*****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:**  | January 15, 2021  |
| **Subject:** | Update on COVID-19 Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families  |

Since our meeting on December 15, 2020, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE/Department) has continued to inform districts of new developments related to COVID-19 and to support schools and districts as they serve students during the pandemic.

Following the Board’s action on December 15, DESE informed districts of the Student Learning Time amendments establishing minimum levels for live instruction and synchronous instruction in hybrid and remote learning models. The requirements will take effect on January 19. To help districts increase the amount of live instruction, the [December 18 guidance](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/slt-regulations-guide.docx) *(download)* includes several strategies, and on January 11, we released [profiles of districts](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/remote-learning/simultaneous-instruction.docx) *(download)* that use simultaneous instruction in hybrid models. As noted in the December Board memo, we believe that approximately two-thirds of districts are already meeting the new requirements.

The new learning time requirements will help combat student isolation, and we have also released an updated document on [promoting student engagement, learning, well-being, and safety during remote and hybrid learning](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/promoting-wellbeing.docx) *(download)*.

On December 16, Massachusetts became the first state to receive federal approval to issue [Pandemic EBT benefits (P-EBT) for the rest of the 2020-2021 school year](https://www.mass.gov/news/massachusetts-is-first-state-in-nation-to-gain-federal-approval-to-continue-pandemic-ebt). The benefits are designed to cover the cost of missed school meals for more than 500,000 students in remote or hybrid learning environments who would qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The Department of Transitional Assistance estimates P-EBT will bring $40 to $60 million per month in federal dollars into the Commonwealth’s economy.

On January 5, we announced that we would take steps to modify testing and accountability this spring. Some of this will be addressed in an agenda item about the Competency Determination.

The other aspects are:

* **Shortened MCAS testing time** for students in grades 3-8, which will be accomplished by using a sampling approach in which each student will take only a portion of each MCAS assessment in each subject. This modified MCAS administration will preserve the validity and reliability of the test at the school, district, and state levels, and when combined with other data points, this approach will provide meaningful diagnostic data at the individual student level.
* **Accountability Relief: I** will not name or recommend to the Board any new underperforming or chronically underperforming districts or schools in the upcoming school year.

On January 8, Governor Baker, Secretary Peyser, and I unveiled the [pooled testing initiative](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/pooled-testing/) ([press release](https://www.mass.gov/news/baker-polito-administration-announces-pooled-testing-initiative-for-massachusetts-schools)) that will be available within the next month to schools and districts, expanding on a rapid testing initiative that began in schools in December. During an initial six-week period, participating districts and schools will receive the test kits, support from a testing service provider, and the testing software to track results, all at no cost to them. In most cases, districts and schools will administer the tests using existing staff resources. Following the initial six-week launch, districts and schools may continue using pooled testing by purchasing the tests and any other accompanying testing materials, software, or support from a statewide contract using their federal stimulus dollars.

We continue to share information and resources with districts about [Abbott BinaxNOW testing](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/BinaxNOW/), [COVID-19 FAQs](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/faq/), and other topics as more information becomes available.

Attachments:

* P-EBT benefits: [Press release](https://www.mass.gov/news/massachusetts-is-first-state-in-nation-to-gain-federal-approval-to-continue-pandemic-ebt) (December 16, 2020) and [memo](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/cnp/p-ebt-eligibility-guide.docx) *(download)* (December 18, 2020)
* [Assessment and accountability update](https://mcusercontent.com/d8f37d1a90dacd97f207f0b4a/files/2e634106-b104-462f-9c2a-1f3390f35dea/Asssessment_and_Accountability_update_January_5_2021_FINAL_002_.01.pdf) (January 5, 2021)
* [January 11, 2021 Installment of FAQs](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/faq/2021-0111faq-installment.docx) *(download)*
* [Other guidance:](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop.html)
* Supplemental Guidance for Student Groups and School Events for School Year 2020-2021 — August 31, 2020 (Updated January 11, 2021)
* Pooled Testing in K-12 Schools — January 8, 2021
* Updated Deadline for Required Influenza Vaccination: FAQ
*(Available in English, Arabic, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese)*
* Updated List of Immunizations Required for School Entry
* Guidance on Amendments to Student Learning Time Regulations — December 18, 2020
* Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios, July 17, 2020 (Updated September 14, November 23, and December 16, 2020)

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