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Year 1 State Report: Massachusetts

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Year 1 State Report: Massachusetts

Abstract

This report examines how the state of Massachusetts approached college- and career-ready standards implementation during a time of transition, as it develops the Next-Generation Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or the "Next-Gen MCAS," in 2015–2016. The transition will take place in 2016–2017, with full implementation of the next-generation assessment by the spring of 2017. For the purposes of this report and in keeping with C-SAIL's focus, the authors concentrate on implementation of Massachusetts' English language arts (ELA) and math standards.

Keywords

college and career-ready standards, implementation, curriculum, professional development, assessment, students with disabilities, english learners

Disciplines

Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research

Comments

The Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (C-SAIL), funded from July 2015 through 2020 by the Institute of Education Sciences, examined how college- and career-readiness (CCR) standards were implemented, if they improved student learning, and what instructional tools measured and supported their implementation.

C-SAIL

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YEAR 1 STATE REPORT:
MASSACHUSETTS
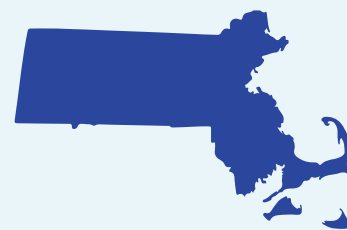
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About the Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (C-SAIL)

The Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (C-SAIL) examines how college- and career-ready standards are implemented, if they improve student learning, and what instructional tools measure and support their implementation. C-SAIL is led by Andy Porter, with a team of researchers from the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, University of Southern California Rossier School of Education, American Institutes for Research, and Vanderbilt Peabody College. The Center is funded through a grant from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) of the U.S. Department of Education.

Introduction

The Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (**C-SAIL**) examines how college- and career-readiness (CCR) standards are implemented, whether they improve student learning, and what instructional tools measure and support their implementation. Established in July 2015 and funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) of the U.S. Department of Education, C-SAIL has partnered with California, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Texas to explore their experiences with CCR standards-based reform, particularly with regard to students with disabilities (SWDs) and English language learners (ELLs).

This report examines how the state of Massachusetts is approaching CCR standards implementation during a time of transition, as it develops the Next-Generation Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or the "Next-Gen MCAS," in 2015–2016. The transition will take place in 2016–2017, with full implementation of the next-generation assessment by the spring of 2017. For the purposes of this report and in keeping with C-SAIL's focus, we concentrate on implementation of Massachusetts' English language arts (ELA) and math standards.

Massachusetts Academic Standards Timeline | At-A-Glance

The adoption, implementation, and revision of Massachusetts' CCR standards and assessments are part of an ongoing process spanning several years. Below is an overview of Massachusetts' timeline for this process, beginning with the year that CCR standards were first adopted:

Year CCR standards were adopted	The Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks in ELA and math were adopted in 2010.
Year(s) the CCR standards were fully implemented (all schools in the state were required to use the CCR standards.)	The Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks in ELA and math were fully implemented in the 2013–2014 school year.
Year(s) CCR standards were/will be revised	Before the final version of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks was officially adopted in December 2010, additions specific to the state were added in the fall of 2010 through collaboration between state officials, Framework Review Panels, educators, and content-area specialists. The additions include pre-kindergarten standards, recommended authors, and models to increase math rigor. Beginning February 2016, the state has convened an English language arts and Mathematics Review Panel to account for lessons learned since initial adoption of the standards and to make recommendations for future revisions. These recommendations will be brought before the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in the fall of 2016.

Year(s) CCR-aligned assessments were fully administered across the state	The MCAS or PARCC test was fully administered in 2014–2015 for grades 3–8 ELA and math.
Year(s) CCR-aligned assessments were/will be revised	Beginning in the spring of 2017, all districts will transition to the Next-Generation MCAS.
Major policy developments relevant to standards-based reform in the state	There have been ballot initiatives calling for changes to the curriculum frameworks and assessments. In July 2016, the Supreme Judicial Court barred one such effort that would have rescinded the state's vote to adopt Common Core and restored the previous state curriculum standards.

Data Analysis | Our Framework

Drawing on interviews with four key state officials across various offices of the Massachusetts Department of Education, the report synthesizes and analyzes those responses using the *policy attributes theory* (Porter, Floden, Freeman, Schmidt, & Schwille, 1988), a theoretical framework positing five attributes related to successful policy implementation. The following descriptions of each policy attribute guided this analysis:

- **SPECIFICITY**: How extensive, detailed, and prescriptive a policy is. The explicitness of the goals, guidelines, and resources may help schools implement policies with a greater degree of fidelity.

- **AUTHORITY**: How policies gain legitimacy and status through persuasion (e.g., rules or law, historical practice, or charismatic leaders). Policies have authority when state and district leaders, parents, community members, and other stakeholders devote time and resources to the reform initiative, which sends the clear signal that the endeavor is an institutional priority. Policies are also deemed authoritative when stakeholders participate in the decision-making processes, when they demonstrate their investment in the reform, or when they believe that the reform sets high standards for norms related to race, ethnicity, or income.

- **CONSISTENCY**: The extent to which various policies are aligned and how policies relate to each other or support each other.

- **POWER**: How policies are reinforced and enacted through systems of rewards and/or sanctions.

- **STABILITY**: The extent to which policies change or remain constant over time.

The report focuses on five focal areas—standards and curriculum, assessment, professional development (PD), English language learners (ELLs), and students with disabilities (SWDs). We report on each focal area through the lens of the policy attributes to help readers see how state officials identified areas of strengths and challenges related to standards implementation in

Massachusetts. Given the limited nature of our data, however, we do not purport to provide the full depth and breadth of the department's work toward standards-based reform. This report is therefore a snapshot of the state's efforts in implementing CCR-aligned reforms related to curriculum, assessments, PD, ELLs, and SWDs.

We will integrate these findings with data from interviews with three districts in Massachusetts, which we will conduct in the fall and winter of 2017. Further, we plan to conduct state and district interviews for the next 4 years, ending in the spring/summer of 2020; data from these interviews will be continually integrated into our analyses.

