

November 15, 2024

Chair, Katherine Craven
Babson College
Chief Administrative Officer
231 Forest Street
Babson Park, MA 02457-0310

Vice-Chair, Matt Hills
c/o Massachusetts Department of Elementary
and Secondary Education
135 Santilli Highway
Everett, MA 02149

Dr. Ericka Fisher
c/o Massachusetts Department of Elementary
and Secondary Education
135 Santilli Highway
Everett, MA 02149

Dálida Rocha
c/o Massachusetts Department of Elementary
and Secondary Education
135 Santilli Highway
Everett, MA 02149

Dr. Martin West
c/o Massachusetts Department of Elementary
and Secondary Education
135 Santilli Highway
Everett, MA 02149

Ioannis Asikis
c/o Massachusetts Department of Elementary
and Secondary Education
135 Santilli Highway
Everett, MA 02149

Russell D. Johnston, Secretary to the Board
Acting Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
135 Santilli Highway
Everett, MA 02149

Dr. Patrick Tutwiler
Secretary of Education
Executive Office of Education
One Ashburton Place, Room 1403
Boston, MA 02108

Mary Ann Stewart
c/o Massachusetts Department of Elementary
and Secondary Education
135 Santilli Highway
Everett, MA 02149

Farzana Mohamed
c/o Massachusetts Department of Elementary
and Secondary Education
135 Santilli Highway
Everett, MA 02149

Michael Moriarty
OneHolyoke Community Development
Corporation
70 Lyman Street
Holyoke, MA 01040

Dear Members of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education,

As we prepare to navigate the shifts brought by this tumultuous election season—with a new presidential administration taking office and shifts in our educational standards on the horizon—we recognize the urgent need for a Massachusetts Commissioner of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) who can lead us through this critical time. The multifaceted challenges ahead require a commissioner who possesses the expertise, foresight, and commitment to ensure that our educational system becomes more resilient, equitable, and responsive to the needs of every student and community in our state.

Our commitment to justice, equity, and opportunity remains steadfast, and the next commissioner must embody these values. In this letter, we outline the core attributes, skills, and professional experiences that we believe are essential for this role. We also highlight the most pressing challenges likely to impact DESE and the broader K-12 community in the years ahead, along with the policy priorities that we consider foundational to progress.

In selecting the ideal candidate, we urge the Board to prioritize factors empowering the next commissioner to meet Massachusetts' diverse needs, lead positive systemic change, and foster meaningful collaboration across sectors. We look forward to supporting your efforts to identify a leader who can rise to this pivotal moment and make a lasting impact on the future of education in our state.

This section outlines some of the many attributes, skills, and professional experiences we hope to see in the next commissioner:

- **Capacity for Strategic Leadership and Impact:** The Commonwealth needs a leader who can hit the ground running, can quickly establish strategic clarity, and has a coherent plan for improving access to quality education, addressing post-pandemic challenges such as learning loss, mental health, and chronic absenteeism. This will require an understanding of how Massachusetts' education works now and a strong vision for what is possible with effective leadership and aligned resources. While relationships in the state are crucial, it is also important that DESE's next leader have a clear track record of impact in addressing core problems in our state, such as improving outcomes for systemically underserved students.
- **Collaborative and Community-Oriented Mindset:** At a time marked by division both within the state and across the country, we need a leader who has experience and a strong commitment to working with and authentically listening to diverse stakeholders—legislators, teachers, families, students, local governments, and advocacy groups—to build consensus and drive meaningful progress. Through strong partnerships with other state departments, this leader should work to establish cross-departmental structures to address critical challenges, such as expanding access to Pre-K, enhancing postsecondary planning, and increasing educator diversity. Furthermore, collaborating closely with human services agencies can help ensure our most vulnerable students and families receive the comprehensive support and resources they need.
- **Commitment to Educational Equity and Social Justice:** Massachusetts is consistently recognized as a top-ranking state in education, yet it has long struggled with significant disparities that separate students from low-income backgrounds and students of color from their peers. To address these inequities, the next Commissioner must have a proven track record of advocating for policies and practices that close achievement and opportunity gaps and result in better outcomes for the state's systemically underserved students. This commitment is crucial for driving meaningful change and closing the achievement and opportunity gaps in the state's education system.
- **Courage to Engage in Difficult Conversations:** Massachusetts is known for its progressive values and diverse communities. As the state prepares for the standards and expectations of a new presidential administration and debates over how to ensure consistent, statewide graduation requirements in the wake of Question 2, we need a commissioner who is able to navigate these complex conversations with courage and conviction. This leader must be prepared to tackle complex issues head-on, making decisions that prioritize the interests of students and families, especially those systemically underserved, and be ready to take swift, decisive action to drive results from day one.

