June 10, 2020

The Honorable Karen E. Spilka  The Honorable Robert A. DeLeo
President of the Senate  Speaker of the House of Representatives
Room 332, State House  Room 356, State House
Boston, MA 02133  Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Jason Lewis  The Honorable Alice Peisch
Senate Chair of the Joint Committee on Education  House Chair of the Joint Committee on Education
Room 511-B, State House  Room 473-G, State House
Boston, MA 02133  Boston, MA 02133

Re: Urgent Need to Mitigate the Traumatic Impacts of the Pandemic by Building an Infrastructure for Strengthening Family Engagement throughout the Commonwealth

Dear Legislators:

We thank the Governor, the Legislature, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, school district leaders and all educators for their tireless efforts to help students engage in remote learning during this public health crisis. However, we are concerned that there will be enduring repercussions if its traumatic impacts are not quickly addressed.

As Massachusetts closes out the school year and considers priorities for the summer and fall, we urge our leaders to understand this pandemic as a traumatic experience that impacts all of us—especially those who are most vulnerable. Before the pandemic, many students were already struggling with barriers to learning stemming from prior traumatic experiences, such as bullying at school, community or family violence, and harms associated with racism and other structural inequities. Now, forced isolation from the COVID-19 crisis threatens one of our students’ most powerful sources of resilience for coping: their positive connections with their educators and school communities. The recent murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis has magnified racial injustices, increasing the level of stress even more. Many students are falling between the cracks of remote learning, in part because closures have made it more difficult for schools to partner effectively with families. Often, these partnerships were challenging even before the pandemic.

Understanding trauma’s impact on learning is important because it helps us remember that learning is dependent on students’ sense of safety, their trust in relationships, their connectedness to their school community, and the ability to self-regulate their emotions, attentions, and behaviors. If feelings of overwhelming disconnection remain unaddressed, they can exacerbate pre-existing challenges and lead to new learning difficulties, long-term disengagement from school, and even potential diagnoses, such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. It is critical that we help children overcome their feelings of helplessness and disconnection from school now, so they can return to
school ready and able to focus and learn. The crisis has demonstrated that many schools are not flexible enough to meet the needs of families and children with disabilities, who live in communities impacted by racial injustice, who live in shelters or group homes, speak languages other than English, experience food, housing or job insecurity, or do not have meaningful access to technology. Too many parents and students with whom we work are expressing a combination of anxiety, frustration and disempowerment with remote learning. And media reports document the alarming number of families in some communities that have yet to be reached by their schools.

Strengthening family engagement in every school and for every family and student in the Commonwealth—beginning now, accelerating in the months leading up to re-entry, and continuing long after school is back in session—will provide families and students a sense of stability, calmness, transparency and partnership in their relationships with educators that can mitigate the traumatic effects this stressful time will have on learning. Below we recommend putting in place an infrastructure through which educators can receive the support they need to work in collaboration with families, to build the foundation of safety and trust that students need to connect deeply to learning and to their school communities.

We respectfully request a meeting with you at your earliest convenience to discuss these recommendations.

**Recommendation 1:** Build on the foundation for parent engagement already established in the Student Opportunity Act and the Commissioner’s guidance by requiring locally-tailored, collaborative, school-based family engagement plans at each school-site to address the traumatic impact of the crisis.

**Background:** The Commonwealth has already laid the foundation for buffering the potential long term impact of traumatic stress. The importance of family engagement has long been acknowledged, and the Legislature prioritized parent engagement as part of the new district plans required under the “Student Opportunity Act.” These plans are required to explicitly address increased parent engagement, including among parents of vulnerable groups of students (students with disabilities, English Language Learners and low-income students). Importantly, guidance from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) also emphasizes this need and has articulated that connecting with students and families is of paramount importance during school closures. We commend Commissioner Riley’s April guidance, “Strengthening Our Remote Learning Experience,” for highlighting the “moral obligation” we have to “do all we can to reach and engage all of our children.” And we greatly appreciate the Department’s expectation that schools and districts will “develop[] a system for identifying and supporting students not effectively engaged in remote learning,” as well as its broad outlines of a sample process that educators can use for conducting outreach. Also, the Department’s FAQ regarding special education includes a helpful section on “Strategies for Engaging Families.” We also understand that a new statewide framework on family engagement will soon be released by the Department.