Executive Summary

SPECIFICITY

In both ELA and math, the 2011 MA Curriculum Frameworks call for an increased focus on "evidence building." In ELA, this involves students writing in response to texts they read. In math, this involves students explaining how they arrive at their solutions. The ELA standards follow an anchor standards approach; common anchors span grade levels, but individual grade-level standards specify how students progress on the anchors from year to year. The math standards involve focus areas in each grade that do span multiple grades, but those focus areas shift and fold into other focus areas as students progress. *Specificity* appeared in the interviews most significantly regarding the balances between state-level control and state-level support. State officials have made available to educators frameworks and companion materials related to standards and curriculum and have focused PD initiatives on the standards. State officials consistently explained that educator and administrator input and collaboration were essential. Overall, the state aims to provide specific support rather than definitive prescription; however, providing the appropriate level of support to create consistent educator-, school-, and district-level implementation of standards-based curriculum and PD was noted as a challenge. The Resource Guide to the MA Curriculum Frameworks for SWDs, which focuses on implementation of the MCAS alternative assessment, is made available for both **ELA** and **math** and shows a balance between support and prescription. This continually updated curricular document provides educators of SWDs with specific instructional resources without being prescriptive. The state has also put forth PD in collaboration with the **WIDA Consortium** around the alignment of curricular frameworks, assessments, and English language proficiency standards for ELLs.

AUTHORITY

Collaboration between state-level officials, district and school administrators, and educators was also emphasized as particularly significant in creating an overall sense of "buy in" toward the curricular frameworks and assessments. State officials described collaborating with educators on mapping the assessments to the curriculum and then sustaining those collaborative efforts through an extensive and ongoing communication network between state officials and local administrators involving both digital and in-person dissemination of information and resources. The state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) organizes fall and spring convenings devoted to the PD of educators and administrators and sets the focus for these convenings. The **fall 2015 convening** focused on curriculum and instruction; the **spring 2016 convening** focused on evaluation. At the spring 2016 convening, about 150 MA districts were represented. State officials described centering these annual state convenings on local principals as "instructional leaders." This contributes to the *authority* of the policy, as principals are then more motivated to embrace and implement state initiatives relating to standards-aligned curriculum and assessments. New assessments were articulated as building upon measures that were already strong—"going from good to great," as one state official termed it—which also bolsters the status of the new frameworks and assessments by focusing on positive aspects.

CONSISTENCY

As a state that emphasizes "local control" over the implementation of standards, Massachusetts faces the challenge of systematically aligning its **Curricular Frameworks**, **Educator Evaluation** program, and statewide assessments—all while trying to work with districts to ensure this consistency is integrated at the scale of actual schools and classrooms. Officials indicated that, to date, there have been challenges in bringing these moving parts into alignment. For example, one administrator suggested that even though the decisions to create the **Next-Generation MCAS test** and rework the Educator Evaluation Framework were part of the larger strategy to bring more coherence across these components, they were likely disorienting for individual districts, which experienced them as disparate changes in a "whirlwind of new initiatives." Despite these "growing pains," state officials indicated that they were impressed with districts' abilities to adapt and to help make these systems work. Further, they indicated that the state has been taking intentional steps to make standards, assessments, and educator evaluation more "linked and integrated." The "review and refinement" efforts, for example, build on existing initiatives to strengthen implementation and work to factor in new lessons learned from the previous 5 years of implementation. One administrator mentioned the possibility of an internal alignment study of the Next-Generation MCAS that includes attention to English language proficiency standards and alternative assessments for SWDs. Another official indicated that the state has included colleagues in higher education on implementation committees as well—something that not only provides additional perspectives in shaping how policies are linked across schools and universities, but also helps to strengthen teacher education programs within the state. One challenge that remains, given the "hands off" approach of the state, is how PD can support implementation. While district officials mentioned they have attempted to conduct surveys to learn how PD is being used, results of these efforts have been mixed, as these programs are largely organized at the district and school levels.

POWER

Massachusetts administrators repeatedly emphasized the "local control" of districts within the framework of state policy. Given this "hands off" approach, *power* in the state implementation process appears to be less linked to direct rewards and sanctions than to steady, systemic pressures that "encourage good implementation." Officials stressed that the Curricular Frameworks were largely implemented through individual districts and that assessments aided in measuring the success of this process. Those we interviewed described assessments as a "temperature check" and a "light touch"—which suggests their role is not intended to be punitive when applied to teacher, school, or district evaluations. However, while assessments may not be the primary basis for such evaluations, they are directly and indirectly brought to bear on these calculations. For all educators, the results of student assessments are one required source of evidence in the Educator Evaluation framework. Likewise, for individual schools and districts, state standardized

student assessment results are used to determine progress toward narrowing proficiency gaps, and, in turn, are used in the "levelling" system that indicates what degree of state intervention and support is necessary. They can also serve as an indirect pressure among school and district stakeholders, as these accountability and assistance levels are made publicly available through websites and reports. Even so, state administrators noted that these analytics are only intended to bring performance and growth into evaluation discussions—not to become the deciding factor in how a teacher, school, or district is evaluated.

STABILITY

In November 2015, the Massachusetts State Board of Education, at the recommendation of Commissioner Mitchell Chester, voted to move away from the use of the PARCC test in favor of a state-developed alternative—a decision that received national news coverage given Chester's previous involvement with PARCC. Aspects of the PARCC assessment were, however, incorporated into the state's updated assessment. In light of this shift in statewide assessment strategy, it is not surprising that "stability" surfaces as a precarious balancing act in the present policy climate.

There is a sense among administrators we interviewed that reforms are meant to be adaptive: that standards, assessments, and curricula ought to change in response to new information from schools and districts. The Next-Generation MCAS is an example of one such pivot, as is the convening of an English language arts and Mathematics Review Panel in 2016 to recommend revisions based on lessons learned in the first 5 years of adoption. This flexible approach is paired with a sense of optimism that these changes will continue to improve the quality of education as students "rise and meet" the demands of these shifts on higher order thinking. In this way, the reform itself—implementation of aligned standards and assessments—remains stable, even as the ways it is enacted fluctuates.

The larger state context continues to exert pressures on this sense of stability, however. State administrators acknowledged that changes and challenges in the alignment of Curricular Frameworks, Educator Evaluation systems, and assessments may create a perceived sense of instability at the district level. Likewise, certain local groups and union leaders have spoken out against assessment and evaluation strategies—efforts that have manifested in small ballot initiatives to reframe the policy structure. As such, there are not only tensions in how short-term changes are communicated to various stakeholders in the context of the long-term policy goals, but also more fundamental disagreements about the efficacy of the policy itself. Despite this, state officials indicated that these tensions remain tenuously balanced, as the shifts have not yet led to the mass opt-outs and refusals that have surfaced in other states.

Standards & Curriculum

SPECIFICITY

While curricular implementation of the standards remains within district control and is therefore nonprescriptive in terms of targeted instructional shifts, the state does engage in direct facilitation of teachers in their work on curriculum units specifically tied to the standards. One state official described this collaboration around the standards and curriculum as follows:

> We did work with teachers and they did most of the work, but we facilitated the development of these 125 some odd units and really tried to illustrate what the standards might look like in practice from an understanding-by-design perspective. In no way do we sell those as what the curriculum should be, we put them out there as examples.

