



ACHIEVING EQUITY THROUGH FUNDING

Teach Plus Policy Fellows Recommendations
for Implementing the Student Opportunity Act



INTRODUCTION

We often hear the current state of education referred to as “unprecedented times.” And though many of the new facets of the current educational landscape present as challenges, one positive implication is the amount of funding available to schools and school districts across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, whether it be through various phases of the Elementary and Secondary School Relief Fund (ESSER) or, in Massachusetts, the Student Opportunity Act (SOA).

We are a group of Teach Plus Policy Fellows representing four districts in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, who chose this work to make sure teachers had ample voice in the decisions surrounding legislated increases and allocations in educational funding. We teach in districts that range from urban to rural across the state and we're united in our steadfast commitment to advocating for our students and the communities in which they live.

Given a radical economic shift in a society still battling a pandemic and the complications in its wake, we felt it was important for districts to be strategic and equitable in deploying the newly available funds to help meet the needs of our students without further burdening the families of the Commonwealth to foot the bill. As teachers, who are the most proximate to students, we also felt we are uniquely positioned to undertake this work and contribute to the conversations about future funding decisions. In this brief, we present findings and recommendations for policymakers to improve equity and learning opportunities for students using SOA plans.

Findings

1. Not every district explicitly addressed students' social emotional learning needs and how to support them in their plans.
2. All surveyed districts prioritized access to high-quality instructional materials in their plans.
3. Stakeholders' input into the SOA plans varied widely from district to district.

Recommendations

1. All districts should include specific and actionable steps to provide for students' SEL needs, rather than goals or general statements.
2. Districts should choose curricular and instructional materials that allow for access to rigorous content and meet the social emotional needs of students in a way that is cohesive and integrated.
3. DESE should create a standardized input-gathering system from various stakeholders to which all districts should be accountable.

METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the equity of funding across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, we focused on the SOA plans for 17 districts. These districts differ in size and location within the Commonwealth, as well as their rural, urban and suburban setting. While the original SOA plans were drafted by districts in 2019, we focused our research primarily on how SOA plans may have been revised following the COVID-19 outbreak. Our research question centered on what SOA funding is being used for in different districts and who was included in the decisions around its allocation.

We started by examining the information that the SOA plans included, and were therefore able to organize them into the following subcategories: 1. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Supports; 2. Curriculum; 3. Outreach and Stakeholders. Specifically, we wanted to find out how consistently an emphasis was placed on increasing support for students' social and emotional learning. In examining these 17 specific districts, we were able to gather the most consistent information about SEL, curriculum and instruction, and the stakeholders involved in determining the usage of these SOA funds.¹

FINDINGS

1. Not every district explicitly addressed students' SEL needs and how to support these in their plans.

Given the social emotional needs of our students, we were particularly interested in seeing what SEL supports districts might be using the SOA funds for in their plans. It is notable, and somewhat surprising, that only nine of the 17 districts whose plans we examined included specific sections for SEL supports. Several districts planned to use funds for personnel relating to SEL. This included hiring for new positions, such as additional guidance counselors, social workers and psychologists, to better support holistic student needs. Several districts proposed enhancing their SEL-related curriculum, including providing instructional training and materials for staff, as well as professional development (PD) related to social and emotional needs for teachers and staff. Two districts specified using these funds for Bridge for Resilient Youth in Transition (BRYT) programs. BRYT offers more intensive mental health and SEL support systems for students who have demonstrated some of the highest needs, particularly being out of school for more prolonged times due to physical and mental health reasons.² Finally, two of the school districts we looked at did not provide plans that more generally encompass social emotional support systems, such as providing programs for families and a district which folded it into work to improve overall equity, while not specifically calling it out.

