



A Pivotal Moment:

Ensuring an Equitable COVID-19 Recovery in Massachusetts Schools

A REPORT BY:

Massachusetts Advocates for Children
In Collaboration with the Advisory Group for
an Equitable Recovery

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September 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides recommendations regarding some of the most effective practices, strategies, and approaches for ensuring equity and closing gaps in educational opportunity during the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery period. Students of Color, low-income students, students with disabilities, English learners, and other high-needs students have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, leading to sharp increases in the student opportunity and achievement inequities that have existed since long before the pandemic.

In this pivotal moment, schools and districts across the Commonwealth are receiving a massive and unprecedented infusion of federal stimulus funds, in addition to increased state funding, which brings many of these otherwise ambitious recommendations within reach.

A few pre-pandemic data points serve to exemplify the long-standing educational inequities in Massachusetts:

- More than half of Black students with Autism were placed in substantially separate classrooms in 2019, a rate that is more than double the rate for white students.
- 36% of Black males with disabilities and 29% of Latino males with disabilities were suspended at least once during the 2017-2018 school year, compared to 13% of white males with disabilities.
- Only 3% of English learners met or exceeded expectations on the 10th grade English Language Arts Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in 2019, compared to 61% of all 10th grade students.

There is a grave risk that these long-standing inequities will worsen dramatically without swift and effective action. The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated families, communities, and populations throughout the state, disproportionately impacting communities of color. Black and Latinx individuals in Massachusetts have been infected with COVID-19 at rates three times higher than white residents. Many of these individuals, including those who have been hospitalized or died of COVID-19, are the parents, grandparents, and other relatives of children in Massachusetts's schools. Moreover, low-income Black and Latinx students in communities most impacted by COVID-19 were simultaneously *more* likely to be limited to remote education and *less* likely to have the requisite devices and internet connection to access remote education. Students with disabilities and English learners, including those facing race-and income-related barriers, have encountered additional hurdles accessing remote learning due to factors related to disability and primary language. For example, more than a third of the Commonwealth's English learners with disabilities were chronically absent during the last school year, a rate twice as high as the rate (17%) for all students.

During the pandemic, Black communities in the United States were further forced to bear witness to the racist murder of George Floyd and ongoing racial bias in policing

which threatens to take the lives of Black people in our country every day, and traumatizes their children, family members, and entire communities. The ongoing impact of systemic racism and these multiple and compounding traumatic events on the lives and educational experience of children and youth of color cannot be overstated. As schools re-open this fall the impact of this trauma on students is likely to present in the form of school avoidance/refusal, difficulty sitting still and focusing on learning, and other behavioral issues that can be misinterpreted as “defiance” or “disrespect” rather than recognized as an expression of trauma or as disability-related.

Proactive, effective, and bold changes are required during the lengthy recovery process that lies ahead. Without such action, racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students with disabilities, including those who are low-income, English learners (EL), and/or students with mental health or behavioral challenges, will likely face:

- higher rates of removal to segregated special education settings;
- higher rates of disciplinary exclusion, restraint, and seclusion; and
- widening achievement and opportunity gaps.

Aware of the urgent need to stem the rising tide of these inequities, Massachusetts Advocates for Children (MAC) convened some of the leading experts and community leaders in the field to develop recommendations regarding policy and practices required at the state, local, and classroom level to address the heightened needs of students during the recovery and change fundamental aspects of our educational system that have contributed to longstanding achievement and opportunity gaps. This group, named the *Advisory Group for an Equitable Recovery*, convened three times between April and June of 2021 to develop comprehensive recommendations to inform the decision-making of state and local policy makers, educators, parents, community leaders, and advocates.

The experts and community leaders reviewed evidence-based practices and developed a series of recommendations in response to the current crisis to address changes to general education, special education, and English language education. These recommendations are essential to:

- create inclusive placements and opportunities for students with disabilities, including those with extensive support needs, in which students have access to the full range of services and supports to be successful;
- provide necessary mental health and behavioral support to prevent the reliance on punitive practices including exclusionary discipline, restraint, and seclusion; and
- provide the supports and instruction necessary to close the opportunity and achievement gaps impacting English learners and English learners with disabilities.

The set of recommendations include immediate, short-term, and long-term strategies and practices for ensuring an equitable recovery, setting Massachusetts on the path of closing gaps in educational opportunity. The recommendations reflect the changes that must be implemented immediately to effectively address in the coming school

year the needs of students most impacted by the pandemic. At the same time, the recommendations capture the longer-term strategies, including the critical importance of school culture change, that will be necessary to fully address long-standing inequities.

Review of the comprehensive and detailed recommendations reveals three essential and over-arching priorities that should guide all recovery efforts to ensure an equitable recovery for high-needs students of color from communities hit hardest by the pandemic:

1 The strengthening of positive and meaningful relationships between educators and students is absolutely vital and must be prioritized during the COVID-19 recovery period.

Relationships built on trust and oriented toward healing for students, families, and school communities must be central to all re-opening efforts. Significant numbers of students have been out of school since March 2020 and will require individualized outreach and support to address the traumatic and disruptive impacts of the pandemic so that students are able to learn. It is essential that all communications are made in a racially, culturally, and linguistically sensitive manner. In addition to outreach and ongoing communication with families, bold and decisive action must be taken to replace punitive, inequitable approaches to student absences and behavior with more effective relationship-based models.

2 Services and supports must be brought to the student, and training must be brought to the teacher.

School policies and practices must ensure that robust supports and services are provided to students with disabilities and/or behavioral needs within the general education classroom, rather than relying upon placement in a separate setting or suspension from school. This is essential to address the alarming racial disparities in rates of segregation and disciplinary exclusion and to avoid the further widening of opportunity and achievement gaps. Moreover, for teachers to change their teaching practices to effectively include students, the format of professional development must shift to focus on direct coaching and modeling of best practices in the classroom, provided by experienced practitioners and consultants.

3 Fundamental shifts in scheduling and staffing levels are essential to effectively address inequities during the recovery.

Schools must hire sufficient staff and implement schedules that provide adequate time for general educators, special educators, English language (EL) educators, and mental health professionals to collaborate with each other and meaningfully engage with students and families. This is imperative to effectively and inclusively address the mental health, behavioral, and learning needs of high-needs students and students of color disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

The detailed recommendations developed in collaboration with the Advisory Group address the urgent need for swift action to support all students experiencing learning loss and increased mental health needs resulting from the pandemic—an educational and mental health crisis of epic proportions

OVERVIEW OF RECOMMENDATIONS

An overview of the recommendations is provided below. The comprehensive range of recommendations, including immediate, short-term, and long-term strategies and practices for implementing the recommendations, are described in the next section.

DRAMATIC EXPANSION OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES, SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING, AND BEHAVIORAL SUPPORTS TO ADDRESS SIGNIFICANT INCREASES IN MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF STUDENTS

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Establish a statewide Social Emotional Learning (SEL) mandate.
2. Increase availability of school-based mental/behavioral health services across all districts and schools.
3. Institute a moratorium on suspensions for minor behavioral issues and invest in training and resources to support alternatives to suspension such as restorative practices.
4. Implement protocols whenever removal to a more restrictive setting is considered to ensure placement in the least restrictive environment.
5. Implement models for providing positive, supportive, and student-centered behavioral services, including the flexible implementation of Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), within general education settings.

CENTERING STUDENT AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIP TO PROMOTE AN EQUITABLE RECOVERY

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Facilitate dialogue with students regarding the impact of the pandemic on their community, including racial inequities.
2. Immediately conduct outreach needed to effectively engage with students and prioritize their mental health and social and emotional learning needs.
3. Cultivate students' assets of bilingualism through culturally enriching skills-based opportunities for bilingual students.
4. Effectively engage parents and caregivers (the term "parents" will be used to refer to parents and caregivers hereafter) in a racially, culturally, and linguistically appropriate manner to address the needs of their children.

5. Increase knowledge and understanding of the benefits of inclusive education among parents, addressing fears of “dumping.”
6. Support and compensate Special Education Parent Advisory Councils (SEPAC) and English Learner Parent Advisory Councils (ELPAC) to engage racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse families disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, and to provide information, guidance, and advocacy.

ADMINISTRATIVE RESTRUCTURING TO ADDRESS HEIGHTENED NEEDS OF STUDENTS DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTED BY THE PANDEMIC

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Provide common planning time for all educators (general, special, and EL education teachers), paraprofessionals, counselors, psychologists, behavior specialists, and other mental health professionals.
2. Provide adequate time during the school day for educators to build meaningful relationships with students and families.
3. Reduce class sizes to address social-emotional, mental/behavioral health, and learning loss needs resulting from the pandemic.
4. Adopt flexible and supportive strategies to address the needs of students experiencing school avoidance/refusal.
5. Identify students experiencing chronic absenteeism during the pandemic and develop individualized strategies to support these students.
6. Build on increased use of technology by educators and parents to increase access to general education, address mental/behavioral health needs, and needs related to English language acquisition.
7. Ensure educator and administrator performance evaluations reflect best practices for the inclusion of students with disabilities, students with behavioral challenges, and English learners.

