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| Student Opportunity Act Data Advisory Commission Annual Report for 2024 |
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| A report on the deliberations of the Student Opportunity Act Data Advisory Commission for the 2024 calendar year, per [M.G.L. Chapter 70, Section 17](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter70/Section17)  December 2024 |
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# Introduction

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) respectfully submits this Report to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education: Student Opportunity Act Data Advisory Commission Annual Report: 2024 pursuant to the statutory requirement in [M.G.L. Chapter 70, Section 17](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter70/Section17):

*Section 17 (a) There shall be a data advisory commission to promote the improved use of state, district and school-level data to inform effective resource allocations at the district and school levels.*

*The data advisory commission shall assist the department in identifying, analyzing and making recommendations on high-impact, cost-effective data strategies for assessing student needs and addressing persistent disparities in achievement, including, but not limited to:*

*(i)  establishing a data collection and reporting system to: (A) track funding allocated for low-income students and students identified as English learners pursuant to chapter 71A and ensure spending is targeted to the intended populations; and (B) allow for access to school-level expenditures and data across all districts to inform the public and policy-makers of high impact, cost-effective school-level interventions and investments;*

*(ii)  strengthening the department’s capacity to analyze and report staffing, scheduling and financial data in ways that support strategic resource allocation decisions at the district and school levels, including a review of national best practice models that ensure greater financial transparency;*

*(iii)  strengthening district capacity to use state, district and school-level data to inform strategic resource allocation and implementation decisions; and*

*(iv)  streamlining data reporting, eliminating duplicative reporting requirements and improving data quality.*

(b)  The data advisory commission shall consist of: the commissioner of elementary and secondary education, who shall serve as chair; the secretary of education, or a designee; 1 member to be appointed by each of the following organizations, all of whom shall have demonstrated knowledge, experience and interest in data collection and analysis for the purpose of improving student performance: the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, Inc.; the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, Inc.; the Massachusetts School Administrators Association, Incorporated; the Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials, Inc.; the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators, Inc.; the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools, Inc.; and the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, Inc.; and 4 members to be appointed by the commissioner, 1 of whom shall be a teacher in a district of not less than 15,000 students who has experience in an underperforming or chronically underperforming school that has utilized data to successfully improve student performance, 1 of whom shall be a parent of a student currently enrolled at a kindergarten, elementary school, middle school or junior high school or high school in the commonwealth and 2 of whom shall have professional experience and knowledge in the area of data collection, quality and usage in establishing education policy and improving student outcomes.

*(c)  The data advisory commission shall report annually, not later than December 1, on its progress to the board of elementary and secondary education; provided, however, that the report shall be made publicly available on the department’s website.*

# Data Advisory Commission Membership

* Matthew Deninger, Chief Strategy and Research Officer, Designee of the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, Chair
* Mark Reilly, Undersecretary of Education, Massachusetts Executive Office of Education (EOE), Designee of the Secretary of Education
* Steve Sharek, Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators (MAVA)
* Deborah Boyd, Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools (MARS)
* Joe Esposito, Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE)
* Mary Bourque, Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS)
* Pola Andrews, Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials (MASBO)
* Paul Schlichtman, Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC)
* Matt Mattos, Massachusetts School Administrators Association (MSAA)

Four members to be appointed[[1]](#footnote-2) by the Commissioner:

* A teacher who has used data to improve performance
* A parent of a student currently in the public schools
* Two at-large members with professional experience in the use of education data

**Data Advisory Commission – 2024 Overview**

The Data Advisory Commission met twice during 2024. Consistent with its legislative charge, the group continued its overview of current ongoing data-related strategies and initiatives at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (hereafter “DESE”). As background, the Commission continues to push forward in six focus areas that it established in 2021. While not all focus areas are addressed at each meeting that the Commission holds, they help ground the Commission and set direction for DESE’s efforts to improve its data systems, and its understanding of questions related to school and district funding, over time. The focus areas are as follows:

1. *Optimize data collection, specifically regarding districts’ reporting of student information, in coordination with other state agencies, and specific to district use of incremental increases in Chapter 70 funding via the state Student Opportunity Act, in concert with the federal COVID relief funds for districts through ESSER I, II, and III. (§17(a)(i) & (iii))*
2. *Optimize and align performance indicators, specifically regarding districts’ performance targets per the state Student Opportunity Act, and any federal requirements as part of ESSER I, II, and III to help determine if funding is achieving its intended purpose. (§17(a)(ii))*
3. *Improve data matching to better understand workforce/wage outcomes for students. (§17(a)(iii))*
4. *Strengthen the end-of-the-year financial data collection to improve usability of financial information, through improved coding and enhanced data exports. (§17(a)(i) thru (iv))*
5. *Commission an independent researcher to study whether state funds are targeted to and are reaching the intended population of students, whether cost-effective interventions are being implemented, and whether the funds are achieving their intended purpose. (§17(a)(i) & (iii))*
6. *Support greater use of existing data analytics tools that provide data for all stakeholder groups, including but not limited to families, school personnel, district personnel, and policymakers, and work with all stakeholder groups to improve the availability and usability of state-supported data and data analytics tools. (§17(a)(ii))*

Having spent much of its time looking at focus areas 1-4 and 6 over the past few years, the Commission consolidated its efforts on focus area 5 in 2024.

# Data Advisory Commission: 2024 Deliberations

### March 2024

In March, the Commission was presented with updates from focus area 5, related to the spending study. At the time, DESE was in the process of formulating documentation that would eventually become a public bid for evaluation/research services to be delivered by a vendor. The purpose of the conversation was to seek the Commission’s feedback on the scope of those services.

