

**Minutes of the Regular Meeting
of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
75 Pleasant Street, Malden, MA 02148
Tuesday, January 26, 2021
9:05 a.m. – 12:10 p.m.**

Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Present:

Katherine Craven, Chair, Brookline
James Morton, Vice-Chair, Boston
Jasper Coughlin, Student Member, Billerica
Amanda Fernández, Belmont (participating remotely via video conference)
Matthew Hills, Newton
Darlene Lombos, Boston (participating remotely via video conference)
Michael Moriarty, Holyoke (participating remotely via video conference)
James Peyser, Secretary of Education
Paymon Rouhanifard, Brookline (participating remotely via video conference)
Mary Ann Stewart, Lexington (participating remotely via video conference)
Martin West, Newton (participating remotely via video conference)

Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

Chair Craven convened the meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) at 9:05 a.m. She noted several members are participating remotely, to adhere to the current state limits on this type of in-person gathering. Board members introduced themselves.

Public Comment

- **Ed Lambert**, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, addressed the Board on Item 1: Update on COVID-19 Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families, with respect to the new live instruction requirements, the decision to proceed with MCAS, and the need for data around student learning loss
- **Andrew S. McIlvaine**, Cambridge parent, addressed the Board on Emergency Regulations on Remote Learning, with respect to mandatory synchronous instruction
- **Gerry Mroz**, parent, addressed the Board on Item 1: Update on COVID-19 Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families and Item 2: Proposed Modifications to Competency Determination Requirement
- **Michael Wilson** addressed the Board on ACCESS testing for students
- **John Cabral**, Taunton Superintendent of Schools, addressed the Board on admissions policies of regional vocational schools
- **Juan Cofield**, on behalf of the New England Area Conference of the NAACP, addressed the Board on admissions policies of regional vocational schools
- **Kevin Murray**, MA Advocates for Children, addressed the Board on admissions policies of regional vocational schools
- **Victoria Pike** addressed the Board on teacher licensing

Comments from Chair Craven

Chair Craven thanked Board members for participating in the training provided via Zoom last week by Overcoming Racism and noted there will be a second round in the spring. She thanked Ms. Fernández for her work as Chair of the Board's Educator Diversification Committee and asked her to present a brief report on behalf of the committee.

Ms. Fernández said she echoes Chair Craven's positive comments about the anti-racism training and its importance for Board members as well as Department staff. She said the Educator Diversification Committee, which includes Ms. Lombos, Mr. Rouhanifard, and Ms. Stewart, met in January and will continue to meet quarterly. Ms. Fernández said at its January meeting the committee heard a progress report from Senior Associate Commissioner Ventura Rodriguez and Associate Commissioner Shay Edmond about the teacher diversification grant, Influence100, the diversity networks that the Department has launched, the Inspired Fellows program and its focus on recruitment, and the racial equity training. Ms. Fernández said the committee discussed new potential areas of work including providing financial support for college students and developing more pathways for high school students to enter the education profession. She said the committee will meet again in February. Ms. Fernández said the educator diversity presentation on the agenda later today will inform the Board about the guidebook and the experience of the first two years of the grant program. In closing, Ms. Fernández said the Department's work in this area is exciting and more relevant than ever.

Chair Craven announced that Mr. Hills will be added to the Board's Commissioner's Performance Evaluation Committee. She offered a reminder and update on evidence-based policy making: In January 2020, our Board and the Board of Higher Education (BHE) each adopted a resolution affirming our broad-based commitment to collect, review, and act on high-quality evidence to inform ongoing and new initiatives intended to strengthen education in Massachusetts. She said as Chair she has designated member Marty West to take the lead in working on these matters at the board level. She informed the Board that the BHE recently set up a task force on evidence-based policy making and the task force will hold a meeting on February 1. Chair Craven said Mr. West, Mr. Moriarty, and Mr. Rouhanifard, as well as Matt Deninger, DESE's Chief Strategy and Research Officer, will attend the BHE task force meeting as invitees, and Mr. West will update the Board at our February meeting.

