

# SEIZING THE MOMENT:

## Leveraging Federal ARPA Funding to Enable Student Recovery and Promote Innovation in K-12 Education

Our Commonwealth finds itself in a very unique position. After a year and a half of innovations and adjustments required by COVID, our school systems and our state have significant amounts of new money to spend (see Box 1). The inequities present before COVID have also been compounded, creating an imperative to be more effective than we were before the pandemic so that we return to better than the status quo. This is an opportunity to dream big on behalf of our students and their families.

We believe that the state must commit to measuring the success of ARPA funding against two goals:

1. Accelerated closing of persistent achievement and opportunity gaps and;
2. Accelerated growth in the percentage of public K-12 students on-track for college and career success.

If we are effective as a state, by the time federal funding expires, we will see improvement toward these goals beyond what history would tell us is possible. The process of delivering education and setting policy will also feel different. High performance in national rankings will no longer allow us to look past our deficiencies or be a reason for complacency at the leadership level. Massachusetts' leaders will know and embrace concrete goals for equity and post-secondary success. We will focus on incremental improvement when warranted, but will also address opportunity gaps and post-secondary attainment rates that leave many students unable to seize economic opportunity like the crises that they are. If we do not meet our goals, leaders will take responsibility for determining and addressing the reasons. After the impact of COVID, the cost of not doing so will reduce economic opportunity for a generation of students, potentially for decades to come.

### BOX 1 ARPA Funding

- On March 11, 2021, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). It contained \$1.8 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) assistance to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and Massachusetts public school districts. A portion of this money must be dedicated to addressing unfinished learning, or what the law calls learning loss. The remainder is available to school districts over the next three years and can be used for a variety of purposes related to health and safety, supporting student recovery, and investing in transformative approaches to meeting student needs.
- In addition, the state and local governments, respectively, have received \$5.3 billion and \$3.4 billion in discretionary funding from the federal government in relief and recovery assistance. These funds are meant to support operations and recovery across a range of government services including education, early education and care, and workforce development priorities.
- This combination of funding, along with unspent funds from the first two rounds of federal relief funding to schools, presents Massachusetts with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reinvent our approach to education; to be bold in order to dramatically improve the student learning experience. Will we seize the day?

The system will also look different. We can use federal dollars to achieve a variety of system redesign initiatives to better align our education system around the needs of students (see Box 2).

However, if these dollars are to be fully deployed for the benefit of students, several things must happen.

### **We must be bold**

We have a singular opportunity to use the confluence of increased state and federal dollars as a platform to think big in service of students. A recent national survey in April of this year showed 58% of parents wanting schools to take advantage of the new federal funding to make bold changes in public education rather than just funding the status quo. State leaders have a critical role to play in doing more to establish a vision for how these monies can be used for systemic change, create a roadmap for how schools can do so, and incentivize it. School districts must develop strong plans and be willing to think differently in replacing strategies that haven't worked for many students.

### **We must embrace innovation if we think it will deliver better results for students**

In addition to consideration of scaling up proven strategies, this is a moment that calls for a redesign, particularly in serving high school students by better preparing them for college and career. Transforming high schools to create pathways for ALL students, using technology in ways that allow for more personalized instruction, and moving away from "time-in-seat" to a more flexible schedule that employs assessment of competencies and utilizes a hybrid approach of in-person and virtual instruction; are all examples of how we can transform school to be more student-centered. Inter- and intra-district collaboration between schools, flexibility in teacher and classroom assignments and freedom from undue regulation can all facilitate necessary innovative practices. The state should significantly increase funding to schools for innovation through the 21st Century Education Trust Fund and districts should involve parents, business leaders and the community in defining innovative ideas to employ.