IV RETHINKING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO EFFECTUATE URGENTLY NEEDED CHANGE IN CLASSROOM PRACTICES

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. General recommendation for all professional development: provide professional development consisting primarily of direct modeling and coaching in the classroom based on evidence-based practices.
2. Provide professional development focused on relationship-building with students and families to address student behaviors and other needs stemming from the pandemic in a manner that is culturally sensitive, relationship-based, and racially equitable.

3. Provide state and regional teams of inclusion experts to provide educators with classroom-based coaching to support inclusive best practices for high-needs students in general education classrooms.
4. Provide professional development to address the needs of English learners and English learners with disabilities during the pandemic recovery.

V COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP TO BOLSTER HOLISTIC SERVICES AND SUPPORTS TO PROMOTE EQUITY

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Build and expand partnerships between schools and community after-school programs or community learning pods.
2. Provide school-based multilingual, culturally responsive home/community wrap-around services.

VI HIRING AND PERSONNEL PRIORITIES TO PROMOTE EQUITY DURING THE RECOVERY

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Designate trusted family liaisons to partner with families.
2. Hire inclusion facilitators in schools and prioritize hiring educators with experience including high-needs students using a racial equity lens.
3. Hire more social workers and other trained mental health staff to more effectively support students and address racial equity concerns.
4. Hire and train more Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and bilingual staff who reflect the racial and linguistic diversity of the student population.
5. Develop new pathways into the teaching workforce to increase the number of multilingual teachers, BIPOC teachers, and teachers with disabilities.
6. Develop systems that support retention of BIPOC teachers.

VII ENSURING DATA AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS ALIGN WITH EQUITABLE RECOVERY GOALS

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Collect, publish, and analyze cross-tabulated data to help ensure that educational inequities experienced by students of color, students with disabilities, and students who are English learners can be effectively identified and addressed during the COVID-19 recovery and beyond.
2. Ensure accountability systems adequately address key inequities contributing to achievement gaps, including the disproportionate placement of students




of color with disabilities in segregated settings and the disproportionate disciplinary exclusion or arrest of students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities.

VIII GROUNDING ALL PANDEMIC RECOVERY EFFORTS IN THE LONG-TERM TRANSFORMATION OF SCHOOL CULTURES THAT EMBODY EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND BELONGING

RECOMMENDATION:

1. Create safe and supportive school cultures in which all students have a sense of belonging, are meaningfully included, and access equitable opportunities, including students with all types and severity of disabilities, and all racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRATEGIES

-  This section provides a comprehensive range of recommendations, with immediate, short-term, and long-term strategies for ensuring equity and closing gaps in educational opportunity during the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery period. The recommendations and strategies reflect the changes that must be implemented
-  immediately to effectively address the needs of students most impacted by the pandemic in the coming school year. The recommendations also include the longer-term strategies that will be necessary to address long-standing opportunity and achievement gaps in Massachusetts schools and to fully address persistent inequities faced by students of color, English learners, students with disabilities, and students with mental health and behavioral challenges.
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DRAMATIC EXPANSION OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES, SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING, AND BEHAVIORAL SUPPORTS TO ADDRESS SIGNIFICANT INCREASES IN MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF STUDENTS

I-RECOMMENDATION 1: Establish a statewide Social Emotional Learning (SEL) mandate and develop related structures to support teachers to effectively teach the five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

***Why is this important?** The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened a mental health crisis among children and youth in Massachusetts and across the country. In Massachusetts, emergency room visits for children in mental health crisis, including those reporting suicidality, have skyrocketed. Racial disparities in mental health and suicidality existed prior to the pandemic and have only worsened under the crushing impacts of the pandemic on communities of color. Research has long demonstrated the benefits of Social Emotional Learning to academic achievement. At this juncture, addressing the mental health, social, and emotional needs of students is no longer merely beneficial; it is necessary. Given the extended period of isolation, anxiety, and trauma students—particularly low-income students and students of color—have experienced, prioritizing the mental and emotional health of students is critical in order to re-engage students and address broader learning loss. The “five core competencies” of Social Emotional Learning, developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), is a widely accepted framework.*

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Immediately integrate stress management and self-awareness skill-building exercises throughout the school day to address students’ social and emotional needs (e.g., daily exercises on mindfulness; curriculum-themed mindfulness).
- Re-structure daily and weekly schedules to allow sufficient time for students to engage with trusted educators.

- Provide more structure and routines during times of the day that are typically unstructured where students experience bullying and increased behavioral challenges.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Implement SEL practices which are *embedded into* - not separate from - the rest of the academic curriculum. Use data-informed approaches that demonstrate improved academic outcomes through the integration of social emotional learning.
- Clarify the respective roles and coordinate the delivery of social-emotional skills instruction and mental/behavioral health services provided by counselors, social workers, school psychologists, speech language pathologists, teachers, and paraprofessionals.
- Prioritize physical exercise and the arts to promote student well-being during the recovery.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Align SEL curriculum with broader school culture efforts.

I-RECOMMENDATION 2: Increase availability of school-based mental/behavioral health services across all districts and schools.

Why is this important? *In order to adequately address the mental health needs of students, particularly those students of color and high-needs students hit hardest by the pandemic, school districts will need to significantly increase the availability of mental/behavioral health services and staff to deliver those services.*

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Increase the number of social workers in each district and school, with more social workers in high-needs districts.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Establish more robust partnerships with local Children’s Behavioral Health Initiative (CBHI) providers.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Create school-based behavioral health clinics through partnerships between school districts and local community health centers or children’s hospitals.
- Integrate individual behavioral health services and supports within a safe and supportive school culture.

I-RECOMMENDATION 3: Institute a moratorium on suspensions for minor behavioral issues during the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years and invest immediately in robust training and resources to support alternatives to suspension.

Why is this important? *Given the significant amount of time students have spent out of school buildings over the past year and a half, it would be counterproductive and, in many instances, deeply harmful to further exclude students from school following their return. Due to the trauma experienced by students during the pandemic, coupled with the extended disruption in educational services, increased behavioral challenges are to be expected when students return. The students most likely to exhibit behavioral challenges resulting in suspension are the very children who have been hit hardest by the pandemic and have experienced untold amounts of trauma - including low-income students, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities. In order to begin to address the widening inequities resulting from the pandemic, it is incumbent upon the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and school districts to issue a temporary moratorium on out-of-school suspensions and commit to meeting anticipated behavioral challenges with positive behavioral support, mental health services, and alternatives to suspension.*

The students most likely to exhibit behavioral challenges resulting in suspension are the very children who have been hit hardest by the pandemic and have experienced untold amounts of trauma – including low-income students, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES:

- During the immediate COVID-19 recovery period, institute a moratorium on suspensions for all conduct except for the most serious offenses.
- Provide comprehensive training in restorative justice circles for a team of staff at each district or school to expand capacity to implement restorative justice as an alternative to suspension when discipline issues arise. The team should include a combination of administrators, educators, counselors, social workers, support staff, and students). (See also Section IV, Rec. 2.)
- Designate a staff person at each school to attend each formal meeting (Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, Multi-Tiered System of Support

(MTSS) meetings, discipline hearings) whose only role is to raise issues concerning racial equity during the COVID-19 recovery. This staff person should work in collaboration with MTSS team members to develop racial equity prompts to utilize during MTSS meetings to identify and address racial bias and inequities which are relevant to student behaviors. For example, review and discuss any racial disparities in the school's discipline data related to the type of behavior at issue; identify the race of the student(s) and teacher(s) involved in any behavioral incidents and consider how race may have influenced the student's behavior; consider how the behavior at issue may be interpreted differently by our society for individuals of different races (e.g., Black, white, Latinx, Asian).

