



School and District Improvement Plans

A Review of Local Accountability Practice
in Massachusetts Gateway Cities

Part Two in a Series of Three Papers

Benjamin Forman
and Connor Lentz



MassINC
RESEARCH. JOURNALISM. CIVIC LIFE.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to the Barr Foundation for providing generous financial support to make this in-depth nonpartisan research possible. We would also like to thank Charles DePascale and Chris Domaleski at the Center for Assessment for serving as research partners and providing invaluable insight; Connor Lenz, who contributed a wealth of curiosity, creative thinking, and research assistance while serving in a Northeastern University co-op position; and Catherine Tumber, whose editorial assistance helped us convey these complex concepts with clarity and zeal.

Introduction

The first paper in this series described how state and federal education agencies have stepped up and assumed a stronger role in holding local schools and school districts accountable for improving student achievement. We argued that to make further progress, Massachusetts must now focus attention on the role of local communities in education accountability, and presented policies to position schools and districts to lead collaborative, community-driven processes that set educational goals consistent with their unique values and priorities.

In this paper, we examine Gateway City school and district improvement plans, which are regularly produced for the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as required by state and federal accountability statutes (see sidebar p. 6). Despite their genesis with higher levels of government, these plans actually tell us a lot about the current condition of local accountability practice.

Foremost, school and district plans document the extent to which communities complement and build upon state and federal performance measures with their own measures of student achievement. They also provide an important window into local leadership and governance. In contrast to state and federal accountability—where the power to produce change derives from formal sanctions for underperformance that can be as serious as state takeovers—local accountability generally relies on more informal mechanisms to create urgency for change. The practice is particularly influential when it provides more transparency, understanding, and coherence about priorities and resource allocation, and whether strategic objectives have been met.¹

The pages that follow assess a selection of Gateway City school and district improvement plans. We analyze the performance measures in these documents, and contrast them with those embedded in superintendent evaluations. Our evaluation focuses on what is being measured and the degree to which each plan creates transparency and accountability for produc-

ing results. This analysis is followed by a discussion of what academic research suggests about our findings and how we might act on them to strengthen local accountability practice in Massachusetts.

Massachusetts' Gateway City school districts face particular pressure from state and federal accountability, for they educate an outside share of the historically underrepresented students that state and federal accountability laws aim to protect. While distinct in this regard, these urban communities still have much in common with their peers and it is likely that the strategic planning challenges revealed in this paper are also present in many other Massachusetts districts. It is our hope that this analysis will be informative for a wide swath of educators and education policy leaders in Massachusetts and beyond.

Findings

1. Most strategic plans for Gateway City schools and school districts do not include measurable goals for increasing student learning.

Every Gateway City school and school district has an improvement plan. State law requires the submission of such plans annually for schools, and every three years for school districts. According to guidance from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), these plans should include “SMART goals” that clearly define the measurable outcomes they seek to achieve (see sidebar, p. 2).² In the Gateway City plans we reviewed, these outcome measures were either conspicuously absent or presented in ways that severely constrained their power to provide local accountability by not making goals and progress toward them clear and transparent.

More than a third of the Gateway Cities in our sample (6 out of 16) produced district plans that did not include any outcome measures.³ In many cases, these districts prepared documents that were otherwise very organized and strategic, making omission of measures that provide accountability

for delivering results particularly notable. Three districts—Attleboro, Brockton, and Westfield—actually used an improvement plan template provided by DESE, but they removed the section on outcomes from the document.

Among the 10 district plans that did include outcomes, we found three problems. The most frequent was that most measures simply did not meet the definition of a SMART goal. Combined, the plans from these 10 districts included 165 items described as outcomes or goals; however, only about one-third of these measures were actually SMART. For example, Chelsea’s strategic plan includes two outcome measures labelled “SMART Goals,” but the district did not establish baselines or growth targets for them. Without this information, there is no way to ascertain how much progress the district aims to achieve within a predetermined time frame. From the local accountability perspective, this clouds transparency while significantly lessening the value of the goals embedded in Chelsea’s plan.⁴

A second problem for transparency was the extremely technical nature of many outcomes measures. For instance, one of Chicopee’s goals is worded:

Based on a 6 year target, Chicopee Public Schools will reach Math CPI goal of 85.4% (2016 80.3) for all students (grades 3-8, 10). At least 2.1% gain in CPI for remaining years to reach state determined goal.

