*****Massachusetts Department of***

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

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| Jeffrey C. Riley  *Commissioner* |  |

# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner |
| **Date:** | November 13, 2020 |
| **Subject:** | Update on Gifted Education in Massachusetts |

This memorandum updates the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) on initiatives undertaken by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) to support gifted and talented education in the Commonwealth.

On August 20, 2019, I submitted to the Legislature the report, *Gifted Education in Massachusetts: A Practice and Policy Review,* by Dr. Dana Ansel. The report highlighted that Massachusetts is an outlier among the states, lacking a common definition, identification process, or explicit mandate to districts to identify and serve gifted students. The report further found an urgent need for adequate programming and supports for gifted students of color. Specifically, the report found that more than three-quarters of Black and Hispanic students identified as academically advanced in 3rd grade are no longer in the top decile by 6th grade. The report referred to this finding as “the excellence gap.”

To address the findings in the report, I decided to reconstitute the Board’s Gifted and Talented Education Advisory Council and to pilot a summer program designed to specifically address the excellence gap. This memo updates the Board on these actions.

**Gifted and Talented Education Advisory Council**

The Gifted and Talented Education Advisory Council advises the Commissioner and the Board on meeting the special educational needs of students who are academically advanced (gifted and talented) and on issues concerning academically advanced education in the Commonwealth. Made up of parents, educators, content experts, and community representatives, the Council represents a variety of interests and perspectives that support challenging learning opportunities for students (Council members listed below). The Council is reviewing research, best practices, models of specific programming and will make recommendations on how Massachusetts can better meet the needs of academically advanced students and students that are capable of advanced work but need more challenging content. Specifically, the Council is currently focused on:

* Reviewing and proposing definitions of giftedness and advanced achievement
* Determining effective ways to collect data and expand research on gifted students;
* Examining best practices of other states and districts.

The Council understands the need for special focus on the “excellence gap” identified in the report described above. As a result, the Council has spent considerable time interrogating what is meant by “high potential,” while exploring how systemic barriers have limited access to educational opportunities for many lower income students and students of color capable of advanced school work. The Council is committed to making recommendations that support equity, especially racial equity, in a real and meaningful way.

The Council anticipates bringing forward to the Commissioner and the Board a recommendation for a state definition of advanced achievement and giftedness, policy considerations for student acceleration, and examples of successful models of programming that districts can review to gain a better understanding of initiatives that address the needs of these students.

***The Biggest Winner Math Challenge* Pilot Program**

A specific recommendation from the report was to “track and report on the excellence gap; identify and implement strategies to close it.” To explore specific gap-closing strategies, the Department partnered with the group Ed Inquiry this summer to pilot a program entitled *The Biggest Winner Math Challenge*. Based on Tyrone Mowatt’s (former chair of the Gifted and Talented Education Council) previous work in New Orleans, the pilot offered advanced students from across the Commonwealth a month-long experience where their skills in math were challenged, their talents recognized as they were encouraged to explore math concepts within a community of similar learners and highly engaged math teachers of color.

The pilot program had an enrollment of 116 participants in grades 5 through 7. Students were selected based on a mix of historical MCAS scores, growth scores, district composition, and other objective factors. The program ran for three days per week, July 29 through August 21, with students receiving between 60 and 90 minutes of teacher-led remote instruction each session. Students were also taught how to use technology for self paced learning in hope they would take this exposure with them when they returned to school in the fall.

Led by highly engaged teachers of color acting as team leaders, students worked together to explore real-world issues promoting deeper learning that brought relevance to math they had previously learned. For example, each student was tasked with buying a car, which required researching and explaining their choice, and understanding all the facets of the mathematics involved in the selection and purchase. The objective was to re-engage, challenge, and motivate advanced learners while providing them with a sense of community working with peers from across the Commonwealth.

An important aspect of the pilot design was the involvement of math teachers of color to act as team leaders for students of color, which also created an opportunity for these educators to find authentic support, camaraderie, and training on deeper learning and remote instruction.

**STEM Advanced Placement Access Expansion Opportunity Grant**

It is worth noting that the Department recently was awarded the STEM Advanced Placement Access Expansion Opportunity grantfrom the US Department of Education. The grant totals $9 million over five years. It will expand access for students, particularly students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities, to Advanced Placement (AP) coursework in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), and particularly Computer Science. This initiative expands our ability to address the “excellence gap.”

Senior Associate Commissioner Ventura Rodriguez, Dr. Victoria Greer, chair of the Gifted and Talented Advisory Council, and Tyrone Mowatt, Founder of Ed Inquiry, will be at the November Board meeting to address the Board and answer questions.

**Gifted and Talented Education Advisory Council Membership**

| **Members** | **Title** | **Institution** |
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| Meena Bharath | School Committee Member | Hopkinton Public Schools |
| Katharina Elbert (Co-Chair) | Advocate | Massachusetts Association for Gifted Education |
| Dr. Victoria L. Greer (Chair) | Educator |  |
| Kenya Guerra | Parent | Hampden County |
| Betsy McCoach | Professor | University of Connecticut |
| Yaileen Moscat | Student | Abbott Academy, Lawrence |
| Tyrone Mowatt | Founder | Ed Inquiry |
| Takeru Nagayoshi | Teacher of the Year | New Bedford Public Schools |
| Marty O'Shea | Superintendent | Longmeadow Public Schools |
| Courtney Perdios | Parent | Quincy Public Schools |
| Magalie Pinney | Parent | Brockton Public Schools |
| Donna Potter-Astion | Enrichment and Academically Advanced Specialist | Berkshire Hills Regional School District |
| MaryGrace Stewart | President | Massachusetts Association for Gifted Education |
| Lance Sun | Coordinator of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion | The Sage School |
| Heny Taraz | Challenge Lead Teacher | Waltham Public Schools |
| Myriam Ulloa-Skolnick | Principal | John R. Fausey Elementary, West Springfield |