Accountability and Assistance Advisory Council (AAAC) Meeting Notes

April 2, 2025 – 10:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.

Virtual Meeting – Zoom

*AAAC members in attendance:* Tamatha Bibbo, Erin Cooley, Kerry Donahue, Heidi Driscoll, Barish Icin, Diane Kelley, Brandi Kwong, Ed Lambert, Andrew O’Leary, Yves Salomon-Fernandez, Jennifer Shorter, Marc Smith

*DESE/BESE staff and presenters in attendance:* Charmie Curry, Rob Curtin, Erica Gonzales, Robbie Havdala, Lauren Zermani

The following notes were recorded during the whole-group discussion between Council members, and a copy of the presentation can be found at <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/councils/sda/>.

**Welcome, Introductions, and Review of Discussion Norms**

Council Co-Chair Heidi Driscoll called the meeting to order at 10:02 a.m. Erica Gonzales, Associate Commissioner of Data and Accountability at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), began the meeting by advising attendees that DESE does not authorize attendees to record or to use AI transcription tools during the meeting and that DESE does not endorse any unauthorized transcripts created by third parties of its meetings.

Ms. Gonzales then gave an overview of the meeting agenda. Council Co-Chair Heidi Driscoll announced that today’s meeting is her last meeting on the Council. Ms. Gonzales thanked Council Co-Chair Driscoll for her service to the Council over the past 6 years and noted appreciation for her time and commitment to the work, urging Council members to submit nominations for a replacement Co-Chair. She then reminded Council members that Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) member Dr. Martin West serves as the BESE’s liaison to the Council. New Council member Dianne Kelly introduced herself as the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS) representative on the Council. Council members then introduced themselves and reviewed Council meeting norms.

Ms. Gonzales then reminded the Council of the Commissioner’s charge for the year:

* The Council shall continue to advise the Department and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education on the implementation of the currently approved district and school accountability and assistance system.
* The Council shall provide input and feedback on potential changes to the district and school accountability system, ensuring that the system produces high-quality, objective, and unbiased information that allows the Department, districts, and schools to partner together to advance the Department’s Educational Vision and Strategic Objectives

**District Instructional Prioritization Plan Guidance and the Integration of the District Standards and Indicators**

Dr. Charmie Curry, Associate Commissioner for DESE’s Statewide System of Support (SSoS), provided an update on DESE’s district instructional prioritization plan guidance and the integration of the district standards and indicators. Dr. Curry reminded the Council that for fiscal year 2026, districts will submit one plan for each school identified as requiring assistance (e.g., the lowest 10 percent of schools, based on accountability results). She then reminded the Council that district partner plans need to be aligned to the following key DESE priorities: DESE’s Educational Vision, Student Opportunity Act (SOA) plans, and accountability targets. Dr. Curry stated that plans should be used as a tool to help districts think about how to improve their systems, as these plans should help build coherence and alignment when thinking about the overall improvement planning process. Dr. Curry then stated that the SSoS team identified the following district standards that focus on instructional prioritization while also addressing equitable outcomes: Leadership and Governance, Curriculum and Instruction, Assessment, Financial and Asset Management, Student Support, as well as Human Resources and Professional Development.

Dr. Curry then reminded the Council of the eight sections of SSoS guidance:

* Instructional Priority
* Analysis of Strengths and Challenges
* Stakeholder Engagement
* Outcomes
* Role Clarity
* Monitoring Implementation
* Resources
* Targeted Support for Priority Schools

Dr. Curry then stated that the guidance elevates the idea of supporting equitable practices and recognizing systemic factors that influence this support, noting that these plans can help districts prepare for district reviews performed by DESE’s Office of District Reviews and Monitoring. She also noted that she is interested in hearing back from schools or districts that are utilizing these tools this year regarding their experiences with integration.

Individual council members provided the following feedback regarding using these tools in their schools/districts:

* The work facilitated by DESE has been phenomenal as schools focus on their lesson planning.
* These DESE tools have helped teachers cohere, as they allow teachers to work around priorities while targeting specific student populations.
* The self-assessment tool was very useful at district level and should translate to the work being done at the school level. The coherence guidebook helps schools see how they grow from year to year.

