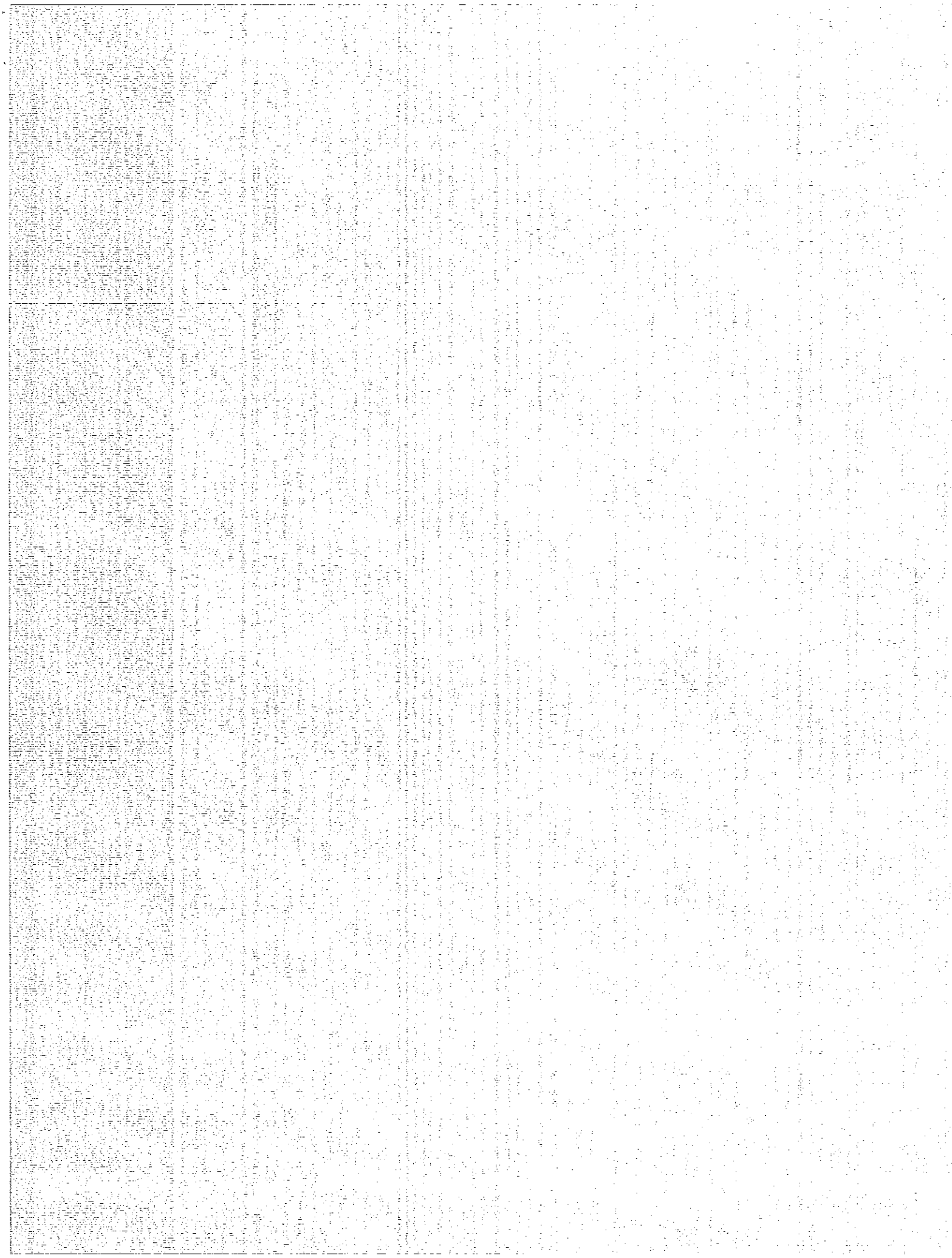


Condition of Education

IN THE COMMONWEALTH

**Toward a More Comprehensive
Vision of Student Learning**



Overview

These days the words “education reform” conjure up an array of associations—from high-stakes assessments to online learning to high school redesign. The school improvement landscape is particularly crowded in Massachusetts, where the era of new investments and attention to student outcomes has been in high gear for almost three decades. The state’s public schools have experienced significant improvement over that period, with Massachusetts’ students performing, on average, above their peers nationally.¹ And, as one might expect in a time of rapid innovation, public dialogue about education in the Commonwealth has grown dense with ideas, approaches, and philosophies.

