

Promising Approaches to the Development and Implementation of District-Determined Measures

As part of the study of the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework (EEF), SRI International and its partners (Abt Associates, Nancy Brigham Associates, and J Koppich & Associates) visited Attleboro, Reading, South Hadley Public Schools, and the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District in spring 2015 to identify promising approaches to developing and implementing district-determined measures (DDMs).¹ These are Level 2 districts, except for Reading, which is Level 3, with student enrollments ranging from approximately 2,000 to 6,000.² Attleboro, Reading, and Whitman-Hanson were early adopters of the EEF, beginning implementation in 2011–12. A Race to the Top district, South Hadley began implementing the EEF in 2012–13.³

In 2013, Massachusetts introduced DDMs as measures of student learning, student growth, or achievement. DDMs are common district assessments that will inform educators' Student Impact Ratings, a component of the EEF. Districts began pilot-testing DDMs in the 2013–14 school year, and statewide DDM implementation began in 2014–15. In 2015–16, districts that have been implementing DDMs for 2 years are expected to begin using them to determine Student Impact Ratings for educators.⁴ After the research team's data collection activities in spring 2015, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) released an Alternative Pathways Proposal that offers districts three alternative methods for evaluating an educator's impact on student learning. Pathway One maintains the current system but provides districts with the option to delay reporting of Student Impact Ratings.⁵ Pathway Two uses two student learning goals—one of which is common across educator roles—as evidence to determine Student Impact Ratings. Pathway Three aligns the Student Impact Rating with the existing 5-Step Cycle and requires educators to provide evidence from multiple measures of student learning, growth, or achievement. Districts may stay with the original DDM-based model, select an Alternative Pathway, or propose another pathway to determine impact ratings by June 30, 2015.

Throughout the state, DDM implementation is still a work in progress. In a winter 2015 statewide survey of educators conducted by the research team, 77 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the DDMs for their grade or subject are well aligned with the content they are teaching. Yet only 30 percent of the educators agreed or strongly agreed that including DDMs as part of the evaluation system is fair.

The experience of the four districts highlighted here in DDM implementation may be instructive for other districts. This brief first describes district leaders' communication and framing strategies to support the development and implementation of DDMs. Next, the brief describes how districts used supports and internal expertise to aid educators in DDM development. Then it identifies districts' efforts to enhance educator ownership and buy-in of the DDMs and efforts to ensure meaningful DDM data use. The brief ends with implications for other districts as they implement DDMs.

¹The researchers visited each district for 2 days, conducting interviews and focus groups with district leaders, union members, school principals, and teachers.

² Districts in Massachusetts are designated annually as one of five accountability levels on the basis of student performance data (MCAS). Level 1 denotes the highest performing districts.

³ All other districts began implementing in 2013–14.

⁴ Some districts were granted one-year extensions for specific grades or subjects and so will begin collecting these data during 2015–16.

⁵ Pathway One delays reporting of Student Impact Ratings to 2016–17 for most educators and to 2017–18 for all educators.

About This Brief

This brief highlights promising approaches in **Attleboro, Reading, South Hadley Public Schools, and Whitman-Hanson Regional School District** to develop and implement district-determined measures under the Massachusetts' Educator Evaluation Framework.

Since 2012, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has been working with an independent research team to study the implementation of the Educator Evaluation Framework. This Case Study Brief Series offers promising approaches for implementing the evaluation system in districts across the Commonwealth.

For information on the study and the full set of research briefs, please visit <http://www.doe.mass.edu/eeval/resources/study/default.html>.

Communication Strategies: Framing the DDMs

ESE intended DDMs as an instructional tool to inform teachers' practice and support improved student achievement.⁶ However, educators have expressed anxiety about DDMs' use in their evaluations. Throughout the study, the research team has found that educators' perceptions of the EEF and its components are largely influenced by how district and school leaders frame the system. Effective communication strategies for DDMs have thus been integral to successful implementation.

