**Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education**

# Commissioner Jeffrey C. Riley

# Testimony

# Joint Committee on Education Oversight Hearing

# October 27, 2020

Chair Lewis, Chair Peisch, and members of the Joint Committee on Education, thank you for the opportunity to testify about the status of K-12 education during the COVID-19 pandemic, and DESE’s work to support in-person and remote learning for students across the Commonwealth.

For the record, my name is Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education.

As schools reopen this fall, our priority has remained the health and well-being of our students and staff. We know, and the American Academy of Pediatrics has been clear, that there are incredible consequences when kids are isolated and not in school. We have seen a rise in mental health issues as well regression in skill development for many kids, particularly those with special needs. Since I last testified before this Committee on May 13, DESE has made significant progress providing schools and districts with the guidance and resources necessary to bring as many students as possible back to school safely. This includes providing funding and technical support to schools and districts and expanding flexibilities and services to district and municipal leaders to help meet their individual community needs.

Most students, families, and schools have responded positively to the return to in-person learning. Despite facing challenges, school leaders using either full-time in-person or in hybrid models overwhelmingly report to us that with the planning, safety measures, and training they put in place using DESE’s guidance, they have seen a successful return to school buildings. DESE further supported summer planning efforts by allowing districts and school to use an extra 10 days this year for planning and training.

Based on parent feedback to DESE, most families who are participating in learning models that include in-person instruction prefer that opportunity. We have asked districts to prioritize family engagement and are in constant communication with district administrators to determine areas in which we can be of assistance. We continue working with districts that are providing remote instruction to determine when they will transition to a full in-person or hybrid model.

**Student, School, and District Fiscal Relief**

Throughout late spring and summer, districts have received substantial infusions of additional funding. Districts also received purchasing assistance to support technology needs and PPE, fill transportation gaps, establish remote learning partnerships, and hire additional staff, to safely reopen schools for in-person instruction. This funding has included:

* $202 million from the federal Coronavirus Relief Fund ([CvRF](http://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2021/102/))
* $193.8 million from the federal Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief Fund ([ESSER](http://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2021/113/)).
* DESE provided $33 million in matching federally funded Remote Learning Technology Essentials Grants ([RLTE](http://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2021/117-118/)) in August, and
* $5 million in Secondary School Virtual Course Access Grants

As the school year progresses, we hope to provide more resources to districts through ongoing work with state and federal leaders.

Students and families have received direct support through emergency pandemic SNAP benefits (known as P-EBT) through a data collaboration between the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and DESE. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act allowed states to request special waivers from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to establish P-EBT. DTA and DESE issued P-EBT benefits in spring 2020 to cover school closures in March through June, bringing $207 million to more than 522,000 students across the state. More recently, DTA and DESE received approval from the USDA in September to issue more P-EBT benefits.

P-EBT benefits also supplement the school and community grab-and-go meal sites that are still available this year through a successful waiver application by DESE that USDA that was granted at the beginning of October. Students can get free meals at hundreds of locations throughout the state with no registration or ID required. These free meals will be available through the end of the 2020-2021 school year.

**Learning Models**

In July, DESE asked districts to develop a school reopening plan that included three learning models: fully in-person, hybrid, and fully remote. Based on the advice of medical professionals, we outlined safety measures that would help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and urged districts to bring as many students back to in-person learning as possible, especially students in the most vulnerable populations, including students with disabilities, English learners, and homeless students. This guidance was endorsed by the Massachusetts Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Districts submitted their preliminary plans to us by July 31. DESE provided rapid feedback on these plans and also worked to quickly release guidance on interpreting DPH health metrics after the state began providing a color-coded metric to each community. As you know, we have asked districts to align their local learning model to this color-coded metric and to monitor three weeks of reports before making changes to learning plans for schools. DESE produced as much guidance on reopening topics as possible by mid-August, so that schools and districts were well-positioned for a strong reopening in mid-September.

Last week, the Command Center updated the DPH health metric report to provide further clarification around municipality’s risk level. The update points out that “the municipality’s risk level color will be identified with an asterisk if one of these identified institutions has more than 10 cases and results in 30% of their total cases over the past 14 days.” Adding this identification acknowledges the impact of a particular institution or facility on the community’s case count and provides valuable information for local leaders to consider when implementing policies in their community.  
  
**In addition, the COVID Command Center recently noted that districts and schools currently open for in-person instruction are encouraged to remain open even if their local community is designated as red, so long as there is no evidence of COVID-19 transmission in the schools**

We have collected district and school level information for the learning model they are using, through a survey tool that we have asked districts to regularly update as they shift their learning model based on their DPH health metric designation. Currently, approximately 80 percent of Massachusetts school districts are engaged in full in-person or hybrid instruction.

