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Accelerating Student Learning

The Need for Urgency
and Innovation

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has dominated the education policy discourse over the last few years, and understandably so—the disruptions caused by the pandemic were unprecedented. In the immediate aftermath of the pandemic’s initial impact, educators and policymakers were rightly focused on keeping students safe and developing strategies for remote learning. Once the initial impact faded, efforts shifted to the development of plans to bring students back into the classroom and return to normal—or as close to normal as we could get. And now, we are in a unique moment where—for the first time—we have an opportunity to look back at the last few years and make a clear-eyed assessment of how the pandemic actually impacted students across the Commonwealth and what policy options should be implemented in order to accelerate learning.

In November 2020, the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) and the Massachusetts Competitive Partnership (MACP) came together and wrote a report documenting the challenges that were on the horizon because of school closures and remote learning. *Choosing a Return to Better: Moving Beyond Normal in the Commonwealth’s Return to School and Learning*, highlighted initiatives to mitigate the pandemic’s negative impacts on student learning.

The report recommended a focus on three broad strategies: closing the digital equity gap to ensure students could learn anywhere and at any time, prioritizing college and career readiness for those students with the least amount of time to make up for lost learning, and promoting innovation and flexibility to ensure educators had the tools they needed to deliver for students. Massachusetts state officials and education leaders should be commended for their immediate and quick action to ensure all students received technology and devices to support them during remote learning and virtual instruction. State leaders also continued to scale up pathways programs like Early College and Innovation Career Pathways programs and to introduce new models like STEM-Tech Career Academies. There has been less emphasis placed on educational innovations and flexibilities with regard to “seat time” requirements which some other states initiated and made permanent in the wake of the pandemic because they proved to be beneficial. In part, the reflexive desire to return to “normal,” particularly given the imperative to bring students back to the classroom, was understandable but the time is now to consider lessons learned with regard to regulatory flexibilities and innovations in learning for future programming.

Other recommendations in the 2020 report have lost some relevance while a review of practices from other states allows us to see what has produced evidence of success. Just over three years later, we now have a clearer picture of how students have been affected by the pandemic. Now that we have been able to re-establish baseline information about student achievement, we know more specifically how the pandemic impacted student learning and chronic absenteeism—including which communities and student groups experienced the largest losses. Further, we have a better sense of the different resources available to districts across the Commonwealth, which received varying levels of support through federal stimulus funding as well as the 2019 Massachusetts Student Opportunity Act.

In this paper, we hope to build upon some of our recommendations from three years ago while incorporating practices and recommendations that data and research demonstrate work to accelerate student learning. We hope these ideas will help form a strong platform for urgent action by state leaders in 2024 and beyond.

We also acknowledge that the focus of this paper is on strategies to accelerate learning and that other initiatives to support student learning, like providing for students social-emotional needs and diversifying the educator workforce, are already underway in Massachusetts and should be continued and supported.

At this critical juncture, state policymakers must take stock of the pandemic’s impact on student learning in Massachusetts and develop a comprehensive response to ensure that the last few years will be seen as a temporary blip in the Commonwealth’s proud history of educational achievement for all, and not a generational setback that impacts countless lives as well as the state’s economic future.

Pandemic Impact: Student Learning and MA State Economy

Student Learning

As schools, like the rest of society, recover from the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, we have gained a more comprehensive understanding of how student learning has been impacted in communities across the Commonwealth. Thanks to recently-released state and national assessment data, as well as nationwide research on the pandemic and student learning, we are in a position to do a more thorough analysis of impacts and find ourselves better informed about strategies that can be employed to address them.

It has been made clear that the pandemic has had a deeply negative effect on learning across whole communities in Massachusetts for all students—regardless of racial/ethnic background, family income, or other factors.¹ In certain communities, the percentage of students experiencing significant learning loss is quite large.

Educators, families, district leaders, and many others have made significant efforts to help students retain some approximation of the classroom learning experience throughout the last few years of pandemic disruptions, and these efforts have almost certainly mitigated the negative effects of the pandemic on student learning.

