

THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT:

Accountability in Massachusetts



INTRODUCTION

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides states with increased flexibility in how they measure individual student, school, and district performance while requiring that states and districts develop a system of accountability that guarantees every student a high-quality education. As public school teachers who represent diverse communities around Massachusetts, we know that a strong accountability system is an essential lever to ensure an equitable education for *all* students. With this increased autonomy under ESSA, states have an opportunity to consider a broader set of measures that ensure that all students have access to an excellent educational environment and increased achievement.

ESSA outlines specific criteria for academic accountability (high school graduation rates, performance on state exams, and English language proficiency). Importantly, states also now have the chance to track additional measures of student success, such as teacher retention, student discipline, and academic offerings. It is our belief that Massachusetts should include additional measures on the accountability dashboard, which will increase school transparency and thus promote the health of the entire school ecosystem. We believe that we need a more holistic approach to identify schools in need of assistance in order to ultimately support them. With increased transparency comes more public awareness—and by extension more community involvement—in schools.

Our hope is that some of the recommended changes to Massachusetts' accountability system will promote a more positive view of the system as a whole and increasingly involve community stakeholders. Our new accountability system has the ability to serve as a lever for school equity, particularly for those students who are most vulnerable and who have been traditionally underserved by public schools. This report lays out our recommendation to guide the creation of such a system, ensuring that every student in Massachusetts has access to a high-quality education.

RECOMMENDATION I: Retaining Highly-Qualified Teachers as an Indicator of School Success

We believe that teacher retention serves as an important barometer of school quality. High levels of teacher turnover negatively impact student achievement, but more importantly act as an indirect measure of a variety of school conditions that lead to low student achievement.¹ Teacher turnover negatively impacts student learning, prevents capacity building, and is correlated with a variety of other school environment issues such as administrative competency, facilities issues, and school climate. In urban schools, these school conditions are the primary factor motivating teachers to leave.² By focusing on teacher retention, we can provide a foundation to ensure that districts and schools are building an environment where teachers, and consequently their students, thrive.

Teacher turnover often negatively impacts student achievement because higher-quality teachers are replaced with less qualified ones. This churn of teachers within a school also lowers student achievement.³ Research shows that high-impact and low-impact teachers leave at about the same rates and that, correspondingly, on average the quality of a newly-hired teacher in an urban school is lower than that of the teacher they replaced.⁴ Students in urban schools are far more likely to have inexperienced, unqualified, or unskilled teachers. This leads to tremendous inequity in the distribution of skillful teachers across school districts. Furthermore, teacher turnover often results in teachers being reassigned to a new grade, course, or even subject area, diminishing their expertise and impact on student achievement.

Districts and schools spend millions of dollars training new teachers each year, but teacher turnover remains high in our most challenging schools. Students directly benefit from improved teacher retention rates, with increased achievement. Furthermore, our increasingly diverse student demographic needs a more diverse and culturally competent teacher workforce. In order to close achievement gaps in our most challenged schools, it is essential that schools develop stronger and more effective systems to recruit, train and support a highly-qualified and diverse teacher workforce in order to meet the needs of the students they serve. In order for a school to become more culturally competent, it should constantly strive to ensure that its staff reflects and has the ability to serve a diverse student population. If a school or district has high turnover rates, it will continue to struggle to close the gaps in our students' academic achievement.

During the three years I taught at a comprehensive urban high school, it experienced extremely high rates of teacher turnover, around 25 percent of the staff per year. In the math department, two-thirds of the faculty left in a single year. The special education department had three directors in as many years. Positions went unfilled at the start of the school year, and it was not uncommon for teachers to leave before the end. This tremendous turnover had a variety of effects on both students and teachers, but the one that most often goes unaccounted for is the **psychological impact**.

When I first arrived, one long-time teacher jokingly remarked that she never bothered to learn the names of new teachers until they had been at the school for two years. Though a joke, it reflects the challenge of building relationships when they are likely to be fleeting. And so it is for students.