The state has ensured that frameworks and companion pieces that give further detail in terms of supporting teachers are available; however, the implementation of the curriculum itself remains the task of individual teachers and educators at their district levels.

There is some sense at the state level, however, that a challenge remains in addressing the needs of teachers and principals for additional support in their implementations of ELA and mathematics content. This is especially true around instructional shifts reflected in Common Core-aligned curriculum frameworks, according to one state official. **The 2011 MA Curriculum Frameworks** consist of the adopted Common Core standards and an additional 15% of content that is specific to the state.

State officials consistently described the overall aim of the 2011 MA Curriculum Frameworks as becoming more "robust" and more challenging in terms of higher order thinking skills. One state official articulated the role of increased attention to evidence building and conceptualization of process in terms of the shifts in ELA and math content:

> I think the standards, the Curriculum Frameworks, that we have are more robust than they used to be. I think they're more demanding. I think particularly when it comes to some of the curriculum shifts like using informational texts to make arguments, like having to garner evidence to build a case in the case of ELA. Or in math, the more conceptual approach to understanding math and teaching math.

This conceptual approach in math involves "stronger emphasis in student dialogue around mathematics," with students being able to explain their thought processes about mathematical problems and arguments. More specifically, a state official clarified that "using real world examples and models" is integral to this added attention to process and explanation of it.

Similar to focusing on incorporating textual evidence in ELA writing, this emphasis on dialogue involving "real-world" examples in mathematics was seen by state officials as fitting in with notions of college- and career-readiness (CCR):

> The end goal is to develop the skills and knowledge students need for any range of opportunities after high school whether college, career or anything. So [both the ELA and math frameworks] take that as the operating principle and both have set out an expectation

or articulation of what those skills and what that knowledge is. For mathematics that's somewhere around that Algebra 2 level that includes a blend of conceptual understanding as well as procedural fluency, the ability to manipulate mathematics and the practices or the standards for mathematical practice which have to do with a little bit of the habit to persevere and identifying patterns and those kind of things. For ELA that has to do with reading, writing, speaking, listening in both literature and informational text in technical subjects and really articulating how those work together, not just in isolation, but how they work together.

This aim for CCR was described as underlying the progression of the ELA and math standards despite their distinct approaches. The ELA curriculum frameworks follow an anchor standards approach, in which common anchor standards span grade levels but individual grade-level standards more specifically articulate mastery within and progression across grade levels. The math curriculum frameworks involve focus areas: "...they have focus areas in each grade which span multiple grades but then fold into other focus areas as you go forward, so the topics are not the same every grade but there are a purposeful sequencing of or progression of topics across grades." This approach in mathematics was described by a state official as a significant shift from prior standards that incorporated more repetition; the current math curriculum frameworks aim for mastery within a grade level.

AUTHORITY

The policy attribute of authority is connected to the notion of local control and the state's nonprescriptive policies about how teachers implement standards. The curriculum exemplars discussed above, which provide specific instructional plans and other resources that can be used by educators, are ultimately created for and with fellow educators, and the **supports offered on the state website** were also created with educators in the field. As noted above, the hands-off approach to implementing the standards at the local level together with the system of educator collaboration that works to create more specific curriculum exemplars results in what state officials describe as a sense of overall "buy in" toward the standards. One state administrator described this buy in among educators by stating that "overall the districts have bought into the standards... and have worked diligently to... make sure their curriculum is supportive of them…, and their systems… are working towards it." In addition, state officials commented that even "our top state organizations like the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents or even the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, I mean two big organizations support…these and don't have any issues with these."

State officials further shared their determinations that by choosing to have MA go "its own way"—for example, by moving away from the PARCC tests—the standards and accompanying assessments are more likely to have greater staying power. This longevity will in turn lead to a continuation of the sense of buy-in felt by officials.

Involved in these shifts in standards, curriculum, and assessments is another concept that relates to authority—that of building on the strengths of the curriculum frameworks, instruction, and assessment. According to one state official:

> The next-generation statewide assessment that we're embarking on right now, the fact that

we're doing this review and refinement of these current ELA and math frameworks, also sends a good message that we like what we see, we're just looking if there are some lessons learned in the last 5 to 6 years that we can tweak these, if you will, to make them better, remind them to make them better, but we're not throwing them out and starting at square one, we like what we have. Is there some way that we've learned lessons that we can improve these upon what's already good and is already pre-existing.

Focusing on strengths and viewing refinement of standards and curriculum as "going from good to great" bolsters the status of the frameworks now and into the future.

Officials also noted that, despite staying away from "much of the political push and pull about standards and testing," resistance and backlash have started to build over recent years. For example, in 2016 there was a proposed ballot initiative on whether or not the state should revert to pre-2010 curriculum standards, or pre-Common Core standards. This particular initiative was described by state officials as a potentially significant challenge given that local districts and their teachers have "made investments in...teaching the standards that are aligned to the 2010 standards that are aligned to the Common Core." Despite being barred in July of 2016 before the November ballot, this potential initiative raised challenges in terms of stability.

CONSISTENCY

State officials recognized the importance of having an assessment that tests what the frameworks teach:

> I think that classroom practice should be aligned. It should be aligned to the curriculum framework, which is what we call our standards. And I think that ... the assessments that we issue are signals of what we value and so the assessments are aligned to the curriculum frameworks and therefore, they should be a fair measure of the extent to which teachers are implementing our curriculum frameworks.

One state official described the state's standards and curriculum, assessments, and educator evaluation system as three significant initiatives that have been "underway...in the past 5 years." However, when asked to what extent these initiatives support one another and push in the same direction, this state official articulated the sense that "it's been a whirlwind of new initiatives" and that, as a result, the state's school districts have not felt the initiatives as particularly cohesive. The official continued:

> I do think that the districts will describe it as feeling like there has not been enough cohesion from the Department in the past few years. And we're trying to do a better job of integrating these things because they're obviously all linked and integrated, but I think districts have experienced them, particularly I would say starting in like 2010 ... or 2011, 2012, they've experienced them as being kind of disparate, and so I think districts would say if the Department could be more cohesive, it would be helpful to us.

While state officials do recognize that they are "pretty distant at the state level," there is the belief that the state has solid "levers" that officials believe "help to encourage ... good implementations of the curricular standards."