A few months ago, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) released new information that gives us the clearest picture yet of how the pandemic affected student achievement. The data show that the pandemic clearly had a significant impact on *all* student groups in Massachusetts—causing a variety of disruptions that prevented many students from learning the skills and knowledge they would need to succeed in the workforce, college and life.²

The Pandemic's Impact on Student Achievement and Chronic Absenteeism [2018-19—2022-23]³

| Student Subgroup | Early Elementary Students (Grade 3) | | High School Students (Grade 10) | | Change in Chronic Absenteeism |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Change in MCAS Reading Scores | Change in MCAS Math Scores | Change in MCAS Reading Scores | Change in MCAS Math Scores | |
| All Students | -12% [56%—44%] | -8% [49%—41%] | -3% [61%—58%] | -9% [59%—50%] | +9% [13%—22%] |
| Black Students | -10% [38%—28%] | -7% [29%—22%] | +4% [38%—42%] | -8% [35%—27%] | +9% [16%—25%] |
| Latina/o/x Students | -16% [38%—22%] | -11% [31%—20%] | -1% [37%—36%] | -8% [33%—25%] | +13% [22%—35%] |
| White Students | -10% [63%—53%] | -7% [56%—49%] | -2% [69%—67%] | -7% [67%—60%] | +7% [10%—17%] |
| AAPI Students | -10% [73%—63%] | -7% [74%—67%] | +1% [78%—79%] | -2% [82%—80%] | +6% [8%—14%] |
| Low Income Students | -13% [38%—25%] | -9% [31%—22%] | +1% [38%—39%] | -8% [35%—27%] | +11% [23%—34%] |
| Students with Disabilities | -7% [22%—15%] | -3% [18%—15%] | 0% [22%—22%] | -2% [18%—16%] | +10% [20%—30%] |

IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING

- Overall, MA student achievement scores fell by 12 percent in reading and 8 percent in math—drops that indicate significant learning loss since the start of the pandemic.
- Both the drop in achievement scores and the increase in chronic absenteeism are especially pronounced for early elementary students—especially Latina/o/x students.

IMPACT ON CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

- There has been renewed attention, nationally and across states, to addressing chronic absenteeism, which is generally defined as the percentage of students who miss at least 10 percent of school days in a given school year.
 - Some studies have estimated that the pandemic was the direct cause of an increase in chronic absenteeism of 13.5 percent, resulting in six and a half million students across the country who were chronically absent during the 2021-22 school year.⁴
- Chronic absenteeism in Massachusetts has jumped by nine percent among all students since the start of the pandemic—and it is 13 percent for Latina/o/x students.

State Economy

These changes in school achievement and attendance data signal real implications for each individual student affected by pandemic-related school disruptions, and also for the Commonwealth's economic growth in the coming years.

Research has shown that the drop in reading and math scores will result in the average U.S. student having lifetime earnings that are **six percent** lower than they would have been otherwise. And the Massachusetts data paints an even bleaker picture—students in the Commonwealth are projected to have their lifetime earnings drop by nearly **eight percent**.⁵

These pandemic impacts will also leave a significant mark on statewide economic growth in Massachusetts. The expected GDP over the remainder of the twenty-first century is expected to be **two and a half percent lower** as a result of the pandemic's impact on student learning, resulting in a total economic loss of over **\$400 billion**.⁶

It's important to note that these projections are based on an assumption that student learning will swiftly return to normal—in other words, that the pandemic disruptions were a temporary blip that states will quickly correct with comprehensive solutions to accelerate learning and help students get back on track. Without intervention, these losses will be much greater.

