



# Technical Assistance Brief: Case Study of Massachusetts

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*Massachusetts' Approach to Improving Low-Performing Schools*

*Prepared for Pennsylvania Department of Education and the ESSA Accountability Work Group*

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# I. Purpose

With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) designed a stakeholder engagement process that relies on participation from a group of diverse thought leaders and practitioners to inform its state plan. These stakeholders have been divided into four workgroups: Assessment, Accountability, Educator Certification, and Educator Evaluation. In June, 2016, PDE requested that the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center at WestEd (MACC@WestEd) provide a case study brief on Massachusetts' approach to improving low-performing schools to inform the deliberations of the Accountability Work Group.

Massachusetts has been considered a leader in education reform in the United States since 1993. The state's students consistently demonstrate high performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and international assessments.

To address this request for information, MACC@WestEd conducted a review of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) website, relevant state and federal documents, presentations by Massachusetts ESE, and documents about Massachusetts developed by other comprehensive centers.

This brief is divided into five sections:

- The **Policy Overview** section briefly describes the key legislation and policies guiding Massachusetts turnaround efforts: the 2010 Massachusetts Act Relative to the Achievement Gap and subsequent regulations.
- The **Massachusetts Accountability System** section presents the state's Framework for District Differentiated Recognition, Accountability, and Assistance and the identification of low-performing schools including its Progress and Performance Index. In addition, it includes the status of districts and schools since 2012.
- The **State Organization and Supports for Turnaround** section briefly describes the Massachusetts ESE's structures for supporting low-performing schools, including funding, and the structure of the Statewide System of Support.
- The **State Implementation Efforts for Turnaround** section provides a brief overview of the requirements, interventions, and monitoring of the lowest-performing districts and schools, including those in receivership and identified as Priority Schools and Focus Schools.
- **Key Considerations for States** identifies questions states may wish to address as they develop their state plans.

The brief also includes Appendix A which is an overview of the Massachusetts Framework for District Accountability and Assistance and references.

## II. Policy Overview

This section presents an overview of key legislation and policy that have played a significant role in Massachusetts Turnaround efforts.

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) of 1993 called for dramatic changes in public education over a seven-year period. Among the Act's major provisions were greater and more equitable funding for schools, accountability for student learning, and statewide standards for students, educators, schools and districts. By the 1998-99 school year, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) had designed the first system of performance and improvement ratings under the MERA. Under this system, low ratings based on student achievement and improvement data would trigger subsequent fact-finding and panel reviews by the state agency. By 2010, it was recognized that Massachusetts needed to codify the accountability and assistance system that had evolved under State Board leadership over a 10- year period (Massachusetts ESE, 2014e).

### Act Relative to the Achievement Gap

In January of 2010, Governor Deval Patrick signed the Act Relative to the Achievement Gap. Grounded in the framework of the 1993 MERA, the 2010 Achievement Gap Act more clearly outlined accountability provisions that flowed from the original MERA's broad framework and powers.

The law provided districts and the ESE with new authorities, including the power to intervene in turnaround schools, to open new high-performing charter schools in the lowest performing districts, and to innovate through in-district charter schools. These reforms were enacted to create a renewed sense of urgency around the need to close persistent achievement gaps by expanding the suite of resources and strategies for turnaround reform. In addition, the passage of this law positioned Massachusetts to qualify for federal Race to the Top stimulus funds, and align Massachusetts' accountability system with federal laws/programs (Massachusetts ESE, 2014d).

Major provisions of the law include:

- The state is responsible for identifying schools that are underperforming and for assisting them to take the actions they need to rapidly improve student performance.
- The Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education is authorized to designate up to 72 schools, or no more than 4 percent of all schools, as either "underperforming" (Level 4) or "chronically underperforming" (Level 5) based on student achievement and improvement measures.
- Massachusetts ESE will provide tools and supports for district leaders to turn around schools and districts designated as underperforming or chronically underperforming.
- Higher caps were placed on the number of charter schools in the lowest performing districts.

- The legislation provided locally controlled options for the creation of Innovation Schools (a new type of in-district charter schools that operate with autonomy and flexibility in key areas: curriculum, budget, school schedule and calendar, staffing, professional development, and school district policies) (Great Lakes Comprehensive Center, 2014; Massachusetts ESE, 2014d).

## Key Regulations

In 2010, following the passage of the *Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted regulations to support the Act. These regulations included two sets of standards for schools and districts: (1) District Standards and Indicators and (2) Conditions for School Effectiveness ([Massachusetts ESE](#)).

## Massachusetts District Standards and Indicators

Massachusetts ESE uses the District Standards and Indicators for accountability and assistance purposes (e.g., conducting reviews of districts, guiding improvement planning). The standards and indicators identify the characteristics of effective districts in supporting and sustaining school improvement. They include the following:

### Leadership and Governance

- Focused school committee governance
- Effective district and school leadership
- District and school improvement planning
- Educationally sound budget development
- Effective district systems for school support and intervention

### Curriculum and Instruction

- Aligned, consistently delivered, and continuously improving curriculum
- Strong instructional leadership and effective instruction
- Sufficient instructional time

### Assessment

- Data collection and dissemination
- Data-based decision-making
- Student assessment

### Human Resources and Professional Development

- Staff recruitment, selection, assignment
- Supervision and evaluation
- Professional development

## Student Support

- Academic support
- Access and equity
- Educational continuity and student participation
- Services and partnerships to support learning
- Safety

## Financial and Asset Management

- Comprehensive and transparent budget process
- Adequate budget
- Financial tracking, forecasting, controls, and audits
- Cost-effective resource management
- Capital planning and facility maintenance (Massachusetts ESE, 2011b)

## Massachusetts Conditions for School Effectiveness

The Massachusetts Conditions for School Effectiveness identify the research-based practices that all schools, especially the most struggling schools, are required to implement to effectively meet the learning needs of all students. The resources also define what each condition looks like when implemented purposefully and with fidelity.