While guidance from DESE specifically discourages this practice—stating “it is imperative that [outcomes] are framed in a way that helps make them meaningful to and easily understood by the public—in almost every instance of difficult-to-interpret goals, the district had simply incorporated a complex accountability measure developed by the state.

Though less common, a final issue was the inclusion of too many measures without assigning priority among them. New Bedford’s plan includes 60 “student learning” and “teacher practice” goals. Establishing so many un-tiered goals is likely to weaken accountability for targeted results. Even with less than half this number, Fall River’s list of outcome measures (24) is difficult to digest.

The Gateway City school improvement plans in our sample were more likely to contain outcomes (15 of 16), but the same shortcomings limited their value for accountability purposes. These 15 school improvement plans included 169 items described as outcomes or goals, but again, our review found that only about one-third of these measures actually met SMART goal criteria.

If we look at our sample of schools and districts and ask what percentage of their plans include *measurable* outcome goals tied directly to the accomplishments of students, the answer is disappointing. Two-thirds of district and half of school plans do not contain measurable goals with respect to actual student outcomes (Figure 1).

What Makes a Goal SMART?

“SMART” (affixed to “goal”) is an acronym commonly used in the world of strategic planning, but with slightly varying terms. The initials S and M generally refer to specific and measurable. The latter three letters often connote achievable, relevant, and time-bound. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, like many other states, sets forth the acronym’s terms as Specific and Strategic; Measurable; Action-Oriented; Rigorous, Realistic, and Results-Focused; and Timed and Tracked.

Since some of the terms in the Commonwealth’s definition are somewhat subjective, we focus on the acronym’s Measureable and Timed and Tracked features to determine whether specific targets are indeed SMART. For instance, a stand-alone goal such as “utilize core instructional program to drive small group instruction” is clearly not measurable as constructed and therefore fails to meet the SMART standard. Likewise, an outcome measure such as “10% increase in students scoring advanced in ELA” that does not specify the timeframe for achieving the result, also fails to meet SMART goal objectives. Appendix A includes a full compendium of the goals we analyzed and whether we classified them as SMART.

2. Few Gateway City improvement plans create local accountability for areas of student learning that are not a part of the state’s accountability formula.

The plans we reviewed demonstrated that Gateway Cities are not exercising local control to create more well-rounded learning experiences for their students. To the contrary, school and district plans document the extent to which state and federal accountability has become the organizing focus of Gateway City schools (Figure 2). The descriptive language in the outcome section of Lynn’s district plan is telling. As if the community had no authority to set its own strategic priorities, they write: “Our major goals have been established by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Waiver Plan.”

Only four Gateway City districts included measureable student learning goals that were not already present in the state’s accountability formula at the time the plans were crafted.⁵ And these measures had little relation to college and career readiness (CCR), the most glaring weakness in the state’s accountability formula. Chicopee did include a well-crafted goal to increase the percentage of high school graduates who have completed MassCore to 50 percent.⁶ But this was an extreme outlier. A few districts included CCR goals, but unlike Chicopee, they did not establish a target. For instance, Salem and Springfield both call for increasing the share of students with Advanced Placement qualifying scores, but neither district recorded a baseline or target for this measure.

The absence of CCR goals was particularly troublesome in the school improvement plans. High schools comprised 7 of the 16 schools in our sample. Haverhill High was the only school to mention student success in post-secondary education. But not only did the plan fail to include a target, the language calling for “greater participation in post-secondary admissions to higher education” was rather confusing. Many of the school improvement plans focused overwhelmingly on goals relating to instructional practices rather than to actual student outcomes.