- For ELs, always include a member of the MTSS team who speaks the student's and parent's primary language and has adequate experience to participate in the process of determining necessary supports.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

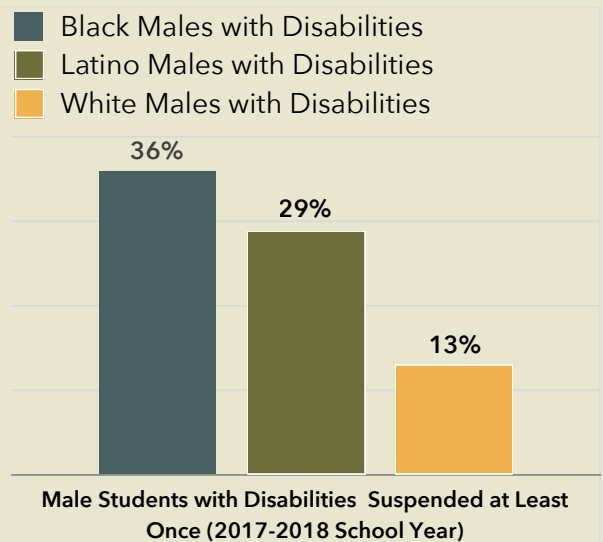
- In any instance in which a student exhibits behavior which under normal circumstances would result in a disciplinary action, the MTSS team must convene a meeting immediately to consider factors related to racial equity and discuss what supports or services the student may need, including potential referral for a behavioral health assessment and/or functional behavioral assessment. This process, in conjunction with restorative practices and other alternatives to suspension, should replace the use of in-school and out-of-school suspension and other punitive disciplinary measures.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Ensure that restorative justice training is ongoing and embedded into long-term school culture change efforts.

Suspension Rates:

36% of Black males with disabilities and 29% of Latino males with disabilities were suspended at least once over the school year, compared to 13% of white males with disabilities



Source: *Disabling Inequity: The Urgent Need for Race-Conscious Resource Remedies & Supplemental Excel Workbook: Suspensions*, The Center for Civil Rights Remedies at The Civil Rights Project, University of California Los Angeles, 2021, (<http://www.schooldisciplinedata.org/ccrr/index.php>).



I-RECOMMENDATION 4: Districts and schools should develop decision-making protocols to follow when removal to a more restrictive setting is considered for individual students to ensure that placement outside of the general education setting is used only when all other support strategies have been exhausted.

Why is this important? *Students of color with disabilities have been placed in segregated special education classrooms at significantly higher rates than their white peers with disabilities historically. Rates of placement in substantially separate classrooms for students of color with disabilities and students with extensive support needs will further increase during the recovery. It is imperative that districts implement decision-making protocols to address long-standing racial inequities and ensure full compliance with special education law.*

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Provide statewide guidance and protocols requiring the exhaustion of all options before proceeding to more restrictive placements and emphasizing the need to employ services, supports, modifications, accommodations, and a multidisciplinary approach to address students' needs within the general education setting (rather than relying on the student to demonstrate "readiness" for inclusion). Protocols should include notification provided to the principal and special education director whenever proposing a more restrictive placement.
- Rely upon newly-formed regional teams of inclusion experts (See also Section IV, Rec. 3) to implement inclusion support plans for students at risk of being recommended for more restrictive placement.

- Designate an individual for each IEP meeting specifically assigned to identify and address racial bias and inequities which are relevant to the proposal to remove a student to a more restrictive setting. The sole role of this individual should be to raise issues concerning racial equity during the COVID-19 recovery. This staff person should work in collaboration with other IEP Team members to develop racial equity prompts to identify and address racial bias and inequities which are relevant to placement in separate settings. For example, review and discuss any racial disparities in the school's special education placement data and consider how the student's academic, behavioral, communication, and other needs leading to placement in a more restrictive setting may be interpreted differently by our society for individuals of different races (e.g., Black, white, Latinx, Asian).

I-RECOMMENDATION 5: Implement models for providing Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and other behavioral services within general education settings for those students who require these services.

Why is this important? *Given the risk of increased racial disparities in rates of placement of students with autism in substantially separate settings following the pandemic, it is important to address all impediments to successful inclusion to ensure an equitable recovery. One of the barriers to the successful inclusion of students with autism in the general education setting is the perception that students who need ABA services must be removed from the general education classroom to receive services in a substantially separate classroom with fewer distractions. However, research demonstrates that students with autism, including those requiring ABA services, have greater success when they are effectively included in the general education classroom.*

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Combine ABA principles with other flexible and supportive emotional and behavioral skill-building approaches.
- Provide adequate training, coaching, and supervision to ensure ABA service providers have the skills to effectively implement behavioral plans in a general classroom setting without stigmatizing children.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Ensure Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) work directly with general education teachers and paraprofessionals, providing training and support so that educators are empowered to implement needed behavioral strategies with the student directly.
- Monitor behavioral progress by focusing on strategy use and skill development. Collect behavioral data that promotes the teaching and shaping of

specific skills rather than limiting data collection to frequency and intensity of behaviors which leads to a more reactive model of behavior management.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Hire and train BCBA's to ensure they are knowledgeable about the general education curriculum and understand the relationship between behavioral issues and a curriculum which does not challenge and engage the student.

CENTERING STUDENT AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIP TO PROMOTE AN EQUITABLE RECOVERY

II-RECOMMENDATION 1: Facilitate conversations with students regarding the impact of the pandemic on their community, including discussion about racial inequities.

Why is this important? Students and educators continue to experience the harms of the pandemic and there will be long-term impacts on their communities. Having open discussions will allow students to connect with their peers and educators over the shared experience and feel less isolated. This will enable them to feel a sense of belonging at school and more effectively engage in learning.

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Create a school-wide structure that creates a safe time and space at the beginning and end of the school day in each classroom to listen to students. This can be “circle time” in elementary classrooms, and circles or advisory periods in middle and high schools.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Adapt existing student surveys to address the impact of the pandemic, including racial inequities.
- Embed activities related to students’ pandemic experiences into the curriculum, such as writing essays, recording phone videos, interviewing family members or other adults, and art projects related to the impact of the pandemic.
- Use circle practice to build community, strengthen identity, learn to listen and grow while exploring topics related to the past year and the recovery.

II-RECOMMENDATION 2: Respect and foster the perspectives of students and incorporate student voice in authentic and meaningful ways.

Why is this important? The pandemic has massively disrupted the lives of students, many of whom may have felt disconnected from school even prior to the pandemic. Fostering and prioritizing student voice will help students to feel valued and engaged in their own learning.

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Develop a range of strategies to incorporate student voice and perspectives during the COVID-19 recovery period.
- Provide a safe space and mechanism for communication with students.
- Identify a trusted adult in the school building for every high-needs student. (See also Section III A, Rec 2.)

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Ensure student and family voices are incorporated in authentic and meaningful ways as an explicit strategy toward racial equity and dismantling the effects of systemic racism in schools.

II-RECOMMENDATION 3: Respect and foster students' assets of bilingualism through culturally enriching skills-based opportunities for bilingual students.

Why is this important? *Although multilingualism is a powerful strength, it is often not recognized as such in schools, where students may be excluded or marginalized due to their limited English proficiency or cultural background. Opportunities for students to celebrate their own culture and the diversity that they bring to the school environment, and to see ways in which their multilingualism can lead to post-secondary education and career opportunities, can instill a sense of pride and counter feelings of marginalization. This is especially important as many culturally and linguistically diverse students have been isolated from their extended families and communities due to the pandemic.*

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Allow opportunities that demonstrate the benefits of strengthening the heritage and cultural identity of culturally and linguistically diverse students.
- Create opportunities for linguistic and cultural expression through the arts and in other ways.
- Engage students in school directly and send communications home sharing the benefits of multilingualism, including future career possibilities.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Provide course options in elementary, middle, and high school to maintain student interest in bilingual and dual-language education programs.
- Offer incentives for students who contribute their language skills for the benefit of the school.

II-RECOMMENDATION 4: Effectively engage parents and caregivers in a racially, culturally, and linguistically appropriate manner in order to identify and address their concerns post-pandemic.

Why is this important? Home-school communication and family engagement are central to ensuring that students are appropriately supported in school and have the opportunity to reach their full potential. During the COVID-19 recovery, students' needs will be more complex and parents and caregivers (the term "parents" will be used to refer to parents and caregivers hereafter) will have important insights on ways to support their children, especially having shared the experience of the pandemic.

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Ensure the implementation of systems for determining the preferred communication methods for each family, including families with limited English proficiency, to ensure that all educators and members of the team utilize preferred methods.
- Initially, conduct outreach to individual families utilizing surveys, phone calls, virtual platforms, in person, or other preferred communication methods.
- Refer to the DESE Communication Plan for Families which includes Sample Questions for individualizing family communication with scripts to ensure that each family has its own preferred time and method of contact and also a schedule for frequency and access tailored to each family's needs.
- As schools reopen, consider racial and cultural differences in preferences regarding return to in-person learning full time.
- Develop strategies to effectively reach parents who are currently disconnected from the school, partnering with community organizations or other trusted providers. (See also Section III C, Recs. 1 and 2; and Section V, Rec. 2.)

