



To: School Committee of the Newton Public Schools
From: Renee McCall, Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning
Date: March 27, 2024
Re: Student Opportunity Act Plan Submission to DESE

Attached is the Student Opportunity Act (SOA) submission for Newton Public Schools (NPS) for your review. The SOA represents a commitment to ensuring equitable access to high-quality education for all students. At NPS, we are dedicated to closing opportunity gaps, particularly for historically marginalized student groups, including Multilingual Learners, Hispanic/Latinx students, Black/African American students, and students with disabilities. Our submission identifies disparities in student learning opportunities and outcomes, and outlines evidence-based strategies to address these inequities.

Our plan focuses on leveraging Culturally Responsive Practices, informed by a thorough analysis of data. Through this approach, we aim to create an inclusive learning environment that respects and affirms the diverse backgrounds and experiences of our students. Additionally, we are committed to providing academic and social-emotional support through the implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS).

NPS will provide progress updates on the implementation of evidence-based practices outlined in this plan.

SOA Plan: Newton Public Schools

Section 1: Summarize your district's plan

Please write 1-2 paragraphs summarizing your 3-year SOA plan.

Newton Public Schools (NPS) is dedicated to closing opportunity gaps for our historically marginalized student groups, including Multilingual Learners, Hispanic/Latinx students, Black/African American students, and students with disabilities. Our 3-year Student Opportunity Act (SOA) plan is designed to mitigate persistent disparities. This plan incorporates a focus on Culturally Responsive Practices, an evidence-based approach identified through a comprehensive analysis of data:

- **Academic and social/emotional student support through Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS):** NPS elementary schools are at the beginning stages of establishing MTSS structures and systems that sustain equitable student access to universally-designed and culturally-sustaining Tier 1 instruction and data-driven Tier 2/3 intervention across core content domains. Significant school-level structural barriers exist in the absence of aligned district guidance that utilizes data-based decision-making to center student needs and outcomes in all school-level scheduling, staffing allocations, and classroom-level scheduling. Our elementary schools are not yet fluent in quantitative data-based decision-making, an area of needed focus impacted by a historical lack of an MTSS data management system that has the features to document tiered supports and drive data-driven Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Our data indicated the need to develop and host district-wide professional development for principals and teacher leaders (train-the-trainer) to support culturally responsive instruction. Professional learning related to MTSS is also currently being planned to address content-specific or department-specific priorities or curricula. MCAS data, the current quantitative data point that can be used to globally measure student' achievement trends over time, continues to show ongoing opportunity achievement gaps of historically-marginalized student populations. Additional data sources also show an overreliance and over-recommendation of special education aides and high rates of special education eligibility. Additional staffing is required as we implement this work.
- **Curriculum Adoption and Implementation of Culturally Affirming Literacy Program:** Our curriculum review process for elementary literacy curriculum highlighted the importance of High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) in narrowing achievement gaps. Therefore, we will continue our district-wide adoption and robust implementation of HQIM to ensure equitable access to high-quality education for all students. Cultural responsiveness is a central tenet in our approach to curriculum and instruction that increases rigor and relevance of content reflective of diverse perspectives and experiences. We also incorporate opportunities to build future readiness in our students through learning experiences that foster creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication.

In total across each of these initiatives, Newton will invest funding as follows:

MTSS = \$552K added 7.0 FTE for elementary support

MTSS/Social Workers: \$529K 6.7 social workers

Future benchmark assessments and digital dashboard/tracking of student results: \$ 460,000 per year

Curriculum Adoption Process and Implementation = \$3M

Section 2: Analyze Your Data and Select Student Groups for Focused Support

In conducting your data analysis, where did you observe the most significant disparities in student learning experiences and outcomes? On which measures and for which student groups?

Some progress has been made in returning to achievement levels from 2019, however we noted lagging performance as compared to pre-pandemic levels in certain grades and subjects as measured by the percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations on MCAS assessments.

- Noteworthy exceptions to the above include: high school (ELA and Physics), grade 4 (Math), and grade 5 (Science) that have regained or surpassed performance from 2019.
- Concerns remain in relation to grade 3 Math and ELA, where performance is below pre-pandemic and last year's levels. A potential contributing factor related to this grade's performance could be the impact of the pandemic as this group of students had their kindergarten year interrupted by the closure of schools in March 2020. Additionally, their first grade instruction was delivered in a hybrid format.
- Persistent opportunity gaps are identified across ELA, Math, and Science for certain subgroups including Black/African American students, Hispanic/Latinx students, and students with disabilities.
- While opportunity gaps persist for English Learners, improvements are seen for Former English Learners.
- Writing scores have improved from last year when both Newton and the state saw historically low average scores. However, writing scores in the early elementary grades continue to be lower than secondary grade levels.