To further support students, families, and teachers, we are providing diagnostic assessments at no cost to schools through a DESE contract for schools and districts that do not already have an assessment in place. These tools are designed to have results communicated quickly for effective use by schools and parents to address students’ areas of need. By conducting diagnostic assessments this fall and throughout the school year, schools can address learning gaps and accelerate students’ progress. At this time, we are preparing for the statewide assessment, MCAS, to be administered in spring 2021, as the federal government has not given indication of any waivers for the assessment at this time.

The Department is offering other guidance and support for remote and hybrid learning, including instructional support networks for educators to exchange best practices and consult with each other during the school year. These instructional support networks include, for example: math, science, literacy, and history/social science district leaders, English Learner directors, and educators who select and evaluate curriculum materials, among many others.

DESE has also released a remote teaching and learning module series, interactive professional learning modules that define best practices for remote teaching and learning and provide tools to support instruction in this context. In addition, DESE has provided updated resources on educator evaluation, with practical tools to help streamline and focus the evaluation process in 2020-2021. And to support the pipeline of educators, DESE is continuing to provide resources and guidance to educator preparation programs across the state.

For the 2020-2021 school year, DESE has contracted with LearnLaunch to provide targeted training, resources, and support to district and school leaders in developing and implementing remote learning programs. LearnLaunch is providing weekly content-specific workshops free of charge to any Massachusetts educator in areas such as ensuring equitable access and supporting parents, and is also providing more tailored support to selected schools and districts.

**School and District Support**

In just a few months, DESE has provided 25 detailed guidance documents, totaling over 225 pages, to schools and districts to promote continuity of K-12 teaching and learning in these unprecedented circumstances and will continue to update or issue new guidance as necessary. As DESE now pivots from guidance development to implementation support for districts reopening their schools, we are focusing on three main areas: operational and technical assistance, quality instruction monitoring in school year 2020-2021, and data collection and reporting.

Following the creation of the Return-to-School Working Group last spring that included key stakeholders and public health experts, DESE established a nimble in-house operational support system to assist districts with reopening schools. Support includes hands-on technical assistance, a rapid response team with a hotline for positive case reporting, partnerships with technology and internet providers to fill gaps quickly, and a Reopening K-12 center to offer individual responses to questions from schools, teachers, and parents. We plan to be responsive to districts’ needs throughout the likely changing environment of the pandemic emergency and will modify these systems as necessary.

Regarding quality instruction assurance, DESE’s ongoing review of school reopening plans resulted in my requesting more details from 16 districts in communities designated “green” or “gray” for a few weeks and that were providing remote-only instruction about when students will return to classrooms in at least a hybrid learning model. These requests have resulted in a renewed commitment by many districts to provide as much in-person instruction as is safely possible. I am certain that the changes these districts employ will result in better outcomes for their students and families. The Department continues to review districts’ learning models to promote effective and equitable learning opportunities for all students during the constraints of the pandemic.

A focus throughout this school year is the Commonwealth’s student learning time requirements,recognizing that instructional time is an essential resource for students. DESE is providing guidance on how districts can meet the requirements using best practices across learning models, with accountability for required structured learning time, grading policies, and curricula aligned to state standards.

Data collection during this time is of prime importance to determine the ongoing needs students and schools are facing, what safety considerations must be examined, and what is working well at the state level and locally. Because clear data reporting allows schools and districts to reopen with as much information as possible, DESE has already asked districts to report to us positive cases of students and staff who have been in a district school building within seven days of the positive result. DESE reports the data, consistent with privacy protections, by posting the number of positive cases weekly on our website. DESE is also collecting data on the high needs, special education, homeless, and English learner students who are learning in fully remote models and overall on how many students are enrolled in public schools and in what learning model they are participating.

**Technology**

Access to technology for all students has been of urgent importance since schools were closed in March. Before the pandemic, DESE was encouraging and supporting schools in the state to be well equipped with technology infrastructure and devices, driven in part by our phased-in approach to a computer-based MCAS. It was, and is, our belief that all students require computer literacy for successful outcomes after graduation. However, school-based internet access and devices were not a sufficient for students’ needs during the unprecedented spring shutdown and the remote instruction that followed. Within a week of school shutdowns, DESE established a Remote Learning Technology Essentials team to address the very real challenges that districts were experiencing.

