



Focus on districts with the largest number of underperforming schools and work collaboratively to strengthen district capacity and build district infrastructure to support standards-based classroom instruction.

N.B. Data collection for this SEA took place between July 2007 and April 2008.

CONTEXT

As the most populous of the six New England states, Massachusetts is also geographically diverse, with topography ranging from Cape Cod to the Berkshires and with many urban and suburban areas between the coastline and the mountains. While 87% of its residents are White, three major cities—Boston, Worcester, and Springfield, in order of size—and a dozen small once-industrial cities all have diverse populations with large numbers of recent immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007a). Most recent immigrants come from Spanish-speaking countries, Brazil, and Haiti. Minority populations are also clustered in the cities. For example, Boston’s population is 25% Black and 14% Latino, while Springfield’s is 21% black and 27% Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007b, 2007c). The diversity within these populations is also great, with a wide range of educational and cultural backgrounds. Massachusetts’ public education system currently serves nearly a million students (Hoffman, 2007).

An initial system to identify and support low-performing schools was enacted through the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) of 1993, placing the state at the forefront of standards-based reform (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, n.d.a, n.d.b). From the MERA, the School and District Accountability System on Underperforming Schools and Districts was adopted in 1999. It has evolved to meet the accountability requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), with the most recent modifications to the regulations on underperforming schools made in October 2006. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), first administered in 1998 and subsequently revised periodically, assesses math and English language arts based on the learning standards in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

Massachusetts General Law, Ch. 69, provides the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education authority over underperforming and “chronically underperforming” schools (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, n.d.a). In October 2006, the Board amended its regulations to specify that schools in either corrective action or restructuring for students in the aggregate according to NCLB are identified as “Commonwealth Priority Schools” (CPS) (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE], 2006). Further changes that will identify chronically underperforming schools as CPS Priority 1 are pending. According to a memo dated October 23, 2007, from Jeffrey Nellhaus, Acting Commissioner of Education (Nellhaus, 2007), this classification indicates “that the school needs significant state-supported

intervention. Possible intervention strategies include assignment of a school turnaround partner, the school’s conversion to a Commonwealth Pilot School, or other substantial changes likely to lead to improvement.” Some describe this move as “akin to a state takeover.” The Board was also given the authority to remove the principal of a chronically underperforming school, with the district superintendent maintaining the authority to designate a new principal who gains authority over the school’s budget and staff. The new regulations direct the district to prioritize the support it will provide to its CPS to be focused on 10 elements, which include extra instructional time for non-proficient students, two instructional coaches, and common planning time for teachers (DESE, 2006). In fiscal year 2007, the state legislature established a line item and appropriated \$6 million in funds to DESE to provide targeted assistance to underperforming schools and districts.

Selection Criteria

The Massachusetts state accountability plan outlining how the state holds schools and districts accountable was most recently updated with the U.S. Department of Education in July 2007 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Table MA-1 outlines the ways in which the state’s plan addresses the 10 principles required by NCLB.

Massachusetts uses Composite Performance Index (CPI) scores rather than straight proficiency targets in its adequate yearly progress (AYP) determination. The state determines AYP for schools based on the CPI, along with a 95% participation rate and an additional indicator. The additional indicator for Grades 1 through 8 is a 92% attendance rate, or 1% improvement over the previous year. For high school, it is a 55% graduation rate of 4-year cohorts.

Table MA-1. Massachusetts AYP Measures

| NCLB AYP Determination Requirement | Massachusetts’ Approach |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Assessment | MCAS |
| Proficiency Target | Index System |
| Starting Point | 20th Percentile |
| Participation | 95% |
| Additional Measure | Attendance/Graduation Rate |
| Additional Provisions | Average scores up to 2 previous years for high schools and averaging of scores across grades within a school |

| NCLB AYP Determination Requirement | Massachusetts' Approach |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Minimum Number for Subgroups | |
| Accountability/Performance | 40 |
| Participation | 40 |
| Confidence Intervals | 95% |
| Other | No |

Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2007.

Table MA-2 outlines the number and percentage of low-performing schools in Massachusetts, as well as the number of years they have been designated as such. Schools can be identified for more than one subject area. For example, a school may be identified as in need of improvement (INI) Year 1 for math and INI Year 2 for reading. Table MA-2 includes both designations. As a result, the year-to-year distribution of schools designated low-performing totals more than 100% of the state's total number of low-performing schools.