3. A majority of Gateway City superintendents are not evaluated on objective measures of student learning.

Regulations established by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education guide the development of annual superintendent evaluations. These regulations specifically call for superintendents to set SMART goals for them-

Figure 1:
Share of Gateway City District and School Improvement Plans with Measurable Student Learning Goals

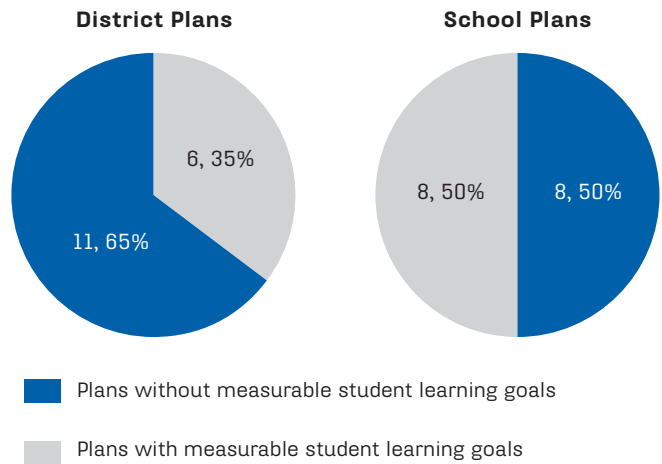
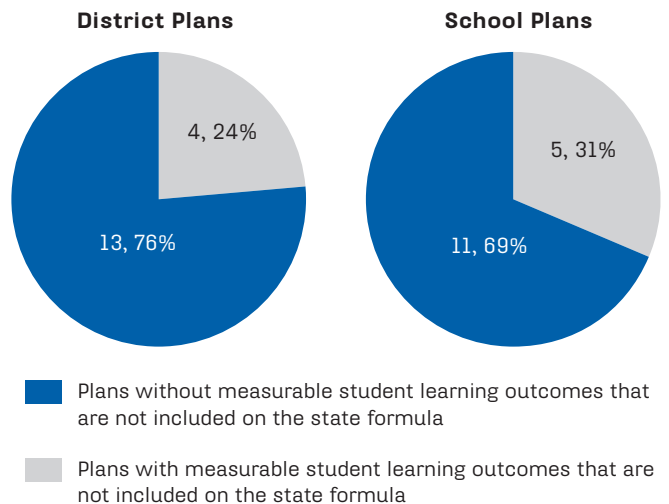


Figure 2:
Share of Gateway City District and School Improvement Plans with Measurable Student Learning Outcomes that are Not Included in the State Accountability Formula



selves related to student learning; school committees must consider progress on these SMART goals in their evaluation of superintendent performance.⁷

Our sample includes the goals set by 13 Gateway City superintendents. A majority (7 of 13) of these superintendents did not establish any SMART goals for themselves.

Lack of measurable goals clearly makes it difficult for school committee members to evaluate superintendent performance objectively. Our review of superintendent evaluations shows that school committees frequently submit reports with widely varying appraisals among individual members as to whether a superintendent has achieved his or her goals.⁸

However, goals established by a handful of superintendents do provide models for how Gateway Cities can prioritize student learning outcomes in areas that extend beyond state and federal accountability. For instance, Salem's superintendent set a discrete number of SMART goals, some drawn from state accountability and others established locally through a strategic planning process (see sidebar, p. 7). Chicopee's exemplary measure to increase MassCore completion was included in the superintendent's self-determined goals. While school committee members still assigned varying ratings to the superintendent for performance on this objective measure, at least the process of establishing the measure led to greater transparency and accountability for results on a student learning measure not included in the state ranking formula.

DESE's District Reviews Consistently Reveal Shortcomings in Improvement Plans

DESE conducts comprehensive district reviews, generally focusing on lower performing districts. The agency uses these reports to establish priorities for allocating its resources. Findings contained in these reports, which are publically available on DESE's website, are directly in line with our analysis of the Gateway City improvement plans.⁹

The DESE team visiting Haverhill put it most bluntly: "The district does not have a current, comprehensive, actionable District Improvement Plan." Other district reviews find an assortment of less glaring problems. For instance, the 2016 Fall River report says that while the district and schools have plans, the district "has not designated staff with primary responsibilities for planning and implementing priorities." The 2014 Brockton report notes that the "link between district goals and budget development was unclear to the review team. District budget documents do not provide comprehensive, transparent information about how resources were allocated to support district goals."