Research shows that "in order to create respectful, inclusive, and responsive learning environments that benefit all students, it is essential to consider the link between educational equity and students' social and emotional development. The relationship between SEL and educational equity is reciprocal: SEL can advance the aims of educational equity by supporting all students to feel welcome, seen, and competent at school. At the same time, an intentional focus on equity enhances SEL practice by ensuring that SEL is relevant, accessible, and beneficial for all students. In fact, high-quality SEL programs facilitate and rely upon many of the same practices that contribute to more equitable and inclusive learning environments, such as 1) fostering a caring and just culture and climate; 2) building student voice and agency; 3) cultivating understanding and respect for cultural differences; and 4) emphasizing asset-based approaches to skill development."³

Many districts have been able to use the SOA funds to directly support student SEL needs, particularly by hiring more counselors and clinicians for their schools who will work directly with students. A number of other districts have considered increasing SEL curriculum, PD, and materials for school staff, while a few have added or bolstered BRYT programming for some of the highest need students. However, notable in the research is the number of districts who did not specify funds for any SEL-related needs or supports.

2. All districts prioritized access to high-quality instructional materials in their plans.

A large number of districts we looked at took advantage of the new funding to close gaps in curriculum and instruction, in an attempt to address unfinished learning from the last two years. Each of the 17 districts in our study included a section in their plan for curriculum, instruction, or both. Many districts may have also taken advantage of the separate Acceleration Grants for curricular materials; however, those are not included in the plans we reviewed.

Some of the more common uses for funds to support instruction include:

- + Eleven districts focus on specific supports for literacy instruction (curriculum, support staff)
- + Seven districts specifically include new staff in their plans, including inclusion teachers, support staff, instructional assistants, tutors, and coaches.
- + Six districts mention early college programs in their plans (specifically focused on students underrepresented in higher education)
- + Seven districts mention funds for professional development
- + Six districts expand access to full-day pre-K
- + Five districts call for inclusion and co-teaching support⁴

Plans vary widely in terms of the range of initiatives. This could possibly be due to the varying sizes of districts that we sampled. It is also possible that many districts used funds to begin or further initiatives that were already in the works when the pandemic hit.

3. Stakeholders' input into the SOA plans varied widely from district to district.

All but two districts gave some level of description of the stakeholders that they involved in their process. Like other parts of the plan, the details ranged from vague to fairly detailed, though none gave specific numbers of people involved.

- + Fourteen districts specifically mentioned teachers (or teacher unions), although terms like “staff” and “educators” were used and may indicate a group broader than teachers.
- + Thirteen had some element of families involved. Some of these were open, others were represented by an advisory group or other committee such as the Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC).
- + Eight mention school committee in some capacity
- + Six include some element of student voice
- + Three brought in community partner organizations

One district had a vague statement that “Stakeholders were engaged in accordance with the SOA” and only offered as additional information that there was a school committee vote.⁵

We were pleased to see the inclusion of teacher voice to some degree, although it varied from district to district. In general, we found that the more diverse the group of stakeholders, the more diverse the components of the plan in that district. In other words, districts that sought input from the biggest number of stakeholder groups developed plans to impact the greatest number of students, particularly those in more need.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All districts should include specific and actionable steps to provide for students' social emotional needs, rather than goals or general statements.

We recommend that more districts include supports for students' social and emotional needs, particularly in light of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on students. A student's educational journey is significantly impacted by their emotional well-being. Therefore, each district should be using the SOA funding to support students' social and emotional needs in order to maintain equity of educational access. Instead of providing stopgap solutions, each district needs to be intentionally planning to make sure their SEL programs are sustainable.

To that end, we recommend that districts in the Commonwealth spend their SOA funds to create SEL programs with resources and guidance to ensure that diverse students are represented in materials and content and to help educators understand how culture plays a role in the development and expression of SEL competencies. It is important to train teachers and students to adopt and implement a culturally responsive approach to SEL to better engage and strengthen skills of students from all backgrounds, especially those from the BIPOC communities. Culturally responsive SEL includes:

1. building critical self-awareness, which occurs when educators monitor their practices, behaviors, emotions, and interactions through a self-reflective and critical lens
2. building warm, demanding, and reciprocal relationships
3. shifting power to students by giving them a voice and a choice in their learning.⁶ (Ramirez, et all, 2019)

Some possible action steps for districts include:

- + Implementation of the [Thriving Mind Initiative](#) to build a comprehensive school mental health system.⁷
- + Use of the DESE [SEL & Mental Health Grant](#) funding opportunities to support and sustain the mental health and wellness of students through multi-tiered systems of support.⁸
- + Setting of funding goals to provide more counselors and SEL support staff to limit the ratio of students to counselors to no more than 250 to 1. To achieve this, DESE should aim to incentivize private practice mental health professionals to become part of this work until the employee pipeline catches up.

