

SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOLS (SaSS) GRANT PROGRAM FISCAL YEAR 2023 EVALUATION:

AN ANALYSIS OF ALIGNMENT BETWEEN SaSS SCHOOL-WIDE ACTION PLANS AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANS

Executive Summary | June 30, 2023

INTRODUCTION

In Fiscal Year 2022-2023 (FY2023), 33 school districts (and educational collaboratives) received funding from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) through the Safe and Supportive Schools (SaSS) grant program. This funding was awarded through two grant codes, which allowed grantees to either complete the SaSS online Self-Reflection Tool (Tool) and develop an action plan based on the results, or to implement an action plan that had been created during a previous grant cycle. Awards across the two funding codes ranged from \$5,500 to \$20,000. The full FY2023 SaSS evaluation report contains details about the funding codes and the districts that were awarded SaSS funds.

The FY2023 SaSS evaluation was conducted through a DESE contract with the Collaborative for Educational Services (CES), and focused on the extent to which grantee schools and districts aligned their action plan development and implementation with existing school and/or district improvement plans (SIPs/DIPs), or other districtwide or schoolwide initiatives. This is in response both to language in the FY2023 state budget SaSS line item¹ that funds the SaSS grant program, and also to one of the responsibilities² of the Safe and Supportive Schools Commission that was established by the SaSS legislation.

The primary source of information for this year's evaluation was interviews with grant coordinators in 24 of the 33 grantee districts (see the full report for a detailed description of the methodology used as well as the interview subjects).

MAJOR FINDINGS

- Nearly all of the SaSS grantee schools and districts interviewed are aligning their SaSS action plan with either school and/or district improvement plans, and/or with other schoolwide and districtwide initiatives.
- SaSS teams whose members include school principals, or teams in which members are familiar with the school and district improvement plans, are slightly more likely to align their SaSS action plan with their school or district improvement plan. However, this difference was not substantial.

1 FY2023 Safe and Supportive Schools Line Item [7061-9612](#) includes this language: "...provided further, that the safe and supportive schools commission shall conduct an analysis of such school-wide action plans and school improvement plans and shall include in its annual report the results of such analysis and any recommendations, including any recommendations related to improving the framework or the self-assessment tool;..."

2 The [Safe and Supportive Schools Framework legislation](#) that established the SaSS Commission includes this language: "...The Commission shall... and (vii) examine and recommend model approaches for integrating school action plans, required under subsection (e), with school improvement plans and for using the framework to organize other school and district improvement processes..."

- Educational collaboratives are able to align their SaSS action plan with collaborative-wide programming. The supports and structure that DESE provides for the SaSS grant are appropriate for educational collaboratives.
- Just over half of the SaSS grantees interviewed incorporate the voices of students in their planning process, and make an effort to reach out to underrepresented students. Just under half of the grantees interviewed incorporate the voices of families and community members in their planning process.
- While DESE offers multiple supports for the SaSS grant, the grantees interviewed noted that they had not widely engaged with them. Grantees had many suggestions about the type of supports that they would like to see as well as general feedback about the grant structure and the Tool.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nearly 60 percent of the grantees interviewed had worked toward aligning their action plans with their school or district improvement plans. Additionally, nearly every grantee was able to discuss ways in which their action plans aligned with either SIPs/DIPs, or existing school or districtwide initiatives.

Interviewees indicated interest in additional support from DESE in several areas, including more structured assistance on using the Tool and completing an action plan, and professional development that supports leadership development. They also offered feedback on areas that were outside of the scope of this evaluation, but still relevant to DESE's SaSS grant program goals, including suggestions about the grant structure, feedback on the supports offered, and feedback on the Tool.

FROM CES FOR DESE TO CONSIDER, INFORMED PRIMARILY BY SASS GRANTEE INTERVIEWS:

- Consider the **expectations of, and intended outcomes of**, the alignment of SaSS action plans with SIPs/ DIPs and/or other schoolwide or districtwide initiatives. Is it enough for the action plans and other plans to have similar goals, or is the actual expectation one of **integration**, which would involve strategic coordination of the efforts at reaching the goals and assessing the results of those efforts?
- While alignment and integration may be important goals, support grantees to give primacy to action planning that **challenges institutionalized bias and oppression**, and that then looks for ways in which this overlaps with existing initiatives. Making alignment the primary consideration in developing action plans risks amplifying existing inequities in educational practices and programming.
- More clearly communicate DESE's expectations around alignment and integration **to grantees through written materials as well as in webinars** about the grant. Look for ways to accompany these with supporting materials such as examples or a rubric to further help grantees with this expectation.
- Consider further **revising the Tool and supporting materials** to make them more user- friendly, particularly for students and community members who do not have a background in education.

- Continue to make this and other grant opportunities, as appropriate, **available to educational collaboratives**. These organizations often serve students who are in need of more intensive support than students in traditional district, charter, or vocational schools. Allowing them to apply for opportunities such as the SaSS grant, and allowing flexibility where possible to reflect their different structures, will help them better serve these students.
- Offer grantees **multiple opportunities to connect with each other**, to share resources and discuss their progress. While four networking sessions were offered during the 2022-2023 school year, two of them were offered in June, which is a busy time for school personnel and is also nearing the end of the SaSS grant cycle for the continuation grantees. Consider, for example, if Option Two grantees, who are asked to take on a mentoring role as part of their grant expectations, could be charged with planning content for and facilitating monthly online professional learning communities for grantees.