DESE reviewers also find that districts with seemingly strong plans, such as Malden, often fail to implement them. A 2017 report on Malden detailed a host of troubles:

- "The 2015 DIP is not driving planning or decision-making at the district level."
- "School committee members had little knowledge of the plan and most members did not report a focus on improving student achievement."
- "Central office administrators, directors, and principals reported that little attention has been paid to the 2015 DIP."
- "The DIP does not appear on the district's website; instead, the 'District Strategy,' dated 2011-2012, is currently on the website."

A 2017 review of the Pittsfield Public Schools that was generally very positive also raised concerns with the district plan. In a high-level finding, the review team writes: "The district's District Im-

provement Plan (DIP) and School Improvement Plans (SIPs) do not have measurable goals and are missing some important components." Interestingly, they go on to note that the district's previous planning process had produced a DIP that was 140 pages long. Now Pittsfield wanted a shorter plan that was "a more realistic, meaningful, living document understandable to educators, parents, and community members."

The most hopeful review is also the most recent, and it contrasts sharply with our analysis of Springfield's district plan, which found no measurable goals. DESE's 2018 report on Springfield glowingly describes the district's efforts to leverage data for improvement: "The use of data is pervasive in the district. The district has well-organized systems to collect, disseminate, analyze, and use multiple sets of quantitative data to guide improvement, monitor progress in a timely way, and inform all aspects of decision-making related to teaching and learning."

Discussion

Academic research on local accountability is extremely limited. Most scholars approach the topic tangentially—that is, indirectly through primary analysis of another research topic. While there has been a recent uptick in studies on the efficacy of strategic planning in education, even this body of literature is thin in relation to local accountability practice—which is surprising given that most US public schools are required by law to engage in school- and district-level improvement planning on a regular basis. Nonetheless, some studies shed light on the tight relationship between effective improvement planning and robust local accountability practices.

Volumes of management research says strategic planning helps leaders establish priorities and goals, develop intentional strategies, and gain buy-in from staff and other key stakeholders.¹⁰ Strategic plans provide an impetus to innovate or, put another way, to help prevent organizational stagnation. Strategic planning can also alter power dynamics within an organization, a process that could be crucial in Gateway Cities looking to invent new ways of serving students and families in the 21st century.¹¹ These findings suggest that strategic planning could provide value to public education, particularly in urban schools where leaders confront serious daily challenges and find it difficult to organize new initiatives with long-term focus.

Studies showing that strategic planning may not be an effective use of time and resources in education are equally plentiful, however. School plans may simply codify practices that are already common rather than pushing educators to pursue new, unknown practices. Tenured faculty have strong job protections, so those who do not buy into the plan may not strive to see it succeed. And in urban districts, high turnover of superintendents and principals is often a major impediment to implementing strategic plans.

Only a few studies have explored the connection between strategic improvement planning and student achievement. Using data from a large number of schools in Nevada, the most rigorous study to date found that students in schools with higher-quality plans had better test scores, controlling for a variety of other factors. (More specifically, the Nevada schools that established goals with clearly delineated time frames and frequently monitored their progress tended to have the most student test-score improvement).¹²

But the literature suggests that such plans are rare. Numerous studies, including several in Massachusetts, show that educators view improvement planning as a routine exercise in compliance.¹³ Reviews have found that school plans often lack detail and are overly optimistic about results. At the other extreme, many plans include a prodigious number of strategic initiatives, overwhelming teachers.