While increased attention on student learning is desirable, the flurry of activity poses a challenge for those seeking to make informed decisions about the best steps the state should take moving forward. For that reason, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy endeavors to look beyond current debates to examine broader patterns in the state’s public schools and recommend areas for action that are well supported by research and data. Through our original research and review of the research of others, we seek to build a more coherent vision of a public education that can guide shared efforts and put every child in Massachusetts on a path to college, careers, and life success.

The Condition of Education initiative is a pivotal piece of how the Rennie Center delivers on its mission. This annual series gives state leaders a clear, concise view of student progress across the state, while pointing to areas where greater investment and strategic expansion of effective practices can bring us closer to achieving the state’s vision of strong, equitable outcomes for all students.

From Data to Action

In 2013, we presented our first *Condition of Education Data Report*, tracking 25 state-level indicators of school performance from the preschool years through transitions into college and the workforce. Last year, we revisited the same data points, presenting them along with the first *Condition of Education Action Guide*, which asked: What do these data suggest about the actions leaders can take at the state, district, and school level to prepare every young person for success in college, careers and life? The enclosed report is its sequel, as we look once again at the same set of indicators and ask where the state can make a substantial difference in student learning going forward.

The reform priorities featured in this report are, as always, supported by research and grounded in data. In addition, we highlight sample approaches in Massachusetts that, while relatively new, show potential for scalability. The research and ideas presented are further guided by two underlying principles:

1. Education encompasses more than academic learning.
2. Schools should not—and cannot—work in isolation.

This year, as we looked at promising practices across the state and the patterns in the most current student outcomes, a clear theme emerged: Massachusetts can do much more—across age groups—to address social-emotional learning needs that are both a precursor to and inextricable element of student’s academic success.

The Critical Importance of Social-Emotional Learning

In an era of standard-based reform, the bulk of our attention and investments to date have been squarely focused on academic outcomes—a necessary but insufficient focus. An increasing—and convincing—body of evidence points to the value of attending to other facets of student development that both contribute to stronger academic performance and to broader measures of long-term success. When schools and their partners address “social-emotional” competencies, such as self-regulation and interpersonal communication, in addition to skills more traditionally associated with academics, they do a better job at both preparing students for the realities of college and adulthood and helping them master core academic content.²

While there are many definitions of social-emotional learning, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides one of the most clear and comprehensive: “social-emotional learning is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” CASEL outlines five inter-related sets of competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Numerous studies find that young people who master such competencies are less likely to engage in risky behaviors and more likely to succeed in school, college, and career environments.³

Students of all abilities and backgrounds benefit from opportunities to develop their social-emotional skills. Researchers have found an average return of \$11 for every \$1 invested in school-based social-emotional programming with proven outcomes for students. These im-

pacts cut across demographics and include reductions in childhood aggression and risky behavior, lower levels of depression and anxiety, and increases in attendance and academic performance.⁴ These findings do not point toward a reduced focus on academics; rather, we see that when schools thoughtfully combine a rigorous academic program with social-emotional supports tailored to students' developmental needs, they do a better job at helping students access rich academic content and set a foundation for long-term success.

