Accountability and Assistance Advisory Council (AAAC) Meeting Notes

October 16, 2024 – 9:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Best Western Royal Plaza Hotel and Trade Center (181 Boston Post Road W., Marlborough, MA)

*AAAC members in attendance:* Noah Berger, Tamatha Bibbo, Bill Cameron, Erin Cooley, Heidi Driscoll, Barish Icin, Ed Lambert, Glenn McKay, Andrew O’Leary, Tim Piwowar, Marc Smith

*DESE staff and presenters in attendance:* Dr. Charmie Curry (Associate Commissioner for the Statewide System of Support), Erica Gonzales (Associate Commissioner for Data and Accountability), Robbie Havdala (Director of District and School Accountability), Dr. Chris Domaleski (Associate Director of the Center for Assessment)

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/>.

Co-Chair Tim Piwowar called the meeting to order at 9:35 a.m. After sharing their names and roles, members rotated and read out loud norms and meeting protocols. Ms. Gonzales thanked Co-Chair Piwowar for his service as the meeting was his final after serving two terms.

Ms. Gonzales then informed the council that the Chair of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) appointed BESE member Dr. Martin West as a BESE Liaison to the Council. Dr. West will join meetings later in the year but could not join the current meeting.

Ms. Gonzales presented the Council’s charge for the 2024-2025 school year, as set by the Acting Commissioner. The charge is to advise on the implementation of the current accountability and assistance system and provide input and feedback on potential changes to the system.

She then began the conversation about the 2024 MCAS results. In English language arts (ELA), achievement was lower in 2024 than in 2023; in Math, grade 3 showed improvement but results were relatively flat otherwise; and in Science, there was an improvement in results for grades 5 and 10, but lower achievement in grade 8. She then shared more detailed results, by subject and grade level.

One member asked about the effect of the changed competency determination cut score for grade 10. Ms. Gonzales said that she would share more information at a later point. The member also asked about the EPP, which Ms. Gonzales also said she would follow up on.

A member noted that, by looking at the statewide average scaled scores, results did not look as different as the achievement level results, and was curious about whether any additional analysis had been conducted. Ms. Gonzales responded that some of that analysis is done following the public release of the results, and highlighted that there is value in looking at both measures.

Ms. Gonzales then shifted to discuss achievement results for students who were chronically absent versus those who were not. A member asked whether there was an analysis of the characteristics of the students, to know whether there were underlying reasons why students were chronically absent (e.g. whether they were low-income, students with disabilities, English learners, etc.). Ms. Gonzales said that a further disaggregated analysis had not yet been done. A member shared that, for a particular school or district, chronic absenteeism results can be viewed for every single group.

A member recalled the Acting Commissioner had sent out a notification to districts about measuring staff attendance; he asked if there was work at the macro level to look at staff attendance and its link to student achievement. He wondered about mapping educator data to student-level data. Ms. Gonzales shared that DESE has collected individual educator data, but that DESE had not reported that data publicly. The member shared that the Student Learning Experience report used to give educator data, because it looked from an equity lens as to whether absenteeism affected certain groups. That level of the report disappeared, as it now focuses on educator preparedness and evaluations. A different member identified that there were a lot of reasons why teacher absences occur, but noted that even if there are legitimate reasons for being absent, the fact is that they were not present.

Ms. Gonzales then shifted to discuss 2024 accountability results. She reminded the group of the accountability system framework – with two components and five indicators, and is used to categorize schools and districts as requiring assistance or not. She shared that, of the 1,827 schools in 2023-2024 school year, 217 received “Insufficient data,” 285 (18%) were classified as “requiring assistance or intervention,” and 1,325 (82%) were classified as “not requiring assistance or intervention” (which includes 57 schools of recognition). In terms of making progress towards targets, 60% of schools made substantial progress, met, or exceeded accountability targets. A member then suggested a long-term theme of disaggregation – for instance, the performance of ELs may have gone up significantly, but the demographics may have shifted – to focus on the role that demographics play.

Dr. Curry shared information about early data on Progress Monitoring Visits. As background, she shared that assistance starts with those schools identified as underperforming and that DESE partners with AIR to conduct school visits. She began that assistance work is guided by DESE’s Educational Vision, and that indicators come from the Coherence Guidebook. One way to think about the Educational Vision is thinking about systems through Deeper Learning – particularly through Instructional Design, Tiered Supports, and Systems & Structures. The progress monitoring pilot was based 91 schools in the pilot year, of which 77% were designated as requiring assistance. Of those, 74% of those schools already receive support from the Statewide System of Support, which is the highest level of intensive support provided by the agency. Some key findings were that, in addition to classroom observations, teacher surveys reported varying levels of agreement that there is a common vision and clear expectations for instruction. A second key finding was that many schools that DESE directly supports in adopting High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) are not yet implementing them consistently and with integrity across classrooms, suggesting that the existence of HQIM is not sufficient for implementation. A third key finding was that classroom instruction resulted in students being passively engaged with few opportunities for meaningful dialogue or critical thinking, based on the CLASS observation tool. A fourth key finding, from staff survey responses, revealed that staff did not universally say they felt all students – specifically certain student groups – could achieve at the same level, suggesting inconsistency among staff beliefs.

