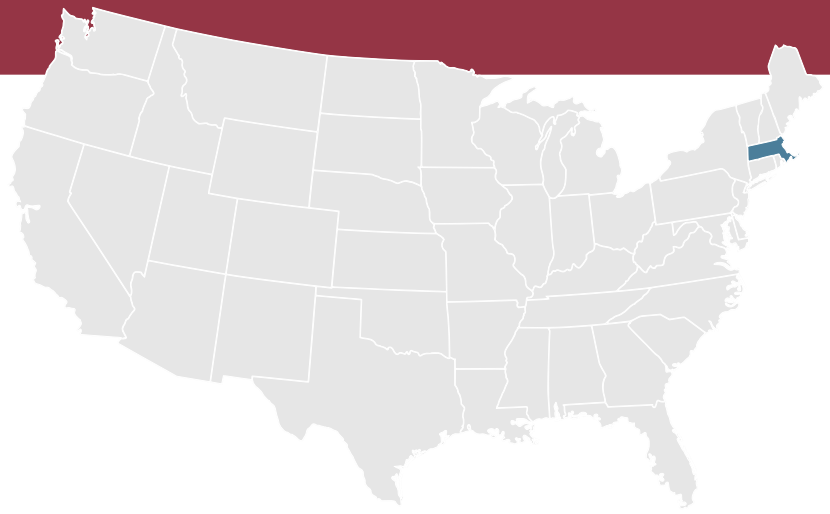


An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



Massachusetts

Project Overview

In partnership with the Collaborative for Student Success, Bellwether Education Partners, convened an objective, independent panel of accountability experts to review ESSA state plans. We sought out a diverse group of peer reviewers with a range of political viewpoints and backgrounds, and we asked them to review each state's accountability plan with an eye toward capturing strengths and weaknesses.

We aimed to provide constructive feedback to the states, and to serve as a source of straightforward information to the public so that they are better able to engage policymakers if and how they see fit. Inherently, this independent process could not take into account the numerous political and situational challenges that occur in every state. We are in no way attempting to diminish those challenges, but the scope of this review was to compare the rigor and comprehensive nature of state accountability plans.

Peers worked in small teams to review the plans that states formally submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. After writing their own reviews independently, the peers met for two days to discuss their individual reviews and work together on the collaborative draft you'll see below. The teams were asked to use their discretion and expertise to respond to and score each rubric item, and those scores were normed across states and peers.

Each state was given the opportunity to review the draft peer analysis and to provide substantive additions and corrections. Still, the reviews should be considered a snapshot of state plans as of April–June 2017, and we anticipate that states will continue to update their plans going forward.

To read more about the project, as well as a list of the expert peer reviewers, visit the Bellwether website [here](#).

Overall Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths: What are the most promising aspects of the state’s plan? What parts are worth emulating by other states?

The Massachusetts plan begins with a compelling and coherent vision of the state’s successes and challenges—resulting in the articulation of five overarching strategies that are meant to drive the state’s plan. The state’s Executive Summary is clear, understandable, and accessible for all audiences.

Massachusetts is also noteworthy for its strong history of taking actions that have resulted in improvements in the state’s lowest-performing schools and districts. The plan offers useful research, experiences, and insights into what the state’s approaches are, and how and why they’ve worked in the past. Although the state’s plan lacks some specificity around exactly how Massachusetts will continue its support for low-performing schools going forward, it does commit to identifying a number of schools with low-performing subgroups for targeted support, and the state’s history on school turnarounds presents a potential roadmap for other states.

The state’s plan for Supporting Excellent Educators is also a model worthy of study by other states. It emphasizes how educator supports for early literacy and middle school math, for example, will push the thinking and learning of teachers and principals. In addition, the state’s educator effectiveness plan is supported by excellent data and trends analysis; it sets goals for the next 10 years to help close gaps; and it makes a credible case for how the state will achieve its vision. In its next ESSA plan revision, the state should focus on the accountability portion with the same thoughtful analysis and intensity it brings to its educator-effectiveness work.

Weaknesses: What are the most pressing areas for the state to improve in its plan? What aspects should other states avoid?