This widely significant notion of local control within the state has created issues of consistency in terms of implementation at the district level, with particular impact noted for school district leaders, who were described as feeling frustrated at times about having to "create some of the systems and components of the system themselves." While local control of standards-aligned curriculum "in many ways gave [school district leaders] the control and the uniqueness," it also "left them to do the work in many instances too." This proved a challenging task for individual districts that necessarily resulted in variation across districts in regard to what one state official termed "calibration," or the "different levels of thinking" and varying stances toward, approaches to, and amounts of adoption.

POWER

In interviews with state officials, the attributes of power and consistency came across as closely linked. One state official in particular touched upon this link with the following statement:

> Yeah, I mean we want to be ... incentivizing the right things.… deep investigation, you know, well rounded, implementation of well-rounded curricula.... And as we move towards a stronger set, more robust set of standards, the accountability system ... the sort of the system used for classifying schools and districts, measuring performance at schools and districts needs to keep up.

Given that the implementation of the standards-aligned curriculum remains locally controlled, as noted above, state officials confirmed that there are no direct "rewards or sanctions" that are connected with those local-level implementations.

While recognizing that it is challenging to rigorously link implementation of standards to student achievement, the state does engage in several mechanisms as a means of determining implementation progress, including through the annual statewide assessments that are themselves aligned with the standards. The implementation of the standards is also a component of the state's district review process; one indicator in that review process is to what extent the standards are "aligned, consistently delivered, and continuously improving curriculum." The accountability measures for school districts classify schools according to five "accountability and assistance levels." Level 1 includes schools "making sufficient progress toward narrowing proficiency gaps." and Levels 4 and 5 include the lowest-performing schools. Districts are classified into one of the five levels based on their lowest-performing schools. In terms of rewards and sanctions at the district level regarding the standards and their implementation, one state official described this system as a "reverse incentive": "the incentive is the high, high, high levels receive relatively little support from the state.." As schools "fall down the levels," however, there are subsequently increased "levels of intervention…and support."

Standards implementation is also measured at the teacher level through the state's educator evaluation system. This system includes two ratings, a summative performance rating, which "assesses the educator's practice against four standards of effective teaching or administrator leadership practice, as well as progress toward attainment of his/her professional practice and student learning goals," and a student impact rating, which is "a determination of an educator's impact on student learning, as measured by patterns and trends in student learning, growth, and/or achievement." In regard to summative performance rating, one of the four standards

of effective teaching is "curriculum, planning, and assessment," which is considered a direct reflection of a teacher's ability to implement the standards in his or her classroom.

STABILITY

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) will bring about changes to MA's school, district, and educator accountability systems. In particular, the state will place greater emphasis on its English language proficiency assessment (discussed in more detail in the English language learner section, below). In addition to these shifts in accountability systems, there was a sense among state officials that changes in standards and curriculum and in assessments are and will continue to be ongoing:

> But I mean assessments change as time goes on . . . we had old standards and then we had to adjust the assessments to meet the new standards … things change all the time but ... as long as it's required we'll continue to have the best assessments that we can.

This exemplifies the overall sense that shifts in policies are seen as positive for students and for the state, with one state official citing the over 20 years of educational reform within the state as evidence of students' abilities to "rise and meet" the more robust standards and their aim for higher order thinking, as alluded to earlier.

Most broadly, significant changes to the ELA standards were described as involving increased attention to evidence building, with students required to write in response to actual texts rather than in response to prompts related to the text. As mentioned earlier, the ELA standards are organized around an anchor standards approach, in which common anchors span all grades but each individual grade-level standard details how students progress across the grades.

The transition to the new ELA standards was described as smoother overall in comparison to the transition to the new math standards, which was described as a slower and more in-depth process. For the math frameworks, the major shift was described as moving from having standards repeated from year to year in the past to teaching the standards for mastery within the particular school year they are introduced. As previously discussed, in the shift to the new math frameworks, there is a greater emphasis on how students arrive at their answers as well as on using real-world examples with the students.

State officials shared their belief that if teaching is aligned to these aims of incorporating tasks that are more "real-world," or authentic, and of promoting higher order thinking, then students will become even more globally competitive. One state administrator stated:

> I think for Massachusetts, we take a lot of pride in being number one, and so we're always reflecting on the work that we've done, the work that we're doing. And we're always asking ourselves how we can improve, how we can better, how we can do things better for our kids.

The fact that Massachusetts ranked as having the number one public school system within the United States and is seen as internationally competitive was described as unsurprising by one state official, who attributed this success to the ability within the state's department of education to capitalize on policy changes:

> We've seen students rise to meet them [expectations of new standards] and . . . I think our own state's history of education reform, and our reliance on standards and assessments to

leverage stronger instruction and the data that…has shown the success of that strategy.

Within this focus on leveraging change and being open to new initiatives is the recognition of the importance of "being sensitive to the field" as the shifts across standards and curriculum, assessments, and the educator evaluator system have been both individually and collectively "an enormous undertaking, not only for the state...but in the field." As one state official put it, there are still people "working in the trenches trying to build curriculum" around the new frameworks. Ongoing challenges include attempting to capitalize on policy changes in ways that most benefit learners while balancing attention to the significant work still being undertaken by educators, administrators, and state officials, as well as being attuned to "the cry of too much testing" emerging within the state.

Assessment

SPECIFICITY

Massachusetts uses annual statewide assessments in all districts and schools serving grades 3–8 and 10 as an indicator of successful implementation of standards. These assessments are connected with the state's Curriculum Frameworks—the Common Core-aligned standards that were implemented in 2010. For example, administrators noted updates to the state's original MCAS (hereafter referred to as the legacy MCAS) test to reflect new standards related to listening skills in English language arts and more rigorous pre-math standards in the elementary grades.

In November 2015, the state board voted to make amendments to the existing assessments, which has brought some uncertainty as districts prepare for the transition. Beginning in January 2016, the state began developing a new assessment that would combine the strengths of the legacy MCAS with those elements of the PARCC test that were more attuned to college- and career-readiness. The resulting test, called the Next-Generation MCAS, will include writing assessments at all grade levels (previous iterations included them only at grades 4, 7, and 10) and will include attention to Massachusetts-specific standards that are part of the Curricular Frameworks. Between 2014 and 2016, districts administered either the legacy MCAS test or the PARCC test; however, beginning in the spring of 2017, all districts will transition to the Next-Generation MCAS. As the new test is designed to be taken online, districts will gradually phase in computerized assessments—offering a digital test in grades 4 and 8 in 2017 and adding two grades each subsequent year with the goal of fully transitioning online in 2019.