In 2010, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted the Essential Conditions for School Effectiveness into state regulations and as a result, the conditions serve as a set of required practices guiding school improvement planning, school accountability and technical assistance across the state. The Conditions are:

1. **Effective district systems for school support and intervention.** The district has systems and processes for anticipating and addressing school staffing, instructional, and operational needs in timely, efficient, and effective ways, especially for its lowest performing schools.
2. **Effective school leadership.** The district and school take action to attract, develop, and retain an effective school leadership team that obtains staff commitment to improving student learning and implements a clearly defined mission and set of goals.
3. **Aligned curriculum.** The school's enacted curricula are aligned to state curriculum frameworks and the MCAS performance level descriptions, and are also aligned vertically between grades and horizontally across classrooms at the same grade level and across sections of the same course.
4. **Effective instruction.** Instructional practices are based on evidence from a body of high-quality research and on high expectations for all students and include the use of appropriate, research-based reading and mathematics programs. The school staff has a common understanding of high-quality, evidence-based instruction and a system for monitoring instructional practice.

5. **Student assessment.** The school uses a balanced system of formative and benchmark assessments.
6. **Principal's staffing authority.** The principal has the authority to make staffing decisions based on the School Improvement Plan and student needs, subject to district personnel policies, budgetary restrictions, and the approval of the superintendent.
7. **Professional development and structures for collaboration.** Professional development for school staff includes both individually pursued activities and school-based, job-embedded approaches such as instructional coaching. It also includes content-oriented learning. The school has structures for regular, frequent collaboration to improve implementation of the curriculum and instructional practice. Professional development and structures for collaboration are evaluated for their effect on raising student achievement.
8. **Tiered instruction and adequate learning time.** The school schedule is designed to provide adequate learning time for all students in core subjects. For students not yet on track to proficiency in English Language Arts (ELA) or mathematics, the school provides additional time and support for individualized instruction through tiered instruction, a data-driven approach to prevention, early detection, and support for students who experience learning or behavioral challenges, including but not limited to students with disabilities and English language learners.
9. **Students' social, emotional, and health needs.** The school creates a safe school environment and makes effective use of a system for addressing the social, emotional, and health needs of its students that reflects the behavioral health and public schools framework.
10. **Family-school engagement.** The school develops strong working relationships with families and appropriate community partners and providers in order to support students' academic progress and social and emotional well-being.
11. **Strategic use of resources and adequate budget authority.** The principal makes effective and strategic use of district and school resources and has sufficient budget authority to do so (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011a).

Massachusetts ESE incorporates the District Standards and Indicators and the Conditions for School Effectiveness into its framework for differentiated recognition, accountability, and assistance.

# III. Massachusetts Accountability System

This section provides an overview of Massachusetts' unified accountability system. The 2012-13 school year marked the first year of Massachusetts' implementation of a unified accountability system (federal and state) for classifying districts and schools. The unified system operates within a framework described below.

## Framework for District Differentiated Recognition, Accountability, and Assistance

The Massachusetts ESE Framework for District Accountability and Assistance classifies schools and districts on a five-level scale, with the highest performing in Level 1 and the lowest performing in Level 5. In general, a district is classified into the level of its lowest performing school unless it has been placed in Level 4 or 5 by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education independent of the level of its schools (Massachusetts ESE, 2014a). See Appendix A for the Framework.

The amount of flexibility and autonomy each district receives is determined by its classification in the state's accountability system.

- **Level 1 Districts** are granted considerable autonomy and flexibility and have access to the Massachusetts ESE online tools and resources available to all districts.
- **Level 2 Districts** are granted some autonomy but must perform an annual needs assessment based on the state's *Conditions for School Effectiveness* to implement and/or improve conditions in their schools that are not effectively supporting the needs of all students. (Refer to previous section for the Conditions.)
- **Level 3 Districts** receive priority assistance from the regional District and School Assistance Center (DSAC) and engage with the DSAC in both the needs assessment process and in the identification of interventions.
- **Level 4 Districts** must rapidly implement the 11 Massachusetts *Conditions for School Effectiveness* in their Level 4 schools. The Massachusetts ESE assigns a liaison to engage their leadership team in system-level analysis of district support activities, and closely monitors districts for efficacy and impact.
- **Level 5 Districts and Schools (Receivership)**
  - If a school is placed in Level 5, the most serious designation, the ESE will engage a receiver to oversee management of the school.
  - Districts are independently eligible for placement in Level 5 on the basis of a district review, the report of an appointed accountability monitor, a follow-up review report, quantitative indicators set out in state regulations, or failure of a Level 4 district to meet the Massachusetts ESE-approved benchmarks or goals in its improvement plan in a timely manner (Massachusetts ESE, 2014d). When a district is placed in Level 5, the Commissioner appoints a receiver for the district. The receiver (according to state law M.G.L. c. 69, § 1K) retains all of the

powers of the superintendent and school committee, as well as full managerial and operational control of the district. This includes limiting suspending, or changing 1 or more provisions of any contract or collective bargaining agreement in the district.

## Progress and Performance Index (PPI)

The state uses the Progress and Performance Index (PPI) and school percentiles to classify schools and districts according to its accountability system. ([School Leader's Guide to the 2016 Accountability Determinations](#)).

The PPI combines information about narrowing proficiency gaps, growth, and graduation and dropout rates into a number between 0 and 100 ([Accountability Lists, Materials and Tools – Mass.gov](#)) All groups (districts, schools, and subgroups) are expected to halve the distance between their level of performance in 2011 and proficiency by the year 2017 (Massachusetts ESE, 2015b).

School and district accountability reports include PPIs for the “all students” group and for eleven subgroups, including: economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, current and former English language learners (ELLs), up to seven racial and ethnic groups, and high-need students (who include unduplicated counts of students belonging to at least one of the following groups: students with disabilities, ELL and former ELL students, and economically disadvantaged students) (Massachusetts ESE, 2015d).

