



## Union #28 Updates from the Superintendent

### *Union #28 Mission Statement:*

*Union #28 strives to ensure equitable access to deep and meaningful educational experiences for every student.*

How has this year flown by so quickly? It is hard to believe it is almost April!

Our schools are busy this time of year with MCAS, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. Statewide assessments help parents, students, educators, and policymakers determine where districts, schools, and students are meeting expectations and where they need additional support. To increase our understanding of school performance, Student Assessment Services develops and administers the MCAS and, for students with significant learning challenges, the MCAS Alternate Assessment. Student Assessment Services also administers ACCESS for ELLs (Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners).

Before education reform and statewide testing in the 1990s, Massachusetts students too often graduated from high school without the basic reading and math skills needed to succeed in life.

Today, Massachusetts students are #1 in the country in reading and math. So how did this happen? In the early '90s, the state passed a law that included high learning standards, consistent funding, more choices for families, and accountability for how well students are being served. Part of that act included statewide assessments to make sure schools are reaching all students.

When scores show students are not meeting basic learning standards, schools and districts can adjust instruction to address those areas. In addition, parents and the public can ask questions and ensure educators are taking action.

Statewide testing helps parents check their child's and school's progress and lets taxpayers know if they are getting a good return on the tax money they invest in schools.

Statewide assessments also help the state know where to focus its efforts, whether that be on individual struggling schools or wide subject areas, like early reading or middle school math. Without testing, those needs would remain hidden.

State test scores are just one piece of a student's academic picture, but they are important information.

Students educated with Massachusetts public funds are required by federal laws and the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Law to participate in statewide testing.

Additionally, each one of our Union #28 schools use a variety of school-based assessments in literacy and math to gather information and data to give a more precise picture of each child's growth.

The Student Opportunity Act (Chapter 132 of the Acts of 2019) ushered in a new phase in the Commonwealth's commitment to ensuring that every student in the state experiences high-quality learning opportunities that lead to success in school and in postsecondary success.

Overall, Massachusetts leads the nation on many measures of student learning experiences, student achievement, and postsecondary success for its students. However, a closer look reveals inequitable gaps in experiences and outcomes across racial and ethnic groups, in economically disadvantaged communities compared to higher income communities, for students with disabilities relative to their non-disabled peers, and for English learners compared to students whose first language is English.

The Leadership Team and I are working to complete our Student Opportunity Act (SOA) Progress Reports as required by DESE. We submitted the original plan in 2020. The plan contains four commitments:

**Commitment 1: Focusing on Student Subgroups:** As evidenced in our District and School Improvement Plans, our Union #28 schools have been placing a strong focus on increasing accessibility to strong Tier I instruction for all students through the use of Universal Design for Learning principles. We have been providing our educators with specific professional development in Universal Design, and we have been focusing our educator goals (administrator and teacher) on these efforts.

Through these efforts to build capacity for fully inclusive first instruction, it has become apparent that it is time for us to concentrate more of our efforts at ensuring intentionality, continuity, and collective efforts in Tier II and Tier III instruction for students who require additional skill building and practice and who may qualify for Individualized Education Programs.

**Commitment 2: Using Evidence-Based Programs to Close Gaps:** In order to build a community of accessibility, Union #28 will continue our professional work towards deepening capacity for all teachers in using the workshop model to provide opportunities for students to engage with their own specific educational needs in the same space. Through continued professional development in Universal Design for Learning principles, teachers will learn to maximize first level instructional time, as well as build a community where students can access content at their level in the same environment as their peers. We plan to strengthen collaboration among student support personnel and adopt targeted programs for reading instruction at second and third instruction. We intend to develop stronger collaboration models for Student Support Educators, Interventionists and Special Educators, to facilitate the sharing of expertise and best practices for students who need additional support. In these collaborative meetings, we intend to build capacity for utilizing specific programs for literacy instruction.

**Commitment 3: Monitoring Success with Outcome Metrics and Targets:** We will use DESE outcome metrics to include ELA mean SGP (MCAS); Custom district metrics; ELA progress monitoring benchmarks; school-based benchmark and progress monitoring assessments to assess our progress towards closing gaps in the high-needs and students with disabilities groups.

**Commitment 4: Engaging All Families:** The Union #28 District recognizes that family engagement is critical to ensuring successful outcomes for all students. Given our focus on student subgroups, it is particularly important that we find ways to continuously engage our families, especially families of students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, EL students and students with disabilities.

We recognize that existing family engagement opportunities at our schools may not be effective in reaching all families. Therefore, in addition to our ongoing family potluck dinners and quarterly PTO meetings, we are also committing to build a membership of our Erving Union #28 Special Education Advisory Council (SEPAC).

We also completed an amendment to the SOA Plans to include: Our data analysis revealed that High Needs students, such as students with disabilities, low income or economically disadvantaged were achieving at consistently lower levels than students who do not fall into this category. As evidenced in our District Improvement Plans, Union #28 schools have been placing a strong focus on increasing accessibility to the Tier I instruction for all students through the use of Universal Design for Learning principles as well as Tier II and Tier III supports in the area of reading, writing and mathematics. We welcome any feedback you may have and look forward to sharing more as this process and reporting continues.

Union #28 schools continue our work with our professional development partners, The Hill for Literacy and the Collaborative for Educational Services to provide staff with training in the science of reading and equity. Earlier in the year, the Director of Curriculum and Instruction and I sent out a survey to all staff members regarding our professional development. We are planning to send out another survey this spring to gather more feedback. We will use this feedback to inform our work moving forward.

At the core of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, lawmakers and advocates established a team approach in which parents and educators working together review challenges, explore options, and make decisions in the best interest of each child.

The very teamwork and collaboration that are at the core of IDEA are also at the core of a best practice in special education: Local Special Education Parent Advisory Councils (SEPACs).

An effective SEPAC takes the teamwork of the IEP process one step further, putting parents in the role of advisors who use their family's experiences, unique perspectives and expertise to influence decisions and help shape programs and policies at the local level.

An effective SEPAC is more than a meeting – it is an approach and a mindset that truly values the advice of parents. When parent advisors are valued and engaged through a local SEPACs, they can work together with school district staff and community leaders to improve education, not only for those with disabilities, but for all children.

We are looking to engage parents and caregivers of our schools in creating an engaging and supportive local SEPAC for Union #28. Please reach out to our Director of Student Support Services, Corinna Wcislo at [wcislo@erving.com](mailto:wcislo@erving.com) if you are interested.

Spring is truly the season of renewal. After a cold, harsh winter, nothing lifts our spirits like seeing early spring flowers popping up around us. As the weather warms and days get longer, our whole perspective shifts.

*"There are always flowers for those who want to see them." - Henri Matisse*

Kind regards,  
Jennifer J Culkeen, Superintendent of Schools