# Education Leaders Webinar August 20, 2025 Transcript

Helene Bettencourt

Yep, good afternoon, everyone. This is Helene Betancourt at DESE. Just hold on one second, I just need to change a setting.

Pedro Martinez

So everybody, again, we're going to be kicking off, thank you for joining us today. We're kicking off our quarterly webinars. So welcome to our first summer webinar. Go to the next slide, please. So what you're going to see now is our agenda that we have. So this is an agenda that was shared with you last week. First of all, I want to thank all of our professional associations out there who provide such valuable input on the agenda. Today I'll start with some introductory pieces, update you on some of the topics I've been working closely since I started, as well as we'll save time for it to also, for questions at the end. Let's go to the next slide. So first, everybody, I just want to, , you know, just, just introduce myself again. I am so, so proud to be to be your 25th commissioner here in our Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

What you have, there is just a few pictures for me, just to give you a little bit of background for me. So, one on the left is a picture when I had just been in the country just about a year. And my, my sister, her name is Guadalupe, Lupe Martinez, she was born, and so that's the baby you see. There was just literally, she was just, you know, just, I think, a few days out of the, out of the hospital. And then on the right is my 4th grade picture. I'm in the second row, A third from the right in the white shirt there. And so, you know, just, you know, my background is I came from Mexico when I was turning 6.

I grew up in Chicago, went to the Chicago Public Schools, and it was teachers who really saw something in me, and because of them, you know, I was able to be the first in my family to finish high school, to finish college. All of my brothers and sisters, by the way, I'm the oldest of 12, 10 of us alive, and all of my siblings have finished some type of post-secondary education, 3 teachers in the family. We also have a nurse, and I also have a brother who joined the Marines and did two tours in Iraq. All of us, by the way, providing, you know, just always devoted to service.

So, just a little bit about my background, and again, you know, what motivates me so much in our work is the impact that educators had on me. And the fact that my public education is responsible for everything that, who I am today. So with that, I just know that that's the lens that I really try to do this role in. Let's go to the next slide. So, I want to introduce everybody to a new team member of our team, Lauren Sicatori, who I'll have her as your speaker in a few seconds, but Lauren is now our new Chief of Staff. I met Lauren in Chicago. She actually was born in Massachusetts, and grew up in Massachusetts, and she'll tell you more about that, but I got to work with her in Chicago, where she was basically Senior Advisor, Chief of staff, to our Chief Academic Officer, and managed all of the, you know, really helped support all of the academic departments, everything from progress monitoring, to helping to support them on getting stronger performance and results, but really just somebody who's had a wealth, you know, just an incredible career. And like I said, you know, I feel proud that I'm bringing her back home to her home state, even though her career was mostly in Chicago. But Lauren, why don't you just say a few words, please?

Lauren Secatore

Sure, thank you. So nice to e-meet everyone. As the Commissioner said, I'm born and raised in Massachusetts. I'm from the Freetown-Lakeville School District. Everyone on this call should know, Superintendent Starkey was a legendary English and drama teacher. I was so excited to see her name, and I looked it up recently. I'm really excited to be back home, but as the Commissioner said, I spent the past two decades, where you are, at the district level, in the superintendent's office, and my goal is to not forget that.

In this new role, and make sure that, I'm thinking about all of your needs every single day. So, excited to be here, excited to meet all of you, be back home, and I'm gonna work on getting my accent back as soon as I can.

Pedro Martinez

Thank you, Lauren. Thank you. And again, truly, truly great to bring her, to bring her back home, everybody. Go to the next slide, please. So, since I started this role, you know, people have been asking me for my vision, what are my priorities, so I'm gonna talk about that just for a moment. Go to the next slide. Oops. So one of, one of the things, you know, everybody that I want, I want you to know that I'm committed to is making sure thatas I'm, you know, starting my second month in a row, that I want to make sure that, first of all, that I'm listening to our stakeholders.

