



Search for the Commissioner
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Everett, Massachusetts

THE SEARCH

The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) seeks an innovative and collaborative systems-level thinker to serve as the next Commissioner of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). The Commissioner advocates for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts's public elementary and secondary schools and works to strengthen the impact, accessibility, and quality of elementary and secondary education across the state.

DESE provides leadership, oversight, funding, support, and accountability for the Commonwealth's 399 school districts representing urban, suburban, and rural communities across the state that educate close to 1 million public school children each year. DESE also oversees programs that serve 20,000 adult learners each year. The DESE Commissioner is appointed by the Board with the approval of the Massachusetts Secretary of Education and works cooperatively with the Board, the Executive Office of Education (EOE), and the leaders of the Commonwealth's 1,827 public schools. The Commissioner is the executive and administrative head of DESE, reports to the Board, and works collaboratively with the Governor and Secretary of Education.

Massachusetts continues to lead the nation in K-12 education. The Department's next Commissioner will maintain the state's steadfast commitment to educational excellence, continue to develop an equitable system that educates all students to their full potential and the highest standards, and develop even more effective policies and practices to increase academic achievement for all. With the support and involvement of numerous partners and stakeholders, the Commissioner will have the opportunity to build on recent years' successes, support the development of innovative strategies and programs, ensure value and accountability, and advance an ambitious educational vision that is student-centered and guided by best practices.

The Commissioner will be a forward-thinking, data-driven, outcomes-oriented educator and a proven leader and manager within complex, multi-tiered systems. They will have a strong grasp of the salient issues, success drivers, and challenges of public education systems, skills in navigating state government structures and the political process, and the ability to place Massachusetts trends within the national context. The successful candidate will demonstrate effectiveness in devising imaginative approaches that serve students, teachers, and their school communities, an unwavering commitment to the transformational power of elementary and secondary education, and a clear track record of dismantling systemic inequities and improving the experience of all students, particularly those from marginalized communities and experiences.

OVERVIEW OF MASSACHUSETTS PUBLIC K-12 EDUCATION SYSTEM

The mission of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education is to strengthen the Commonwealth's public education system so that every student is prepared to succeed in postsecondary education should they choose to enroll, compete in the global economy, and understand the rights and responsibilities of American citizens, and in so doing, to close all proficiency gaps.

Massachusetts boasts the highest high school graduation rate in the United States (96.1 percent) and ties Connecticut for having the highest average ACT score (26.4 out of the highest possible score of 36). The national average is 19.5. The Commonwealth ranks first in the nation for the percentage of graduating high school seniors who score a three or higher on an Advanced Placement exam (College Board, 2023). Younger students in the Commonwealth have also proven their success in the classroom — the state has the best fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math scores in the country on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests. Nevertheless, gaps in student achievement and success persist across Massachusetts's diverse communities. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted learning, impacting some of the most critical foundational skill development, and the effect on students, educators, and communities is still being felt, including in chronic absenteeism rates that continue to persist.

Improving literacy rates remains a top priority for the state. Starting in 2018, the staff of DESE's Office of Literacy and Humanities engaged educators and other stakeholders statewide to develop DESE's Literacy Strategic Plan. [Mass Literacy](#) is a statewide effort to empower educators with the evidence-based practices for literacy that all students need. Extending the work of Mass Literacy, Massachusetts Governor Maura Healey recently introduced the Literacy Launch initiative, which provides schools, educators, and students opportunities to access high-quality, evidence-based reading instruction through materials, technical support, coaching, and professional development for educators. The first year of this new, multi-year strategy is supported by \$20 million in the current fiscal year and represents a key investment in the future of early learners, helping equip students with the reading and writing skills necessary for academic success and lifelong learning.

Educational Vision

DESE's goal is that as a result of their public education in Massachusetts, students will:

- Attain academic knowledge and skills: achieve in a comprehensive and diverse range of subjects and apply their competencies in relevant, real-world contexts.
- Understand and value self: know their own strengths, interests, and areas of growth, be self-aware, be a self-advocate, and make responsible decisions.
- Understand and value others: understand differences and multiple perspectives, empathize with others, and build connections with peers and adults.

