

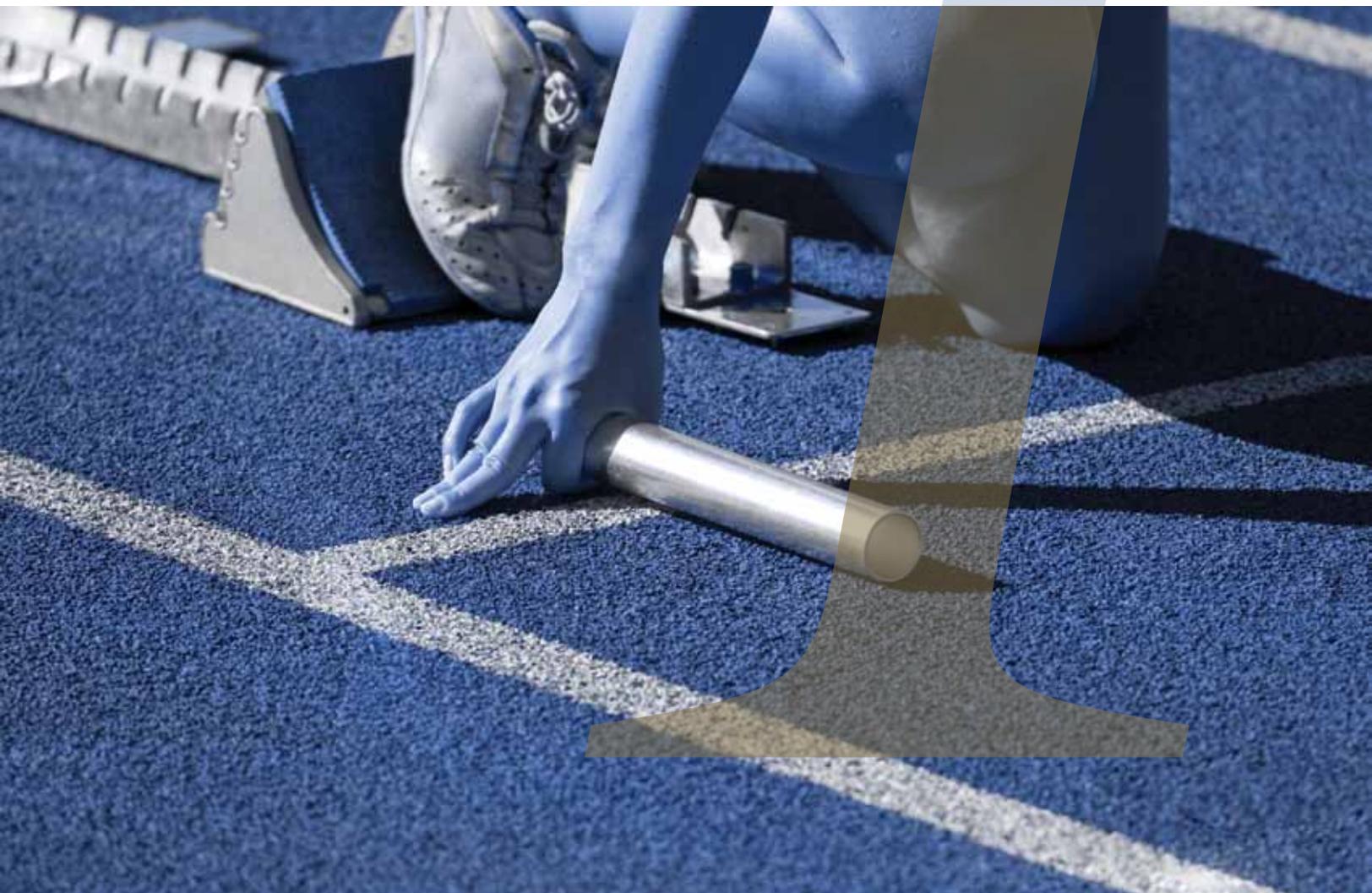


MASSACHUSETTS BUSINESS ALLIANCE FOR EDUCATION

YEAR **1**

RACE TO THE TOP IN MASSACHUSETTS

an education progress report





Massachusetts is recognized across the country as a leader in education, regularly out-ranking other states on many measures of student performance. Yet sustaining this level of achievement is by no means assured, and more significantly, it is not adequate to meet current or future demands.