### **Specific targets for equity and post-secondary success must be the starting point for a strategic investment strategy**

The state and school districts must avoid a menu approach to investing these new dollars where programs are selected off a list of approved practices without regard as to how they align and work together to meet targets and goals. The overarching purpose to be achieved, through a combination of federal and Student Opportunity Act of 2019 (SOA) funds, should be to produce whole-system reform that enables better service to

#### **BOX 2 Examples of transformative system redesign initiatives that Massachusetts could consider**

- Universal Pre-K for all 3 and 4 year olds in every high need/gateway city district/school
- 100% student access to tech devices and connectivity
- Remote learning capacity on snow days, or other times when school buildings are closed
- Longer school days/years under Extended Learning Time models
- Learning pods in every community with less than half of students on grade level
- Regular use of high impact tutoring in communities where students are chronically behind
- Districts partnering to ensure equal access to courses through use of remote or in-person instruction
- Computer science courses throughout K-12 accessible to every student either through their district or remotely
- Access for EVERY high school student to take the recommended course of study for college and career readiness (MassCore)
- Opportunities for students in every high school to earn industry-recognized credentials aligned with workforce demand
- An early college program in every urban district
- New school models like P-TECH emerging in gateway cities

students than they received before the pandemic. Districts must submit plans for the use of federal and SOA funding that explain how investments increase equity and improve postsecondary outcomes.

### **We must be transparent and accountable for the results of our investments**

Strategies selected for scaling up should have a track record of success before major investments are contemplated and innovations should be well thought out and assessed for results. Progress on closing gaps and achieving outcomes, or lack thereof, as well as an honest assessment of the current state of student learning and achievement, should be well documented and shared with parents and the public. All investments should be made with an eye toward efficient use of dollars with documentation that money is going directly to those students and schools most in need of support. We must acknowledge when we fail to achieve the intended results and change our approach.

### **We must make equity an animating goal as the Student Opportunity Act intended**

Equity requires that every student, regardless of race, family income, native language(s), and disability, be able to access the learning opportunities, services, and supports they need to graduate from high school ready for college and career. Without an explicit approach to identifying and addressing current inequities, it is unlikely that recovery and reinvention efforts will successfully address them. Disparities in student outcomes by demographic factors are indicators of systemic inequities. A focus on closing gaps is therefore warranted as a strategy for assuring equity. For programs that target student recovery or closing gaps, state ESSER funds can reinforce local efforts to achieve equity by being targeted to programs, schools, or school districts based on the demographics of students served or the potential gap-closing effects of the initiatives.

The creativity and innovation of the past year and a half have generated many new ideas about how to better serve students and convinced many that doing school differently is possible. Unprecedented federal and state funding to schools explicitly focused on supporting recovery and closing gaps among students provides an opportunity for transformative investment.

## **Specific strategies that we believe deserve consideration for federal ESSER funding, by category.**

### **1. STUDENT RECOVERY**

We must immediately accelerate learning with proven strategies and personalized approaches for those students most impacted by school closures and disruption to get them back on track while simultaneously assessing and addressing the social-emotional needs of students as they return to the classroom.

#### **Universal measurement of unfinished learning**

**WHO:** DESE and school districts.

**WHAT:** DESE should require that every school district screen every student at the beginning of the coming school year (SY2021-2022) to determine their academic needs and share this information with students and parents/guardians. Formative assessment should continue at regular intervals throughout the year. In addition, the state must share spring 2021 MCAS results with students and parents/guardians and administer the assessment in spring 2022.

**WHY:** Students' opportunity to learn during the pandemic varied widely. Many students will return with greater academic need than normal. In order to provide personalized services, particularly to students whose learning was impacted by the pandemic, baseline assessment data and on-going assessment are needed.

**HOW:** Many districts have routinely, in prior years, conducted such assessments and have the expense built into their local budgets. Assessment is also an allowable use of the federal ESSER funding to districts.

## Access to high-impact tutoring

**WHO:** School districts and DESE.

**WHAT:** Assure that all students have access to high-impact tutoring if needed. High-impact tutoring services are provided one-on-one or in groups of up to four students. They are designed to reinforce and extend learning to help students master required knowledge and skills. The model is proven effective if integrated during the school day.

