Accountability and Assistance Advisory Council (AAAC)

Meeting Notes December 6, 2023 (9:30 – 11:00 a.m.)

Virtual Meeting (Zoom)

*AAAC members in attendance:* Noah Berger, Tamatha Bibbo, Erin Cooley, Kerry Donahue, Heidi Driscoll, Barish Icin, Brandi Kwong, Ed Lambert, Glen McKay, Andrew O’Leary, Tim Piwowar, Yves Salomon-Fernandez, Marc Smith

*DESE staff in attendance:* Komal Bhasin, Lindsey Bryant, Andrea Condit, Charmie Curry, Rob Curtin, Erica Gonzales, Robbie Havdala, Kara Higgins, Tess Murphy, Corinne Thomas, Yu-Mui Wan

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 called the meeting to order at 9:32 a.m. The meeting agenda was reviewed, Council members introduced themselves, and Erica Gonzales (Associate Commissioner of Data and Accountability) introduced staff from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Council Co-Chairs Heidi Driscoll and Tim Piwowar reviewed meeting norms and protocols.

**Accountability System Review Process**

Ms. Gonzales described a new committee called the Accountability System Review Advisory Committee, which DESE established to develop a set of guiding principles and recommendations for DESE to consider in the review of the district and school accountability system. The goal of the Committee and its recommendations is to assist DESE in the development of an improved measure of school quality. Ms. Gonzales distinguished between the roles of the AAAC and the Accountability System Review Advisory Committee. She noted that this work is timely for several reasons. The existing accountability system was established in 2018 and a lot has happened since then – the rollout of the Next Generation MCAS assessments and DESE’s Educational Vision in particular. She shared that the work to review the accountability system is starting with an external stakeholder group and DESE is partnering with the Center of Assessment to do so. The committee is responsible for identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the current system and proposing considerations for DESE. There is an overlap between AAAC and Accountability System Review Advisory Committee membership. This is not by accident – DESE wants to hear the shared expertise and to bridge the gap between the two groups. Ms. Gonzales highlighted the roles and responsibilities of both the committee and the Council and noted that DESE staff will be liaisons between the two groups.

**Accountability Reporting for 2024**

Ms. Gonzales introduced a proposed shorter-term change to the accountability system for the current year. She shared that while the committee is looking at changes that would be implemented in a future system, DESE still has the responsibility to publish accountability results in 2024. One potential change that DESE is considering is to reconsider the number of years of data included in the calculation of accountability results. There is less volatility in annual results if more years of data are included, which helps to stabilize results. The plan in 2018, when the system was first implemented, was to add more data over time (potentially up to 4 years of data). However, due to the pandemic, DESE only got up to including two years of data. At this point, we are past the initial disruptions of the pandemic, and we could potentially add a 3rd year of data. To do so, we need to discuss what the weighting of those years should be. Currently, with two years of data, the prior year accounts for 40 percent, and the current year accounts for 60 percent of the calculation. Ms. Gonzales posed the following questions for the Council to consider: *Should DESE include three years of data in the system this year? How much weight should be given to each year of data?* Council members provided the following reactions:

* Can you clarify that 2022 was given the full assessment? Ms. Gonzales confirmed that in 2020 there were no MCAS assessments, in 2021 grades 3-8 took a shorter assessment, and 2022 was the first year since the pandemic began that students took the full test.
* Three years is much more reliable. I would lean towards the latest year to be weighted more heavily. We should be considering other data in weighing the latest year more heavily because from that time they will have a full year of instruction.
* I thought in 2022, there was some variation in the test being shorter. If we were to put weight on 2022 results, does that mean that those results are compared to an earlier year? I assume that 2022 is a comparison to prior years. Ms. Gonzales noted that progress toward targets looks at progress from one year to the next. The calculation of percentiles, however, does not take into consideration change from year to year. There is nuance depending on the part of the system that you are looking at.
* I agree that we should have more years for balancing, and keeping a greater weight on the most recent year is the right approach, since it is a full year of instruction.
* We should use as many years as we can, and it makes more sense to put the most weight on the current year. Are there other states using a multiple-year approach? Ms. Gonzales noted that DESE could review what other states are doing. Rob Curtin, DESE’s Chief Officer of Data, Assessment, and Accountability, added that in some states, the 2021-2022 school year was disrupted as well so it will be tough to make comparisons to the years that other states use in their systems. In general, he noted, states try to include as many years as possible.
* We often think of MCAS as the accountability system, but the weightings are more than just MCAS. What are the anticipated weightings for a four-year calculation? I am anticipating 10, 20, 30, and 40 percent? Ms. Gonzales responded that in the last system, DESE used a weighting of 10, 20, 30, and 40 percent for four years of data. However, we would need to determine whether using four years is necessary. Mr. Curtin added that DESE may be looking at a different accountability system in 2025, so that question may not even be on the table; however, it is something to consider if the system calls for it.
* As someone who works in a district, I would personally prefer a weighting of 10, 20, and 70 percent for three years of data. The 2021-2022 school year was a very different year. Student attendance was a challenge. Our 2022 district attendance rate looked wildly different than in 2019. We are getting better, but not back to where we were.