The overwhelming narrative from teachers this year has been that there will never be a return to consistent student learning if we cannot manage their social emotional health. Districts must make certain to have the order right; to attempt to address the learning without addressing the mental health will lead to meager gains at best.

2. Districts should choose curricular and instructional materials that allow for access to rigorous content and meet the social emotional needs of students in a way that is cohesive and integrated.

Many district plans we reviewed appear to separate academic curricular materials from other aspects of student needs. The good news is that the opposite is also true. As districts begin to look into High Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM), many programs are intentionally including SEL lessons and frameworks into their curricula. DESE, through the Rennie Center, works with a committee for CURriculum RATings by TEachers (CURATE).⁹ Teach Plus and Teach Plus teacher leaders have previously taken part in the CURATE work. CURATE's next iteration of curriculum evaluation should provide information for districts on how to best meet the social emotional needs of students, regardless of the curriculum or content area.

3. DESE should create a standardized input-gathering system from stakeholders to which all districts should be accountable.

School communities should feel that they have the ability to shape the SOA plans to meet the specific needs of their students and families. In order to ensure that a district plan meets local needs, DESE should create and monitor a survey system with abundant teacher, student, and community participation in the process. Before that, each district should convene a coalition of stakeholders to implement the recommendations from the survey — those whose opinion is asked must have representation in the execution.

From there, DESE should encourage and support opportunities for dialogue among cohorts of districts to ensure that neighboring school communities feel empowered to collaborate in order to provide more robust educational experiences for their students. This can lead to collaboration, innovation, and, ultimately, more positive student outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The two defining words of the SOA are Students and Opportunity. The SOA funds provide districts with the opportunity to reinvent and reimagine learning opportunities for students in equitable and innovative ways. We are eager to begin a conversation with state and district leaders about the what, how, and who of the SOA process to ensure we can help every student access high-quality learning experiences.

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ABOUT TEACH PLUS

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that affect their students' success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all. teachplus.org



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ENDNOTES

1 Teach Plus teacher leaders examined the Student Opportunity Act plans in 17 Massachusetts school districts in spring 2022. Districts varied in urbanicity including 6 urban districts, 6 suburban districts and 5 rural districts. District plans were examined based on the following categories: social and emotional learning, school infrastructure, instruction, curriculum, outreach, student subgroups, and stakeholder involvement.

2 Bridge for Resilient Youth in Transition. The Brookline Center for Community Health. Retrieved from: <https://www.brooklinecenter.org/services/school-based-support/bryt-program/>

3 Ramirez, T., Brush, K., Raisch, N., Bailey, R., & Jones, S. (2021). Equity in Social Emotional Learning Programs: A Content Analysis of Equitable Practices in PreK-5 SEL Programs. *Educational Psychology*. Vol 6. Retrieved from: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2021.679467/full>

4 See endnote 1

5 See endnote 1

6 Ramirez, T., Brush, K., Raisch, N., Bailey, R., & Jones, S. (2021). Equity in Social Emotional Learning Programs: A Content Analysis of Equitable Practices in PreK-5 SEL Programs. *Educational Psychology*. Vol 6. Retrieved from: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2021.679467/full>

7 Thriving Minds: Building Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems. Rennie Center: Education Research and Policy. Retrieved from: <https://www.renniecenter.org/initiatives/thriving-minds-building-comprehensive-school-mental-health-systems>

8 Social and Emotional Learning in Massachusetts. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/sel/default.html>

9 CURATE. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Retrieved from: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/curate/>