Accountability and Assistance Advisory Council (AAAC) Meeting Notes

December 4, 2024 – 10:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.

Virtual Meeting – Zoom

*AAAC members in attendance:* Tamatha Bibbo, Bill Cameron, Erin Cooley, Kerry Donahue, Barish Icin, Brandi Kwong, Ed Lambert, Glen McKay, Yves Salomon-Fernandez, Jennifer Shorter

*DESE/BESE staff and presenters in attendance:* Dr. Marty West (BESE Member), Michelle Ryan (Acting Chief of Schools), 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), Corinne Thomas (District Review Support Specialist), Kevin Daly (Data Analyst)

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/>.

Council Co-Chair Barish Icin called the meeting to order at 10:07 a.m. A quorum of Council members was reached at 10:12 a.m. Erica Gonzales led introductions, including Mr. Icin, who was recently appointed as a council co-chairperson; Dr. Jennifer Shorter, a new at-large member; Dr. Marty West, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education’s (BESE) appointed liaison to the Council; returning Council members; and staff from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). She also reviewed discussion norms and the Council’s charge for the 2024-2025 school year.

Robbie Havdala began the discussion about DESE’s district review process with the following questions: *Reflect on your experience participating in any kind of review (NEASC, Tiered/Integrated Focused Monitoring Review, external consultant, district walkthrough, etc.). What were the most effective elements of it? What would you have changed?* Council members provided the following comments:

* These are helpful – improvement planning strategies use those rubrics. As a leader, I have experienced Tiered Focused Monitoring (TFM), New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), and district reviews. What can be difficult is that each has different expectations. However, if DESE provides the context behind the review, it helps districts identify priorities.
* In another state, a university partnered with the state to observe instruction, and principals provided feedback directly to the teacher in the moment which empowered the principals.
* Grant visits, authorizer visits, and monitoring have become more of a collaborative effort, with the review team trying to understand the schools and giving specific feedback. Specific questions are asked ahead of time and then looked for during the visit.
* There may have been great changes that have taken place since I experienced this before, but at the time, in a low-performing district, the thing that would have been most valuable would have been the visiting team’s definition of effective ways to heighten student learning in instruction (outside of compliance) compared to what was observed. That would be helpful to the district leadership.

Mr. Havdala presented the objectives of the Office of District Reviews and Monitoring’s efforts to reimagine the district review process. He also provided a high-level overview of the purpose of the district review process and the current model, including pre-onsite, onsite, and post-onsite activities.

Corinne Thomas then offered additional details related to the activities that occurred prior to the onsite visit, as well as the different types of district review that might be used. She posed the following questions: *Is there a benefit to having two different review types? How do we provide targeted, relevant information while fulfilling our responsibility to conduct comprehensive reviews?* Council members provided the following responses:

* I appreciate the opportunity to have this conversation given resources, Student Opportunity Act (SOA) funding, etc. The Department should consider selecting districts that are struggling (using accountability data or another metric) and following up with another type of review in the year or two after to stay in direct partnership to move the needle for students. This could make the impact of the office more effective. It doesn’t mean every district gets a review, but the data shows that some districts have rebounded from the pandemic in better ways than others, and this type of review could be used for districts that are still struggling.
* I am struck by the length of time it takes to conduct a review. Changes might not be able to be implemented in the current or following year if the budget has already been set. Can there be a quicker review?
* A challenge with the targeted review is that you might be missing the root causes in the system that are potentially not seen in the focus areas of the review. Can the review be shorter initially to identify more targeted areas the dig into? Ms. Thomas noted that even in targeted reviews, the standards are at the system level, so they can still address leadership, support, etc.
* How often are the reviews? If you have a comprehensive review in one year, does that mean you can only have a target review the next time? Ms. Thomas noted that DESE does not have a cycle for this type of review and that DESE does not review every district.
* Why are there two kinds of reviews? What drives that? Mr. Havdala notes that this is primarily a resource issue and that DESE can conduct more district reviews each year if some are targeted.
* Is there a way to have a comprehensive review using minimum criteria for some standards and all criteria for other standards?

