Accountability and Assistance Advisory Council (AAAC) Meeting Notes  
March 8, 2023 (9:00 – 10:30am)   
Virtual Meeting (Zoom)

*AAAC members in attendance:* Mike Barth, Noah Berger, Tamatha Bibbo, Kerry Donahue, Barish Icin, Brandy Kwong, Ed Lambert, Craig Martin, Tim Piwowar, Ron Sanborn, Marc Smith

*DESE staff in attendance:* Lindsey Bryant, Charmie Curry, Rob Curtin, Kara Higgins, Yu-Mui Wan, Lauren Zermani

The following notes were recorded during the whole-group discussion between Council members, and a copy of the presentation can be found at https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/councils/sda/.

**Welcome, Introductions, and Review of Discussion Norms**

Council Co-Chair Tim Piwowar opened the meeting at 9:05 a.m. Rob Curtin, Chief Officer of Data, Assessment, and Accountability at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), began the meeting by thanking the Council for their time and gave an overview of the meeting agenda. Mr. Curtin then reviewed Council meeting protocols and introduced a new Council member, Noah Berger, who represents the Massachusetts Teachers Association. Council members then introduced themselves and reviewed Council norms.

**Assistance Updates**

Dr. Charmie Curry, Associate Commissioner of DESE’s Statewide System of Support (SSoS), provided an update on DESE’s assistance efforts. Dr. Curry announced that DESE’s Center for District and School Partnerships (CDSP) is offering an in-person and virtual [Instructional Prioritization Institute](https://www.doe.mass.edu/csdp/guidebook/pinstitute.html), a two-day learning experience that will support district leaders in their efforts to plan for sustainable improvement in school year 2023-24. Dr. Curry noted that this institute will help districts articulate and refine their data-driven instructional priorities to operationalize improvement efforts and stated that this is an opportunity for DESE to support schools and districts in closing equity and opportunity gaps. Dr. Curry noted that while many districts with schools that are receiving assistance from DESE will participate, this opportunity is open to all districts. Sessions will be held on March 21-22 and May 10-11. Dr. Curry advised interested participants to assemble a team of diverse district stakeholders with different levels of influence so that the team can attend the institute sessions together.

Dr. Curry then stated that DESE released its assistance guidance on March 1st of this year, a much earlier release than last year. Dr. Curry said that DESE adjusted the timing of this release in direct response to district feedback so that districts can begin their instructional planning for the upcoming school year as soon as possible. Dr. Curry then stated that school year 2023-24 assistance submissions are aligned with  [Student Opportunity Act (SOA) plans](https://www.doe.mass.edu/soa/) , school and district accountability targets , and DESE’s Educational Vision for supporting [Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining Practices](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/culturally-responsive/).

**Accountability Updates**

Rob Curtin reviewed the accountability agenda items and provided a staffing update regarding DESE’s Accountability team. Mr. Curtin stated that when DESE reorganized in 2021, he took on the additional responsibilities of managing the state’s assessment program while Council Liaison Erica Gonzales, who was previously in charge of the day-to-day responsibilities for DESE’s accountability system, took on an Associate Commissioner role in the Data and Accountability team. Mr. Curtin announced that Robbie Havdala, from Needham Public Schools, was recently hired as DESE’s Director of District and School Accountability, a new position at DESE that will oversee the day-to-day operations of the accountability system as well as DESE’s district review process. He stated that Mr. Havdala has an extensive background in education and education consulting. Mr. Curtin noted that Mr. Havdala will attend the next Council meeting, as he will formally join DESE in early April.

Mr. Curtin then led a discussion about the lowest performing students group. He reminded the Council that in past years, the Council discussed including a lowest performing students group into the system in an effort to close achievement gaps. Mr. Curtin informed the Council that DESE was not able to include this group in the most recent accountability results due to temporary pandemic-related changes to the system. Mr. Curtin reminded the Council that DESE’s accountability methodology focuses on closing the achievement gap by raising the "achievement floor" and that the lowest performing students group accounts for half of the school's overall calculation of progress toward accountability targets, noting that points are assigned for achievement, growth, and chronic absenteeism indicators. Mr. Curtin noted that every school has a lowest performing group regardless of overall school performance.