In order to support students in a high-poverty environment, teacher-student relationships are essential. Children in high-poverty environments more often experience family members being deported, abusive step-parents, pregnancy, abortions, depression, and homelessness, all issues through which I have supported students. They too wonder if they should build relationships with teachers who are likely to leave. They wonder if we can be trusted to stick around. They are not blind to the teacher turnover or what it might imply about them. Some students wonder openly if teachers leave because they are “bad kids” or if they leave to work at a “better school.” I have had students ask me, “Why do you teach here?” the unsaid addendum being, “When you could teach someplace else.” How can we convince them that they should learn when each year they get the message that they were not worth teaching? Each June, they look at you with curious and sometimes cold eyes asking, “Will you be back?” They are waiting for the disappointment they know will come. They have already accepted it.

— Will Schwartz, Revere Public Schools

Beyond the impact designation of school levels, Massachusetts should pay attention to the systemic effects of teacher turnover. The crisis lies in the fact that 50 percent of teachers who leave their school each year (for reasons other than retirement) are not merely leaving their school, but also the profession. The cost of replacing these teachers amounts to seven billion dollars each year across the US.⁵ These resources could be better spent providing mentoring, high-quality professional learning and other supports to reduce teacher attrition. In a single school, some teacher attrition may be helpful and may represent teachers and schools

trying to find the best fit, but when the issue persists systematically and chronically at high rates, it creates a revolving door of less-qualified teachers.⁶

Teachers who stay together as a team and engage in peer learning are the most powerful predictor of improved student achievement over time.⁷ As teachers, we know this, and we need an accountability system that acknowledges the immense value of long-term capacity building of teachers. Reporting and holding schools accountable for their teacher retention rates will be the first step toward ensuring that our schools are places where all teachers and students can thrive.

RECOMMENDATION II: Discipline Referrals by Subgroup as an Indicator of School Success

As teachers, we know how important it is to engage students and to meet their emotional and behavioral needs in order for them to learn. Schools and school systems often remove challenging students from their learning environment to mitigate the impact that these students have on the quality of education for others and the standardized test data. African-American students are more than three times as likely as Caucasian students to be suspended multiple times during an academic year.⁸ This trend begins in preschool and is consistent through high school. Although boys are twice as likely to receive multiple suspensions as girls, African-American girls are consistently suspended more than Caucasian girls. According to the Civil Rights Data Collection, students with diagnosed disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive suspensions. We believe that to increase equity in our educational system, schools and districts in Massachusetts should be required to report data on discipline referrals and suspensions.

I worked in a substantially separate special education setting for eight years. At this school, we served students diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders. It's impossible to ignore the role that my students' race had in their special education status. In addition to exclusively serving students with diagnosed disabilities, we *almost* exclusively served African-American and Latino students.

Our average student attended five different educational settings during their elementary school years, being referred from program to program. In addition, almost all of our students had been suspended from each school on multiple occasions. When they arrived at our school, many of our students' families expressed that they felt disenfranchised from the educational system. Often students as young as 11 years old would be absent from school upwards of 20 days in a year. Although students received more intensive services and therapeutic supports at our school, they also entered the school through a metal detector and were subject to searches and "therapeutic holds."

About halfway through my eight years of service, our school adopted positive behavioral supports and a restorative justice program. We began to take a much more introspective and data-driven approach to our disciplinary practices and to give students, teachers, and parents mediated opportunities for honest communication. This school system continues to serve one of the most challenged and fragile population of students in Boston with greatly improved therapeutic outcomes—including a reduction in rates of suspension. Our school was recently recognized as a model for other schools to emulate to develop effective behavior management practices for their students.