Most Massachusetts employers have experienced rapid and extensive changes in their industries and professions as a result of technological advances and the globalization of the marketplace. As a result, the Commonwealth is projected to lead the nation in the proportion of jobs requiring a Bachelor's degree by 2018, when 68% of all positions will demand postsecondary training. Educating our children to meet these workforce needs is essential for their well-being and for our state's economic vitality.



One year ago, Massachusetts celebrated a \$250 million award as the highest-ranked state in the nation's Race to the Top education grant competition. Race to the Top provides a unique opportunity to institute systemic changes rather than the incremental advances typical of many state-level initiatives. This is our chance to think beyond what *can* be done to what *must* be done to ensure a high quality education for every child.

Race to the Top also provides valuable tools to complete the unfinished work of education reform – closing achievement gaps and raising student achievement to the levels demanded by our global economy and society. The four priorities of the grant match MBAE's goals of closing achievement gaps, ensuring an effective teacher in every classroom, measuring progress with a robust statewide accountability system and educating all students for success in college, careers and citizenship.

So, one year later, we want to know whether we have met our first year's benchmarks and whether we are on track to deliver results. To answer this question we asked Education First, an organization that has done extensive work on the Race to the Top, to look at what Massachusetts promised, whether we are meeting our objectives, and what we need to focus on to make sure we realize the full potential of this major opportunity.

Our focus is on those Race to the Top initiatives that MBAE considers most important and likely to effect the transformation needed in our schools. Our assessment of progress is featured in response to two questions at the beginning of each section. We cannot simply go through the motions of reform to satisfy Race to the Top requirements. It is imperative that these funds be used to introduce and sustain meaningful improvement in our state's educational system. We can't miss this opportunity, and we must succeed.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On August 24, 2010, Massachusetts Education Commissioner Mitchell D. Chester got the news that our state was one of 12 winners in the U.S. Department of Education's coveted Race to the Top grant competition. The prize: \$250 million over four years to dramatically improve the Commonwealth's schools.

To qualify for the competition, states and their school districts (nearly every state and the District of Columbia applied) had mere months to develop far-reaching and often controversial policy changes: the evaluation of teachers and principals based on student achievement growth, a revamp of academic standards to match college- and career-ready goals, aggressive plans to turn around low-performing schools, and specific improvements to make data more accessible to and informative for classroom teachers.

One year in, some signs of progress are evident, but what really has changed for Massachusetts' 1,800 schools? Are we moving toward increasing student achievement and closing performance gaps among the state's nearly 1 million students?

This report tracks progress against major commitments in the state's application and outlines the successes and challenges of Massachusetts' first year of Race to the Top. Among the state's 53 Race to the Top projects, this report focuses on the key priorities of the business community and those most critical to the overall success of the initiative.

Year One of Race to the Top began August 24, 2010, and ended August 31, 2011. The main objective for the first year of the project was to build the capacity at the state and district level for more intense reform in later years. Commissioner Chester described it as a year of "setting the table" for significant reforms so that by 2014, the following broad outcomes would result:

- 1. Students** will receive a high-quality education that prepares them for colleges or careers through the Common Core State Standards and related assessments and activities.
- 2. Teachers** will be able to use and analyze their students' data proficiently to tailor instruction or design lessons.

3. Teachers and principals will be evaluated based in part on students' academic growth, with support for educators who need extra help, and incentives for excellent educators to work in low-income schools or hard-to-staff subjects.

4. Low-performing schools will be turned around through placement of highly effective teachers, help from qualified external vendors, and greater flexibility for innovation.

Race to the Top: a Snapshot

- » Massachusetts is among 12 winners nationwide.
- » \$250 million over four years (2010-2014). Half of the award amount goes to the 258 local districts and charter schools that are participating.
- » Covers 1,309 schools, 52,000 educators, and 675,000 students.
- » Covers 86% of low-income students.
- » Major assurances:
 - Implement college- and career-ready academic standards.
 - Use data to improve instruction.
 - Build an effective workforce of teachers and principals
 - Turn around low-performing schools.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Q: Did Massachusetts fulfill its Year One Race to the Top promises?

A: Mostly

Capacity to implement: The state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) added staff for oversight and implementation, created a project management structure, and staffed up district service centers that offer professional development and support.

High-quality standards and assessments: Information about the Common Core State Standards is making its way into school districts, which have begun training teachers in preparation for the standards' full use in 2013-14.

Data systems to inform instruction: Delays in procurement and staffing prevented the Department from achieving Year One goals and resulted in postponing the work on data analysis for teachers to Year Two and beyond.