Modifications for these assessments are available to support students in need of special accommodations. For example, while the Next-Generation MCAS will make computers the default testing interface, the state will continue to offer paper tests for students who need them. In keeping with federal and state laws that require English language learners to be assessed on their proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, beginning in the 2012–2013 school year the state began offering the **ACCESS** for ELLs test. This assessment is based on **WIDA's 2012 Amplification of English Language Development Standards**, which are grounded in research in language development and state content standards. Likewise, additional modifications are available for students with disabilities who are unable to take the test with standard

accommodations. In these cases, the **MCAS-Alt test** is provided, which assesses students based on portfolios of annually collected materials, work samples, instructional data, and video recordings. In 2015, the total number of students who took the MCAS-Alt test was 8,650, or 8.9% of the state's SWDs and 1.7% of the total tested population.

AUTHORITY

Following the initial adoption of Common Core-aligned standards in 2010, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education built up the authority of subsequent assessment strategy through regional conversations and convenings that were spread out over a 3-year implementation timeline. Administrators highlighted shared efforts in professional development and curriculum mapping between 2011 and 2014 that were, in part, designed to get districts "on board" with the process. Such efforts continue to be sustained through the state's communication network. This involves sending out bi-weekly emails to principals and test coordinators, as well as releasing documents and student work to support implementation. One representative mentioned that officials frequently "go out on the road" to train principals in test administration and in the use of alternative assessments.

The state also establishes advisory committees and workgroups comprising testing experts, educators, parents, and students. Along with the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, these groups help make key decisions related to assessments. For example, after districts were initially given the choice between the legacy MCAS and the PARCC test, input from these committees helped make the decision to break from PARCC to develop the Next-Generation MCAS. Administrators highlighted that these same committees would be helping with the transition process to the new test as well. In many ways, the process of advocating for the Next-Generation MCAS has also involved building on the existing authority of the legacy exam. While some stakeholders in districts have indicated that the existing MCAS is not broken or in need of adjustment, state officials emphasize that the move to the new assessment is about taking the MCAS "from good to great"—adjusting the assessment to include things they have learned during the 5 years since initial adoption, while retaining the "quality, rigor, and level of transparency" of the original.

CONSISTENCY

The implementation processes have largely revolved around the alignment of the state Curricular Frameworks, the Educator Evaluation system, and the assessment. While the timeline and process of this alignment has been structured, state administrators acknowledged that districts themselves likely felt that yearly changes—not to mention the decision to abandon the PARCC exam in favor of a state-designed alternate—were a kind of "whirlwind" of disparate reforms rather than a cohesive processing of bringing standards, assessments, and evaluations into alignment. One way that they have tried to bring more cohesion to this process is by articulating the continuity in the Next-Generation MCAS exam. This has involved assembling "review and refinement" efforts that do not throw out the ideas and perspectives of the legacy MCAS but instead build on them and bring their core components in line with lessons learned since the initial adoption of the current Curricular Frameworks.

According to state officials, one of the state's principal responsibilities in developing the

assessment is ensuring its alignment to standards. One administrator illustrated this by saying that if the assessment was strong but not well-aligned, the state would risk having districts and teachers more attentive to the assessment than the standards themselves. Another emphasized that this was particularly important in the Massachusetts context, where the department does not take a prescriptive approach in teaching the standards. Because the state aims to be more hands-off, they see the assessment as one of the touchstones that provide a glimpse into whether standards are being successfully implemented at the district and classroom levels. With that in mind, one administrator also mentioned the double bind the state finds itself in: on the one hand, there is a growing public faction that is concerned with the over-testing of students; and yet, there are also those who are concerned that facets of the standards are not presently being assessed as they should be. Balancing these demands can be a challenge to addressing issues of consistency. Under the MCAS the state had conducted an internal alignment study that examined how the standards and assessments supported one another. Officials indicated that there have been recent conversations about conducting a similar study after the Next-Generation MCAS is implemented in the spring 2017. In particular, this new study would include more attention to the alignment of English language proficiency standards as well as the alternative assessments to be used with SWDs.

Regarding aligning the assessments with the state's Educator Evaluation system, the procedures for organizing feedback for teachers, schools, and districts have not always been consistent. One administrator noted the "growing pains" around this particular process, and remarked on the impressiveness of the districts themselves in sustaining efforts to give meaningful feedback to educators. Another official suggested that the challenges associated with aligning educator evaluation and the assessment were also linked to the distance created by the state's "hands-off" approach to managing districts. For example, assessment scores are part of the "conversation" in teacher effectiveness, but they are not factored into a formal measurement for teacher evaluation. With the development of new data-tracking efforts in the state, including the recent purchase of a large-scale database, there is a sense that the metrics for providing feedback to stakeholders, including teachers, are becoming more precise and widespread.

Along with the alignment of the Curricular Frameworks, Educator Evaluations, and assessments, state officials also identified ways that they have worked to extend these changes into higher education. Most immediately, the adoption of new standards has meant updating expectations for teacher licensure programs so that those entering the classroom are equipped with knowledge of the standards and feedback mechanisms, as well as the expectations associated with each. Another official identified partners in higher education that have helped in the larger processes of alignment—from building the statewide assessment to framing the discussions about competency determination and college- and career-readiness. In recent efforts for the "refinement and review" of standards, for example, five higher education representatives sat on the review panel. In this way, administrators see the work of alignment not only as a process of internal consistency but also of extending this beyond K–12 contexts.

POWER

In emphasizing the state's hands-off approach to district decision making, administrators pointed to the assessment and its alignment with the Educator Evaluation framework as one way of

understanding how the implementation process was working in actual classrooms. Officials did not discuss these in explicit terms of rewards or sanctions, but rather referred to them as a sort of "dip stick" for checking conditions of implementation. As one administrator noted, "If you really want to measure how well standards are being implemented in a classroom, you've got be in that classroom." As such, this administrator pointed to assessments as an "interim check" that helps to bridge the distance between state and district operations. Nevertheless, officials did discuss the pressures that the alignment of assessments and educator evaluation might place on teachers. One referred to the process as a "lever to encourage good implementation of curricular standards." Importantly, this leverage is not tied formally to teachers' annual or bi-annual review but instead brings data related to student growth into the conversation about teacher effectiveness. One official illustrated that these conversations did not need to be punitive, saying, "You can be a very highly rated teacher and have low growth; or a low-rated teacher and have high growth."