Social-emotional learning is especially needed today, when schools are being asked to address more diverse student learning needs than ever before. Across Massachusetts, districts are experiencing an increase in the percentage of students who have special needs, are English language learners, live in poverty, and come from marginalized racial groups. Districts also report dramatic increases in the number of students who display behaviors linked to severe anxiety, emotional trauma, and poor self-control. Massachusetts educators are responsible for the success of all of these children, but often have limited access to models and training that would help them effectively address this range of social-emotional learning needs within the context of their assigned curricula.

A number of promising reform activities, including several highlighted in the 2015 *Condition of Education Action Guide*, emphasize partnerships between schools and community-based organizations to supplement a broader range of student learning needs. As we look at current patterns in student performance and consider where, as a state, we have the greatest opportunity to improve outcomes, social-emotional learning emerges as a clear priority. This year's *Condition of Education Action Guide* highlights a number of promising partnerships attempting to address this priority.

Toward a Common Frame for Action

Social-emotional learning happens across settings and throughout a child's life. A thoughtful statewide approach to supporting students' social-emotional development, therefore, requires attention to multiple tiers of the system. In this report, we explore the critical role social-emotional learning plays at several stages of the schooling pipeline, noting where the state has made progress and how Massachusetts leaders can support a more comprehensive and research-based vision for social-emotional learning for all educators, students, and their families. We then offer four recommended areas for action.

- **Priority One:** Set a social-emotional foundation in early childhood
- **Priority Two:** Build comprehensive K-12 systems of social-emotional support
- **Priority Three:** Promote skills for college and career success
- **Priority Four:** Equip educators to foster social-emotional wellbeing

PRIORITY ONE

Setting a Social-Emotional Foundation in Early Childhood

Why Social-Emotional Learning Matters in the Early Years

Of all stages in the schooling spectrum, early education is perhaps where social-emotional approaches have their strongest roots. Well-designed early education programs build social-emotional learning into the core of instruction, treating children's interpersonal and emotional development as a core part of their mission. Such programs attend to two important tiers of social-emotional development.

- **Readiness to learn:** When young children learn how to self-regulate, engage productively in learning activities, and interact positively with others, they have the foundation they need to function in school and continue developing the social-emotional competencies they will need throughout their lives.⁵ Further, positive social-emotional skills foster a sense of enjoyment and motivation related to learning.⁶ Studies have found that preschool gains in competencies like social problem-solving and conflict resolution predict school engagement and reading achievement through kindergarten and into first grade.⁷ Meanwhile, young children who do not develop appropriate social-emotional competencies participate measurably less in the classroom and are less likely to feel accepted by teachers and peers.⁸
- **Family engagement:** Children find their motivation to learn through their relationships with adults.⁹ Effective early education programs work to create a continuity of learning experiences by establishing shared responsibility for student learning and success.¹⁰ Family involvement can promote positive student attitudes toward school, improved behavior, and higher self-esteem, which are strongly associated with academic engagement.¹¹

Consistency and collaboration are critical; early educators are better able to support children and communicate with families when they have clear, consistent rules and routines regarding social-emotional behaviors, as well as opportunities for families and staff to reflect and plan together.¹² Fostering authentic family partnerships requires relational trust, cultural sensitivity, and a belief that all families—regardless of education level and socioeconomic status—can contribute to children's learning.¹³

A Moment for Action

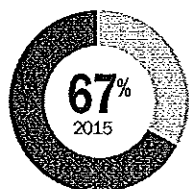
Massachusetts has built an important foundation for supporting the implementation of effective social-emotional learning practices in early childhood programs.

- **Learning standards:** Over the past few years, a team of state leaders, educators, and advocates participated in the National Governors' Association Early Learning Academy, helping to shape a comprehensive birth-through-grade-three policy agenda that includes essential competencies and foundational experiences across five developmental domains, including social-emotional learning. In 2015, the Board of the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) approved a new set of statewide social and emotional learning standards for preschool and kindergarten, which were developed with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) and informed by the National Governors' Association recommendations.
- **Assessments:** ESE currently requires programs that receive funding for full-day kindergarten to assess incoming students on several domains. Programs participating in the Massachusetts Kindergarten Entry Assessment (MKEA) can choose among a number of assessments that include some measurement of social-emotional skills. In 2015, the majority of kindergarten students were assessed with the MKEA; plans for broader rollout remains uncertain.

