Safe and Supportive Schools Commission   
Summary of key themes from focus group interviews with the Massachusetts Association of School Committees and the   
Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (Summer 2017)

Voices of Leaders: Superintendents and School Committee Members

*Discussion regarding strategies for increasing schools’ capacity   
to carry out the administrative functions required to implement the   
Safe and Supportive Schools Framework*

# Background

The “Safe and Supportive Schools Framework” statute (Massachusetts General Laws, chapter 69, section1P) calls upon the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department), together with the Safe and Supportive Schools Commission (Commission), to create a Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Self-Assessment Tool (informed by the [Behavioral Health and Public Schools Framework/Tool](http://sassma.org/)) that can serve as a guiding resource and common structure for schools as they create the infrastructure for whole-school safe and supportive environments. Among its many duties, G.L., c.69, s.1P(g) instructs the Commission to identify strategies and make recommendations for increasing schools’ capacity to carry out the administrative functions required to implement the framework. In particular, the legislature directed the Commission to seek answers to six questions about administrative capacity that had earlier been identified in a [2011 report](http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/2011/08BehavioralHealth.docx) to the governor and legislature by the precursor to the Commission, the Behavioral Health and Public Schools Task Force.

In Summer 2017, Commission focus group discussions centered primarily on the following questions.

* What is needed in your district/community to implement the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework, to make all schools safe and supportive for all students *(as defined in the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework law)?*
* What capacity do you need meet this vision? Are you doing fine with the resources you have?  Can positions be reallocated? Would you need more staff at the district level? At the school level?
* Would your district staff and/or partners need to learn new skills? If so, what types of supports would they need to be successful? What kind of qualifications would they need?
* What does your district need to connect better to community resources?
* Would your district need additional funding to support this work? If so, how much, for what, and in what format (state aid, grants, etc.)? What funding sources and strategies are you already using in this realm?

These additional questions, grounded in the six framework areas, were also addressed when time permitted:

* Leadership (*What role does school and district leadership play in implementation?*)
* Professional development (*What professional learning opportunities are necessary for implementation?*)
* Access to resources and services (*What resources, supports, or services need to be in place for students, families, and staff?*)
* Academic and non-academic practices (*What strategies--both academic and beyond academic--support implementation?*)
* School and district policies, procedures, and protocols (*What policies, procedures, or protocols do we need to review, revise, and develop?*)
* Collaboration with families (*How can we partner with families during planning and implementation?*)

Commission members represent the following 19 education associations, advocacy associations, and roles: MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE), Executive Office of Education (EOE), MA Association of School Superintendents (MASS), MA Association of School Committees (MASC), MA School Administrators Association (MSAA), Teachers Associations (MTA, AFT), MA Administrators for Special Education (ASE), MA Organization of Education Collaboratives (MOEC), MA School Psychologists Association (MSPA), MA Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), MA School Counselors Association (MASCA), MA School Nurse Organization (MSNO), MA Advocates for Children, Inc. (MAC), Parent/Professional Advocacy League, Inc. (PPAL), MA State Student Advisory Council (SSAC), two former members of the BHPS Task Force with evaluation expertise and framework implementation expertise, MA Recovery High Schools, and the Children’s Behavioral Health Initiative (CBHI).

Representatives from two of the above associations participated in two focus groups during July 2017 to respond to and discuss the topic. On July 12, 2017, 14 members of the Leadership Council of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) joined together at their annual leadership retreat in Marlborough for the focus group. The Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS) focus group was attended by 19 district leaders during their summer retreat on July 19, 2017 in Mashpee. In addition, Commission members held five in-depth interviews lasting approximately 2-3 hours long: three with superintendents, one with an elementary principal who is now coordinating that district’s Social Emotional Learning initiatives, and one with a high school principal. [A summary of the interviews](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/safety/meetings/2017-0322capacity.docx) can be found on the Commission’s [webpage](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/safety/?section=commission).

The questions noted above lay the groundwork for a discussion around the capacity needed to meet the Safe and Supportive School vision. The focus group discussions with MASC and MASS were organized and facilitated by members of the Commission, those organizations, and Department staff. Key themes from the discussion are highlighted below.

# Key Highlighted Themes

The focus group participants were passionate about the work that needs to be done in their schools and districts to create safe and supportive environments and demonstrated a deep understanding of the depth and breadth of work needed to ensure that all students are successful.   
MASC and MASS group members felt that creating safe supportive environments requires leadership at all levels and that this work should be on an equal standing with academics. One member referred to studies showing that social and emotional learning must be part of any rigorous academic program. Numerous group members firmly stated that they need and want to do this work, but that funding levels combined with rigorous academic standards have made this very difficult. One school committee member explained that in that district, to meet the state’s academic standards, that district had to choose hiring math coaches over social workers, despite the tremendous need to provide social and emotional support. Participants in both groups called for the state to increase Chapter 70 funding, raise the sense of urgency in the community about the importance of this work, and send a clear message from all levels about the role creating safe and supportive school cultures will play in improving academics and ensuring future job skills and growth. There was much discussion about the shifts needed to implement a process of school culture change in order to create safe and supportive environments and the professional development needed at the leadership level so that leaders could in turn help educators understand how to make their environments safe and supportive. The need to revise the state standards to include safe and supportive schools goals was discussed, as was the need for a non-punitive method to assess accountability so that this work spreads through the Commonwealth.

***What capacity is needed to help all schools in MA become safe and supportive?***

Leadership for school culture change: Focus group participants from both groups emphasized that for safe and supportive school culture to take hold at the school level, leaders at all levels, including at the state level must **lead for culture change**.

