Message from Rachelle Engler Bennett, Associate Commissioner, Student and Family Support

On behalf of my DESE colleagues across offices, I am writing during a time of heightened attention to the ever-present need for racial justice and all forms of equity, in the wake of the deeply disturbing and violent deaths of African Americans including George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and far too many others. Painfully, generations of systemic inequities based on race and ethnicity, compounded by intersectionality with sexual orientation and gender identity, language, ability, and more have tragic consequences for individuals, communities, and humanity as a whole. In this vein, I recognize that the current COVID-19 pandemic is impacting individuals and communities inequitably across the state, as can be seen in disproportionate rates of illness, hospitalization, and death by race and ethnicity. Those of us with privilege need to continue to increasingly reflect and find ways to better contribute to what is helpful, not harmful.

During these especially challenging times - and always - I greatly appreciate what you do to help all students engage in learning and to further develop the skills they need for the next grade level and for their lives in our diverse and global community. As essential components of this work, I am grateful for efforts you are making to strengthen both students’ and adults’ ability to attend to health and wellbeing; to grapple with challenging and unavoidable truths; and to navigate communication amongst dramatically different perspectives. We collectively rely on your important role, in partnership with families, community organizations, DESE, and others to help bring about a more fair and just world. As offered by Commissioner Riley, “Despite the anger, sadness, and frustration that many of us feel, I hope we will use this moment to bring about much-needed positive changes. Thank you for everything you do to support our students.”
The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s DESE-SEL newsletters provide updates on offerings that promote holistic supports & enrichment, including efforts to help strengthen social emotional competencies, health & safety. This is the third edition of the newsletter during school closures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Below you will find some recently released guidance and several upcoming offerings designed to help bolster efforts to support student, staff, and family well-being and safety, alongside implementation of new modes of teaching and learning during school closures. Feedback, suggestions, or questions are welcome and may be sent to achievement@doe.mass.edu.

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GUIDANCE DOCUMENTS & WEBSITE UPDATES

DESE webpage updates:

Please note that we now have a new Mental and Behavioral Health section on DESE’s COVID-19 pages, and we also have added a headlines section on our social and emotional learning webpage.

Guidance on Behavioral and Mental Health
Services During School Closures:

DESE has developed guidance for school counselors, psychologists, and other specialized instructional support personnel involved in providing school-based behavioral and mental health supports and services during the COVID-19 school closures (download). This document provides recommendations and resources.

Guidance for summer programs:

DESE recently posted on the COVID-19 pages an initial summer school guidance document designed to help districts and schools begin planning for any possible in-person summer school programs they hope to hold. More detailed guidance focused on special education summer programs will follow next week, and we anticipate comprehensive guidance about in-person summer programs will be available within two weeks. The content of this initial document is focused primarily on the health and safety of students, staff, and educational community. The comprehensive guidance will cover academic programs, teaching and learning, and student support models that are also integral parts of summer planning efforts.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORK OPPORTUNITIES

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Academies:

DESE is accepting applications for the 2020-2021 Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Academies. These intensive professional development processes are designed to aid school and district teams with the implementation of tiered systems of instruction and support, and include the Culturally Responsive Practice Leadership Academy, Culturally Responsive Teaching Academy, Inclusive Tier 1 Instruction Academy, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Academy, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) / Mental Health Academy, Tiered Literacy Academy, Tiered Math Academy, and Systemic Student Support (S3) Academy. Any school and/or district may apply for these MTSS Academies, though first priority will be given to schools that are designated as underperforming or chronically underperforming and/or schools requiring focused/targeted or broad/comprehensive support. Also note that all academies will be adapted as needed in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Comprehensive School Mental Health System Learning Network Opportunity:

DESE, in partnership with the Massachusetts School Mental Health Consortium (MASMHC), is pleased to offer an opportunity for district teams to engage in a learning collaborative facilitated by the National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH) during the 2020-2021 school year. Selected district teams will be given access to professional
development, technical assistance, and ongoing coaching as they work to pilot practices to support the establishment of an equitable and effective comprehensive school mental health system. For more information, see the brief overview, and use the online registration form to sign up to receive updates, including the application form once released (by mid-June). Anyone with questions can contact DESE’s Office of Student and Family Support with at achievment@doe.mass.edu or 781-338-3010.

WEBINARS AND NETWORKING SESSIONS

❤️ Webinar on Supporting the Whole Child Amid COVID-19: June 9

DESE is pleased to offer a free webinar, hosted by the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy and the Center for Optimized Student Support at Boston College, focused on systems to remotely identify and organize a response to students’ strengths and needs in this moment of crisis. Particular attention will be focused on successfully closing out the academic year while simultaneously beginning to plan for supporting students through the summer and into the fall. The webinar will be held from 12:00 to 1:30 p.m. on Tuesday, June 9 and is open to anyone interested. Please register online to participate. The session will also be recorded and posted at www.matoolsforschools.com.

❤️ Elementary and Middle School Principal Virtual Networking: June 9, 10, and 11

Three virtual networking sessions (June 9, 10, and 11) have been scheduled as a follow up to a May 20th webinar that was hosted by DESE and the Massachusetts School Administrators Association (MSAA). The May 20th event for elementary and middle school principals and other school and district leaders addressed the social and emotional well-being of children, youth and adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. The networking during these sessions will also include sharing strategies to address race and racial equity. More information about the follow up virtual networking sessions can be found on the registration form.

❤️ Webinar: Understanding and Responding to Children with Problematic Sexual Behaviors: June 9

Most children with problematic sexual behaviors will grow into healthy adults, especially if they receive early and effective interventions. Recent legislation decriminalized these behaviors for children under 12, and you can register for an upcoming webinar to increase your understanding of how to effectively intervene. Register online for this webinar, “The Unique Challenges and Opportunities to Manage Problematic Sexual Behavior within a School Setting” will be offered Tuesday, June 9th from 2:00-3:00 PM. Topics include:
• Differentiating between students who need new skills and students who have the skill but are having difficulty performing or generalizing.
• Teaching the child about personal and sexual boundaries and positive, healthy relationships.
• Collaborating with community-based supports.
• Establishing a solid safety planning process for the school community and the child.