Table MA-2. Massachusetts Low-Performing Schools, Academic Year 2007–2008

| No. of Schools in State | No. (%) of Schools Designated as Low-Performing | Number of Years Designated | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|----------------------------|-----|-----|-----|----|---|----|---|---------|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | Exiting |
| 1,822 | 674 (37%) | 183 | 183 | 117 | 140 | 26 | 9 | 16 | 0 | 17 |

Note: Years Designated corresponds to previously noted NCLB designations accordingly: Year 1 = INI (year 1), Year 2 = INI (year 2), Year 3 = Corrective Action, Year 4 = Restructuring (year 1), Year 5 = Restructuring (year 2), Year 6 = Restructuring (year 3), Year 7 = Restructuring (year 4), Year 8 = Restructuring (year 5).

Source: Massachusetts DESE, 2007 (numbers do not include single-school districts).

District AYP determinations are issued separately for three grade spans: Grades 3 to 5, 6 to 8, and 9 to 12. A district fails to make AYP if students in the aggregate or any subgroup fail to make AYP in the *same subject area in all grade spans* for 2 consecutive years.

Before 2008, districts had come under review by the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA), an entity outside of DESE that the Governor's Office established in 2000. Every year, EQA analyzed district performance data and selected districts to undergo a district review, with a focus on districts with high-need schools. Coincidentally, the districts that had been identified as being in corrective action fell into this category, although AYP designation neither triggered nor resulted in an EQA visit.

The district reviews were lengthy and comprehensive, covering everything from governance to student performance. If widespread deficiencies were found upon review, the Commissioner and the Board determined a district to be underperforming and appointed an independent fact-finding team to assess the reasons for the underperformance. (The EQA system was shut down in December 2007, and the function of district auditing has been moved to DESE.)

Table MA-3 presents the numbers of schools identified and the numbers of years schools have been low performing.

Table MA-3. Massachusetts Low-Performing Districts, Academic Year 2007–2008

| No. of Districts in State | No. (%) of Districts Designated as Low-Performing | Number of Years Designated | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|---|----------------------------|---|----|----|---|---|---|---|---------|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | Exiting |
| 389 | 47 (12%) | 3 | 8 | 16 | 20 | - | - | - | - | 86 |

Note: Years Designated corresponds to previously noted NCLB designations accordingly: Year 1 = INI (year 1), Year 2 = INI (year 2), Year 3 = Corrective Action, Year 4 = Restructuring (year 1), Year 5 = Restructuring (year 2), Year 6 = Restructuring (year 3), Year 7 = Restructuring (year 4), Year 8 = Restructuring (year 5).

Source: Massachusetts DESE, 2007.

Note: The following sections of this profile are grounded in data gathered from state education agency (SEA) interviews and a focus group conducted between July and November 2007. The SEA website, official SEA policies and administrative policies, legislation, court cases, and other official documents supplement the interviews and focus groups.

Interventions with Low-Performing Schools and Districts

Table MA-4. Massachusetts Interventions with Low-Performing Schools and Districts

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Policies | Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MGL Ch. 69) provides the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education authority over underperforming and chronically underperforming schools. Board regulations 603 CMR 2.00. |
| Primary Focus of Intervention | The 24 districts in corrective action, with the 9 largest identified as “Commissioner’s districts.” CPSs, including Commonwealth Pilot Schools. Priority 1 Schools—chronically underperforming schools. |
| Services | |
| Site-Specific | DESE staff are assigned to each of nine Commissioner’s districts and meet regularly with district staff to monitor and support implementation of the District Plan for School Intervention (DPSI). |
| Planning Assistance | DESE supports nine urban districts in developing DPSIs and negotiates an agreement for appropriate services and supports. Turnaround Partners are assigned to three small underperforming districts. |
| Work with Data | Tools and training on data analysis are offered. CPSs are encouraged and supported to develop and use a formative assessment system to target instruction. |
| Professional Development | Leadership training required for all CPS principals. Workshops in literacy, math, Reading First, and supporting English language learners (ELLs) offered to teachers. |
| Convening Schools/Districts | Urban Superintendents Network Stakeholder Working Group |
| Sanctions | DESE has authority to require improvement planning with state oversight, remove school principals, and reassign staff. |
| Monitoring | DESE staff are assigned to each district; consultants are contracted to oversee improvement efforts in underperforming districts and chronically underperforming schools. |
| Other | Schools that show exemplary improvement, named Compass Schools, are given \$10,000 to support ongoing improvement initiatives. |

Rationale for Intervention

The state’s methods of intervention with low-performing schools were in transition in 2007. As the Senior Associate Commissioner said in a recent concept paper, “Our approach to helping schools and districts improve has evolved from identifying problems to working collaboratively to strengthen district capacity and build district infrastructure to support standards-based classroom instruction” (DESE, 2007c).

