



Safe and Supportive Schools Commission – Eighth Annual Report

This report provides updates and recommendations related to safe and supportive schools. The report is submitted pursuant to Chapter 284 of the Acts of 2014, An Act Relative to the Reduction of Gun Violence. This Act was signed into law by the Governor on August 13, 2014 (House Bill 4376). Provisions within this Act relating to safe and supportive schools are codified as Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 69, Section 1P (G.L. c. 69, § 1P).

April 2023

This report was prepared with assistance from the staff at





This document was prepared by the
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Jeffrey C. Riley
Commissioner

Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Members

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Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
75 Pleasant Street, Malden, MA 02148-4906
Phone 781-338-3000 TTY: N.E.T. Relay 800-439-2370
www.doe.mass.edu



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Introduction

The Safe and Supportive Schools Commission (Commission) respectfully submits this Report to the Governor and Legislature: *Safe and Supportive Schools Commission Eighth Annual Report*. This report is part of the [Commission's responsibilities](#), pursuant to Chapter 284 of the Acts of 2014, [An Act Relative to the Reduction of Gun Violence](#), which was signed into law by the Governor on August 13, 2014. Provisions within this Act relating to safe and supportive schools are codified as Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 69, section 1P (G.L. c. 69, § 1P), the [Safe and Supportive Schools Framework](#) law.

“...The commission shall prepare and submit an annual progress report concerning the commission’s activities with appropriate recommendations, together with drafts of legislation necessary to carry out such recommendations, if any, not later than December 31. The commission shall submit such annual report to the governor and the clerks of the senate and the house of representatives, who shall forward the same to the chairs of the joint committee on education, the chairs of the joint committee on mental health and substance abuse, the joint committee on children, families and persons with disabilities, and the house and senate committees on ways and means...”¹

This report includes recommendations to the Legislature (*Recommendations* section) informed by Commission discussions during 2022 and prior years, as well as an overview of Commission activities during 2022 (*Commission Activities Undertaken in 2022* section), and highlights from Department Activities in 2022 related to the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework law and associated state funded grant program (*Department Activities* section).

We have seen first-hand the impact that the pandemic has had on the mental health and well-being of students and adults in schools (and educational collaboratives) across the Commonwealth.² Inequities associated with race/ethnicity, income level, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other marginalized identities and backgrounds have resulted in many students further facing food insecurities, homelessness, substance abuse, bullying, harassment, suicidal ideation, grief, and other traumatic experiences. Now more than ever, it is essential for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department/DESE), schools, families, and partners to work together to create and strengthen safe and supportive learning environments that keep the health and wellbeing of students, staff, and families front and center.

Furthermore, safe and supportive school environments are essential in order to reach high academic standards and other important educational reform goals including diminishing the use of suspension and expulsion as an approach to discipline; bullying prevention and intervention; preventing substance use and misuse and providing support for addiction recovery; closing proficiency and opportunity gaps; and halting the school to prison pipeline. These environments raise the achievement of all students with a community of adults that challenge and support students, valuing and empowering each student to experience a sense of competency and agency in their individual

¹ The full legislative charge and links to the full text of the statute can be found in Appendix B of this report.

² NOTE: When schools and districts are referenced to in this report, generally this includes charter schools, regional schools, vocational technical schools, educational collaboratives, and virtual schools.

and collective learning. These environments also help students to self-regulate their emotions and behaviors, support them to form positive relationships with adults and peers, and support their health and wellbeing. In order to address proficiency gaps, safe and supportive environments act in an inclusive, equitable, and culturally sustaining way to provide high quality opportunities and experiences for all students.

According to the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, **a positive school climate is the product of a school’s attention to fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community no matter the setting—from Pre-Kindergarten/Elementary School to higher education.** Moreover, a positive school climate is critically related to school success. For example, it can improve attendance, achievement, and retention and even rates of graduation, according to research.³ Additionally, in passing the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework Law and committing resources to support the statute, the Massachusetts Legislature recognized that addressing these needs, together with actions to make schools physically safe, are integral to helping prevent acts of violence that have devastated other school communities.⁴

Massachusetts G.L. c. 69, § 1P, in subsection (a), defines safe and supportive schools as *schools that foster safe, positive, healthy, and inclusive whole-school learning environments.*⁵ These environments recognize the connections between academic success and students feeling safe enough to make friends, form strong relationships with adults, and take risks in the classroom (e.g., speaking up) in order to succeed. Safe and supportive schools help students (and adults) to strengthen their ability to regulate their emotions, behaviors, and attention in ways that intertwine with effective teaching and learning. Such schools also develop data-informed multi-tiered systems of support (universal, supplemental, and intensive) that help promote wellness and engagement and help prevent and address physical, mental health, and disability-related challenges that may interfere with learning.

Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Self-Reflection Tool: First developed and piloted during the 2008-2011 Behavioral Health and Public Schools Task Force, the most recently updated version of the framework and tool⁶ was completed in 2021. The Department’s Safe and Supportive Schools grantees (see *Department Activities* section for more details) are required to use the tool with participating schools, and the online resources are available for use voluntarily by all school

³ National Center of Safe Supportive Learning Environments: <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-climate-improvement>

⁴ At the time of this law’s passage, many in the state were particularly concerned about ways to avoid the kind of violence that had occurred at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. In addition, Commonwealth students have suffered from other kinds of violence, such as bullying, suicides, and substance abuse. Many educators and policy makers felt that creating safe and supportive school cultures were needed to address safety, social, emotional, and academic needs holistically. These concerns and beliefs are still relevant today, across and beyond the Commonwealth.

⁵ G.L. Chapter 69, Section 1Pa defines safe and supportive schools as “schools that foster a safe, positive, healthy and inclusive whole-school learning environment that: (i) enables students to develop positive relationships with adults and peers, regulate their emotions and behavior, achieve academic and non-academic success in school and maintain physical and psychological health and well-being; and (ii) integrates services and aligns initiatives that promote students’ behavioral health, including social and emotional learning, bullying prevention, trauma sensitivity, dropout prevention, truancy reduction, children’s mental health, foster care and homeless youth education, inclusion of students with disabilities, positive behavioral approaches that reduce suspensions and expulsions and other similar initiatives.”

⁶ The online Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Tool are available through <https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/safety/> and through <http://www.sassma.org/>.

districts. The goal of the framework is to provide a structure and a guiding resource to help each school develop school-wide action plans (either through, or aligned with, their school improvement plans), that help efficiently align and integrate initiatives in a way that fits with the school's (and district's) own culture and locally identified priorities. The framework's topic areas, known as implementation levers, address the following areas of school operations: *leadership and culture; family and community engagement; professional learning opportunities; access to resources and services; teaching and learning that fosters safe and supportive environments; and policies and procedures.*

Aligned with the framework, the tool is designed to prompt collaborative reflection and actions between and among educators, parents, students, and community partners. These efforts can help create supportive school-wide environments that avoid the use of punitive approaches while recognizing the inextricable connections between students' social, emotional, and educational needs. The tool is also organized by the aforementioned implementation levers, and can help prompt schools to identify and address urgent local, district, and/or school-wide priorities related to creating safe and supportive school cultures.⁷ To date, the tool (all versions combined) has been used by approximately 290 schools in 130 districts, including FY2014-FY2023 Safe and Supportive Schools grantees, approximately one-third of Gateway Cities districts,⁸ five demonstration schools that work on trauma sensitivity through the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative,⁹ and others.

The Commission will continue to learn from the work of schools that have utilized the prior and current versions of the tool. Several grantees have presented at Commission and DESE Board meetings. Information has been gleaned by reviewing data and feedback, and information from those using the current version will inform recommendations on further refinements to the framework and tool, and on the feasibility of statewide implementation of the framework. In addition, the data provided by grantees, along with other statewide data and presentations will inform future recommendations to the Legislature. More details are provided in the *Commission Activities Undertaken in 2022* section below.

⁷ Per G.L., c. 69, § 1P(d), "The self-assessment tool created by the department consistent with the recommendations of the behavioral health and public school task force created under said section 19 of said chapter 321 shall be organized according to the elements of the framework established under subsection (b), and (if adopted pursuant to c. 69§1P(c)), shall be used by schools to: (i) assess the school's capacity to create and sustain safe and supportive school environments for all students; (ii) identify areas where additional school-based action, efforts, guidance and support are needed to create and maintain safe and supportive school environments; and (iii) create action plans to address the areas of need identified by the assessment."

⁸ Forman, Ben; Bourvier, Sonia, and Citino, Christina (September 2015). "[Building Community-Wide Social and Emotional Support Systems in Massachusetts Gateway Cities: Assessing Progress from the Perspective of Local Educators](#)," MassInc and the UMass Donahue Institute.

⁹ The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative is a collaboration between Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School. <https://traumasensitiveschools.org/>.

