Summary of Public Outreach on Draft Massachusetts ESSA Plan: Public Comment Period, February 7 - March 9, 2017

After nearly a year of public outreach, which included several rounds of focus groups, special meetings, public forums, phone calls, and other engagements, ESE drew up a draft of an accountability plan required under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and officially solicited public comment on it from February 7 through March 9, 2017. During this official public comment period, ESE received scores of letters, postcards, phone calls, and emails, along with over 1,000 responses to an online survey. The Department also continued to hold meetings with key stakeholders to capture their good thinking in person. The following synthesis represents the feedback that the agency received during the official public comment period. The Department extends its sincere gratitude to all of the people who engaged with the agency on this important matter.

# The Department's Priorities

The four focus areas laid out in the draft plan received strong support from respondents. When asked to what degree these topics should be special priorities or focus areas, a majority of the 1,039 survey respondents[[1]](#footnote-1) strongly agreed with all four.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly  Agree | Somewhat Agree | Somewhat Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| Early grades literacy | 78.8% | 17.3% | 2.3% | 1.6% |
| Additional supports for students who have historically struggled to attain proficiency | 74.7% | 20.2% | 2.9% | 2.2% |
| High quality pathways to educational and career opportunities after secondary school | 66.7% | 27.3% | 4.6% | 1.3% |
| Middle grades math | 60.1% | 35.5% | 2.9% | 1.4% |

# Providing access to a well-rounded curriculum

Respondents frequently and consistently expressed their strong desire for students to receive a well-rounded education. Generally, they expressed that ESSA presents an opportunity for the state and local school districts to strengthen more areas of the curriculum so that the needs of the whole student are addressed. Whether through the inclusion of a metric in the accountability system or specific programming funded through federal entitlement grants, most respondents wanted the ESSA plan to direct attention, resources, and supports for all parts of a well-rounded curriculum. Though not an exclusive list, ESE received responses for the following elements of such a curriculum during the public comment period: (They are sorted here by volume of responses to the open response items on the survey.).

## *Physical, Health, and Wellness Education*

In approximately 48 percent of the open response items on the survey, respondents made the case that improving students’ physical health should be a priority, given the research on the links between a healthy, active lifestyles and student achievement, as well as concerns about the opioid crisis and the growing childhood obesity epidemic. Despite the fact that physical education for each student in every grade is a statutory requirement in Massachusetts, many respondents pointed out that this state law is rarely enforced and that the inclusion of physical and health education in the ESSA plan, especially under the Social-Emotional Learning, Health, and Safety strategy, would help reinforce that such programming is essential for all students and that a student’s ability to self-manage their health has long-term benefits. Respondents also noted that ESSA should provide resources and opportunities for both in-school and out-of-school programs that promote physical fitness and health.

## *Arts Education*

In over 24 percent of the open response items on the survey, as well as in dozens of letters, emails, and Pantone color swatch postcards, respondents made the case that access to the arts was a fundamental component of the humanities and a critical piece of becoming a well-rounded citizen. Many asked that ESE include access to the arts both as an accountability measure, as it was presented in the draft plan, and as an area where the Commonwealth could enhance its programming (specifically among its Title IV programs, but also in professional development programs such as Title IIA). Some respondents also cited evidence that shows the positive effects of arts education in improving student engagement and corresponding academic improvement in English language arts and mathematics. It is important to note, however, that while no respondents disagreed with the idea of broadening students’ access to the arts, a few expressed a specific concern about including access to the arts as an accountability measure. Their argument was that certain specialized schools with an intentionally narrow program of study, or where arts is “baked into” other courses within the general curriculum, might be adversely impacted by such an accountability measure and that the state ought to consider publicly reporting on student access to the arts rather than using such a measure as part of a formal accountability system.

## *Career and Technical Education*

In over 5 percent of open response survey items, respondents expressed a desire for ESSA programs to address, either through career and technical education (CTE) programming, personalized learning programming, or through a metric in the accountability system, the importance of building career pathways throughout the K-12 system. As part of the broader push for a well-rounded curriculum, respondents from both the education and business sectors would like to see ESSA incentivize career-readiness skills being part of schools' general, accepted curriculum rather than existing in a separate niche area of the curriculum.

## *Computer Science Education*

In over 5 percent of open response survey items, respondents wrote about the importance of computer science and advanced math skills in the current economy. Respondents wanted to ensure that ESSA provided more opportunities to build upon the momentum established with Massachusetts’ new digital literacy and computer science standards and expand science, technology, engineering and mathematics offerings in the context of a well-rounded curriculum.

## *Gifted and Talented Education*

In over 5 percent of open response survey items, respondents lamented the dearth of opportunities for gifted and talented students in the Commonwealth and expressed hope that ESSA could provide resources and/or incentives to develop high-quality talented and gifted programming in districts. The Department heard concerns expressed on behalf of talented and gifted students, as well as those who are profoundly gifted.

## *Library and Media Education*

In approximately 2 percent of open response survey items, respondents stated that they would like each student to have access to a library and a professional librarian and that the ESSA plan ought to provide resources and/or incentives for high-quality libraries and media centers.

## *Civics Education*

In approximately 1 percent of open response survey items, respondents discussed the importance of including civics education, financial literacy, and media literacy as part of a well-rounded curriculum and said that ESSA could provide opportunities for schools and districts to focus on those areas.