From the perspective of local accountability, the most interesting study we reviewed was a recent Harvard Graduate School of Education doctoral dissertation by Bob Ettinger, who partnered with the Cambridge Public Schools. After a year in residency experimenting with teams of Cambridge educators to improve strategic planning processes, he concluded that these efforts can only be productive when they are employed in an environment where local accountability is strong.¹⁴

Ettinger notes that leading scholars of accountability have found that increasing external accountability (i.e., state and federal sanctions) can make schools more dysfunctional if they do not have well-developed internal accountability structures (i.e., high levels of agreement on norms, values, and expectations). Conversely, increasing external accountability in schools with high internal accountability can produce positive results, giving them additional drive and focus.¹⁵

Policy Recommendations

School and district improvement plans are a window into local accountability practice. As detailed above, current Gateway City plans lack measurable student learning goals and fail to build upon the limited set of measures established by state and federal accountability. This is a strong indication that local accountability is underdeveloped, which should come as no surprise: Gateway City educators have been under intense state and federal accountability pressure. For many local educators, this oversight is a disincentive to formally commit to achieving results in areas that are not components of the state and federal formula. Our findings should serve as a wake-up call. State policymakers must work to position communities to exercise more robust accountability locally. Toward this end, we conclude with three ideas for consideration:

1. Incentivize high-quality school and district improvement planning.

To build greater levels of internal accountability within schools and districts, Massachusetts needs to structure incentives in ways that challenge local educators to establish transparent, realistic, and measurable goals. Ettinger advances this argument by quoting Jim Liebman, former chief accountability officer for the New York City Department of Education: “If we want the lever of accountability to be as powerful as possible, we have to provide ways for schools to build their capacity to be relatively self-sufficient in evaluating themselves every day.”

State incentives to improve planning practices could come in the form of direct rewards. For instance, schools and districts that submit strong improvement plans might receive relief from other reporting requirements. The state could also offer bonus points in its accountability formula for schools and districts that take on extra responsibility for improving student outcomes.

Alternatively, the state could incentivize stronger improvement planning by focusing greater attention on these documents. For example, the state could require public hearings on school and district improvement plans to raise more awareness of them. Or the state could simply work to make the documents more accessible. (We were unable to retrieve one-third of the

district plans on the districts’ public websites. Annual school improvement plans were even more difficult to locate online, especially the most current versions of the document). While DESE maintains an accountability webpage for every school in Massachusetts, these plans are not included. Posting current school and district improvement plans on this site, thereby making this information more readily accessible to the public, is a relatively simple way to heighten accountability.

To establish trust with schools and districts, the state should proceed with caution before creating new mandates in this area. However, to create local accountability and shared responsibility for school improvement, the community must be aware of strategic priorities and progress toward meeting them. Where appropriate, the state should facilitate efforts to increase access to this information.

2. Invest in new models to help communities enhance school and district improvement planning practices.

Even with strong incentives in place, Gateway Cities that serve high-need student populations will have difficulty carving out time and resources to plan for change. The state must develop a variety of models to provide support, striking a careful balance between under-resourcing efforts to provide technical assistance and over-mediating plan development.

School and District Improvement Plans in State and Federal Law

The requirement that all school principals work in consultation with school site councils to develop annual School Improvement Plans was a cornerstone of Massachusetts’ 1993 education reform act.²¹ Legislation requiring school districts to produce District Improvement Plans on three-year cycles came a decade later in a bill whose primary purpose was the reduction of municipal reporting. DIPs were a vehicle to consolidate all planning requirements established by previous state and federal laws.

Since their initial passage, these two

planning requirements have been revised repeatedly, changing the role of school committees in reviewing and approving school improvement plans, codifying the relationships between school site councils and other parent advisory groups, and requiring schools that serve high percentages of English Language Learners to include provisions for improving learning outcomes for those students.²²

At the federal level, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) required all schools designated in need of improvement to develop plans. The 2015 Every Stu-

dent Succeeds Act (ESSA), NCLB’s successor, calls on the lowest 5 percent of schools, schools with consistently underperforming subgroups, and high schools with chronically low graduation rates to work with their districts to submit an improvement plan to the state.

Under ESSA, schools and districts must show that the strategies proposed in their plans are evidence-based. States are instructed to prioritize improvement grants for schools and districts whose plans demonstrate a strong commitment to improving student outcomes.

Experience shows that a planning process driven too heavily by state-funded consultants is apt to result in a “pretty” document that schools and communities do not own and will not faithfully implement.