**Chronic Absenteeism**

Mr. Curtin presented DESE’s proposed change to the weight of the chronic absenteeism indicator for 2024 accountability reporting. He shared recent student attendance data trends, noting that while they are improving student chronic absenteeism rates remain almost double what they were before the pandemic. To inform the discussion, he reviewed the current weighting of the accountability indicators in the high school and non-high school grade spans. Mr. Curtin reminded the Council that increasing the weight of any indicator must be accompanied by a decrease in the weighting of one or more other measures. He noted that DESE is considering all options to increase the chronic absenteeism indicator between the current weighting and up to 25 percent. He added that DESE values the English language proficiency indicator, which leaves achievement and growth as the primary indicators to be affected by a change in weight to the chronic absenteeism indicator. Finally, he presented some considerations for altering the weight of the achievement and growth indicators. He posted the following questions to the Council: *What are the general thoughts of the council about increasing the weight of the chronic absenteeism indicator? Should the increase apply to both the normative (accountability percentiles) and the criterion-referenced (target percentages) parts of the system? Should the weighting all years of chronic absenteeism be increased or just 2024? If increased, where should the additional weight come from?* Council members provided the following feedback:

* There is a lot here – what I understand is that this is a reaction to post-pandemic realities. If this is the starting point, if we continue to see a decline, is this a problem we should be addressing overall, or do we just want to get back to 2019? Mr. Curtin responded that the Commissioner has done a good job in making this case – we were hoping we would not be here. We were hoping to be at pre-pandemic levels by now; however, most schools are nowhere near those rates. If kids are sick, they should stay home. But something has happened since the pandemic: dysregulation. We all have a part in this – DESE, districts, schools, and homes. The accountability system is not the only lever, only one of them, and we can address this issue from all angles.
* I think it is notable that DESE is looking at a multiple-prong approach. My concern would be changing the approach with one lever and negatively impacting school districts. This is a curriculum problem, and schools should not be penalized for this, but I understand the pressure it puts on schools and districts to address the problem – I hope we are funding them. Using achievement rather than improvement is the fairer option. Also, I agree that we should not touch the EL proficiency indicator.
* Where I am struggling is that the doubling of chronic absenteeism rates out of the pandemic was expected. We are going to be punishing schools for doing what we asked them to do – keeping students out of school when they were sick or when they were exposed. We have been good stewards of the public health message, and now suddenly, we have an accountability hammer coming down on schools for doing what they were told to do. It feels like we are punishing them. Mr. Curtin clarified that DESE does not intend to go back and back and retroactively increase the weighting of the chronic absenteeism indicator in previous years.
* We need to move forward with policy changes. Current guidance keeps kids out of school for five days if they have COVID. There is a whole messaging piece that is beyond the districts’ control. Schools are going to be punished for abiding.
* Thank you to the department for taking the issue of chronic absenteeism seriously – this is not normal and impacts students’ learning. Have we dug into the data? How are we supporting districts and schools outside of the accountability system? Mr. Curtin noted that the multi-faceted approach is currently happening. DESE has made grant funding available, and there is a communications strategy. When the Commissioner brought this matter to the Board, he first brought out doctors to describe the impact of missing school.
* The world belongs to those who show up. The idea of school attendance is more of an output than an outcome. One could potentially argue that there are more variables outside of a school or district’s control that are impacting attendance. I think some good points have been made. Other inputs impact absenteeism – more parents are working from home for example. It should not affect achievement or growth weightings. A minimal short-term increase that does not come out of achievement and growth would be best.
* I understand that it is one lever for change, and I appreciate the doctors coming in. I think it is a mental health crisis, a family issue: elementary school kids do not get themselves to school. I do not think this will inspire families to go to school. Schools used to be able to rely on family involvement, Child Requiring Assistance (CRA) cases, and truancy officers as soon as a student demonstrated any sort of concern. It is hard to inspire families to get their students back in school. Certain schools are going to be disproportionately impacted by this increase in weight. There should be a small increase if any. I am worried that the consequences could be severe – I do not see it as a punishment, but I do not know how to fix this problem.
* I agree that we should not go backward. Accountability is not a punishment; we need to make sure that these are points of information to make decisions. We have never experienced a punishment from DESE, and the data are always quite helpful to bridge gaps and get support. I would love for the public to understand that we first need to see changes in attendance before we see changes in achievement. Therefore, I think it may be best to take weight from achievement.
* There is a concern that we do not have control of chronic absences; however, this is not true. Districts should have control and efficacy over chronic absenteeism. One of the concerns about this year is that we are halfway through the year – we are starting late. Anything we decide now is going to be short-term since the accountability system review process is underway.

**Next Steps and Closing**

The Council was reminded of the schedule for the remaining meetings:

* February 28, 9:30 – 11:00 a.m. (Virtual meeting)
* April 10, 9:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. (Likely in-person; time/location TBD)
* June 12, 9:30 – 11:00 a.m. (Virtual meeting)

To help build future meeting agendas, Council members can use a form to suggest ideas or connect with DESE staff or the Co-Chairs. Co-Chair Piwowar thanked the Council members for their time and contributions and adjourned the meeting at 11:02 a.m.