All districts, schools, and groups with sufficient data are assigned an annual PPI which is an annual measure of improvement toward its own targets over a two-year period, as well as a cumulative PPI which is the average of annual PPIs over the most recent four-year period. Cumulative PPIs are calculated for a group that has at least three annual PPIs. (Cumulative PPIs weight recent years most; see Table 1 note.) A PPI of 75 or higher indicates that a district, school, or group is on track toward meeting its proficiency gap-narrowing goals. (For more information, please refer to the *Massachusetts School Leader's Guide to the 2015 Accountability Determinations*.)

A district's, school's or subgroup's annual PPI is a measure of improvement toward its own targets over a two-year period on up to seven core indicators. A group is awarded 0, 25, 50, 75, or 100 points based on their improvement. To be considered on target for a given indicator, a group must earn 75 points. The annual PPI is calculated by dividing the total number of points earned for all indicators by the number of indicators.

**Indicators.** The PPI combines information on up to seven of the following indicators:

- **Narrowing proficiency gaps in English language arts, mathematics, and science**  
In 2015, a district, school, or subgroup's “proficiency gap” is the distance between the group's 2011 Composite Performance Index (CPI) and a CPI of 100. All groups (districts, schools, and student subgroups) are expected to halve the distance between their level of performance in 2011 and proficiency by 2017. The CPI assigns 100, 75, 50, 25, or 0 points to each student participating in state assessments based on how close they scored to Proficient or Advanced. If a student scores Proficient or Advanced, the student is assigned 100 CPI points. The CPI is calculated by dividing the total number of points by the number of students in the group. The result is a number between 0 and 100. When all students in a group score Proficient or Advanced on state assessments,

the group's CPI will be 100. The goal for all districts, schools, and subgroups is to halve that gap in the six-year period between 2011 and 2017.

- **Growth in English language arts and mathematics**  
All districts, schools, and subgroups are expected to demonstrate growth in student achievement each year between 2011 and 2017. ESE uses median Student Growth Percentiles (SGPs) to measure how achievement for a group of students has grown or changed over time. A group is awarded 100 PPI points and an "Above Target" rating if it improves its median SGP by 15 or more points from the prior year.
- **Annual dropout rates**  
Only schools with grades 9-12. All districts, schools, and student subgroups are expected to halve the gap between their 2010 annual dropout rate, if one exists, and a rate of zero percent by the 2016-17 school year. A school is automatically awarded 100 PPI points and an "Above target if a group has a dropout rate of 0 percent, met the dropout rate of the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile for all students in the school, or exceeded the group's annual gap- halving target by declining 3 or more percentage points from the prior year.
- **Cohort graduation rates**  
All groups (districts, schools, and subgroups) are expected to make steady progress toward a goal of 90 percent for the four-year cohort graduation rate or 95 percent for the five-year rate by the 2016-17 school year.

In 2015, the four-year cohort graduation rate target was 80 percent and the five-year cohort target was 85 percent. For accountability determinations in any given year, the cohort graduation rate from the prior school year is used. PPI points are awarded to the group for making improvement toward the group's own target. To be considered on target, a group must earn 75 points.

### Extra credit

There are several ways in which a district, school, or subgroup can earn extra credit toward its annual PPI calculation. These include:

- **Improving student achievement:** The ESE awards extra credit for reducing the percentage of students scoring Warning/Failing and/or by increasing the percentage of students scoring Advanced by 10 percent or more on ELA, mathematics, and/or science state assessments from one year to the next. For each subject, the group is awarded 25 PPI points.
- **Re-engaging dropouts:** Schools serving high school grades can also earn 25 extra credit points if they reengaged two or more dropouts in the previous school year. The re-engaged student is credited to the school that re-enrolls/graduates them regardless of which school the student originally dropped out from. Extra credit points can be earned by the "all students" and "high needs students" groups only, and only at the school level.
- **Demonstrating strong growth in English language acquisition:** Beginning in 2015, schools and districts serving English language learners (ELLs) who demonstrate strong growth on the ACCESS for ELLs English language Proficiency Assessment (obtains a

median Student Growth Percentile (SGP) of 60 or higher) are awarded 25 PPI points.

Table 1 provides a sample of Massachusetts calculations for PPI indicators.

**Table 1. Sample Massachusetts Progress and Performance Index Calculation Indicators**

Indicators		2012	2013	2014	2015
English Language Arts	Narrowing proficiency gaps (CPI) Growth (SGP)	50	50	75	<b>100</b>
	Extra credit for decreasing % <i>Warning/Failing</i> (≥ 10%) Extra credit for increasing % <i>Advanced</i> (≥ 10%)	0	25	50	<b>75</b>
Mathematics	Narrowing proficiency gaps (CPI) Growth (SGP)	0	25	0	<b>0</b>
	Extra credit for decreasing % <i>Warning/Failing</i> (≥ 10%) Extra credit for increasing % <i>Advanced</i> (≥ 10%)	0	0	25	<b>0</b>
Science	Narrowing proficiency gaps (CPI)	75	50	100	<b>75</b>
	Extra credit for decreasing % <i>Warning/Failing</i> (≥ 10%) Extra credit for increasing % <i>Advanced</i> (≥ 10%)	50	50	75	<b>100</b>
High School	Annual dropout rate Cohort graduation rate	0	0	25	<b>25</b>
	Extra credit for reengaging dropouts (2 or more)	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
English Language	Extra credit for high growth on ACCESS for ELLs assessment (Student Growth Percentile on ACCESS)	75	100	75	<b>100</b>
<b>Points awarded for achievement, growth, and high school indicators</b>		75	75	75	<b>75</b>
<b>Points awarded for extra credit</b>		-	-	-	<b>25</b>
<b>Total points awarded</b>		375	400	500	<b>625</b>
<b>Number of achievement, growth, and high school indicators</b>		0	25	50	<b>125</b>
<b>Annual PPI</b>		375	425	550	<b>750</b>
<b>Cumulative PPI (2012*1 + 2013*2 + 2014*3 + 2015*4) ÷ 10<sup>1</sup></b>		7	7	7	<b>7</b>
<b>Annual PPI</b>		54	61	79	107
<b>Cumulative PPI (2012*1 + 2013*2 + 2014*3 + 2015*4) ÷ 10<sup>1</sup></b>		<b>84</b>			

Source: Massachusetts ESE (2015c)

<sup>1</sup> Annual PPIs are weighted most for most recent years: Year 1 \* 1, Year 2 \* 2, Year 3 \* 3, and Year 4 \* 4 and then divided by weighting factor to calculate a cumulative PPI on a 100-point scale.

