining years of the grant award.

**Q23: What is the timeline for the 2011-12 School Redesign Grant competition?**

A: A request for proposals (RFP) for FY 13 School Redesign Grant funds will be posted in late winter/early spring 2011, with an announcement of funded schools anticipated in May 2011.

**Q24: What is the state’s role in Level 4 schools?**

A: The state’s role is to define exit criteria, including measurable annual goals tailored to each school and based on empirical data; assess district and school capacity to implement one of four federally-required implementation models, and provide targeted assistance via partner providers, tools, templates, and other resources.

**Q25: Is there a limit on the number of Level 4 schools?**

A: By statute, the state can have no more than 4% of all public, non-charter schools (currently 72) identified Level 4 and 5 at one time.

**Q26: When will ESE identify the next cohort of Level 4 schools?**

A: ESE will consider identifying more Level 4 schools in October 2012 based on 2012 MCAS results and prior year analysis. These schools would be identified using the same criteria as are currently used.

**Q27: Where can I go for information about Level 4 schools?**

A: More information can be found at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/sda/framework/level4/>