Specifically, **state** leaders were called upon by participants in the focus groups to:

* Provide **adequate funding through Chapter 70**.
* **Demonstrate and convey a** **sense of urgency** that safe and supportive schools are needed to ensure all students learn (from the MASS focus group);
* Send a message to educators about the need to **change mindsets regarding the importance of safe and supportive school cultures, among educators and the public and other members of the school community** so as to begin to overcome barriers posed by different philosophies. [An example of a mindset shift is moving from punitive approaches to teaching self-regulation skills, understanding that learning takes place in the context of positive adult and peer relationships.];
* Provide leadership development to create safe and supportive schools, including how schools leaders can train their staff and develop the infrastructure needed.
* Hold leadership institutes to share best practice and ways to align and prioritize initiatives with our superintendents and principals as well as those who will lead the culture change in their schools and districts.
* **Some leaders suggested a revision to the state accountability standards** to make safe and supportive school environments a quality measure that the Department calls for and that reflects a priority for creating safe and supportive environments.
* Effectively use **data** to demonstrate need for culture change (For example: to raise the sense of urgency on the community without raising extreme concern) (from the MASS focus group).

## Culture Change

Many focus group participants explained that creating safe and supportive school environment involves a process of culture change and changes in “mind set.” Changing ways of disciplining students, for example, requires new ways of thinking about student accountability; a different mindset from one that calls for punitive responses. Districts and schools need time and support to reflect, train, and to make culture change. To make this happen, focus group members:

* Indicated that districts need to designate a **person at the district level to coordinate school culture change** and **to increase their current staff’s capacity (expertise, etc.) to support the needs of learners.** This includes training for teachers, administrators, school resource officers, among others.
* One MASS focus group participant discussed the need for cultural proficiency training in their school, while others from both groups mentioned the need for culture or mindset changes.
* Leaders from the MASS focus group described the need to help schools give teachers and principals strategies to manage their own stress in order to create a more positive culture.
* Several leaders from the MASS focus group described the need for more training for staff they already have so that **teachers can be more responsive.** Principals only react to issues once they have escalated.
* One district from the MASS focus group is using the Guidelines for Inclusive Practices and embedded professional development in professional learning communities (PLCs) to have discussions on each module on an on-going basis. The district realized that many staff members had a basic understanding on the best way to support students, but that deeper understanding was needed to implement those supports.
* Another leader from the MASC focus group said that their schools have **school resource officers**, but they do not all have the proper background to work on local issues in the school setting. Typically, they are former police officers.

## Resource Allocation

In addition, focus group participants were concerned about **the limited resources that are available to support this work**. In particularly, they noted that the resources for students and families with the most needs are not equitably distributed across the state. While funding was a major theme for many focus group participants, they also discussed time-related issues. Some stated that a focus on the process of improving safe and supportive schools would take more time than other improvement needs (e.g., focusing on academic outcomes only) and emphasized that shifting culture and mindsets is a long process.

* There was a repeated theme with a number of focus group participants in both groups that state agencies need to coordinate better. They stated that schools might know who needs help, but they need help with identifying services and connecting students with those services.
* Time and money are needed. “If we are changing culture, it takes time and there needs to be recognition that this work takes time.” (from the MASC focus group)
* One district leader from the MASS focus group described their budget priority to have an SEL coordinator.

## Coordination of resources

Some focus group participants from the MASC focus group called for **more coordination within schools and with and across state agencies**. This includes helping districts to coordinate resources and services for students.

* A district leader said that there **is no coordination in their district between Family Resource Centers and the Children’s Behavioral Health Initiative**. In addition, they have only one identified case leader for the System of Care (SOC), and they are only in one school. They found that the participants in SOC meeting were not consistent and often were not the most relevant people for the task.
* Related to comments above, other leaders believed that **state agencies do not coordinate services well and often are not organized to provide support to schools.**
* Another leader described how they have hired a clinical care coordinator to connect schools with community health providers, but they have found that there **are not enough local services to meet the needs of their adolescent students.**
* A focus group participant suggested a visual from the Department that organized the requirements for various initiatives to help them to better organize their time and resources, as well as a way for the **Department to facilitate sharing of best practices**

## Accountability

Accountability was mentioned by some participants in both focus groups as a way to make sure this work was prioritized. Others mentioned concerns about the potential impact of increased connections with accountability. While there was no consensus on measures or consequences, there were many suggestions from the leaders, including:

* Give schools credit for doing safe and supportive work
* Make this work be part of state standards.
* Include explicit language in the teacher and principal evaluation that speaks to SEL.
* Publish more accountability data to share with school committees and community members. One leader suggested accountability requirements for what the teachers and staff are doing rather than the performance of the students. For example, this could include reporting data on professional development.
* More explicitly teach SEL standards, even though they are embedded in the Comprehensive Health Curriculum Frameworks. Others seemed unaware of these standards and requested that standards be created. Prioritizing the revisions of the Comprehensive Health Curriculum Frameworks and the creation of the Pre-K/K Social and Emotional and Approaches to Play and Learning Standards was also discussed by some leaders.

**Of note are similar themes from interviews with a handful of school and district leaders during the fall 2017:**

* Need for culture and mindset shift.
* Need for district level position dedicated to this work.
* Building capacity of teachers and staff already present in the schools.
* Funding concerns.
* Need for accountability measures, with caution on the topic as well.

For more information about the Commission or focus groups, please contact the   
Office of Student and Family Support via [achievement@doe.mass.edu](mailto:achievement@doe.mass.edu).