

A YEAR IN REVIEW

FY 2026

RENNIE CENTER FOR EDUCATION RESEARCH & POLICY

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DEAR FRIENDS,

Massachusetts has long been recognized as a national leader in education. That legacy reflects decades of commitment by educators, families, policymakers, and communities working together to create opportunities for young people. But leadership is not something we preserve. It is something we continually earn.

The world our students are preparing to enter is changing faster than at any point in recent memory. Artificial intelligence, new technologies, and shifting workforce demands are reshaping what young people need to know and be able to do. At the same time, schools are responding to increasingly complex needs while working to ensure every student has the opportunity to learn and thrive. Meeting these challenges will require more than improving the schools we have today. It will require an education system that is willing to evolve alongside the students it serves.

That belief shapes every aspect of the Rennie Center's work.

At first glance, our work can appear remarkably diverse. In the pages that follow, you'll read about expanding early childhood education, strengthening literacy instruction, improving student mental health, supporting alternative pathways to success, and informing public policy.

These are not separate initiatives. They are connected by a common strategy.

We believe lasting improvement happens when research, practice, and policy continuously inform one another. Research helps identify promising opportunities. Partnerships with schools and communities help them develop new approaches and learn what works in real-world settings. The lessons from those partnerships then inform policies that remove barriers, strengthen systems, and create the conditions for successful ideas to spread. Every project we undertake is intended not only to solve an immediate challenge, but also to generate knowledge that can improve education across Massachusetts.

The results of that approach can be seen throughout this report.

This year, we helped advance a statewide conversation about the future of education through our Condition of Education initiative, translating lessons from research and practice into ideas



that can improve schools across the Commonwealth. We expanded opportunities for young people by advancing statewide efforts in literacy, student mental health, early childhood education, and alternative pathways to success. We accelerated educational innovation by partnering with schools and districts to develop practical solutions to persistent challenges, from creating a new framework for measuring student progress in alternative education settings to helping districts rethink instructional models and comprehensive systems of support. Finally, we strengthened the Rennie Center itself by diversifying our partnerships, expanding our statewide reach, and maintaining the financial stability needed to sustain this work for years to come.

Taken together, these efforts reflect the kind of educational improvement we believe Massachusetts needs. Lasting progress is built through continuous learning, strong partnerships, and a willingness to rethink how we support young people. Our state has the talent and capacity to once again define what excellent public education looks like for the nation. Our role is to help make that vision a reality by ensuring the lessons learned in one school or community benefit young people across the Commonwealth.

Thank you for your partnership and your commitment to improving public education.

Sincerely,

Chad d'Entremont
Executive Director

Antoniya Marinova
Chair of the Board

OUR MISSION

The mission of the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice.

Every young person deserves an education that prepares them to thrive in school and in life. Achieving that vision requires more than identifying opportunities for improvement. It requires helping schools and communities turn research and innovation into meaningful, lasting progress. The Rennie Center serves as a catalyst for systemic change by partnering with education leaders and practitioners to develop new approaches, learn from their implementation, and translate those lessons into policies and practices that strengthen public education across Massachusetts.

OUR THEORY OF ACTION

Sustainable educational improvement depends on research, practice, and policy working in concert. Our approach integrates these three elements into a continuous cycle of learning that identifies new opportunities, turns ideas into action, and informs the policies needed to expand opportunities for young people across the Commonwealth.

RESEARCH | *Discover what is possible*

We study promising practices from early education and care through college and career to better understand what works, why it works, and how successful approaches can be adapted to serve more young people. Grounded in the experiences of educators, students, families, and communities, our research is designed to inform action—not simply add to knowledge.

PRACTICE | *Turn ideas into action*

We partner with schools, districts, and communities to design, implement, and evaluate new approaches to persistent challenges. These partnerships strengthen local capacity while generating practical lessons that help accelerate improvement across the Commonwealth and beyond.

POLICY | *Spread what works*

We translate lessons from our research and practice partnerships into recommendations for strengthening public education. Whether advising state leaders, informing public conversations, or supporting legislative efforts, we work to ensure policy change is ambitious, grounded in evidence, and shaped by the on-the-ground experiences of schools and communities.