- **Dedication to Transparency and Accountability:** The next commissioner must be a leader who embodies dedication to transparency and accountability, fostering a culture of openness and responsibility within DESE. By setting concrete annual and long-term goals that are clearly communicated to the public, the next commissioner can establish measurable benchmarks and provide regular updates on progress. Equally important, the commissioner must drive meaningful progress for systemically underserved students, ensuring they receive focused attention and support. With clearly defined goals, a commitment to producing high-quality, publicly available cross-tabulated data, and consistent, transparent evaluation, the next commissioner can build an educational system that upholds equity and accountability for all students, particularly those who continue to face barriers to success.

An equally important quality, not explicitly mentioned above, is a commitment to providing access to windows and mirrors—opportunities for students to encounter stories and experiences that reflect their own identities and lives ("mirrors") while also gaining insights into the lives of those who are different from them ("windows"). The next commissioner should not only prioritize creating these experiences for all students but also embody this principle—whether by more closely reflecting our diverse student population or by deeply understanding the unique challenges faced by communities across the state.

We have outlined below the key challenges we anticipate DESE and the broader K-12 education community will face over the next few years, and we urge the board to choose a commissioner committed to addressing these issues. As the new commissioner and their leadership team work to address these challenges, they must seize this opportunity to engage students, teachers, families, and the broader community in meaningful dialogues. Additionally, they must ensure that their decisions are well-informed by an understanding of the governance and structure of our education system, the current state of education policy and its implementation, and the needs and concerns of key stakeholders.

- 1 **Alternative Graduation Standards:** Recently, Massachusetts residents voted in favor of eliminating the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) as a graduation requirement. We remain committed to maintaining educational rigor and high standards for all students, and the removal of this requirement underscores the urgent need to develop an alternative statewide graduation standard that ensures every student is prepared for life beyond high school. To address this, the next commissioner must proceed thoughtfully and deliberately in implementing an alternative graduation framework to avoid creating a disjointed system where there is no guarantee that students across the state are receiving a comparable education. The new graduation standards must be grounded in research that demonstrates what best prepares students for success after high school and holds all students to high expectations, regardless of their background.
- 2 **Chronic Absenteeism with a Focus on Mental Health:** Like many states across the country, we are grappling with the persistent issue of chronic absenteeism, which has been exacerbated in this post-pandemic era, especially among our most vulnerable students. While recent data shows some promise, and we are encouraged by DESE's commitment to addressing this challenge—particularly through the "Power of Presence" campaign—it is clear from our conversations with parents and our on-the-ground advocacy work that effectively tackling chronic absenteeism requires addressing its connection to mental health. Many students are struggling with underlying mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and stress, which not only hinder their ability to attend school regularly but also impact their engagement and presence in the classroom. To address this, the next commissioner must prioritize investments in schools that focus on integrating mental health support services, such as counselors and social workers, to identify and assist students facing these challenges. Additionally, providing schools with guidance on implementing strategies like early intervention and creating a supportive, stigma-free, welcoming environment will be essential in improving both attendance rates and academic outcomes.

