



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

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.