Mr. West added he has been meeting with BHE Chair Chris Gabrieli and key staff to move this work forward. He said the February 1 meeting will review our Department's progress in developing the student longitudinal data system and focus on an urgent opportunity to use data to address the drop-off in the number of high school seniors completing financial aid applications for college.

Comments from the Secretary

Secretary Peyser said that tomorrow the Governor will introduce his House 1 budget for FY22 and that last week, the Governor announced his House 1 budget will include full funding for the first year of the Student Opportunity Act (SOA), which was delayed due to the pandemic in FY21. The Secretary said this is on top of a billion dollars in new federal aid that has come to the Commonwealth for K-12 education in the first CARES Act and most recently in the federal stimulus bill. Secretary Peyser said most of those resources are still available and will remain available into FY22. He added that with full funding of the SOA, as well as the additional federal resources, our schools and districts should be in pretty good fiscal shape going into FY22.

Secretary Peyser also noted the recent *Boston Globe Magazine* article on the impact of COVID-19 and remote learning on struggling readers in the Commonwealth. Noting that the pandemic has caused tremendous challenges and learning losses across all grades, subjects, and levels, the Secretary said the greatest urgency is to get early readers back on track. He said the state is addressing this and allocating resources to it, and schools and districts need to focus their efforts on it during the rest of this school year as well as during the summer and into the fall. Secretary Peyser said we know the early years are critical for building reading skills and when those years are lost or students fail to achieve proficiency by the time they are in 3rd or 4th grade, it is very hard to recover despite significant interventions. He encouraged the Board to keep this on top of the priority list.

Comments from the Commissioner

Commissioner Riley said the Massachusetts School Counselors Association is awarding the 2021 School Counselor of the Year today to Jessica Descartes of Tech Boston Academy. He said Ms. Descartes is a counselor for students in grades 6-12 who are in Sheltered English Immersion and students who have limited or interrupted formal education. Commissioner Riley said Ms. Descartes exemplifies the great work so many school counselors and other educators are doing.

Commissioner Riley said the Department has continued to implement the act relative to students with dyslexia and among other activities, is producing dyslexia guidelines in consultation with the Department of Early Education and Care. He noted four chapters of the guidelines were released in December 2020 and the remaining five chapters will be released soon. He added that meetings with stakeholders will occur through February and the Department expects to post the final version of the guidelines in March 2021.

Commissioner Riley updated the Board on the STEM Advanced Placement Access Expansion Opportunity. He said the Department last fall applied for and received a federal grant to expand opportunities for students in Massachusetts who lack access to Advanced Placement coursework in the STEM fields; those gaps are particularly acute for students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities. He said the program will increase the capacity of schools to offer advanced coursework in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The Commissioner said he will report periodically to the Board as this initiative proceeds.

Approval of the Minutes

On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:

VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approve the minutes of the December 16, 2020 Regular Meeting.

The vote, by roll call, was unanimous.

Update on COVID-19 Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families

Commissioner Riley presented an update on new developments since the Board's last meeting on December 15, 2020. He said the Department continues to inform districts of new developments related to COVID-19 and to support schools and districts as they serve students during the pandemic. He highlighted a few items including the announcement on January 5 that the Department would shorten MCAS testing time for students in grades 3-8 this spring and provide accountability relief by

not naming or recommending to the Board any underperforming or chronically underperforming schools in the upcoming school year. The Commissioner said the Department has worked to get more than 13,000 air purifiers distributed to schools with ventilation issues. He said the purchases are made on behalf of the districts and shipped directly to the district, eliminating any added procurement burden. Commissioner Riley said on January 8, he joined Governor Baker and Secretary Peyser in unveiling the pooled testing initiative that will be available within the next month to schools and districts, expanding on a rapid testing initiative that began in schools in December. He said during an initial six-week period, participating districts and schools will receive the test kits, support from a testing service provider, and the testing software to track results, all at no cost to them. In most cases, the Commissioner said, districts and schools will administer the tests using existing staff resources. He added that following the initial six-week launch, districts and schools may continue using pooled testing by purchasing the tests and any other accompanying testing materials, software, or support from a statewide contract using their federal stimulus dollars.