I want to make sure that I'm really working with all of our LEAs, whether it's our districts, our charter organizations, our amazing regional schools. I want to make sure that I really understand, you know, the challenges that you're going through. I see nothing but opportunities. You know, for me, you know, my main goal is making sure that as our students finish in our Commonwealth through their academic pathway with us, as they're, you know, whether they're starting in kindergarten or coming right from our amazing preschool programs into kindergarten, into finishing high school, that they have all the amazing opportunities that our state has to offer, whether it's the amazing economy. The higher ed system that we have in place, and so, but with that, you know, I also know that it's gonna take, it's gonna take us working together. It's gonna take us partnering with our LEAs, and so I, you know, we're gonna be doing a listening tour.

That, we'll have, we'll talk to stakeholders, we'll do roundtables, and so please know that, the other thing I want you to know is, is we're right now as part of the state, I'm a co-chair, and a co-facilitator with Secretary Tutwiler on the statewide graduation council. This next month, we're going to be sharing with you a very preliminary release of what we call, what is our vision for a graduate. And in fact, we're working with Mary from Mass, and thank you, Mary, so that we can work and see how we can make sure there's alignment between, you know, many of our LEAs have visions for graduate profiles themselves, so we want to have some alignment with our state, profile, but please look out for that, because we are going to be asking for some feedback. But know that, you know, that's the first step out of the Graduation Council, and then, later, we're going to start looking at initial recommendations as we think about.

So again, I'll be coming back to you with some of that information. But for next week, you know, next, after Labor Day, because most of our LEAs will be started right after Labor Day, know that I plan to visit schools, and so this will be, we're going to have a plan for the entire school year, but, you know, no, and including, by the way, that I'll be, you know, trying to visit schools on the first day of school as well. So more to come on that, but know that, the goal is throughout the school year, you're going to see me very visible in our LEAs, in our districts, in our charter organizations, at our regional schools, and I just, I can't wait, because I will tell you, that is my happy place. If I could be there every day of the week, that's all I would do. And I'm jealous for those individuals that get to do that every day. Let's go to the next slide. So, everybody, as part of this listening tour. And thank you, please.

As part of this listening tour, we're gonna be holding, quarterly webinars, and you can see the dates on the slide. So the goal, really, on these webinars is really just, and by the way, you'll be able to sign up, so don't worry if you can't, if you don't sign up on the 16th, you know, we'll have through the 20th, but really what it really is, is for you to share just your feedback of how the agency could be a better supporter for you. How do we partner? I really want to make sure that, myself, I will model this, but our entire team, that we, that we are really collaborators with you, that we partner with you.

So we just want to get feedback. We just want to know what things are working well, what are areas that, that we should make changes in? There's a lot going on, there'll be a lot going on as we, as we conclude the Graduation Council. There'll be a, there's a lot of other things that we're providing guidance to you, so please, again, that's what really this is, so I just encourage you to please participate, give us your feedback. We want to take that to heart, and then I want to be able to shape that so that we continue to be strong partners with you.

Go to the next slide.

So, this is now, we're gonna get into, you know, I'm gonna turn, my light, so everybody, I have, I have this, we have this green building where the lights turn off and on, depending on motion, so,

Please bear with me, there you go. But at this point, what I want to do is I want to turn, turn it over, this section to my colleague, to my amazing staff.

Erin Hashimoto-Martel, she's the Associate Commissioner for Instructional Support, and what she's going to discuss with you is some updates on the Commission that got created for the Special Commission on Combating Antisemitism.

Just know, everybody, that, you know, I'm starting to get deep into this work.

I actually testified at the commission to express that we are in alignment with many of the recommendations they have. I think you'll be in alignment with it. This is about just making sure that we protect our students against any kind of discrimination, any hate.

But I know that also that we're also going to create a dedicated role in our agency just to support LEAs on this.

And I know as a, keep in mind, everybody, my whole career is, has been in K-12, has always been through the, through a district lens.