Great teachers and leaders: The state has begun piloting a new system that will evaluate teachers and principals partially on whether their students are progressing academically, as determined by standardized test scores and other measures. But projects to create incentives for effective teachers to take on greater leadership roles or work in low-achieving schools have been delayed until Year Two.

Turning around persistently low-achieving schools: "Turnaround" schools were identified before Race to the Top for extra assistance and flexibility. The state identified qualified vendors to provide outside assistance, but initiatives to match districts with these external vendors and highly effective teachers were slow to launch.

Q: Is Massachusetts on track to reach its overall Race to the Top goals by 2014?

A: Only if it ensures all districts meet obligations

Massachusetts' ability to fulfill its overall Race to the Top goals is at risk if the state does not address the issue of quality control for its 258 participating districts. For all Race to the Top projects, the state can determine whether school districts met a requirement, but not how well they met the requirement. There is no clear plan in place to ensure that Common Core State Standards will be taught effectively in every classroom, that teacher evaluations will be meaningful and inform personnel decisions, or that districts' data infrastructure will be used to improve curriculum and instruction across the state. The need to monitor and assist districts is especially critical with new teacher evaluations, which 35 low-performing schools and another 11 school systems are piloting in 2011-2012 even as DESE works to finalize guidance that all districts will use starting in 2013. Though they have sample tools and templates, pilot schools and districts are designing their own teacher and principal evaluation systems, with no guarantee of consistency across districts.

Quality control touches every Race to the Top commitment, from helping school districts understand the Common Core State Standards to creating new pipelines for teachers and principals to work in low-performing schools. The state's success will hinge on whether schools and districts fulfill their individual commitments to the state's vision—and whether the state has the capacity to assist districts in meeting this expectation. Commissioner Chester agreed that success on the ground in the state's classrooms will be the ultimate measure.

"The only way we're going to deliver a world-class education to every student in Massachusetts, is if every classroom in Massachusetts, every school in Massachusetts is delivering a world-class curriculum and instructional program that addresses kids who are struggling and kids who are excelling," Commissioner Chester said.

Change does not come easily to any endeavor, especially public education. This report highlights what Massachusetts accomplished in the first year of this unprecedented grant—and how far it has to go. ◆

CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT

MBAE Conclusion

Did Massachusetts fulfill its Year One Race to the Top promises?

YES. It created a project management and oversight structure, convened internal/external advisory committees, and set twice-annual performance goals for districts.

What should Massachusetts do to ensure that it meets its Race to the Top goals by 2014?

The state needs to focus not only on whether districts met a goal or benchmark, but more importantly on the quality of how they did so and the impact on student learning.



Massachusetts' Race to the Top award required immediate staff shifts within DESE to execute the grant. The Department is working to transform itself from a compliance-driven agency to one focused on more deeply assisting Massachusetts' 393 school districts, which includes 63 charter schools. DESE also has to ensure that its 53 Race to the Top initiatives operate in alignment with its current programs, and do not become disconnected efforts.

Monitoring Progress: The Department adopted the “deliverology” approach pioneered by Sir Michael Barber, a former McKinsey & Co. consultant and advisor to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. The delivery method relies on creating clear goal statements, understanding what strategies will help accomplish the goals, aligning activities, monitoring performance, and changing practice if results do not show success. Massachusetts is one of five states partnering with the U.S. Education Delivery Institute to establish in-house delivery units and create internal systems to measure progress.

DESE is using the delivery method to track its overall goals, not just Race to the Top, so that the grant becomes intrinsically linked to the agency's daily work. The existing Office of Planning and Research took

on responsibility for leading the implementation of both Race to the Top and delivery. Race to the Top funds paid for seven positions to monitor and manage the grant (one is assigned to the office's three-person delivery unit). Each of the 53 Race to the Top projects has a “project charter” that defines the scope of work and objectives. It also identifies a lead sponsor, a project manager, and where applicable, an information technology lead. The Office of Planning and Research coordinates a host of regular meetings—including weekly Race to the Top updates with Commissioner Chester—to ensure that sponsors and project managers are communicating. The office's delivery team meets frequently with program staff to monitor progress and produces a monthly memo for the Commissioner detailing progress and the likelihood of success for various projects.