Recommendations

Through this eighth annual report, the Commission respectfully offers four recommendations to members of the Massachusetts Legislature and state policymakers more broadly. These recommendations focus on **1) Efforts supported through the Safe and Supportive Schools line item; 2) Educational equity related to race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation; 3) Collaboration with families; and 4) Schools' access to clinically, culturally, and linguistically appropriate services.**

The recommendations are designed to inform efforts in Massachusetts for the 2024 fiscal year (FY2024) and beyond that can help schools become safer and more supportive. The content is grounded in Commission meeting discussions and includes examples of ways the Legislature and policymakers can support the recommendation goals. Accompanying Data Snapshots provide sample data points to help paint a picture of the current context related to each topic area. Examples of Department initiatives related to these topics are included in the *Department Activities* section of the report. The Department invites and welcomes feedback from Commission members and others on that work throughout the year.

As a reminder, as defined by the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework Law (G.L., c.69, §.1P), safe and supportive schools *foster a safe, positive, healthy & inclusive whole-school learning environment that:*

- **enables students to develop positive relationships** with adults and peers, regulate their emotions and behavior, **achieve academic and non-academic success** in school and maintain **physical and psychological health and well-being**; and
- **integrates services and aligns initiatives** that promote students' behavioral health, including social and emotional learning, bullying prevention, trauma sensitivity, dropout prevention, truancy reduction, children's mental health, foster care and homeless youth education, inclusion of students with disabilities, positive behavioral approaches that reduce suspensions and expulsions and other similar initiatives.

A FEW NOTES ABOUT THE RECOMMENDATIONS:

Taken collectively, these recommendations are particularly salient considering the disturbingly disparate impacts seen throughout the pandemic across communities that exacerbated vast pre-existing inequities by race/ethnicity, income level, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability status, and more. Schools continue to grapple with how best to accelerate student learning while attending to the health and wellbeing needs of students, families, staff, and partners. Concurrently, many school districts have a significant amount of increased funding available through a number of sources, such as [ESSER](#) and the [Student Opportunity Act](#). There are also concerns about how best to mitigate workforce shortages and use funds to sustain strengthened systems, services, and practices after the potential “funding cliff” that some districts may face when the ESSER funds expire on September 30, 2024. The recommendations in this report can inform how funding and other policies and practices can be used most strategically to help schools become safer and more supportive schools.

RECOMMENDATION 1: CONTINUE TO SUPPORT EFFORTS FUNDED THROUGH THE SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOLS LINE-ITEM

The Safe and Supportive Schools Commission (Commission) recommends continuing to support efforts funded by the Safe and Supportive Schools line item ([7061-9612](#)) through the fiscal year 2024 (FY2024) budget. It will be important for funds to continue to support efforts as described below, through this line item with at least the current funding levels, as well as through any other available and appropriate funding sources.

The Commission is very appreciative that Governor Healey included Safe and Supportive Schools initiative efforts in H. 1 and for the Legislature's continued support over the past decade (since FY2014).

Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education Jeffrey C. Riley's (Commissioner) [priority goals](#) for DESE's FY2023 work include to *Cultivate Safe and Healthy Learning Environments*. Students as well as teachers, school staff, and families across the Commonwealth are continuing to cope with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors that can impede learning, health, and wellness. Furthermore, some students who experience mental and physical health challenges may be exhibiting significant behaviors and could benefit from more intensive supports and interventions, as well as broad efforts to create safe and supportive learning environments grounded in the [Safe and Supportive Schools Essential Elements](#) (*supporting all students, deepening learning, advancing equity, exemplifying cultural responsiveness, and reflecting and adapting*).

The 7061-9612 line-item can help further efforts that strengthen safe and supportive learning environments and available services, through the type of work described in the *Department Activities* section of this report, and can help furthers goals associated with all four Commission recommendations.

In March 2022, a [Students Speak](#) virtual legislative briefing enabled policy makers to hear students share about what they need to feel supported in school. The briefing was hosted by State Senators Sal DiDomenico and Jason Lewis, and State Representatives Ruth Balser and Alice Peisch; and was organized by the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI) of MA Advocates for Children (MAC) and Harvard Law School. Briefing highlights were shared with the Commission, and themes from Haverhill, Chelsea, Brockton, and Springfield students clustered around **the importance of their learning environment, relationships, equity, and genuine learning**. Examples of what students shared are below and woven throughout the recommendations.

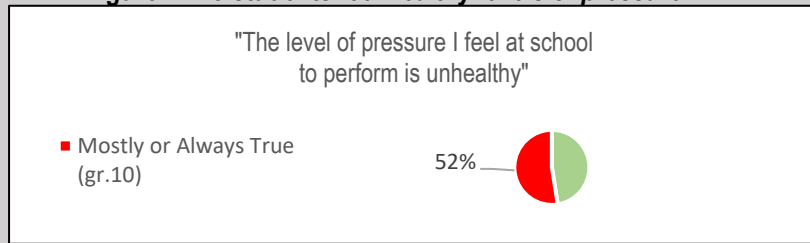
“One way to make schools more safe and supportive is to make sure that teachers take time to learn about students’ experiences. Teachers could get better at listening so that students are able to express themselves. ...We need to feel heard and understood and that helps us learn. When I feel understood, I know that my future is going to be bright because I can be successful at school.”
–Theresa

“The way [my teacher] presents herself and communicates creates sort of an aura of kindness, it's nothing like intimidation or fear tactics. It's, ‘let's communicate, I'll help you learn.’ And it's so relieving to have someone that can create that kind of environment.” - Ethan

DATA SNAPSHOT EXAMPLES IN THIS REALM

- In FY2023, a total of 46 grantees (school districts and collaboratives) are creating or implementing action plans informed by the Safe and Supportive School Framework/Tool, with support from DESE and district mentors, and funding from the Safe and Supportive Schools line-item (7061-9612).
- Regarding *Safe and Supportive Schools Professional Development (PD)*, led by the Equity Imperative during 2021 and continued into 2022: **“Participants were very positive about their participation in the [PD], with particular praise for the facilitator, the way the sessions were structured, and the learning they will take back to their districts.... The [PD] was perceived by participants as being very effective and important for their understanding of how to implement anti-racist strategies in their schools and districts.”** [Collaborative for Educational Services (CES), Pathways PD for Educators Report, 2021]
- Safe and Supportive Schools have high expectations and supports for all students, with a healthy level of pressure to perform. **More than one-half (52%) of 10th graders report feeling an unhealthy level of pressure.** (VOCAL 2022)

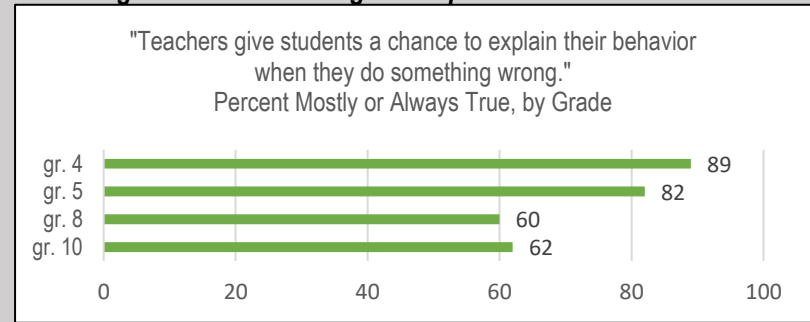
Figure 1: Do students feel healthy levels of pressure?



- In safe and supportive learning environments, teachers work with students and families to set positive behavioral expectations and supports, and when expectations are not met, students have a chance to explain their behavior. Data from the Department’s

2022 “*Views of Climate and Learning*” (VOCAL) surveys shows that **more students in younger vs. older grades report having the chance to explain their behavior**, as can be seen in this table:

Figure 2: Do students get to explain their behaviors?



EXAMPLES OF EFFORTS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH LINE-ITEM 7061-9612 INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

Grant opportunities for school districts and collaboratives to use the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Self-Reflection Tool to **create and implement action plans, and to mentor other communities** across the Commonwealth, informed by staff, student, family and community partner perspectives.

- Safe and Supportive Schools Grant program **evaluation** efforts.
- Safe and Supportive Schools grant program, PD, and Commission **coordination and administrative support**.
- Content updates and other **improvements to the online Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Self-Reflection Tool**.
- **Professional learning for administrators and other educators** related to safe and supportive learning environments.

RECOMMENDATION 2: ADVANCE EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, INCLUDING RELATED TO RACE/ETHNICITY AND GENDER IDENTITY/SEXUAL ORIENTATION

The Commission recommends that policymakers continue to support and promote efforts to advance and strengthen educational equity, including prioritizing racial and ethnic equity, as well as equity as it relates to gender identity and sexual orientation, as key levers for strengthening safe and supportive learning environments. This includes supporting efforts across the Commonwealth that increase a focus on dismantling systems of oppression in schools; that highlight districts making strides in practices that further anti-racist efforts including in practices related to professional development (PD), discipline, family engagement, and curriculum; and that create safe and supportive educational learning environments that actively include the engagement and voices of LGBTQ+ students, staff, and families.