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Engage and support parents to meaningfully incorporate their input in school planning and decision-making.
- Provide safe spaces for families to ask questions or attend workshops on mental health framed in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner.
- Partner with groups like the Parent/Professional Advocacy League (PPAL) and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) who have experience supporting families with mental health challenges.
- Provide families with a directory of multilingual mental health providers in local areas.
- Develop resources that highlight best practices related to engagement of parents whose primary language is not English, such as effective use of interpret-



ers and translators and centralized interpretation/translation services, to communicate with parents regarding special education, general education, and EL needs.

- Provide trained interpreters during all meetings that include parents whose primary language is not English, including but not limited to IEP Team Meetings, discipline hearings or meetings, and MTSS meetings.

II-RECOMMENDATION 5: Increase knowledge and understanding of the benefits of inclusive education among parents and caregivers using a racially, culturally and linguistically responsive parent outreach and engagement plan that addresses fears of “dumping.”

Why is this important? *The large majority of parents want more than anything for their children with disabilities to be meaningfully included in school and in the community. Research also supports better long-term outcomes for students who are included with their nondisabled peers. Unfortunately, many parents do not consider advocating for more inclusive placements due to misconceptions they learn from service providers and school personnel that their children can only receive specialized services in a separate placement. As many students with disabilities are having behavioral responses and other learning challenges as they adjust to in-person learning with COVID precautions, there is a risk that more students*

will be placed in separate settings. It is crucial that parents are fully informed about the benefits of inclusion for students with disabilities when implemented with the services and supports they need.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Provide opportunities to “see” models of resourced, successful inclusive options (through in-person or videoconferencing tours, and other video resources); ensure models include and address the needs of students of color, English learners, students with mental health/behavioral health needs, and students with significant intellectual disabilities.
- Provide parents with information and data related to the benefits of inclusion, in accessible “plain language.”
- Provide opportunities for parents to hear stories about the positive outcomes of inclusion through documentaries, TED Talks, YouTube videos, etc. with subtitles in other languages.
- Provide information sessions with linguistically and culturally diverse guest speakers, including other parents and educators, to highlight benefits of inclusive practices.
- Provide opportunities for parents to engage with other parents of children who have been successfully included (i.e., parent-to-parent network).
- Identify parent concerns related to inclusion (e.g., bullying, dumping) and develop specific strategies to directly address these concerns.
- Include meaningful participation of parents in any teams (at the state, district, or school level) created to increase inclusive opportunities.
- Encourage TASH (disability rights advocacy organization promoting community inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities) and PPAL memberships for parent leaders.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Create and broadly disseminate a series of videos highlighting racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse parents from across the state who share their inclusion success stories.

II-RECOMMENDATION 6: Support Special Education Parent Advisory Councils (SEPACs) and English Learner Parent Advisory Councils (ELPACs) to provide outreach, information, and advocacy support to parents, and to advise the district on strategies to effectively engage racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse families disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

Why is this important? SEPACs and ELPACs can be important sources of information and advocacy support for families of students with disabilities and English learners. As advisory bodies, they can also raise concerns expressed by parent members and function to improve district special education and English Learner systems and services. Supporting robust parent engagement through SEPACs and ELPACs is particularly important in the wake of the pandemic as a mechanism to incorporate parent input, concerns, and priorities into district recovery efforts.

Supporting robust parent engagement through SEPACs and ELPACs is particularly important in the wake of the pandemic as a mechanism to incorporate parent input, concerns, and priorities into district recovery efforts.

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Use federal funds allocated to Massachusetts through the American Rescue Plan Act to support SEPACs and ELPACs by hiring full-time staff who are parents reflecting the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the community. The staff in these positions should have independence in order to gain the trust of parents and effectively work to meet the needs of students with disabilities and English learners during the pandemic and recovery.
- Create parent-to-parent systems in which PAC staff and members offer support to other parents, including by conducting outreach to families of students who are initially referred to special education or identified as English learners.
- Support SEPACs and ELPACs to work together to provide joint outreach, training, and advocacy support for families of English learner students with disabilities.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- DESE should provide resources for PACs to conduct parent training sessions on topics such as: addressing increased mental health and behavioral health needs resulting from the pandemic; addressing racial inequities and implicit racial bias in IEP meetings; and equitable access to evaluations, special education services, inclusive opportunities, transition services, and compensatory services.
- DESE should provide resources needed to conduct parent trainings on topics impacting ELs and ELs with disabilities such as: second language development; common behaviors in child development when acquiring a second language; distinguishing between sequential and simultaneous language

learning; translanguaging (communication using two languages interchangeably); importance of communicating with children with disabilities in the home language; addressing “myths” of students who supposedly have “low or no” language abilities; and use of interpreters and translators in school settings.

- Create an outreach and advocacy campaign that includes ELPAC membership promoting multilingualism and multiculturalism.
- Compensate and partner with SEPACs to engage and support parents.

ADMINISTRATIVE RESTRUCTURING TO ADDRESS HEIGHTENED NEEDS OF STUDENTS DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTED BY THE PANDEMIC

A. COMMON PLANNING AND COORDINATION AMONG EDUCATORS

III-RECOMMENDATION 1: Each school and district should develop and implement a plan for frequent and regularly scheduled common planning time between all educators (e.g., EL educators, special educators, general educators, paraprofessionals, counselors, psychologists, behavior specialists, other mental health professionals), including identifying and specifying the role of a planning team coordinator.

Why is this important? *Prior to the pandemic, a lack of adequate common planning time between educators presented substantial barriers to effectively and inclusively addressing the complex needs of the students with multiple intersecting historically marginalized identities. The increased needs and inequities created by the pandemic for these populations of students have heightened the need for enhanced communication and planning among teams of educators.*

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

Each plan must:

- Include a master schedule that provides common planning time among educators to ensure effective coordination regarding the needs of all students, and particularly those with multiple, intersecting identities (e.g., students facing cumulative barriers due to a combination of race, income, disabilities, behavioral or mental health challenges, and/or English learner status).
- Identify the team members for each high-needs student and designate planning times for each student's team.
- Develop mechanisms to meet during unplanned time in order to address urgent issues that arise.



- Develop clear systems of communication for each team to supplement scheduled planning time.
- Develop mechanisms to require team members to meet immediately whenever school is considering removal to a more restrictive setting, and use the protocol described in Section I, Rec. 4 (See also Section VII, Rec. 1.).
- Incorporate into the master schedule professional development time for principals.

III-RECOMMENDATION 2: Each school and district should provide adequate time during the school day for educators to build meaningful relationships with students and families.

Why is this important? As a result of the pandemic, many students have been less connected to school for an extended period of time. The families of students of color have faced substantial and disproportionate economic, health, and other stressors over the course of the pandemic. Moreover, students with disabilities, English learners and other high-needs students have faced significant barriers accessing remote instruction during the pandemic, and in many cases this has resulted in high rates of chronic absenteeism. For example, more than a third of the Commonwealth's English learners with disabilities were chronically absent last school year, a rate twice as high as the rate for all students (17%).

It is therefore critical that schools and districts intentionally plan to build in time for meaningful connection and relationship building with students and families. If educators feel too much pressure to immediately address “academic learning loss” without re-establishing trusting and supportive relationships with students and their families, there is grave concern that high rates of disengagement and chronic absenteeism of the most vulnerable populations of students will continue or increase.

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Adjust master schedule to provide teachers “permission” and time to focus on relationship-building and the impacts of the pandemic on students’ lives, especially in the initial weeks of school. Ask educators about schedule modifications needed for them to effectively connect with students and families.
- Identify a trusted adult for every high-needs student, including students with disabilities, ELs, and those presenting with behavioral challenges. Schedule daily check-ins between each of these students and their identified trusted adult.
- Create regular opportunities for staff who have developed effective strategies for building relationships with students to share their expertise with all staff.

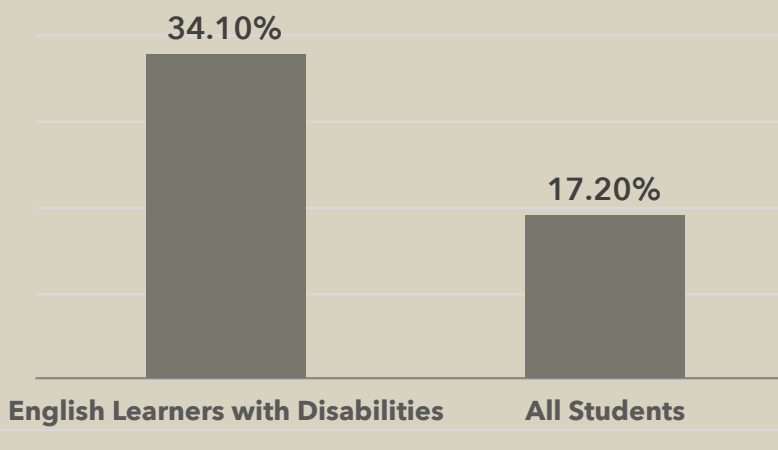
SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Ask families what forms of communication and time of day (e.g., early mornings, daytime, evenings) work best for them, and schedule meetings and calls during these times. Provide direct communication with multilingual staff or translation and interpretation services for parents whose home language is not English.
- Ensure that there is designated time to provide educators with support through supervision and/or consultation with experts to effectively engage with students and families.
- Create structures for educators to share strategies on how to build effective relationships with students and families during scheduled common planning time.