While some officials emphasized that this alignment was a "light touch," assessment results are not entirely inconsequential to educator evaluation. The educator evaluation system is designed to give each Massachusetts teachers two ratings. The first is a summative performance rating, which assesses the educator's practice against four standards of effective teaching as well as progress toward attainment of their professional practice and learning goals. The second is a student impact rating, which is a determination of the educator's impact on student learning, as measured by patterns and trends in growth and/or achievement. These two ratings are used together to determine the type and length of a teacher's "educator plan" – ranging from a 1- or 2-year, self-directed growth plan for exemplary and proficient instructors, to an improvement plan for educators labelled "unsatisfactory."

While not explicitly used to reward or sanction, assessment data is part of the state's larger system of school and district accountability. The state assessment system was modified in 2002 under No Child Left Behind and then again under the Race to the Top waiver system initiated under Education Secretary Arne Duncan in 2011. Massachusetts' accountability system measures each school's and district's progress toward the goal of reducing proficiency gaps by half between the 2010–2011 and 2016–2017 school years. In the present version, the state uses its Progress and Performance Index (PPI) and school percentiles to classify schools into one of five accountability and assistance levels. Schools making sufficient progress toward narrowing proficiency gaps are classified into Level 1, while the state's lowest-performing schools are classified into Levels 4 and 5. Districts are classified into one of these tiers based on the level of their lowest-performing school. Districts that demonstrate low performance are prioritized for on-site accountability reviews, and the findings may lead to the district being identified as underperforming (Level 4) or chronically underperforming (Level 5). At the other end of the spectrum, each year the state also identifies and celebrates "commendation schools" that demonstrate high achievement, growth, or progress toward narrowing proficiency gaps.

This assessment data used to categorize school and district performance is also made publicly available. Further, the state provides parents with reports and hosts a **public website** with information about the performance of particular schools and districts. Recently, the state has also developed its mechanisms for internal data collection and analysis. In particular, it has secured a data warehouse called Edwin Analytics, which is accessible to all schools and districts in the

state. This has involved a gradual process of scaling up the use of this database. In 2015, there were 5,000 users, and at the time of our interviews in early 2016, there were nearly 20,000. State officials emphasized that access to this database would not only provide a means of generating more precise educator-level reports for classrooms, but could also be used to look across multiple classrooms for a single teacher. In this way, administrators see the database as a means to get data into the hands of different stakeholders and, by extension, to facilitate better planning at the district, school, classroom, and student levels.

STABILITY

Given the recent events that have led to the development of a state-specific assessment, it is not surprising that some administrators reported a lack of perceived stability—particularly at the district level, where these changes may appear less as a coherent process of flexible implementation and more as a disparate set of loosely connected initiatives. Nevertheless, officials were clear that the questions associated with this transition were worthwhile in light of the opportunities the process presents. One administrator noted that there was a shared sense that the PARCC Consortium was dwindling to the point that it may not be viable beyond the next few years—an observation that suggests the present uncertainties involved in developing a new state assessment may actually make the policy more stable in the long run. Another official noted that flexibility and adaptability were an important part of standards-based reform—that is, standards and assessments are not meant to remain static, but should adapt with changing conditions and new information. In this sense, the changes in assessment could actually be understood as a stable facet of long-term standards-based implementation.

Even so, many state administrators spoke of some perceived unrest related to assessments that were less tied to the PARCC or MCAS specifically, but to the current climate of high-stakes testing. One official expressed that a few vocal groups want to eliminate testing statewide, though the official noted it was unclear what the size of this faction is or if it is growing. Another mentioned that the leader of the Massachusetts Teachers' Association, one of the state's largest educator unions, had spoken out against both state-wide testing and its ties to educator evaluation. To date, one ballot initiative on this issue has reached the state's Supreme Judicial Court. This initiative called for rescinding the Board's initial vote to adopt the Common Core and reinstating the state's previous curriculum standards, but it was struck down by the court in July 2016. Should similar efforts gain traction, they could have an impact on how the state aligns, conducts, and reports its assessments—which, in turn, would have an effect on the long- and short-term stability of the policy.

Some administrators suggested that these pockets of resistance to state testing should be understood as part of the larger waxing and waning of support around similar policy efforts. One cited the decline in public disavowal since the initial announcements related to adoption and implementation, suggesting that the present resistance may, likewise, be temporary. Some officials expressed that some of the outcry was the result of misinformation. For example, many who voice concerns about Common Core broadly do so in a manner that conflates the standards, assessments, and the actual taught curricula—all of which are distinct, even if they are aligned. While administrators stated that they hope to improve communication about the distinctions between these policy dimensions, there is a broad sense that the public is ultimately supportive of

the assessments. As one administrator noted, Massachusetts has not seen the kind of opting out or refusal that other states have witnessed.

Professional Development

SPECIFICITY

In keeping with its emphasis on local control, MA does not prescribe any particular types of PD activities or approaches to implementation. Despite this hands-off approach to how districts execute PD activities, the state has been deeply involved in developing detailed PD initiatives and content. For example, state officials described how the state carried out regional sessions with school districts for several years to map curriculum and develop exemplars as part of the Race to the Top initiative. In addition, in 2014–2015 the state funded PD about the content of standards and accompanying instructional shifts and methods; this PD was offered through various vendors. Officials describe these initiatives as having since faded, leaving the aforementioned higher education institutions to "carry that forward." More recently, the state has been encouraging districts to implement high-quality PD through Title IIA, a federal grant program intended to increase student achievement through district initiatives focusing on teacher preparation and training. The state hopes to leverage this grant program to strengthen curriculum and instruction, bolster the effectiveness of educators, and draw on data in ways that work toward supporting student achievement.

State officials also described ongoing "convenings" and initiatives happening within the state, in particular "a really strong early initiative going right now that's involving a good number of our districts" in the area of early literacy. At the most recent of these fall and spring convenings, one state official asserted that about 1,000 educators attended, with the state setting the specific focus of the fall convening on curriculum and instruction and the spring convening on evaluation; the state official described these sessions as helping to support the professional development of staff, including teachers but also extending to administrators, demonstrating that the state sees its role in regard to PD as supportive rather than prescriptive.

AUTHORITY

The state seeks to legitimate its PD efforts through buy in from local education leaders. While a large number of educators attend the state's convenings, described above, one state official said that "the main audience for the fall and spring convenings, they're actually educational leaders," further specifying that they are "curriculum and instruction leaders or school and district administrators." Making these local leaders the focus of the state's PD efforts allows state officials to "try to get that kind of scale," or that kind of locally initiated and maintained "buy in" toward PD initiatives that the state supports in topic and focus. The notion of local school district principals, in particular, as "instructional leaders" was described as especially significant within the state, as this motivates principals to buy into areas of importance identified by the state and thus be "on the cutting edge." This in turn can work to legitimate the related PD initiatives as they are implemented and experienced by local educators.