Mr. Curtin stated that lowest performing students are identified from a cohort of students who were enrolled in a school for more than one year to control for transiency. He noted that this change was made in 2018 as a direct result of feedback from school and district leaders who expressed concerns about the ways in which churn affected their ability to meet accountability targets. He also stated that this cohort does not include students who are first- or second-year English learners or students who take the MCAS-Alt assessment. Mr. Curtin shared that for 2023, students in this group are identified using the average of their English language arts (ELA) and math MCAS scores.

Comments and questions from individual Council members:

* *Are the achievement, growth, and chronic absenteeism indicators equally weighted in the system?* Mr. Curtin responded that achievement and growth count for 80 percent of the calculation (at a 3:1 ratio), and that chronic absenteeism counts for 10 percent of the calculation. However, Mr. Curtin noted that the overall weighting could change depending on whether a school has an English learner (EL) group, and if not, the EL percentage is reapplied elsewhere.
* *Consider the messaging around using the name “lowest performing” – it feels like we are blaming the students when we use that language.* Mr. Curtin responded that DESE will take this feedback into account.
* *The use of this group seems focused on MCAS prep. It may be worth having a broader conversation with the Council about what kinds of pedagogical and assessment strategies will be most helpful for students, especially those needing extra support.* Mr. Curtin responded that the feedback from schools and districts about including this measure has been overwhelmingly positive and stated that while we want particular attention paid to these students overall, the use of this data should not result in an overemphasis on MCAS prep, as DESE would not advocate for that kind of unintended consequence. Mr. Curtin then reminded the Council that this group is used for criterion-reference calculations (e.g., how schools are doing in making progress toward their own targets), and that percentiles are calculated at the *all students* level.
* *Is it fair to say that transiency is handled differently at the district level, or within a district? Does that factor into a district’s lowest performing group or are these students removed from the district calculation?* Mr. Curtin clarified that for a student to be included in the lowest performing students group list for a school, that student needs to be enrolled in the same school in consecutive years, and that to be included on a district list the student needs to be enrolled within the same district in consecutive years. Mr. Curtin reminded the Council that the district list is not a sum of all schools’ lists. He noted that DESE evaluated the lowest performing students group methodology after first implementing it, stating that analysts indicated improvement in the kids who were identified, and that the percentage of schools meeting targets for this group increased as well.

Mr. Curtin then noted that the lowest performing students group was not calculated for Grade 10 for 2023 reporting because of a lack of baseline data, and that Grade 10 progress toward targets will be based on the *all students* group this year. However, Mr. Curtin stated that in 2024, Grade 10 lowest performing student groups will be identified. Mr. Curtin went on to note that this year’s lowest performing students group lists and methodology document is available in DESE’s Security Portal. He stated that he is often asked why it takes so long to provide districts with the lowest performing lists. He reminded the Council that DESE needs to have certified October SIMS data to do this work, and that the SIMS certification process often takes longer than it should as some districts do not meet their reporting deadlines. However, Mr. Curtin told the Council that there are some districts that perform this calculation themselves using DESE’s methodology documentation.

Comments and questions from individual Council members:

* *Regarding the calculation that controls for transiency: DESE is looking for two consecutive years of enrollment prior to the assessment, but why aren’t we also looking at two consecutive years of enrollment after the assessment administration?* Mr. Curtin responded that the purpose is to hold schools accountable for a group of low performing students who returned for a consecutive year because schools and districts expressed concerns about being held accountable for students who have left the district. Mr. Curtin stated that he is available to follow up and answer questions outside of this meeting.
* *Regarding Grade 10 lowest performing student subgroup data, is this calculation also excluded from district-level data?* Mr. Curtin confirmed that yes, the lowest performing group data at the district level will only include students in grades 3-8.