Lasting change requires more than good ideas. It requires rigorous research, meaningful partnerships, and policies that enable innovation to flourish. By bringing these elements together, the Rennie Center helps forge a path toward a stronger education system that expands opportunity for every young person.

FY2026 FOCUS AREAS



Early Childhood

High-quality early learning lays the foundation for lifelong success, yet too many children still lack access to the opportunities and supports they need. This year, we launched a new research and policy exchange to help state and local leaders make informed decisions grounded in the latest evidence. We also prepared the next generation of early childhood leaders through our policy fellowship and partnered with communities to evaluate local needs and plan for expanded access to high-quality early education and care.



Whole-Child Support

Young people cannot thrive academically if their mental and emotional needs go unmet. As schools respond to increasingly complex student needs, they need systems that support the whole child. This year, we helped hundreds of schools and districts strengthen student support by expanding access to mental health screening, building comprehensive systems of care, and equipping educators to identify and respond to students' needs before they become barriers to learning.



Academic Learning

Every young person deserves rigorous, engaging learning experiences that support success in school and prepare them for the opportunities ahead. As Massachusetts works to strengthen student achievement, schools must ensure that rigorous instruction is paired with meaningful learning experiences that keep students engaged and motivated. This year, we helped educators expand access to high-quality instructional materials, strengthen evidence-based literacy instruction, and design more hands-on, relevant learning experiences that deepen student engagement and support success in school.



Career Pathways

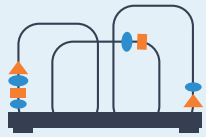
As the demands of postsecondary education and the workforce continue to evolve, schools and colleges must create more flexible, connected opportunities that help students pursue their goals. This year, we advanced research to strengthen connections between postsecondary learning and career-connected experiences, develop new approaches to measuring student success for learners following nontraditional pathways, and help higher education institutions build more inclusive systems of support.



Rethinking Education

Preparing every young person for a rapidly changing world will require more than improving the schools we have today. It will require reimagining what learning looks like, how schools are organized, and how success is measured.

This year, we advanced that conversation through our Condition of Education initiative, annual Action Guide, and ongoing engagement with state and local leaders. Drawing on what we learned alongside thousands of educators and hundreds of schools, districts, and community partners, we elevated innovations and emerging ideas from across the Commonwealth. Together, these lessons are helping advance an important conversation about the future of education in Massachusetts and the changes needed to ensure every young person has the opportunity to thrive.



Early Childhood

HIGHLIGHTS FROM FY26

Connecting Research and Policy through a New Partnership

Building a stronger early childhood system requires more than good intentions. It requires timely, trusted evidence to inform the decisions that shape programs, policies, and investments. This spring, we launched the [Massachusetts Early Childhood Exchange \(ECX\)](#), creating a new statewide resource to ensure early childhood policy decisions are informed by timely, high-quality evidence. This first-of-its-kind partnership brings together the Rennie Center, Strategies for Children, and the Massachusetts Early Childhood Policy Research Collaborative to establish ECX as a trusted hub where policymakers can access the evidence, expertise, and insights needed to strengthen outcomes for young children and families.

Expanding Access to High-Quality Preschool in Worcester

For the past year, we worked with Worcester's preschool partnership—a group that includes Worcester Public Schools, community-based preschool providers, and an early childhood-focused organization—to help expand access to high-quality preschool and related special education services across the city. Our team conducted a community-wide needs assessment, using family and provider surveys and stakeholder interviews to better understand the preschool landscape in Worcester, and led the partnership in mapping action steps to carry out their strategic priorities.

Sharing Research on Early Childhood Policy

Our research identified promising strategies for expanding inclusive preschool opportunities through collective service teams that support multiple early education programs. We shared these findings at the Massachusetts Early Childhood Policy Research Summit, highlighting how regional teams of special education professionals—including Board Certified Behavior Analysts, inclusion coaches, and speech, occupational, and physical therapists—can strengthen support for young children across communities.

SPOTLIGHT

Building Policy Skills for Early Childhood Leaders

This year we launched the inaugural [Fellowship for Impact in Early Childhood Policy \(FFI\)](#) with a clear mission: to prepare early childhood leaders to navigate policy, advocate for change, and shape the systems that support young children and families.