**Classifications of Schools and Districts Based on PPI.** Based on the PPI, the Massachusetts ESE classifies schools and districts according to the five levels of the state's accountability system.

**Classification based on Student Assessment Participation.** All districts, schools, and subgroups must assess at least 95 percent of their students on state assessments. Any district or school with less than 95 percent participation for any student group on any subject test is classified into Level 2. Any school with less than 90 percent participation of any student group is automatically classified into Level 3. (Massachusetts ESE Glossary of 2015 Accountability Reporting Terms).

Table 2 includes an overview of the five levels in the Massachusetts accountability system, their descriptors, and a brief list of school and district reasons for each level.

**Table 2. Summary of Massachusetts' Classification of Schools and Districts and Reasons**

Levels	Descriptor	School Reasons	District Reasons
<b>Level 1</b>	High-achieving, high growth, gap-narrowing Commendation Schools	Meeting gap-narrowing goals (Cumulative PPI for all students and high-needs students is 75 or higher)	One or more schools in Level 1
<b>Level 2</b>	Not meeting proficiency gap narrowing goals	Not meeting gap-narrowing goals (Cumulative PPI for all students and high-needs students is 74 or lower)  Low assessment participation (less than 95% for any group in any subject)	One or more schools in Level 2  Low assessment participation (less than 95%)
<b>Level 3</b>	Lowest performing 20% (including lowest performing student groups)	Focus Schools: Among the lowest performing 20 percent of schools (including schools with the largest gaps) and/or among the lowest performing 20 percent of student groups  Persistently low graduation rates for one or more groups (less than 67% in 4 years)  Very low assessment participation (Below 90% for any group in any subject)	One or more schools in Level 3  Very low assessment participation (less than 90%)
<b>Level 4</b>	Lowest Performing	Priority Schools: Among the lowest performing schools or least improving schools	One or more schools in Level 4  Underperforming district (Classified by Board of Elementary & Secondary Education)
<b>Level 5</b>	Chronically Underperforming	Priority School: Chronically underperforming schools	Chronically underperforming district (Classified by Board of Elementary & Secondary Education)

Sources: Massachusetts ESE, (2014d) and (2015c).

**Commendation Schools.** A subset of Level 1 schools is recognized as Commendation Schools for their academic accomplishments. Commendation schools are identified for one or more of the following reasons:

- High achievement: Schools with the highest relative performance in both the aggregate and for the high-needs subgroup across the PPI achievement indicators.
- High progress: Schools with the highest relative performance on the PPI growth/improvement indicators (median SGP and changes in CPI) in both ELA and mathematics for students in the aggregate.
- Narrowing proficiency gaps: Schools commended for narrowing proficiency gaps with the highest relative performance on the PPI growth/improvement indicators in both ELA and mathematics for students in the high-needs subgroup.

## Accountability and Assistance Status of Districts and Schools since 2012

Table 3 provides a summary of the numbers and percentages of designated districts in each of the five levels from 2012 to 2015.

**Table 3. Summary of District Accountability and Assistance Status Levels, 2012-2015**

District Totals by Level	2012		2013		2014		2015	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Level 5	1	0%	1	0%	1	0%	3	1%
Level 4	12	3%	10	3%	10	3%	8	2%
Level 3	64	17%	61	16%	65	17%	59	16%
Level 2	207	54%	218	57%	234	61%	239	63%
Level 1	96	25%	91	24%	73	19%	71	19%
Total	380	100%	381	100%	383	100%	383	100%
Insufficient Data	20	–	21	–	24	–	25	

<sup>a</sup> Schools and single-school districts with insufficient data to be eligible for a level are schools ending in grade PK, K, 1, or 2, very small schools, and schools without four full years of data.

Source: [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#)

Table 4 presents a summary of school accountability and assistance status levels for individual schools from 2012 to 2015.

**Table 4. Summary of School Accountability and Assistance Status Levels, 2012-2015**

School Totals by Level	2012		2013		2014		2015	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Level 5	--	--	4	0%	4	0%	4	0%
Level 4	43	3%	34	2%	36	2%	34	2%
Level 3	288	18%	299	19%	293	18%	280	17%
Level 2	746	47%	772	48%	857	53%	824	51%
Level 1	510	32%	505	31%	425	26%	468	29%
Total	1587	100%	1614	100%	1615	100%	1610	100%
Insufficient Data	242	--	235	--	245	--	251	--

Source: [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#)

In 2010, Massachusetts identified its first cohort of 35 Level 4 schools. After three years, 14 schools exited Level 4 status having made significant gains in student achievement and attaining their measurable annual goals in 2013. Through four years of turnaround (through spring 2014), another 4 schools exited Level 4 status. In total, 18 of the original 35 schools have exited Level 4, 11 schools remained in Level 4, 4 schools were at Level 5, and 2 schools have closed (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2015d, Turnaround Practices in Action).

## IV. State Organization and Supports for Turnaround

This section briefly describes the organization and supports of the Massachusetts system for turnaround efforts and assistance to low-performing schools and districts. It includes a brief description of the organization of Massachusetts ESE focused on turnaround efforts, funding, and the structure of the statewide system of support.

### SEA Organization

Within the Massachusetts ESE, a Senior Associate Commissioner is assigned to the Center for Accountability, Partnerships, and Targeted Assistance. The center includes: the Office of District and School Turnaround (ODST), the Office of Tiered System of Support, District and School Assistance Centers, the School Improvement Grant Programs, the Office of Special Education Planning and Policy, and Special Education in Institutional Settings. The Office of Tiered Systems of Support assists districts statewide by developing policies, practices and procedures around the [Massachusetts Tiered System of Support](#).

