



Response to Request for Public Comments on the Race to the Top Proposal

The Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) supports the state's goal that "All students receive a world-class education and graduate ready to succeed in the 21st century and those most in need of additional support accelerate to meet that standard." While MBAE finds this "vision for students" compelling, the available application materials contain too few details on specific methods, plans, and actions for full understanding of the state's commitment to realizing this vision. We believe that the Race to the Top is an unprecedented opportunity to couple a visionary plan addressing crucial education issues with the funds to support substantive action; and urge Massachusetts leaders to present a comprehensive proposal to achieve transformative results in our schools.

MBAE offers comments below on the Draft Race to the Top Proposal Summary that was made available for public comment. In general, MBAE favors those provisions that describe a clear outcome-oriented plan that can be evaluated for effectiveness in implementing standards based assessments, recruiting effective educators, using data to inform instruction, and turning around our lowest performing schools. Further, MBAE encourages the state to leverage the progress that can be made with these funds by employing a competitive approach to addressing pressing education issues. Race to the Top has already generated significant nationwide reform before a single dollar has been spent, and it is our belief that the "Race to Raise the Rate", described below, could have a similarly transformative impact on dropout rates statewide. The state's vision for students is only as compelling as its plans to realize that vision, so the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education urges the state to be as bold in action as it is in rhetoric.

Improve teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance:

- MBAE strongly endorses the state's commitment to improve the system for educator development and require districts to evaluate all teachers annually. The Massachusetts business community has significant experience evaluating professionals that can be brought to bear on this challenging project. Employers should be included in the collaborative work to develop multiple measures of effectiveness anchored in student performance.
- MBAE is concerned that there is no requirement that districts (LEAs) do more than use evaluations to "inform" compensation, promotion, retention and tenure decisions; and collect and report data on teacher and principal effectiveness to the state. LEAs receiving Race to the Top funds should be held accountable for ensuring evaluations are conducted fairly and validly through an explicit process the state would institute to evaluate the newly developed system. Once established, LEAs should commit to *basing* personnel decisions on evaluations.

Ensure effective teachers and leaders in every school and classroom

- MBAE shares the state's goal of placing effective educators in every school and classroom and supports initiatives that go beyond further planning and discussion by

committing to action. We hope the final application will include approaches such as providing incentives and differential compensation for teachers that take on hard to staff subjects and move to high-needs schools; granting school leaders the authority to assign staff based on performance and organizational need, rather than seniority; and an explicit plan to evaluate such initiatives to determine successful methods that can be brought to scale.

- MBAE believes in the need for improved recruitment strategies, and strongly supports efforts to improve the STEM pipeline. In addition to building a strong cadre of professionals with appropriate subject matter specialties, we urge the state to address the quality of teacher recruits by focusing on high achieving and ranking college graduates for all teaching positions.

Turn around MA's lowest-achieving schools

- MBAE strongly supports state efforts to require LEAs to turn around low-performing schools and finds merit in creating a group of specially trained turnaround teacher teams. However, LEA involvement in turning around underperforming schools should include the provision of training opportunities for turnaround teachers and administrators and commitment to accepting the placement of turnaround teachers and administrators in their low achieving schools. LEAs receiving Race to the Top funds should also commit to intervention in level 3 schools to prevent a slide from level 3 to levels 4 and 5.
- While MBAE is aware that pending legislation may impact the state's application, we support the use of Race to the Top funds to implement the state's new accountability system as the method for identifying low-achieving schools and determining the appropriate state intervention in these schools. The application should describe how Race to the Top funds will be used to strengthen the state's district review processes and fund the implementation of the state's new accountability system.

Use data to improve instruction

- MBAE recognizes that Massachusetts has already made tremendous progress in building a comprehensive data system and supports the expansion of that system. It is crucial that the state's application provide for the dissemination of that data in ways that will improve curriculum and instruction and drive reform. In addition to educators, the public should be able to access clear and detailed school performance data in a manner that informs parents and community members about the progress of their schools. The assessments and reports that inform the data system should not be restricted to content knowledge but should also include evaluation of critical thinking, communication and collaboration skills.

Roll out statewide P-12 Teaching and Learning System

- The P-12 Teaching and Learning System is an ambitious project that MBAE supports, and which, as described in the summary materials, has the sort of concrete goals, systemic methods, and bold vision that should be replicated in each initiative in the state's proposal. However, here, where the state had a bold vision, LEA involvement is optional. LEAs should be required to participate in the development, implementation, and use of the P-12 Teaching and Learning System, as well as its evaluation, which should be stipulated as part of the proposal.

- MBAE supports the emphasis on formative assessments, linked to MCAS standards and real time professional development as the type of approach to teaching and learning we should be pursuing.

Increase college and career readiness

- MBAE is a strong advocate for college and career readiness and believes that the state's Race to the Top commitments around increasing rigorous college and career pathways, with an emphasis on STEM, are rightly targeted at issues that are of significant importance to the Massachusetts business community. However, this crucial issue is listed amongst the optional programs for LEA involvement and its specific initiatives fail to adequately address the core issues.
- College and career readiness should be central to the state's Race to the Top proposal and LEA participation should be required. This is a critical area where incentives and competition can leverage local initiative and progress. Instead of repurposing the Adams Scholarship as a standard of college and career readiness, the state should develop a comprehensive strategy – beginning with reading proficiency by end of grade 3, early warning systems to identify students at-risk in middle school, and including high school reforms with high likelihood of engaging students in rigorous coursework that will ensure they graduate ready for college, career and citizenship. Among these should be the requirement that districts awarded Race to the Top funds adopt *MassCore* graduation prerequisites as the minimum coursework for a diploma – a system that is ready and available to be implemented and then evaluated.
- The state's Race to the Top plan should include as part of its college and career readiness plans action with proven value such as early childhood education, expansion of successful extended learning time programs, and successful models of student engagement and learning from vocational and technical education.
- The state proposal should act on research and reports already incorporating the input of stakeholders such as the Readiness Project Education Action Agenda and the recently released report of the Massachusetts Graduation and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission. We encourage for this, and/or other goals, a plan that would leverage the focus and activity at the municipal level in Massachusetts that the national Race to the Top achieved in states across the country. By setting aside a limited portion of the state's funds for a competition such as the one proposed in the attached "Race to Raise the Rates", the state could achieve dramatic results in districts with high dropout rates.