For students to get back on course, state and local leaders must treat this crisis with the urgency that it requires. While our state's data show that, in many school districts, the pandemic "slide" has ceased or slowed, there is evidence that in less wealthy districts, the decline in student learning and achievement is continuing. At this moment, it is not clear if Massachusetts is fully prepared to address or facilitating a swift recovery from the pandemic disruptions to student learning—urgent attention, planning and strategic investments must be prioritized. If we all, collectively, educators, policymakers, business and community leaders, and others, fail to take immediate action and emphasize accelerated learning for students as a policy imperative, these projections regarding the state's future economic competitiveness could end up being much worse while negatively affecting the lives of our Massachusetts graduates and their families.

Students in the Commonwealth are projected to have their lifetime earnings drop by nearly eight percent due to setbacks in learning.

Resources Available to Address Learning Loss

Districts across Massachusetts should take advantage of opportunities to focus federal stimulus funding provided in the wake of the pandemic—the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER)—on strategies to address the pandemic’s impact on student learning—although the calculus will vary depending on each district’s circumstances.

The ESSER funding provided to districts in Massachusetts was historic—a total of \$2.6 billion, disbursed in three different rounds, was sent to districts to support their efforts around mitigating the effects of the pandemic. Districts submitted plans to DESE that detailed how they would spend each round of funding, but they generally had broad latitude to spend their ESSER funds on a variety of initiatives—including both one-time investments and ongoing expenses.

ESSER funding must be spent by a certain date (the third round has a due date of September 2024), which could pose a problem for districts that chose to spend part of their allocations on multi-year or ongoing expenses. Districts that made such investments—for example, hiring additional personnel whose salaries will need to be covered in future years—may be facing a “fiscal cliff” in fall 2024 when the federal stimulus funding expires.

Overall, Massachusetts is at a higher risk of facing a steep fiscal cliff because many of the state’s students go to school in so-called “higher-need districts,” which has been identified as a significant factor in how severe the impacts of the ESSER fiscal cliff will be.⁷

But there is another important factor that plays a role in determining how individual districts in the Commonwealth should approach resource allocation decisions in the coming years: the 2019 Student Opportunity Act (SOA), a historic investment which increases state aid to public schools by \$1.4 billion annually, with a phase-in over a six-year period, that is targeted at increasing state funding to districts for high needs students, which we know are concentrated in urban areas and gateway cities. Many of these districts, particularly most amongst the 15 or so largest in the state with the highest numbers of high-needs students, will be receiving transformational amounts of new money that can and should be used for evidence-based practices to accelerate learning and close achievement gaps.

For these high need districts, the impact of the ESSER fiscal cliff will be (at least partially) mitigated by the continued annual SOA funding increases. Leaders, educators, community members, and families in these districts should focus their efforts on how SOA funding could be used to sustain and build upon investments made using federal stimulus funding. These decisions should align with a multi-year strategy to invest in evidence-based practices (like those detailed in the next section) that focus on addressing the pandemic’s impact on student learning in each district.

However, most districts across the state will not be receiving significant state funding increases through the SOA that could be used to offset the expiration of ESSER funds. For these district and school leaders, spending decisions will have to incorporate the need to focus on mitigating the impact of a “fiscal cliff” that could result from the expiration of federal stimulus funding. Decisions about incorporating the evidence-based practices detailed in the next section must be weighed against the existing fiscal impacts of staffing cost increases and other factors and a possible re-allocation of existing resources.

It should also be noted that having a significant amount of unspent ESSER funding has been identified as another factor in whether a district will face a significant fiscal cliff impact.⁸ The more unspent ESSER funding a district has, the more difficult it will be to make spending decisions before the federal relief funding expires (on September 30, 2024).

It is also important to note that in some districts where the pandemic’s impact on student learning has been especially severe—in some cases as high as a 20 percent drop in achievement—there is an urgent imperative to focus resources on evidence-based strategies to accelerate student learning and close achievement gaps that pre-date the pandemic.

