# Accountability and Assistance Advisory Council (AAAC) Meeting Notes

June 4, 2025 – 10:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.

Virtual Meeting – Zoom

*AAAC members in attendance:* Noah Berger, Bill Cameron, Erin Cooley, Barish Icin, Diane Kelley, Brandi Kwong, Glen McKay, Andrew O’Leary, Jennifer Shorter, Marc Smith

*DESE staff and presenters in attendance*: Charmie Curry, Rob Curtin, Erica Gonzales, Robbie Havdala, Tess Murphy, 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 Barish Icin called the meeting to order at 10:02 a.m. Erica Gonzales, Associate Commissioner of Data and Accountability at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), began the meeting by advising attendees that DESE does not authorize attendees to record or to use AI transcription tools during the meeting and that DESE does not endorse any unauthorized transcripts created by third parties of its meetings. Ms. Gonzales gave an overview of the meeting agenda.

Council members then introduced themselves and reviewed Council meeting norms. Ms. Gonzales asked the Council members to refamiliarize themselves with the Council’s charge for the current school year:

*The School and District Accountability and Assistance Advisory Council (AAAC) advises the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education on matters pertinent to the development of school and district accountability in the Commonwealth. To accomplish that goal, the Council will:*

* *Continue to advise the Department and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education on the implementation of the currently approved district and school accountability and assistance system.*
* *Provide input and feedback on potential changes to the district and school accountability system, ensuring that the system produces high-quality, objective, and unbiased information that allows the Department, districts, and schools to partner together to advance the Department’s Educational Vision and Strategic Objectives.*

**DESE Updates**

Ms. Gonzales then provided the Council with several DESE updates related to matters discussed by the Council over the course of the year.

District Reviews

Ms. Gonzales explained that the revised [District Standards and Indicators](https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/district-standards-indicators.docx) have been used for all reviews in the 2024-2025 school year, providing a greater level of detail in the reports, and that reports from this year’s reviews are being [published](https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/default.html) upon completion. She noted that while a few reports are available now, the rest are expected to be available over the next couple of months. Ms. Gonzales stated that based on Council member feedback, districts that have been selected for a review in 2025-2026 were notified in late February, which is the earliest that DESE has ever notified districts. She explained that DESE will continue to use the updated standards and indicators to inform the district review process. Ms. Gonzales then stated that DESE is finalizing a contract with an external partner to support the district review process in 2025-2026, and that this decision is expected to be made soon. She then noted that DESE will also adjust the review process in 2025-2026 (based on feedback from the Council) to include post-review debrief meetings and findings calls. Ms. Gonzales explained that over the years, several districts have expressed interest in debrief meetings and findings calls, and that this should be a welcome addition to the review process. She then stated that DESE will be updating the district review website in the coming weeks to make it more appealing and to improve navigation for users.

Questions and feedback from individual Council members:

* Is there a degree to which this process could include looking at whether districts are implementing Ballot Question 2 with fidelity, and whether they are narrowing curriculum by continuing to teach to the MCAS test? It’s important to know whether districts are engaging in deeper learning.
  + Ms. Gonzales responded by stating that DESE’s district review process utilizes classroom observation tools and curriculum reviews. She then noted that while American Institutes for Research [DESE’s current contracted reviewer] has used these tools during the district reviews but confirmed that DESE may continue to explore this as part of the process in the future.

Accountability System Review

Ms. Gonzales reminded the Council that in the 2023-2024 school year, DESE convened an external advisory committee to review and develop recommendations for potential changes to the state’s district and school accountability system. She then stated that using the committee’s [report](https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/lists-tools/accountability-review-report.pdf), an internal group of DESE staff representing a broad range of program offices and expertise has been engaged in ongoing discussions related to potential future changes to the system. Ms. Gonzales noted that DESE believes this work needs to be done thoughtfully and carefully over time. She then told the Council that this work will continue this summer and into the next school year, with more discussions taking place at future Council meetings.

Questions, comments, and feedback from individual Council members:

* Taking the time to do this right is a great approach, but it seems that the work last summer was done in a very different climate (e.g., before the passage of Question 2 and wide-ranging discussions on standardized testing, under a markedly different federal climate, and with guidance from a Commissioner who is no longer at DESE), so perhaps it would be helpful to start looking at this issue with a clean state, using the newly established statewide Graduation Commission to inform this work.
  + Ms. Gonzales notes that many of these points have been acknowledged during internal DESE workgroups.
  + Rob Curtin, DESE’s Chief Officer for Data, Assessment, and Accountability, provided some clarification and additional context. He noted that DESE has not yet received any notification or indication that federal requirements around school and district accountability systems have changed or will be changing. Mr. Curtin agreed that the climate has changed but noted that DESE's work is not changing until there is a direction from the federal government to do so. He noted that the state’s view on MCAS and standardized assessments has not changed, only that the state’s use of MCAS as a graduation requirement has changed.