The Department's [Acceleration Roadmap](#) emphasizes the importance of all students having access to grade-appropriate instruction, as well as students from all identities and backgrounds experiencing a sense of belonging. While the Commission is highlighting the importance of educational equity focused on race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation, we are also deeply committed to equity for all students, including students with all marginalized identities and experiences. For example, we are invested in equitable learning environments for students with disabilities and English learners, students with housing instability and food insecurity, and students with knowledge and skills far above or below grade level. Identities and experiences can be sources of pride, strength, and resilience while they can also relate to experiences of being disparaged and excluded. It is also critical to recognize that each individual has multiple identities (e.g., race and gender, etc.), and experiences can layer in compounding ways. For instance, a student's identities (or those of a family member, staff, etc.) can interact to create patterns of marginalized experiences or oppression. For an example of how patterns of experience can be different when gender and race are layered, see the first data snapshot on the next page that shows that female Hispanic/Latinx high school student rates of feeling sad or hopeless are not only significantly higher than rates for all

students, but are also higher than rates for all Hispanic/Latinx students, as well as rates for all female students.

Listening to students about their experiences and ideas for change is an essential component of school improvement efforts. Making sure to listen to voices least often heard is especially important. As a high school sophomore explained at the March 2022 [Students Speak](#) legislative briefing:

"There is an unfortunate number of voices that currently go unheard in my school, especially from students of color and economically disadvantaged students, but these are the voices that are most necessary moving forward, since these voices have historically been ignored and silenced." - Sean

At the same time, it is also crucial that students not feel pressured to share, or tokenized because of their identity(ies), and that adults take responsibility for speaking up and making changes to policies, procedures, and protocols where needed and helpful.

The Department’s [Guidelines for the Preparation of Administrative Leaders](#) (September 2021) explains that to achieve equity, school and district leaders must ensure that each and every student across the Commonwealth receives the high-quality curriculum¹⁰ and evidence-based instruction they deserve. Research demonstrates that student learning is accelerated when administrative leaders ensure all students have access to high-quality, culturally responsive, and standards-aligned curricula and all educators are provided professional learning and support to implement those curricula (TNTP, *The Opportunity Myth*, 2018). Additionally, a growing body of research indicates that school and district leaders that commit to work aligned with anti-racist leadership competencies provide benefits to all students, especially Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, and Multiracial students (Banks, J.A., et al., *Center for Multicultural Education*, College of Education, University of Washington, 2001).

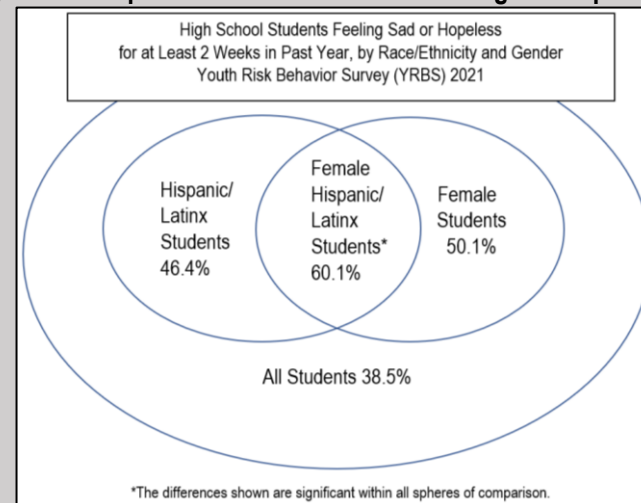
As noted in the Commissioner’s [Our Way Forward](#) report, and included in the [#1 for Some](#) Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership report, while Massachusetts is ranked top in the nation on many educational measures, for virtually all metrics, large achievement gaps persist for our students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities. These gaps and inequities are clearly visible across many data sets, including the state’s MCAS scores, graduation rates, rates of chronic absenteeism, Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) results, and dropout data.

¹⁰ High-quality curricular materials are aligned to the Massachusetts standards and exhibit a coherent sequence of target skills, instructional practices, and

DATA SNAPSHOT EXAMPLES IN THIS REALM

- *Female Hispanic/Latinx students report significantly higher prevalence of feeling sad and hopeless, not only when compared to students overall, but also when compared within their racial/ethnic and gender subgroups.*

Figure 3: Comparison rates for students feeling sad/hopeless



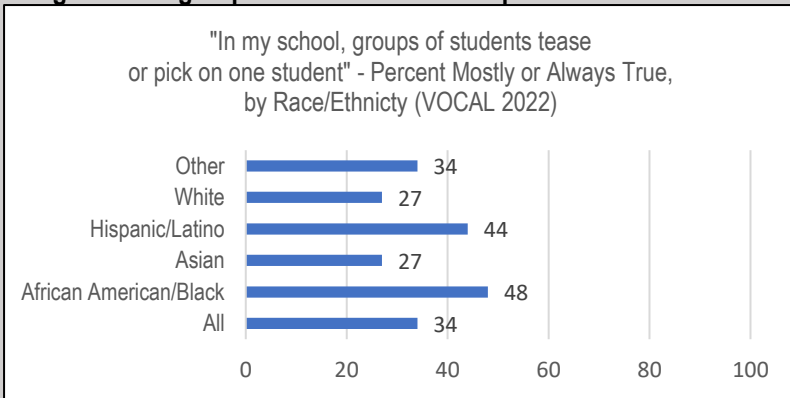
- *Department data show that while **Hispanic/Latinx students** comprised **20% of grade 9-12 students** in FY2021, they comprised **45% of that year’s high school dropouts**. Furthermore, this student group has the highest **chronic absenteeism rate** across all ethnic/racial groups: **42 percent** of Hispanic/Latinx high school students missed 10 percent or more of school (compared to 28 % of all students). Chronic absenteeism is tied to lower graduation rates.*
- *In the FY2021, the 4-year **graduation rate** for African American/Black students was **84.4 percent**, and **80 percent** for*

understandings. These materials are accessible for all students, including students with disabilities, students above and below grade level, English learners, and Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, and Multiracial students.

Hispanic/Latinx, while their white and Asian peers had graduation rates of 93.2 and 96.1 percent, respectively.

- *[Achievement gaps in 2022 MCAS data](#) remain disturbingly high. For example, the percentage point performance differential between **grade 3-8 Hispanic/Latinx students and white students** scoring in the meeting or exceeding expectations range was **29 points in Math and 26 points in English Language Arts (ELA); and for grade 10 African American/Black students and white students was 33 points for Math and 24 points for ELA.***
- ***African American/Black students report a higher incidence of experiencing bullying behaviors than white students, particularly in the younger grades. Results for a sample grade 5 question are shown in figure 4.***

Figure 4: Do groups of students tease or pick on one student?

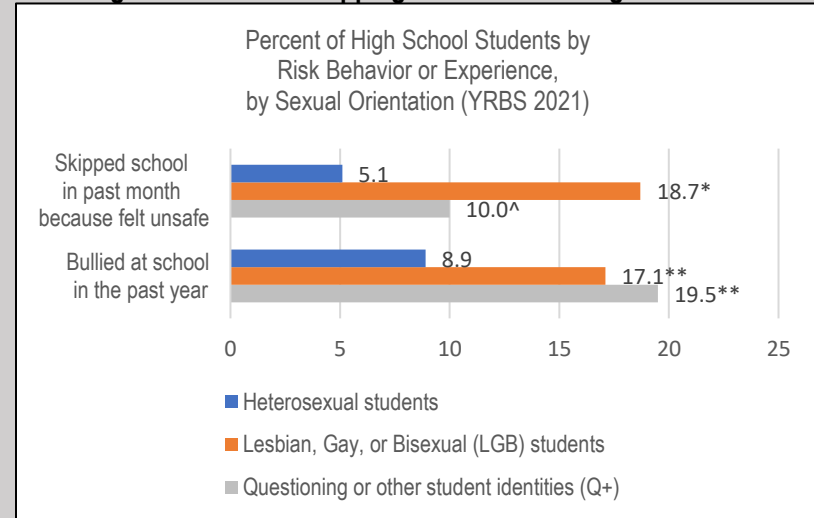


- *VOCAL data also show that **Black students in the younger grades (4-5 vs. 8-10) are less able to rely on other students to intervene when they see bullying happening compared to white students.***
- *Moreover, 2022 VOCAL data also showed that **non-binary students experience a less safe, less engaging, and less supportive school learning environment, with very large gaps***

(standardized differences of 0.73-0.9) in all three dimensions measured (environment, safety, and engagement).

- *YRBS data indicate that **LGBQ+ students are 2.0-3.7 times more likely than heterosexual students to report the experiences shown in figure 5.***

Figure 5: Students skipping school and feeling bullied



* significantly higher prevalence than heterosexual and Q+ students
 ^ significantly higher prevalence than heterosexual students
 ** significantly higher prevalence than heterosexual students

EXAMPLES OF WAYS POLICYMAKERS CAN HELP STRENGTHEN EFFORTS RELATED TO RECOMMENDATION #2 INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- Support grants, programs, and efforts that can contribute to wide-scale racial/ethnic equity goals and dismantling systems of oppression, including but not limited to efforts that support educator diversification – including multiple strategies for recruitment and retention. Research at [Johns](#)

[Hopkins University](#) found that even having one Black teacher could yield positive outcomes for Black students, including an increased chance at graduating high school and enrolling in college. A growing body of research supports having a diverse workforce, such as that shown in the working paper, “[The Long-Run Impacts of Same-Race Teachers](#)” (Gershenson et al, NBER series 25254). Consider expanding existing initiatives in this realm, in tandem with the Commissioner’s FY2023 priority goal to *Build a Diverse and Culturally Responsive Workforce*.

