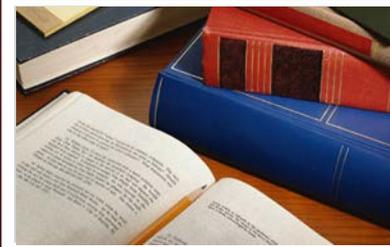




District and School Assistance Center (DSAC) Evaluation:
Annual DSAC Evaluation Report: 2012

A summary of findings related to the DSAC Initiative's implementation and outcomes

August 2012



Summary

In late fall 2009, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) established six regional District and School Assistance Centers (DSACs) with the goal of helping districts and schools improve instruction and raise achievement for all students. The DSAC Initiative marked a significant shift in the state's system of support to schools and districts through the development of a specific, regional infrastructure to provide coordinated assistance to an increasing number of high-need districts and schools. Reflecting the nature of this undertaking and level of maturity of the system, during the Initiative's launch year (SY10) and first full year of operations (SY11), foundational tasks—such as staffing the new organization, developing and integrating its service offerings, clarifying its mission and approaches, and building relationships with priority districts—comprised a large proportion of system activity. As the Initiative entered into its second full year of operation (SY12) the system demonstrated a marked shift away from building infrastructure and relationships toward increasing the delivery of services and deepening engagement with priority districts.

In collaboration with partner organizations, DSACs use a regional approach that emphasizes the development of district capacity to accelerate and sustain improvement, and leverages the knowledge, skills, and expertise of local educators to address shared needs¹. DSACs may serve all non-Commissioner's Districts in a region, but give first priority for assistance to Level 3 districts, as outlined in the *ESE Framework for District Accountability and Assistance*. Level 4 districts not identified as Commissioner's Districts—Gill-Montague, Southbridge, Randolph, and Salem in SY12—also receive priority for DSAC assistance. Additionally, 13 districts in their first year out of Level 3 status continued to receive services as “Legacy” districts. Collectively, these 60 DSAC districts comprised 392 schools, over 14,000 educators, and more than 205,000 students, or 20% of the state's student population. Nearly half of these students are classified as low-income, 19% receive special education services, 22% have a native language other than English, and 7% have limited English proficiency.

The implementation of the DSACs is taking place within the context of a number of other significant reforms that ESE is implementing. These include, but are not limited to, full implementation of the revised Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks in mathematics and English language arts, which incorporate the Common Core State Standards, and the development and implementation of a new educator evaluation system. These and other initiatives are being implemented in pursuit of ESE's overarching priority of making every school an excellent one and preparing all students for success after high school. The DSAC Initiative's emphasis on leadership and planning, content area support in math and literacy, and effective use of data, is strongly aligned with ESE's four sub-priority areas. In fact, three of these sub-priorities—strengthening curriculum and instruction, improving educator effectiveness, and using data to support student achievement—are an explicit focus of DSAC work. The fourth, turning around the lowest performing districts and schools, is also an explicit focus of the DSAC model as implemented, and is an end-goal for the provision of all its services. In this context, DSACs have not only focused on increasing delivery of services to districts, they have also been contributing to the Department's growing ability to gather field-level perspectives as it develops and implements these new Initiatives. This capacity was particularly valued by ESE leadership, in light of the Department's increasing emphasis on collaboration with districts as it seeks to implement an ambitious set of reforms.

¹ The DSACs use a variety of strategies, including: (1) providing funding in the form of targeted assistance and improvement grants; (2) offering in-district targeted assistance services, including support for self-assessment and improvement planning, as well as training, modeling and facilitating the implementation of effective practices through the use of ESE tools; and (3) the coordination of regional opportunities to share effective practices, including a menu of professional development offerings and cross-district regional networks.