Throughout the year, fellows deepened their understanding of early childhood policy through monthly learning sessions and immersive site visits, a day at the Massachusetts State House, and a multi-day Federal Policy Retreat in Washington, D.C. They also completed original policy projects, culminating in presentations to their peers and the fellowship's advisory committee, that turned research and advocacy into actionable policy proposals and solutions.

In its first year, the fellowship exceeded expectations. We planned to welcome 15 fellows but expanded the inaugural cohort to 20 in response to strong demand and an exceptional applicant pool. Building on that success, we will expand to 25 fellows next year.

FFI also had a tangible impact on fellows. In end-of-year self-assessments, 100% of the cohort reported feeling like they could confidently communicate their perspective in policy conversations, every fellow said they now feel very comfortable developing a policy proposal and presenting it to key stakeholders, and they all agreed that they are now confident in leading systems-level change.



Whole-Child Support

HIGHLIGHTS FROM FY26

Building Skills for School Mental Health Leaders

Strong school mental health systems depend on strong leaders. For the past five years, we have been working with Massachusetts Partnerships for Youth and the Massachusetts School Mental Health Consortium to prepare district and school staff to build comprehensive systems of support. About 100 practitioners from across Massachusetts join the School Mental Health Leadership Institute each year. We offer professional development on the essential elements of a school mental health system—like establishing a student support team and implementing tiered interventions—and provide opportunities for practitioners to gain knowledge from one another through a unique learning cohort.

Sharing Research on Youth Sports

Participation in youth sports can improve physical health, strengthen social connections, and promote positive youth development, yet access remains uneven for many young people. This year, we examined six exemplary sports programs in Massachusetts, highlighting innovative approaches to expanding middle school sports, increasing inclusive recreation opportunities for children with disabilities, and promoting positive youth development through community-based programs. These case studies were part of a larger report by the Aspen Institute that was shared at the Project Play Summit—an annual nationwide convening that was held in Boston in May.

Improving Attendance for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Students experiencing homelessness have some of the highest rates of chronic absenteeism, due to obstacles that make consistent school attendance particularly challenging. This year, we partnered with Boston Public Schools and United Way of Massachusetts Bay to help six Boston Community Hub Schools design and test new strategies to improve attendance for students experiencing homelessness. Through a series of design sprints and communities of practice, school teams—including homelessness liaisons and Hub School coordinators—developed, refined, and shared promising approaches to supporting students and families. The lessons from this work point toward a more relationship-centered and responsive approach that recognizes the realities students and families face.

SPOTLIGHT

Universal Mental Health Screening Learning Lab

Too many young people struggle with mental health challenges that go unidentified until they become crises. Since 2021, our [Thriving Minds](#) initiative has been helping schools address the youth mental health crisis by training and coaching school staff to build comprehensive systems of student support that identify students earlier and connect them with the care they need. Thriving Minds—a partnership between the Rennie Center, the Massachusetts School Mental Health Consortium, and bryt—has worked with hundreds of educators from more than 200 Massachusetts school districts as well as districts in Maine and Rhode Island.

This year, our Thriving Minds team has partnered with the National Center for School Mental Health to lay the foundation for a new nationwide learning opportunity around universal mental health screening. We know that early identification of mental health concerns increases preventative measures and reduces students' wait times for care. Universal mental health screening alerts schools and districts to emerging concerns proactively by screening every student, not just those identified as being at risk.

Starting this fall, the [Universal Mental Health Screening Learning Lab](#) will bring together student support staff from across the nation for virtual learning sessions designed to help districts implement and expand mental health screening. More than 200 practitioners from more than 20 states have already expressed interest in joining the Learning Lab!



Academic Learning

HIGHLIGHTS FROM FY26

Sharing Lessons on Driving Student Engagement

Over the past three years, our Student Changemakers program has shown that students become more engaged when learning is connected to issues they care about. Grounded in Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), Changemakers empowers middle and high school students to investigate real issues in their schools and communities by designing and presenting actionable solutions. To share the lessons we've learned from this program, we released a brief on [How Interest-Driven Learning Drives Student Engagement](#), highlighting how students turned learning into action by launching community initiatives, presenting findings to policymakers, and shaping decisions in their schools. The brief also shares key lessons for educators and leaders looking to increase engagement by connecting learning to real-world issues, building transferable inquiry skills, and creating authentic audiences for student work.