**WHY:** Some students will require special supports to recover unfinished learning. High-impact tutoring has been rigorously evaluated and is among the most effective strategies to help students rapidly master unfinished learning.

**HOW:** This is an allowable use of federal ESSER funds and is being employed by districts across the country to great effect. DESE could use its own funding from ESSER to incentivize the practice with matching grants to districts.

## Access to acceleration academies and other forms of expanded learning time (ELT)

**WHO:** School districts and DESE.

**WHAT:** Encourage the use of acceleration academies and other ELT strategies to help address unfinished learning. Acceleration academies offer intensive instruction and support in core subjects, delivered during summer and semester breaks. Other forms of ELT include after-school programs, summer school, or added hours to the school year. All these programs serve to increase the amount of instructional time students receive each year.

**WHY:** There is growing evidence that ELT can improve academic and other outcomes. Acceleration academies have been effectively implemented in Massachusetts and have the buy-in of DESE.

**HOW:** This is an allowable use of federal ESSER funds to districts. DESE could use its own funding from ESSER to incentivize the practice with matching grants. Additionally, state SOA funding anticipates districts potentially including ELT as a best practice, thus making new state funds currently being received by districts available for this purpose.

## Assessing and addressing students' social-emotional needs

**WHO:** School districts.

**WHAT:** Many students will return to the classroom in great need of social-emotional supports. Schools, through referrals from teachers and other means of assessment, will have to determine which students have been impacted by the pandemic in ways that require intervention to ensure effective learning. Additional staffing may be needed in the form of adjustment counselors and social workers to attend to student need.

**WHY:** Evidence suggests that student learning is impacted by social and emotional pressures that can interfere with success in achievement and focus on learning. Additionally, an investment now in meeting the immediate needs of students can and should lead to an established network of wraparound services in schools to be sustained as an evidence-based practice for supporting students in increasing their success in school going forward. Wraparound services allow for an infrastructure that connects school and community services to students to meet needs related to health care, mental health, nutrition, fitness and preventive health care and education.

**HOW:** Meeting the social-emotional needs of students in support of learning recovery is an allowed use of ESSER funding to districts. Additionally, SOA funds can be used to sustain these services in a wraparound model that facilitates and enhances student learning.

## 2. SCALING UP OF PROVEN STRATEGIES

We must advance our implementation of proven practices for closing gaps on a large scale in the highest need districts and in a systemic, integrated fashion while emphasizing improvements in college and career readiness for students by redesigning the high school experience and creating significant access to multiple pathways for all students.

### High-quality universal pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds

**WHO:** School districts.

**WHAT:** High-quality universal pre-K would extend K-12 education to 3 and 4 year olds and be available for free to all families. It would include certified/qualified instructors and approved programmatic elements available through and be delivered in partnership with public school districts.

**WHY:** High-quality early childhood programs have been proven to be effective in preventing achievement gaps by building the cognitive and social skills necessary to ensure a child's readiness for kindergarten and future success.

**HOW:** Districts can utilize ESSER funding to significantly increase access to high-quality pre-K programs and transition to utilization of SOA funds in subsequent years.

### Extended learning time strategies

**WHO:** School districts.

**WHAT:** In addition to its use as a recovery strategy, ELT should be employed as a recognized and a significant, evidence-based strategy for closing achievement gaps. Extending the school day in an effort to maximize teaching and learning, along with consideration of summer, vacation time and in-school opportunities, gives students additional time and support to accelerate learning with programming that is relevant and aligned.

**WHY:** ELT is a recognized approach to helping underserved students meet high standards and was cited in the SOA as a presumed strategy for use by districts in closing achievement gaps.

**HOW:** Accelerated scale up of ELT is an approved use of ESSER funding and can be sustained through anticipated increases in SOA funding.