Dr. Curry then posed two discussion questions to the group, which Co-Chair Piwowar opened to the Council. A member asked what DESE will do to act upon the shared information, given that school leadership is key and much of this is visionary. Dr. Curry shared that, for HQIM, her team uses a district-focused assistance model to look at the system. For instance, they may go to the school level to look at common planning time, which is not prevalent in many districts, and ensure that time is being spent well. Another member then asked about the beliefs and whether those were related to preparedness and instructional materials; Dr. Curry responded that it was important to measure and be cognizant of bias and align professional learning accordingly. One member shared a comment on the slides with charts, that the slide is misleading based on how the statement is framed. Instead, she suggested presenting the question at the top that staff were asked, to more effectively show the results. One member asked, regarding HQIM, if there was any differentiation regarding implementation timelines – and if that explained the results, and potentially correlated with classroom observation results. Dr. Curry replied that DESE has grappled with that too and that most schools were in the “2” range for HQIM, but have had them for some years. One member thanked Dr. Curry for collecting this information on how the staff was feeling, noting that she did not think she had ever seen data on expectations before. A member wondered whether it was Dr. Curry’s team or the larger agency that is defining the instructional practices we expect to see in all classrooms, given the agency’s focus on HQIM. Dr. Curry shared that several DESE offices released materials this summer and that she can share those following the meeting. Another member echoed the previous member’s comment regarding the belief that “demography is destiny.” He also wanted to note that the public conversation generally centers on HQIM and not enough about instruction; specifically, that high quality instruction is more important than HQIM. Another member agreed and wondered how to use student engagement in the accountability system.

Ms. Gonzales provided an overview of the Accountability System Revisory Advisory Committee, which was an external committee established by DESE to look at the existing accountability system and provide recommendations for changes that DESE might consider in the future. The Department engaged the Center for Assessment to facilitate the meetings. Ms. Gonzales described the purpose of that advisory committee purpose to develop a set of guiding principles and recommendations for DESE to consider in review of the district and school accountability system, that complies with existing federal and state laws, and that honors Massachusetts’ Educational Vision and priorities. She shared the list of organizations invited to participate, as well as the timeline for meetings. She then shared the scope of the committee, identifying items within scope (accountability indicators, measures, weighting, years included, performance categories, report design, connection to assistance work, community engagement process) and those out of scope (competency determination, MCAS design, designation of underperforming and chronically underperforming schools and receivership), given existing laws. Dr. Domaleski, as he began to present, acknowledged four members who served on the advisory committee. He identified that the Center was to document the process and recommendations. He also flagged that the committee did not agree on everything and that there were areas of disagreement that were identified in the report. Dr. Domaleski said the committee started from vision – thinking about the idealized vision or theory of action first, and using that to get to design principles and eventually design recommendations. The committee identified goals of accountability as being effective when looking at both inputs and outcomes, as well as being integrated with a system of supports. Regarding design principles, the committee spent time looking at the current system, other states’ systems, as well as national reports on indicators; the appropriate size for federal requirements; flexibility where possible; and a focus on assistance.

Then, in terms of design recommendations, the committee recommended one coherent federal and state accountability system with three categories of indicators, as opposed to two parallel (federal and state) systems. Those categories included Category 1: Core ESSA Required Indicators, to designate schools into required support categories, Category 2: Supplemental Indicators, to provide flexibility that is not required by ESSA (such as menu systems), and Category 3: State Reporting and Resources, that reflects the information that the state collects and reports. He drew the distinction between Category 2 and 3 in that there is some implied decision or preference with Category 2, whereas Category 3 is just disseminated.

Within Category 1, the core proposed indicators included graduation rate, academic achievement, advanced coursework, growth, progress in achieving EL proficiency, and school climate. A member asked about how school climate would be measured; Dr. Domaleski replied that operationalization was not determined by the committee, but that they imagined a focus on survey feedback. One member concurred, with the agreement that climate was important to be included in the system, but that there was no consensus on whether VOCAL was appropriate. Dr. Domaleski said that a handful of states include climate data in their systems, but some focus only on participation rates rather than results. Others, however, do give higher accountability ratings to those with positive climate ratings. One member noted that VOCAL is not currently reported on the school or district level and that there would be implications if included in the accountability system, especially with unintended consequences.