From 2001 through 2005, the department focused on underperforming schools by supporting the establishment of school leadership teams and training the teams and leaders to disaggregate student data and develop results-oriented school improvement plans. Because nearly all these schools were located in urban districts, DESE also began convening the Massachusetts Urban Superintendents Network, first with 12 superintendents and later adding leaders of 14 additional districts.

In these years, there was an emphasis on objective assessment of schools' and districts' capacity to help all children learn at high standards. Schools were assessed through a State Panel Review, consisting of teams of educators organized and trained by DESE. In addition, the department encouraged schools to do a root cause analysis (RCA) to understand the problems underlying poor test scores, in order to develop more effective school improvement plans. Districts were assessed by an independent entity, the office of EQA, established by the legislature. The EQA process was widely seen as punitive, and local educators often confused the entity with DESE.

In 2003–2004, the first three school districts (Holyoke, Southbridge, and Winchendon) were declared underperforming. The department assigned each of the districts a school improvement organization as a Turnaround Partner, funded out of the districts' MCAS remediation accounts. The Turnaround Partners continued to work with the districts through 2007.

In fall 2006, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education passed regulations that allowed stronger interventions to be directed to low-performing schools more quickly. The new regulations streamlined the process of classification and now allow the Commissioner to identify underperforming schools based on NCLB status, now called CPSs (DESE, 2006). The regulations also require districts to make 10 “necessary changes” for CPSs, which the Associate Commissioner for Performance Improvement and Leadership Development (interview, September 5, 2007), called “conditional structures.” These include allowing the principal additional authority over staffing and budget, requiring weekly common planning time for teachers, and completing quarterly formative assessments in core subjects; the regulations also specified 90 minutes per day instruction in English language arts and math for students who are not proficient, and after-school tutoring and support (DESE, 2006). The 10 requirements came from a systematic examination of the school reform literature.

Around the same time, the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education was faced with a decision about four schools that had reached the chronically underperforming level. Rather than naming the schools as such, the Board chair gave them a choice: be named a chronically underperforming school and receive priority for state intervention support, or become a CPS with considerable autonomy, as long as the 10 conditions are met and 80% of the staff and the union support improvement plans. Each school chose the latter, developed a restructuring plan, and identified a partner. The pilot schools receive assistance from the Center for Collaborative Education.

Preconditions

Massachusetts is providing implementation support to the nine largest school districts, which together include 80% of the CPSs. The 10 required conditional structures are seen as preconditions for change in schools to ensure they achieve AYP.

Strategies

Department staff are assigned to each targeted district and provide ongoing support and monitoring. The district, rather than the school, must provide a school intervention plan, and the plan must show how the district will support its CPSs. The district must first provide an analysis of past efforts and current problems, identify new strategies to implement, and outline expected outcomes. The district has 30 days to submit an intervention plan for review by a state review panel and approval by the Board. The district receives funding according to a state formula to support its plans. Although the goal of DESE was to shift assistance to districts, it has also provided assistance to schools identified as chronically underperforming.

Initial Outcomes

From 2000-2006, DESE:

- Conducted 105 school panel reviews and 40 fact finding reviews.
- Developed the Performance Improvement Mapping process, used in 50+ schools.
- Formed Turnaround Partnerships with three chronically underperforming schools and three underperforming districts.
- Provided National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) training. In FY 07, NISL trained 30 trainers and 576 leaders from 24 districts; in FY 06, it trained 279 leaders from 20 districts.

DESE has developed lessons learned from its experience to date that can influence new approaches to interventions and has shared these lessons with the Board (DESE, 2008).

Lead SEA Contact(s)

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Challenges and Future Plans

As the number of schools and districts in corrective action began to dramatically increase, DESE staff became concerned about their own capacity to offer intervention and support. Thus, the department has begun to focus its attention and support at the district level. The department recognizes, however, that many districts are small and have limited staff and resources with which to intervene with schools, and it has begun to explore with a group of educational service organizations possible approaches for providing services to schools and districts in a geographic region of the commonwealth. The goal is to establish a

statewide system of support for underperforming schools, through districts when they have the capacity to provide it and through external partners for schools in small districts. A concept paper on this approach has been written and circulated for feedback.

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