The following breakdown of unspent ESSER funding and the change in student achievement levels gives a clearer picture of the unique circumstances faced by individual districts across the Commonwealth:

Top 15 SOA Funding Districts^{9, 10, 11}

| District | FY24 SOA Funding Increase | Unspent ESSER Funding | Change in MCAS Reading Scores | Change in MCAS Math Scores |
|-------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Worcester | \$41,301,739 | \$62,806,509 | -6% | -10% |
| Springfield | \$38,571,921 | \$132,317,848 | 3% | -3% |
| Lowell | \$27,723,626 | \$27,604,973 | -5% | -14% |
| Lynn | \$27,173,054 | \$28,697,437 | -3% | -20% |
| Lawrence | \$25,438,040 | \$46,073,415 | -10% | -16% |
| New Bedford | \$25,013,084 | \$45,808,755 | 1% | -4% |
| Fall River | \$19,603,219 | \$34,947,173 | 0% | -7% |
| Everett | \$19,049,207 | \$12,310,304 | -9% | -12% |
| Brockton | \$17,077,228 | \$0* | -2% | -10% |
| Framingham | \$16,143,057 | \$8,218,223 | -13% | -15% |
| Revere | \$13,965,022 | \$14,632,714 | -7% | -23% |
| Chelsea | \$12,172,417 | \$18,325,571 | -5% | -8% |
| Taunton | \$10,300,260 | \$10,426,530 | 0% | -7% |
| Quincy | \$9,699,816 | \$6,516,618 | -2% | -3% |
| Malden | \$9,122,350 | \$11,678,723 | -14% | -9% |

*Brockton is experiencing larger fiscal issues regarding overspending and budget deficits.

5 Additional Districts (Not Receiving Significant SOA Funding)

| District | Unspent ESSER Funding | Change in MCAS Reading Scores | Change in MCAS Math Scores |
|------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Boston | \$235,588,474 | +2% | -8% |
| Salem | \$4,654,157 | -11% | -18% |
| Cambridge | \$4,642,970 | -1% | 0% |
| Barnstable | \$4,125,373 | -13% | -19% |
| Peabody | \$2,847,179 | -10% | -12% |

Best Practices—Strategies to Accelerate Learning

The unique resource allocation decisions faced by districts in the coming years require thoughtful consideration of the best ways to incentivize and support decisions that will accelerate learning and help get students back on track.

Thankfully, there are a number of educational policy and programming strategies that have been proven effective at addressing the impacts of the pandemic on student learning and accelerating learning in general.

Accelerating Learning through High-Dosage Tutoring

One of the more popular strategies that district and school leaders have implemented to increase instruction time for students who have fallen behind because of the pandemic is high-dosage tutoring. High-dosage tutoring follows a specific model, which includes groups of no more than four students who meet the same tutor consistently, during the school day, three times a week for 30 minutes each session, over the course of a semester or more. Tutors should use a structured curriculum that helps students learn grade-level material while filling in individual gaps in knowledge and skills.¹²

There is a strong foundation of research and evidence showing that high-dosage tutoring can produce large learning gains for a wide range of students, including those who have fallen behind academically. Tutoring interventions have been shown to increase student achievement by an additional three to 15 months of learning across grade levels.¹³

MASSACHUSETTS POLICY RESPONSE

In an effort to guide district spending decisions, DESE released two lists of policy initiatives that state leaders recommend be the focus of federal stimulus (ESSER) and SOA funding allocations. For the ESSER funding, “tutoring programs” are listed as one of the evidence-based practices (EBPs) that districts are encouraged to report on—although the specific approach of high-dosage tutoring is not mentioned. The list of recommendations that DESE released for Student Opportunity Act spending does not include high-dosage tutoring as one of the options.

POLICY RESPONSES IN OTHER STATES

In **Virginia**, the legislature and governor included \$418 million in the Fiscal Year 2024 budget for the All in VA program, designed to help mitigate the pandemic’s impact on student learning, and officially recommended that school districts use 70 percent of their allocations on high-dosage tutoring programs.¹⁴ The Virginia Department of Education also published and distributed a “playbook” document on high-dosage tutoring with recommendations and best practices for districts across a number of program aspects including tutor recruitment and training, modifying student schedules, and more.¹⁵

Strengthening and Scaling College and Career Pathways

As we think about the need to ensure that students at all grade levels are offered opportunities to recover any learning lost as a result of the pandemic, it is important to note that many high school students will be exiting the public education system in a few years. For these students, some of the multi-year early grade interventions that have been discussed will not impact their ability to get back on track.