# Providing supports to students who have historically struggled to reach grade-level proficiency

Respondents offered comments on behalf of a wide range of student groups, all of which have historically struggled to reach grade-level proficiency. Below is a summary of many of the concerns and comments the agency received on behalf of said groups.

## *English Learner Education*

Many respondents expressed concerns that the state plan needs to focus more on providing supports so that all English learners attain proficiency in all domains of English literacy. Some respondents made the case that low proficiency English learners should be exempt from all state testing. Others argued that a greater emphasis should be placed on growth and progress for English learners and cautioned against putting too much weight on attainment, especially for those students who are new to the language.

## *Special Education*

Respondents advocating for more supports for students with disabilities gave feedback on the increasing number of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities and said that ESSA provides an opportunity to help both educators and students address those students' learning needs. Feedback was also nearly universal that the Commonwealth should continue to report on the special education subgroup and take advantage of the flexibility in ESSA that allows states to also report on those students who formerly qualified for special education services.

## *Education for Minority Populations*

The agency engaged in conversations with a number of groups from minority populations. All were strong proponents of the provision in ESSA to continue to report on proficiency and growth by racial and ethnic group so that a spotlight is shone on their progress. Representatives of the Hispanic/Latino community expressed concerns about the needs of undocumented and first-generation families who hope ESSA will result in their receiving clearer and more digestible information about the quality of education their students are receiving. Representatives of the African-American community expressed support for the continuation of holding all students and educators to high standards. The Native American community expressed enthusiasm about new provisions in ESSA that enable closer partnerships between tribal education agencies and state education agencies, but representatives of that community also expressed concerns about the stresses of colliding cultures, inequities in the curriculum, and providing the right kinds of social/emotional/behavior supports for their student population.

# Modifications to the Accountability System

The survey results show that many of the indicators that were proposed in the draft plan were strongly supported by respondents to the survey. This is consistent with the information that the agency gathered throughout the ESSA consultation process.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly support | Somewhat support | Somewhat oppose | Strongly oppose |
| Student access to the arts | 76.0% | 20.1% | 2.7% | 1.1% |
| Student access to a broad curriculum | 68.6% | 27.8% | 2.3% | 1.3% |
| Student access to advanced coursework | 60.6% | 35.3% | 3.0% | 1.1% |
| School climate and culture (as measured by a student survey) | 54.8% | 32.0% | 9.4% | 3.8% |
| Chronic absenteeism | 43.3% | 39.2% | 12.2% | 5.3% |
| 9th grade course passing rates | 34.8% | 49.4% | 12.5% | 3.3% |

When asked to what degree they supported the following statements about the proposed accountability system, respondents were generally in favor of all the statements made:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly support | Somewhat support | Somewhat oppose | Strongly oppose |
| Accountability status for a district should be determined by the performance of all of its students taken together, rather than by the performance of its weakest school. | 49.3% | 36.5% | 9.6% | 4.5% |
| In aiming to provide a multidimensional picture about school performance, the proposed system strikes a good balance between too few and too many data elements. | 21.7% | 56.3% | 16.3% | 5.7% |
| The proposed system includes the right amount of indicators related to outcomes (e.g., student academic attainment, high school graduation). | 23.1% | 53.8% | 16.4% | 6.7% |
| The proposed system includes the right amount of indicators related to inputs (e.g., access to arts or advanced courses). | 31.1% | 42.9% | 17.4% | 8.6% |

With respect to the accountability system in general, respondents offered a wide range of perspectives on what ought to be modified. Some offered that the proposed system is overly complex, difficult for families and educators alike to comprehend, and does not accurately or fairly measure school quality. Some argued for a five-month delay in submitting the plan to the federal government and/or a two-year delay in implementing the accountability system ratings to allow for the Commonwealth’s transitions to both ESSA and to a new, next-generation MCAS. Others had an opposing point of view, contending that the proposed system ought to be enacted immediately and include even more measures, such as the extent to which exclusionary discipline practices are used, more nuanced and advanced measures of school climate and culture (such as family and community involvement), and more specific measures related to academically advanced pathways. However, almost all respondents agreed that an accountability system in general is an important part of the state’s role in improving the education system; the challenge is in getting all of the components right to arrive at what’s best for all students.

# Strengthening Transitions between K-12 and Early Education

Many respondents wanted to see a clearer and more pronounced narrative around collaboration between K-12 and early education. Throughout the plan, these stakeholders were looking for a clearer vision across state agencies about greater integration for the critical transitions that students make early in their lives. Some respondents expressed the need for more definition around transition activities (such as shared K-12 and early education professional development, shared assessment data, curriculum alignment, summer learning programs, etc.). Respondents expressed hope that the new ESSA provisions that require coordination of K-12 and Head Start, as well as other specific provisions, will enable smoother transitions and more high-quality opportunities for young children.

# Provisions related to non-public schools

A number of respondents expressed concern that, aside from a formal assurance provided in the form of a checkbox, the draft report did not adequately address the new provisions in ESSA related to funding non-public (private, parochial, etc.) schools and opportunities for professional staff to engage in equitable professional learning activities alongside public sector colleagues. Many of these respondents believe that ESSA, more than any federal education legislation ever has, extends the notion of equitable access to high-quality education for all students, public and private, and that it calls for a partnership between the public and private sectors to provide for the needs of all students.

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1. 52 percent educators, 29 percent concerned citizens, 28 percent parents, 16 percent administrators, 10 percent advocacy groups, 1 percent students (respondent categories do not add up to 100 percent because respondents were permitted to select multiple roles (such as teacher and parent) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)