One model focuses on training principals to lead more dynamic planning efforts, helping them bring educators and community partners together to develop concise plans, monitor progress over shorter time horizons, and regularly re-evaluate their strategies. School improvement fashioned in this manner can enhance school culture by strengthening collaboration between teachers, administrators, and community leaders. Boston has gained considerable experience deploying this model in what it calls school-based inquiry teams. State policymakers should tap learnings from Boston and elsewhere to design models that could work in districts that lack resources and capacity to provide schools leaders with this level of coaching and support.

Another promising approach is to network schools so that they can collaboratively identify objectives, and test and refine strategies to meet shared goals. A recent meta-analysis found that this model increases use of data, shared decision-making, and the “efficacy of school systems.”

3. Use additional Chapter 70 funds to support innovation.

Reluctance to commit to measureable improvements in student learning beyond that required by state and federal accountability policy may at least partially be the result of resource limitations; if leaders believe resources are insufficient to get all students to basic proficiency targets, they may well see it as imprudent to push their systems to go beyond already established core academic learning thresholds.

Schools and districts that want to go deeper may simply lack the time and money to plan for the technically difficult change required to bring about these outcomes. The state often provides grants for innovation in the public education sector, but the timing of these funds has been unpredictable and often misaligned with the school calendar. Many schools and districts have invested time and energy developing programs only to see their grant funding eliminated through 9C cuts. And too often the allotted funds are insufficient to craft high-quality interventions in the first place.

Emerging Gateway City Models: The Salem Public Schools

In 2016, the Salem Public Schools—working with New Profit, a venture philanthropy that specializes in leading innovation in public education—raised funds privately to facilitate an intensive strategic planning process. Seventy staff participated in half a dozen work teams. They conducted focus groups and a survey to get additional input from teachers. They also held three City-wide Conversations, including one led in Spanish, and solicited responses to a community-wide survey. All of this effort led to a 49-page plan to establish strategic priorities for the district between 2017 and 2022.

The document did not include visible and transparent performance goals, though it did include a set of outcome measures to demonstrate success. What is most notable is the superintendent’s commitment to being held responsible for results. Her goals translate targets for progress on the state’s accountability measures into plain English (e.g., “decrease the performance gap Salem Public Schools has with the state on the percent of Meets and Exceeds Expectations in ELA, Math and Science in grades 3-8 by at least 20%”). She also takes responsibility for increasing college and career readiness (e.g., “increase the enrollment and diversity in AP courses by 10%” and “increase to 100% the number of high school seniors who will apply to college and/or have a postsecondary education plan.”)

While, on the whole, the measures Salem is employing to evaluate success are still overwhelmingly oriented toward state and federal accountability outcomes, it is also notable that the city is now developing a much broader plan in partnership with the Education Redesign Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. This strategy spans beyond the public schools and into the community to ensure that all of the youth-serving systems are aligned and operating strategically to improve student outcomes across multiple domains.

The state should set aside a portion of the dollars it plans to inject into the Chapter 70 formula for an innovation fund. This dedicated financing would provide reliable multi-year funding that is sorely lacking for schools and districts that want to adequately resource and staff complex initiatives that result in systemic change. Rather than limiting communities to investments in a set of discrete practices determined by the state, this fund should offer communities wide latitude to sow innovation. To encourage local accountability practice, applications for these grants should be judged on both the merits of the proposed intervention and the overall quality of the school and district improvement plans.

One of the more noticeable shortcomings of current Gateway City school and district improvement plans is that they are devoid of information about resource allocation. Of all the plans reviewed, only Haverhill's included space to identify resource requirements for the plan's strategic initiatives (and for most initiatives, Haverhill's planners left this column blank).

Combined with the incentive structures and practices described in recommendations 1 and 2, and the funding to seed innovation outlined here, state policymakers could change the dynamic whereby schools and districts struggle to identify resources and commit to demonstrable outcomes in their improvement strategies. It is difficult to overstate the transformative effects these policy changes could have on communities, positioning them to adapt more rapidly to change and to continuously improve student learning outcomes. However, as described in the third and final paper in this series, to take root these policy changes must be coordinated with efforts to strengthen the school and district governing bodies that are ultimately responsible for providing local accountability.