Access to college and career pathway programs—or access to key aspects of such programs—can have a transformational effect on a student’s ability to find success after high school. The main key aspects of pathway

programs that provide benefits to students are the ability to earn college credit, participate in work-based learning opportunities, earn industry-recognized credentials, and receive dedicated career counseling.

There is a strong body of evidence which shows that students who participate in Early College programs here in Massachusetts—two-thirds of whom are Black or Latino, and over half of whom are low-income students—show strong success on a range of outcomes. Students who participate in Early College programs are more likely than their matched peers to immediately enroll in college—and to remain enrolled through a second year.¹⁶

MASSACHUSETTS POLICY RESPONSE

Thanks to the strong leadership and commitment of state policymakers, college and career pathway programs have grown significantly in recent years—over 50 high schools now have designated Early College programs, over 100 high schools now have designated Innovation Career Pathways programs, and approximately half of all high schools across the state provide a platform for dedicated career counseling through the My Career and Academic Plan (MyCAP) program.

It is important to note, however, that despite these recent increases, under 30 percent of high school students across the state currently have access to an Early College, Innovation Career Pathway, or Chapter 74 program.

POLICY RESPONSES IN OTHER STATES

Delaware has made continuing progress in its follow through of the Delaware Promise—a statewide commitment to increase the number of residents achieving a college degree or post-secondary credential by over 50 percent within ten years and to increase the number of students participating in a high school pathways program to 50 percent of all students within five years.

Colorado, despite the pandemic, followed through on implementing newly-established statewide graduation standards for the '21-'22 school year, enacted previously by their legislature, which allow students to choose elements from a menu of college and career related requirements they must achieve to receive their high school diploma, including college credit, industry-recognized credentials, work-based learning experiences, and a capstone project.

Early Literacy

For many years, well before the pandemic, research has definitively shown the importance of early literacy: students who do not become proficient readers early in their educational journey are at greater risk for experiencing poor educational and economic outcomes.¹⁷ And we also know that helping every student attain literacy is a very achievable goal, since studies have shown that the vast majority of students—from every racial, ethnic, and socio-economic background—can learn to read by the end of first grade if they are exposed to evidence-based reading instruction.¹⁸

The impacts of the pandemic have created a heightened sense of urgency around early literacy, because the data show an alarming drop in literacy among third grade students. Massachusetts already had an early literacy challenge before the pandemic, but the impacts of school closures have exacerbated the issue significantly. In the most recent year of data before the pandemic (2019), only 58 percent of third grade students were showing proficiency in reading—by 2023, that number had dropped to 44 percent. And the numbers are even starker for some student groups: the latest rates of third grade reading proficiency are just 28 percent for Black students, 22 percent for Latina/o/x students, 25 percent for low income students, and 15 percent for students with disabilities.¹⁹

Perhaps most concerning is that many districts fail to use scientifically based reading instruction. A recent survey of the state's school districts found that nearly half are using curriculum the state calls "low quality."²⁰

Recent developments in education technology have made it even easier for states and educators to help more students reach this important milestone. There are a number of commercially available digital literacy screening assessment tools that can be used by districts and schools—the most commonly-used in Massachusetts include DIBELS 8th Edition, i-Ready, mCLASS, and Star Early Literacy.²¹ And there are also education technology tools that can be used to aid literacy coaches and others seeking to help students make greater progress in reading.