- Increase opportunities for legislators, school officials, and educators to hear from students about what they need to succeed and what works for them in schools, including students who identify as Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) and LGBTQ+. These efforts could be similar to those described on the [Students Speak website](#) that were discussed at the February 2021 Commission meeting. These opportunities could also include adding language into state line-items to include expectations regarding student input into grant proposals, with the Safe and Supportive Schools line-item as an example,¹¹ or adding in language that incentivizes student and family engagement with funded grant implementation and evaluation efforts. Efforts can also include using available data sets such as the YRBS and the VOCAL student climate survey. Themes shared by students coupled

with student survey data (examples of which are shown in the data snapshot boxes throughout these recommendations) highlight the need for more efforts that help ensure students feel safe and supported in schools.

- Support interactive PD in the education sector on topics that build and strengthen safe and supportive learning environments through a lens that enhances racial and ethnic equity, and equity related to sexual orientation and gender identity. Specifically, this PD can build educators’ capacity to engage in reflecting on biases and identifying ways to improve student, staff, and family experiences - informed by research, learning, and practice. The PD can also draw upon DESE's [model rubrics](#) for the evaluation of school administrators and teachers that will be released in 2023 and 2024, and that integrate and strengthen *culturally responsive and relevant practices*¹² within the [Standards of Effective Teaching](#) and [Administrative Leadership](#).
- Consider ways to encourage or require that students from multiple identities and perspectives are included in commissions and workgroups, when appropriate. Having students participate in these efforts can help ensure their experiences, ideas, and thoughts are heard and considered in decision making processes that will impact students the most.

¹¹ This language was included in the FY2023 7061-9612 line item: “...provided further, that grant awards shall be prioritized for applications that include a process for developmentally appropriate input from students who are reflective of the school population;...”

¹² For information and resources on culturally responsive practice, please see [Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading](#).

RECOMMENDATION 3: PROMOTE AND STRENGTHEN COLLABORATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES TO SUPPORT STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SUCCESS

The Commission recommends that policymakers continue to support efforts to build capacity at the state and local levels to help schools more actively and effectively engage families and community partners in ways that are meaningful to students and families, and that are grounded in anti-racist and equity focused goals. These efforts can positively help improve outcomes for students - including but not limited to students of color; students with disabilities; students who are English learners; and students who identify as LGBTQ+. These efforts can leverage and deepen relationships where they have been built or strengthened by increased family engagement efforts in many communities since the start of the pandemic.

As the Commissioner described in his FY2023 goals, *across each of our initiatives, family engagement is an essential ingredient for success*. As noted in the Massachusetts cross-agency [Strengthening Partnerships: Prenatal through Young Adulthood Family Engagement Framework](#) (page 4), research shows that when quality family engagement strategies are implemented, they can have a **lasting positive impact on a child’s social-emotional and physical health, school readiness, and academic achievement and yield success in life** (e.g., Smith, Robbins, Stagman, & Mahur, 2013; Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, & Lloyd, 2013; Henderson, & Mapp, 2003). Effective family engagement is also associated with a **reduction in the number of children entering the child welfare system** (McRoy, & McCroskey, 2008). Furthermore, **families who are active and respected participants** in students’ learning and educational settings can **help educators see new ways to build safe, welcoming, and trusting environments** (Reedy & McGrath, 2010; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010).

Now more than ever, it is essential for schools to recognize, and for state leaders to support, the value of anti-racist and equity

focused family engagement. As a high school junior put it at the March 2022 Students Speak legislative briefing,

“One thing I benefitted from was I have a mother who... would email the teachers and be sure the IEP was getting implemented. My mom had a phone and an email at work, but I feel like there are lots of families that don’t have access to those resources to help their students and don’t know how to help. Could parents be encouraged to help the teacher implement the IEP? Could there be training for the teacher and the parents to work together?... [Also,] it would go a long way to help if there were teachers from the community who could understand the needs of students of color... I feel like if more teachers understood our backgrounds, things would go better because teachers would know how to talk to students and have relationships with them. If teachers understood our backgrounds, they might know how to de-escalate situations better and make it easier for students” – Chris

The *Family and Community Engagement Standard III* in DESE’s [standards](#) of effective teaching and administrative leadership

(and draft [updated rubrics](#)) outlines and expects strong, culturally responsive family and community engagement practices. For example, the updated [draft School-Level Administrator Rubric](#) describes Proficient performance in *III-C.1 Communication with Families* as follows: “*Models, sets clear expectations for, and provides appropriate supports to educators regarding partnering with families through regular, two-way communication in a manner that is culturally and linguistically responsive, aligned with family preferences, and in approachable language and formats. Ensures access to high-quality translation and interpretation as needed.*”

Building and strengthening relationships between school staff, students, families, and community-based partners is foundational to creating safe and supportive learning environments. As noted in The Brookings Institution’s article “[Top 5 insights for improving family-school collaboration during COVID and beyond](#)” (January 2022) that draws from the Center for Universal Education’s (CUE) “Collaborating to improve and transform education systems: A playbook for family-school engagement”, there is an opportunity to positively change student’s academic and life trajectories with intentional family engagement strategies, especially after the negative impacts of the pandemic. Furthermore, “[Rigorous evidence](#) has shown that when families and schools have strong relationships, children win: [They are more likely to stay in school, graduate, and do well academically](#) [and] socially.”

DATA SNAPSHOT EXAMPLES IN THIS REALM

- *Eighth grade students were asked whether their parents feel respected when they participate at school. (VOCAL 2022) Looking at the percentage of students who indicated this was mostly or always true, a 7-point gap was seen between low income (83%) and non-low income students (90%), and an 8-point gap was seen between African American/Black (82%) and Asian students (90 %).*
- *In Massachusetts, [1 in 5 households with children are food insecure, with Black and Latinx families disproportionately impacted](#). Furthermore, over 1 in 4 children who are food insecure live in households that would not typically qualify for free or reduced-price meals. In FY2021, through [DESE’s state and federally funded programs](#), school meals were offered at no charge to all students, raising participation rates and resulting in over 53,000 more students across the Commonwealth eating school lunch every day.*

EXAMPLES OF WAYS POLICYMAKERS CAN HELP STRENGTHEN EFFORTS RELATED TO RECOMMENDATION #3 INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- Provide support for state and local efforts guided by goals in the [Strengthening Partnerships: Prenatal through Young Adulthood Family Engagement Framework](#), e.g., *building positive relationships, promoting family well-being, promoting pathways for partnerships with families, and supporting child and youth development and learning – all of which are in alignment with the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Tool.*

- **Include parents/guardians** (and/or those who work closely with families) **in current or newly formed statewide commissions, taskforces, workgroups, and/or advisory boards** that support initiatives related to student wellbeing and education, to help ensure that parent/family perspectives inform groups that make decisions or recommendations.
- Provide support for efforts that **strengthen school-family communication**, and that include inquiry and active listening, and that are grounded in shared school-family agreements on goals for students. Also ensure adequate funding in schools for **translation and interpretation services** where needed, for any type of school interaction with families. Furthermore, recognize and celebrate the critical role families play in creating and informing the array of supports for their children.
- Continue to support **universal free breakfast and lunch to all students** (something fully supported by federal funding during the pandemic’s first few years). The pandemic, coupled with the increased cost of living, has intensified financial hardships for a substantial number of families across the Commonwealth. Many families depend on school meals to alleviate financial constraints and have one less thing to be concerned about regarding their child’s wellbeing. Offering school meals free of charge to all families also alleviates the stigma or shame for students who previously ate free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch. Additionally, offering school meals at no charge to families has increased student participation, which can help increase wellness and engagement for all participating students, as well as increase revenue to school meal programs which helps offset high food costs, improve menu offerings, and address staffing shortages.

RECOMMENDATION 4: STRENGTHEN SCHOOLS’ ABILITY TO ACCESS AND DELIVER SERVICES THAT ARE CLINICALLY, CULTURALLY, AND LINGUISTICALLY APPROPRIATE

The Commission recommends policymakers support efforts to increase schools’ access to clinically, culturally, and linguistically appropriate services as a part of implementing comprehensive, integrated, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) that are grounded in access and equity (including equity associated with race/ethnic and gender identity/sexual orientation), and that promote health, wellness, and student success.

In fall 2021, a coalition of the nation’s leading experts in pediatric health [declared a national emergency](#) in child and adolescent mental health, and in December 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an [Advisory](#) emphasizing ways the pandemic has further exposed a youth mental health crisis.

Pervasive mental and physical health concerns, coupled with compacted time for learning over the past few years (due in part to school closings, sickness, and isolation protocols contributing to increased chronic absenteeism), make it even more important to elevate the association between safe and positive school environments and improved health behaviors and

achievement,¹³ and between school attendance and good health.¹⁴ In light of these challenges, and as noted in the Commissioner’s priority goals, DESE is committed to advancing work in areas that include cultivating safe and healthy learning environments by focusing on student mental and behavioral health, COVID-19 supports, and other health and safety matters.