- Engage with the world: understand and think critically about local, national, and world events and societal systems, and create positive change through civic action.

So that they can:

- Be curious and creative: find joy in learning, pursue their interests, and use innovative thinking to approach opportunities and solve challenges, including those previously unseen.
- Shape their path: be well prepared to thrive in college and/or career and be positioned for lifelong learning.
- Feel connected: see themselves as valuable and involved members of their communities and be aware of their independence and interdependence.
- Be empowered: play a role in advocating for equity, justice, and liberty in their communities and beyond.

This vision is anchored in DESE's commitment to high-quality teaching and learning. The next Commissioner will champion DESE's educational vision, working with districts, schools, and educators to promote teaching and learning that is antiracist, inclusive, multilingual, and multicultural; that values and affirms each and every student and their family; and that creates equitable opportunities and experiences for all students to excel in all content areas across all grades, particularly those who have been historically underserved. Culturally and linguistically sustaining classroom and school practices will support students to thrive by creating affirming environments where students have a sense of belonging, engage in deeper learning, and are held to high expectations with targeted support.

DESE is currently supported by a leadership team of nine, including the Commissioner, and approximately 500 additional staff across the department. Massachusetts invests approximately \$20 billion a year in its public schools through a mixture of federal, state, and local funds. DESE's FY2024 budget totals \$8.2 billion. The [Student Opportunity Act](#) has been fully funded since 2022, and school meals, both breakfast and lunch, continue to be free for every single student, permanently. Massachusetts is one of only eight states to continue funding universal free meals after federal funding during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic concluded.

For more information on DESE by the numbers, including enrollment, demographic, achievement, and other data, please see [here](#).

ROLE OF THE COMMISSIONER

The Commissioner will excel in leading and supporting DESE in its efforts to educate all students of the Commonwealth for success in a globally competitive world. Candidates for the position should possess a deep and diverse set of experiences that will enable them to develop effective strategies for the education of all students in Massachusetts and significantly improve the state's education system. The successful candidate will be a skilled communicator and relationship-builder, a change agent, a champion of

students, and a proactive executor who drives meaningful adjustments through strategic action and effective implementation. They will be capable of developing a good working knowledge of the Massachusetts context and will build on decades of bipartisan reform efforts to foster effective working relationships among all education stakeholders—particularly parents and caregivers, educators, and students—while strengthening internal capacity inside DESE and creating a robust culture that allows for the effective fostering of these relationships.

The Board believes effective collaboration among all stakeholders is essential to fulfilling the Commonwealth’s education reform goals. The Board is committed to further transforming DESE into a professional service agency that, working with the Board, develops a strategic plan for continually improving K-12 education and, in collaboration with various partners, delivers a comprehensive set of supports and services designed to implement the plan and realize the educational vision. The Commissioner will work collaboratively with the Board, serving as a vital bridge between departmental staff and board members to ensure alignment and facilitate impactful outcomes.

The DESE Commissioner will also collaborate with the Commissioners of Early Education and Care (EEC) and Higher Education (DHE) to develop and continue cross-sector initiatives to ensure that Massachusetts residents have the best chance to reach their full potential. The Board of Higher Education has recently partnered with the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to increase exposure and access to higher education for K-12 students so they have consistent and equal access to the information, tools, guidance, and resources that they need to pursue all types of postsecondary opportunities.

PRIORITIES FOR THE COMMISSIONER

In partnership with the Board, DESE staff, EOE, and relevant stakeholders, the Commissioner will:

- Serve as chief executive officer of the state system of elementary and secondary education and supervise all K-12 public schools in the Commonwealth.
- Represent Massachusetts Elementary and Secondary Education throughout the Commonwealth as well as nationally and internationally.
- Build statewide consensus with diverse stakeholders and communities on strategies to realize the goal of dramatically improving student achievement.
- Support the work of districts and individual schools with resources and initiatives that will help to eliminate educational inequality.
- Foster flexibility to allow for innovative practices in elementary and secondary education.
- Promote equity throughout all systems, facilitate alignment with agency-wide equity goals, and help ensure that all staff, students, and families benefit from DESE's policies, programs, and decisions.
- Attend to the specific needs of the Commonwealth’s growing multilingual learner population and invest in accessible and effective education for students with disabilities.