Help for School Districts: In the field, the state is using its six regional District and School Assistance Centers (DSACs) to provide technical assistance, professional development, and networking for individual school districts, primarily Level 3 districts (the state's lowest-performing 20 percent of schools). DSACs are led by retired superintendents and have former principals as support facilitators, along with specialists in mathematics, literacy, and data. The goal is to help Level 3 districts that have gaps in their internal capacity or infrastructure to ensure significant improvement in curriculum and instruction.

The Race to the Top application positions DSACs as one vehicle for assisting school districts with Race to the Top projects. But DSACs predated Race to the Top and have their own menu of services for districts—sometimes aligned and sometimes not. In some cases, superintendents report being confused about whom to call for what issue, their local DSAC contact or someone at DESE. Lise Zeig, who oversees the DSACs, said the centers' work naturally dovetails with Race to the Top efforts such as implementation of the Common Core State Standards or data analysis. In other cases, such as revamping teacher evaluations, DSACs will not provide significant support.

Ensuring High Quality Across Districts?:

Despite its delivery unit and project management, one major question for DESE is how to ensure quality control across the 258 participating districts and charter schools. DESE has created a performance management workbook so districts can track progress on both their overall outcome goals and implementation steps. DESE will collect data in these workbooks twice a year and review the information to spot problems. But the department has not planned exactly how it will undertake this analysis and what the follow-up will be. DESE leaders acknowledge that the question is critical, and have pledged to form a plan as Year Two begins.

“I do not expect all 258 districts will get calls from us,” said Carrie Conaway, who directs the Office of Planning and Research and oversees the Delivery Unit that will track Race to the Top implementation. “We will have to figure out what’s doable with the staff we have and what’s the most important thing to do.” ♦

Race to the Top Allocations Over Four Years

- » Total to state: \$250 million (half to the state, half to participating districts based on population of low-income children)
- » Number of participating districts/charter schools: 258
- » Average district award: \$484,496
- » Median district award: \$104,305
- » Smallest award: Zero (eight districts/charter schools)
- » Smallest dollar award: Savoy, \$855
- » Largest dollar award: Boston, \$31,956,500

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

“The message has been pay attention, look at the standards, get to know them ... Teachers are aware of what’s going on and have some basic knowledge of what’s going on because of the adoption of the Common Core. They’re at an awareness level now, and they will get to the knowledge level by June.”

— Paul Dakin, Superintendent, Revere Public Schools

HIGH-QUALITY STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

MBAE Conclusion

Did Massachusetts fulfill its Year One Race to the Top promises?

YES. The state has trained educators about the Common Core and is beginning to distribute related materials that will help schools and teachers align their lessons.

What should Massachusetts do to ensure that it meets its Race to the Top goals by 2014?

The state needs ongoing indicators throughout the school year to measure whether district implementation of the new standards is actually occurring. It also needs to prioritize getting materials to districts and teachers quickly to have an impact in the classroom.



Rigorous Standards: The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted the Common Core State Standards on July 21, 2010, after concluding that these standards are comparably rigorous to the state's own, and there is substantial overlap between them.

The transition to teaching these standards in classrooms in 2012 is already underway. The state's Race to the Top award will pay for much of the standards implementation and training in local schools, which superintendents said was a clear incentive to sign the application. The state already has compared existing standards with the Common Core, identified gaps, and worked with teams of educators to create curriculum frameworks that more specifically explain what students need to know and be able to do at each grade level in mathematics and English. DESE mailed copies of the standards to more than 80,000 educators across the state, held regional information sessions, and began developing model instructional units that teachers can build upon.

Inside Schools: The new standards will be rolled out over two school years. Teachers will continue teaching the current standards in 2011-12 while learning about the new ones through professional development funded through Race to the Top. In 2012-13, the

standards that are common between both sets—the majority of the Common Core—will be assessed on MCAS. Full implementation will be in 2013-14, one year before the new assessments replace MCAS. The state also reserved the right to return to its own MCAS tests if the new assessments that are developed by a 24-state consortium (chaired by Commissioner Chester) are not comparably rigorous.

Most school districts felt the impact of Year One of Race to the Top through the alignment of their work with the Common Core. Districts paid stipends to teachers and principals to attend summer workshops, convened teacher teams to begin matching their district curriculum and materials to the new standards, and discussed what they needed to change in classroom instruction in the future. For example, middle schools will increase emphasis of algebraic concepts. Some concepts that teachers taught in fourth grade are now in third grade or vice versa. Model instructional units to help teachers plan new lessons, which superintendents reported they would have liked available before school started, are being developed by DESE for release in December. To ensure success in schools, the state will need to prioritize getting materials and other implementation support to districts on a timely basis.