So I also know that, you know, our district leaders are gonna do, you know, like always, right? We always step up to lead when we need to, so please, I'm gonna ask your help for all of us to work on these issues, work together. Again, it's all about protecting our children, and like I said, I know, I don't have to say this, but I know our leaders are always, always, you're always gonna help up, you're always gonna help, and you're gonna help us, you know, be effective in this area.

So with that, I'm going to turn it over to Aaron.

Erin Hashimoto-Martell

Great. Thank you, Commissioner Martinez. So, I'm Erin Hashimoto-Martel, I'm the Associate Commissioner for Instructional Support, here at DESE.

And today, I'm going to talk about two and provide you all with some updates related to two separate sections that passed in the fiscal year 25 budget outside section.

So, One section, requires that the department make available resources relative to antisemitism and societal bias. We have recently updated the resources that we've posted on our webpage, where we provide these for you all.

The other thing, and we'll put that link to that page in the chat as well, so you can access that.

Also, we are developing a rubric for instructional materials and professional development related to the teaching of antisemitism and societal bias.

We are currently doing some internal reviews. We will post it to get some public comment. We encourage you all and your educators to provide feedback on this rubric when it is out to help inform the final version.

And additionally, in this upcoming school year, be on the lookout. We're going to post, about some initial trainings that will be available to your staff and teachers, that will, we will announce as soon as we finalize those dates and make those available. So that's coming this school year as well.

The other section, that passed, which called for the establishment of a special state commission on combating antisemitism, DESE had a seat on that commission. Commissioner Martinez referenced,

attending their most recent session and, addressing the Commission there.

At the August 7th meeting, they put out recommendations that included calling on DESE to continue to implement that first section of, related to resources that I just spoke about, as well as some additional work so the department is currently reviewing these recommendations. We'll share what those recommendations, are in the chat.

And happy to answer any questions you have during the Q&A portion later. But other than that, Commissioner, I will pass it back to you.

Pedro Martinez

Thank you. Thank you, Aaron. Thank you for your leadership in this area.

Next on the agenda, everybody, we have updates on some recent amendments to regulations, so I'll turn that over to our amazing Acting Deputy Commissioner, Lauren Wu.

Lauren Woo

Great. Thank you, Commissioner. Hi, everyone. Nice to be with you today. Helene, if you can go to the next slide. Great. So, last spring, the board voted to approve amendments to regulations in a few key areas, and so I want to highlight just 3 of those areas today for you, and some of the recent work that the department is doing, in those areas.

For the competency determination, we issued guidance last month and hosted a webinar. As a reminder, districts must have their updated policies approved and submitted to DESE in GEMS by December 31st, 2025.

Technical guidance on how to submit the policies and local graduation requirements and gems will be shared in the coming weeks. And all of the resources about the CD, including the guidance, the webinar slides, and the recording, can be found on our updated graduation requirements webpage.

And, Amrita will put that information in the chat.

For our CTE regulations, our admissions guidance for CTE schools and districts with CTE programs, and the guidance for sending middle schools is coming soon. We anticipate in the next few weeks, we will be able to release that guidance to districts and schools.

And finally, for timeout practices, we will soon announce opportunities for professional learning and funding to assist districts in the implementation efforts before the regulations take effect for next school year, for the 26-27 school year, so stay tuned for more information on those additional resources.

Just as Erin said, we'd be happy to answer your questions during the Q&A portion, and Commissioner, I'll turn it back to you.

Pedro Martinez

Thank you. The next section will cover some questions we received from you about the one big, beautiful bill elect and the impact that it's had on our work. So this is, again, everybody, the federal budget, they just, you know, that they just got passed, and then I, so now we'll pass it to Matt Deninger, our Chief Strategy and Research Officer.

Matthew Deninger

Thanks, Commissioner, and thanks, everybody, for being here today. It's good to see you. You can go to the first slide here. So, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act was passed right around July 4th.