>>> Where We Are Now: Key Indicators

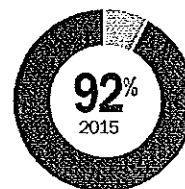
All indicator data cited in this box can be found in the Rennie Center's 2016 Condition of Education Data Report.

Massachusetts continues to expand access to high-quality early education—a critical factor in ensuring the state's youngest students develop the social-emotional skills they need to succeed in school and beyond. However, more work remains to ensure universal access, to create stronger links between social-emotional learning and other curriculum priorities in early childhood, and to assess and monitor students' acquisition of these important foundational skills.



Children aged 0-5 eligible for a subsidy and enrolled in high-quality early education programs

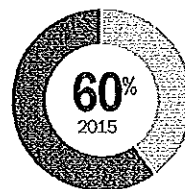
EARLY EDUCATION ACCESS: Currently, 67 percent of children receiving EEC subsidies attend programs that self-assess at level two or above on the Quality Rating Indicator System (QRIS).



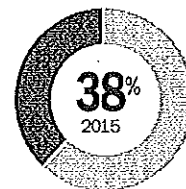
Students attending full-day kindergarten

STUDENTS ATTENDING FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN: Participation in full-day kindergarten continues to increase, with 92 percent of kindergarten students participating in full-day programs in 2015. Full-day kindergarten programming provides an opportunity for educators to work with the Commonwealth's youngest learners on critical social-emotional skills.

EARLY READING: Last year, 60 percent of third graders scored proficient or advanced on the English language arts MCAS, the state's first standardized measurement of achievement; only 38 percent of high needs students met the same bar, suggesting that the state still has significant work to do in the preschool and early elementary years.¹⁴



all students



high needs students^A

Students scoring proficient or advanced on the 3rd grade English language arts MCAS

Next-Tier Measures: Available indicators for early education are limited and do not yet measure social-emotional factors directly. The state can support more comprehensive assessments of early childhood learning by adopting tools like as the Assessment Profile for Early Childhood Programs, which uses observation and teacher reported data to assess the learning environment, and the Devereaux Early Childhood Assessment or Minnesota Preschool Affect Checklist, which assess children's social-emotional competence and growth.

A. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education defines "high needs" students as those belonging to at least one of the following subgroups: eligible for free/reduced lunch, students with disabilities, English language learners, and former English language learners.

ACTION ONE

Expand Effective Social-Emotional Learning Models in Early Childhood

The recently approved state standards for preschool and kindergarten are an important step toward defining and systematizing expectations of social-emotional learning for young children. The standards offer a jumping off point for decision makers at every level—state, district, school, and classroom—to bringing effective practices to scale in early childhood programs across the state. Several additional actions would help the spread of effective social-emotional learning practices for the state's youngest learners.

1. **Assess for readiness.** Early educators need comprehensive, developmentally appropriate, and culturally sensitive screening and assessment tools to monitor the development of young children's social-emotional skills. Such assessments should be low-stakes and integrated into curricula, allowing teachers to observe children's behavior as they learn and interact, and use the data to inform next steps in instruction. Quality assessments would also help educators identify early risk factors, reducing barriers to achievement.

The good news is that such assessments exist. The state made important strides by establishing MKEA requirements for districts receiving funding for full-day kindergarten programs; new social-emotional screening requirements may be introduced into the QRIS. As EEC and ESE move forward in aligning preschool and K-12 standards, a natural next step will be for both departments to recommend and support implementation of quality, embedded assessment options across all programs serving young children.