However, despite a strong research base and relatively widespread availability of tools and resources, helping all students achieve early literacy remains a challenge in many states, including Massachusetts. Our state's 3rd grade MCAS data provides a helpful snapshot of which students have attained literacy, but by the time students are in third grade they have already progressed through the formative years where literacy intervention can have the biggest impact. By the time we know about reading deficiencies in third grade students, it is much more difficult to provide interventions that can help them get back on track than it would have been in earlier grades.

MASSACHUSETTS POLICY RESPONSE

Massachusetts has taken a number of steps to incentivize more effort around early literacy, although the setbacks caused by the pandemic should warrant greater and more direct action from state leaders. In 2020, the state launched the Mass Literacy initiative to provide guidance and resources to help educators implement evidence-based early literacy instruction across the Commonwealth. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has also placed an emphasis on ensuring that new teachers are learning evidence-based learning practices in their educator preparation programs.

Most recently, in 2022, the Massachusetts state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted a new policy that requires all elementary schools to assess each student's early literacy skills at least twice per year from kindergarten through third grade. An initial look at the data from these early literacy screenings has sounded the alarm even further—a study commissioned by the state shows that more than half of students in grades K-3 showed signs of reading difficulties.²²

POLICY RESPONSES IN OTHER STATES

Other states have made significant progress in early literacy through strong state policy interventions, namely **Mississippi** which passed a law in 2013 requiring all schools to use evidence-based literacy strategies while also making significant investments in literacy coaches. And the state has seen results: low-income students from Mississippi had the 42nd-highest reading scores in the country in 2011. The most recent data shows that those students now have the 2nd-highest reading scores in the country.²³

Expanded Learning Time

One of the clearest takeaways from recent national research on how the pandemic has impacted student learning is that the effort to get students back on track will require a major increase in instructional time for affected students.²⁴

The main policy approach to this issue is Expanded Learning Time (ELT), which gives students more instructional time through a variety of strategies that include after-school, summer, and in-school programming. These efforts often involve a comprehensive redesign of student and educator schedules.

One of the most effective ELT strategies, along with summer school programs and “double blocking” initiatives where students get an extra period each day, is the use of acceleration academies.²⁵ This approach was shown to be particularly effective in the context of the turnaround effort undertaken in Lawrence, Massachusetts, where students who participated in acceleration academies saw achievement gains in both math and reading. The

acceleration academies approach involves providing targeted instruction to small groups of students over week-long vacation breaks, either in English Language Arts or Math. A study of acceleration academies in Lawrence found that participating in such programs had large, positive impacts on student achievement—allowing students to catch up, or even surpass, their peers in other districts across the state.²⁶

MASSACHUSETTS POLICY RESPONSE

Massachusetts first started helping districts implement ELT concepts in 2005 with the launch of the Expanded Learning Time initiative, which has grown significantly over the years.²⁷ And in the wake of the pandemic, DESE set up a grant program that provides a total of \$5 million for districts to set up summer acceleration academy programs that had to be designed in ways that aligned with evidence-based practices.²⁸

POLICY RESPONSES IN OTHER STATES

Experts have called for states and districts to leverage the federal stimulus relief funding to set up ELT programming as a high-impact strategy to mitigate the pandemic’s effects on student learning. In 2020, a school district in **California** used federal relief funding to set up a free summer enrichment program for the district’s students—which included small groups, personalized instruction, hands-on science activities, and field trips.²⁹

Spurring Innovation through Flexible Seat Time

Many states, including Massachusetts, have long-standing requirements around how many hours of “seat time” each student must fulfill—as well as what counts as “seat time.” However, the pandemic shifted how many students and families think about what counts as “learning time,” and there is an increasing recognition of how remote learning and hybrid schedules can benefit students. Many alternate approaches to learning—such as remote learning from home outside of traditional school hours, providing credit for daytime work and experiences, and using non-traditional approaches to assessing skill acquisition—have been expanded in the wake of the pandemic and proven valuable.