Reimagining DESE's Data reporting Tools

Ms. Gonzales announced that in Spring 2025, DESE and the Executive Office of Education’s IT team (EOE IT) launched a joint effort to reimagine our School and District Profiles and other DESE data reporting tools (DART, RADAR, Education-to-Career Data Hub, etc.). She stated that this is a once-in-a-decade opportunity to update DESE’s repository of publicly available data, with the goal being to create a more cohesive set of data tools and a coherent space for all data users to find what they need in a format that better serves their purposes. Ms. Gonzales explained that DESE is currently winding down stakeholder engagement work (in-person and virtual) on this matter and noted that findings from that work indicate that there is a broad range of data literacy and comfort amongst those who use DESE data. She explained that stakeholder input will be used to better understand which tools our users rely on most, how and why they use these tools, and what needs are not met through the existing tools. Ms. Gonzales then stated that in the coming months, DESE and EOE IT will continue the work of developing a future version of Profiles that integrates existing tools, addresses pain points and/or gaps, and better meets the needs of the wide range of stakeholders they are intended to serve.

Questions, comments, and feedback from individual Council members:

* Profiles is already very reliable – does this work need to happen?
  + Ms. Gonzales answered that the back end of DESE’s reports is dated and needs modernization, and that EOE IT says a new front end must be built to support the updates that will power the reports. She stated that DESE is simply taking advantage of the opportunity to update tools and modernize the reports.
* Does DESE envision doing any kind of public outreach or education campaign for parents so they can access these tools more effectively?
  + Ms. Gonzales answered that DESE is thinking about this, but notes it is difficult to accomplish. She stated that DESE is aware of the need to be more intentional in finding parents/community members to provide feedback. She stated DESE learned that people are using general tools [Profiles] without knowing there are even more specific tools [DART, RADAR] available, and that DESE would like to hear from Council members about better ways to get in front of a broader user/audience.
* Some Council members note that DART and RADAR are extremely useful and suggest creating a single landing page where all tools are prominently displayed, as the current setup leads users to look at different pages/links/locations to get a comprehensive view of the available tools.
  + Ms. Gonzales acknowledged that a centralized location for report tools would be more impactful and helpful for users at all levels.

Ms. Gonzales thanked Council members for their feedback and stated that there will be opportunities to engage on this issue further at future Council meetings. Ms. Gonzales then clarified that DESE is *not* proposing to report any less data than what is currently published – data from these tools will still exist, stating that this work is an effort to modernize DESE’s data tools.

Mr. Curtin thanked the Council for their comments and stated that Profiles is the most visited page on the DESE webpage by far. He then acknowledged that DESE understands the need to keep the current version of Profiles up and running while building the new version and stated that at no time will the current version of Profiles be unavailable. He noted that his charge to the DESE staff doing this work is that the public needs one-stop shopping that accommodates all levels of data literacy. Mr. Curtin stated that DESE is excited about the opportunity to improve these tools.

Competency Determination

Mr. Curtin then provided an update on Competency Determination (CD). He stated that this goal is to keep the Council informed of what is happening as changes unfold. Mr. Curtin stated that the new regulations are related to the CD and are not a broader set of statewide graduation requirements. Mr. Curtin stated that after the passage of Question 2, districts adopted varied CD policies, so DESE recognized a need for some level of consistency across districts. He explained that the statutory language for CD only covers through grade 10 and that these regulations are meant to serve as a bridge to a longer-term solution from the Statewide Graduation Council and legislature. Mr. Curtin said the Statewide Graduation Council began its work with three meetings and two open listening sessions. He then reviewed the following changes to the CD that were adopted by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) on May 20th:

* Removed obsolete language regarding the MCAS;
* Defined terms found in the new statutory language to provide clarity (i.e., “satisfactorily completing coursework” and “showing mastery”);
* Specified minimum requirements to earn the CD;
* Added United States history to the areas included in the CD, beginning with the graduating class of 2027;
* Offers a narrow option for students in exceptional circumstances to earn the CD by attaining a qualifying score of at least “Meeting Expectations” or “Exceeding Expectations” on the relevant high school MCAS test; and
* Requires that districts adopt a CD policy and certify to DESE that the policy complies with the regulations, DESE can audit the quality of districts’ CD policies.