Other College- and Career-Ready Projects: The state largely accomplished other Race to the Top Year One activities geared toward college and career readiness. These include awarding grants to six districts to create STEM-themed Early College High Schools (one exists in Marlborough); sending middle school teachers to pre-Advanced Placement training (about 500 teachers, half of the Year One goal of 1,000); and aligning the Board of Higher Education's admissions requirement with MassCore, the state's baseline high school course requirements. MassCore requires four years of English, four years of mathematics, three years of social studies, three years of science, two years of a foreign language, one year of the arts, and a choice of five additional courses. Under Race to the Top, 169 districts will develop plans to increase student completion of MassCore requirements.

Again, the issue of quality control deserves greater attention from DESE. Some districts never fully implemented the first round of standards in the mid-

DATA SYSTEMS TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTION

1990s, and the stakes are even higher now. States that participated in Race to the Top must document their implementation progress to continue to receive funds. But the real test of quality control will be reflected in 2014-15, when students will take new assessments that are based completely on the Common Core. DESE will have to create more frequent indicators in its review of districts' Race to the Top progress to gauge whether the Common Core standards are truly in place. ♦

MBAE Conclusion



Did Massachusetts fulfill its Year One Race to the Top promises?

NO. Problems with the state's existing data warehouse, contracting, and staffing have pushed deadlines back by one year or more.

What should Massachusetts do to ensure that it meets its Race to the Top goals by 2014?

The most crucial piece of this assurance is creating tools for teachers to analyze and use their students' data. The state should focus on this priority item above all in this assurance.

Some call education a “DRIP” enterprise: “data rich, information poor.” Numbers, percentages, percentile rankings, scaled scores, and averages exist but are frequently misunderstood, poorly communicated, and rarely used to inform instruction. Students take exams annually, but teachers receive results too late for action and often do not get assistance with analyzing what the results really mean.

Massachusetts' Race to the Top application focuses on expanding an existing data warehouse to include statistics that will be more meaningful for teachers (such as student discipline data), as well as on giving educators more training on data use and analysis. Most activities in this section of the Race to the Top application were not planned to begin until Year Two and beyond. The Year One activities have faced contracting problems, delays in hiring because of initially low state salary limitations, problems with data processing, and other setbacks. The U.S. Department of Education has granted the state permission to postpone some deadlines into 2012 and beyond because of the unforeseen delays.

One exception has been the School Interoperability Framework. This infrastructure allows schools to transfer student data electronically to DESE and eliminates the need for manual entry. The result is that the data can be viewed in near real-time, which is especially important in districts with high rates of transiency. Race to the Top funds will allow all 258 participating districts to use the infrastructure by 2014, up from 65 districts in Year One. ♦

GREAT TEACHERS AND LEADERS

MBAE Conclusion

Did Massachusetts fulfill its Year One Race to the Top promises?

NOT YET. The state passed new regulations linking educator evaluations to student growth. It created draft tools, templates, and training resources for schools and districts piloting the new evaluation. But there are still more questions than answers about what “multiple measures” will be used to make student performance a significant factor in teacher evaluation. Also, plans to create more incentives for effective teachers to work in high-need schools have been delayed.

What should Massachusetts do to ensure that it meets its Race to the Top goals by 2014?

Make this assurance the highest priority and avoid any further delays. The state’s final guidance for districts on rating educators’ impact on student learning, expected in June 2012, must be such a high-quality model that districts will adopt and use it. The state must accelerate development of a robust system of technical assistance and support for these crucial evaluations that begin in 2013-14. It also needs to clearly communicate the purpose and benefits of the new system.



No section of the *Race to the Top* application attracted as much attention—and as much controversy—as the *Great Teachers and Great Leaders* section. *Race to the Top* requires states to evaluate educator effectiveness through multiple measures of student achievement; use evaluation results for decisions such as tenure, compensation, and dismissal; ensure alternative ways to certify teachers; and track the performance of teacher preparation institutions. At least a dozen states have passed legislation paving the way for their states to revamp educator effectiveness policies, often facing opposition by teachers unions.

Massachusetts accomplished much of what it promised in Year One in the *Great Teachers and Great Leaders* section. Changes include enacting new regulations that link educator evaluations to student growth, starting to pilot new evaluation tools in 35 low-performing schools and 11 additional districts in advance of a statewide rollout, and writing preliminary guidance on the use of evaluations. DESE did not make progress on establishing programs aimed at improving the distribution of effective teachers in low-income

schools and high-need subjects. Many incentive and recruitment programs proposed for Year One were pushed back to Year Two because of delays in hiring and a desire to align the program with second-year school turnaround efforts.