### Expansion of Early College

**WHO:** School districts with support from the state budget and DESE.

**WHAT:** School districts should, if existing state resources are not sufficient, use a portion of ESSER money to cover one-time Early College program planning and start-up costs. Early College is a structured high school pathway program, often aligned to a particular industry or career field, that allows high school students to enroll in college classes and earn college credit at no cost. Massachusetts established its Early College program four years ago. It has expanded to serve over 3,000 students in 35 high schools through 20 higher education partners. Early results show that Early College significantly boosts college enrollment among Black and Latinx students and, if expanded, could make a substantial contribution to closing college access gaps by race and socio-economic status. Rapid expansion is needed. A particular focus should be on implementing the Commissioner's commitment to expand immersive Early College programs in which all students enrolled participate in an Early College high school with its own separate leadership and staff. The state has more than doubled funding for Early College with the FY 2022 budget allocation, which pays for student college credits and supports start-up costs. However, starting programs also requires a commitment of district resources, something ESSER funds can help enable.

**WHY:** Early College is the Commonwealth's most promising program to reduce gaps in college attainment by race and socio-economic status.

**HOW:** ESSER funds, as well as SOA funds, can be used by districts to support planning and scale up of these programs. DESE can use its ESSER funds for matching grants to districts and the state should continue its budgetary commitment, through relevant line items in the annual budget, to grow Early College as an effective strategy for enhancing college and career readiness.

## **Expand the Career Technical Initiative (CTI) and overall access to career and technical education for students**

**WHO:** School districts and the state through DESE.

**WHAT:** CTI provides students and adults with access to career and technical education (CTE) courses by providing access to CTE schools' equipment and facilities outside of regular school hours. The CTI program is relatively new in Massachusetts and has yet to serve many students. Nonetheless, because it promises to efficiently expand access to CTE, Massachusetts' FY 2022 budget more than tripled funding for program expansion. Federal funding should complement this investment by covering one-time start-up and planning costs incurred by school districts. Funding should also be used to evaluate the impact on student academic, post-secondary, and labor market outcomes.

**WHY:** Massachusetts CTE systems are oversubscribed and there is considerable demand for expansion from students and from businesses who would like to hire CTE graduates. There is evidence that students of color, lower-income students, ELL students, and students with disabilities are disproportionately denied access due to the limitations on seats in CTE schools. Expanding access will help close these gaps and provide more students with hands-on, career-aligned learning opportunities.

**HOW:** ESSER funds can be used by districts to plan and develop partnerships with CTE schools that increase access to career technical programs to more students. ESSER funds can also be used to develop CTE programs and pathways within schools with a transition to SOA funding allowing for sustainability. The state should continue, through line items in the annual budget, to support expansion of the CTI program and access to CTE in general.

## **Rigorous and relevant curriculum (MassCore and computer science)**

**WHO:** School districts with direction, support and incentives from DESE.

**WHAT:** High expectations for all students, with the support and effort of educators to achieve them, is an important component of an educational system committed to equity of opportunity and success for all. Ensuring rigor and relevance in curriculum, and ensuring that teachers and educators are prepared to engage and teach content that reflects both, is an important factor in improving college and career readiness. To these ends, Massachusetts should commit to requiring that all students graduate high school having taken a MassCore curriculum (DESE recommended) and that access to computer science courses be available in every Massachusetts high school with digital literacy and computer science instruction integrated through every K-8 curriculum.

**WHY:** Current data show significant portions of Massachusetts high school graduates not participating in the MassCore suggested curriculum pathway and that a quarter of all high school students in the state lack access to a single computer science course in their high schools. We must graduate students fully prepared for college and increase digital literacy skills for all.

**HOW:** Federal ESSER dollars can be used by districts to develop curricula and train and certify teachers appropriately to teach a more rigorous high school course framework and to include and incorporate computer science instruction at all grade levels.

### 3. INNOVATION IN EDUCATION DELIVERY

We must seek to change out of the status quo that has left many students behind and use this moment, and the funds available, to transform the educational experience in ways that personalize instruction, close gaps and accelerate college and career readiness. Through the use of new technology, creative instructional designs and partnerships, with the support of financial investments and staffing re-alignments, we can create flexibilities and improvements that can offer substantial benefits to students.