***Focus Area 5: Commission an independent researcher to study whether state funds are targeted to and are reaching the intended population of students, whether cost-effective interventions are being implemented, and whether the funds are achieving their intended purpose. (§17(a)(i) & (iii))***

The Commission reviewed key provisions of the spending study, covering the process for procuring the study and discussing potential research questions related to the equitable distribution of SOA and ESSER funds, trends in spending, evidence-based practices, and high-impact spending categories.

The Commission discussed the research questions themselves:

1. How did districts and schools use SOA and ESSER funds? What are the patterns of spending? Do similar types of districts, based on characteristics like district size and student groups served, have similar patterns of spending (based on categories)? To what degree were SOA and ESSER funds used for similar or divergent activities?
2. To what extent has the additional funding under the SOA and ESSER funds been targeted to the intended populations (low-income students, ELs) in districts and schools? To what extent have these funds been allocated and distributed to districts and schools that disproportionately serve these student groups?
3. To what extent has the growth in required local contributions under the SOA, as well as the state’s distribution of SOA funding to districts and schools, been more equitable than the distribution of [Chapter 70](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.doe.mass.edu%2Ffinance%2Fchapter70%2Ffy2024%2Fchapter-2024-whitepaper.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK) funds in the years prior to SOA?
4. What are trends in SOA and ESSER spending, separately and jointly, at the district level, relative to district spending in the years prior to SOA and ESSER (i.e., what categories of spending have increased, decreased, stayed constant) in total dollars and proportionally?
5. What are trends in SOA and ESSER spending, separately and jointly, at the school level, relative to school-level educational spending in the years prior to SOA and ESSER (i.e., what categories of spending have increased, decreased, stayed constant, both over time and relative to one another)?
6. To what extent did Massachusetts public school districts use these funds to build capacity by funding investments that will continue after ESSER funding ends? Which evidence-based practices were invested in?
7. To what extent can we quantitatively identify spending (in categories or programs) that has been high impact (i.e., has led to improved student outcomes, for example attendance, discipline, course completion, etc.)? To what extent can we quantitatively identify categories of spending that seemed to be high impact and/or cost-effective (e.g., has shown a positive return on investment)?

The Commission members’ feedback was wide-ranging. Some raised questions and concerns about:

* using data beyond what DESE has access to
* the potential for overlap between SOA and ESSER impacts that will be challenging to disentangle
* the highly dynamic nature of the current education funding landscape, especially with respect to the fiscal cliff post-ESSER funding termination
* the study's timeline
* the need to include information about how funds supported special education and mental health issues
* the researchers’ ability to precisely track SOA funds since the funds go into municipal general funds and lose their identity
* identifying districts that benefitted most from SOA to provide a clearer picture of funding impacts.

The meeting highlighted the importance of incorporating feedback from Commission members on critical areas of focus in the comprehensive study on the impacts of SOA and ESSER funding, while also addressing the need for clear methodologies, precise research questions, and clear timelines.

### October 2024

***Focus Area 1: Optimize data collection, specifically regarding districts’ reporting of student information, in coordination with other state agencies, and specific to district use of incremental increases in Chapter 70 funding via the state Student Opportunity Act, in concert with the federal COVID relief funds for districts through ESSER I, II, and III. (§17(a)(i) & (iii))***

***Focus Area 2: Optimize and align performance indicators, specifically regarding districts’ performance targets per the state Student Opportunity Act, and any federal requirements as part of ESSER I, II, and III to help determine if funding is achieving its intended purpose. (§17(a)(ii))***

In the fall, the first part of the Commission’s meeting centered on focus areas 1 and 2, specifically the collection and review of the second round of Student Opportunity Act 3-year plans (2025-2027). The Commission was briefed on the review process, as required by SOA legislation. The group was introduced to a summary document that DESE prepared that detailed the status and investment plans of districts over the next three years. DESE noted improvements in this year's district plans but emphasized the need for more implementation support for districts and schools as they target strategies to help various student groups, especially those who are lowest performing.

Commission members asked that the formally resubmitted plans be shared with the researchers who will be working on the aforementioned spending study (focus area 5), and DESE reiterated its commitment to share as much as possible with the researchers to give them a better understanding of how funds were spent to support the goals of these SOA plans, and to then leverage the findings from the study to support future SOA plans.

***Focus Area 5: Commission an independent researcher to study whether state funds are targeted to and are reaching the intended population of students, whether cost-effective interventions are being implemented, and whether the funds are achieving their intended purpose. (§17(a)(i) & (iii))***

For the second part of the meeting, the Commission was provided with an update on the SOA/ESSER spending study, which, since the previous meeting, had met several preliminary objectives. DESE had conducted and completed a thorough procurement process, and had selected a research vendor: Afton Partners, a research outfit that has extensive experience and expertise in education finance and evaluations. The members learned that some of the deliverables include a public summary report expected midway through the fiscal year, and a comprehensive report to be delivered by June 30, 2025, which marks the end of the 2025 state fiscal year. The contract with Afton Partners has also built into it two possible years of extensions, should DESE want to extend the relationship and if funding is available.

The group did a final review of the research questions, as the spending study was just underway. A few more ideas came out of the conversation. Within the scope of the research questions, Commission members asked that the vendor consider the incremental differences on total district spending on large expenditure areas like staffing, detailed spending on certain evidence-based practices, and how local contributions are influenced by state aid increases.

# Conclusion

In 2025, the Commission anticipates holding meetings to review the preliminary findings of the independent spending study, improvements in DESE’s public reporting around spending, resource allocation, and financial transparency, among other topics that arise. We also anticipate, following the Commissioner’s outreach efforts in 2024, having all seats on the Commission filled in 2025.

1. As of this writing, the Commissioner has sought applicants for these vacant seats and is actively vetting applications. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)