Student Growth Percentiles (SGP) vary by performance level in grades 3-8, showing an increasing trend with higher performance levels. A similar pattern is observed with the median SGP. This indicates that on average, students with higher overall performance on MCAS are growing at a faster rate than students with lower overall performance on MCAS.

To address these performance concerns, we are taking the following actions:

- Strengthen Tier 1 reading and writing curriculum and instruction with the adoption of EL Education, which includes knowledge and vocabulary building, a focus on standards, and targeted writing instruction with an emphasis on analyzing texts.
- Continue building strong Tier 2 literacy intervention including regular assessment periods, data meetings, identification of student needs, targeted instruction, progress monitoring, and regular professional learning for literacy specialists and intervention teachers.
- Focus on strengthening the trajectory of writing instruction with more opportunities for students to compose and engage in the iterative writing process through feedback and common writing assignments.
- Adding in consistent fluency assessments in multiplication, following up with targeted intervention activities.
- Deliberate rollout of ST Math with emphasis on access for all students. ST Math builds number sense understanding and complements our mathematics program at the elementary level.
- Focus on strategies to bolster student mastery of grade-level standards in critical early grades.

What does your deeper analysis (including the triangulation of multiple types of data) suggest are the best ways to address these disparities across student groups?

Below is a summary of how we plan to address the disparities across student groups that were revealed in our deeper analysis.

- **HQIM Implementation:** We will implement a high quality instructional material adoption process for ELA in grades K-5, and provide professional development to educators to ensure familiarity with lesson internalizations and effective implementation of the curriculum. This will include professional development for all teachers on strategies to ensure the curriculum is accessible to all students, including our English learners and students with disabilities.
- **SEL Screener and Curriculum for Mental Health:** We adopted an SEL competency screener across the district in grades 3-5 to address the significant challenges for the mental health and social emotional development of our students, expanding on the SEL curriculum that we've adopted across our middle and high schools

over the past three years.

Based on your identification of the greatest disparities in outcomes, which student groups will require focused support for rapid improvement as you implement your evidence-based programs over the next three years?

- Black/African American Students
- Hispanic/Latinx Students
- English learners
- Students with disabilities

Section 3: Set Ambitious Three-Year Targets for Improving Student Achievement

Confirm that your district will use DESE's three-year targets for increasing performance for the "Lowest Performing Students" group in ELA and math.

Yes. We will adopt the three-year improvement targets established by DESE for the "Lowest Performing Students" group as our district's SOA plan improvement targets.

Section 4: Engage Families/Caregivers and other Stakeholders

Describe the approaches your district uses to regularly engage with families/caregivers. In your response, please be sure to address what steps you will be taking to meaningfully engage with families/caregivers of student groups you are targeting for accelerated improvement as this plan is implemented.

Newton has implemented several strategies to meaningfully engage families over the past few years, including:

- Routine, ongoing meetings between district leadership and PTO/SEPAC/ELPAC leadership.
- Formal and informal family engagement opportunities throughout the school year that included interpretation services to meet the needs of our multilingual families (both in-person and virtually)
- Community meetings and forums held at various times and in different modes to accommodate as many families as possible
- New superintendent met with 59 groups of families across all villages of our city and Boston families (METCO Program) over the summer
- A formal entry plan noting district areas for attention, areas of strength and needs for students was published to community in November of 2023
- PTO meetings with school committee and school superintendent have occurred at all schools sharing the above priority areas
- Maintaining open lines of communication through various avenues such as school-based newsletters, district updates, and social media
- Implementing Parent Square in Sept 2025 (pilot phase Spring 2024), as a platform to make digital communication between schools, teachers and families more streamlined, efficient, and effective. The platform, in particular, will provide easier access to translated communications with families.

We use the following strategies to measure family engagement in our district:

- Shared results of Thoughtexchange, AI Stay Interviews, and meetings with 200 educators regarding experiences in the Newton Schools. (Entry plan)
- Family and community participation in strategic plan development process and Portrait of a Graduate creation and reflections on the process (in writing, focus groups or public meetings).
- Two profile of a graduate community visioning sessions with 70 community members attending each session
- The creation of a profile of a graduate design team with over 100 family participants
- Plan to implement Parent Square in Sept 2025 (pilot phase Spring 2024), as a platform to make digital communication between schools, teachers and families more streamlined, efficient, and effective. The platform, in particular, will provide easier access to translated communications with families.
- Tracking caregiver participation in caregiver/teacher conferences at the elementary level.