Unfortunately, Massachusetts’ plan neglects to connect the dots between its long-term vision and how that vision will be embodied in its accountability system. As a result, it misses multiple opportunities to tie these together in meaningful and actionable ways. It could, for example, have elevated indicators of early grades literacy and middle grades mathematics, or it could have focused the state’s school support resources in these areas.

Massachusetts clearly spent a lot of time rethinking its performance index, indicators, and determinations. But due to the lack of data, simulations, and examples, this is still somewhat abstract rather than an actionable plan.

The state proposes to include stakeholders—including parents and students—as it continues refining its ESSA plan, as well as through the implementation of its plan. However, the state has not proposed a clear stakeholder engagement plan, and it lacks timelines and communications around many critical decisions.

Plan Components

Each state’s plan has been rated on a scale of 1 (“This practice should be avoided by other states”) to 5 (“This could be a potential model for other states”).

Goals: Are the state’s vision, goals, and interim targets aligned, ambitious, and attainable? Why or why not?

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Massachusetts aims to reduce the proficiency gap by one-third over the next six years. Although the state is transitioning to new assessments and the results will not be available until the summer of 2017, the state has provided a sample set of performance targets based on its prior state assessments. Similarly, Massachusetts is waiting for more current data on English language proficiency, and in the meantime has provided placeholder goals that it plans to update in the near future.

Massachusetts’ proposed “long-term goal” for graduation rates was set for 2020—and even progress from now until then would leave large gaps among different student groups. Encouragingly, the state has set gap-closing graduation rate improvement goals for lower-performing subgroups, and it says the goals are based on historical improvement rates. However, the state does not explain how it derived its 2020 goals, nor provide historical data to demonstrate that they are truly ambitious.

Massachusetts does have a strong overview and opening section that lays out a compelling introduction, explains the state’s educational strengths and weaknesses via data, outlines credible strategies on which to focus, and acknowledges its commitment to continued excellence, particularly emphasizing how the state will continue to redouble its efforts around eliminating persistent gaps. But rather than building on this narrative throughout the plan, Massachusetts does not provide a comprehensive vision or set long-term goals for the future. And while Massachusetts does highlight five overarching strategies to support all students, based on clear gaps that the state is currently experiencing, these strategies are not cohesively pulled through the plan as submitted.

Standards and Assessments: Is the state’s accountability system built on high-quality standards and assessments aligned to college and career readiness? Why or why not?

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Massachusetts has had strong standards that align with college readiness, but the state is in the midst of revising those standards. The state has been using the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment but is in the process of developing and administering a new assessment (derived from PARCC) called the Next-Generation MCAS. Due to the transitions taking place and the lack of transparency around those, it is not certain at this time that Massachusetts’ new standards and assessments will be as strong as they have been historically.

Additionally, Massachusetts does not assess students in any language other than English, due to a state law passed in 2002—with the exception of the high school mathematics assessment, which is offered in Spanish and grandfathered in. Despite this legal obstacle, research indicates that English learners are best served by being permitted to take content-area assessments in their native language. Lastly, Massachusetts should strengthen its plan by ensuring that it has a process in place to meet the 1 percent cap on alternate assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Indicators: Are the state’s chosen accountability indicators aligned to ensure targets and goals are met and likely to lead to improved educational outcomes for students? Why or why not?

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Massachusetts plans to revisit its indicators when it has its new assessment results in summer 2017, but for now the state’s plan includes a relatively simple list of high-quality indicators: academic achievement, academic progress, English language proficiency, graduation rates, and chronic absenteeism. Within those categories, its school quality indicators appear to be well constructed. The state’s proposed use of “Success in grade 9 courses” is notable, as it will serve as an early warning indicator to help schools and districts identify which students are most likely to drop out, and position them to better respond. To produce this measure, the state proposes to use prior-year student performance data to determine if a student failed one or more courses in high school.

Massachusetts also deserves credit for including its science assessment in its accountability system. That decision will help lessen concerns about curriculum narrowing and will force schools to pay attention to student performance beyond reading and math.

The plan also includes a measure for the successful completion of “challenging coursework,” but it does not describe how that would be defined. The state may want to consider combining this indicator with access to the courses as an incentive for schools to pay attention to both access and success.