The Department and Commission recognize the value of a multi-faceted and integrated student support approach to health, wellness, and student success - such as that outlined in the [Safe and Supportive Schools Framework](#), as well as in other national resources such as the Center for Disease Control’s [Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Framework](#); the [National Guidelines for Integrated Student Support](#) from Boston College’s Mary E. Walsh Center for Thriving Children; and the Behavioral health Integrated Resources for Children ([BIRCh](#)) Project [Research Brief](#) on Access to Professional Support Personnel in Massachusetts Public Schools. Recurring themes in these resources include that schools can improve the health and learning of students with comprehensive and integrated approaches that are equity focused and include supporting opportunities such as learning about and practicing healthy behaviors; providing evidence-based school health, nursing, and counseling services at school and in the community; creating safe and positive school environments; attending to staff wellness; and engaging families and community partners.

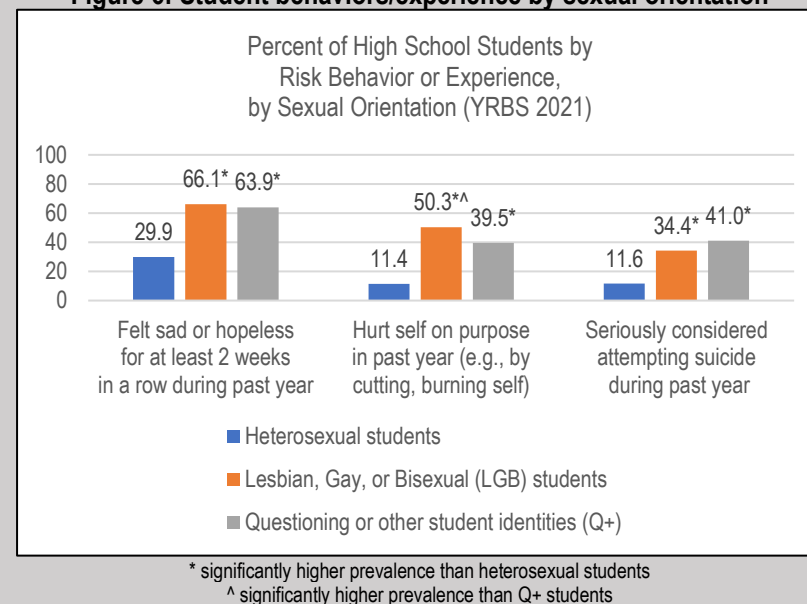
¹³ Michael SL, Merlo CL, Basch CE, Wentzel KR, Wechsler H. Critical connections: health and academics. *J Sch Health*. 2015;85(11):740–758.

¹⁴ Mandy A. Allison, Elliott Attisha, COUNCIL ON SCHOOL HEALTH, Marc Lerner, Cheryl Duncan De Pinto, Nathaniel Savio Beers, Erica J. Gibson, Peter

DATA SNAPSHOT EXAMPLES IN THIS REALM

- In May 2021, a Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) [review of recent research](#) found that more than **1 in 4 high school students, and 1 in 5 children ages 5-12** were experiencing **worsening emotional and cognitive health**, according to reports from high school students and parents of younger children. Furthermore, in October 2021, **31% of adults Massachusetts** reported **symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorder**, and even pre-pandemic (2018-2019), **21% reported having any mental illness**.
- **LGBQ+ students are 2.1-4.4 times more likely than heterosexual students to report the experiences shown in figure 6.**

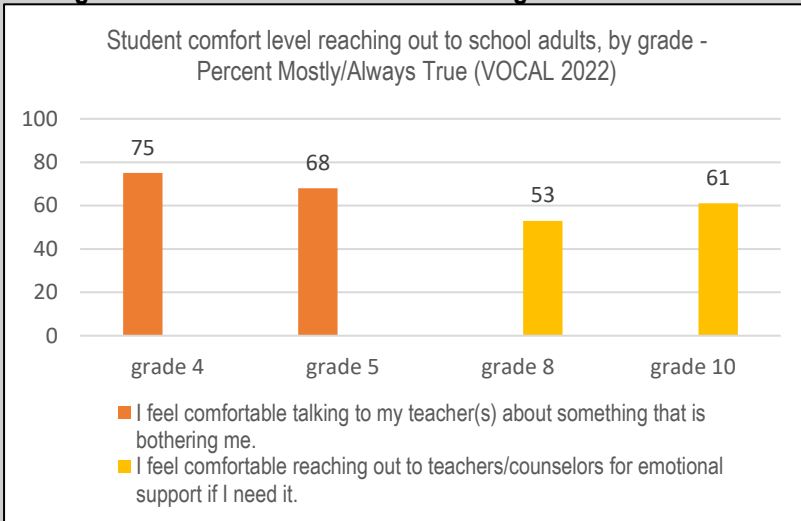
Figure 6: Student behaviors/experience by sexual orientation



Gorski, Chris Kjolhede, Sonja C. O’Leary, Heidi Schumacher, Adrienne Weiss-Harrison; The Link Between School Attendance and Good Health. *Pediatrics* February 2019; 143 (2): e20183648. 10.1542/peds.2018-3648.

- *Student comfort level reaching out to school adults varies by grade, with the least comfort (53%) in grade 8 and the most in grade 4 (75%), as seen in figure 7.*

Figure 7: Students comfort level reaching out to school adults



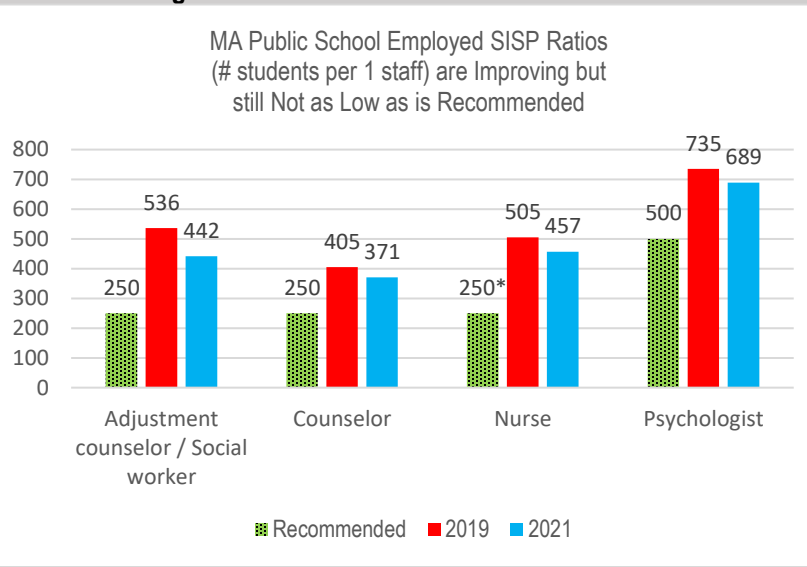
- *It is helpful that the number of **Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP)** employed by Massachusetts public schools have increased more than 7% in the past few years, but the state is still generally below ratios recommended by professional associations. Note that particularly for nurses, there is not widespread agreement on a recommended ratio.¹⁵ Additionally, how many total SISP staff are in a building/district, what roles they play, and how they collaborate can be even more important than individual role ratios. See figures 8 and 9 for more details.*

¹⁵ Recommendations listed are from national associations of social workers ([SSWAA](#)), counselors ([ASCA](#)), and psychologists ([NASP](#)) School nurse numbers on this page do not include special education nurses or nurse leaders. Also, all staff numbers are FTE (fulltime equivalents), not necessarily the total number of individual staff. Student to school nurse ratios in Massachusetts were 457:1 in 2021, and 505:1 in 2019. A 1998 state legislative report recommended a ratio of 1 fulltime nurse per 250-500 students (shown as 375 in the above chart). See DPH School Health Services Unit Guidance 5/2021, p.3 for more details. Though national associations previously

Figure 8: SISP numbers and increases in MA 2019-2021

SISP Role	# in 2019	# in 2021	# Increase (% Increase)
Adjustment counselor / Social worker	1,774	2,062	288 (16.2%)
Counselor	2,352	2,455	103 (4.4%)
Nurse ¹⁶	1,886	1,996	110 (5.8%)
Psychologist	1,294	1,322	28 (2.1%)
TOTAL	7,305	7,834	529 (7.2%)

Figure 9: SISP ratios in MA vs. recommended



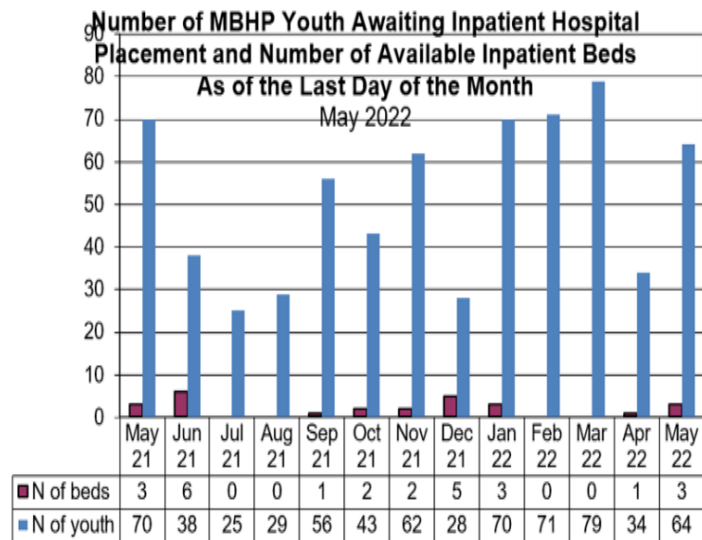
*250-500:1 recommended range; see footnote 15 for more details.

recommended 750:1, for further discussion on recommended nurse staffing levels, see <https://www.nasn.org/nasn-resources/professional-practice-documents/position-statements/ps-workload> from the National Association of School Nurses that emphasizes “Student acuity and school community indicators should be assessed to determine appropriate staffing levels...School nurse workloads should be evaluated on at least an annual basis to meet the health and safety needs of school communities (Jameson et al., 2018).”