Dr. Curry thanked the Council for their continued input on these efforts.

**2025 Accountability Reporting**

Ms. Gonzales provided an update regarding DESE’s plans for accountability reporting. She clarified that DESE is *not* proposing any changes to the accountability system at this time and that this year’s results release will look like last year’s reporting. Ms. Gonzales then reminded the Council what to expect this year:

* No additional years of data included
	+ Results based on 3 years of data (2023, 2024, 2025)
	+ Same weighting of years (15%, 25%, 60%)
* No changes to indicators or weightings
	+ The Grade 8 Civics MCAS results are not included. Ms. Gonzales stated the rationale behind this decision – that this brand-new assessment was just operationalized, so DESE would need a minimum of 2 years of data to include it the accountability system. She noted that inclusion of this measure would be a significant change to the accountability system and would require both BESE and federal approval.
	+ Chronic absenteeism rates still reflect missing 10 percent or more of the school year
* No changes to participation rate requirements. Districts and schools are expected to maintain rates of 95% or higher.
* The new Competency Determination (CD) law does not affect graduation rates used in 2025 results. Ms. Gonzales stated that DESE does not expect to see an effect on data this year based on timing. She noted the law did not take effect until January of 2025, and that DESE’s accountability system uses lagged results for high school completion measures. Ms. Gonzales reminded the Council that the accountability system uses data based on the 2024 four-year and 2023 five-year rates.
* Same general timeframe for reporting: results will be available in late summer/fall.

Ms. Gonzales notes that DESE is not proposing changes to the accountability system this year as DESE is currently amid a leadership transition. She stated that DESE’s future Commissioner may wish to have input on any proposed changes before bringing ideas to the Council for feedback.

Individual Council members provided the following comments and questions:

* Is there any reprieve or guidance that will be developed by districts heavily impacted by changes in immigration? Students may or may not be attending school during this challenging time and as such there could be an impact on chronic absenteeism and participation rates.
	+ Ms. Gonzles notes that DESE doesn’t have sufficient data to assess the impact of the current climate and that DESE is amid the annual March data collection, which should provide a mid-year snapshot of student attendance. She noted that DESE will be able to assess these concerns by reviewing student attendance information collected this March.
* Has there been any discussion about how DESE might try to measure whether students at the high school level are lending the same amount of seriousness to the MCAS test considering the new changes to competency determination? There is a sense of importance that appears to have been lost. Are there any plans to measure that in any way, e.g. focus groups, etc., and how might that influence how we view this year’s results compared to previous years?
	+ Ms. Gonzales stated that DESE will take this issue into consideration but will need to rely on assessment data before making any formal recommendations.
	+ To this, another Council member responded that once the results are released, assessments of achievement and motivation will need to happen at the district level. Because it would be difficult to measure motivation statewide, districts should focus on making sure they are communicating what the data are used for, what it measures, what it reflects, and why stakeholders should care.
* Can you remind us of what counts as assessment participation?
	+ Ms. Gonzales answered that in general, there needs to be active response in every section of the assessment, including any written compositions.
* Regarding the potential inclusion of 8th-grade civics in the accountability system, is DESE working on getting this approved?
	+ Ms. Gonzales answered that DESE is not having conversations about including the 8th-grade civics test in the current accountability system because DESE is already in the early stages of work for potential future changes to the system. She stated the importance of consistency, specifically noting that DESE has never had two consistent years with the new system framework because of the pandemic and that it is not practical to think about adding new indicators when thinking about future long-term changes.
* Some educators are frustrated about the administration of the grade 8 civics assessment. There are motivation issues at that grade level, and too many assessments – please consider this when thinking about potential inclusion in a future system.
* Regarding the Student Opportunity Act (SOA), it delayed establishing targets for closing achievement gaps. The timespan of recovery targets is between one and four years. Rather than distinguishing this from the accountability system, it was integrated. Can you speak to that in regard to reporting? Are targets being reported sufficiently and separately? Some stakeholders may advocate for pulling out of this policy to provide clarity about what has happened to achievement gaps and recovery targets during this time.
	+ Ms. Gonzales states that DESE did adjust targets coming out of the pandemic and that she is not able to speak about reporting on SOA targets.
* Is the work done by the accountability system redesign committee on hold due to DESE’s leadership transition? Is there a timeline for resuming that work?
	+ Ms. Gonzales answered that this work was paused during DESE’s annual fall reporting cycle but that DESE staff from a variety of program offices are now meeting to review the recommendations from the external advisory committee and consider potential improvements to the system. She noted that DESE is engaging in very pointed conversations regarding what is required, what the committee recommended, and what DESE thinks should be raised to the level of priority for inclusion. Ms. Gonzales noted that work is underway, and productive conversations regarding what DESE may want to do differently are currently ongoing. Ms. Gonzales detailed that many things are on the table like small tweaks, large overhauls, etc., but explained that DESE is nowhere near the point of sharing something for the Council’s reaction. She noted that conversations will extend into this summer and that DESE will share findings with a broader audience including the new agency leadership, BESE, advisory councils, and other stakeholders. Ms. Gonzales noted that DESE is intentional in this planning for several reasons, mainly to make sure the next Commissioner has an opportunity to weigh in and share their priorities before anything is formalized. She stated that DESE wants to make sure this is vetted through proper channels, with opportunity for stakeholder feedback, before securing state and federal approval, and that this takes time. Ms. Gonzales stated that the tentative plan is to share more information about the system during the 2025-2026 school year, and report the results from the system in the fall of 2027.
* With the partial dissolution of the U.S. Department of Education, what implications does that have for the accountability system, and will those responsibilities be absorbed at the state level? If so, what are the implications for students?
	+ Ms. Gonzales stated that so long as there is a federal law requiring this work, it will continue unless DESE is told otherwise.