At the high school level, it’s not clear if the state’s proposed inclusion of two separate measures of graduation rates (in addition to an annual dropout rate) are sufficiently discrete to add extra information to the system, or if they’re just adding undue noise. The state would have a stronger plan, and more closely align its accountability system with its long-term goals, if it placed greater weight on the four-year graduation rate.

Academic Progress: Has the state created sufficient incentives for schools to care about both student proficiency and student growth over time? Why or why not?

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Massachusetts’ accountability system plans to include both student achievement and growth, and it is planning to place a strong weight on both, but neither of its proposed measures is aligned to the state’s grade-level standards for students.

The state’s proposed achievement measure is an average scale score. This method combines all student scores into one number, which avoids setting rigid cut points for students, but it can obscure information about how many students are meeting various performance thresholds. Similarly, the state’s growth measure, Student Growth Percentiles, is a relative measure of growth (meaning it compares students with each other, not with an objective standard). While the state plans to add another growth measure based on whether students are growing at a pace sufficient to meet state standards, the plan provides very little information about how that measure will be used or when it will be phased in.

All Students: Does the state system mask the performance of some subgroups of students, or does it have adequate checks in place to ensure all students (including all subgroups of students) receive a high-quality education? Why or why not?

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Massachusetts is clearly wrestling with the question of how to incentivize schools to address the needs of every child with a focus on traditionally disadvantaged students. But with few specifics and little backup data to support its outlined approach, it is difficult to predict its impact.

On the positive side, Massachusetts plans to identify for targeted support any school with a subgroup in the lowest performing 10 percent “of all eligible subgroups,” although it’s not entirely clear from the state’s plan if that applies to *each* subgroup (i.e., the 10 percent of schools with the lowest-performing subgroup of black students, the 10 percent of schools with the lowest-performing subgroup of students with disabilities, etc.) or if the state is envisioning one composite group based on *all* subgroups. The former would be a stronger plan and would allow for more tailored interventions than one composite group of “achievement gap” schools, but the state could provide greater clarity about how this identification process will work and how many schools might be identified.

Massachusetts plans to include “gap-closing for high-needs students” as part of its accountability system, but it has not provided specifics about how it would be incorporated in its overall school rating system. The state provides data showing that its “high-needs” subgroup would capture virtually all underserved students in schools where the number of English-language learner, economically disadvantaged, and special education students is not high enough to be disaggregated alone. This high-needs subgroup could be a useful addition to subgroup analysis and performance, with the stated impact of adding an additional 150 schools to be held accountable for subgroup performance.

However, it would be helpful to see modeling of the approach that supports the decision. Which kinds of schools are now included that otherwise would not be? How is this super subgroup better than reducing the n-size from 20 to 15 or 10? How would schools respond to these particular incentive structures? The nuances and potential cross-currents of this approach are not addressed.

Massachusetts has also not committed either way to including or excluding former students with disabilities within the students-with-disabilities subgroup. Similarly, the state does not commit to how it will approach the inclusion of English learners for either recently arrived English learners or for recently exited English learners for a time frame of two to four years. Nor does it say when it will make a decision.

Identifying Schools: Is the state’s plan to identify schools for comprehensive and targeted support likely to identify the schools and student groups most in need?

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Massachusetts has the outline of a plan for how it will rate schools. As discussed above, it has proposed weights of its indicators in its accountability system, but it plans to revisit those decisions in the coming months. Once the indicators are combined, each school will be assigned to a tier, qualifying it for specific levels of support or intervention. Per above, the state has also committed to identifying a number of schools with low-performing subgroups for targeted support. While the state’s overall approach could be innovative, it still lacks details that will be important for educators, parents, policymakers, and other stakeholders to make sense of it.

Massachusetts states that it will model out its plan once it has additional data, but for now it’s difficult to know what that will look like. Educators, parents, and communities deserve—and indeed, need—to understand the state’s thinking behind its final weighting system. Further, the state explains that it plans to reset the index ranges each year, but it does not explain how the state would make those changes, why it would do so, or how any changes would be communicated to educators and parents. To drive improvement behaviors, all of this must be transparent.