Commissioner Riley noted the Department Public Health (DPH) has removed the flu vaccine mandate from the immunization requirements for school entry in light of the mild flu season, although DPH continues to strongly recommend the flu shot for everyone age 6 months and older. In other matters, the Commissioner said last week the Department announced it will seek flexibility from the U.S. Department of Education around certain federal accountability requirements. He said the Department is following current federal discussions over President Biden's \$1.9 trillion recovery plan proposal which includes additional federal education relief. Commissioner Riley said he is pleased that the Governor's House 1 budget proposal will include the rollout of funding for the Student Opportunity Act. He concluded by stating work is proceeding to launch the education internship program for high school seniors and he will continue to update the Board.

Mr. Hills asked if the request for federal flexibility relating to accountability has any bearing on MCAS testing. Commissioner Riley said it does not, and the Department is tracking any guidance the U.S. Department of Education may issue on student assessment. Ms. Fernández asked about ACCESS testing, noting it is a requirement for English language learners and some families may be reluctant to send their children to school for in-person testing. She asked that the Department consider the recommendations from various stakeholder groups about ACCESS testing this year. Commissioner Riley said has extended the window for the testing to take place through May 20 and the Department will continue to monitor the situation, taking into account the requirements of state and federal law. He said Associate Commissioner Rob Curtin would provide additional information in his upcoming presentation. Ms. Lombos expressed support for the concerns Ms. Fernández raised.

Proposed Modifications to Competency Determination Requirement for the Class of 2021 Due to the COVID-19 Emergency

Associate Commissioner Rob Curtin briefly reviewed the Board's prior action modifying the competency determination (CD) requirements for students in the class of 2020. He said last spring special legislation authorized certain flexibilities because of the pandemic, and the Board modified CD requirements for students in the class of 2020 in English language arts (ELA), mathematics, and science and technology/engineering (STE), and for students in the classes of 2021-2023 in STE only. Mr. Curtin said coming into this school year, the plan was to administer a makeup MCAS test in January for students in the class of 2021 who had not yet earned the CD in ELA and math. Based on the trajectory of the virus, the Commissioner announced several weeks ago that the January tests would be postponed.

Mr. Curtin said today the Commissioner is recommending that the Board approve a limited modification to the CD for students in the class of 2021 who have not yet earned the CD and are missing the chance to take and pass the ELA or math tests in January. Mr. Curtin explained that the award of the high school diploma is still a local decision; students must meet local requirements in addition to earning the CD. He said the proposal today would allow students in the class of 2021 to earn the CD in ELA or math based upon earning full credit in a relevant course, noting this is similar to the process the Board adopted for the class of 2020 last year. Mr. Curtin explained the award is not automatic; last year about 3000 students who had not received their CD in ELA or math were eligible to earn it through this process and about 2000 did so.

Mr. Hills asked what percent of the students in the class of 2021 who have not yet earned the CD would have done so through the January MCAS tests if the tests could have been administered. Mr. Curtin said about 92 percent of the 72,000 students in the class have already earned the CD and while the percentage of the remaining students that would pass is typically not high, the January tests would have been an opportunity for these students; hence the need to offer an alternate pathway. Mr. Hills said he views the proposal as reasonable. Vice-Chair Morton said he commends everyone for the 92% passing rate for this year's seniors and he supports the proposal to provide an alternate path for those who have not yet earned the CD.

Mr. Moriarty said while the loosening of standards always concerns him, he sees this proposal as a consequence of the pandemic and not an effort to lower standards. Noting that the high school ELA and math tests call for proficiency at the 10th grade level, Mr. Moriarty said he believes the Department is serious about the need to address learning gaps for students who might otherwise lack essential skills and knowledge when they seek jobs or who might lose Pell grant eligibility because they need to take remedial courses in college. He said even with his concerns, he would accept the realities and vote yes. Commissioner Riley said the Department is discussing some opportunities for these students and is working with community colleges on a potential pilot program, and he hopes to have more information on that for the February meeting.