MASSACHUSETTS POLICY RESPONSE

In the immediate wake of the pandemic, DESE provided a temporary waiver that exempted schools and districts from the requirement that all elementary school students receive at least 900 hours per year of “structured learning time,” and that secondary school students receive at least 990 hours per year.³⁰

However, the waiver from seat time requirements was temporary, which discouraged schools and districts from committing to new approaches that give students more flexibility in demonstrating that they have learned certain knowledge/skills—including through hybrid approaches that include some remote learning.

POLICY RESPONSES IN OTHER STATES

Arizona: State legislators and the governor passed a law that amended the traditional seat-time requirements and gave schools the ability to adopt new models for measuring instructional time that accounted for things like mixed remote and in-person instruction, competency-based learning, and more.³¹

Addressing Digital Equity

Access to technology, internet connectivity, and digital skills are essential to student opportunity and success. Technology allows educators to personalize learning and provides access to classes not readily available to students in their school or district and to online classrooms and lectures to take learning outside of traditional classroom spaces. In addition, digital fluency is foundational to college, career, and life success. Many community and business leaders have called for a more urgent response to ensure that more students have the connections they need to succeed in school.³²

MASSACHUSETTS POLICY RESPONSE

In the summer of 2020, DESE launched the Remote Learning Technology Essentials program. This program provided \$25 million in matching grants for any technology-related expenses that districts would incur to ensure that all students have access to devices and internet services in support of remote learning.³³ In addition, the legislature passed, and the Governor signed into law, a \$1.7 billion technology bond bill, directly allocating \$50 million to support the state's public schools in ensuring student access to devices and connectivity. Surveys of districts conducted that fall indicated a high rate of success in closing the digital divide at that moment in the pandemic.

Unfortunately, many districts that received the one-time matching grants in FY2021 are faced with issues related to devices such as Chromebooks becoming broken or obsolete—and are finding it challenging to maintain funding to replace devices that students should have and meeting other technology-related expenses.

The state has also undertaken significant efforts to address the larger issue of broadband connectivity in communities across Massachusetts through initiatives led by the Massachusetts Broadband Institute, which has worked to leverage federal resources—such as the Capital Projects Fund and the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment program—along with other funding to put the Commonwealth on a path to 100 percent connectivity.³⁴

POLICY RESPONSES IN OTHER STATES

New Jersey: Governor Phil Murphy fully bridged the K-12 digital divide in March 2021 by ensuring devices and connectivity for all enrolled students through the \$54 million Digital Divide Grant (grant created in July 2020; divide closed in March 2021). Gov. Murphy also allocated another \$6 million in Coronavirus Relief Funds for grant funding to nonpublic schools.

At the start of the pandemic, it was estimated that approximately 231,000 of the state's nearly 1.4 million public school students needed either devices, internet connectivity or both. Data reported by school districts and other entities as of March 3, 2021 indicates that the number of students lacking devices or connectivity had been reduced to zero.³⁵

Policy Recommendations

By looking at the evidence base for different policy strategies, as well as best practice examples of what has worked in other states, we are able to put together a shortlist of policy recommendations and state budgetary investments that would be most likely to have an impact on accelerating student learning in Massachusetts and could, in the application of strategies to redesign the high school experience and create greater flexibility for students in seat time, potentially assist in addressing chronic absenteeism.

High-Dosage Tutoring

- Massachusetts should embrace high-dosage tutoring as a primary strategy for accelerating student learning and encourage its adoption in school districts, through financial incentives, such as matching grants, and prioritization in guidance to districts regarding use of their Student Opportunity Act and ESSER funds.
- The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education should define the parameters of an evidence-based high-dosage tutoring model and offer schools and districts technical assistance around implementation, along with support in the recruitment and selection of third-party vendors for districts where staffing is an issue.