Staff and other stakeholders:

- Educators of color participate in opportunities of mentoring/coaching by administrators and supervisors of color and access to professional development particularly geared to support the dynamics of retention for this community (documented through attendance logs and reflections on professional development offered).
- Expansion and maintenance of staff affinity spaces as documented by summary of meetings, record of number of participants and impact reflections from participants.
- Coaching supervisors and administrators in culturally-responsive supervision practices to support and develop staff of color for leadership positions as documented by “look for document” and instructional rounds schedules.

Describe the ways in which you engaged different stakeholder groups in the development of your three-year SOA Plan. How have you integrated the perspectives of those groups into the three-year plan? How will you continue to engage stakeholders throughout the implementation of your plan?

We engaged stakeholders in the development of this plan in several ways, including:

- We held a series of focus groups with our educators in which we shared the aggregated data on gaps between student groups and solicited their feedback on what supports would be most critical to address them.
- During regular meetings with various advisory councils (Special Education Parent Advisory Council, English Learner Parent Advisory Council, School Improvement Council, and School Committee) we shared aggregated and disaggregated data on disparities in student learning experiences and outcomes and solicited feedback on approaches to addressing those disparities.
- We held two facilitated community meetings for families/caregivers and community members to both share the aggregated and disaggregated data on disparities and gather input and insights.
- We reviewed aggregated data gathered during our community visioning process for our comprehensive strategic planning last year as a reference point for selecting our EBPs to close gaps. This group included a wide cross-section of district stakeholders, including educators, students, families, and representatives from local community groups, non-profits, and business leaders.
- We consulted with local elected and appointed officials about the disparities observed in the data and emerging priorities and strategies to address them.
- We identified support for mental health and social-emotional learning as a consistent priority across groups, so we integrated that priority into our plan.

Confirm you engaged with the following stakeholder groups in the development of this plan: parents/caregivers, special education and English learner parent advisory councils, school improvement councils, and educators in the school district.

Yes

Confirm that your school committee voted to approve this plan and provide the date of the vote.

Yes

Section 5: Select Evidence Based Programs to Address Disparities in Outcomes

Select the Focus Area that your district will prioritize over the next three years to address the academic disparities identified in your data analysis.

Focus Area 1.1: Promote students’ physical and mental health and wellness in welcoming, affirming, and safe spaces

Which EBPs will your district implement within this Focus Area?

EBP 1.1B: Enhanced support for SEL and Mental Health: Expand capacity to address social-emotional learning (SEL) and mental health needs of students and families (e.g., build knowledge and skills of current staff, add specialized support staff, partner with community-based providers)

Provide a short description of what your district has in place now related to this EBP and what you anticipate will be in place by the conclusion of the plan's implementation (by June 2027).

Our district will continue to work on focusing on the whole student - including the importance of students' social emotional competencies alongside their academic competencies. As one of our focus areas, we will continue to implement district-wide student perception surveys from grades 3-5 and the teacher perception survey in grades K-5. By measuring student and teacher perceptions respectively, the surveys can gather feedback about their classroom experiences and SEL skills. Decades of research have shown that student perceptions strongly correlate with learning outcomes. In the 2024-2025 school year, the district will introduce a family survey PK-post secondary to gather feedback on the family-school relationship. Implementation of these surveys will also include high-quality aligned training for staff in order to best support the administration and interpretation of the results. In addition to building the capacity of our existing staff, we also plan to increase the number of FTEs across the district who have specialized skills and training regarding the response to students' social, emotional, and mental health needs. A total of 6.7FTE has been added to the operating budget for social work positions at each elementary school. This will allow for daily support of social, emotional, and mental health needs at all fifteen elementary schools.

Which schools will be impacted by these efforts (answer can be district-wide)?

District-wide

What is the anticipated amount of funding that will be allocated to this EBP over the next three years (FY25 + FY26 + FY27), across all funding sources? Total should be cumulative.

- Anticipated amount of funding allocated to this EBP over the next three years across all funding sources is estimated to be \$1,655,442.

Describe the anticipated allocation of funds to this EBP in more detail.