Mr. Curtin then began a discussion about target-setting by reviewing DESE’s target-setting methodologies, and reminding the Council that targets are set differently according to a school or district’s path:

* Achievement: English language arts, Math, and Science
  + New methodology (recovery path and path forward)
  + Traditional methodology (looking at past improvers)
* High School completion
  + 4-year graduation rate
  + Extended engagement rate
  + Dropout rate
* Progress toward attaining English language proficiency
* Additional indicators
  + Chronic absenteeism (10 percent of days missed)
  + Advanced coursework completion

Mr. Curtin noted that target-setting was discussed at-length at recent Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) meetings. He reminded the Council that the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires measures of interim progress and that DESE sets targets annually for all accountability system indicators.

Mr. Curtin stated that in recent analyses, high school indicators did not perform any differently over the course of pandemic, likely due to modified competency determinations. He stated that while DESE felt comfortable using the same high school target-setting methodology used in previous years, DESE did not feel comfortable using the same achievement methodology as was used in the past, as there have been disparate impacts on achievement shown in all tested subjects caused by the pandemic. Mr. Curtin noted that there are schools that experienced significant learning losses in the range of 10-20 scaled score points. He stated that DESE does not feel that the previous achievement methodology shows consideration and care for what has happened to student learning throughout the pandemic. However, Mr. Curtin also stated that according to 2022 achievement data, schools are recovering, and that DESEwill set targets for school year 2022-23 reporting that are at least as rigorous as they were in 2019.

Mr. Curtin stated that to set achievement targets, each group in a school or district is assigned one of two paths: *recovery path* or *path forward*. For those on the recovery path, Mr. Curtin then noted that each district, school, and student group will have a “full recovery target” reflecting their 2019 scaled scores, and that the amount of the decline between 2019 and 2022 will determine the group's "time to recovery" quartile. He stated that DESE continues to believe that this approach shows the most consideration for those that experienced the greatest learning loss during the pandemic. Mr. Curtin stated that groups in the bottom quartiles (with the largest declines) will have a longer timeline to reach recovery than those with smaller declines in their assessment scores.​ He noted that there may be schools that will not need this entire timeline, and that as soon as districts recover or meet their recovery target, they will be put on the path forward, where targets increase. Mr. Curtin then stated that annual targets will be calculated by dividing the difference between full recovery and the 2022 scores by the number of years to reach full recovery, as determined by the quartile in which each group falls. Mr. Curtin then walked the Council through an example detailing the recovery path for a non-high school. He stated that districts, schools, and student groups with the largest declines in MCAS scores will have the longest time for recovery but will still need demonstrate steady growth towards their targets. Mr. Curtin estimated that approximately 25 percent of schools lost at least 10 scaled score points in their achievement results, which is approximately on third of an achievement level.

Mr. Curtin then reviewed the methodology used to determine targets for the path forward, noting that each district, school, student group is assigned an improvement increment based on their 2022 school percentile​, and that the improvement increments come from the 2019 target analysis​ (i.e., the median of improvers in schools with similar percentiles​). He then stated that improvement increments are capped at 5.1 scaled score points, which was the most rigorous increment used in 2019 target-setting, and that targets are calculated by adding the improvement increment to the group’s 2022 baseline.