2. **Spread strong instructional practice.** Districts and individual programs can learn from the effective social-emotional learning practices of peers across the state. EEC can play a role by curating professional development offerings, implementation tools, and documented best practices through a centralized resource hub. In particular, programs can benefit from tools and examples that help them assess emerging skills, model those skills, create supportive learning environments, and modify teaching to address different learning styles and stages.
3. **Support greater family collaboration.** Families and early educators alike need opportunities to learn how to foster children's social-emotional learning. Early education programs would benefit from professional development that models effective family engagement, including strong communication practices and approaches to supporting social-emotional development in the home.
4. **Create more seamless, sustainable funding.** Currently, early education programs depend on a patchwork of public and private sources, each with its own restrictions, and many of the community-based initiatives that support the social-emotional development of young children rely on temporary grants. Bringing forth a more comprehensive notion of early childhood education—including effective implementation of social-emotional learning practices at scale in the early education sector—will require a state budget that supports early education in a manner more akin to K-12 Chapter 70 support.

New Bedford: A Community-Wide Effort in Birth to Grade 3

The New Bedford Birth to Grade 3 Alignment Partnership is an unprecedented alliance of educators and community agencies with a stake in early childhood. Created with a seed grant from EEC, the partnership's primary objective is to improve early education access, while creating a network of support for parents and educators. As many as 26 percent of New Bedford children currently enter kindergarten without any preschool or formal child care experience, an issue that has a huge ripple effect for individual students and the system.

Convened by the district, the partnership includes public preschool educators, community-based providers, and representatives from public housing, mental health, the libraries, arts organizations, and others. Initial conversations with preschool providers and local survey data revealed a common concern with social-emotional skills and needs.

Promising Practices

The New Bedford partners meet monthly and have made important strides in several areas.

- **Focus on literacy and social-emotional skills:** Building on a previously existing early reading campaign, the partners have adopted the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning's pyramid model for supporting social-emotional competence in young children via tiered, holistic supports.
- **Shared professional development:** Through a common professional development series, educators across settings have explored the same set of promising strategies for teaching early literacy and social-emotional skills. Educators working in the public schools and private preschool programs are collaborating to implement key Massachusetts standards for early learning.
- **Parent engagement:** A thirteen-month calendar provides parents with advice, literacy tips, and parenting strategies leading up to the kindergarten transition. Parents of children from birth to age three can access additional support through home visits, parenting classes, and service referrals.
- **Shared data:** A new kindergarten transition tool will compile individual student data on early literacy, number sense, and social-emotional skills. The universal tool will allow every preschool provider to communicate baseline data with the district prior to the kindergarten transition.

The New Bedford partnership is still new and has yet to be rigorously evaluated, but one important outcome is already apparent. Where distrust among sectors had been common, participants have noted a cultural shift, with partners finding creative ways to link services and agendas. As the EEC grant expires at the end of this year, the partners are looking at ways to remain connected and reach more young children at this critical early stage.

Building Comprehensive K-12 Systems of Social-Emotional Support

Creating Conditions for Student Success

Social-emotional learning doesn't stop when children enter kindergarten. In fact, educators across the grade spectrum can learn from the example set in early childhood programs by developing proactive systems that increase student engagement and set the stage for success in college and beyond.¹⁵ Nurturing social-emotional development is a school-wide process, requiring contributions from many. Here, we outline three core components of a comprehensive approach to social-emotional learning.