Chronic Absenteeism

For example, over a third of the Commonwealth’s English Learners with disabilities were chronically absent last school year (2020-2021), a rate twice as high as the rate (17.2%) for all students.

Chronic Absenteeism - 2020-2021 School Year



Source: 2020SY Data received from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, public records request, July 2021; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Attendance Report, Last Updated April 30, 2021 (<https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/attendance.aspx>).

B. SMALLER CLASS SIZES AND TEACHER-TO-STUDENT RATIOS

III-RECOMMENDATION 1: Reduce class sizes to address social-emotional, mental/behavioral health, and learning loss needs resulting from the pandemic.

Why is this important? *Smaller class sizes will better support student engagement, relationship building, implementation of restorative practices, provision of social and emotional learning, inclusive practices, and the individualized assessment and instruction necessary to address learning loss.*

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Implement smaller class sizes. If a school lacks the physical space to create smaller class sizes, implement lower teacher-student ratios.
- If smaller class sizes are not feasible in middle or high school, plan for, design, and implement a student advisory period of at least 90 minutes per week to provide one-to-one support.
- Implement effective professional development strategies to ensure that educators are equipped to implement best practices and take full advantage of smaller class sizes or lower teacher-student ratios (See Section IV).

C. ATTENDANCE

III-RECOMMENDATION 1: Adopt flexible and supportive strategies to address the needs of students experiencing school avoidance/refusal.

Why is this important? *Research demonstrates the importance of examining the underlying cause of the avoidance/refusal exhibited by a student and creating a plan for gradually transitioning back to school with high support and clear and consistent expectations. As more students return to school in-person following the pandemic, there may be an increase in school avoidance/refusal behaviors due to pandemic-related stressors and/or anxiety associated with returning to school after the extended disruption. These behaviors are more likely to present for students with disabilities and those with mental health and behavioral needs, as well as students who have experienced more significant trauma during the months of the pandemic.*

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Implement individualized step-by-step plans to support the gradual transition to full-time in-person learning for each student experiencing school avoidance/refusal and allow partial attendance without consequences for these students.



- Partner with outside mental health clinicians or other specialists, including those supporting the child. Identify multilingual clinicians and clinicians who have experience working with students who are non-speaking and/or have intellectual disabilities. Assess and address the root causes of the avoidance/refusal.
- Provide remote instruction on a student-by-student basis to accommodate disability or mental health-related needs in order to ensure students not present in-person have access to the curriculum alongside their peers as the district supports them to transition back to in-person learning.

LONG-TERM STRATEGY

- Examine the extent to which truancy and attendance officers play a punitive rather than supportive role with respect to students struggling with attendance. Hire additional social workers or other family and student engagement staff who are trained in offering non-punitive support, resources, and case management to families.

III-RECOMMENDATION 2: Each school and district should identify students who experienced chronic absenteeism during the 2020-21 school year and develop individualized strategies to support each of these students to successfully attend school.

Why is this important? *Students who experienced chronic absenteeism in the 2020-21 school year are at high risk for continuing to face barriers to attendance during the COVID-19 recovery period. Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, and English learners experienced some of the highest rates of chronic absenteeism during the 2020-21 school year.*

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Analyze attendance data to identify each student who was absent more than 25%, 50% and 75% of the 2020-21 school year. Develop individualized strategies to support each of these students to successfully attend school. Refrain from utilizing punitive, truancy-based strategies which penalize students for absences, often leading to further disengagement.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Establish a centralized, multidisciplinary team in each school district to consult with school level staff, including IEP teams, to assist with problem-solving and identifying school and community-based resources to support the student and family.

D. USE OF TECHNOLOGY

III-RECOMMENDATION 1: Districts, schools, and parents should build on the expanded use of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic to increase access to general education for students with disabilities, and to creatively address the complex needs of other high-needs students.

Why is this important? *The COVID-19 pandemic has presented tremendous obstacles for school districts and educators but has also created opportunities such as the ability to implement new technology strategies. Technology utilized during the pandemic should continue to be implemented to expand staff capacity, increase accessibility for students, engage with families, and more flexibly and effectively teach students with more complex learning needs.*

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Evaluate the strategies and technologies utilized during the pandemic to identify those that were effective in facilitating learning for high-needs students and should continue during the recovery.
- Provide parents the option to conduct IEP meetings and other parent meetings by video conference technology to facilitate parent participation, while continuing to offer in-person meetings to parents who do not have the requisite technology or who prefer to meet in person.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Develop ways for educators and parents to share knowledge and skills relating to technology.
- Use video conferencing technology (e.g., Zoom) to enable inclusion facilitators to provide consultation support for educators in districts across the state.
- Provide feedback and praise to students privately through technology, if preferred by the student, in order to improve engagement.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Ensure that all students and families have access to reliable high-speed internet, devices, and tech support in their homes.
- Ensure that educators, students, and families have the knowledge and skills necessary to implement technology best practices.

E. EDUCATOR EVALUATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES

III-RECOMMENDATION 1: Ensure the performance evaluations of school administrators and educators reflect best practices related to racial equity, alternatives to exclusion, and the inclusion of students with disabilities, students with behavioral challenges, and English learners.

Why is this Important? *To successfully ensure racial equity in the classroom and effectively include students with the full range of social, behavioral, and academic support needs, accountability structures, including administrator and educator performance evaluations, must be aligned with these goals. Given the risk of increased rates of disciplinary exclusion and segregation of students of color with disabilities during the recovery, it is critical at this juncture to explicitly integrate into educator evaluations performance indicators related to racial equity, alternatives to exclusion, and inclusion.*

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES:

- Incorporate and implement best practices related to racial equity, alternatives to exclusion, and inclusive practices into the performance evaluations of principals, general educators, special educators, EL teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors and social workers, and related services providers. Integrate these practices into evaluation standards (including indicators, elements and descriptors).
- Include evaluation standards and indicators which address evidence-based practices for reducing racial disparities in rates of segregated placements.
- Revise the administrator and educator evaluation standards to ensure accountability regarding skills related to team building, collaboration, culturally responsive curriculum, building positive relationships with students and families, and effectively teaching social and emotional skill building. Shift the focus away from MCAS score-based metrics of teacher evaluation.
- Implement a model inclusion rubric reflecting evidence-based practices when revising and implementing evaluation standards.
- Ensure that principal “walk-throughs” focus on evidence-based practices for inclusion, including culturally responsive practices, social and emotional skill building, and alternatives to suspension.

IV RETHINKING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO EFFECTUATE URGENTLY NEEDED CHANGE IN CLASSROOM PRACTICES

IV-GENERAL RECOMMENDATION 1 FOR ALL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: Professional development opportunities must consist primarily of “in the moment” modeling or direct coaching in the classroom based on evidence-based practices. These opportunities must be offered to all educators, including paraprofessionals.

Why is this important? *An equitable and effective recovery calls for meaningful changes in practice, which will require moving beyond the typical presentation-style format of professional development outside of the classroom. The urgent needs of students with disabilities, students with mental health and behavioral challenges, and English learners, which have been further exacerbated by the pandemic, require more effective training approaches which will translate into immediate results in the classroom.*

IV-RECOMMENDATION 2: Professional Development during the COVID-19 recovery should focus on relationship-building with students and families to address student behaviors and other needs stemming from the pandemic in a manner that is culturally sensitive, relationship-based, healing-centered, and racially equitable.

Why is this important? *The COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial negative impact on students’ mental health statewide, and communities of color have disproportionately experienced trauma associated with the pandemic.*

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES:

- Survey all general and special education teachers, paraprofessionals, related service providers, and administrators in grades K-12 to identify their professional development needs in the reentry process and recovery, based upon their perceptions of how to most effectively support students.



