*****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:**  | May 19, 2022 |
| **Subject:** | Supporting Students’ Mental and Behavioral Health and Wellbeing |

At the May 24, 2022 meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board), Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department or DESE) staff will present an overview and examples of ongoing DESE initiatives to support schools and districts in building and expanding comprehensive, multi-tiered systems of support for students’ mental health and wellbeing.

Work in this realm helps further the Department's [strategic priorities](https://www.doe.mass.edu/research/StrategicPlan-Summary.pdf), including [strengthening social emotional competencies, health, and safety](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/sel/heart-strategy.pdf). This work is also aligned with the ***Holistic Support and Enrichment*** theme described in my report, [Our Way Forward](https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2019/2019-06/item2.docx).

As we heard from district leaders at our April 26, 2022 Board meeting, students as well as teachers, school staff, and families, are coping with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors that can impede learning. Some students who experience mental health challenges may be exhibiting more significant behaviors and could benefit from more intensive supports and interventions.

Our educators are committed to supporting students and increasing their understanding of effective practices. In the 2020 School Health Profiles questionnaire, 93 percent of teachers reported that they worked to increase students’ knowledge about both emotional and mental health, 83 percent worked with mental health or social services staff to support students, 83 percent attended professional development on emotional wellbeing, and 87 percent wanted even more professional development on this topic.

Though major concerns are pervasive, particularly related to anxiety and depression, many students do feel supported and hopeful. The 2019 (pre-pandemic) Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey ([YRBS](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/yrbs/)) results found almost three-quarters of high school students (74 percent) felt there is a teacher or other adult in the school they can turn to for advice. A similar number of students (73 percent) reported they are confident about their future and have plans to complete a post-high school training program such as a vocational program, military, or college. The latest YRBS data (collected in fall 2021) is anticipated to be released soon and will give us additional information about changes since 2019.

Following are some examples of support the Department is providing to help schools and districts strengthen their multi-tiered systems, focus on preventing problems and promoting mental health and wellbeing, and strengthen partnerships to meet students’ varied needs. We will continue to listen to what students, families, and educators are telling us they need and adapt our supports where possible.

**Funding**

* Districts are encouraged to leverage **new and existing federal allocation funds** to support this work (e.g., [ESSER](https://www.doe.mass.edu/federalgrants/esser/) I-III, ARP [I](https://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2022/301/) and [II](https://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2022/302/) for Homeless Children and Youth, Title [IVA](https://www.doe.mass.edu/federalgrants/titleiv-a/default.html)).
* Districts have expanded capacity to address social and emotional learning (SEL) and mental health needs of students and families through [**Student Opportunity Act**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/soa/) plans and amendments.
* More than $11 million is supporting [73 districts and collaboratives](https://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2022/awards/613-311-332.docx) through a competitive state and federally funded [**SEL and Mental Health grant**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2022/613-311-332/) to:
	+ Develop comprehensive, integrated multi-tiered systems for student, family, and educator social-emotional and/or mental health supports;
	+ Build sustainable infrastructure to facilitate integrated coordination between school and community-based services and/or providers; and
	+ Pilot universal mental health screenings for students in grades K-12.

**Professional development (PD), coaching, and other resources**

Many of the Department’s PD offerings are part of series that provide educators and school-
or district-wide teams with support to build sustainable, comprehensive systems for meeting students’ needs at all levels.

* [**PD Series and Standalone Sessions**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/mental-health.html)**:** In partnership with Walker Therapeutic Programs, the Rennie Center, and their respective partners, we have offered nearly **40 sessions** to over **1,100** participants.
* [**Multi- Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Academies**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfss/prof-dev/default.html)**:** The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), SEL/Mental Health, and Systemic Student Support (S3) Academies have engaged **152 teams** with **1,600 team members** in PD and coaching.
* [**Youth Mental Health First Aid**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/ymhfa/) **(YMHFA)**: The Department is offering this training to help teachers and other school staff to recognize, support, and refer to professional mental health services, if needed, students who may be experiencing mental health or substance use challenges and/or may be in crisis. With partners, DESE has delivered and is continuing to schedule with the **56 districts** that have already requested trainings to reach over **2,000** participants this school year and summer.
* [**Promoting Student Engagement, Learning, Wellbeing and Safety — School Year 2021-2022 (Released Summer 2021)**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/promoting-wellbeing.docx)**:** ([Power Point slides](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/mental-health/promoting-wellbeing-slides.pptx) / [eLearning Module](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/mental-health/promoting-wellbeing/index.html)) This document includes guidance and resources to help districts develop, strengthen, and implement comprehensive systems for engaging with students and their families, connecting students and families with additional supports they may need, and promoting student safety. This document also includes racial equity and cultural responsiveness considerations to support districts in promoting the wellbeing of all students.

**Department partnerships with state and local agencies**

Building comprehensive mental health systems is key to coordinating supports and resources for students, families, and school districts. Working with outside partners is critical to address racial inequities, expand access to behavioral and mental health services, and promote student health and wellness. The Department continues to engage with state agencies and local advisory groups to discuss research and identify challenges and promising practices. Examples of these organizations and groups include:

* + State agency partners, including MassHealth and the Departments of Mental Health, Public Health, Children and Families, Early Education and Care, and more
* Advisory groups, such as:
	+ Children’s Behavioral Health Advisory Council
	+ School-Based Behavioral Health Advisory
	+ Safe and Supportive Schools Commission
	+ Coalition of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (representing the Massachusetts School Mental Health Consortium and the Massachusetts associations of school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, and social workers), and more.

Department staff from the Office of Student and Family Support will be at the May 24 Board meeting to present more information and respond to your questions.