- 3 College and Career Readiness:** In Massachusetts' knowledge-driven economy, postsecondary education serves as a crucial pathway to economic security and mobility, influencing not only individual students but also entire families across generations. However, Black and Latino students, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners face significant disparities in accessing the information, guidance, tools, and resources essential to pursuing their chosen postsecondary paths. The Supreme Court's recent decision to overturn race-conscious admissions should not deter the Commonwealth's commitment to promoting representation in higher education. The next commissioner must uphold this commitment, striving to ensure equitable access to rigorous coursework and college preparation opportunities, such as AP courses and early college programs. They should prioritize bringing more college and career counseling professionals into high schools, particularly counselors who reflect the identities of the students they serve, and develop a comprehensive approach to postsecondary planning that equips all students with the information they need before graduation.
- 4 Educator Equity and Diversity:** Having a racially and culturally diverse teacher workforce is beneficial for all students — and particularly for students of color, who often thrive in classrooms led by teachers who share their racial and cultural backgrounds. Yet, in Massachusetts, people of color only make up only 10% of teachers. What's more, students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and multilingual learners are also more likely than their peers to have teachers who are inexperienced or teaching out of the field and to attend schools with high teacher turnover, further undermining their educational experience. We are encouraged by the initiatives DESE has pursued to support a more diverse and culturally responsive educator workforce. The next commissioner should continue building on these promising initiatives, partnering with both local and national experts on teacher diversity, innovation, and retention while establishing a plan to provide more robust and targeted support to districts to prioritize teacher diversity, development, and retention.
- 5 Literacy as the Foundation for All Learning:** Literacy is the cornerstone of all academic achievement, yet recent data from across the Commonwealth highlights a concerning trend: too many students, particularly those systemically underserved, are struggling with reading. In 2024, 58% of third graders in Massachusetts were not proficient in reading, which research has shown to be a key indicator of long-term academic and personal success. While this issue has garnered much-needed attention—especially through Governor Healey's Literacy Launch program, which committed \$20 million in the FY'25 state budget to accelerate the adoption of high-quality literacy materials and provide technical support, coaching and professional development for educators—as advocates with decades of professional and lived experience, we understand that policy is only as effective as its implementation. To address this crisis, the next commissioner must prioritize early and sustained engagement with school districts to identify areas in need of support and improvement, including developing a plan to address literacy challenges among older students. Moreover, the next commissioner should leverage their authority to work with members of the legislature to pass legislation to require the use of evidence-based literacy curriculum classrooms and advocate for sufficient resources to support professional development for teachers to ensure they are well-trained in the use of evidence-based approaches.

6 Student Opportunity Act (SOA) Implementation: MEEP played a crucial role in the adoption of the Student Opportunity Act (SOA) because we recognized early on the potential of this law to transform our schools and districts, providing significant funding and the opportunity to strategically plan and engage the school community to enhance learning experiences and outcomes for all students—particularly those who have been underserved in our state for far too long. However, more than four years since the passage of this landmark legislation, progress has not unfolded as we had hoped. While we understand that the pandemic shifted district priorities, preventing many from completing their plans, it is concerning that plans remain inconsistent and unreliable. Data continues to be incomplete, and it remains unclear how districts are leveraging funding to support students and fulfill one of the key components of the SOA: ensuring that families and the broader community are part of meaningful conversations about improving the quality of education. To address this issue, the next commissioner must prioritize providing districts with the support they need to develop effective improvement plans. This includes setting clear targets that encourage the elimination of disparities. Additionally, a strong plan review process should be established to evaluate the overall quality of district plans, offering constructive feedback and ensuring alignment with desired outcomes. Furthermore, the commissioner must hold districts accountable for demonstrating tangible progress and sustaining change. By implementing these strategies, we can fully realize the promises of the SOA and ensure that resources are effectively allocated to support the students who need them the most.

In conclusion, we acknowledge the vital role that the next Commissioner of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education will have in shaping the future of our state's K-12 education system. This is a critical moment for Massachusetts to reaffirm its commitment to providing an equitable, high-quality education for all students while addressing the challenges and seizing the opportunities ahead. We are confident that with the right commissioner—one who embodies the values of equity, collaboration, and forward-thinking—Massachusetts can truly become a state that others look up to, leading the nation in educational excellence and providing opportunities for every student.

We look forward to supporting this process and working together to ensure the best possible outcome for the future of education in Massachusetts. Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