On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:

VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, in accordance with St. 2020, c. 56, § 6, and as recommended by the Commissioner, grant a limited modification of the competency determination (CD) requirements by authorizing a process through which students in the class of 2021 who have not yet earned the CD in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics may earn the CD through successful completion of a relevant course, as follows:

- **For ELA and mathematics – upon district certification that the student earned full credit for a relevant course aligned to the appropriate curriculum framework in that subject matter, and has demonstrated competency in that subject.**

This action is not intended to be a permanent pathway to earning a competency determination, but rather a limited measure needed in response to the extraordinary circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic. This process will be implemented when information about students' course

completion is available. The Commissioner shall report to the Board and the public on the results of this process.

The vote, by roll call, was unanimous.

On ACCESS testing, Mr. Curtin said the Commissioner extended the deadline to administer the tests to May 20. He said the hope is by spring more students will be attending school in person. Mr. Curtin said the Commissioner's intent is to use testing data this year for diagnostic purposes, and the ACCESS is a diagnostic test to determine how students are progressing towards English language proficiency. Mr. Curtin noted federal law requires schools to use test data to determine whether an English learner is ready to exit EL status or needs additional services, and schools use the data to plan their programs for next school year. He said the Department will review any further guidance the federal government issues about testing English learners.

Update on College Access Data for the Class of 2021

Commissioner Riley introduced Matt Deninger, Acting Chief Strategy and Research Officer in the Department's Office of Planning and Research, and Nyal Fuentes, College and Career Readiness Coordinator in the Department's Office of College, Career and Technical Education, to discuss data on college access. Commissioner Riley said the Department is tracking completion of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) forms and is concerned that completion rates are down compared to previous years. Mr. Deninger said he and Mr. Fuentes are a part of a cross-agency team that has been working on college access since the fall. He presented data from Massachusetts and across the country about how the pandemic is affecting student enrollment in higher education and how it has exacerbated equity gaps. He noted that fall 2020 enrollment in Massachusetts public institutions of higher education was down 20 percent for the high school graduating class of 2020 compared to the previous year.

Mr. Deninger explained that in January 2020, both the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Board of Higher Education (BHE) voted on a common vision of and commitment to evidence-based policy making. He explained that current data show the following: college access matters for future earnings; immediate enrollment in college matters for future earnings; immediate enrollment in college dipped in fall 2020, especially among low income students; for seniors in high school, on-time Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion is an indicator of future college enrollment; and compared to last year, FAFSA completion is down across the board both nationally and in Massachusetts. Mr. Deninger said this is an opportunity to promote equity in college access amid the pandemic and keep college options open for families and students in the fall.

Mr. Fuentes discussed how the Department is working with Department of Higher Education (DHE) to raise awareness by promoting college access this year. The activities include meeting with counselors across Massachusetts to understand challenges and bright spots, and conducting a statewide virtual convening in partnership with the MA School Counselors Association and College Access Groups to share data, tools (FAFSA reports), and evidence-based approaches such as direct FAFSA assistance to engage students and families. He highlighted some ways the Department is generating awareness including the Commissioner's Zoom conferences with district leaders, collaboration with the State Student Advisory Council and DHE, and discussion at the Evidence-Based Policy Making task force meeting scheduled for February 1.

Vice-Chair Morton offered his support as a leader of a youth services organization and encouraged the Department to connect with other youth-serving organizations such as Gear Up, United Way, and others because there is a network of them across the Commonwealth that could provide direct and immediate access to young people, especially young people of color. He also suggested a public awareness campaign about this challenge, perhaps including a video with young people who reflect the students they are trying to reach, to encourage them to complete their FAFSA applications. He offered to support this work in any way he can. Chair Craven echoed Vice-Chair Morton's comments. Mr. Hills asked if the data show differences among various high schools. Mr. Deninger said there is considerable variation and staff is following up on that. Mr. Coughlin said the State Student Advisory Council is interested in joining this effort and suggested a public service announcement for families on filling out the FAFSA and why it is important. Secretary Peyser said he hopes the Department will encourage school counselors to download reports weekly to see who has and has not completed the FAFSA. Mr. Deninger said the upcoming webinars will prompt counselors to check those reports. Ms. Fernández suggested cultural proficiency training for counselors could be helpful.