The last thing we want you to do is make something up so [you] can check off a box and tell the department [ESE] that we're doing it. It has to be something that you feel passionate about and that informs your instruction. —*District Administrator*

Leaders in Attleboro, Reading, South Hadley, and Whitman-Hanson used a variety of communication strategies to present DDMs to educators, including weekly newsletters, on-site professional development sessions, and one-on-one meetings. In their communications, the district leaders reiterated that the goal of DDMs was to support classroom practice. They presented the DDMs as tools embedded into instruction, rather than add-ons, and emphasized that educators should use existing assessments as DDMs when possible. As a Reading district administrator noted, "If it feels like it's extra, it's the wrong DDM." In Reading, district leaders responded to educators' initial negative feedback by altering their communication strategies, concentrating on DDMs' instructional uses and minimizing the connection to the EEF. This rebranding of DDMs resulted in more positive educator perceptions. In South Hadley, the district communication to teachers was, "This has to be fundamental to your daily practice. It needs to be meaningful."

Additionally, educators in the four districts often expressed feeling overwhelmed by the number of initiatives being implemented simultaneously. Thus, it was important for educators to perceive DDMs as an instructional tool rather than an additional state-mandated assessment. District leaders strove to make this distinction clear to educators. Although some teachers continued to view DDMs as an accountability tool, those who perceived them as useful to their practice had more positive perceptions of DDMs overall.

Expertise and Support for DDM Development

The four districts used a combination of strategies to lead and support educators in the development and implementation of DDMs: identifying a district lead to support educators, establishing teacher committees to train teacher leaders who supported educators at the school level, and/or partnering with district collaboratives to support DDM development for noninstructional or noncore staff.

District DDM lead. All four districts identified a respected district-level lead to spearhead DDM development and implementation. In South Hadley, one district administrator organized professional development sessions on DDM development at districtwide convenings and at individual school sites, established drop-in sessions, and made herself available to educators for one-on-one assistance. The district DDM lead in Whitman-Hanson served as a sounding board for grade-level and subject area teams. Reading's lead met with educators at each school to discuss the purpose of DDMs and emphasize the connection to student learning. Attleboro designated ELA and math curriculum coordinators to provide intensive support as educators developed their DDMs. In all districts, establishing DDM leads helped educators know where to go for assistance and eased some anxiety about the development of DDMs. For example, one educator in South Hadley stated, "[The DDM lead]...came to the school and made herself available. I went to see her and explained that I had no idea what to do. Her message to me...was, basically, the point is to help you learn about your practice, how to measure it, and how to change and improve it."

I [created] my DDMs after I went to a workshop at Springfield College on developing assessments for physical education. I did some additional research. It's very hard to put together a [DDM], but the professional development at Springfield really helped. After that..., I learned to make my assessment 30 percent cognitive [understanding physical education concepts] and 70 percent physical [performance]. I think it's a valid measure...[and a] fair measure. —*Physical Education Teacher*

Teacher committees. Reading established two committees composed of teacher representatives from each school and district staff that identified teacher leaders who could support their colleagues with various components of the new evaluation system, including DDMs. One teacher reported that her participation in the committee was an extremely positive experience. She believed that the committees helped support DDM implementation by preparing educators for

⁶<http://www.doe.mass.edu/eeval/ddm/>

implementation ahead of time. Similarly, district leaders said that the committees created teacher leaders who could share information and support other teachers with DDM development.

Partnering on DDMs for noninstructional/noncore academic staff. In all districts, DDM development was typically more difficult for noninstructional or noncore academic staff because they lacked relevant assessments. The process was more successful when districts attempted to provide additional targeted support structures. For example, Whitman-Hanson and South Hadley used their local educational collaborative, comprising partnerships across multiple districts, to help noncore or noninstructional staff develop DDMs. In both districts, participation in collaboratives provided noninstructional or noncore academic staff with an opportunity to work with other educators in their area. In addition, South Hadley created opportunities for noninstructional or noncore academic staff to attend external professional development sessions, to enroll in relevant university courses, and to collaborate across schools. One noninstructional educator saw the benefits of working with educators from other districts in the same field, noting, “It’s interesting to hear...what they were focused on in their building [when] trying to come up with common DDMs.” This educator also believed that working with educators in other districts was challenging but worthwhile: “On the whole, it’s cumbersome, even for teachers, but at least we have a say in it. Seeing how [the DDM] starts from the groundwork... has been helpful.”

Building Ownership of the DDMs

In general, leaders in the four districts viewed DDM development as a teacher-driven process to capitalize on teachers’ expertise. The districts promoted collaboration and teacher ownership by encouraging or, in one district, requiring educators to develop DDMs and discuss ongoing implementation in teams.