We ask that policymakers build on this strong foundation: statewide guidance and district-level plans must be accompanied by—and be designed to support—school-specific plans that are developed collaboratively by the administrators, educators, families and students who comprise each school community. Engaging families effectively will help them join with educators to address the frustrations
of online learning for students. A school-specific plan can help to mitigate the effects of disconnection and avoid punitive approaches by enabling all to feel part of a caring community, working together to connect every child. This requires a local, textured process characterized by trusting relationships and teamwork among educators who have the support to provide relational connection to families and students. A process of education for school staff on the impact of trauma on learning and best approaches for developing trusting relationships, in addition to judicious planning, inclusive norms, and ongoing care and commitment are required. District plans can and must support this process, but cannot substitute for deep and meaningful collaborative planning by all stakeholder groups in each individual school. There are several possible avenues for requiring school-based family engagement plans, including regulations, a temporary session law, or a permanent amendment to MGL ch. 69, § 15.

Proposed Language:
Each school district shall ensure that each district school develops a school-based, locally-tailored family engagement plan. This plan shall outline the actions the school will take to 1) build trusting relationships between families and school personnel; 2) establish effective and regular two-way communication with each student’s family; 3) facilitate and encourage the involvement of families in their student’s learning at school and at home; 4) recognize, appreciate and adapt to diversity of all kinds among the school’s students and families, and include specific provisions for engaging families of students with disabilities, English language learners, and low-income students; 6) establish effective mechanisms for involving families in decisions about how their particular student is educated; 7) build practices for meaningfully involving families in major decisions about how the school is run; and 8) develop methods for continuously increasing awareness of and engagement with the neighborhoods and communities in which the school is located. This plan shall be developed through a collaborative process led by the building administrator that shall include meaningful participation by educators, parents, and students who are reflective of the school community, provided that opportunities for student participation shall be developmentally appropriate.

The department shall ensure resources are available for professional development opportunities that support school administrators and educators to lead and facilitate an inclusive process to develop the school’s family engagement plan. Said professional development shall include, without limitation, opportunities to understand 1) the impact trauma can have on student learning and family engagement, 2) culturally sensitive practices for engaging students and families, and 3) best practices for engaging linguistically diverse families.

Recommendation 2 – Support schools’ and districts’ efforts to develop effective family engagement plans by increasing access to Safe and Supportive Schools grants and making an emergency appropriation available immediately so this work can commence over the summer.

Background: Fortunately, Massachusetts has already developed and evaluated a robust set of tools and practices for helping school and district leaders facilitate a collaborative and inclusive process among all stakeholders at the local level. Under the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework statute, a statewide Commission led by the Department has developed a Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Online Self-Reflection Tool that guide educators through the process of school-wide
improvement, in a safe, supportive, trauma-sensitive way. For the past several years, the Legislature has appropriated funds through the Safe and Supportive Schools Grant Program so that schools, with support from their districts, can create school-wide safe and supportive action plans focused on priorities of local importance. So far, 73 districts have participated in this program. Now is a time to provide a special opportunity for schools and districts to apply for grants immediately that will support them to use the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Tool over the summer to engage in a school-wide action planning process specifically focused on developing an effective family engagement plan. Recipients of these grants should be expected to share their learnings and best practices going forward so that other schools and districts can also benefit.

In order to accomplish this recommendation, we respectfully request a $200,000 increase in funding for the Safe and Supportive School Line Item (7061-9612) in the FY21 budget (a total request of $700,000) and the addition of the following provisions to the line item language:

**Proposed Language:**
provided further that the department shall use no less than $200,000 for an emergency grant program to fund the development of school and district action plans that focus on increasing effective family engagement using the safe and supportive schools framework and online self-assessment tool; provided further, that such emergency grants shall be distributed by no later than June 30, 2020; provided further, that recipients of such emergency grants shall be required to share learnings and best practices from the development of their action plans with other schools and districts as required by the department.

**Recommendation 3 – Issue further guidance on best practices for engaging the most vulnerable and hardest to reach students and families, including the development of inclusive processes for involving students and families in the development of plans for school re-entry.**

Below we share suggestions, based on our direct work with some of the Commonwealth’s most vulnerable families, for additional guidance the Department could issue in specific areas to help schools and districts further refine their efforts to connect with and effectively engage each and every family.