This section will focus on the Office of District and School Turnaround which coordinates the work with the lowest performing districts and schools and the statewide system of support that includes the District and School Assistance Centers that work with identified districts and schools.

### Office of District and School Turnaround Support (ODST)

The ODST coordinates Massachusetts ESE's work in building partnerships with the lowest performing districts and schools to turn around student performance. ODST has ten staff members whose backgrounds and skills vary. Project coordinators include former principals, teachers, and social workers (Great Lakes Comprehensive Center, 2014).

**Theory of Action.** ODST operates according to a theory of action purporting that, if a district uses a continuous cycle of improvement to turn around its lowest performing schools, the district will strengthen its systems of support necessary to continuously improve district and school performance (Massachusetts ESE, ODST, 2008).

**Assistance.** ODST supports the ten largest highest poverty districts and their schools. These ten districts (often known as the Commissioner's Districts)—designated in Levels 3, 4, and 5—are Boston, Brockton, Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn, New Bedford, Springfield, and Worcester (Massachusetts ESE, 2014a). ODST meets with high-needs urban district leaders every month (Great Lakes Comprehensive Center, 2014). Massachusetts ESE provides assistance through ODST-deployed liaisons and program coordinators, who also coordinate within Massachusetts ESE with Curriculum and Instruction, Educator Effectiveness, College and Career Readiness, and Language Acquisition and Academic Achievement (Massachusetts ESE, 2014a).

## Funding

Massachusetts ESE applies funds from the Targeted Assistance to Schools and Districts account (state budget line) to support key interventions in the lowest performing districts and schools. In fiscal year 2013, the state allocated \$8,066,518 during the school year from September 2012–June 2013 (Massachusetts ESE, 2014e).<sup>1</sup> Although federal funds are of help in enhancing some initiatives and expanding their reach, state funding from the Targeted Assistance line is the main source of funds for the state education agency (SEA) to fulfill its obligations.

According to the Massachusetts ESE 2013 School Improvement Grant (SIG) 1003(g) grant application, the SEA reservation helps support state administration, oversight, and evaluation of grant-funded activities. The funds support a portion of school improvement grant program staff salaries, administrative costs, and state-level school intervention activities (technical assistance). These funds, along with state appropriations for targeted assistance to low-performing schools, provide for program expenses associated with state-level coordination and participant networking activities. Massachusetts ESE has a prioritized state system, so that the lowest performing schools with the greatest needs receive the SIG funds. Funding is aligned to the Massachusetts ESE turnaround plan (Great Lakes Comprehensive Center, 2014).

## Structure of Statewide System of Support (SSOS)

The Massachusetts SSOS is structured to deliver the assistance required under the Massachusetts ESE Framework for District Accountability and Assistance for those districts in Levels 3, 4, and 5. The SSOS tiers its support on the basis of the accountability level of the district (Massachusetts ESE, 2014a).

Within Massachusetts' SSOS, the Office of District and School Turnaround focuses its support on ten Commissioner's Districts, while the District and School Assistance Centers focus support on small and medium sized districts in Levels 3 and 4.

### District and School Assistance Centers (DSACs)

The DSACs focus support on small and medium-sized districts in Levels 3 and 4 (Massachusetts ESE, 2014a). These “virtual” regional assistance centers geographically divide the state into six DSAC regions (Berkshires, Central, Greater Boston, Northeast, Pioneer Valley, and Southeast). DSAC staff include part-time former superintendents (known as Regional Assistance Directors) and principals (known as Support Facilitators), as well as specialists in mathematics, literacy, data, and vocational and technical education.

DSACs collaborate with districts to assess their strengths and needs, facilitate access to resources and professional development, establish partnerships and networks, and deliver individualized assistance for a region's districts. DSAC team members are expected to work collaboratively with districts and schools, serving as thought partners (Massachusetts ESE, 2014a). The *Conditions for School Effectiveness* and its *District Standards and Indicators* are the frameworks around which the DSAC work is organized. The DSAC's foundational services include support in the following areas:

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<sup>1</sup> The state [allocated](#) approximately \$8 billion to school funding in FY 2012.

- Planning and implementation strategies
- Enhancing capacity to implement and sustain effective practices
- Professional learning networks and professional development
- Funding and resource allocation (Massachusetts ESE, District and School Assistance Center, n.d.).

In addition, each DSAC serves as a forum for regional networks of school and district teams on various topics, especially the education of English language learners and students with disabilities, and for developing strong instructional leaders (Massachusetts ESE, 2014a).

### **Turnaround Priority Partners**

Districts in Levels 3, 4, and 5 may arrange for assistance from turnaround partners and consultants who are recruited and vetted by Massachusetts ESE. These partners and consultants have track records in improving outcomes for high-needs and urban students in areas essential to school and district turnaround and improvement (Massachusetts ESE, 2011b). Priority Partners are familiar with the context and requirements of Massachusetts school turnaround work, understood the Massachusetts *Conditions for School Effectiveness*, and were part of a Priority Partners Network to facilitate collaboration and alignment (Massachusetts ESE, 2014b).

# V. State Implementation Efforts for Turnaround

This section briefly describes Massachusetts implementation of a tiered system of support for schools and districts identified as lowest performing (Levels 5, 4, and 3 in the state's accountability system). It includes information on the requirements, interventions, and monitoring of districts and schools identified in these levels.

## State Receivership of Districts and Schools in Massachusetts Level 5

The Massachusetts Board of ESE designates a district as Level 5 if it is chronically underperforming (both low performing and not showing signs of substantial improvement over time). Districts are independently eligible for placement in Level 5 on the basis of a district review, the report of an appointed accountability monitor, a follow-up review report, quantitative indicators set out in state regulations, or failure of a Level 4 district to meet the Massachusetts ESE-approved benchmarks or goals in its improvement plan in a timely manner (Massachusetts ESE, 2014e).