For Category 2, Dr. Domaleski described how supplemental indicators could be used for further differentiation, to acknowledge schools that are going above and beyond, where the agency could promote better practices for students. These indicators would be more flexible and provide insights, and incentives to those who are doing good work. Indicators that the committee proposed included 9th-grade persistence/promotion, access to effective instruction, curricular breadth, curricular quality, educator absenteeism, student absenteeism – but there was not consensus on all of these.

For Category 3, Dr. Domaleski said he felt like Massachusetts is already doing well already – reporting on a broad range of indicators, such as research, promising practices, performance measures.

In terms of next steps, Dr. Domaleski said that greater specificity is needed, particularly operational definitions and business rules (e.g. whether to use a composite index for Category 1 versus profiles or filtering for Category 2, the latter of which does not require ranking and sorting), exceptions, and refinement. Ms. Gonzales then summarized the work ahead, focusing on how stakeholder engagement and feedback opportunities will continue. She then described some steps, including discussing the report and recommendations with DESE staff and AAAC, the next phases of the project plan (aligned with DESE’s Racial Equity Decision-Making Tool (REDT)), and eventual state and federal approval. She also said the timeline, which was not presented, is to take time – and to allow the future permanent commissioner to weigh in on the system. She said that we will likely not be using a new system again at this time next year, but may have more xoncrete information on what a future system might look like.

Ms. Gonzales then posed four discussion questions to the Council. One member complimented Dr. Domaleski and the team, especially given the wide diversity of opinion, on the process and report. He then expressed a desire for the system to focus more on post-graduate outcomes, such as college persistence and wage rates. One member echoed what the previous member had shared, complimenting the process and ensuring all voices were heard, but wished there was more data looks like for students in Massachusetts. One member also thanked Dr. Domaleski and the staff; he agreed with a member on long-term outcomes data being valuable. Maybe, he asked, should accountability be an algorithm that ranks schools, or rather accountability to the community and students, to build/strengthen a community’s ability to define what they want from their schools. He acknowledged that that would not meet federal requirements, but that it was important for measuring and for parent engagement. A member echoed the comments from colleagues and also noted the voices on the advisory committee that are not on Council are parent voices. He also thought the committee would produce concrete recommendations, but that broader recommendations were the results – and that the theory of action was something to lean into as a future frame for accountability.

Co-Chair Piwowar then invited Council members not on the advisory committee to speak. One member asked a question about the inclusion and exclusion of student populations; Dr. Domaleski responded that it came up particularly in Category 2 indicators, around opportunities to learn and factors that impact that. He also asked about a 2021 IES study around a student’s destiny being determined in 8th grade in Washington DC schools. A member said that academic performance is frequently the focus, but that not all factors are taken into the accountability system, which are equally important and get less attention. Dr. Domaleski shared that this conversation is happening across other states. A member added that led to the rationale for including school climate in Category 1. A member asked the population of students ages 18-22, and how they would be included. A member replied that that was why the extended engagement rate was preserved, but post-secondary outcomes fell into Category 3. A member mentioned student independence – “students who are ready for college, career, and civic participation,” and that these criteria resemble the Portrait of a Graduate, which many districts use. A member wondered if there were ways to more directly incorporate those measures into an accountability system. A member did say there are a lot of factors to consider when thinking about the success of a school district, and – if we believe that all kids can achieve at high levels, as shown in data earlier in the meeting – then achievement should be a heavy marker. A school district’s primary function is to ensure that kids learn, he shared. A member said that he agreed, to make sure students are learning, but was not sure he agreed that MCAS was the only measure of learning. A member noted that groups that were invited to participate in the committee were unable should be included in future conversations. A member encouraged the system to look at closing gaps – not just meeting expectations. He also asked about his interpretation of Category 1 and Category 2, as well as the focus on inputs versus outputs. Dr. Domaleski replied that he hopes the system is viewed as integrated, and that they work together. He agreed that Category 1 supports ESSA requirements and is similar to the current system, except for school climate, but helps the state deploy resources to support. Integrating Category 2, however, helps the state differentiate those supports. He also referenced the “growth to standard” recommendation, which relates to the member’s gap-closing question. A member also said there are community groups that could be represented and weigh in. A member also suggested including feedback from stakeholders in western Massachusetts.

Ms. Gonzales then shared the Council meeting schedule for the remainder of the school year. She also mentioned seeking nominations for a Council Co-Chair. Co-Chair Piwowar expressed his gratitude for his six years on the Council and called the meeting to close at 11:59 a.m.