CONSISTENCY

The specific PD initiatives previously funded and executed by the state also connect to the attribute of consistency. The state's most direct and specific work around PD—the efforts related to the Race to the Top initiative described above—was directly aligned to the standards. One state official described the purpose of this PD work coordinated by the state as creating exemplars "that would help the district think more systematically about how these standards play out across grades."

The concept of local control mentioned throughout the interviews is also significant in relation to the consistency of PD initiatives and their implementation across individual districts. One state official recollected previous workings in the field, discussing the ways that individual districts' curriculum directors both created and carried out PD internally as well as in collaboration with curriculum directors of other school districts:

> I mean first of all you did things internally…your . . . director of curriculum established . . . a variety of different venues, a variety of different activities...to help support the work in this . . . there's that piece, and then you also have what we call collaborators across…the state and so very often job alike groups would meet and very often that was our curriculum directors of different districts that would also meet with the support of the collaborative and they would regroup and...organize...different venues and different events for folks that care.

While this locally and regionally based collaboration was described in terms of some school districts that "just naturally work together," the state official clearly indicated that these efforts "really had nothing to do with the state," pointing to a potential disconnect in terms of consistency.

This disconnect seemed to be confirmed by another state official who described the difficulties that the state has in systematically evaluating PD due to this regional and/or district initiation and organization. One state official commented that the local and regional initiation and execution of PD makes it challenging for officials at the state level to more systematically compare across those districts what types of PD have been focused on, what PD activities have been carried out, and what the impact of the completed PD is within and across districts. This final point about impact is perhaps most important given state officials' assertions pertaining to standards and curriculum that the state is interested in outcomes rather than processes.

The state's Professional Development Point (PDP) Eligibility system, which provides clear criteria for what the state considers high-quality PD and awards educators for their participation in PD activities that meet those criteria, was mentioned as one means of state oversight into district PD. One state official did recognize that the PDP system is "imperfect," however. State officials also mentioned efforts to survey districts about their PD initiatives, but these were said to have been met with "mixed results." Because PD efforts are "not organized by the state at this point," the state lacks a clear and direct means of determining consistency or inconsistency of PD topics, approaches, and outcomes.

English Language Learners (ELLs)

SPECIFICITY

English language learners (ELLs) receive additional support under standards-based reform. Administrators expressed that the need for such support has become especially clear with the rising numbers of immigrant students who are coming to Massachusetts cities. One challenge associated with this has been the influx of undocumented students, as they are attending school but are not presently counted in terms of funding formulas. Another challenge has been aligning standards and assessments related to English proficiency. Massachusetts' involvement with the WIDA Consortium has been one way of addressing these challenges. WIDA's aim is to help college- and career-readiness standards be more consistent with the English language proficiency (ELP) standards. As a part of this consortium, Massachusetts provides teachers with training to better support ELLs. Likewise, the state assessments are also adapted to be aligned with ELP standards in the form of the ACCESS for ELLs test.

AUTHORITY

State administrators highlight that one of the primary ways for building consensus around its policies for ELL teaching and learning in relation to college- and career-readiness standards has been to provide resources, training, and professional development. One administrator said the state's role is to ensure "that all teachers who have an ELL student have a suite of strategies or teaching tools to support the language development of those students." Another emphasized that more than 35,000 teachers have been trained both online and in person through the RETELL program and other professional development opportunities to support ELL students. In these workshops, teachers are given resources for designing unit plans, creating lessons, and differentiating instruction in a manner that incorporates both the Curricular Frameworks as well as the English language proficiency standards.

CONSISTENCY

As part of the WIDA consortium, there is a strong emphasis on the alignment of standards and assessments with regard to ELLs. As a 38-state organization, WIDA takes on the work of aligning the English language standards with academic standards and documenting this alignment so that states are not responsible for independently mapping these standards onto one another. Nor do states need to create a separate test aligned with these standards. Beginning in the 2012–2013 school year, Massachusetts began using the ACCESS for ELLs test, which is based on WIDA's 2012 Amplification of English Language Development Standards. Through its involvement with WIDA, the state is able to maintain an alignment of its standards and assessments.

Even so, some administrators expressed that the state was working to improve its instruction of ELLs beyond the demands of the WIDA standards. In the course of acknowledging the strides made in recent policy implementation, one official noted, "We still have lots of work to do" and went on to describe the growing ELL population as one group that the state needs to better address. Another official mentioned that the state offices that oversee English language acquisition are increasingly being integrated into committees and projects in other offices for

the purpose of more closely integrating ELL instruction with other types of curricular reform. For example, the Office of Language Acquisition was, at the time of our interview, working on curriculum in partnership with the Office of Curriculum and Instruction in an effort to support the goals of each within the larger agency. In this way, while administrators indicated that there was room for further alignment, they suggested the existing efforts and involvement in WIDA provide a foundation on which to continue to improve instruction for ELLs.

POWER

Adherence to policies related to ELLs is reinforced by school and district accountability systems. All ELL students are required to take an annual assessment of their English language proficiency in addition to regular statewide assessments (with the exception of those students in their first year of U.S. schooling). The results from these English language proficiency assessments are currently only a minor factor in school and district accountability determinations and can only serve to benefit a school's or district's overall results. However, this will change as Massachusetts transitions to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), in which English language proficiency assessment results will be integrated into the main accountability system.

Additionally, as with all testing since No Child Left Behind, ELL students' scores are counted among statewide assessments. Reported results are broken into subgroups, one of which includes ELLs. Since the waiver system, passed under Arne Duncan in 2011, Massachusetts has an additional group called "high needs," which includes SWDs, ELLs, and students who are officially designated as "low income." Administrators noted that ELL scores are factored into the rating system that places schools at one of five levels—from (1) indicating high performance to (5) indicating chronic underperformance. While these calculations are largely based on assessment data, officials noted that they also factored in graduation and dropout rates and awarded "bonus points" for the ways ELLs are assessed and for demonstrating growth among ELL students.

Students with Disabilities (SWDs)

SPECIFICITY

The curricular resources provided for educators of SWDs relate to the attribute of specificity. The Resource Guide to the MA Curriculum Frameworks for SWDs is continually revised in connection with the addition and revision of frameworks. According to one official, "every time a framework is updated, [we] update that document." The document overall offers a consistently expanded upon "array of outcomes" so that teachers can determine how to proceed in "moving up" the complexity of frameworks and accompanying instruction based upon each student's current individual level. While this document is not prescriptive, it has been embraced among educators for its clear, detailed resource offerings.