It didn't have a ton related directly to K-12 education, but it did have a few things in there that may impact K-12 education. The first is this voucher program.

The first thing to say right off the bat here is that states will have the option to participate in this program when it gets launched.

Right now, there's a 2027, start to this, and it would be, developed and run by the Treasury, not by U.S. Department of Education, but basically, it would be

A tax credit, of up to $1,700, per year for, donation to qualified scholarship-granting organizations.

And then those scholarship-granting organizations would make funds available in the form of scholarships. It wouldn't be available to every kid. It would be limited to households earning up to 300% of the area's median gross income.

So, again, this is a little ways off. Just because it was signed into law doesn't mean it pops into existence immediately, so there's a planned 2027 start to this, and no decision has been made as to whether Massachusetts will opt in to this program at this time.

I think you can go to the next slide.

The other piece of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act was there were, cuts made to social safety net programs, like Medicaid and SNAP.

There are going to be, and again, this didn't pop into existence immediately, there's going to be some rulemaking, and, sort of a delayed implementation on this.

probably into next fiscal year. There are gonna be stricter eligibility requirements, for Medicaid.

It could, you know, impact students who rely on Medicaid, for school-based health services, and also for the Supplemental Nutrition Program, SNAP,

known as food stamps, it makes some funding cuts to them. It could potentially impact low-income counts when this all gets implemented, but it may be premature there, because you know our system, the way we match students to income, we run them through a lot of different databases, not just the SNAP database, but a lot of different databases. So if they're not captured in the SNAP database, they could be captured in a lot of other databases.

So, it's a little premature to know how this is going to impact, low-income eligibility counts.

Those, I think you can go to the next slide, and I think that the Commissioner is going to, talk about this slide.

Pedro Martinez

Thank you, Matt. Thank you so much. So, everyone, I'm happy to share that as of August 1st, 20, you know, as August 1st, fiscal year 26 awards are now available in GEM.

I wanna just, shout out to our DESE team for getting this work done so, so, you know, so quickly. As soon as we found out, everybody, that we were getting those, those federal grants restored, we wanted to get them online to you, and, and I just, again, I'm just,

I was so appreciative of the hard work of our team, how they were able to do that.

Congress is currently working on the 2027 appropriations, everybody, so remember.

The federal budget is always one year lag, so they're working on the current budget that will affect us in 26-27, so,

We’re keeping an eye on that, and just, so we'll keep you appraised as we see both threats.

I'm hopeful that we're seeing some, you know, some people stand up to the administration and really trying to push back on cuts, so, but again, we'll keep, we'll keep, we'll be watching that carefully and letting you know as we see things.

Another note, it was, we see some questions from the Supreme Court decision of Muhammad versus Taylor.

This is everybody in the Montgomery County School District, I believe. And in that decision, the Supreme Court held that a school district must give parents the option to have their children excused from instruction involving LGBTQ-supported books based on their religious objections.

We understand that the, we understand that the Massachusetts Association of School Committees

Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents are providing policy guidance and legal guidance to district leaders. So, again, I just want to, I'm grateful for both associations for really supporting our LEAs at this time.

And everybody, you know, again, as a former district leader myself, I know that these are tough, you know, these are tough issues, but again, I ask all of us, let's continue to show leadership in this area and continue to work together.

We will be moving, forward, you know, with this as, as there are, you know, we'll be looking at on, you know, we'll be just looking at how it could impact our work.

In the future, but know that this is something that we're going to stay just on top of, and we'll continue to give guidance as we need to, but right now, please continue to leverage both the Association of the School Committees and the Association of School Superintendents. And again, my thanks to both organizations for supporting you in this area.

So let's go to the next topic.

So at this time, everybody, I want to turn it over to our Chief of Accountability, Rob Curtin.

He's the Chief Officer of Data Assessment and Accountability, and again, thank you, Rob, for your leadership.

Robert Curtin

Thank you, Commissioner. Good to be with you all today, and I want to, you can go to the next slide, please.