Educator Evaluations: On June 28, 2011, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved regulations requiring multiple measures of student growth to be factored into evaluations of both teachers and administrators. MCAS scores and at least one other measure will count for teachers in grades and subjects in which student academic growth calculations are available. For everyone else, at least two measures that districts must define will be used. The regulations call for the Department to provide direction and guidance for districts by June 2012 about how to choose district-wide measures of student learning for all subjects and how to assign ratings of high, moderate, or low impact on student learning gains based on results of those measures. All educators also must set goals for their impact on student performance and their overall practice—the two main areas in which they will be evaluated. There will be four performance categories; educators in the bottom two (“needs improvement” and “unsatisfactory”) must develop with their evaluators plans that give them either one or two years to improve. (Model superintendent and principal evaluations also are being developed.)

This move is uncharted territory for Massachusetts, which previously gave districts more discretion in designing educator evaluations. This year, the state produced draft evaluation rubrics for teachers and principals, templates, and other training materials for use by those piloting the new system: 34 Level 4 schools plus Chelsea High School, and 11 “early adopter” school systems that volunteered. They are racing to test-drive the evaluations this fall to provide comments by December that will inform final guidance from the state due in January 2012. The state is piloting training workshops that will be rolled out statewide after January. All *Race to the Top* districts will design their evaluations and decide on district-wide measures of student learning gains for all subjects in 2012-2013, with full implementation for all teachers and principals in every district in 2013-14. Districts will have to report the distribution of teachers’ effectiveness ratings across their schools. Unfortunately, how much student achievement will count toward defining

“Based on the information that has been provided, [the new educator evaluation system] has prompted a whole lot of discussion about just really what is good practice with respect to observations, evaluations, and providing meaningful feedback ... I will also say that there is apprehension about how student performance data will be used with respect to the evaluation.”
—Barbara Malkas, Deputy Superintendent, Pittsfield Public Schools

an educator’s effectiveness will vary from district to district, making comparisons across school systems difficult at best.

In the Field: The draft materials notwithstanding, pilot schools and districts still have to work out the kinks on their own. Districts cannot determine what kinds of measures to use other than MCAS; what qualifies as low, moderate, or high impact on student growth; and what weight will be given to student growth vs. teacher practice until final guidance on district-wide measures and ratings of impact on student learning is released in June. State law prevents DESE from specifying these and other details of each district’s evaluation procedures, which means that such important matters as the weight given to student test scores could differ from district to district. “We cannot compel districts to adopt the details in our model, but we want to make the model so good that its adoption is compelling,” said retiring Deputy Commissioner Karla Baehr, who is staying on part-time to lead the educator evaluation overhaul. “We want to give them lots of support, but districts ultimately have the right to make decisions as long as they’re based on our specifications.”

Some superintendents have convened planning committees with their local teachers unions to begin discussing how their collective bargaining agreements need to be updated and what the new evaluations could look like. “The only way we’re going to get movement on this work is to have teachers working with teachers to collaborate,” said Attleboro Public Schools Superintendent Pia Durkin, whose district is an early adopter. Even in Attleboro, where existing evaluations incorporated student achievement indicators, there is concern from classroom teachers about the forthcoming state system.

Incentives for Recruitment and Retention: Another major commitment in Year One of Race to the Top was to design new ways to place effective teachers in low-income schools and high-need subjects such as math, science, or special education. These efforts include supporting districts in their recruitment efforts, creating retention and hiring incentives for effective teachers, administering a school climate survey to determine what may be driving teachers away from or keeping them in certain schools, and offering human resource support to districts that need the help. Although early stages of some of this work was launched, state leaders got permission from the U.S. Department of Education to push it to Year Two

to better coincide with school turnaround efforts, when superintendents and principals will be looking to staff schools. In addition, the state won a \$27 million Teacher Incentive Fund grant for Boston and Springfield schools that will pay for incentives to bring effective teachers into low-performing schools.

One change coming in 2012 is developing career ladders, and changing the state’s licensure system to recognize teachers who serve in different types of roles (such as data specialists, mentors, behavior management specialists, etc.). The regulations would specify how teachers would qualify for those roles, but districts would be responsible for setting additional compensation levels. This kind of differentiated pay system is popular with both education policymakers and classroom teachers.