- **School climate.** A positive school climate ensures the social, emotional, intellectual, and physical safety of all members. Research links school climate factors to increased academic achievement, student motivation, group cohesion and trust, and personal development, and to decreases in aggression and other negative behaviors.¹⁶ Peers are an important influence on school culture, one that can be harnessed to set a productive tone and ensure safety.¹⁷ In fact, research finds that peer group interventions yield better outcomes than interventions aimed at training adults to support students.¹⁸ In schools that implement a “caring majority” approach—engaging at least 85 percent of students as champions of a positive school climate—students experience fewer instances of bullying and other negative events.¹⁹
- **Curriculum focus.** A comprehensive social-emotional learning program explicitly teaches the academic and behavioral skills that are necessary to long-term success.²⁰ Mastery of the Common Core State Standards also depends on many of the same foundational skills, such as problem-solving.²¹ Teachers can build students' competence in these skills through direct instruction, modeling, and by integrating skills into daily routines and classroom management.²² When teachers design learning tasks in which students can practice self-regulation and other important skills, they develop greater insight into individual students' emerging strengths and remaining needs, information that can guide ongoing instruction.²³
- **Relationships.** Teachers reinforce a positive school climate and contribute to students' wellbeing when they use social-emotional constructs to develop stronger classroom relationships.²⁴ A welcoming and safe class routine helps ensure every learner is valued, while minimizing feelings of intimidation or alienation and allowing students the freedom to make responsible decisions.²⁵ Positive student-teacher relationships help teachers gain a deeper understanding of students' strengths and needs, which in turn influences students' social adjustment and academic competence.²⁶ To establish and sustain strong classroom relationships, educators must be able to regulate their own emotions and approach students, from a wide range of backgrounds, with cultural sensitivity and competence, a process that requires continuous education.²⁷

A Moment for Action

Through several recent legislative commitments, Massachusetts has established important requirements related to school climate and social-emotional support for public school students.

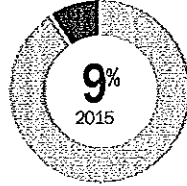
- **An Act Relative to Children's Mental Health (2008)** addresses access to child mental health services by facilitating the coordination of services with schools.
- **An Act Relative to Bullying in Schools (2010)** provides regulations for school leaders to address school bullying, and the follow-up act of the same name passed in 2014 expands on the prior legislation with prevention and intervention plans.
- **Behavioral Health and Public Schools Task Force (2011)** proposed a statewide infrastructure, with action steps, to assist schools in creating safe learning environments and addressing behavioral health barriers to learning.
- **An Act Relative to Student Access to Educational Services and Exclusion from School (2012)**, also known as Chapter 222, requires schools and districts to consider alternatives to expulsion with intentions of promoting more positive behavior and school climate.
- **An Act Relative to Safe and Supportive Schools (2014)** offers guidance to school leaders on integrating and aligning initiatives that promote behavioral health in schools, including those that support social-emotional learning and trauma sensitivity.

Additionally, ESE has created a recommended blueprint for districts to help them coordinate and align services to address students' academic and social-emotional wellbeing. The Massachusetts Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) differentiates learning tasks to address a range of student strengths, needs, and learning styles and to identify those in need of services or screening.

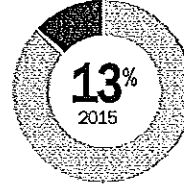
>>> Where We Are Now: Key Indicators

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Student engagement is one of the most important predictors of academic success and is deeply connected to social-emotional development.²⁸ Tracking indicators of student engagement—including risk factors like school mobility and absenteeism—can help schools and districts apply interventions more strategically, keeping more students on track for graduation and long-term success.

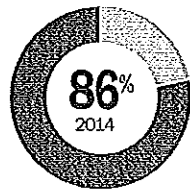


Students transferring into or out of a school during the school year

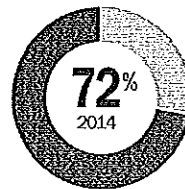


Students absent from school 10% or more of days enrolled

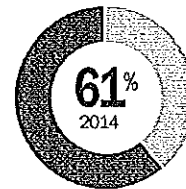
ENGAGEMENT INDICATORS: A focus on social-emotional learning may be particularly important for students whose connections to school are most tenuous. Currently, 9 percent of Commonwealth students transfer schools at least once in a given year, and 13 percent are absent 18 or more times in a year.