Mr. West said this issue is of interest to both our Board and the Board of Higher Education; hence the need for an interagency effort to address it. He said discussion of this topic will continue at the February 1 meeting of the Board of Higher Education's task force on evidence-based policy making and all Board members are invited to attend.

Chair Craven thanked the presenters and called for a break at 11:08 a.m. The Board reconvened at 11:22 a.m.

Update on Educator Diversity Initiatives

Ventura Rodriguez, Senior Associate Commissioner for Strategic Initiatives, explained that about two years ago, the Department launched the Teacher Diversification Pilot Program to support district efforts to strengthen and diversify their recruitment and retention efforts. He said this grant program was designed with the idea that a successful talent diversification strategy requires evaluating and revising current practices around recruitment, selection, and retention while also taking steps to be inclusive. Mr. Rodriguez said as part of the design of the overall program, the Department partnered with TNTP to create and deliver ongoing technical assistance to grant recipients related to their recruitment, selection, and retention strategies. He said TNTP has created a guidebook that reflects the collective learning from the work with these districts and programs; it highlights research as well as best practices that have emerged nationally and within the Commonwealth.

Shay Edmond, Associate Commissioner for Strategic Initiatives, presented the guidebook, [*Promising Recruitment, Selection, and Retention Strategies for a Diverse Massachusetts Teacher Workforce*](#). She said the Commissioner and Department are committed to this work, noting the research showing improved social and academic outcomes for all students, particularly students of color, when they can learn from diverse educators. Ms. Edmond said the guidebook will support school and district leaders as they design and implement their educator diversification strategies. She noted that TNTP has been a partner since this initiative began and is providing support to the Department as well as to schools and districts that are participating in the pilot program. Ms. Edmonds explained the theory of action developed by the Department and TNTP focuses on cultural proficiency, equity, and anti-bias work as a foundation for an effective talent strategy with a clear long-term vision and metrics of success. She said a more diverse workforce and a culturally responsive educational experience would benefit all students, particularly students of color.

Christina Brown, partner at TNTP, provided a brief overview of TNTP and its work with schools and communities in Massachusetts and nationally to promote educational equity and opportunities. Ms. Brown said TNTP has a great ongoing collaboration with the Department to support diversification work in Massachusetts. She explained that the guidebook proposes four key steps to develop and implement a talent diversification strategy: (1) understand why teacher racial and ethnic diversity matters to students and districts; (2) audit current talent management processes, understand the experience of stakeholders, and set goals; (3) adjust talent practices; and (4) create a long-term diversification strategy. Ms. Brown discussed effective strategies. Ms. Edmond reviewed the four steps outlined in the guidebook, discussed the educator networking that the program fosters, and concluded by reviewing resources for schools and districts as they continue to engage in this work.

Vice-Chair Morton asked how the Department is measuring success. Mr. Rodriguez responded that the Department is collecting data from districts, for example, on the initiative to encourage more paraprofessionals to become licensed educators. Ms. Edmonds said while the pandemic has slowed some activities, including a third-party evaluation, the Department is continuing to gather and analyze data from districts. Chair Craven thanked the presenters for their report and their ongoing work on this initiative.

Update on Education Budget Matters

Senior Associate Commissioner/CFO Bill Bell provided an update on state and federal education funding. He reviewed key points in the FY21 state budget and touched on federal pandemic relief, including funding for Massachusetts under the CARES Act and Coronavirus Relief Act. Mr. Bell said the Governor will release his FY22 state budget proposal on January 27 and the Commissioner has conveyed priorities reflecting items the Board has discussed, including targeted funding to address learning losses, early grade reading programs, and state aid to implement the Student Opportunity Act. He said the Board will have an opportunity to discuss the Governor's FY22 budget proposal at the February meeting. Mr. Bell said the Department continues to monitor progress on President Biden's proposed COVID-19 stimulus bill and the President's directive to the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) to increase reimbursement to schools.

On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:

VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adjourn the meeting at 12:10 p.m. subject to the call of the Chair.

The vote, by roll call, was unanimous.

Respectfully submitted,
Jeffrey C. Riley
Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education
and Secretary to the Board