Overarching Evaluation Findings

The following is a summary of findings from an evaluation of the Initiative conducted by the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI). These findings, which reflect primarily on the Initiative during its second full year of operations (SY12), were informed by a number of evaluation activities, including: end-of-year surveys with district and school leaders in DSAC priority districts, as well as other educators engaged with their DSAC in identified core services; extensive interviews with district and school leaders and other DSAC-engaged educators in a sample of 18 priority districts; feedback from participants at DSAC-sponsored events and trainings; interviews with regional DSAC teams; and a review of program documentation, including district plan and progress reports submitted by regional DSAC teams for each of their priority districts

Overall, DSAC priority districts are highly engaged and satisfied with DSAC assistance.

Through a review of district plans and progress reports, surveys and interview data, evaluators assessed the levels of engagement, satisfaction with and relevance of DSAC assistance offerings.

DSAC-priority districts engaged more intensively with their DSAC in SY12. Analysis of program documentation indicates that 94% of the DSAC priority districts engaged with their DSAC in one or more in-district services. Furthermore, the number of priority districts receiving ongoing and sustained targeted assistance doubled from SY11 to SY12². More than half of the district leaders surveyed responded that DSAC staff interacted with their district between 11 and 20 times during the course of the year. In interviews DSAC team members and district and school leaders frequently attributed this increasing engagement to the strong partnerships that had been built over time. Factors that contributed to engagement included DSAC staff's expertise, depth of knowledge, and field-based experience; the job-embedded and ongoing nature of DSAC targeted support; and the teams' ability to understand district and school needs and differentiate services in ways that reflect and respond to those needs. District and school leaders offered favorable impressions of their region's DSAC which also contributed to increasing levels of engagement, with the vast majority strongly agreeing that their DSAC was collaborative in its approach (88%), respectful in its interactions (88%), committed to providing the highest quality assistance (84%), responsive to district and school needs (74%), and served as an important strategic thinking partner (72%).

With few exceptions, district and school leaders offered favorable opinions of the assistance provided by their region's DSAC.

- 94% reported overall satisfaction with the services provided, including 70% who reported that they were "very satisfied" with their DSAC.
- 94% also expressed their view that the assistance was relevant to their educational improvement priorities and sufficient to meet their needs, with a sizeable majority describing the work they were doing with their DSAC as "extremely relevant" to their efforts.
- 91% of responding districts and 86% of responding schools anticipated that they would continue to work with their DSAC at the same or an increasing level of intensity in the coming year.
- 96% of schools that had implemented a Learning Walkthrough indicated that they were "very likely" to continue using that process in the future. Among those that conducted the Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessment, 90% reported that they were at least somewhat likely to continue using that tool.

² It should be noted that DSAC assistance is voluntary and not required.

- 93% of responding district leaders described DSAC-sponsored professional development courses as valuable. Interviewees regularly described the courses as high-quality experiences that often had an immediate and substantial impact on the classroom practice of participating teachers.
- 91% of those who accessed DSAC regional networks described them as valuable to their improvement efforts.

DSAC assistance (particularly the core services) is having a positive impact on district culture, capacity, and practice.

Through interviews and surveys, leaders and educators from priority districts reflected on changes in culture, capacity, and practice that could be attributed, at least in part, to DSAC assistance. Reflecting the focus of DSAC assistance, inquiry related to outcomes emphasized four areas—leadership and planning, use of data as part of a cycle of inquiry process, curriculum and instruction, and professional staff culture.

In interviews, many district and school leaders described their DSACs as strategic thinking partners and external entities that could provide impetus for change. In the interview process, several leaders described the DSAC as instrumental in providing direction, focus, and feedback with regard to district improvement efforts. Many leaders also described the DSAC as a “strategic thinking partner” that could help them manage and integrate a complex set of new initiatives into local improvement efforts, something seen as invaluable to mitigating the potential for “initiative overload.” Also, as external entities, DSACs were described by some district and school leaders as serving as an impetus for change, both by creating a sense of urgency and legitimacy for local improvement efforts and by offering new ideas and approaches.