#### State investment of \$100 million dollars into the 21st Century Education Trust Fund

**WHO:** The Governor and Legislature should commit to innovation in education and a significant investment to support it.

**WHAT:** The SOA created the 21st Century Education Trust Fund with the express purpose of investing public and private funding, which the fund is devised to receive, for the awarding of grants to districts and schools for flexible funding to pursue innovative approaches to teaching and student learning designed to improve student outcomes and close opportunity gaps. To date, the fund has only received \$6 million in state funding.

**WHY:** This fund represents an excellent vehicle for supporting field-driven efforts to scale up best practices and to innovate and re-invent using strategies like those listed below or other transformative pilot programs that might be suggested by teachers and schools. Supporting innovation can only happen if funding comes as a supplement to existing operational funds. The statutory language creating the fund also requires evaluation which will facilitate the widespread adoption of the most successful programs.

**HOW:** By state appropriation from the Commonwealth's tranche of ARPA funding or other sources, including state ESSER funds.

#### A shift toward greater personalization of instruction

**WHO:** Schools and districts with incentive matches and grant funding from the state.

**WHAT:** There are several novel models for personalized instruction that can be used to accelerate and deepen learning, especially relevant for addressing pandemic-related disruption, that can be implemented now and be sustained as effective learning strategies. They include the creation of learning pods (smaller groupings of students based on their similar academic and learning needs) and the utilization of personalized opportunity plans for students a grade or more behind in reading, which, with parental involvement, establishes how resources will be spent to enable that student to catch up, either with in-school programming or out of school enrichment activities (see The National Opportunity to Learn Campaign).

**WHY:** Research suggests that, in a normal classroom in a normal year, students' abilities span up to seven grade levels. It is likely that the pandemic has made this spread even wider. This makes it difficult for educators to meet every student where they are. Strategies for personalizing learning can enable educators to provide more tailored learning experiences for students, more precisely address gaps in understanding, and engage students by allowing them to build needed skills while pursuing topics of personal interest. Smaller group settings allow for this. Additionally, not all of the services students will need can be adequately provided during the normal school day. Enabling student participation in programs with community partners will help expand the students' access to needed services, encourage collaboration and communication between schools and other partners, and leverage existing community organization resources to augment the services that schools can provide to students.

**HOW:** Funding for new approaches to personalizing education can be found in multiple sources: ESSER funding to districts, matching grants from DESE's ESSER funding and from the 21st Century Education Trust Fund.

## New instructional models

**WHO:** School districts with support from state and DESE.

**WHAT:** Technology opens the door to a range of new possibilities for delivering learning content and assessing student progress in better and more effective ways. With greater and more strategic technology investments in schools, along with educator training and professional development in its use as an instructional tool, schools should expand the use of both in-classroom use of technology and virtual and hybrid learning models employing technology. Online content delivery and strategies like the “flipped classroom model,” which is a type of blended learning allowing for more in-classroom time for problem-solving and project activities, can help change our approach to teaching in ways that foster greater student engagement. Partnerships comprising schools between or within districts and with higher education partners can facilitate the sharing and delivery of content to students in separate locations and such partnerships can also innovatively allow for sharing of best practices and unique staffing assignment configurations. Teacher use of technology in the classroom can facilitate a much more personalized approach to learning as students’ competencies can be assessed in real time.

**WHY:** The opportunities that come with consideration of these, and other, game-changing strategies for improving teaching and learning models are timely and important to take advantage of given that the current models are not delivering results for far too many students. The investments made in technology as a result of the pandemic can be built upon to design a more effective system.

**HOW:** Redesigning instructional methods, through pilots or whole school adoptions, can be funded through ESSER funding to districts, and grants from the 21st Century Education Trust Fund and/or through a state Education Technology Fund, described below.