- Provide training at the beginning of the 2021-22 school year that provides concrete examples of behaviors students are likely to exhibit. This training must address the impact of structural racism, cultural differences, and immigration status in families' experiences during the pandemic, and should support educators to understand and avoid contributing to racial inequities and bias in their own responses to student behavior.
- Provide training in Restorative Justice practices for all school staff (general educators, special educators, EL educators, paraprofessionals, custodial, lunchroom, administrative staff, etc.). As an initial step, develop a cohort or team of staff and administrator(s) at the school or district level and fully train and equip them with the skills needed to immediately implement restorative practices as an alternative to suspension starting in the fall of 2022.
- Provide concrete examples and modeling for educators on how to effectively build and maintain positive relationships with students and families.
- Create regular opportunities for staff who have developed effective practices to share their expertise with all staff.
- Provide resources and structures to support all school staff with their own healing and self-care practices.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES:

- Invest in training models which enable educators to understand and implement evidence-based models of teaching which are relationship-centered, trauma sensitive, and healing-centered and that promote alternatives to punitive and harmful practices such as exclusionary discipline, restraint and seclusion.

- Provide training on how to conduct high quality functional behavioral assessments and effective behavioral intervention plans for psychologists and other appropriate staff.
- Provide training on the cultural stigmas associated with mental health issues, the mental health impact of acculturation, and behaviors that may stem from mental health issues.
- Collaborate with community-based mental health clinics and resources to conduct training for educators, including modeling and coaching.

IV-RECOMMENDATION 3: Develop state and regional teams of inclusion experts to work with educators in classrooms and other school settings to model and support inclusive best practices and provide services and modifications based on the needs of each student, including those with extensive support needs.

Why is this important? *Prior to the pandemic, students of color with disabilities were placed in segregated special education classrooms at significantly higher rates than their white disabled peers. Because the pandemic deepened existing inequities, there is a grave risk that in response to increased levels of need, rates of segregation for students of color with disabilities and students with extensive support needs will increase during the pandemic recovery.*

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Allocate the required funding to recruit and hire inclusion experts (administrators, teachers, related services providers, and paraprofessionals) who are knowledgeable about inclusive practices and specifically dedicated to supporting inclusion in grades pre-K through 12.
- Ensure that inclusion experts have the requisite coaching and consultation skills necessary to support general, special, and EL educators and related service providers.
- Ensure there is time built into the master schedule for professional development for all school personnel regarding inclusive best practices, including administrators, teachers, related services providers, and paraprofessionals.
- Identify cohorts of educators (inclusion facilitator, general education, special education, ELE, related service providers, paraprofessionals) to work with inclusion experts.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

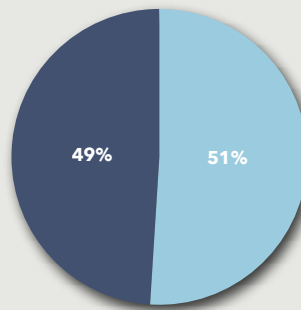
- Provide professional development, including modeling and coaching regarding inclusive practices for all students, including those with extensive support needs, and in all curriculum areas, including academics, arts, and physical

education. Deliver the modeling and coaching in both classroom and non-classroom settings.

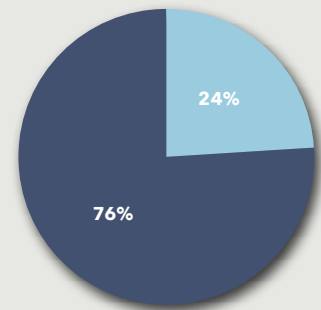
- Promote awareness of racial disproportionality in rates of segregation of students with disabilities. Invite reflection among educators (e.g., confidential reflection activities) regarding implicit bias and assumptions affecting students of color with disabilities, addressing the intersectionality of disability, race and culture.

Massachusetts: Black vs. White Students with Autism in Substantially Separate Classroom Placements (2019)

Black Students with Autism in Massachusetts



White Students with Autism in Massachusetts



● Substantially Separate Classroom ● Any Other Placement

Source: 2020SY Data received from Massachusetts Department of Elementary Education, public records request, February 2021. Percentages rounded to nearest whole number

- Emphasize practices such as prioritizing goals, differentiation of curriculum, and provision of accommodations and modifications to successfully include all students, including those performing significantly below grade level and students with behavioral challenges.
- Provide coaching focused on proactive, preventive classroom practices and strategies to engage all students and decrease inattention or disruptive behaviors which can pose barriers to inclusion, including best practices to address racial inequities, mental health, and trauma-related needs of students exacerbated by the pandemic.
- Use videoconferencing and other technology (e.g., bug-in-ear coaching) to increase access to training opportunities.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Provide stipends to educators to create a toolbox of best practices for inclusion, and create the means (website, etc.) for them to be shared widely.

IV-RECOMMENDATION 4: Provide professional development to address the needs of English learners and English learners with disabilities during the pandemic recovery.

Why is this important? During the COVID-19 pandemic, English learners and English learners with disabilities faced significant challenges accessing education due to language barriers, higher proportions of these students living in communities with significantly higher rates of COVID-19 than the state average, and higher proportions of these students living in households with limited or no internet access.

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Assess the loss of English language skills during the pandemic for ELs, including ELs with disabilities.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

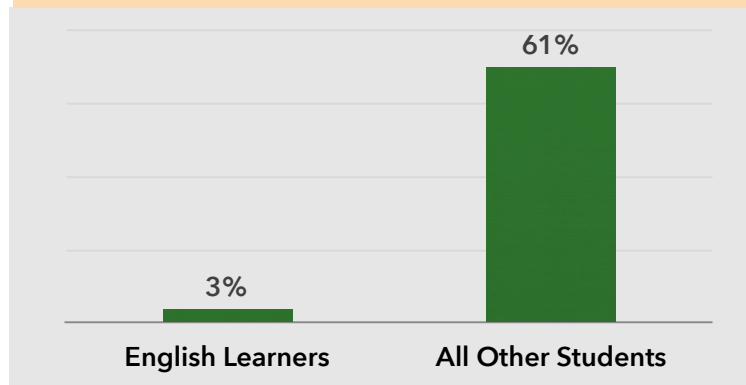
- Develop guides regarding all assessments that are available in specific languages, with information about norming, validity, and reliability for students whose primary language is not English.
- Establish systems of educator-to-educator coaching on the use of alternative assessments that focus on the specifics of what each student can do, has learned, and needs to know as an alternative to the use of norm-referenced assessments for ELs with disabilities or those suspected of having disabilities.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Provide the necessary professional development so that educators demonstrate knowledge and skills regarding: first and second language acquisition; concepts of language “dominance” and “proficiency;” differentiating the process of language development from the impact of a child’s disability on language development; ensuring that ELs become proficient in both languages and gain foundational literacy skills; English language proficiency assessments and EL instruction for students with disabilities who are nonspeaking or have limited speech; how to report assessment findings when using an assessment instrument that is not normed or reliable for ELs; and addressing “myths” of students who supposedly have “low or no” language abilities.

Passed ELA MCAS in 10th Grade (2019)

In 2019, only 3% of English learners met or exceeded expectations on the 10th grade English Language Arts Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) compared to 61% of all students.



Source: 2019SY Data received from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, District Analysis Review Tool (DART); Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Next Generation MCAS Achievement Results, Last Updated September 24, 2019 (<https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/nextgenmcas.aspx>).

V COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP TO BOLSTER HOLISTIC SERVICES AND SUPPORTS TO PROMOTE EQUITY

V-RECOMMENDATION 1: Build and expand partnerships between schools and community after-school programs and community learning pods.

Why is this important? *Students with disabilities, students with mental health and behavioral challenges, and English learners will need increased support from caring adults in and out of school following the disruption of the pandemic. Coordination and communication between schools and after-school programs will better equip educators and staff in both settings to identify areas of need and support students in those areas. After-school programs based in the community also may offer opportunities to share culturally and linguistically responsive practices and understanding of individual students and families with school staff.*

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Involve parent leaders in determining needs.
- Identify best practices utilized to develop effective partnerships between schools and community programs during the pandemic.
- Conduct outreach to community after-school programs and learning pods to establish contact persons and develop a system of communication.
- Clarify roles and process to ensure effective collaboration between staff in schools and community programs.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Identify liaisons to coordinate school and community after-school program/ learning pod efforts.
- Offer professional development provided by educators (special education, ELE, general education) to after-school programs and community learning pods. Professional development should include modeling of strategies and instructional practices.



LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Build inclusive opportunities and supports for students with disabilities, students with behavioral/mental health needs, and ELs.
- Provide incentives for site-based before and after school programs that can meet the needs of students with disabilities so that multiple community partners can operate within school buildings.

V-RECOMMENDATION 2: Provide school-based multilingual, culturally responsive home and community wraparound services.

Why is this important? Student needs can be addressed more comprehensively with strong communication and coordination between community-based providers and school personnel. Racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students and families may feel more comfortable accessing services and support from individuals with whom they have a relationship, who share their race and/or culture, and with whom they can communicate in their primary language.

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Initiate dialogue with community partners to better understand the impact of the pandemic and police violence on students and families.