The Department quickly collected a technology use and needs survey from districts, charter schools, and collaboratives in the spring to identify gaps. We projected that 15 percent of students lacked access to individual devices such as Chromebooks, laptops, or tablets, and 8 percent of students did not have access to internet at home. In our urban centers, including Gateway Cities that serve a higher number of students of color and low-income families, the need was greater at approximately 25 percent for devices and 18 percent for internet access. The cost to address these gaps was estimated to be $50 million statewide.

To support schools and districts in providing every student with access to more robust remote learning opportunities for the 2020-2021 school year, DESE established a Remote Learning Technology Essentials grant program. This grant awarded nearly $33 million in federal funds to 252 districts and charter schools to supplement the nearly $40 million they had collectively spent on student technology since March 15. Funding for this grant was prioritized to address the unmet technology needs of students in communities with fewer financial resources, in line with our Chapter 70 formula. These grants supplemented the already significant funding DESE allocated to districts this summer, which districts could also use to cover technology needs.

In July, DESE became aware that worldwide supply chain challenges were having an impact on Chromebook orders, and we assisted districts experiencing significant delays in deliveries by purchasing nearly 22,000 Chromebooks with expedited shipping through HP. These arrived by the first week of October, weeks and even months before districts were expecting their orders to arrive. We will be conducting an updated technology survey to better quantify the outcomes of these efforts in terms of student connectivity. Based on our current understanding, we are confident that student access to devices and internet has dramatically improved since the spring.

Moving forward, we will continue to work closely with districts and their technology teams to address near-term needs, and further support the integrated use of technology beyond the pandemic.

**Students and Families**

At the core of our response as a state education agency is the well-being of our students, and by extension, their families. We have strengthened our connections with students’ parents and guardians in order to help meet students’ needs. One part of this initiative is our partnership with Learning Heroes to promote parent and student engagement with DESE and local school districts. Focus groups led by Learning Heroes confirmed that strong communication builds trust and that families are active and engaged, eager to partner with teachers, and want accurate information to make the best decisions for their children. In addition to our own efforts to develop informative FAQs for families, provide translation services for districts, and create a designated family page on our website, this partnership has enabled us to provide teachers, schools, and districts with support on clear, family-friendly communications. We have also maintained a specific email address at DESE for parents and guardians to contact us with concerns.

To address parents’ and teachers’ concerns around virus spread in schools, DESE has worked with DPH to provide health and safety guidance and rapid mobile testing for schools that experience a cluster of positive COVID-19 cases. In addition, the state’s application for virus tests to be used in schools will soon allow us to distribute rapid virus tests for symptomatic students and staff, which will help to more quickly determine and isolate individual cases in schools.

As in other states and countries, Massachusetts schools have seen relatively low positive cases as compared to their communities at large. Districts have carefully implemented safety protocols developed by DESE and DPH in consultation with experts in infectious diseases and epidemiology, and these appear to have had a significant positive effect on school safety for staff and students. On the most recent weekly positive COVID-19 cases in schools report, Massachusetts reported about 202 positive student and staff cases in schools statewide. For context, out of 1,845 school buildings in the state, 1,400 are open for some form of in-person instruction and 425,000 students out of 905,000 are learning in school at least part-time. Due to districts’ success so far in keeping positive cases low, DESE strongly recommends that districts use several weeks of community health metric data before shifting to a model of instruction that includes less in-person instruction, especially for the most vulnerable students. We will continue to monitor the latest COVID-19 research and issue updates to health and safety guidance as appropriate, in collaboration with DESE’s medical advisors, DPH, and the Governor’s COVID-19 Command Center.

**Students with Disabilities**

Of particular concern to DESE is the provision of district and school services for students with disabilities. Despite the efforts that schools and districts made to deliver instruction and services remotely in the spring, students may show signs of regression, have returned to school with greater gaps in their learning than is typically experienced over the summer, or have experienced trauma during this emergency. To mitigate the impact of these challenges, students may need general education recovery support to regain lost skills and knowledge. Some recovery support may be provided to students through core instruction, and other support may be available through the school’s or district’s Tiered System of Support or the District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP). For students with disabilities, access to recovery support does not need to be identified by the IEP Team but rather is made available to them the same way that it may be available to other students.

DESE’s special education guidance states that, in cases where recovery supports do not adequately address the student’s needs, DESE recommends prioritizing the scheduling of IEP meetings to discuss COVID Compensatory Services (CCS). This prioritization includes preschool-aged students, students with complex and significant needs, and students who turned 22 during the suspension of in-person education or who will turn 22 during the first three months of the 2020-21 school year, and whose transition programs were interrupted or suspended before they aged out.