When a school receives a Level 5 designation, the Massachusetts ESE Commissioner selects one of the following three options for implementing a school turnaround plan:

- Send a targeted assistance team to the school to assist with the implementation of the turnaround plan.
- Require the superintendent of the district to implement the turnaround plan.
- Select an external reviewer to operate the school and implement the turnaround plan.

The Commissioner must approve the turnaround plans for Level 5 schools (Massachusetts ESE, 2014d).

Massachusetts ESE identified individuals or nonprofit organizations who offer statewide education improvement services to manage and operate chronically underperforming (Level 5) districts. The ESE Commissioner decides if the district will be led by the superintendent or a receiver (a nonprofit entity or an individual with a demonstrated record of success in improving low-performing schools or the academic performance of disadvantaged students (Massachusetts ESE, 2014e). The Commissioner and the district receiver create a three-year Level 5 District Plan that includes priorities and strategies to accelerate the achievement with measurable benchmarks of progress. The receiver implements the plan and provides monthly reports of progress toward measurable benchmarks (Massachusetts ESE, 2014e).

## Requirements, Interventions, and Monitoring of Priority and Focus Schools

### Priority Schools (Massachusetts Levels 4 or 5)

When a school is placed in Massachusetts' Level 4, the ESE must notify the district's school committee, superintendent, local teachers union or association president, the school's principal,

and the school's parent organization. The notifications begin a purposefully detailed, inclusive process designed to involve the community in the turnaround of a Level 4 school, resulting in a redesign plan that must be approved by the Commissioner (Massachusetts ESE, 2014d).

**Yearly Redesign Plans.** Districts with Level 4 schools must engage in an Accelerated Improvement Planning Process to develop a redesign plan to rapidly implement interventions aligned to each of the Conditions for School Effectiveness. The superintendent must submit the redesign plan to the local stakeholder group, local school committee, and to the ESE Commissioner for approval (Massachusetts ESE, 2014d).

**District Requirements.** In addition to the plan, the district must describe the following:

1. What its approach will be to ensure rapid, systemic change in its Level 4 schools within three years, including a theory of action.
2. Its redesign and planning process, including descriptions of teams, working groups, and stakeholder groups; and, the process used by district- and school-level redesign teams to identify the interventions selected for each Level 4 school.
3. How the district will recruit, screen, and select any external providers to provide the expertise, support, and assistance to the district or to schools.
4. Its systems and processes for ongoing planning, supporting, and monitoring the implementation of planned redesign efforts, including the support and monitoring of implementation of school-level redesign efforts.
5. Which district policies and practices currently exist that may promote or serve as barriers to the implementation of the proposed plans and the actions the district has taken or will take to modify policies and practices to enable schools to implement the interventions fully and effectively.
6. How the district will ensure that the identified school(s) receive ongoing, intensive technical assistance and related support from the state, district, or designated external partner organizations.
7. How the district will monitor the implementation of the selected intervention at each identified school and how the district will know that planned interventions and strategies are working (Massachusetts ESE, 2014d).

**System Interventions with Priority Schools.** Each district of a Priority School is provided a Massachusetts ESE liaison who is charged with working closely with each priority school (Massachusetts ESE, 2013). The liaisons identify and triage Redesign Plan implementation challenges with both school and district leadership. In addition, districts work with the DSAC regional teams.

Massachusetts ESE:

- (1) defines exit criteria, including measurable annual goals tailored to each school and based on empirical data;
- (2) assesses fidelity to the federal turnaround principles as well as district capacity to implement one of four federally required implementation models; and,
- (3) provides targeted assistance via partner providers, tools, templates, and other resources (Massachusetts ESE, 2014d).

**Monitoring of Priority Schools.** The Department's monitoring includes the following: review of data collection; annual school visit from a team of reviewers who review progress and trend data, and the school's conditions, its success in meeting goals, and its plans to meet any goals not yet achieved. Results of the visit are shared with the Massachusetts ESE Commissioner.

In addition, all Level 4 schools receive an annual monitoring site visit conducted by an accountability team assigned by Massachusetts ESE. The team collects information on district and school improvement efforts, holds the district and school accountable for implementing interventions, and provides feedback to ESE and to the district on the efficacy and impact of those interventions (Massachusetts ESE, 2014d).

The ESE Commissioner may place a Level 4 school in Level 5 (i.e. in state receivership) after three years if the school does not improve after implementing the redesign plan or if district conditions appear to make it unlikely that the school will make significant improvement.

### **Focus Schools (Massachusetts Level 3)**

Districts with one or more focus schools are placed in Level 3. A Level 3/Focus School and District must engage in the following:

**Conduct Conditions for School Effectiveness Self-Assessment.** All Level 3 districts must use the Self-Assessment to identify unmet conditions and revise their District Improvement Plan and School Improvement Plans to meet them (Massachusetts ESE, 2014d).

**Develop and Implement District Accelerated Improvement Plans.** As part of the Accelerated Improvement Planning Process, districts must create an Accelerated Improvement Plan for implementing the interventions they have identified. The districts must evaluate the extent to which their own systems and processes anticipate and address issues, including school staffing and instructional and operational needs, especially at their lowest performing schools (Massachusetts ESE, 2014d).

**Reserve Title I Funds.** A district with one or more Level 3/Focus Schools is required to reserve up to 25 percent of its Title I, Part A funds to support the implementation of interventions aligned with *the Conditions for School Effectiveness* (Massachusetts ESE, 2014c).

**System Interventions with Focus Schools.** Any district with one or more Level 3/Focus Schools will receive priority assistance from the regional DSAC or the Massachusetts ESE district liaison. Massachusetts ESE staff work collaboratively with district and school staff to ensure that the plans to support identified student groups are appropriate. Massachusetts ESE may require districts to implement specific interventions based on its interpretation of the needs assessment; student performance data; or other information, such as findings from a review of the district and its schools (Massachusetts ESE, 2014e). In addition, the DSAC team periodically meets with the district and reviews the implementation and progress of the schools/districts identified in Level 3. For any Level 3 school, a district also may identify one or more Massachusetts ESE-approved partner(s) to add value and capacity to the district and school in implementing the chosen interventions (Massachusetts ESE, 2014e).