— Nathan Lewellen, Boston Public Schools

When looking at discipline data that combines racial background and disability status, the trends are even more concerning. Approximately 25 percent of all African-American males with disabilities receive multiple out-of-school suspensions. They are also more frequently arrested at school and placed in physical restraint or seclusion. Suffice it to say that the empirical data gathered to this point shows that there is a demographic gap in discipline referrals that mirrors the achievement gap.⁹ We believe that it is possible to address this inequity in education through adoption of best practices in school discipline. These practices include the use of school-wide positive behavioral supports, data-driven behavioral interventions, and restorative justice practices. If schools are struggling to support student emotional learning, they should receive support in the same way as when they struggle to support student academic learning. As teachers, we know the importance of engaging students before they are able to learn. Before we can reach the hearts and minds of all of our students, we must create a positive environment where they can succeed.

RECOMMENDATION III: Well-Rounded Curriculum Publicly Reported for All Schools

The number of hours spent on math and English courses over the past 15 years has dramatically increased for all students, especially when compared to the hours spent in history, science, art, physical education, and other extracurricular classes. Math and English are important foundations for all students, but we believe that in order to teach to the whole student, we must provide equal access to a well-rounded curriculum.

Art, physical education, and other electives provide students with skills that complement learning in other subjects. For example, designing something in art class assists in spatial reasoning in math, while setting and beating your own personal record for the mile run in physical education class supports students' ability to set reading goals in English. For many students, these electives provide windows into careers and interests that they will continue to explore throughout their lives.

In high-poverty schools, history and science are often cut in order to add more time for math and English. These subjects are valuable for students to dive into year after year, and there are many ways to integrate both math and English into a science class, for example. We believe all children should have equal access to a diverse, challenging, and engaging curriculum, not just those in the best-resourced schools.

This is why we are recommending that families, community members, and other stakeholders be provided with information about the hours of instruction per week that students receive for each class. For a parent who values art for their child, knowing that a school provides art will be crucial information. With increased transparency around hours and type of instruction, families will be able to make well-informed decisions about whether or not a school is the right fit for them and their child.

CONCLUSION

We believe that a comprehensive and broad set of accountability measures will guarantee that all schools strive to provide all students in Massachusetts with the best possible education. The purpose of an accountability system is to ensure equity amongst our students and schools, determine where schools lie in comparison to others, and provide feedback and data for educators to support and drive improvement in school performance.

We want to change the perception of our accountability system from punitive to supportive of our students and schools in reaching the highest of standards. The measures we recommend will be most successfully implemented if they are phased in, in order to increase school capacity to meet these targets.

Regardless of whether these measures are included as part of the formal school accountability rating metrics, we believe that they should be reported to the public via school report cards in a manner that is easily accessible, clearly understood by all stakeholders, and includes clear benchmarks for improvement. It is essential that families understand where schools stand in relation to other schools in their district and state in order to act on that information.

We believe deeply that our communities deserve to have access to this data, because with increased transparency comes increased urgency and action to improve schools. Our hope is that our proposed changes to Massachusetts' accountability system will encourage and increase community involvement in improving our schools. By using a more holistic approach to identify schools in need and to provide them with necessary supports, we will not only improve the performance of the school, but also the well-being of the entire school community.

ENDNOTES

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Teach Plus Massachusetts Teaching Policy Fellows, 2016-2017

Ulana Ainsworth

Emily Banta

Ryan Casey

Karen Clark

Desirée Daring

Gina Desir

Tuyet Dinh

Krista Fincke*

Emily Griggs

Jillian Jacobs

Caroline Jones

David Jones*

Christina Jusino

Telia Kapteyn*

Jennifer Langdon

Nathan Lewallen*

Michael Macchi

Ariel Maloney

Chaitra McCarty

Justin Norton

Julie O'Neil

Curtis Perdue

Molly Ross

Will Schwartz*

Alicia Serafin

*Denotes lead author

Paul Toner, Executive Director, Teach Plus Massachusetts

Diane Grinnell, Policy Manager, Teach Plus Massachusetts

Sasha Zuflacht, Senior Program and Policy Coordinator, Teach Plus Massachusetts