## High school re-design and pathways for all students

**WHO:** School districts with support, guidance and flexibility from DESE.

**WHAT:** The High School experience is not working for many students. A high school journey comprising of watered-down academics does not guarantee college or career success. Districts should embark on a thoughtful redesign of their high school experience that integrates many of the strategies already mentioned, including MassCore, Early College and greater access to CTE, computer science, etc. In doing so, they should ensure that every student is part of a “defined” pathway, which would include these and other elements, such as P-TECH, the receipt of industry-recognized credentials, Advanced Placement, internships, mentorships, and work-based learning opportunities. Just as importantly, schools need to adapt to a new design in support of personalized learning that offers different scheduling such as evening and weekend learning on-site or off, hybrid and remote learning opportunities, blended learning, less focus on seat-time and more on the acquisition of academic and “soft skill” competencies.

**WHY:** The pandemic has demonstrated our capacity for flexibility in delivering instruction and the desire of many older students to be part of designing their curriculum, schedule and delivery method, all in an effort to help them support themselves and their families while increasing the relevance they wish to see in their school experience. Additionally, the SOA requirement that the state and districts now be measured specifically on college and career readiness outcomes should motivate these necessary changes.

**HOW:** Districts can use ESSER funds for the planning, training, and initial implementation of redesign models. SOA funding can be used to transition them to permanency. State ARPA funds can also be used, along with DESE ESSER funds, to incentivize and match dollars for such changes and the 21st Century Education Trust Fund can offer grants for such innovations while the proposed Education Technology Fund, described below, can support related technology needs.

## Create an *Innovation Roadmap* that supports school district leaders to identify, prioritize, and execute strategic investments in changing schooling models to better serve students

**WHO:** DESE.

**WHAT:** DESE should create an *Innovation Roadmap* to provide guidance to districts that helps them identify strategic, transformative uses of ESSER funding to achieve system redesign goals. Like the *Learning Acceleration Roadmap* that DESE has already published, the *Innovation Roadmap* would identify key goals and a sequenced set activities and milestones for at least the 2021–2022 school year.

**WHY:** An *Innovation Roadmap* to accompany the *Learning Acceleration Roadmap* would clearly communicate that ESSER funding should be used for redesign and innovation in addition to supporting student recovery. A simple roadmap document will help remove some of the barriers to planning transformative investments.

**HOW:** Through existing resources and additional funds from DESE’s ESSER allocation if necessary.

## 4. LEADERSHIP THAT DRIVES TRANSFORMATION

Recovery and transformation will require excellent execution. Strong leadership at the district and school level is essential for the effectiveness and sustainability of the strategies enabled by federal funding. The state must help develop and support the education leaders who are responsible for driving the use of federal funding.

### Establish a leadership academy to train school leaders to drive innovation

**WHO:** DESE.

**WHAT:** DESE should establish a structured recruitment and learning program for principals focused on change management, outcomes-based budgeting, and the creation of transformative and innovative teaching and learning models.

**WHY:** Strong school leaders, particularly principals, are a driver of student success. Research shows that principals are also often the most trusted school district officials among both teachers and parents, making them critical change agents. Intentionally recruiting candidates capable of managing transformation and providing high quality training for new and existing principals is necessary to improve the chances of high-impact, sustainable change. Principals manage all aspects of school operations, including pedagogy, personnel, and budgets. This breadth often means that principals enter their jobs without equal experience and training in all aspects of their responsibilities. The need to manage federal funding and significant, transformative changes in practice simultaneously will create pressures on school leaders. The state has a responsibility adequately equip and support them.

**HOW:** Through training with the use of state DESE ESSER funds, if necessary, to fund said training.

### Training to districts on participatory budgeting practices and meeting the “meaningful consultation” requirements in ESSER

**WHO:** DESE.

**WHAT:** DESE should provide training to key district officials on conducting consultations with community stakeholders focused on aligning resource allocation to school or district goals for redesign and supporting student recovery.

**WHY:** ARPA contains a meaningful consultation clause that requires substantial engagement with school community members. Participatory budgeting training will help make sure that consultations focus on community priorities and

also include consideration of what various strategies cost. This will help assure that resources are used efficiently to meet community priorities.