I just want to give everybody today an update on the staff attendance data, and this is not going to be anything really new in terms of news. This is something we've been previewing with, for you.

over the course of the last few quarterly webinars that we've had. But I just want to reiterate today that we do intend to publicly release the staff attendance data from the 24-25 school year later this fall.

That data is currently being collected. Almost all districts have given it to us already through the EPIMS system. And as part of that system, districts were provided a preview of their rates that were calculated right behind the scenes as you submitted the data to us.

And as you certified the data, one of the things that you did once you certified the data was

Acknowledged that you had, that you had access to those, rates in the summary reports that were provided to you.

So, those are already there for you. We will give you another preview period prior to the public release, but at that point, the data are final, because we had, you had an opportunity through the submission process to revise it once we had shown you, the rates.

And a reminder again, we will be releasing the data at the district and school levels, in three categories. All staff, administrators, and teachers.

And we will, of course, be doing, the proper outreach to stakeholders beyond yourself, including our union colleagues, to be able to make sure that they are aware of what we will be producing and when we will be releasing the data publicly. So,

I just wanted to give everybody a brief update. This is something, basically, that we've shared with you prior to this date, but letting you know that this is moving along, and later this fall, we will be, for the first time, publicly releasing staff attendance data.

Back to you, Commissioner.

Pedro Martinez

Thank you, Rob, again, and thank you, everybody, for all the leaders that have advocated for releasing this information. I think it's, I know it's sensitive information, but it's also really important that we're transparent about it, and all the challenges that, you know, that we're facing with it.

I want to now call your attention to two new statewide resources that are now available. They're available as of this week. We just published a Generative AI Policy Guidance and an AI literacy module for educators to support local decision-making and educator capacity building.

I know everybody that, you know, artificial intelligence, I mean, we talk about it, it is here now. It is here, our students are using it, we know many of our teachers are starting to use it, so we're hopeful that these resources will be, will help you as you see artificial intelligence playing out in your LEA.

These resources were developed with input from a diverse group of educators, leaders, stakeholders from across the state that want to promote an informed, consistent, and equitable approach to AI integration.

They offer framework, examples, and tools that districts can tailor to their contexts and priorities. We know that many of you are already leading in this work. Some of you might just be getting started, even with policies.

So please, you know, we're not recommending or expecting anyone to make any major revisions or pause the work they're doing. Instead, we see these as resources that may support continuing the work in your local communities.

Future phases will include one-pagers, implementation workshops, and professional learning support local adoption.

Materials are now available on our web, webpage, so please share them with your leadership team and staff. The link is, we have it, at www.mass.edu backslash edtech.

backslash AI, and you see it now. Rita just put it on the chat box. So everybody, again, on AI, know that it's here. It's here, it's not even now that it's coming. We know that our children are technology natives, look.

I'm somebody who's old school, you know, who I remember the days when there was, you know, we used index cards, voicemail was the innovation in my time, now we have AI, so please embrace it, leverage our resources, count on us to be support, you know, to support you hand-in-hand.

Let's go to the next slide.

So, everybody, you know, before I open it up to questions, again, you know, for me, I know LEA leaders

you know, it's always, you know, the first day of, as we get close to the first day of school, it's both sort of, sort of like excitement, but also a little bit of fear, right? Because, you know, you've been working so hard to get ready. So, first of all, I want to just wish you such an amazing start to the school year. I wish you a strong start to the school year.

I know that everybody, your whole teams have been working towards this.

Our children, I'll tell you, parents are more excited than anybody. My children are about to start 9th grade and 6th grade, and so I'm excited, you know, just to even have them start school. I know that, you know, our children are excited to see their friends, to see their teachers.

So again, I just want to wish you the best for the start, and I, you know, I know, again, that I will, I am anxious to be visiting schools.

And to see your students, and to see your classrooms. But with that then, now we will turn it over to questions.

Lauren Woo

Great, thank you, Commissioner.