College and Career Pathways

- Massachusetts should adopt a NorthStar Goal of creating universal access for students to college and career pathway programs in all high schools, including the ability for students to earn college credit, to earn industry-recognized credentials, to participate in work-based learning experiences and to receive dedicated career counseling.
- State leaders should continue to increase state budget line items related to student pathways, including Early College, Innovation Career Pathways, career vocational technical education and career connected activities, to allow for continued growth and expansion of these programs.
- State leaders should pass into law a legislative package (H.592/S.256) that includes bills filed that would:
 - Codify the Workforce Skills Cabinet as a cross-agency governance structure overseeing the growth of high school pathway programs;
 - Remove barriers that prevent greater expansion of career pathway programs, including work-based learning opportunities;

BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of these policy approaches to accelerate student learning would be greatly enhanced by increased state investment in targeted strategies and technology capital. As Governor Healey and the legislature begin the process of putting together the Fiscal Year 2025 budget, and associated bond bills, they may consider the following options:

- Provide new dedicated funding to high-need districts that can be used to establish and/or incentivize through matching grants, high-dosage tutoring programs, with appropriate guidance from state officials.
- Continue to provide strong support for college and career pathway programs—including Early College, Innovation Career Pathways, Chapter 74 programming, and STEM Tech Career Academies—not only through dedicated funding for program line items but also for administrative efforts to strengthen and scale pathways in equitable ways.
- Authorize and disburse new grant funding through state bond bill authorizations to help districts re-invest in technology-related expenses that help maintain students' connection to education resources through the purchasing of devices—as well as investing in strategies to form public/private partnerships to expand broadband access for students.
- Develop separate and independent line item funding to support early literacy efforts statewide including, but not limited to, funding to train existing teachers, to hire literacy coaches and to support technology and software related to science-based early literacy instruction.
- Include dedicated funding to support extended learning time practices in high-needs districts.

- Create a financial incentive for high schools to help more students earn industry-recognized credentials;
 - Ensure that all students are able to receive dedicated career counseling through the MyCAP program, and,
 - Expand Computer Science instruction to every high school.
- State leaders should play a convening role in helping to establish more partnerships between businesses and district leaders, with the goal of expanding the work-based learning opportunities—including not only internships and apprenticeships but also things like career planning and worksite tours—for more students across the Commonwealth.

Early Literacy

- Massachusetts should require all school districts to adopt a high quality, science-based literacy curriculum.
- State leaders should work with districts to train and educate incumbent teachers in the science of reading and implementation of high-quality curricula in the classroom while also requiring teacher preparation programs in the state to enhance and improve their training of new teachers in literacy instruction.
- The state should consider a program of grants to high-need districts to employ literacy coaches where needed.
- State leaders should consider expanding the use of technology and associated programs in support of literacy instruction at the elementary level.

Expanded Learning Time

- Massachusetts should continue and expand upon its efforts to provide funding, incentives and support for high-need districts to engage in expanded learning time models, including longer school day and year, summer programming, and acceleration academies.

Seat Time Flexibility/Innovation

- State officials should work to remove any barriers to innovation and encourage districts and schools to adopt innovative learning models as part of their emphasis on high school redesign, including a review and loosening of seat-time requirements and support for competency-based learning that gives credit for time and experience out of school and allows for flexible educational-content delivery and assessment, including off-site and off-hours virtual instruction and project-based learning.

Closing Digital Equity Gaps

- Massachusetts should repeat its pandemic-era effort to survey districts and provide funding to schools and districts to ensure that every student has the technology and devices they need to be successful.
- State leaders should develop a plan for ensuring devices are replaced in districts on a regular basis and that digital equity gaps are closed and remain closed.
- State leaders must also complete efforts to address internet connectivity and related affordability and access issues for all of the state's residents toward a goal of ensuring the closing of homework and opportunity gaps for all students.

Conclusion

MBAE and MACP look forward to working with Governor Healey, legislative leaders, educators, and other stakeholders to drive progress on the issues raised in this report. We hope to be advocates for a policy and budgetary urgency in accelerating student learning in a way that supports students impacted by the pandemic and moves our schools toward flexible and innovative practices that set the stage for future success for our citizens and the state's economic competitiveness.

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