Supporting Schools: Are the state’s planned interventions in comprehensive and targeted support schools evidence-based and sufficiently rigorous to match the challenges those schools face? Why or why not?

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Massachusetts has a strong track record in this area that could serve as a model for other states. Massachusetts has commissioned studies to evaluate the effectiveness of its approaches to school turnaround: a 2014 study called *Turnaround Practices in Action* and a 2016 quasi-experimental study called *Evaluation of Level 4 Turnaround Efforts in Massachusetts*. Together, these studies form the evidentiary foundation for the state’s current practices and have informed future directions, and Massachusetts will continue to embed those principles into competitive grant funds dedicated for school-improvement activities.

Massachusetts cites its strong recent history of taking actions that have resulted in improving the state’s lowest-performing schools and districts. The state has the authority to do full takeovers through receivership, to assign third-party organizations to manage a school on behalf of the department or the district, or to support districts in establishing alternative governance structures for specific schools or clusters of schools such as Empowerment Zones. It has used each of these authorities in different circumstances across the state—all to good effect.

For schools and districts that do not require the highest level of intervention, Massachusetts offers several other research-based supports. It provides resources focused on four evidence-based turnaround practices; it provides direct support to the state’s largest districts through the Commissioner’s Districts programs; it supports small and midsized districts through the District and School Assistance Centers; and three additional offices provide specialized support in such areas as social/emotional learning, partner vetting/selection, and managing/evaluating/monitoring those in receivership.

However, while the state has a strong track record in this area, it’s not clear exactly how, or in what stages, Massachusetts will extend those supports to low-performing schools going forward. Will there be more or fewer schools in need of differentiated support? Will the state be able to handle the volume if there are more? How will the state handle/support schools that may have been previously identified but are no longer identified? The state may have answers to these questions, but they weren’t readily available in the state’s plan.

In addition, there is a lack of specificity around exactly how, at what time, or in what stages support will be provided to low-performing schools. There are no examples given of how this impressive array of support will be tailored to specific needs identified through its to-be-determined indicator/index system.

Exiting Improvement Status: Are the state’s criteria for schools to exit comprehensive and targeted support status sufficient to demonstrate sustained improvements? Why or why not?



Massachusetts has not yet finalized its exit its criteria for low-performing schools to exit improvement status, but it has outlined what those might be once the state has more current data. To exit comprehensive support status, schools must meet achievement, growth, and gap closing targets, and submit “exit assurances” that provide a school’s plan to sustain its efforts going forward. For schools identified for targeted support, they can exit improvement status when they rise above the 20th percentile within the group that led to the school’s identification and if that group meet its annual targets. Although these criteria are still in development, they represent a potentially strong combination of requirements that would demonstrate schools were on track for sustained improvements.

Continuous Improvement: Has the state outlined a clear plan to learn from its implementation efforts and modify its actions accordingly, including through continued consultation and engagement of key stakeholders? If not, what steps could the state take to do so?

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Massachusetts has a history of using data and qualitative feedback to improve its policies, supports, and interventions. Throughout the plan, Massachusetts emphasizes its commitment to continuous improvement and says it will continuously engage stakeholders to develop improvements. It is less clear in the plan where specific stakeholder feedback may have influenced a decision or will influence future decisions. That may be helpful to emphasize when communicating with stakeholders moving forward.

Massachusetts also asserts that it has established intentional processes that allow the state to study the effectiveness of initiatives, though it does not identify the frequency or “the how” behind the ongoing conversations and processes and improvements/adjustments to the overall state plan. It is positive that the plan references that the state agency will focus on implementation, including dedicating some staff to the effort. It is also positive that the state plan will be the basis of the report to the commissioner. What is less clear is who is making decisions and then communicating out broadly on things like annual performance targets or the final decisions on index measures and weighting. Will parents understand this and how to make decisions for their child accordingly? Will educators understand what to do differently in their classrooms? Will school leaders understand how to support their educators and students based on this system?

Moreover, the state’s theory of improvement is based on the belief that it will set targets for each school and district that requires it to “stretch and continually improve,” but it offers little insight as to how any larger continuous improvement framework will be defined, operated, or resourced. Given the number of elements that are still in development, the state could strengthen its plan by articulating a more refined monitoring approach.