- Develop partnerships with the Children’s Behavioral Health Initiative, local hospitals and community health centers, and other trusted community organizations to provide students access to needed behavioral health services and other community resources.
- Ensure that wraparound services are available in the primary language of students and families.
- Ensure that family and students are aware of and give permission (via limited release of information forms in parents’ primary language) for information-sharing between wraparound service providers and the school.
- Clarify the roles of non-school personnel in the school setting.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Identify immigrant rights organizations in the community and build partnerships needed to help connect families with immigrant services.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Partner with community organizations to work with families to amplify their participation and voice in schools.
- Work with community organizations to address the social determinants of health, such as housing, poverty, and immigration status, and the impact of these factors on students’ mental health and performance in school.

VI HIRING AND PERSONNEL PRIORITIES TO PROMOTE EQUITY DURING THE RECOVERY

VI-RECOMMENDATION 1: Designate trusted family liaisons to partner with families.

Why is this important? *Given the stressors families have faced during the pandemic and the level of disconnection from school many students have experienced, it is essential that schools conduct outreach to families in a supportive manner that is culturally sensitive and helps them to reconnect with the school community. School districts must have the staffing resources required to conduct this outreach effectively and to rebuild positive relationships with families.*

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Designate culturally and linguistically responsive family liaisons to conduct outreach to students and families at the start of the school year to begin the process of building or re-establishing positive, trusting relationships. (See DESE's Communication Plan for Families, providing questions and scripts to ensure that communication is tailored to each family's needs.)
- Conduct intensive outreach to students who were chronically absent in the 2020-21 school year; outreach should be conducted by family liaisons who have been trained to adopt a culturally sensitive and supportive approach, rather than operating from a punitive truancy-based framework.
- Partner with community organizations to increase communication and relationship-building with families.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Hire family liaisons who are from diverse racial backgrounds and who speak the primary languages of families.
- Provide training for family liaisons about their role and required background knowledge, including training regarding implicit racial bias, assumptions affecting students of color with disabilities and/or behavioral needs, the intersectionality of disability, race and culture, mental health needs, English learners, and special education.
- Provide training for family liaisons to effectively support generalization of skills learned in school to home and community settings. Liaisons should also work

with families and educators to adapt strategies which are effective at home for use in school settings.

VI-RECOMMENDATION 2: DESE should hire or identify state and regional teams of inclusion experts to provide coaching and support to district educators and inclusion facilitators. Districts and schools should hire or identify qualified inclusion facilitators and also prioritize the hiring of staff with experience in the implementation of inclusive practices.

Why is this important? *Given the disproportionate rates of placement of students of color with disabilities in substantially separate settings before the pandemic, and the risk of this disparity increasing, support for implementation of inclusive practices must be prioritized to ensure an equitable recovery. When inclusion is supported and implemented well, it results in positive outcomes for students with and without disabilities. Schools and districts must make necessary staffing investments, and the state must provide inclusion experts to support schools and districts to decrease the number of students of color with disabilities educated in substantially separate settings and to assure positive outcomes for all students in inclusive settings.*

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Hire or identify at least one inclusion facilitator in each school who has the requisite background and knowledge about inclusive practices for all students, including those with extensive support needs. Inclusion facilitators must also demonstrate an understanding of the impact of implicit racial bias and assumptions on the experiences of students of color with disabilities, including the disproportionate placement of students of color in separate special education classrooms.
- Provide state and regional teams of experts with substantial background and expertise in inclusion, to offer high quality coaching and support to general and special educators, including inclusion facilitators and related service providers. The experts should be knowledgeable about implicit racial bias, assumptions affecting students of color with disabilities and/or behavioral needs, and the disproportionate placement of students of color in separate settings. (See also Section IV, Rec. 3.)

LONG-TERM STRATEGY

- Hire staff members (administrators, teachers, related services providers, and paraprofessionals) who are knowledgeable and skilled in the implementation of inclusive practices for students with disabilities and are knowledgeable about implicit racial bias, assumptions affecting students of color with disabilities and/or behavioral needs, and the disproportionate placement of students with color in separate settings.



VI-RECOMMENDATION 3: Hire more social workers and other trained mental health staff to more effectively support students presenting with increased behavioral challenges during the pandemic recovery period.

Why is this important? One of the major impediments to equity for students of color in Massachusetts schools is the extent to which their learning and mental health needs are met with punitive responses such as student arrest, disciplinary exclusion, the filing of Child Requiring Assistance (CRA) petitions for truancy, and other punitive measures. Research has clearly shown that these practices and systems are racially biased and serve to punish and criminalize students for common childhood behaviors and/or needs related to disability, mental health, and trauma. In order to achieve racial equity, schools and districts must prioritize the hiring of social workers and mental health staff to support students with behavioral challenges and attendance barriers.

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Hire additional racially and culturally sensitive social workers or other staff with the background and training to provide non-punitive, supportive, trauma-sensitive, racially equitable mental health support to students.
- Examine the extent to which police officers, SROs, truancy and attendance officers play a punitive rather than supportive role with students. Hire additional social workers or family and student engagement staff to provide intensive support to students to address behavioral challenges and barriers to attendance.

VI-RECOMMENDATION 4: Hire more Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and bilingual staff who reflect the racial and linguistic diversity of the student population (including administrators, teachers, social workers, counselors, psychologists, related service providers, and paraprofessionals).

***Why is this important?** The pandemic has disproportionately impacted communities of color and immigrant communities. Hiring and retaining BIPOC and bilingual staff is key to effectively engaging with ELs (particularly ELSWDs) and their families to address the academic learning loss and mental health needs resulting from the pandemic. Addressing these needs effectively is essential to prevent further widening of opportunity and achievement gaps.*

Hiring teachers and staff who reflect the racial, ethnic, linguistic, and disability diversity of the student population is an essential step toward ensuring equity and better educational outcomes for all students.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Conduct recruitment events that take place in racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse communities and highlight the value of racial diversity, multilingualism and multiculturalism. Publicize the events widely through community partners.
- Revise hiring practices to prioritize and ensure a racially and linguistically diverse applicant pool at all stages of the hiring process.

- Ensure that school principals create goals and a timeline for hiring staff of color reflecting the racial diversity of the students in the school.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Offer funding for university teacher preparation programs to partner with schools to recruit and train bilingual and racially and culturally diverse special educators and related service professionals, such as speech and language pathologists.

VI-RECOMMENDATION 5: Given the potential shortage of teachers due to the pandemic, develop new pathways into the teaching workforce, with the specific goal of increasing the number of BIPOC teachers, multilingual teachers, and teachers with disabilities.

Why is this important? Hiring teachers and staff who reflect the racial, ethnic, linguistic, and disability diversity of the student population is an essential step toward ensuring equity and better educational outcomes for all students. At this critical juncture in which equity concerns are heightened, it is particularly important to commit to taking the steps necessary to build pathways to hire and retain more teachers of color, multilingual teachers, teachers with disabilities, and teachers from other historically marginalized groups.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Develop recruitment strategies to increase the teacher candidate pipeline, with a particular focus on individuals of color, individuals who are bilingual, and individuals with disabilities.
- Develop collaborations between school districts, DESE, and institutions of higher education to implement pathways that provide talented paraprofessionals and other identified staff with greater access to educational programs that qualify them for licensing as teachers.
- Identify interested BIPOC students within the district and support them within their career process to become educators.
- Offer incentives to highly qualified educators to fill empty teaching slots in districts with high need.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Develop alternative pathways to licensure that take into consideration experience.

VI-RECOMMENDATION 6: Develop systems focused on retention of teachers of color.

Why is this important? *In order to create more inclusive and equitable school communities, schools must not only hire, but also retain teachers of color and teachers from other historically marginalized groups who reflect diverse student populations. National data show that teachers of color have higher attrition rates than white teachers. These patterns must be understood and addressed in order to sustain a diverse teaching staff that will help to promote educational equity.*

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Ask educators and administrators to identify strategies and practices for developing a supportive environment for teachers from diverse backgrounds and distribute findings across schools and districts.
- Invite full input and participation of staff of color in school-wide efforts to create more positive, safe, and supportive school cultures for staff of color, resulting in greater sense of empowerment, ownership, and respect.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Establish teacher-to-teacher peer mentoring.

VII ENSURING DATA AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS ALIGN WITH EQUITABLE RECOVERY GOALS

VII-RECOMMENDATION 1: Collect, analyze, and publish data to help ensure that educational inequities experienced by students of color, students with disabilities, and students who are English learners can be effectively identified and addressed during the COVID-19 recovery and beyond.