Many Unknowns: As Massachusetts begins Year Two of Race to the Top, many questions remain about how the educator evaluation system will operate. The state can provide guidance and issue regulations but cannot mandate that districts use the model system. Districts will face the hurdles of negotiating with their unions, training good evaluators, and using valid and reliable measures of student growth. No one knows how the work will unfold, and some have suggested that statutory changes will be necessary to make the teacher evaluation system truly effective.

It is critical that the evaluation work drive the other big commitments in the Great Teachers and Great Leaders section: recruiting, hiring, promoting, and placing teachers deemed to be highly effective into schools that need them the most. These are two sides of the coin—developing evaluations and actually using them—and should not be seen as separate.

Commissioner Chester has called the Great Teachers and Great Leaders section of the application the most high-leverage effort in Race to the Top and urges districts not to think of evaluations in isolation from improving teaching and learning.

“I’ve heard superintendents say, ‘You’re laying too much on us at a time when our resources are going south. You’re asking us to redo evaluations, you’re asking us revamp our curriculum to be consistent with the new frameworks.’ And my response is, ‘Those are one and the same,’” Commissioner Chester said. “These evaluation regulations give you leverage to think of those as part of a package, to ensure that your teachers are in fact upgrading curriculum and instruction.” ♦

TURNING AROUND PERSISTENTLY LOW-ACHIEVING SCHOOLS

MBAE Conclusion

Did Massachusetts fulfill its Year One Race to the Top promises?

MOSTLY. It established a list of qualified external partners to assist schools with key features of school turnaround, and it launched Innovation Schools. But new pipelines to fill jobs in turnaround schools with highly effective teachers will not begin until Year Two and beyond, concurrent with turnaround schools' staffing timelines.

What should Massachusetts do to ensure that it meets its Race to the Top goals by 2014?

Quality teachers are the most important in-school factor to increase student learning. The state must prioritize the creation of these specialized corps of teachers and principals, and ensure that they have the support to stay in low-achieving schools long enough to make an impact. A positive development is the creation of the Priority Partners list that will help districts direct resources to support services that will yield the greatest return, rather than those vendors who may be familiar but less effective.



external help. It also began developing new pipelines for principals and teachers who want to work in turnaround schools, although these efforts will not bear fruit until later years.

Turnaround Schools: The bottom 20 percent of schools in Massachusetts, about 360, are known as Level 3 schools. Thirty-four of them qualify as Level 4 “turnaround” schools, clearing the way for their superintendents to modify collective bargaining agreements to extend the school day and replace their teachers and principals under the new law. Many of the schools made staffing changes in spring 2010 to qualify for School Improvement Grants, another source of federal dollars. But they would not have been able to take action so quickly if the new law had not been in place.

For these schools, particularly Level 4 schools, DESE created four externally run teacher and principal pipelines to train staff to work and lead turnaround schools. Although the Race to the Top application called for the first class of these new teachers and leaders to be placed in turnaround schools in Year One, districts said they did not need them since they had just gone through the process of re-staffing the schools after the new law passed. DESE has selected vendors to recruit and develop the pipelines, which will be launched in 2011-12.

Priority Partners for Turnaround: Another key feature of the Race to the Top application was the creation of a Priority Partners list for districts that need external capacity for reforms such as extending their school day. DESE drew up a list of rigorous guidelines for vendors such as non-profits, for-profits, or community groups based on criteria that venture philanthropies use to invest in organizations. School districts can use their Race to the Top dollars to work with one of seven DESE-approved providers (culled from a list of 22) with a track record in addressing students' social and emotional needs and maximizing learning time; eight districts have signed up to do so.

Some superintendents have complained the list is too narrow and ignores successful partnerships that already exist. Jesse Dixon, who is coordinating this initiative, said the Priority Partners list is meant to give districts access to rigorously screened providers with

Aside from educator evaluation policy changes, the Race to the Top-related reforms that have garnered the most headlines in Massachusetts center on aggressive new powers given to districts to turn around persistently low-achieving schools. Prompted by Race to the Top in January 2010, the Massachusetts Legislature passed and Governor Deval Patrick signed the Achievement Gap Act, with hours to spare before the Race to the Top application's Round One deadline. State leaders said the law would make Massachusetts more competitive for Race to the Top by establishing Innovation Schools, essentially in-district charter schools; allowing superintendents to make radical staffing changes in low-performing schools; and expanding opportunities for operators with proven track records to open charter schools in low-performing districts.