**HOW:** Through policy and training with use of state DESE ESSER funds, if necessary, to fund said training.

## 5. INFRASTRUCTURE AND POLICY SUPPORTS

The state must create and adopt policies that spur and incentivize innovation while requiring and supporting change that is strategic and systemic rather than piecemeal and programmatic.

### Creation of a state Education Technology Fund of \$150 million

**WHO:** The Governor and Legislature.

**WHAT:** In addition to funding already approved and made available through DESE and a previous bond authorization, the Commonwealth should take advantage of this opportunity, as it determines how to use federal relief funds made available to state government, to accelerate and expand spending on technology in schools through grants to school districts in support of recommendations made in prior sections of this report and to ensure universal student access to devices, connectivity and technical support. The state should accompany this investment with clear direction and guidance from DESE to districts as to how monies should be spent with guidance providing systemic models for its use. Funding from this source should also have a set aside for the education and training of teachers and administrators in the use of education technology.

**WHY:** Schools will need the technology infrastructure necessary to make this transition to a systemic innovation agenda. Students need and deserve the resources to close digital equity gaps that still impact high-need schools and create opportunity and homework gaps for too many. This funding would leverage this unique moment in a way that will facilitate change in teaching and learning, fostering innovation through tech education, changes in assessment, personalized learning, and competency based instruction, all with a student centered approach that would not be otherwise possible.

**HOW:** State to fund from its share of ARPA funding by creating an Education Technology Fund accessible to school districts through grant awards.

### A commitment to preserve, utilize and evolve common state assessment

**WHO:** State leaders, DESE and school districts.

**WHAT:** Massachusetts must continue to administer MCAS in the 2021-2022 school year and beyond while also assuring that results are available to students and parents/guardians as quickly as possible so that they can use them to help identify and advocate for appropriate academic supports. The results should provide parents/guardians and students with the context needed to understand the extent of unfinished learning, the ability to monitor student learning growth, and the information needed to discuss next steps if greater academic support is needed. The state must commit to common state assessment as an important and necessary tool for measuring progress with SOA and the closing of gaps and, in so doing, should further commit to evolving MCAS to continually improve it.

**WHY:** The MCAS is the only source of statewide information on student learning. It is also the only standards-aligned assessment whose results are required to be shared with students and parents/guardians. They are a critical tool for understanding the extent of unfinished learning and progress in addressing it during the 2021-2022 school year. In preserving it as an assessment tool for the future, it will be important to evolve it to ensure continued relevance in measuring college and career readiness, ensuring against cultural bias, and finding ways to make assessment more continuous and done in real time to provide timely feedback for students, teachers and parents.

**HOW:** By DESE policy and state or DESE federal relief funds allocated to support continual and evolving MCAS improvements.

## 6. TRANSPARENCY AND DATA

We must invest in technology and practices that enhance and streamline data collection and promote transparency in state goals, investments, and results. We must also make clear commitments to the outcomes we hope federal and SOA funding will achieve for students so that everyone, from parents and students, to educators, to policymakers know if we are on track.

### Set ambitious SOA targets

**WHO:** DESE.

**WHAT:** DESE must set state and district-level targets for closing achievement gaps among student subgroups as required under the SOA. These targets should reflect the impact of the pandemic on student learning and the availability of both significant ESSER and SOA funding. The availability of this funding must lead to more ambitious targets than targets based on past performance, before additional funding was available.

**WHY:** The SOA requires that the state and school districts set targets for closing gaps in achievement among student subgroups. These targets are a core component of the SOA's approach to assuring the transparency and impact of SOA funding. The targets have not yet been set due to disruptions caused by the pandemic. Setting these targets will help districts plan for the use of SOA and ESSER funding and will help create public will and accountability for ambitious results for students.