Individual Council members provided the following feedback:

* *Kudos to the DESE team for being thoughtful in their focus on equity. Schools serving marginalized populations experienced unprecedented disruption, transiency, and trauma; volunteers, emergency personnel, and administrators were often moved into classroom roles to accommodate rapidly changing needs. Thinking about like schools with similar profiles is especially helpful and the proposed target methodology will give schools an opportunity to move forward, and rally supports, as necessary. This is not a perfect solution, but the Department should be applauded for this approach.*
* *Regarding the recovery path option, how did the Department decide that it would take four years to regain 10 scaled score points? What is the rationale or analyses behind setting the four-year target? Kids currently scoring in the fourth quartile are most likely remote learners and may not need such a long path now that they are back in classrooms.* Mr. Curtin responded that this work is unprecedented, as DESE has never had to think about how to set targets for such enormous losses. He said that DESE carefully considered the number of years and the amount of time required and thought that a four-year window was the most appropriate timeline. Mr. Curtin then respectfully disagreed that remote learning is the determining factor regarding quartile placement, stating that remote learning may indeed be a factor but that it cannot be confirmed that it is the sole cause of low performance. He then stated that DESE wanted to be cognizant of the fact that setting shorter targets might signal that schools are “back to normal”, which is not yet true in many schools. Mr. Curtin noted that it would be unfortunate to make such a mischaracterization.
* *Last year, DESE weighted chronic absenteeism at 20 percent to adjust for what was seen in the data. However, what we are experiencing and hearing about is that pandemic absenteeism patterns haven’t reset; we are continuing to see high student absenteeism. It is concerning that we would return to a 10 percent calculation while this remains a large challenge. There are strong relationships between chronic absenteeism and assessment performance.* Mr. Curtin responded that DESE struggled with this decision because when looking at absenteeism (at both 10 percent and 20 percent), the rank order of schools does not change that much. He noted that from a technical perspective, the switch does not have much of an impact and that regarding this year, it may end up being that schools meet a lot of their chronic absenteeism targets, as the worst of the pandemic being behind us. Mr. Curtin provided the following examples:
  + Since the start of the pandemic, there have been 1.6 million days missed from positive COVID cases.
  + In the January 2022 COVID surge, there were 650,000 days missed.
  + At one point, Massachusetts students were averaging 50,000 positive COVID cases per week.
  + From what we can see (so far) for March 1 SIMS, the number of days missed have decreased overall.
* *Is there an effort underway to look at the disparate impacts in districts and understand the causation in terms of informing how long it will take to recover? Regarding the path forward option, there is an impression that once recovery is reached, the Department will return to setting targets around gaps. If that happens, how does path forward close gaps and comply with the Student Opportunity Act’s (SOA) gap closing requirements? SOA requires setting statewide targets and does not necessarily say those targets have to be within the accountability system structure.* Mr. Curtin responded that there are thousands of potential gaps, that SOA does not specify which achievement gaps and which groups to focus on. It would be an impossibility to close all gaps, so the proposed increments in *path forward* and *recovery path* address this in a significant way. He noted that student groups that have traditionally been the furthest behind may have the largest target requirements for the *path forward* scenario. Mr. Curtin noted that he would engage with this member offline to discuss further.
* *Kudos to the DESE team for navigating the complexities of a system like this. However, we should emphasize that we really do not know how schools and districts will come out of the pandemic and how things will change going forward- the lingering impact is still sneaking into schools in unexpected ways. We should not lose sight of this. The Council should keep this in mind.*
* *Regarding calculating like schools, is this based purely on achievement or are there other demographics and/or complexities considered?* Mr. Curtin responded that this calculation is based on school percentile, so it involves all indicators in the accountability system.
* *Is there a process by which members can suggest future meeting topics?* Mr. Curtin responded that yes, Council members can reach out to the Council Co-Chairs directly or via a DESE survey.

**Next Steps and Closing**

Mr. Curtin thanked the Council for a thoughtful discussion and reviewed the Council’s meeting schedule. He closed the meeting by stating that DESE staff will follow-up with a survey tool through which Council members can propose potential meetings topics for upcoming meetings because this is a member-driven Council. Council co-chair Piwowar then thanked everyone for their thoughtful remarks and participation and encouraged Council members to reach out to him and Council Co-Chair Driscoll with questions or future topic suggestions. Mr. Piwowar adjourned the meeting at 10:30 a.m.