¹⁶ See footnote #15.

- The Massachusetts School Mental Health Consortium ([MASMHC](#)) asked participating districts, “Does your district currently employ an administrator with counseling experience that: 1) **provides clinical supervision** to school mental health staff (school counselors, school psychologists, adjustment counselors/school social workers) and 2) **provides leadership regarding mental health/social-emotional learning (SEL) initiatives** for the district?” A total of 108 districts responded to the survey, and **nearly 69% indicated “No”** to both questions.
- The Department of Mental Health’s [June 2022 Children’s Mental Health Report](#) included the following chart and highlights the **number of youth awaiting inpatient hospital placement**, which contributes to students returning to school post-crises without adequate supports for students and families to help them thrive

Figure 10: Youth awaiting inpatient hospital placement



EXAMPLES OF WAYS POLICYMAKERS CAN HELP STRENGTHEN EFFORTS RELATED TO RECOMMENDATION #4 INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- Enhance and promote schools’ and communities’ ability to deliver services students can access - that are clinically, culturally, and linguistically appropriate (including translation and interpretation service where needed). Making supports available for staff and families as well is critical and impacts student health, wellness, and success.
 - ❖ *The Commission commends current legislative funding for related line items such as [7061-9650](#) and [7061-0028](#) for [Student Wellness School Supports / Social Emotional Learning Grants](#), and [4800-0200](#) for [Family Resource Centers](#).*
- Support the establishment of statewide and regional hubs of PD, technical assistance, and networking in this realm, informed by student voice.
 - ❖ *The Commission commends legislative efforts such as those in the [Act Addressing Barriers to Care for Mental Health](#), c. 177 of the Acts of 2022. For example, the law includes a statewide program (s.4) to help school districts implement equitable, linguistically and culturally competent, and developmentally appropriate behavioral health services and supports - to be developed by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) and DESE and have a central base of operations within the University of Massachusetts. The law also establishes an advisory committee with at least one-third of participants being secondary school students – to work with DESE on mental health.*

- Provide funding or guidance to help strengthen school staffing models that can 1) promote increased collaboration among staff and better leverage the expertise of school mental and physical health and wellness staff, 2) better utilize evidence-based practices, 3) provide clinical supervision and leadership for existing mental and behavioral health support specialists, and 4) increase and diversify the SISP workforce (i.e., school adjustment counselors/school social workers, school counselors, school nurses, and school psychologists).

- ❖ *For instance, support additional recruitment and retention efforts focused on SISP staff that are similar to those focused on [classroom educators](#), and [building and district leaders](#) – to address the current workforce shortage as well as increase diversification of SISP staff by language, culture, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other identifies and backgrounds.*

- ❖ *Support efforts to incentivize in-district clinical supervision for school counselors, or leverage collaboratives, higher education, and/or community partners to provide clinical supervision across districts.*
- ❖ *Support efforts that promote in-district and cross-agency collaboration with student health and support teams.*

- Support partnerships with higher education institutions and others to strengthen programs that increase the number and diversity of mental health and nursing focused graduates.

- ❖ *Consider strategies such as those endorsed by the [pediatric health coalition](#) that include innovative training programs, loan repayment, attention to health professional's well-being, and intensified efforts to recruit underrepresented populations into mental health*

professions. Learn from efforts underway, such as the National Association of School Psychologists' Exposure Project, [NASP-EP](#), that exposes high school students and undergraduates, especially those of diverse backgrounds, to school psychology as a career.

- Support implementation efforts that assist school districts with aligning their efforts to updated standards for health, physical education, and social-emotional learning competencies, once a revised version of DESE's 1999 Comprehensive Health Framework is available.

- Promote the goals of the state's [behavioral health roadmap](#), a multi-year blueprint for expanded access to treatment, more effective treatment, and improved health equity, along with other initiatives that increase access to community promotion, prevention, early intervention, and crisis services that support health/wellness.

- ❖ *The Commission commends the goals of the behavioral health reform underway, including efforts from the legislature and EOHHS to help create a "[front door](#)" in the state for behavioral health services – i.e., a new, centralized service for people or their loved ones to call or text to get connected to mental health and addiction treatment. As a part of this, beginning in January 2023, designated Community Behavioral Health Centers ([CBHCs](#)) will provide expanded access to behavioral health evaluation and treatment in communities across the Commonwealth.*

- ❖ *The Commission urges consideration of the best role for schools in helping spread awareness about and utilization of increased availability of services.*

Commission Activities Undertaken in 2022

In 2022, the Commission focused primarily on the two [responsibilities](#)¹⁷ shown below, *as well as consultation with others and the drafting of this annual report outlining Commission activities and appropriate recommendations.*

- Propose steps for improving schools' **access to clinically, culturally, and linguistically appropriate services.**
- Develop recommendations on best practices **for collaboration with families**, including families of children with behavioral health needs.

Additionally, woven throughout meetings and topics was student and family voice/engagement and advancing racial/ethnic equity, and equity related to gender identity and sexual orientation.

Below is a summary of activities conducted during this eighth year of the Commission. **Seven Commission meetings were convened in 2022**, including a two-part summer retreat. All meetings occurred virtually per the [extension to the open meeting law](#). Each meeting covered topics related to at least one of the aforementioned areas of focus. Each meeting included one or two spotlight presentations from school staff or students, Commission members, Department staff, or others with insight into the topics at hand. Meetings also generally included time for brief Department updates; as well as time for discussion in small groups to help inform annual recommendations, and for members and participants to share about reactions to the presentations as well as related challenges and successes and available resources.

- **February 9 – Focus areas for 2022 confirmed.** Spotlights included:
 - *Quantifying Equity: Racial and Ethnic Opportunity Gaps for Massachusetts High School Students* with DESE’s College and Career Readiness Coordinator, Nyal Fuentes.
 - [Equity Related Initiatives](#) at the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents ([MASS](#)) with Commission Co-Chair John Doherty.
- **March 21 – Student voice and equity.** Spotlights included:
 - *Highlights from the March 2022 Students Speak Legislative Briefing* with Massachusetts Advocates for Children’s ([MAC](#)) Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative ([TLPI](#)) team and Harvard Law Clinic Students.
 - *Safe and Supportive Schools Grantee Panel including a former student* with Chelsea Daigle, Haverhill Public Schools, and Kariña Monroe, Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative.
- **May 11 – Student Voice, Equity & Collaboration with Families.** Spotlights included:
 - *State Student Advisory Council (SSAC) Student panel* with Commission member Jack Kamataris and three SSAC student leaders (Eleni, Oliver, and Sam).

¹⁷ A full list of the Commission charges noted in the [Safe and Supportive Schools Framework Law](#) (G.L., c.69, § .1P) are outlined on the Commission’s web page: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/safety/commission.html#responsibilities>

- *DESE Family Engagement Initiative Highlights* with DESE’s Family Engagement Specialist, Olga Lopez, grounded in the cross-agency [Family Engagement Framework](#)
- **Summer two-part retreat**
 - PART ONE, July 18 – Access to Effective Services.** Spotlights included:
 - *A panel of practitioners supporting students, educators, and families* with Gayl Crump Swaby, New Generation Consultants/CPLAN; Ev Gilbert, Safe Schools Program for LGBTQ Students; and Kathleen Mackenzie, New Bedford Public Schools.
 - *DESE Social Emotional Learning and Mental Health Initiative Highlights* with DESE’s Mental Health and Behavioral Health Specialist, Christine (Chris) Pond.
 - PART TWO, August 10 – Collaboration with Families.** Spotlights included:
 - *District Family Engagement Example* with Kim Connolly, Erin Perkins, and Maura Papile, Quincy Public Schools.
 - *Panel of family representatives* with Lizbeth Brown, EdNavigator; Ivelisse Caraballo, CPLAN; and Danubia Camargos Silva, Boston Foundation.
- **October 3 – Discussion of draft annual recommendations.** Spotlights included:
 - *SEL/Mental Health Grant Example* with Jariel Verge, Holliston Public Schools
 - *Safe and Supportive Schools Grant Example* with John Crocker, Methuen Public Schools
- **November 9 – Vote on annual report recommendations.** Spotlight:
 - *DESE’s [VOCAL](#) Student Climate Survey Highlights* with DESE’s Psychometric Coordinator, Shelagh Peoples.