Through Race to the Top, DESE created a competitive process to identify successful non-profits and vendors that could be matched with districts seeking

successful histories in certain high-impact turnaround areas, not to fund an existing partnership that may or may not pay dividends. In future years, DESE will choose providers that specialize in other areas, such as effective data use and human resources support.

The Priority Partners list is notable for another reason: It is one of the few times that DESE has scrutinized the qualifications of partners for districts with this level of rigor. Bare-bones screening took place under No Child Left Behind, when the state generated a list of providers that could tutor students at qualifying schools. Dixon sees the Priority Partners process as a model for quality control. “Because of limited resources, how we approve providers is often light-touch and not as rigorous as the processes we’re seeing venture philanthropies use,” he said. “We do hope there’s standard-setting that comes out of this.”

Continued on page 14

Massachusetts School Improvement Categories

Massachusetts categorizes schools in need of improvement into five levels of performance based on their performance gains (meeting “Adequate Yearly Progress”):

Level 1: Schools identified for “Improvement” under No Child Left Behind for student subgroups and/or the aggregate.

Level 2: Schools identified for “Corrective Action” or “Restructuring” under No Child Left Behind for student subgroups and/or the aggregate.

Level 3: Schools among the lowest-performing 20 percent, based on four-year trends in MCAS performance.

Level 4: Schools among the lowest-performing and least-improving 2 percent; schools formerly declared as “Underperforming.” These are generally known as “turnaround” schools.

Level 5: Schools identified for a state-appointed panel to share budgetary, policy, and personnel decisions with the district. No Level 5 schools currently exist.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, August 27, 2010, Commissioner’s Update

A critical part of the state’s turnaround school strategy is giving school districts the ability to establish Innovation Schools and allowing proven charter school operators the chance to expand in the lowest performing districts, as outlined in the chart below. ◆

Charter and Innovation Schools

In addition to Innovation Schools, The “Act Relative to the Achievement Gap” allows more charter schools to open in the lowest-performing 10 percent of districts in Massachusetts:

- » Previously, charter school funding was capped at 9 percent of a district’s net school spending. The law doubled that cap to 18 percent for the lowest-performing districts—potentially making more seats available—but only permits charter operators with successful track records with students in the greatest need to open schools under this cap expansion.
- » In addition, the new charter schools must have student enrollment recruitment and retention plans to serve students with special needs, limited English skills, or other challenges.
- » Innovation Schools are in-district charter schools that have more flexibility with budget, staffing, and curriculum. Innovation Schools must be approved by local school committees, but do not need approval of their local teachers unions.

BEFORE RACE TO THE TOP	AFTER RACE TO THE TOP
<p>Between 2004 and 2010, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved the opening of 10 new charter schools.</p>	<p>Between December 2010 and March 2011, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education granted Commonwealth Charters to 13 new schools and amended four charters to increase enrollment at existing charter schools, for a total of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » 4,740 new seats for students in Boston » 1,000 new seats for students in Lawrence » 224 new seats for students in Chelsea » 474 new seats for students in Lynn » 324 new seats for students in Springfield
<p>The first Innovation School—the Paul Revere Innovation School in the Revere Public Schools—was established on May 25, 2010.</p>	<p>Three Innovation Schools opened in 2010-11:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Paul Revere Innovation School (Revere Public Schools) » Pathways Early College Innovation School (collaboration between the Mahar School District and Mount Wachusett Community College) » Massachusetts Virtual Academy (Greenfield Public Schools) <p>As of November 1, 2011, an additional 16 schools (for a total of 19 Innovation Schools) were established in communities across the state, according to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Education.</p>

Conclusion

This report presents a snapshot of where Massachusetts stands at the end of Year One on the key priorities of Race to the Top. It is encouraging to see that most of the goals – although focused this year on planning and building DESE infrastructure – have been met. Where we lag behind, there is every reason to expect we can make up for lost ground in future years.

Now that the people and systems are in place, Massachusetts is poised to accelerate progress and stay on track to deliver on the potential of Race to the Top. In addition to the four main areas of focus, there are other activities underway that promise positive results in the future. For example, planning grants have been awarded to six communities to establish STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) early college high schools where students can earn credits toward, or even complete, an associate's degree or certificate while earning their high school diploma.

MBAE will be following the development of Race to the Top initiatives as education stakeholders in Massachusetts continue to use this federal grant and others to transform our education system for the future. ◆

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