Methodology

MassINC requested school superintendent performance evaluations and goal-setting sheets (the template superintendents use to establish district goals for school committee to review when conducting their evaluations per state law and regulation). These records requests were filed in 24 of the state's 26 Gateway Cities (excluding two in state receivership). Sixteen cities responded in whole or in part. For this sample of 16 districts, we searched online (i.e., visits to school and district websites and Google keyword searches) to obtain recent school and district improvement plans. In a few instances

where these documents could not be located online, we followed up with administrative offices to obtain them.

While most schools and districts use the improvement plan template provided by DESE, they often leave the outcome section blank. Several schools and districts place outcomes in the strategic objectives and strategic initiatives sections of the document. A handful use their own planning documents. In determining what to cover in our analysis, we dealt with these inconsistencies by including any item described as a "goal" or "outcome," or which used wording that clearly conformed with SMART goal protocol.

As noted earlier, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education defines SMART goals as Specific and Strategic; Measurable; Action-Oriented; Rigorous, Realistic, and Results-Focused; and Timed and Tracked. Since some of the terms in this definition are subjective, we focused on the Measureable and Timed and Tracked classifications when determining whether measures were genuinely SMART.

Even with these narrower parameters, we often had difficulty conducting a thorough comparative analysis, particularly with regard to timeliness. For example, while the language of a given goal may not have included a time dimension, in some cases it was clear from the document that the intention was to achieve the result within the plan's time frame (e.g., by 2018 in a 2016-to-2018 plan) or with a time frame described elsewhere. As a result, we were forced to infer some of this critical information.

The online appendix includes a full compendium of all of the goals we analyzed and whether we classified them as SMART. In addition, a file posted online with this report provides all of the plans reviewed for this analysis.

Online Appendices

1. Improvement Plan Measures
2. School and District Improvement Plan Sample

Notes

- 1 The first paper in this series terms this theory of action “social accountability” and reviews the underlying conditions that produce it in more detail.
- 2 See <http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/success/setting-outcomes-targets.docx>.
- 3 State law defines 26 Gateway municipalities; however, two districts (Holyoke and Lawrence) were excluded from the sample because they are currently under state receivership.
- 4 From Chelsea’s District Improvement Plan: “SMART Goal 1: By the end of the 2017-2018 school year, Chelsea educators will effectively deliver MA frameworks aligned lessons and purposeful teaching in order to impact student growth and achievement. Growth will be measured through learning walks, observations and feedback, targeted professional development offerings, and student performance. SMART Goal 2: By the end of 2017-2018, Chelsea educators will use trauma informed practices to build social emotional learning competencies. Educators will create safe and supportive classroom climates and school environments in order to positively impact student growth and achievement. Growth will be measured through learning walks, observations and feedback, targeted professional development offerings, self assessment, and student performance.”
- 5 Interestingly, about half of these measures are now a part of state accountability indicators: five-year graduation rates, English language acquisition for ELLs, and chronic absenteeism.
- 6 Adopted by the Board of Education in 2007 and amended in 2018, MassCore is a rigorous program of study intended to prepare students for college and workforce expectations. MassCore requirements include completion of four units of English, four units of math, three units of a lab-based science, three units of history, two units of a foreign language, one unit of the arts, and five additional “core” courses. Many view MassCore as a stronger predictor of college and career readiness than a student’s achievement on standardized tests.
- 7 See “The Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation Part VI: Implementation Guide for Superintendent Evaluation” (Malden, MA: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012).
- 8 Even on objective measures, school committee members often voted differently. This was the case in Chicopee.
- 9 See <http://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review>
- 10 C. Chet Miller and Laura B. Cardinal. “Strategic Planning and Firm Performance: A Synthesis of More than Two Decades of Research.” *Academy of Management Journal* 37.6 (1994).
- 11 A. Paul Spee and Paula Jarzabkowski. “Strategic Planning as Communicative Process.” *Organization Studies* 32.9 (2011), 1217-1245.
- 12 Kenneth E. Fernandez. “Evaluating School Improvement Plans and Their Effect on Academic Performance.” *Educational Policy* 25.2 (2011), 338-367; David J. Huber and James M. Conway. “The Effect of School Improvement Planning on Student Achievement.” *Planning & Changing* 46 (2015).
- 13 D.M. Dunaway and others. “Superintendents’ Perceptions of the School Improvement Planning Process in the Southeastern USA.” *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 42.4 (2014); “Perceptions of the Purpose and Value of the School Improvement Plan Process.” *The Educational Forum* 76.2 (2012); Robert Ettinger. “Shifting From a Plan to a Process: School Improvement Plans in the Cambridge Public Schools.” Ph. D. diss, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2015. L. Bell. “Strategic Planning and School Management: Full of Sound and Fury, Signifying Nothing?” *Journal of Educational Administration* 40.5 (2002).
- 14 Ettinger (2015).
- 15 Specifically, Ettinger cites Michael Fullan. *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, 4th edition. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007), and Richard Elmore. “The Problem of Capacity in the (Re)Design of Educational Accountability Systems” in M.A. Rebell and J.R. Wolff, eds. *NCLB at the Crossroads: Reexamining the Federal Effort to Close the Achievement Gap* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).
- 16 Another quantitative analysis of the Nevada data found that schools that do not conform with outside pressure and build plans that show true independence tend to have significantly higher student achievement than “prettier” plans that conform with external expectations. See D.B. Reeves. *The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006).