- **Best Practices for Family Communication** – The Commonwealth’s work to increase remote access and language access for families is commendable. As these barriers are removed, the important question remains of how best to establish effective relationships with each and every family, including the most vulnerable. Part of this process involves gaining a basic understanding of each family’s communication preferences and capacity and then customizing a communication plan that fits that family’s unique needs. This must be done in a safe and supportive way, accounting for hardships and traumatic experiences a family may be enduring, and must focus on building trust and rapport. The Department should issue additional guidance, and make professional development opportunities available, regarding strategies for establishing individualized family communication plans. These resources can be designed to help properly trained educators and other school staff conduct outreach to families in order to gather the minimum basic information that is necessary in order to build an individualized communication plan. For the hardest to reach families, where an initial individualized communication plan may not be yielding effective results,
we recommend a more in-depth list of problem-solving questions that can be used by a trusted member of the school staff to gather additional information that could be useful at removing less visible barriers to communication; however, Department guidance should be clear that a student’s difficulty engaging in remote learning, in and of itself, should not constitute a basis for any school or district to file an allegation of abuse or neglect against any caregiver.

- **Best Practices for Including Educators, Parents and Students in Re-Entry Planning** – Our observation suggests that many school districts are establishing re-entry committees at the district level to plan for the coming school year. These efforts are essential, but often these committees do not seem to include educators, parents and students in their deliberations. In addition, it is difficult for district-level deliberations to account effectively for all of the particularities of what it will mean to re-open each individual school site. For re-entry to happen successfully and in a way that maintains and strengthens relationships with families and students, a trauma-sensitive approach suggests that planning efforts must be more inclusive, transparent and localized to each school-site. The Department could issue additional guidance on best practices for establishing re-entry efforts at each school-site, complementary to those happening at the district level, that include a representative cross-section of educators, parents and students from each school and that provide meaningful opportunities for participation and decision-making among all stakeholders. Parents and students, in particular, will anticipate challenges and opportunities in re-opening that educators and administrators will not envision. Bringing all stakeholders into the process early and in meaningful ways will help to manage the stress and uncertainty surrounding the coming school year, improve relationships, and help to mitigate traumatic reactions associated with the pandemic.

**Recommendation 4** – **Ensure the Commonwealth has access to timely and accurate statewide data regarding families and students who have not yet been effectively engaged in remote learning during COVID-19-related school closures.**

**Background:** Data has surfaced in particular school districts regarding alarming numbers of students and families that have not been effectively engaged in remote learning. Anecdotal experience confirms that many families are experiencing significant barriers to communicating with their students’ schools, and teachers are struggling on a daily basis to discover ways to connect with each and every student and family. In order to meet DESE’s laudable goal of moving all students toward consistent engagement in remote learning and in order to prepare for successful re-entry that mitigates the impact of trauma and lengthy disengagement from school, it is imperative that the Commonwealth have actionable data about the number of families who have not yet been engaged, the characteristics of these families, and the nature of the barriers they are facing. One way to accomplish this recommendation would be to promulgate regulation or enact legislation as follows:

**Proposed Language:**

School districts shall collect and report to the department on an ongoing basis the number of students in the district who have not been effectively engaged in remote learning and the number of families the district has yet to reach through attempted communication. Districts’ reports to the department shall not include the identities of students or families, but shall include de-identified demographic characteristics as required by the department in order to
identify any relevant disparities. Districts’ reports shall also include documentation of the district’s attempts to communicate with each of the families and to engage each of the students in remote learning. The department shall provide technical assistance and/or resources to those districts with the most un-reached families and/or the most students not yet engaged in remote learning to provide additional strategies for engagement, including help with removing barriers to engagement, such as lack of language access and remote access.

Careful observation and research indicate that schools that created the infrastructure of trust and connection with families using a trauma-sensitive lens before COVID-19 have been more flexible and able to shift more successfully to remote learning that connects and engages students. **Again, we express our gratitude for all the work to date to elevate family engagement.** We would very much like to meet with you to discuss how the Commonwealth can move forward to strengthen family engagement.

Very truly yours,

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Representative Aaron Michelwitz, Chair, Joint Committee on Ways and Means
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