Identifying High-Quality Instructional Materials

For the past eight years, we've been partnering with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education on a range of curriculum review initiatives designed to help educators identify high-quality instructional materials. Through [Curriculum Ratings by Teachers](#) (CURATE), panels of Massachusetts educators review and rate the standards alignment and classroom application of core instructional materials. Since 2018, CURATE panels have completed more than 100 curriculum reviews across mathematics, ELA/literacy, science and technology/engineering, digital literacy and computer science, and history and social science. We've also partnered with DESE to conduct baseline reviews of K-12 history and social science, comprehensive health and physical education, and arts curricula. All told, this work helps schools make informed curriculum decisions that strengthen teaching and improve learning opportunities for students across the Commonwealth.

SPOTLIGHT

Supporting Educators to Expand Early Literacy

Research shows that 95% of students can become proficient readers with the right instruction, yet only 42% of Massachusetts third graders met ELA expectations in 2025.

Early literacy in Massachusetts demands urgent attention, and the [Literacy Launch Institutes](#) play a key role in doing just that. A cornerstone of the Healey-Driscoll administration's statewide effort to strengthen early literacy, the Literacy Launch Institutes provide educators with free, high-quality professional learning on evidence-based literacy instruction.

Each Institute brings together up to 300 educators for four days of differentiated learning. The Rennie Center partners with HILL for Literacy and RMC to design and implement the Institutes while providing ongoing coaching and communities of practice to help educators translate learning into classroom practice.

This year, we hosted six institutes that served more than 1,000 educators. Three additional institutes are planned this summer and are expected to bring total participation to more than 1,800 educators statewide. Literacy Launch intends to host six institutes each year over the course of five years in hopes of reaching as many educators across Massachusetts as possible.



Career Pathways

HIGHLIGHTS FROM FY26

Studying Early College Programs

Early college programs can help students see stronger connections between high school, higher education, and future careers. This year, we launched a project with the Massachusetts Alliance for Early College to document promising practices from five career-connected early college programs across the Commonwealth. The case studies will focus on effective program components, challenges that programs have overcome, and key considerations for more closely linking college and career preparation. This project will contribute to ongoing efforts to make career exploration more accessible for Massachusetts students.

Defining Quality in Financial Literacy Curricular Materials

With the new Massachusetts graduation requirements likely to include financial literacy, our team identified the need for the Commonwealth to invest in a robust process of reviewing financial literacy curricula. This spring, we wrote a [blog post](#) highlighting the need for Massachusetts to be prepared to support and guide schools in this subject area. This led to a partnership between the Rennie Center and DESE to develop a new curriculum review tool and conduct a standards-aligned review of personal financial literacy curricula.

Strategic Planning for Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School

Students following nontraditional educational pathways deserve the same opportunities for success after graduation as their peers. Since January, our team has been partnering with Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School (LMACS) to facilitate the development of a comprehensive five-year strategic plan as well as a roadmap for implementation. LMACS is a small public charter school designed to serve students ages 16-21 who are undercredited or at significant risk of dropping out of traditional high school settings. The school has cultivated a strong culture of care, belonging, and individualized support that is highly valued by students, families, and staff alike. Recognizing the importance of preserving and strengthening this culture, our team designed a strategic planning and consultation process focused on elevating community voice, allowing us to build a clear roadmap for the school's future that will help LMACS prepare even more students for success after graduation.

SPOTLIGHT

Guidebook on Advancing Integrated Student Support Systems in Higher Education

At a time when higher education completion rates are stagnating and mounting pressures make it increasingly difficult for students to achieve a certificate or degree, it is critical for stakeholders from all corners of the higher education sector to prioritize efforts to strengthen student support.

A pivotal strategy to improve completion is to assist institutions in building integrated student support (ISS) systems—comprehensive networks of support, designed to deliver timely and personalized assistance as students navigate academic and non-academic needs. ISS ensures each student receives the right support at the right time to succeed, whether by addressing pressing challenges or creating new opportunities for advancement.