Commission member updates:

The Commission welcomed five new members, appointed by the organizations cited in the legislation authorizing the Commission that had vacancies in their member spots.

Starting with the February Meeting:

- **Edverette Brewster**, Principal at the Holmes Innovation School, Boston (and presently a Leadership Coach, Lynch Leadership Academy, Boston College) - appointed by the Massachusetts School Administrators Association ([MSAA](#)).
- **Shanyn Toulouse**, Northeast Regional School Nurse Consultant at Haverhill Public Schools - appointed by the Massachusetts School Nurse Organization ([MSNO](#)).
- **Beverly Williams**, Executive Vice President, Behavioral Health and Community Services, [BAMSI](#) (Brockton) - representing a community-based organization that provides services as part of the [Children’s Behavioral Health Initiative](#) and that provides mental health services in schools, appointed by the Secretary of Education.

Starting with the July meeting:

- **Ulana Ainsworth**, Fifth Grade Teacher, Roger Clap Elementary, Boston Public Schools – jointly appointed by the American Federation of Teachers ([AFT-MA](#)) and MA Teachers Association ([MTA](#)).
- **Fabienne Eliacin**, Family Support Specialist, Parent Professional Advocacy League ([PPAL](#)) - appointed by PPAL.

The Department and Commission are **extremely grateful for the generous and helpful contributions of the following three members** and wish them well with their other responsibilities and new endeavors:

- **Sara Burd**, Director of Counseling and Social Emotional Learning, Arlington Public Schools, who served from the Commission’s inception in Fall 2014 through September 2022, as well as on the 2008-2011 Behavioral Health and Public Schools Task Force.
- **Jack Kamataris**, Marlborough High School Class of 2022, and Vice-Chair of State Student Advisory Council (SSAC), who served from February 2021 through June 2022.
- **Joel Khattar**, Program Manager at PPAL, who served from Fall 2020 to April 2022.

The Commission is thankful to all members for their time, contributions, insights, and dedication to efforts with and beyond the Commission that can help make schools safer and more supportive for all students. See Appendix A for a list of 2022 members.

Commission meetings are open to the public, and the Commission is also thankful to all **participating guests**, for their interest and willingness to attend meetings to learn and to contribute to the Commission’s discussion when possible. Attendees who participated in more than half of the seven Commission meetings in 2022 included: John Crocker, Anne Eisner, Michael Gregory, Joan Wasser Gish, and Denise Wolk; as well as Jeff Perrotti from the [Safe Schools Program for LGBTQ Students](#) (a collaborative effort between the Department and the [Commission on LGBTQ Youth](#)).

The Commission appreciates all **Department staff and consultants** who assisted with 2022 Commission efforts. In particular, the Commission thanks Stacy Cabral for co-planning and helping move forward all Commission work; Emily Taylor for a variety of contributions including preparing minutes for every Commission meeting this year; and Kristen McKinnon, Chris Pond, and Donna Traynham for frequent thought partnership and small group facilitation efforts.

Department Activities Related to G.L. c. 69, § 1P(f)

The statute [G.L. c. 69, § 1P] outlines numerous roles for the Department to play to help further safe and supportive learning environments.¹⁸ Many of these are subject to appropriation and include but are not limited to: *providing administrative support to the Commission and offering grants, professional development, and technical assistance to schools and districts using the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Tool*. Highlights of Department efforts associated with these responsibilities are described below.

[Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Tool](#): The Framework and Self-Reflection Tool was most recently updated in 2021. Details on those updates can be found in last year's (the 7th Annual) [Commission Report](#), and an [at-a-glance version](#) and the [Essential Elements](#) woven throughout outline key information about the resources. During 2022, several refinements and additional guidance components were made available through the tool reports and action planning sections of the online resource, to help strengthen grantees and other users' efforts to create action plans informed by self-reflection and data gathering prompted by using the tool. The Department continues to seek [feedback](#) on the updated versions and plans to make further refinements informed by this feedback over time.

[Safe and Supportive Schools Grant Program](#): This grant program supports school and district team efforts to develop and implement action plans that organize, integrate, and sustain school and district-wide efforts to create safe and supportive school environments and coordinate and align student support initiatives. The program also funds efforts for school and district staff who have used the tool to mentors and support other grantees; other districts interested in using the self-reflection tool; districts beginning to implement action plans created previously; the Department and Commission; and other stakeholders interested in safe and supportive schools.

The Department posted the FY2023 Safe and Supportive Schools **Competitive Grant** Request for Proposals (RFP) Fund Code [\(FC\) 335](#) in May 2022, and publicized the news in a number of ways such as through the June 6th [Commissioner's Weekly Update](#). Applications were due July 18th and [grantees](#) were announced September 22, 2022. In June 2022, the Safe and Supportive Schools **Continuation Grant**, [FC 337](#) RFP was made available to districts with competitive grant awards in the prior year, and grant applications were reviewed and approved on a rolling basis.

More than \$300,000 will support competitive and continuation grants in 2022 to develop and implement action plans and provide support to others and share promising practices that will help create and maintain safe and supportive learning environments. Seventeen (17) entities (including 3 regional school districts, 2 charter school district, 2 collaboratives, and 10 other school districts) were competitively [awarded](#) approximately \$220,000 to support efforts in 39

¹⁸ NOTE: For the entire list of Department responsibilities associated with G.L. c. 69, § 1P, see: <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2014/Chapter284>.

schools or programs. Additionally, nine (9) districts were awarded more than \$84,000 through continuation grants, for use in approximately 19 schools or educational programs.

Grant evaluation: Funded through the safe and supportive schools line item 7061-9612, the Department contracted with Collaborative for Educational Services (CES) for continued work on an independent [evaluation of the grant program](#), to complement and extend efforts described in their 2018 and 2019 reports. In 2020-2021, CES was able to provide the Department with feedback on leadership supports and district needs as well as a review of participation and feedback on professional development opportunities. Additionally, CES continued to assess grantee feedback regarding the use of the self-assessment tool (updated in 2021), and ways in which schools and districts are incorporating equity considerations into their grant planning and implementation efforts. Conversations between CES and Safe and Supportive Schools (SaSS) grantees indicated that, “Overall, SaSS team members at each school thought that using the [preliminary/shortest version of the] Tool was a positive experience. They appreciated the opportunity to think in a structured way about the supports their school is providing to students and where there may be gaps. They found the questions to be thought-provoking and comprehensive, and appreciated the focused time that the grant allowed them to spend on discussing ways to improve the learning environment at their school. However, teams did express some concerns about using the tool as described below.” (CES Evaluation of the SaSS Program, 2021-2022, p.3) A few examples of areas for improvement are outlined below, along with examples of efforts to address them.

Sample Areas for Improvement	Examples of DESE Efforts to Address Areas for Improvement
Logistical use of the tool was more complicated than they anticipated.	DESE staff will offer one on one meetings with grantees to walk through the self-reflection tool and will be available for technical assistance as requested.
The language used in the self-reflection tool is very technical and can be hard for some (including families and students) to understand.	Grantees who previously used the tool with families and students will help coach new tool users. DESE will also consider over time ways to shift language to be less technical.
The grant was awarded in 2021 later than grantees expected and did not give them as much time as they had hoped to complete the tool.	FY2023 grantees were announced more than one month earlier than the prior year (September 22 vs. November 9), and more than two months earlier than in 2020 (November 24). Continuation grantees as well in FY2023 were able to access their funds sooner than in prior years.
Lack of involvement and active support from some school administrators and some suspicion and active resistance from community members to equity, anti-racism, and SEL work.	DESE is considering how to better address this need, including through a yearlong PD series for public elementary school principals, and the yearlong SaSS and Rethinking Discipline PD calendar offerings that are open to public school administrators of all levels. DESE is looking into additional ways to engage with PK-12 school and district administrators as well, e.g., through their annual conferences and more.

Professional development to support work related to safe and supportive schools: During 2022, the Department offered a series of professional development that included webinars and virtual networking meetings, similar to those described in last year’s [Commission Report](#). The Department continued the contract with the [Equity Imperative](#), a portion of which is funded through the Safe and Supportive Schools line item 7061-9612, to provide in depth professional

development pathways on topics related to equity and anti-racist practices in school climate and data and leadership. The pathway opportunities were publicized in Commissioner Weekly Updates, DESE newsletters, and on the Safe and Supportive Schools and Rethinking Discipline webpages. More than 140 people registered for three pathway sessions (each pathway consisting of three weekly 2-hour webinars).

The Equity Imperative is also further developing and continuing to offer a comprehensive online course for Safe and Supportive Schools grantees, [Rethinking Discipline](#) initiative participants, and others. Course themes include learning about:

- The racist history of our schools and society; and how that history can live within ourselves and requires a commitment toward racial equity and a development of equity-based interactions.
- The history of deficit thinking; and developing a structural lens to situate the root of racially delineated achievement outcomes and to create strategies to strengthen relationships.
- The ways that racism manifests and is perpetuated in the regular day-to-day routines in schools; and ways to interrupt this reality.
- The obstacles and roadblocks to leading equity work; and ways to best press forward on behalf of students and families.