Rob Curtin, DESE’s Chief Officer for Data, Assessment, and Accountability, provided some additional context in response to the Council’s questions. Regarding Council members’ questions about declining motivation for taking the MCAS assessment, Mr. Curtin stated that while DESE cannot comment on motivation, DESE is pleased with early participation information coming out of the administration of MCAS so far this year. He noted that this year over 65,000 MCAS tests were administered over both testing days, which is on track with last year’s administration. He then clarified that this year’s participation was strong amongst grades 3-8 and 10 for both math and ELA. In response to Council questions about permanently incorporating the new grade 8 civics tests into the accountability system, Mr. Curtin stated that DESE will not include data from the first year of a test into the statewide accountability system. He stated that it is simply not good practice and that while DESE believes in the strength of the test, DESE would prefer the data to be reviewed and publicly released before including it in the accountability system.

**Feedback on DESE’s Draft Regulations Related to the Competency Determination (CD) and Considerations for Future Accountability Reporting**

Mr. Curtin then reviewed DESE’s recent draft regulations relating to the Competency Determination (CD) and asked the Council to provide feedback on how these changes may be considered for future accountability reporting. He started by reviewing the changes to the language of the law. Mr. Curtin noted that districts are currently in an interim period as they were forced to change and develop competency determination policies for the class of 2025. Mr. Curtin stated that Governor Healey signed an executive order that establishes a [statewide graduation council](https://www.mass.gov/massachusetts-statewide-k-12-graduation-council) to make recommendations on how Massachusetts can ensure that all students graduate with the skills necessary to succeed in life. He noted that the legislature will weigh in on the graduation council’s work and may be looking at implementing new statewide graduation requirements. Mr. Curtin then stated that no matter how quickly the group works, we are still looking at an interim period of a few years before a new statewide competency determination is implemented, which will likely be in place in time for the graduating class of 2031.

Mr. Curtin stated that since the passage of the ballot question, BESE has discussed the matter of competency determination and the new statutory requirements at the November, December, January, and February regular meetings as well as the February special meeting. He stated that the proposed amendments are informed by BESE’s discussions and are designed to focus on student learning and promote academic equity for all students. He then reviewed the proposed changes to regulations.

