# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:**  | Russell D. Johnston, Acting Commissioner |
| **Date:**  | May 14, 2024 |
| **Subject:** | Revision of Massachusetts 2017 ESSA Plan |

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is preparing to file a revision of its 2017 *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) State Plan* with the United States Department of Education (USDE). The revised plan will reflect our current practices, which have evolved over the past several years due to the pandemic and other factors while continuing to meet USDE’s standards.

USDE requires that the updates to the ESSA plan be posted for public comment before submission. DESE will be accepting public comment on our [ESSA website](https://www.doe.mass.edu/federalgrants/essa/stateplan/) (<https://www.doe.mass.edu/federalgrants/essa/stateplan/>) in May and June, and I invite the Board to comment as well. DESE will process the public comment, make additional updates to the plan if needed, and send a final version to Governor Healey for signature before submitting the plan to USDE.

**Recent Historical Context**

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed into law the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), which reauthorized the 1965 *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) and replaced the previous reauthorization of ESEA known as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). Through ESSA, Massachusetts annually receives hundreds of millions of dollars in funding that goes to districts and schools by way of entitlement grants, which are weighted equitably toward those communities with higher rates of poverty based on the U.S. Census.

Shortly after ESSA became law, the U.S. Department of Education required all states to submit an ESSA plan, detailing how each state intended to comply with the law. Massachusetts took advantage of the added flexibilities and federal expectations in ESSA by proposing a state plan that brought the state and federal systems of accountability and supports for schools and districts into closer alignment.

After an extensive stakeholder outreach and public comment period in 2016, DESE submitted its plan to the federal government in March 2017. At the time, Massachusetts was in the midst of several systemic and policy-related reforms, and the submitted plan noted that some issues would be clarified as those initiatives came to fruition. Massachusetts received official approval of its plan on September 21, 2017.

Since 2017, consistent with our approved ESSA plan, Massachusetts has made progress and improvements to the education system, including an increased focus on equity, new standards and curriculum frameworks, a next generation MCAS test, and updates to school and district accountability and assistance. While the pandemic caused challenges for the education community, Massachusetts continues to work toward the goals of ESSA: equity and excellence for all.

Late last year, acknowledging that much has changed in the nation’s schools since ESSA went into effect, Ruth Ryder, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Programs at USDE, urged states to revise and update their ESSA plans to document modifications and progress since 2017. For Massachusetts, many of the revisions and updates to our approved plan reflect the resolution of issues that were pending as the 2017 plan was submitted and approved. Consequently, most of the edits summarized in Appendix A and reflected in the edited version of the 2017 plan do not represent new policies and programs; rather, they document policies and programs that have been and are being implemented.

A summary of revisions to the Massachusetts ESSA State Plan is attached. Should you have any questions, please contact Matthew Deninger, DESE’s chief strategy and research officer, at elementarysecondaryed.act@mass.gov.

**Appendix A: Summary of Revisions to the Massachusetts ESSA State Plan**

The ESSA State Plan is structured around the major sections and themes of the law itself. Broadly, these themes include:

1. Consultation with Stakeholders and Performance Management
2. Academic Assessments, Accountability, Support, and Improvement for Schools
3. Supporting Excellent Educators
4. Supporting All Students (including English Learners and Homeless Students)

Below is a high-level summary of the substantive updates within each major section of the 200-page plan.

1. *Consultation with Stakeholders and Performance Management*

Since 2017, DESE has continued to consult with stakeholders on education policy matters, through the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and through other formal and informal mechanisms. Following the required consultation with the Governor’s office in 2023 and 2024, the revised ESSA State Plan will be posted for public comment in May and June of 2024.

DESE’s performance management system has evolved since 2017. Commissioner Riley was appointed in 2018, and under his leadership DESE revamped its system of performance management, putting a strong focus on using data and evidence, and partnering with districts to improve practices through various forms of differentiated technical assistance. Acting Commissioner Johnston has continued to refine DESE’s performance management system.