Students graduating from high school in four years



all students



high needs students^B

STEM Students completing MassCore coursework

ON-TRACK OUTCOMES: In the most recent graduation cohort, 86 percent of students completed high school in four years; 72 percent of high school seniors satisfied MassCore requirements, a measure of college readiness, although only 61 percent of high need students had done the same.

Next-Tier Measures: The indicators discussed above are a jumping off point for identifying challenges facing Commonwealth students. Districts and schools would benefit from assessments that capture key social-emotional competencies, such as the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA), which originated in the early education sector and can be used to screen and monitor development of social-emotional competencies through the eighth grade. The DESSA can be completed by families, teachers, or staff in partner agencies; the DESSA-mini uses eight-item behavior rating scales for quick progress checks.

B. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education defines "high needs" students as those belonging to at least one of the following subgroups: eligible for free/reduced lunch, students with disabilities, English language learners, and former English language learners.

ACTION TWO

Establish More Comprehensive and Consistent Social-Emotional Support

While the MTSS and recent legislation are steps in the right direction, these largely unfunded and disconnected guidelines have been implemented unevenly across the state. Ensuring more proactive and comprehensive social-emotional support for students statewide will require a coordinated vision as well as dedicated resources and attention.

1. Provide protocols and guidance to districts. The tiered service model of MTSS and many of the instructional principles it outlines offer a strong framework for organizing social-emotional learning schoolwide. Districts and schools can build on the MTSS to design comprehensive service models that develop students' academic and behavioral competencies through multiple layers of support, tailored to the needs of particular students and student populations. Districts will need guidance in implementing such supports and in creating capacity among teachers and school leaders to lead this work.
2. Support use of a broader set of student data. In the past several years, Commonwealth schools have become proficient users of

academic data to guide improvement in instruction, but few schools are versed in using data to monitor students' social-emotional progress. ESE has disseminated several tools that can be used to track social-emotional skills, including the Survey of Academic Youth Outcomes developed by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time. Massachusetts educators will need additional guidance from the state to effectively use data from these tools and other commonly available assessments in districts and schools.

Newton: A Comprehensive Social-Emotional Response

Over the past three years, the Newton Public Schools has ramped up its social-emotional focus by training teachers and administrators in social-emotional learning practices to best support all learners in the district. Among the factors that prompted a closer look at students' emotional health and safety, the district experienced three student suicides in the 2012 school year. In 2014, Newton received a five-year federal School Climate Transformation grant from the state to take the social-emotional effort districtwide, establishing a centralized department of Social Emotional Learning that places the initiative on par with other academic priorities. To date, the district has also adopted a Response to Intervention tiered student support model which includes a focus on social-emotional skills and has launched a Responsive School Initiative in 11 elementary schools and four middle schools.

Promising Practices

Newton does not approach social-emotional learning as an add-on program; rather, it's part of how schools organize their work and is regarded as a prerequisite for students' academic success. Several features deserve highlighting:

- **Schoolwide consistency:** Every school has or is developing a positive behavior plan, which defines the social-emotional practices to be implemented across all grades and classrooms and includes intervention protocols for students in need of additional support.
- **Integrated practice:** Professional development focuses on helping teachers to blend research-based social-emotional practices with the content they already teach.
- **Community partnership:** School teams work closely with youth-serving organizations and health and human service agencies to provide holistic supports; community partners are often included in educator professional development, and parents are receiving training.
- **Comprehensive data:** Educators use a variety of data, including on social-emotional competencies, to evaluate students' skills, identify students in need of intervention, monitor progress, and evaluate equity in discipline practices.

A comprehensive social-emotional strategy like Newton's can be challenging to implement, especially in a large district with competing demands, but the district has maintained the priority placed on social-emotional learning. Newton is already seeing promising outcomes, including reductions in absences, suspensions, and discipline and special education referrals. Student surveys show improved perceptions of connectedness and safety as well, and teachers have been enthusiastic, viewing the initiative as a way to help children fulfill their learning potential.