AUTHORITY

The specificity of the Resource Guides to the Curriculum Frameworks for SWDs has allowed it to gain strong legitimacy and status among educators in the state. As described by one state official:

In that document we've kinda teased out an expanded array of outcomes within each standard that allows teachers to hop on board and start moving up the escalator at wherever their student is at the moment. So we're getting good traction with this, all students with disabilities.

There has been a high degree of buy in from local educators concerning the document's provisions.

In addition to providing educators with the Resource Guide, the state establishes authority in relation to the standards-aligned instruction of SWDs through the involvement of content-area experts. Officials emphasized that collaboration between content-area experts, state officials, and local educators was significant in supporting educators with navigating instructional challenges related to the simultaneous concreteness and higher level thinking tasks of the new frameworks and assessments. According to one state official:

> We had our math experts to figure out what it means when you tailor the essential meaning of functions to a student who's working at . . . perhaps a 1st or 2nd grade level...what does that look like, such a low level, the difficulty? So thankfully we have great people here who helped us do that and teachers in some cases are realizing that they're already doing functions without knowing that it was functions, so a lot of it is just re-tooling the teaching profession not to do what they're already doing but to realize to be more conscious of what they're doing and to expand...the way in which they do it.

CONSISTENCY

The Resource Guide to the Curriculum Frameworks for SWDs contributes to policy consistency by bolstering the alignment between standards and assessments. This is especially the case for SWDs who take the alternative assessment and whose engagement with the standards is not at the same level of complexity as measured on the non-alternative, grade-level assessment. According to one state official, the Resource Guide makes it possible for SWDs to take away the same "big ideas" of the standards at a lower level.

Alignment between the standards and assessments is also pertinent to state officials' discussions of the Next-Generation MCAS and its impact on SWDs. This new assessment moves toward greater emphasis on both the use of real-world examples within the questions and how students arrive at their answers and are able to explain those processes of arrival. This is part of the overall shift toward higher order thinking skills within the frameworks and assessments. One state official spoke about this shift as particularly positive for SWDs as well as for other learners characterized as within the "high needs subgroup":

> Our low-income students, our students of color, our ELL students, our students with disabilities...will be well-served by having standards that are cognitively demanding and that... push all of our students to attain really strong, robust concepts.

As articulated by a state official, the "concreteness" embedded within the new frameworks and assessments helps SWDs understand the rationale behind the processes involved in test questions. Whether such revisions are helpful, however, was described as depending upon "the extent teachers incorporate" them into their own curricula and instruction. Building on this potential

for disparity in impact and outcomes with SWDs, another state official cautioned that "...we have a very long way to go. Like we have lots more work to do. As I said we have a pretty gaping achievement gap. We're not well-serving our students with disabilities." These quotes highlight the challenges involved in determining how to most consistently and effectively serve SWDs through the new frameworks and assessments and the instructional shifts that accompany them.

Consistency in relation to SWDs also came up in officials' discussions of collaboration across offices at the state level and providing local support. A state official provided an example of this collaboration and how it can work toward stronger relations and alignment between departments and policies by referencing supports created collaboratively for administrators as they conduct their educator evaluations. The official explained:

> So for example we just put out this year and last year, a what to look for document . . . basically looking at, taking a look at the standards, kind of snapshotting them to help support our administrators and say, these are the things you absolutely need to be seeing happening in a classroom when you're doing the evaluation. When we did that process we had representatives sitting in on that process from Special Education and from our OLA offices that oversee . . . English language acquisition. . . . So we work very hard where we can, where it makes sense, to work across the agency.

This system of collaboration and its distributed impacts was identified by officials as a strength of the state.

POWER

SWDs can be seen as connected to the attribute of power through the state's assessments and the ways in which SWDs factor into different accountability and evaluation systems. While it was noted above that the assessment results of SWDs are included in the educator evaluation system for those educators working with SWDs, assessments results as they pertain to educators are more specifically organized by student subgroups, of which SWDs, ELLs, and students deemed "officially low income" are considered "the high needs subgroup." For those students who do take the alternative assessment, concordance tables that detail how credit is to be assigned are utilized, and results are then incorporated into evaluations. How assessment results of SWDs factor into individual educator ratings more specifically is determined at the "local level," emphasizing local control within the state and nonprescriptive systems of enacting and reinforcing policies.

One state official described rewards and sanctions related to SWDs as applying at the district and school levels in the following way:

> [SWDs are] not only included but they're counted . . . as with all testing since No Child Left Behind, all students are included in. . . assessment results in the aggregates and all results, also broken down by student subgroups, so students with disabilities is one subgroup, ELLs are another subgroup. Under our current system which is since 2011 the Waiver system, we have a group called the high needs subgroup which is composed of any student with a disability, who is ELL or who is officially low income. That group's performance automatically drives part of your school accountability level.

But because the state's teacher evaluation program is based on a rating system that rewards

progress, one state official said that assessments are given only "a light touch" in the system of teacher evaluation. Further, how assessment results of SWDs factor into individual educator ratings more specifically is again determined at the "local level," reinforcing the overall consistent notion of local control within the state and of nonprescriptive systems of enacting and reinforcing policies.

Conclusion

State departments of education are charged with conceptualizing and implementing numerous policy activities to facilitate standards-based reform. Using the policy attributes theory as an organizing framework helps states see how individual initiatives contribute to a system of standards-based reform. Understanding how each reform component impacts the specificity, authority, consistency, power, or stability attributes of the implementation of reform helps uncover strengths, opportunities, patterns, and variations in each state's strategic roll-out of CCR-aligned standards.

Considering how these attributes have been configured in Massachusetts' standards-based reform initiatives over the past 5 years, one can see why the state's education system is consistently listed high in national rankings. While its hands-off approach between state and district operations creates challenges—for example, in ensuring cohesive, standards-aligned professional development—much of the instability around assessments can be understood as necessary steps toward a more consistent system that links standards, assessment, and evaluations as mutually supportive policy dimensions. Even so, contextual tensions remain—most notably, in the uncertainties around legislative efforts that could redirect or overturn recent reforms, as well as the criticisms directed at state policies by union and public voices. Additional consideration of these and other challenges, as well as the efforts being made to address them, may come to the fore as future data provided through C-SAIL's district, principal, and teacher surveys and interviews with key district administrators will provide further insights into both the successes and challenges that Massachusetts is experiencing in bringing rigorous standards to the classroom.

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