Ms. Thomas described the timeline for pre-onsite visit activities in the current model and potential changes DESE could make. She asked: *What are your reactions to the proposed timeline shifts? What challenges do you foresee? What adjustments would you recommend?* The Council responded with the following comments:

* I appreciate DESE being thoughtful about adjusting the timeline. The budget process and planning begin early and last several months. In January and February, people are already preparing for the following school year.
* Why start in the spring? Could notifications start in January or November? What is the barrier to starting before spring? If you move up notifications and orientations, it could help with incorporating feedback into planning and budgeting.
* On the contrary, the budget season and other efforts are stressful from January to June – the summer is a better time to focus on this type of work.

Next, Ms. Thomas described the timeline for onsite visit activities in the current model and potential changes DESE could make. She asked: *To what extent should we allow virtual focus groups, rather than in-person?* Council members provided the following comments:

* Any efficiencies make sense, including using technologies. What about other community stakeholders, parents, and business leaders? Ms. Thomas responded that we do meet with families in the district review process. However, we have not asked for broader community feedback in the past.
* Scheduling can be a challenge – have you considered one-way interview tools? This would alleviate scheduling and translation issues. Then you can figure out who you really need in a focus group.
* Are there examples of other states or agencies that do this? How do they do it? Ms. Thomas responded that Massachusetts is the only state with this specific type of district review, but we can look into other types of reviews and how they are conducted.
* Think about which reviews need to be in person versus which can be virtual. Think about individuals to speak with to avoid groupthink. Try to do as much in person as possible, during work/school time. Use virtual tools to minimize accessibility issues.

Next, Ms. Thomas described the post-onsite visit activities in the current model and potential changes DESE is considering. She asked: *How do we balance the need to share findings with districts with the many constraints on their time? How do we maintain the integrity of findings while collaborating with districts prior to publication? How can ODRM effectively connect districts to support while ensuring alignment with the work of other teams and respecting the roles of each office?*  Council members offered the following thoughts:

* I imagine that districts will make time if this is helpful and important. Though time constraints occur, because of how important it is, they will make time.
* Can you define “integrity of findings”? Ms. Thomas explained that this means the report includes the facts, not just the opinion of the loudest voice in the room or suggestions for revisions from the district.
* The bar should remain high for revising the report. Not to say it can’t happen, but there should be standards that need to be met to make changes to the report’s findings.
* Have we asked districts what might be most helpful in these reports and findings calls?
* Use a clear protocol and set expectations with the districts about what they can and cannot address in their review of the draft report. Be clear about the report serving as real data, reflective of a point in time.
* Could a district have more than one chance to provide comments or respond with a letter that is included in the report? DESE staff responded that we currently do not have findings calls, and in the past have made minor changes to the report based on feedback from the district and confirming data triangulation with conversations with the current district review vendor/partner.

Mr. Havdala closed the presentation with the following discussion questions: *What did we miss? Are there other changes you would recommend? Do these changes feel aligned with the stated project objectives? How could we better address our stated objectives?* Council members offered the following thoughts:

* I like the idea of circling back with districts after they receive the report. What did they do with the report? Are they having an impact? It’s a cycle of inquiry approach. Consider offering a menu of options and/or partners that districts can choose to work with in the implementation of recommendations.
* Consider assessing in the short term whether the district has acted upon on the recommendations and if it has moved the needle on outcomes. Independent follow-up shouldn’t take long and would enhance the effectiveness of the work of the office. Some districts might not want that level of oversight, but if you come at it from the lens that this is student-focused, that should be the desired goal.
* I don’t think you missed anything, and I like the transparency. I appreciate the effort to partner with the district. You should lean on the districts to help with this work– ask them if they would be willing to connect with another district that is getting a review a year in the following year. This could build trust and resources.

Ms. Gonzales reminded the Council of the meeting schedule for the remainder of the school year. She also noted the Council will need a second co-chair following the next meeting and asked for members to consider nominating themselves or a fellow member. Council Co-Chair Icin adjourned the meeting at 11:31 a.m.