He noted that the draft regulations mark the first time DESE would establish minimum coursework requirements at the state level. He asked Council members to note that the math or science coursework proposed above does not specifically refer to high school level courses and explained that this is because DESE and BESE know that a lot of students take algebra (and in rare circumstances, biology) in grade 8.

Mr. Curtin explained that changes to the law revealed some unique outlier situations, creating a pathway to the competency determination for students who arrive in Massachusetts from other states or countries. He explained that in this situation if a district is unable to verify coursework via a transcript, the proposed regulations would allow districts to use a qualifying score on the MCAS to fulfill competency requirements.

A Council member asked Mr. Curtin if DESE maintains a database of local district graduation requirements. He confirmed that no, this does not currently exist but that DESE is not opposed to collecting this information. He also explained that while it is easy to find graduation requirements on some district websites, it would be a public service to consolidate them into one easily accessible location.

Mr. Curtin then explained the other following possible non-regulatory steps, including the public reporting of performance in school courses in relation to other outcome measures, which would provide information to the public about how grading aligns with other outcome measures, as well as the potential to include a review of local graduation policies in DESE’s district review process.

Mr. Curtin then reviewed information pertaining to the public comment period for these proposed changes. He also stated that the Board is expected to vote on the proposed amendments at its regular monthly meeting scheduled for May 20, 2025.

Individual Council members provided the following comments and questions:

* This feels like a lot of change.
* What happens if an audit indicates challenges? For example, issues with curriculum content, grade inflation and grading policies, etc.? Would issues be referred to Mr. Curtin’s office for resolution or addressed through the accountability system?
	+ Mr. Curtin answered that after the public comment period has ended, DESE will present final proposed regulations to BESE. He explained that once the regulations are approved, DESE will then create guidance for districts to use in situations like these. Mr. Curtin then noted that audits may result in recommendations and would be fully dependent on the severity of the uncovered issues.
* How far away are we from these proposed changes becoming finalized? Is there a timeline that districts can reference as they move forward in their planning processes? Once the changes are in place, is there a plan for guidance documents, an appeals process policy, and competency determination for kids that would’ve previously taken the MCAS-Alt assessment, etc.? Districts will need support in handling outlier scenarios.
	+ Mr. Curtin responded that approximately 1 percent of students take the MCAS-Alt every year, explaining that it is not a grade-level assessment, but rather for students that have significant cognitive disabilities and are unable to access the curriculum at grade level. He explained that DESE has previously played the role of decision-maker on these issues, working closely with districts to resolve these scenarios, but noted that districts will have to play this role moving forward as the changes to the law have shifted this responsibility away from DESE and onto districts instead. Mr. Curtin went on to state that while DESE understands the need to offer guidance on these issues, it may not be via policy but rather in the form of guidance.
* These changes will allow districts to connect curriculum to outcomes, which is exciting!
	+ Mr. Curtin clarified that mastery is something that DESE is asking districts to define for a small number of courses. He noted that the law is clear about where this responsibility lies.
* Is there a plan or opportunity as part of the audit to try and ensure equity across policies? In looking at high school graduation requirements, there are various definitions of competency.
	+ Mr. Curtin responded by stating that publicizing the requirements and policies may result in a need to establish a minimum level of rigor.

Mr. Curtin reminded the Council that BESE Member Matt Hills proposed whether to use MCAS more broadly as a path to show mastery to earn the competency determination. He stated this would be discussed at the May BESE meeting.

**Next Steps and Closing**

Ms. Gonzales thanked the Council for a thoughtful discussion and reviewed the upcoming Council meeting schedule. She stated that while she intentionally overscheduled the number of meetings, she does not believe the Council needs to meet twice before the end of the school year. She explained that in the interest of time, she will send a poll to the Council to gauge preferences for keeping one remaining virtual meeting. Ms. Gonzales then reminded the Council that DESE is looking for nominations for the vacant Council co-chair seat and urged members to express interest or nominate a member.

Council Co-Chair Barish Icin adjourned the meeting to close at 11:31 a.m. and thanked the Council again for their time.