1. *Academic Assessments, Accountability, Support, and Improvement for Schools*

In 2017, Massachusetts was transitioning from the original MCAS exams to the current “Next Generation MCAS” exams. As a result of the eventual transition, details relating to the state’s student assessment program, such as achievement level descriptors, have been updated. And, because assessment information flows into the accountability system, details related to the accountability system were clarified to reflect changes in the point scale and descriptors used. Certain proposed elements of the accountability system were settled upon and included soon after plan approval, such as “successful completion of challenging high school coursework (i.e., AP courses, IB courses, etc.),” in order to incentivize equitable access to rigorous coursework. Other elements that had been proposed in the 2017 plan, such as “achieving passing grades in all 9th grade classes” were ultimately not included due to concerns related to data comparability as well as the potential to create unintended consequences. This updated plan describes the current system, how the various indicators are utilized, and how the accountability system differentiates schools for purposes of accountability, assistance, and support. It is important to note that while updated program design in areas such as student assessment led to changes in the specific data elements used for these purposes, there was no consequential rebalancing of the underlying elements used to inform school and district identification. And because Massachusetts goes above and beyond in identifying and providing targeted support to more schools and districts than the federal accountability provisions require, any minor technical changes in data points to the accountability system would not have jeopardized the provision of such support to schools and districts in need.

In terms of how the support and improvement systems have evolved since 2017, a DESE-wide reorganization in 2021 brought together several assistance-focused teams (Statewide System of Support, Kaleidoscope Collective for Learning, English Language Acquisition, Educational Technology, and Effective Partnerships and Impact) to form the Center for School and District Partnership (CSDP). CSDP provides coordinated support to the highest-need districts and schools in the state grounded in a vision for Deeper Learning, a key agency initiative since 2019. While these changes brought programmatic cohesion, they did not fundamentally alter the system of identification and progress measurement that informs the overall system of accountability and assistance.

1. *Supporting Excellent Educators*

This section describes how the state, since 2017, has strengthened its efforts and supports with respect to induction and mentoring programs for teachers and leaders, educator evaluation, and aligning the pathways and partnerships between educator preparation programs and school districts. For example, DESE continues to make refinements in the educator preparation program approval process to ensure that it is increasingly effective, efficient, consistent, and equity-driven. Program approval includes a more explicit review of instructional programming with a specific emphasis on the development of curriculum literacy, evidence-based practices (e.g., evidence-based early literacy), and administrator preparation. This work, like all DESE initiatives, is grounded in inclusivity, cultural responsiveness, equity, and the latest research.

Since 2017, Massachusetts has also worked with educators and other stakeholders to update academic content standards and curriculum frameworks for science and technology/engineering, digital literacy and computer science, English language arts and literacy, mathematics, history and social sciences, arts, world languages, and comprehensive health and physical education.

1. *Supporting All Students*

Since 2017, and particularly since the agency’s reorganization in 2021, DESE has continued to improve its support of districts and schools by developing multi-tiered systems of social emotional, behavioral, and mental health support. This work was, and remains, a critical component of the state’s recovery from the pandemic. This section of the revised plan also discusses the evolution of support for migratory children, English learners, at-risk youth in correctional facilities, after-school and out-of-school programming for students, students from rural areas, and students impacted by homelessness.

Other changes in this document include:

* Updates to terminology: “English learners” instead of “English language learners” and “student groups” instead of “student subgroups”
* Updates to data points and trends, and elimination of data points and trends that are no longer accurate or are of less relevance in the present day
* Changes to verb tense (i.e., if something that was proposed in 2017 has been accomplished)

Finally, while most of the edits to the plan describe the current status of programs and policies, one area in which the modified plan does make new proposed updates is to the long-term data targets that USDE requires. All states must have a baseline measure for performance on standardized assessments in ELA (English language arts), math, and science, and then a series of incremental improvement targets, disaggregated by student group, that extend into the future. Statewide MCAS data targets have been a topic of discussion in recent Board of Elementary and Secondary Education meetings. Informed by those public discussions, DESE has updated the MCAS targets to comply with USDE’s request and has included them in the revised ESSA plan (clean, untracked version) on pages 28-29.

The revised plan and feedback survey can be found [here https://www.doe.mass.edu/federalgrants/essa/stateplan/](https://www.doe.mass.edu/federalgrants/essa/stateplan/).