**HOW:** Through DESE policy, guidance and oversight.

### Update the end-of-year expenditure reporting chart of accounts

**WHO:** DESE.

**WHAT:** The state must make the chart of accounts used for end-of-year reporting on funding use more detailed than the one currently used. A chart of accounts is comprised of the accounts and subcategories that guide how the use of money is recorded. The chart of accounts used for end-of-year reporting currently does not always allow adequate granularity in understanding how funding on programs and items like staff benefits breaks down across different spending categories and staff types and does not easily enable reporting on access to investments by different student subgroups.

**WHY:** Tracking how money was spent in detail is necessary to determine how funding has benefitted different schools and student groups, and what impact funding, including ESSER and SOA funding, has had for students. An inability to demonstrate the impact of federal ESSER funding and state SOA funding could jeopardize public support for continued increased investment in schools through SOA funding.

**HOW:** Through DESE policy, guidance and oversight.

### Accelerate the process of linking workforce and education data through the state's longitudinal education and labor market data system

**WHO:** DESE and other state agencies.

**WHAT:** The state should allocate the resources necessary to enable officials to rapidly establish the systems and partnerships necessary to link student-level early childhood, K-12, higher education, and workforce data. It should also set clear, ambitious expectations for regular availability of longitudinal data, its use for evaluating the impact of K-12 programs and strategies, and the timeline according to which this work should be completed.

**WHY:** Longitudinal data, like the data recently compiled on a one-off basis to evaluate disparities in college and career outcomes by student demographics and the promising early impact of Early College programs, should be regularly available to school administrators, policy makers and researchers. Availability of these data could help the

state better identify credentials of value, align Innovation and Early College Pathways, evaluate and improve learning standards, support effective teaching, and take a more evidence-based approach to many other important priorities.

**HOW:** Through co-ordination and the use of state ARPA funds, if needed, to make necessary infrastructure investment.

### **Harmonize expectations for SOA and ESSER funding use, with a focus on making sustainable investments**

**WHO:** DESE.

**WHAT:** DESE should encourage school districts to determine a single set of targets and plans for the use of ESSER and SOA funding between now and school year 2023-2024. Plans for using resources to increase equity, required under the SOA, should include consideration of how both SOA and ESSER funding will be used to meet the targets. State-required reporting on funding use should enable the public to determine how ESSER and other funding was spent in pursuit of targets.

**WHY:** SOA is the most substantial increase in funding to districts in decades. For many districts, ESSER funding is even more substantial. ESSER is one-time funding that needs to be spent between now and school year 2023-2024. SOA is set to increase steadily between now and school year 2027-2028, meaning that SOA funding can be used to sustain some investments enabled by ESSER funding. Harmonized planning for the use of ESSER and SOA funding will enable greater ambition and sustainability in allocating resources to best serve students.

**HOW:** Through policy, communication and coordination with DESE and districts.

## **7. COMMUNICATIONS**

We must proactively inform all education stakeholders about where student learning stands and what district-level practices are helping move the needle. Sustaining system transformation requires intentional communication that enables coordination and learning.

### **Highlight exemplary districts**

**WHO:** DESE.

**WHAT:** DESE should identify districts with strong plans for using ESSER and SOA funding to support both recovery and redesign and publicize those efforts. In future years, exemplary districts would be determined by the strength of their implementation, continued community engagement and support, and the impact of investments on student opportunity.

**WHY:** Public information on strong approaches from school districts signals that DESE is prioritizing the opportunity created by ESSER and SOA, enables learning among districts, creates incentives for districts to prioritize planning and implementation, and provides additional information to the public about how ESSER and SOA funding are being used to serve students.

**HOW:** With DESE's ESSER funds.

### **Issue a state report on the impact of the pandemic on student learning**

**WHO:** DESE.

**WHAT:** Massachusetts should issue a statewide report on the state of student learning. It should provide information on the extent of unfinished learning and disparities by student groups. This report should draw on MCAS, local assessment data, and other sources. It should be published as soon as possible.

**WHY:** Setting a baseline for the impact of the pandemic is important for maintaining public support for investments in education recovery and redesign. It also sets a baseline against which the success of ESSER and SOA investments can be measured.

**HOW:** With DESE's ESSER funds.