Condition of Education 2021: Q&A Resource Guide

On January 28, 2021, the Rennie Center held its annual Condition of Education in the Commonwealth release event. This virtual conversation on the future of our education system featured a panel discussion with all three state education commissioners—Early Education and Care Commissioner Samantha Aigner-Treworgy, Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Jeffrey C. Riley, and Higher Education Commissioner Carlos Santiago—moderated by Meghan Irons of the Boston Globe. Massachusetts Secretary of Education James Peyser also provided remarks on the state of learning in this unprecedented time. The following document provides resources and information on questions from the audience Q&A. Note that these resources are not meant to serve as comprehensive answers, but instead to point to additional sources that can help shed light on the questions asked.

What data and resources are available on access to technology, especially in Western MA?
Western Massachusetts
- The Boston Globe reports on how *Spotty broadband challenges Western Mass. schools*: "...in a time of pandemic, the lack of reliable high-speed broadband access in [small western Massachusetts towns] has become a serious challenge, especially for families with school-age children forced to fall back on remote learning." (Boston Globe, *Spotty broadband challenges Western Mass. schools*)
- "Before schools closed, many people in communities that don't have residential broadband services got work done in local libraries or coffee shops. But now that's not an option. And many school and community leaders worry that the lack of reliable internet access could also lead to learning inequities." (WBUR, *When Your Remote Classroom is Your Car: How Some Rural Students Without Broadband Are Connecting*)
- The interactive tool from BroadbandNow on Internet Access in Massachusetts offers a city-by-city look at broadband coverage, speed, and number of providers.

Across the State
- In Boston, "Despite stepped-up efforts to improve technology and Internet access for the city's 51,000 students, some are still slipping through the cracks, mired in connectivity and technology woes that often prevent low-income, immigrant, Black, and Hispanic students from learning." (Boston Globe, *Digital divide remains wide for some*)
- "Latinx students make up 25 percent of the nation's public school students and in cities like Boston and Worcester, they make up over 40 percent of the student population... [A survey of] 288 Spanish speaking families, 60 multisector leaders, and 60 educators...found that 46 percent of parents found their child was experiencing learning loss as a result of the pandemic, 21 percent said their households lacked access to devices and connectivity, and 74 percent were worried about income or food insecurity as a result of the pandemic." (WWLP, *Digital gaps underscore need: "Tech para todos"*)
- "One of every five households in Essex County, Mass., does not have a computer or access to an Internet connection, a digital divide that has been unmasked by the

pandemic, according to a new report."(Government Technology, *Report Examines Digital Divide in Massachusetts County*)

- Read more about Access to Technology in Gateway Cities in the Rennie Center's Data Dashboard and in MassINC's article, *Gateway Cities at the center of the digital divide in Massachusetts*.

Federal and State Resources

- "The Commonwealth's Last Mile program has invested over $55 million in direct grants to close broadband access gaps, bringing the total to 29 of 53 communities with completed projects. That includes six communities which have delivered broadband access to at least 96 percent of residences, the target of the Commonwealth grant program, but which will finish connecting additional customers in early 2021. The 29 completed projects have delivered broadband connections to an estimated 25,000 citizens since 2016." (Massachusetts Broadband Institute, *Expanding Wireless Broadband Hubs in Unserved Communities*)
- Federal programs such as Lifeline—which provides free or low-cost phone or internet service to low-income households through a monthly service discount of up to $9.25—have supported students and families with the cost of technology. However, rural areas in western MA still fall behind other regions in terms of reliable Internet access. (Read more about Lifeline at mass.gov.)

What did Lawrence Public Schools do to increase teacher diversity?

- "Lawrence is trying to provide that "missing element" for students by training residents to be paraprofessionals. In the process, the city has tripled its number of Latinx educators. 'These paras mirror what the kids look like. It has a positive impact on students because that para looks like them. That para lives in the community. That para could possibly be their neighbor' said Marianela De La Cruz with the Lawrence Working Families Initiative. The Lawrence program also helps paraprofessionals work toward a 4-year teaching degree." (Boston 25 News, *Equity in Education: Teacher Diversity*)
  - Read more about the Lawrence Working Families Initiative at their website and at Lawrence Community Works.

What are critical elements of social, emotional, and behavioral supports in the state?

- **A move towards Transformative SEL:** "If educators and leaders implement SEL without regard to students' cultural, racial/ethnic, linguistic, or economic backgrounds, some students may feel more alienated in their classrooms. To ameliorate this concern, educators can rethink and define SEL as transformative SEL, a process whereby students and teachers build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences; learn to critically examine root causes of inequity; and develop collaborative solutions to community and social problems." (CASEL, Toward Transformative Social and Emotional Learning: Using an Equity Lens)

- ○ The Rennie Center convenes the [Excellence through Social-Emotional Learning (exSEL) Network](#) alongside Transforming Education to gain critical insight on how to support the development of social-emotional skills through changes in policy and practice at the district, school, and classroom levels. In the 20-21 school year, the network adopted a Transformative SEL lens. Transformative SEL approaches the work through an explicit racial equity lens, elevating three key pillars: identity, agency, and sense of belonging.
  - ○ Approaches like that of [City Connects](#), that takes into account how teachers, school staff, families, and community partners can come together to support every student, can drive schools towards a more holistic and transformative approach to supporting students' needs.
  - ○ The MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education offers a [Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) blueprint](#) for ensuring that all students receive a high quality educational experience that includes incorporating social-emotional and behavioral supports alongside equitable access to opportunities.