We recently released *Advancing Integrated Student Support Systems in Higher Education: A Guidebook for Policymakers*, which outlines the key features of integrated student support systems, the challenges institutions face in achieving those key features, and the role of policy in helping to put them in place across a wide and varied higher education sector. By outlining common policy building blocks that strengthen ISS systems and strategies for assembling them, the report serves as a guidebook for policymakers (and others) seeking to kickstart a new wave of growth in college completion rates.



Rethinking Education

HIGHLIGHTS FROM FY26

Positioning Schools as Leaders in Innovation

Meaningful improvement rarely happens through a single reform. It requires schools to continuously test new ideas, learn from experience, and refine what works. To support that work, schools need dedicated research and development structures that provide the time and resources to innovate and continuously improve. Over the past several years, we've partnered with districts across Massachusetts to help schools become leaders in educational innovation and decision-making, not just implementers of change. This year, we expanded our R&D model to offer two ways for schools and districts to engage in this work. [R&D Lab Sites](#) participate in multi-year partnerships to design, test, and refine innovative approaches while serving as demonstration sites for the Commonwealth. Their lessons and tools are then shared through our [R&D Learning Cohorts](#), enabling other schools to address persistent challenges by adapting proven approaches rather than starting from scratch.

Developing a New Framework for Measuring Student Success

Traditional accountability systems often fail to capture the progress students make in alternative education settings. This year, we partnered with Boston Adult Technical Academy, one of the Rennie Center's R&D Lab Sites, to develop a comprehensive school performance rubric that better reflects the goals of alternative education and the diverse pathways students take toward success. Grounded in evidence-based practices and emerging guiding principles for alternative education, the rubric measures student learning, college and career readiness, school climate, and the practices that support sustained achievement. By creating a more holistic approach to school performance, this work offers a promising model for strengthening accountability and continuous improvement in alternative education across the Commonwealth.

Rethinking the Educational Model in Dedham Public Schools

This year, our team is partnering with Dedham Public Schools to rethink their educational model by examining how instructional models, grade configurations, program delivery, and physical learning environments work together. To support this community-driven process and reimagine how teaching and learning happen across the district, we've held focus groups with school staff, students, and parents, hosted multiple listening sessions for all community members, reviewed national and local data, and worked closely with an architecture firm to align effective learning practices with plans for new physical spaces.

SPOTLIGHT

Charting the Path for a New Vision of Learning in Massachusetts

Our education system stands at an inflection point. With the economy being reshaped by artificial intelligence, automation, and global interconnection, students will need to develop durable skills—like critical thinking, problem solving, and ethical reasoning—that allow them to keep learning and navigate an increasingly complex world throughout their lives. The challenge ahead is not to replace core academic expectations, but to refocus them—ensuring that every student masters essential skills in literacy and numeracy while also developing the adaptability and self-direction needed to thrive in an unpredictable world. Massachusetts has an opportunity to once again lead the nation by aligning education with the evolving needs of today's students. That begins with building a shared vision for the future of education.

This year's [Condition of Education Week](#) served as a statewide forum for advancing that conversation. We released updates to our [Data Dashboard](#) highlighting where Massachusetts is making progress and where new approaches are needed, [convened](#) all three education commissioners and the Secretary of Education to discuss the future of learning, and published our [Action Guide](#) outlining three key policy shifts: prioritizing the essential knowledge students need to access complex content, moving from grade-level expectations to mastery-based progressions, and emphasizing the durable skills needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

THANK YOU

Our work to improve public education in Massachusetts and beyond would not be possible without the generous contributions of our funders and partners. We are truly grateful for the support of the following organizations as well as all those who follow and engage with our work.

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Joyce Foundation
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Massachusetts School Mental Health Consortium
RMC Research Corporation
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Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School
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Maryland State Department of Education
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Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education
Massachusetts Partnerships for Youth
Media Literacy Now
Medway Public Schools
Montgomery County Intermediate Unit Project AWARE
North Middlesex Regional School District
Northshore Education Consortium
Portsmouth School Department
Randolph Public Schools
Regional School Unit 73
United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley
Worcester Public Schools



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