MBAE will enthusiastically support a final proposal that is outcome-oriented rather than focused disproportionately on process and planning; that includes measurable goals and explicitly commits to evaluating initiatives to assess their success and impact; and that addresses our educational needs comprehensively through a coherent strategy that will bring dynamic results.

Race to Raise the Rate

A Proposal to Strengthen the Massachusetts Race to the Top Application

Through the Race to the Top application, Massachusetts must articulate its vision for accelerating education progress in our state by closing achievement gaps and preparing all students for success in college, career and citizenship. The recent release of the Commonwealth's Graduation and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission's report and recommendations, together with the Race to the Top competition presents a unique opportunity for Massachusetts. In the former, experts have articulated a plan to reduce the dropout rate; in the latter, we have been offered a vehicle to act on the plan. In our opinion, the application could be more responsive to the current conditions and more competitive if it included plans to act on the Commission's recommendations. The Race to the Top model has fostered excitement and game-changing activity in states across the country as they respond to the challenge of this federal competition. The Commonwealth can engage districts and their partners in the same innovative thinking and planning by generating a state-level competition to raise graduation rates—and thereby close our most persistent achievement gaps. Each year, approximately 10,000 students drop out of school across the Commonwealth – there is no more important challenge to address than this one.

We call upon the DESE to establish a competition for communities with the highest numbers of dropouts to develop the best plan for raising graduation rates. Massachusetts can use discretionary stimulus funds – we suggest allocating at least \$25 million - to leverage real progress. This strategy demonstrates a willingness to take calculated risks that have the potential to advance bold education goals. It is also consistent with President Obama's challenge to have every American commit to at least one year of higher education or training. In order to make college-attendance the standard, we must address our nation's dropout crisis and dramatically improve high school graduation rates. Furthermore, by making this competition part of a comprehensive approach to federal stimulus opportunities, other sources of economic stimulus funding can be directed toward promising proposals as well.

By having a "Race to Raise the Rates" among the fifteen districts with an average of 100 or more dropouts per year, Massachusetts could make significant progress in closing our own achievement gaps *and* demonstrate the national leadership that Race to the Top demands. The potential for funds to address this issue would motivate school districts to set measurable goals, develop local plans to meet these, engage partners in the effort and have a blueprint for action ready to go. The recent report of the Massachusetts Graduation and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission, *Making the Connection*, provides the resources and guidance to support all districts eligible to compete. Through applying and developing a plan, even those districts not selected for awards from this competition would be poised to take advantage of other grant opportunities (such as the \$2 billion competitive grant program proposed in the Graduation for All Act – HR 4122) and engage private sector and philanthropic partners in this effort.

In addition to the moral imperative, there is a clear economic necessity to raise graduation rates. Massachusetts has the advantage of having already convened a commission of stakeholders to address the very serious problem of dropout prevention and recovery. We know what needs to be done – now we need to fund the will and the wherewithal to do it. Race to Raise the Rates would provide both.

Just as the Race to the Top identified the four “assurances”, or focal points, that had to be addressed in every state’s proposal, without prescribing any specific approach to these objectives, the Race to Raise the Rates would outline four proven strategies. In its application, each district would develop a plan that drew from these strategies, and would specify the action it would take to reduce the local dropout rate. Consistent with the Governor’s target of at least 90% of students statewide graduating from high school prepared for postsecondary education by 2020 – the Race to Raise the Rates would require each district to set a goal and a target of **reducing the dropout rate by half over the next five years.**

A winning proposal would address each of the Commission’s recommendations to “include specific strategies for dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery that align with national research on effective approaches:”

- Targeting interventions** to individual students, such as increased adult attention and supervision, increased academic support, wrap-around services, and advisories; some school districts have begun using an approach that features a “coach” who organizes interventions for at-risk students;
- Connecting school to college and career** by providing internships, career explorations, or mentoring programs;
- Active recovery** that includes reaching out to dropouts and providing them with support and alternative pathways to graduation; and
- Providing alternatives to traditional high schools** that may feature benefits such as smaller class sizes, coaches or case managers who provide increased support, competency-based instruction, accelerated credit recovery, and access to social services.”

Districts would be expected to work with a cross-section of stakeholders to develop the plan, and to involve these stakeholders in overseeing and assisting with the plan’s implementation. A transparent point system for rating the proposals would incentivize use of these strategies. The Race to the Top offers an unprecedented opportunity to accelerate education reform in Massachusetts. Dropout prevention and recovery should be cornerstone of our proposal to turnaround failing schools and graduate all students ready for college and career. We believe that the Race to Raise the Rates can leverage these funds for greater impact than the dollars spent can buy; and will energize those responsible for addressing this issue to take the kind of aggressive action that can serve our children and communities most in need of attention.