The Department strongly encourages districts to maintain close, productive relationships with adult agencies and providers and to invite representatives of these entities to IEP meetings, as required by federal regulation, to meet each individual student’s needs. Through our guidance, we recommend that this approach is the most effective way to provide the continuity of support that students need to successfully transition to adult life. Districts should seek to understand agency services to the greatest extent possible and to serve as a connector and source of information for students and families.

During IEP meetings, districts and adult agency personnel have the opportunity to agree on what services are required to meet the needs of each student, how services will be delivered, who will be responsible for providing each of the services, and determine who is responsible for funding different portions of the services. To help agency staff gain a better understanding of students, familiarize students with new faces, and improve school personnel’s understanding of agency services, districts can invite their adult agency counterparts to participate in remote or in-person classes, programming, or meetings, and educators can participate in remote or in-person adult agency programming or meetings.

The Department has also provided guidance on sources of funding to provide services for these students. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs has stated that IDEA Part B funds may be used to fund CCS even if the student has reached 22, the state’s maximum age of special education eligibility. This is a unique circumstance due to the COVID-19 pandemic and is limited only to students who reached or will reach their 22nd birthday between March 17 and December 23, 2020 and who are determined to need CCS. Districts may also use ESSER (CARES Act) funds for this purpose. In addition, the Department is not aware of any prohibition on the use of local and/or state funds to cover the expense of necessary CCS, with the exception of Circuit Breaker reimbursement. Because state law reserves Circuit Breaker funds for “eligible” students, and students’ eligibility is not extended past their 22nd birthday, Circuit Breaker funds may not be used for CCS.

DESE continues to support special education leaders by providing bimonthly webinars and question-and-answer sessions to address the reopening of schools and districts as well as improving learning opportunities for students with disabilities.

**2020-2021 School Year**

To provide ongoing COVID-19 response and support for districts and schools throughout this school year, DESE will:

* monitor the effectiveness of the DESE Rapid Response Help Center to support districts and schools and adjust as necessary,
* monitor the latest COVID-19 research and issue updates to health and safety guidance,
* strongly encourage districts to align their learning model to DPH COVID-19 health metrics with a focus on prioritizing in-person learning whenever it is safe to do so,
* promote and monitor adherence to student learning time requirements,
* conduct reviews and audits where appropriate to identify best practices and assess the quality of remote and hybrid learning models so we can promote effective practices and sound decision-making regarding which model districts are implementing within their schools, and
* continue ongoing two-way communication with superintendents and other key stakeholders to evaluate areas where DESE can provide support.

Fundamentally, the support DESE provides to districts and schools is designed to close opportunity gaps for students. With that goal in the forefront, this school year DESE will work with districts and schools to:

* plan and support new programming for summer 2021 to accelerate student learning using the Acceleration Academies model,
* promote improved special education outcomes through the new IEP process,
* support districts to employ the new Interactive Blueprint for English learners,
* strengthen interpretation and translation services for students’ parents and guardians, to promote family engagement in education, and
* provide direct support for additional districts requiring assistance.

In addition, we remain committed to providing all students across the Commonwealth with equitable, high-quality learning opportunities and to close opportunity gaps, even in the face of pandemic challenges. Core DESE initiatives for the upcoming year include:

* continuing our ongoing deeper learning pilot, inaugurated last year with the first cohort of the Kaleidoscope Collective for Learning
* expanding programs to support diversification of the administrator and educator workforce and promote culturally responsive teaching through [Influence 100 and InSPIRED fellowships](http://www.doe.mass.edu/teach/diversity.html) and professional development through the Diversity Network – a cross-section of school districts, educator preparation programs, and non-profit organizations focused on educator diversification
* advancing early literacy through the new Mass Literacy Guide, a compilation of evidence-based information and resources for literacy in grades preK-3, in connection with a major effort to promote evidence-based literacy instruction in districts and schools.
  + DESE will administer two significant grants to promote early literacy: $8.5 million for early literacy tutoring will be allocated as part of the Governor’s coronavirus relief support (GEER fund) and a $19.98 million federal grant that DESE secured to design and implement a new intensive district and school literacy support program to support literacy in grades preK-12 over five years and expand literacy in pre-kindergarten.
* extending the early college program in collaboration with the Early College Joint Committee, including establishing performance standards for what constitutes high-quality early college programs, increasing high-quality programs through the designation process, and expanding the number of early college designated sites offering 30+ credits.

DESE shares this committee’s commitment to nurture and support a high-quality K-12 public education system that prepares each and every student for success. Our mission to sustain and expand educational opportunities and close gaps is more vital now than ever. Your partnership during this unprecedented state of emergency to support our students, families, and educators has been central to our progress so far. I look forward to our ongoing collaboration for the benefit of students.