Mr. Curtin explained that DESE is currently developing guidance that clarifies the requirements and addresses the next steps, including:

* + Answers to frequently asked questions about new requirements
  + Defined process and timeline for what must be adopted and submitted to DESE
  + Requirements for students with disabilities and English learners
  + Commitments by DESE around public reporting of policies and local requirements

Questions, comments, and feedback from individual Council members:

* Is the Statewide Graduation Council’s work a recommendation or requirement?
  + Mr. Curtin answered that the ultimate role of the Statewide Graduation Council is to issue recommendations to the Secretary and Commissioner, but clarified that the Statewide Graduation Council’s work may require legislation.
* Council members thanked Mr. Curtin for acknowledging the challenges districts face in needing to implement changes quickly.
* Is DESE (through the School Interoperability Framework and Student Information Systems) going to check CD eligibility against course completion?
  + Mr. Curtin responded that course information may be used to check CD eligibility and stated that any guidance DESE releases will include this information. He then noted that DESE will collect CD policies from districts and will make them available (in multiple languages) on the DESE website. Mr. Curtin stated that DESE may ask districts to identify which courses are going to count as meeting requirements for CD. He clarified that for the class of 2026, a high percentage of students (approximately 80%) have already met CD by taking MCAS in spring 2024, and they will retain that benefit. Mr. Curtin then stated that DESE plans to host a webinar sometime in the next few weeks to answer questions and further explain the requirements outlined in the forthcoming guidance.
* Some districts are experiencing anxiety over the unintended consequences of Question 2, specifically over the possibility that many more students may not earn the CD through coursework, which is the opposite of the ballot question’s intention.
  + Mr. Curtin acknowledged and echoed this concern, noting that for close to 20 years, DESE played the role of deciding who earned the CD, and now that role now falls to the districts. He acknowledged the additional work this places on districts, noting that DESE will require districts to implement an appeals process to address exceptional circumstances. Mr. Curtin stated that DESE ran three types of appeals processes to handle the different types of appeals requests in the past, further highlighting that the burden is now on the district to manage. Mr. Curtin noted that DESE’s forthcoming guidance will get into the specifics of the appeals process requirements.

Mr. Curtin concluded this part of the discussion by stating that district leaders can expect to receive more information related to the CD in the next few weeks. He noted that DESE is intentional in trying not to overload superintendents during this busy time of year, but that time is of the essence, so it is important to get information out to districts as soon as possible.

Ms. Gonzales thanked the Council for their continued input on these matters.

**Planning for SY2025-2026**

Ms. Gonzales led a discussion about Council meetings in the 2025-2026 school year, stating that DESE will develop a charge for the Council’s upcoming work in consultation with DESE’s new Commissioner. She reminded the Council that the Council’s scope of work is defined in regulation, but that DESE will make sure the upcoming year’s charge is aligned with the anticipated work this year. Ms. Gonzales then stated that at the fall 2025 meeting, DESE would like to review the norms that guide the Council’s meeting conversations. She notes the norms were developed a while ago, and while still sound, DESE would like to be sure Council norms align with priorities and the meeting format. Ms. Gonzales stated she would work with Co-Chair Icin this summer to plan the fall meeting. She urged the council to please let DESE or Co-Chair Icin know of any suggestions.

Regarding the 2025-2026 AAAC meeting format, Ms. Gonzales stated that DESE is allowed to continue hosting public meetings virtually through June 2027 as approved by the state legislature. Ms. Gonzales then asked the Council about their preferences and comfort regarding AAAC meeting formats, noting that hybrid meetings are not feasible at this time.

Questions, comments, and feedback from individual Council members:

* Virtual meetings can guarantee more regular participation – a lot of time is saved by not having to commute
* It is much easier to participate virtually, even with the potential disadvantage of disrupting group dynamics
* There is a benefit to having at least 1 in-person meeting per year so members can get to know each other a bit better and have more collegial interactions
* Some Council members note no strong opinions either way
* Would it be possible to meet the incoming commissioner or other DESE stakeholders at an in-person meeting?

Ms. Gonzales stated DESE would take this feedback into consideration while planning for the next meeting year, and that she will make sure there is ample notice if there is an in-person option in a location that is convenient for most. She explained that DESE is limited in where to procure meeting space and that she is open to feedback on in-person meeting locations.

**Next Steps and Closing**

Ms. Gonzales thanked the Council for a thoughtful discussion today, for their participation in all Council conversations this year, and for making time for these meetings. She stated she anticipates a fair bit to discuss at the next meeting, including ongoing updates and discussions regarding the accountability system (review work, potential system changes, etc.) as well as DESE’s accountability and assistance office structure and roles. Ms. Gonzales explained that the Council will add another Co-Chair in the fall, and that the Co-Chairs will assist DESE with figuring out the Council’s meeting cadence and upcoming meeting agendas. Dr. Charmie Curry, DESE’s Associate Commissioner of the Statewide System of Support, also thanked the Council for their work this year and wished members a restful and enjoyable summer. Council Co-Chair Barish Icin thanked Council members for their time and input, and adjourned the meeting to close at 10:59 a.m.