***Why is this important?** Efforts toward educational equity will only be effective to the extent that these efforts are aligned with data collection, analysis, and publication. Carefully planned and aligned data collection efforts are essential both to identify students experiencing disparities resulting from the pandemic and provide necessary information about whether or not equitable recovery goals are being achieved.*

Efforts toward educational equity will only be effective to the extent that these efforts are aligned with data collection, analysis, and publication.

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Collect discipline data from schools and districts on a quarterly basis, to allow for more frequent review of racial and disability-based disparities and create the ability to more quickly respond to data trends to prevent inequities from widening further during the recovery period.
- Districts and schools should develop and implement a comprehensive plan to ensure that students of color with disabilities are included in general education at the same rates as white students with disabilities.
- To address racial inequities, schools, districts, and DESE should report and analyze data regarding special education placement rates based on race, ethnicity, type of disability, primary language, EL status, and gender, including cross-tab-



ulations necessary to address inequities faced by specific populations of students. (See *also* Section I, Rec.5 and Section IV Rec.3.)

- Educators should review special education placement data on a monthly basis at minimum.
- DESE should notify school districts of potential denial of equal educational opportunities if there is a statistically significant increase in the rates of segregated placement of students of color with disabilities during the COVID-19 recovery period.
- Schools should develop action plans for improvement with accountability structures, if indicated based upon discipline and special education data, to reduce disciplinary exclusion and increase inclusive practices and placements.
- DESE should develop accountability systems to ensure that all schools and districts are accurately reporting all student arrests and referrals to law enforcement.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Publish student data in a manner that can be easily cross tabulated by, at a minimum, the following: each major racial and ethnic group; gender; economic status; high needs status; English learner status; and disability category. Publish in an accessible and user-friendly manner. Share data with local communities in a manner that is easy to understand and accessible.
- Institute regular data reviews, including identification and discussion of any disparities, as a standing item in school, district, and DESE administrative meeting agendas. Support administrators and educators to consider the ways in which racism and implicit racial bias are reflected in the data.

- In response to data analysis, acknowledge and develop strategies for addressing the connection between racism and implicit bias and the punitive and restrictive approaches used with students of color who have undiagnosed mental health needs, behavioral needs, disabilities, and/or English learning needs.
- Ensure each school develops a plan to actively participate in self-reflection and analysis of data to identify the specific areas in which there are disproportionate impacts based on race and develop an action plan to address disparities (See Safe and Supportive Schools Implementation Guide/DESE Self-Reflection Tool).
- Use data to ensure the equitable distribution of resources for students of color who are students with disabilities, English learners, or low-income students across general education, special education, and EL settings.
- Review and analyze data each year over the next five years to ensure that inequities and recovery needs of students are being effectively addressed.

VII-RECOMMENDATION 2: Reform accountability systems to adequately address social emotional competence and key inequities which contribute to achievement gaps, including the disproportionate placement of students of color with disabilities in segregated settings, and the disproportionate disciplinary exclusion and arrest of students of color and students with disabilities.

***Why is this important?** Preventing increased inequities during the pandemic recovery and further reducing existing inequities and opportunity and achievement gaps will require effective accountability systems to ensure districts implement strategies that achieve outcomes toward equity.*

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Establish effective systems of accountability which lead districts to develop competencies related to social emotional instruction, educator-student relationship building, and family and community partnership.
- Establish accountability indicators and systems which address racial disparities in the rate of placement of students with disabilities in substantially separate settings as well as the overreliance and/or disparate use of disciplinary exclusion and arrest.
- Eliminate student arrest as a means of punishment for routine school disciplinary matters by ensuring all districts implement Memoranda of Understanding with police departments which limit police and SRO involvement with student misbehavior to serious criminal conduct which poses a threat of real and substantial harm.

VIII GROUNDING ALL PANDEMIC RECOVERY EFFORTS IN THE LONG-TERM TRANSFORMATION OF SCHOOL CULTURES THAT EMBODY EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND BELONGING

VIII-RECOMMENDATION 1 Create a safe and supportive school culture in which all students and staff have a sense of belonging, are meaningfully included, and access equitable opportunities, including students with all types and severity of disabilities, and all racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

Why is this important? *The culture of a school is reflected by its values, underlying beliefs, and norms, which directly shapes a student's experience in school and ability to learn. Research has demonstrated a strong link between a student's sense of belonging, physical and emotional safety, and their ability to focus and achieve academically and in other important areas. Given the magnitude of inequities, disconnection and isolation faced by students during the pandemic, and the traumatic experiences of students and families, developing a positive school culture and strong communities is more vital than ever. Successful implementation of the other recommendations included in this report will require development of a broader school culture which is supportive, safe, equitable, and inclusive.*

IMMEDIATE STRATEGIES

- Each district and school should establish a committee to meet regularly to address issues of racial equity and school culture. The group should be a representative group of general education staff, special education staff, counselors and mental health staff, school leadership (in most instances, the principal), and parents.
- Develop racially equitable school cultures by creating intentional and ongoing spaces for educators and students (including *all* students with disabilities and English learners) to reflect on their own experiences relative to systemic and institutional racism, racial identity, racial discrimination, bias, and privilege. Support staff to develop awareness of biases regarding intersectionality of disability and race (for example, through confidential reflection activities).



- Create opportunities for students and families to have input into decision-making to address the power structures which function to maintain systemic racism and racial inequity in schools.
- Evaluate and address the impact of police officer presence on the culture of the school and students' perceptions of school, especially among BIPOC students.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

- Significantly expand the utilization of DESE's Safe and Supportive Schools (SaSS) Framework and Self-Reflection Tool by increasing the pool of funding for larger SaSS grants for additional districts and schools. The SaSS Framework and tools will support school districts to conduct a multi-year process to identify the most urgent needs facing their school community and engage in a process of shifting mindset based on core values and implementing best practices for school culture change.
- Invest in resources which support schools to implement other evidence-based approaches to whole school culture change which reduce punitive discipline such as relationship-centered schools, restorative practices (e.g., circle practice), and "healing-centered engagement." These models are relation-

ship-based frameworks which emphasize student strengths, community building, and collective well-being.

- Create school cultures rooted in values of meaningful inclusion of students with disabilities. Counteract the myth that students with disabilities need to be “ready” for inclusion. Share research and practical strategies, presented in a format that is readily accessible to educators, emphasizing that there should be no “readiness criteria” for a student to be included (for example, there should be no requirement that the student operate at grade level or lack behavioral issues). Rather, the environment must be modified to support students to be successful in an inclusive setting.
- Provide information to educators which helps them to make the paradigm shift necessary to bring the resources to students, rather than bringing the students to the resources.
- Provide opportunities for educators, staff, and parents to observe models of resourced, successful models of inclusion (in-person and through videos); ensure inclusive models address the needs of students of color, ELs, students with mental health/behavioral health needs, and students with significant intellectual disabilities.
- Provide incentives and resources to develop pilot programs to develop inclusive models as an entry point for hesitant districts and schools.
- Promote and incentivize dual-language programming as an effective model for bringing together different student populations with the goal of developing socio-cultural competence.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

- Strengthen racial equity curriculum and practices in the classroom.
 - Hire and retain educators and administrators who represent the cultural and linguistic diversity of students and families in the school community. (See section VI)
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GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

ABA - Applied Behavioral Analysis

BCBA - Board Certified Behavior Analyst

BIPOC - Black, Indigenous, People of Color

CASEL - Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

CBHI - Children's Behavioral Health Initiative

CRA - Child Requiring Assistance

DESE - Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

EL - English Learner

ELE - English Language Education/Educator

ELPAC - English Learner Parent Advisory Council

ELSWD - English Learner Student with Disabilities

IEP - Individualized Education Program

LABA - Licensed Applied Behavior Analyst

MABE - Multistate Association for Bilingual Education

MAC - Massachusetts Advocates for Children

MCAS - Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System

MTSS - Multi-Tiered System of Support

NAMI - National Alliance on Mental Illness

OSEP - Office of Special Education Programs (of the United States Department of Education)

PAC - Parent Advisory Council

PPAL - Parent/Professional Advocacy League

SaSS - Safe and Supportive Schools

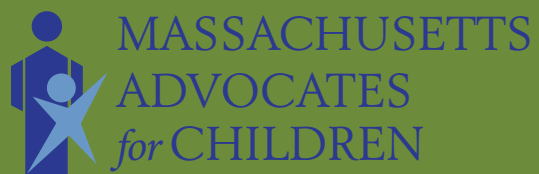
SEL - Social Emotional Learning

SEPAC - Special Education Parent Advisory Council

SRO - School Resource Officer

TASH - Disability rights advocacy organization promoting community inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities (acronym no longer used)

TIES Center - Increasing (T)ime, (I)nstructional Effectiveness, (E)ngagement, and State and District (S)upport for Inclusive Practices



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