- 17 T.E. Kaufman and others. *Collaborative School Improvement: Eight Practices for District-School Partnerships to Transform Teaching and Learning*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012); J.E. Talbert. "Collaborative Inquiry to Expand Student Success" in J.A. O'Day and others, eds. *Education Reform in New York City: Ambitious Change in the Nation's Most Complex School System* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2011).
- 18 K.O. Strunk and others. "The Best Laid Plans: An Examination of School Plan Quality and Implementation in a School Improvement Initiative." *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 52.2 (2016).
- 19 Meghan Lockwood, Meghan (2017). "Refining the Art of Coaching: Organizational Learning on a District Data Inquiry Team." Ph.D diss, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2017. See also R. Gallimore and others. "Moving the Learning of Teaching Closer to Practice: Teacher Education Implications of School Based Inquiry Teams" *Elementary School Journal* 109.5 (2009); and J.E. Talbert and others. *Developing School Capacity for Inquiry-based Improvement: Progress, Challenges, and Resources* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, 2010. (Retrieved from <https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/spa/researchcenters/documents/NVPS-SAMProgramEvaluationNovember2010.pdf>)
- 20 Bruna Barletta and others. "Networks for School Improvement: A Review of the Literature" (New York, NY: Columbia University Center for Public Research and Leadership, 2018).
- 21 See Chapter 71, Sections 29 (creating MGL Chapter 69, Section 11 pertaining to school improvement plans); Chapter 71, Section 53 (creating MGL Chapter 71, Section 59c pertaining to school site councils).
- 22 See Chapter 159, Section 148 of the Acts of 2000; Chapter 218, Section 13 of the Acts of 2002; Chapter 46, Section 82 of the Acts of 2003; Chapter 255, Section 2 of the Acts of 2016; Chapter 138, Section 26 of the Acts of 2017.

ABOUT MASSINC

The Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth (MassINC) is a rigorously nonpartisan think tank and civic organization. It focuses on putting the American Dream within the reach of everyone in Massachusetts using three distinct tools—research, journalism, and civic engagement. MassINC’s work is characterized by accurate data, careful analysis, and unbiased conclusions.



H₂O

MassINC

RESEARCH. JOURNALISM. CIVIC LIFE.

11 Beacon Street, Suite 500
Boston, MA 02108
massinc.org | massincpolling.com
[@massinc](https://twitter.com/massinc) | [@massincpolling](https://twitter.com/massincpolling)