- **School Counselors:** "School counselors can play a critical role in making sure that students receive opportunities to have safe, enriching experiences in and out of school, and in helping to prepare students for postsecondary success. Our school counselors fact sheet paints a clear picture: In too many states, students — particularly students of color and students from low-income families — do not have enough access to school counselors. But what about Massachusetts specifically? Generally, there are enough school counselors, but they are allocated inequitably." (The Education Trust, *School Counselors Matter in Massachusetts*)
  - ○ Learn more about the importance of school counselors at The Massachusetts School Counselors Association's [website](#).
  - ○ The 2019 Student Opportunity Act included increased funding for mental health and guidance counselors. Read more about the law at [Salem News](#) or read the full text of the law at the Massachusetts Legislature's [website](#).

- **Classroom Teachers:** "Like their peers in the nation, large majorities of Massachusetts teachers recognize the importance of SEL and believe it can have an effect on other domains of student development...The report discusses the need for future research on how the Massachusetts state policy context could affect the views Massachusetts teachers on SEL." (RAND Corporation, *Teacher Perspectives on Social and Emotional Learning in Massachusetts*)
  - ○ The Rennie Center has released reports on related topics including: *A Supportive School for Every Student: How MA Districts are Bringing Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Health Supports to Schools and Classrooms*, 2016 Condition of Education — *Toward a More Comprehensive Vision of Student Learning*, and *Social and Emotional Learning: Opportunities for Massachusetts, Lessons for the Nation*

- **Early Education and Care:** "The needs of families as the COVID-19 pandemic has continued have become more complex, and the programs who support them are faced with deeper and more intersecting challenges than ever before. Now more than ever, the need for increased types of support, like trauma informed practices among staff and educators, as well as levels of support, like wraparound services and crisis supports, is clear." (pg. 24, Department of Early Education and Care's Strategic Action Plan)
- **Out of School Time:** "To many OST leaders, SEL renews the field's long-standing commitment to youth development and represents an opportunity to bring a more intentional, research-based approach to helping young people thrive. Yet it can be difficult to know where to start when implementing SEL, and how the myriad tools and initiatives can fit together cohesively to support youth social-emotional development." (Committee for Children, First Steps to Intentional SEL in Out-of-School Time)

How is the entire pipeline addressing learning loss due to the pandemic?
- **What is the "COVID slide"?** "Looking to other examples of widespread learning loss, educators have begun to refer to COVID-related learning loss as the "COVID slide." The magnitude of the COVID slide will not be known for some time, but researchers have begun to predict its impact."(Rennie Center, *Back-to-School Blueprint: Accessing Grade-Level Content*)

Early Education
- The Office of the Child Advocate and UMass medical have teamed up to put together a series of tip sheets, videos, and other resources for early childhood educators. (Read more at mass.gov)

K-12 Education
- A J-PAL North America publication highlights the sizable impact tutoring programs can have on student learning. (J-PAL North America, *How tutoring programs can combat the "Covid-19 slide"*)
- A McKinsey and Company study on COVID-19 and learning loss recommends Acceleration Academics and high-intensity tutoring as evidence-based strategies that can expose students to grade-level learning. (McKinsey and Company, *COVID-19 and learning loss—disparities grow and students need help*)
- MCAS testing is set to return in late spring/early summer in order to diagnose the learning loss that has happened across the Commonwealth. As of March 5th, 2021, "schools can now administer MCAS testing to grades 3-5 between May 10 and June 11. Dates for upper grades are still being formalized." (Boston Globe, Massachusetts school officials to postpone spring MCAS testing)

Higher Education
- The National Conference of State Legislatures has detailed pending legislation, including some Massachusetts bills, that address the impact of the pandemic on students' learning environments. Boston Magazine held a conversation between five Boston college and university leaders on the future of higher education.

What is the current state of racial segregation in MA schools, and how can it be addressed?
- "Even as Massachusetts grows more diverse, a growing number of its public schools are becoming 'intensely segregated.' In a new report, education researchers argue that as a result, thousands of students miss out on the many benefits of learning in a diverse community." (WBUR, *Even As Diversity Grows, Mass. Schools Remain Segregated*)

What lessons were learned from federal funding of Early Education and Care?
- "In FY2020, investment in EEC constituted nearly $680 million in federal and state funding. This funding was utilized to support providers who opened emergency childcare and in support of programs that had to close and/or reduce services due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All the funding used for those purposes from March 10, 2020 through August 31, 2020 totaled $160M." (pg. 4, Department of Early Education and Care's Strategic Action Plan)
- "In June 2020, the federal CARES Act included additional funds to Massachusetts through the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG). The Legislature appropriated those funds to support providers working with subsidized families and those that operated during the emergency child care period...their allocation model is one that can be replicated across all provider types (regardless of subsidy agreement) and at scale, as needed and with available funds, in order to sustain key components of the child care infrastructure over the coming year." (pg. 12, Department of Early Education and Care's Strategic Action Plan)

What is the MASSGrant Plus program?
- "The MASSGrant and MASSGrant Plus programs are funded by the state Legislature and provide need-based financial assistance to undergraduate students who reside in Massachusetts. Students must be enrolled in and pursuing a program of higher education in any approved public or independent college, university, school of nursing or any other approved institution." (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, Office of Student Financial Assistance)
- "Under the MASSGrant Plus program, both full-time and part-time students attending Massachusetts public community colleges may be eligible for additional funding to help with the cost of tuition and fees." (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, Office of Student Financial Assistance)