**Monitoring of Focus Schools.** Massachusetts ESE meets with district leaders that have a focus school at the beginning, mid-year, and end of the school year. The meetings focus on the supports and interventions implemented for each school; the population, resources, and

partners engaged in the work; progress attained to date; and any additional data acquired through the monitoring system in place (Massachusetts ESE, 2014d).

## Accountability Reviews of Schools and Districts

**Center for District and School Accountability.** The Massachusetts ESE's Center for District and School Accountability (CDSA) reviews and reports on the efforts of all schools and districts, including those placed in Levels 3 and 4. The CDSA must audit no less than 40 school districts each year. Thirty of the audited districts are chosen because they have lower performance than the state overall and peer districts serving similar students. The remaining 10 audited districts are selected based on having higher achievement levels or at random. Audits are required to review school and district finances, curriculum, professional development, overall student achievement, state assessments support and improvement plans, management, and governance.

The Massachusetts ESE implements comprehensive, on-site district reviews, which include detailed examinations of student performance; school and district management; and overall district governance, including programmatic and fiscal audits of district and school improvement plans and other documentation, to ensure alignment of resources with identified priorities. The Massachusetts ESE also oversees the work of Plan Monitors in some Level 4 districts (Massachusetts ESE, 2014d).

**Monitoring Reviews of Level 5 Districts and Schools in Receivership.** The Massachusetts ESE Commissioner and the designated Receiver monitor the districts and schools in Level 5 on a monthly basis. The Commissioner provides quarterly reports on the progress of Level 5 Districts and schools to the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

### Massachusetts Advisory Council on School and District Accountability and Assistance (AAAC)

The AAAC is a Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education advisory council established by statute (G.L. c.15, s.1G). The 15-member<sup>2</sup> AAAC advises the Board on matters pertaining to the development and implementation of the Commonwealth's School and District Accountability and Assistance system. To accomplish that goal, the Council:

- Reviews and advises the Department and Board on the policies and practices of the Massachusetts ESE Center for School and District Accountability.
- Develops and administers, through the Department, a post-audit survey of audited school districts and an annual survey to any schools and districts receiving technical assistance.

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<sup>2</sup> The Board appoints members based on the following required recommendations from the Commissioner of Education: one representative of business/industry with a "demonstrated commitment to education"; eight at-large members with "demonstrated record of achievement or academic expertise" in areas related to accountability and assistance; and six members selected from among three nominees offered by identified stakeholder groups (Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents; Massachusetts Teachers Association and the American Federation of Teachers of Massachusetts; Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators Association; Massachusetts Elementary Principals Association; Massachusetts Association of School Committees, and Massachusetts Charter Public School Association.

- Presents its findings and recommendations to the Board at least twice annually.
- Reviews and comments on all regulations relative to the accountability and assistance program areas before Board approval.

## VI. Key Considerations for States

ESSA provides opportunities for states to review their current accountability systems in light of the ESSA requirements. Examples of key considerations for states are provided below.

### General Considerations

- What is the state’s vision for its accountability system and how it connects to meaningful supports and continuous improvement for all public schools and districts?
  - What is the state’s overall approach to developing a system that “meaningfully differentiates” all public schools in their process of continuous improvement?
  - What will districts and schools need to address the accountability requirements under ESSA and drive continuous improvement?
  - How will the accountability system provide useful feedback to schools and districts that will drive and promote continuous improvement? (Elgart, 2016)
  - How will the state ensure that its accountability system is clear and transparent for all stakeholders, particularly parents?

### Accountability Indicators

Given ESSA’s requirements for accountability indicators, states may want to consider the following:

- What indicators will communicate the effectiveness of the state’s accountability system and determine the overall effectiveness of its continuous improvement processes?
- What is recommended for the second academic indicator for elementary and middle schools, such as growth in ELA and mathematics, that is valid and reliable?
- What is recommended for the indicator for English language proficiency for English language learners (in each of grades 3–8, plus one grade in high school)

- The assessment will need to align with the state’s English Language Proficiency Standards.
  - What are the implications and opportunities associated with incorporating English language proficiency into the accountability system?
  - Please refer to the MACC@WestEd brief on English language proficiency for additional information and suggested considerations.
- How will the requirement - that 95 percent of all students and each student subgroup participate in assessments - be factored into the accountability system? (CSAI, 2016)
  - Are there any implications for the state’s assessment opt-out policies (if applicable)?
  - What is the recommendation for the additional indicator of school quality or student success (e.g., school climate/safety, student engagement, educator engagement, or postsecondary readiness) that allows for meaningful differentiation of public schools?
  - What weights should be assigned to the accountability indicators?

## Identification of Schools for Assistance

Given the ESSA requirements for identifying schools, states may want to consider the following:

- Are there any recommendations for identifying schools beyond targeted support and improvement and comprehensive support and improvement schools?
  - For example, would the state want to consider recognizing high-performing schools and/or high-growth schools?
- What are the recommendations for a school needs-assessment that would align with the indicators and identify a school’s strengths and weaknesses which would become the basis for an improvement plan?
- Are there any recommendations for the development and implementation of improvement plans that must include evidence-based interventions?

- Since states have the flexibility to determine exit criteria from identification, what is recommended for the criteria for targeted support and improvement and comprehensive support and improvement schools?