- Develop a strategic plan to further transform DESE into a state-of-the-art resource, support, and service delivery center.
- Ensure DESE's organizational structure allows for the most effective, efficient, and cohesive operations.
- Provide guidance, support, and administration to the delivery of public K-12 education throughout the state.
- Implement strategies to enhance teacher retention and expand professional development opportunities, fostering a supportive environment for educators' growth and long-term success.
- Develop and implement targeted interventions to address COVID-19 learning loss, ensuring students receive appropriate support and accelerate academic recovery.
- Strengthen collaboration and alignment among EEC, DESE, and DHE to ensure cohesive education policies and streamlined decision-making processes.
- Strategically balance incentives and accountability measures to drive innovation while empowering individual districts to tailor approaches that best meet their unique community needs.
- Streamline and distribute data and evidence that are easy to understand and use for action-oriented outcomes to districts, schools, teachers, students, parents, lawmakers, and school committees.

QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COMMISSIONER

The Commissioner will bring many of the following qualifications, professional experiences, and attributes:

- Deep knowledge of K-12 policy and practice and experience working in the field with frontline educators. Experience as an agent for change, with a vision for universal student success and a strategy to drive it forward.
- Experience with or knowledge of strategies, programs, curricula, and systems of support that have been successful in measurably boosting academic achievement for all students and closing persistent inequities that impact Black and brown students, students with disabilities, multilingual learners, LGBTQ+ students, and others.
- Demonstrated leadership, administrative, and managerial expertise and success in large, complex, public-facing professional environments.
- Demonstrated evidence of utilizing high-quality research and data analytics to support the adoption of innovative strategies for the solution of persistent educational challenges.
- The ability to engage in blue-sky thinking while confronting everyday practicalities and experience building consensus around priorities and goals by engaging diverse and sometimes opposing perspectives.

- Empathy and understanding of how to navigate and build relationships across diverse communities, particularly marginalized communities, and evidence of putting students and families first at all times.
- Skills in working with constituents and policy-making partners, including the Legislature, the Executive, other state agencies, local officials, school committees, and teachers unions.
- Track record of advocating for and materially improving students' learning, well-being, and social-emotional health.
- The ability to communicate skillfully through multiple modes of influence and messaging.
- Inspirational leadership and ability to set the right tone at the top, including building a strong culture within the agency
- A champion for educators, a thoughtful listener, and a leader guided by integrity and humility.
- Applications encouraged from non-traditional candidates with the ability to show how their outstanding track record in a related or relevant field would allow them to fulfill this position.

EMPLOYMENT DETAILS

Location: The Commissioner must reside within daily commutable distance of Everett, Massachusetts.

Compensation: The compensation package is competitive and will be commensurate with the selected candidate's experience. Please inquire with the search team below for salary details.

APPLICATIONS, NOMINATIONS, AND INQUIRIES

All inquiries, nominations, and applications (including resumes/CVs and two- to three-page letters of interest describing relevant experience relating to the priorities and qualifications outlined above) should be directed in strict confidence to the search team below. Applications will be reviewed as they are submitted. The position is open until filled.

Katie Rockman, Tatiana Oberkoetter, Arianna Williams, and Maria Connor

Isaacson, Miller

[DESE Commissioner Search](#)

The Commonwealth is an Equal Opportunity Employer and does not discriminate based on race, religion, color, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, disability, national origin, veteran status, or any other basis covered by appropriate law. Research suggests that qualified women, Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color (BIPOC) may self-select out of opportunities if they don't meet 100% of the job requirements. We encourage individuals who believe they have the skills necessary to thrive to apply for this role.

The Education Secretariat is committed to equity and valuing the unique and diverse characteristics and experiences of every member of its workforce. We encourage an authentic workplace where colleagues show up as their full selves, and where collaboration, innovation, and connections are key to realizing our mission that all children, youth, and families thrive socially, academically, and economically. We seek teammates committed to promoting a diverse and inclusive work environment, where everyone is valued and engaged. We encourage you to apply and identify your strengths in these areas.