- Social Workers = \$528,764
- Student, Teacher, Family Surveys = \$ 23,050
- **Total = \$551,814**

Which budget foundation categories (G.L. c. 70) will be included in this anticipated annual allocation?

StudentServices, Teaching and Learning, Information & Technology, Professional Development

What metrics will your district use to monitor progress on this EBP? Please keep in mind that you will be asked to report on progress against these metrics in your annual update to DESE starting next year.

- Change in social and emotional competency rates as measured by local screener
 - Grades 3-5: percentage of students responding favorably to: Supportive Relationships, Positive Feelings, Challenging Feelings, Learning Strategies, Growth Mindset, Emotion Regulation
 - Grades 3-5: district percentile compared to nation: Supportive Relationships, Positive Feelings, Challenging Feelings, Learning Strategies, Growth Mindset, Emotion Regulation
 - Districtwide (grades 3-8 and 10): average scores on: Comfort at School, Behavioral Support
- Decrease in chronic absenteeism rates for targeted student groups
- PD attendance (% of staff trained)
- New positions filled in accordance with our district hiring plan

Select the Focus Area that your district will prioritize over the next three years to address the academic disparities identified in your data analysis.

Focus Area 2.1: Select and skillfully implement high-quality and engaging instructional materials that support culturally and linguistically sustaining practices and foster deeper learning

Which EBPs will your district implement within this Focus Area?

EBP: 2.1A Inclusive Curriculum Adoption Process: Implement a comprehensive and inclusive curriculum adoption process that engages multiple stakeholders in the exploration and assessment of potential instructional materials

Provide a short description of what your district has in place now related to this EBP and what you anticipate will

be in place by the conclusion of the plan's implementation (by June 2027).

Our ongoing integrity walks have highlighted positive impacts on student engagement as a result of our high-quality instructional material adoption and implementation efforts. We will be enhancing and deepening this strategy by implementing an adoption process for HQIM for ELA in grades 3-5 in the upcoming year.

Which schools will be impacted by these efforts (answer can be district-wide)?

District-wide (elementary)

What is the anticipated amount of funding that will be allocated to this EBP over the next three years (FY25 + FY26 + FY27), across all funding sources? Total should be cumulative.

- \$3,000,000

Describe the anticipated allocation of funds to this EBP in more detail.

- Instructional Materials, Equipment & Technology = \$3M

Which budget foundation categories (G.L. c. 70) will be included in this anticipated annual allocation?

Other Teaching Services, Instructional Materials

What metrics will your district use to monitor progress on this EBP? Please keep in mind that you will be asked to report on progress against these metrics in your annual update to DESE starting next year.

- Increase in HQIM adoption rates
- Increase in efficacy of HQIM implementation as measured by classroom walkthrough tools
- Increase in MCAS SGP ELA MCAS and interim assessments
- Teacher perception of student engagement (via survey)

Which EBPs will your district implement within this Focus Area?

EBP 2.1B: Supporting Educators on Curriculum Implementation: Engage teachers in professional development linked directly to the curriculum and set up a process to regularly monitor the effectiveness of curriculum implementation

Provide a short description of what your district has in place now related to this EBP and what you anticipate will be in place by the conclusion of the plan's implementation (by June 2027).

New curriculum print and digital materials were purchased, and we contracted with professional development providers to provide teachers and leaders with a framework in which to measure successful implementation. The professional development and materials explicitly outline effective strategies to address the persistent disparities in achievement for our English learners and students with disabilities. Furthermore, a subgroup of school leaders are working with central administration to develop a classroom walkthrough tool based on the latest research. While we plan to develop and pilot this tool for the upcoming school year, we will subsequently implement the tool as a part of our regular instructional walkthrough and feedback cycles across schools at a future date.

Which schools will be impacted by these efforts (answer can be district-wide)?

District-wide

What is the anticipated amount of funding that will be allocated to this EBP over the next three years (FY25 + FY26 + FY27), across all funding sources? Total should be cumulative.

- \$150,000

Describe the anticipated allocation of funds to this EBP in more detail.

- Professional Development = \$150,000

Which budget foundation categories (G.L. c. 70) will be included in this anticipated annual allocation?

Professional Development

What metrics will your district use to monitor progress on this EBP? Please keep in mind that you will be asked to report on progress against these metrics in your annual update to DESE starting next year.

- Increase in HQIM adoption rates

- Increase in efficacy of HQIM implementation as measured by classroom walkthrough tools
- Increase in MCAS SGP ELA MCAS and interim assessments