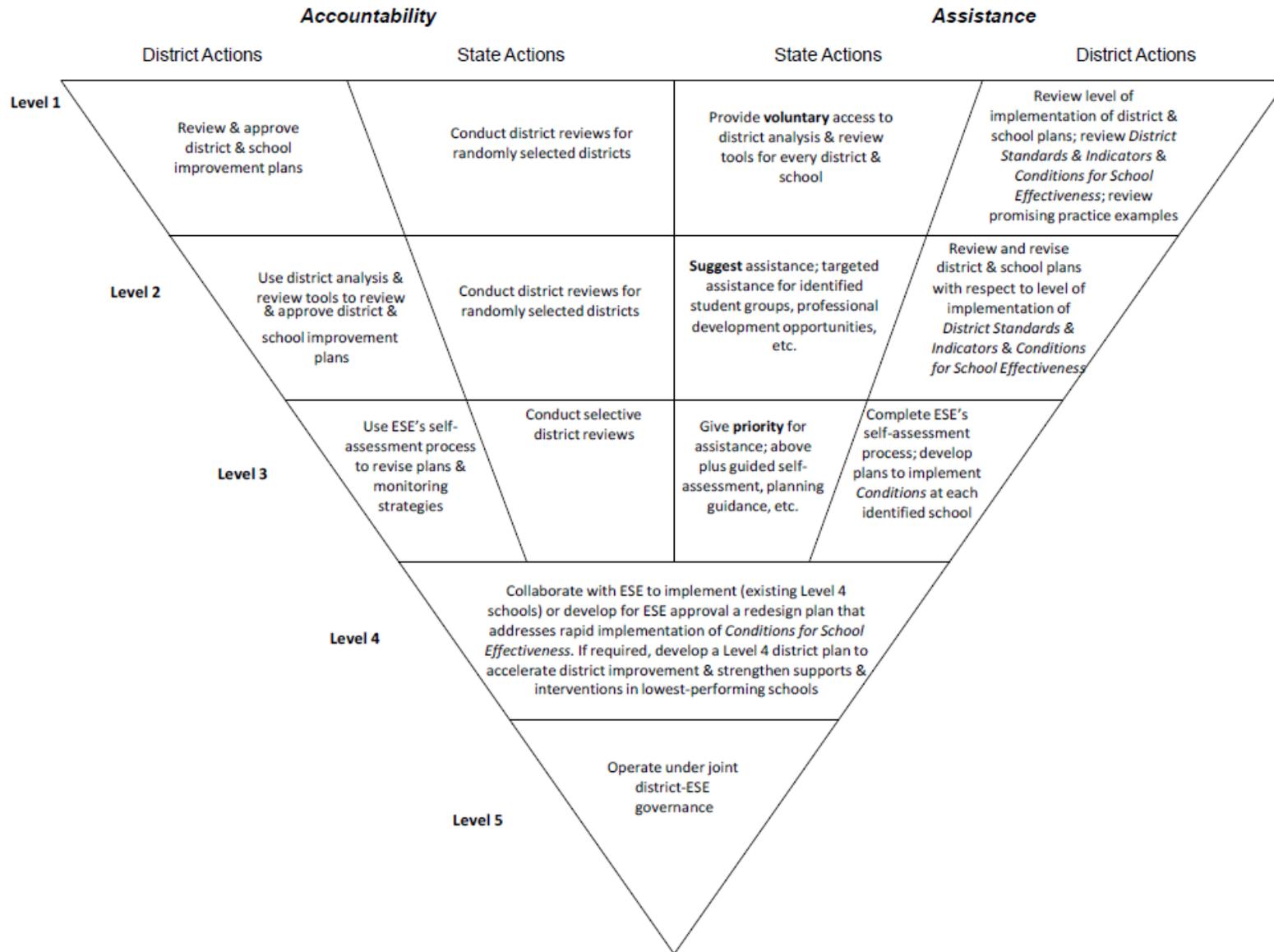
## Evidence-based Interventions

Under ESSA, states may establish evidence-based interventions or approve a list for districts to use at their discretion (CCSSO, 2016b). States must demonstrate that the selected interventions are evidence-based.

Given the above, states may want to consider the following:

- Should the state establish a list of approved evidenced-based interventions for identified schools to use?
- What are the implications for increasing the knowledge and capacity of district and school personnel to select and implement evidence-based interventions?
  - What approaches and resources will be needed to support implementation of evidence-based interventions by schools and districts?
- What are the implications for technical assistance providers to schools so they have the knowledge and experience in implementation of evidenced-based practices?
- What are recommendations for monitoring the implementation of evidence-based practices by identified schools? (CCSSO, 2016b)

## Appendix A: Massachusetts Framework for District Accountability and Assistance



**Classification of districts**

Massachusetts' Framework for District Accountability and Assistance classifies schools and districts on a five-level scale, with the highest performing in Level 1 and lowest performing in Level 5. A district generally is classified into the level of its lowest-performing school, unless it has been placed in Level 4 or 5 by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education or has been required by the Department to develop a Level 4 District Plan to aid in turning around its Level 4 schools.

**Classification of schools**

All schools with sufficient data are classified into Levels 1-5. Eighty percent of schools are classified into Level 1 or 2 based on the cumulative Progress and Performance Index (PPI) for the aggregate and high needs group. Schools are classified into Level 3 if they are among the lowest 20 percent relative to other schools in their grade span statewide, if they serve the lowest performing subgroups statewide, or if they have persistently low graduation rates. The lowest achieving, least improving Level 3 schools are candidates for classification into Levels 4 and 5, the most serious designations in Massachusetts' accountability system. A small number of schools each year will not be classified into a level: small schools, schools ending in grades 1 or 2, new schools, or schools that were substantially reconfigured.

**Determination of need for technical assistance or intervention in the area of special education**

A district's need for technical assistance or intervention in the area of special education is based on five categories: Meets Requirements (MR); Meets Requirements- At Risk (MRAR); Needs Technical Assistance (NTA); Needs Intervention (NI); and Needs Substantial Intervention (NSI). In most cases these categories correspond to the district's accountability and assistance level, except when the district has specific compliance needs. Upon classification of a district into Level 3, two additional focus areas for special education will be reviewed at the district level and may require action: (A) over-identification of low-income students as eligible for special education; (B) Inordinate separation of students with disabilities across low income and/or racial groups.

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