Teachers in all four districts worked together in grade-level or subject-area teams to develop and implement their DDMs. In Whitman-Hanson, teachers received additional guidance from district curriculum coordinators or school-level teacher leaders to ensure that the DDMs aligned with both school priorities and DDM requirements. Reading also required educators to participate in cross-school professional learning communities (PLCs) on DDM development and implementation. Reading framed the PLCs as a professional development opportunity that would involve teachers in decision-making, resulting in union support for the PLCs. The district also identified teacher leaders to be PLC facilitators and provided them with significant training from an outside provider on adult learning, setting an agenda, and identifying additional professional development needs for educators. Educators believed that the PLCs provided collaboration time that was helpful for DDM implementation. One participant stated, “[It provides] built-in time to talk as group, reflect... continuing to speak to the faculty as whole and get feedback.”

These strategies built teacher ownership of DDM development by enabling them to create DDMs that were relevant to their practice. Using teacher teams also enabled educators to collaborate with one another and leverage the knowledge and expertise of educators throughout the school.

Meaningful DDM Data Use

When used well, DDM data can support improved instruction by helping teachers identify the specific skills and content areas where their students need additional support. Three of the districts created or used existing structures to facilitate meaningful educator analysis of DDM data in grade-level and subject-area teams.

Reading and South Hadley capitalized on existing structures to provide opportunities for educators to analyze DDM data. In Reading, educators analyzed DDM data in their cross-school PLCs. South Hadley leveraged existing data teams to provide a forum for collaborative analysis and use of DDM data. As part of South Hadley’s curriculum initiative, educators organized into teams within and across schools to realign the curriculum. These data teams met periodically to examine DDM data, disaggregate data by types of students, and make data-driven decisions about differentiated instruction, remediation, and other teaching practices. Educators submitted action plans to school leaders after each session to help them continuously target student improvement. The data team structure has helped teachers improve their analysis skills and intensify their focus on the intentional use of data to identify student needs. As one teacher noted, “Working collaboratively and having conversations in data teams has broadened my comfort level in teaching, and it has made me more reflective of the types of instruction I’m providing. I’m using data and making changes.”

Evidence makes me more conscientious [about] meeting the needs of students. I have become more reflective of my teaching practice—helping me grow and become better as a teacher. If people want to grow, they can have an honest discussion about their own strengths and weaknesses. —*Middle School Teacher*

In Attleboro, district leaders created a system for educators to analyze DDM data in team structures with guidance from coaches. ELA and math coaches maintained DDM data on an online system. Teachers met with the coaches in grade-level meetings to review DDM data reports from the system. Coaches assisted the teacher teams in using assessment data to identify areas of weakness across the grades and brainstorm on strategies to improve practice. Multiple educators reported finding the process of reviewing data with their coach beneficial to their practice. For example, one educator stated, “Our coach showed us what to look for in terms of reviewing the data.... [This training] made me rethink not only how I look at the numbers, but then what I actually do in my instruction.” If a teacher found that his or her students were struggling in a particular area, these meetings provided an opportunity to seek advice from colleagues about how to more effectively teach that topic or skill.

Implications for Other Districts

Over the last 2 years, districts in Massachusetts began developing and implementing DDMs in all subject areas and grade levels. Their experiences demonstrate the complexity of the work. Attleboro, Reading, South Hadley Public Schools, and the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District continue their efforts to build educator buy-in for DDMs as a tool for instructional improvement. However, as highlighted in this brief, they have established promising approaches to the implementation and development of DDMs that have the potential to serve as models for other districts across the Commonwealth. Communication strategies for framing DDMs, expertise and supports for DDM development, building educator ownership of DDMs, and meaningful DDM data use all contributed to educator buy-in, better understanding of DDMs’ purpose, and data-driven decision-making in educators’ practice. The following approaches may be instructive for other districts:

- The districts presented DDMs as an instructional improvement tool that built on existing practices and was integrated into instruction rather than an additional top-down requirement of the accountability system.
- The districts provided initial and ongoing professional supports to assist teachers in the development and implementation process. Ongoing support helped ensure educators were administering assessments that informed instruction and provided them with meaningful data.
- The districts established teacher teams to develop DDMs, thereby building educator ownership and promoting within- or cross-school collaboration. Educators involved in those teams were active participants in developing relevant, useful DDMs.
- The districts created or used existing structures to help teachers analyze and use the DDM data to inform their instruction. By enabling meaningful analysis of student data, the districts helped educators identify specific areas of student need and target instruction accordingly.