The first two of these online modules were made available in January 2021. The third module was made available in the spring of 2022. Participants completed online asynchronous learning on their own and then met virtually with the Equity Imperative to deepen their learning. Additional offerings for 2022-2023 can be found on the Safe and Supportive Schools and Rethinking Discipline [professional development calendar](#).

Department Safe and Supportive Schools Staffing: Funds from the safe and supportive schools line item also enable full-time staffing to support Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Tool related work. This staff work includes providing technical assistance and training to school districts; policy development and dissemination; project planning and implementation; grants and contract management; inter-agency collaboration; and coordination of and participation in information gathering efforts such as focus groups, and in research and evaluation activities.

Select Additional Department Efforts: The Department is engaged in a wide array of initiatives beyond those noted above that also help to strengthen safe and supportive learning environments. Prompted by Commission member interest, Department staff began to periodically send out brief documents and links that provide information about initiatives of interest to Commission members. The Department welcomes feedback from Commission members and others on this work. Currently available documents provide information about initiatives related to [building a diverse and culturally responsive workforce](#), [early learning](#), [family engagement](#), [mental health and wellness](#), the [Safe Schools Program for LGBTQ students](#), and student surveys ([VOCAL](#) and [YRBS](#)).

APPENDIX A: Safe and Supportive Schools Commission Members

Note: Commission members are appointed by entities as outlined in G.L., c.69, §.1P.

Agency / District / Role Represented (alphabetically listed)	2022 Member Name	Title
American Federation of Teachers (AFT)-MA / MA Teachers Association (MTA)	Ulana Ainsworth	Fifth Grade Teacher, Roger Clap Elementary, Boston Public Schools
Community-based organization (CBO) representative that provides services as part of the Children's Behavioral Health Initiative (CBHI), and that provides mental health services in schools	Beverly Williams	Executive Vice President, Behavioral Health and Community Services, BAMS (Brockton)
Former BHPS Taskforce Member and Tool Developer/Evaluator, Currently University of MA - Boston and Behavioral Health Integrated Resources for Children (BIRCh)	Melissa Pearrow	Executive Director, Behavioral Health Integrated Resources for Children (BIRCh) Project; Associate Professor in School of Counseling and School Psychology, College of Education and Human Development; and School Psychology Program Director, UMass Boston; and MSPA Past President
MA Administrators for Special Education (ASE)	John Salovardos	Director of Pupil Services, Athol-Royalston Regional School District
MA Advocates for Children (MAC)	Marissa del Rosario	Trauma-Sensitive Schools Specialist, Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative
MA Association of School Committees (MASC)	Ellen Holmes	MASC President; Ashburnham-Westminster Reg. School Committee Member
MA Association of School Superintendents (MASS)	John Doherty	Commission Co-Chair (Selected by Commission Members); MASS Professional Development Chair, Retired Superintendent, Reading Public Schools
MA Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers	Margie Daniels	Social Worker, and Executive Director, Middlesex Partnerships for Youth
MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)	Rachelle Engler Bennett	Commission Co-Chair (DESE Designee); Associate Commissioner, Student and Family Support
MA Organization of Education Collaboratives (MOEC)	Susan Farrell	Central Mass Collaborative Executive Director
MA Recovery High School representative with expertise in adolescent substance use disorders	Michelle Lipinski	Principal, Northshore Recovery High School
MA School Administrators Association (MSAA)	Edverette Brewster	Leadership Coach, Lynch Leadership Academy, Boston College; and formerly Oliver W. Holmes PK-5 Innovation School Principal, Boston

MA School Counselors Association (MASCA)	Donna M. Brown	MASCA Immediate Past Executive Director
MA School Nurse Organization (MSNO)	Shayn A. Toulouse	Northeast Regional School Nurse Consultant at Haverhill Public Schools
MA School Psychologists Association (MSPA)	Andria Amador	Senior Dir., Behavioral Health Services, Boston Public Schools; and MSPA Past President
Parent/Professional Advocacy League (PPAL)	Joel Khattar, then Fabienne Eliacin	(Khattar) Program Manager / (Eliacin) Family Support Specialist
Practitioner of the Framework	Sara Burd	Director of Social Emotional Learning and Guidance, Arlington Public Schools
Secretary of Education (EOE Designee)	Heidi Gold	Senior Policy Manager, MA Executive Office of Education (EOE)
State Student Advisory Council (SSAC)	Jack Kamataris	SSAC Vice Chair, and Marlborough High School '22

APPENDIX B: Legislative Charge for the Commission

Massachusetts General Laws, c. 69, § 1P(g): There shall be a safe and supportive schools commission to collaborate with and advise the department on the feasibility of state-wide implementation of the framework. The commission shall consist of 19 members: 1 of whom shall be the commissioner of elementary and secondary education or a designee, who shall serve as co-chair; 1 of whom shall be the secretary of education or a designee; 1 of whom shall be a school superintendent appointed by the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, Inc.; 1 of whom shall be a school committee member appointed by the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, Inc.; 1 of whom shall be a school principal appointed jointly by the Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators' Association and the Massachusetts Elementary School Principals Association; 1 of whom shall be a teacher appointed jointly by the Massachusetts Teachers Association and the American Federation of Teachers-Massachusetts; 1 of whom shall be a director of special education or a director of student support services appointed by the Massachusetts Administrators for Special Education; 1 of whom shall be an executive director of an education collaborative appointed by the Massachusetts Organization of Education Collaboratives; 1 of whom shall be a school psychologist appointed by The Massachusetts School Psychologists Association, Inc.; 1 of whom shall be a school social worker appointed by the Massachusetts Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, Inc.; 1 of whom shall be a school adjustment counselor or guidance counselor appointed by the Massachusetts School Counselors Association, Inc.; 1 of whom shall be a school nurse appointed by the Massachusetts School Nurse Organization, Inc.; 1 of whom shall be an advocate with experience in education, behavioral health and the impact of trauma on learning appointed by Massachusetts Advocates for Children, Inc.; 1 of whom shall be a representative of the Parent/Professional Advocacy League, Inc. appointed by the Parent/Professional Advocacy League, Inc.; 1 of whom shall be a student appointed by the department of elementary and secondary education's student advisory council; and 3 members to be appointed by the secretary of education: 1 of whom shall be a former member of the behavioral health and public schools task force who participated in the development and statewide evaluation of the self-assessment tool; 1 of whom shall be a former member of the behavioral health and public schools task force with experience implementing the framework; 1 of whom shall be a representative of Massachusetts recovery high schools with expertise in adolescent substance use disorders; and 1 of whom shall be a representative from a community-based organization that provides services as part of the children's behavioral health initiative and that provides mental health services in schools. The commission shall select a co-chair from among its appointees.

The commission shall: (i) investigate and make recommendations to the board on updating, improving and refining the framework and the self-assessment tool as appropriate; (ii) identify strategies for increasing schools' capacity to carry out the administrative functions identified by the behavioral health and public schools task force; (iii) propose steps for improving schools' access to clinically, culturally and linguistically appropriate services; (iv) identify and recommend evidenced-based training programs and professional development for school staff on addressing students' behavioral health and creating safe and supportive learning environments; (v) identify federal funding sources that can be leveraged to support statewide implementation of the framework; (vi) develop recommendations on best practices for collaboration with families, including families of children with behavioral health needs; and (vii) examine and recommend

model approaches for integrating school action plans, required under subsection (e), with school improvement plans and for using the framework to organize other school and district improvement processes.

The commission may collect and review data and feedback from schools as the schools complete the self-assessment tool and develop school action plans, and may convene stakeholders to facilitate solutions to challenges as such challenges arise during the implementation process. The commission may request from the department such information and assistance as may be necessary to complete its work.

The commission shall consult with and solicit input from various persons and groups, including, but not limited to: (i) the office of the child advocate; (ii) the department of early education and care; (iii) the department of children and families; (iv) the department of mental health; (v) the department of public health; (vi) the department of youth services; (vii) the department of developmental services; and (viii) any other parties or entities the commission deems appropriate.

The commission shall prepare and submit an annual progress report concerning the commission's activities with appropriate recommendations, together with drafts of legislation necessary to carry out such recommendations, if any, not later than December 31. The commission shall meet not fewer than 4 times annually. The commission shall submit such annual report to the governor and the clerks of the senate and the house of representatives, who shall forward the same to the chairs of the joint committee on education, the chairs of the joint committee on mental health and substance abuse, the joint committee on children, families and persons with disabilities, and the house and senate committees on ways and means. The first 3 annual reports shall include recommendations regarding: (i) federal funding sources that may support statewide implementation of the safe and supportive schools framework; (ii) training programs and professional development for school staff on creating safe and supportive learning environments; (iii) improving access to clinically, culturally and linguistically appropriate services; and (iv) addressing the administrative functions necessary to carry out the implementation of the safe and supportive schools framework.

NOTE: The full text of the [Safe and Supportive Schools Framework Law](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2014/Chapter284) (G.L. c. 69, § 1P), within *An Act Relative to the Reduction of Gun Violence*, can be found on <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2014/Chapter284>.