More than two-thirds of district and school leaders responding to the survey reported that DSAC assistance had a positive impact on leadership and planning, including the ability to identify instructional strengths (78%) and improvement priorities (78%), the capacity to address improvement priorities (70%), and the capacity to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement (70%). It should also be noted that more focused improvement planning and greater alignment of professional development to identified needs were the most commonly identified areas of impact as described by interviewees. Several leaders remarked that as planning became increasingly data-based improvement efforts were becoming increasingly focused and coherent.

A vast majority of educators who participated in DSAC data services indicated positive impact on their capacity to use data.

- 87% of recipients indicated that their work with the DSAC had a “great” or “moderate” impact on awareness of the tools and resources to support data work.
- Nearly three-fourths of respondents indicated that DSAC assistance contributed to their ability to analyze data and integrate various kinds of data to address key lines of inquiry.
- Interviewed educators described increased sophistication in the use of data as a common area of impact.
- More than half of district and school leaders reported that DSAC assistance contributed to improvement in their organizations’ use of data for system-level improvement planning and monitoring student progress.
- Surveyed leaders reported that DSAC assistance contributed “greatly” or “moderately” to improvement in their district’s or school’s use of data to identify improvement priorities (65%), identify professional development needs (60%), and monitor student progress (60%).

Curricular impacts were particularly notable at the district level and with regard to the alignment of local curricula to state frameworks in mathematics, with leaders from 71% of responding priority districts reporting moderate to great impacts of DSAC assistance on the alignment of local curricula to the new state frameworks in mathematics. To some extent, this may relate to the finding that a significantly larger proportion of districts identified mathematics as the substantive focus of their work with the DSAC as compared to literacy.

More than half of district and school leaders also reported that the DSAC contributed to instructional improvement in many areas. A majority of surveyed leaders indicated that their work with the DSAC contributed either “greatly” or “moderately” to the use of effective instructional approaches (62%), teachers’ use of data to reflect on instructional practices (59%), the quality of instruction in their district or school (58%), content area knowledge among teachers (57%), alignment of instruction with student learning needs (54%), and the capacity to support instructional improvement (52%).

Leaders from a majority of districts and schools indicated that the DSAC had contributed “greatly” or “moderately” to improvements in identified aspects of their staff culture including dialogue about teaching and learning (77%), staff collaboration around teaching and learning (66%), responsiveness to teachers’ needs (65%), a shared sense of accountability for student learning (63%), expectations for student learning (63%), faculty commitment to improvement goals (59%), and teachers’ input into decision-making (58%).

The DSAC Initiative is contributing to the overall effectiveness of ESE targeted assistance and support for districts.

ESE targeted assistance and improvement grant funds were being used in increasingly strategic and targeted ways. In SY12, DSACs helped 60 DSAC districts access such funds totaling more than \$2.9 million. These resources funded professional development, staff collaboration, and/or targeted assistance supporting improvement initiatives. This shift toward more strategic and targeted use of funds was attributed by DSAC team members and educators to DSAC involvement and the strong partnerships DSACs had formed with districts, but also to a growing perception of the quality of DSAC offerings and improved grant timeframes.

The DSAC Initiative has helped to enhance the dissemination and use of ESE’s research-based tools and resources. In fact, 78% of responding school and district leaders from priority districts felt that the DSAC Initiative contributed either “greatly” or “moderately” to field-level access to ESE tools, and a similar proportion described the Initiative as enhancing district and schools’ use of those resources. In interviews, many described how DSAC team members were able to suggest relevant tools and resources, such as the Learning Walkthrough resources, the Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments, and data and data analysis resources. Although many of these resources existed in some form prior to the Initiative, drawing on their relationships with districts and their understanding of local needs, it was noted that DSACs could help districts navigate available resources and select those that addressed their own needs and improvement efforts. Similarly, DSACs were able to help districts to develop their existing capacity to more effectively use these resources.

Finally, DSACs enhanced access to information about ESE services, policies, and upcoming initiatives. In total, 69% of responding school and district leaders indicated that the DSAC contributed either “greatly” or “moderately” to increased access to information from ESE. In interviews, school and district leaders described how regional DSAC staff, particularly their region’s assistance director, had become an important point-of-contact regarding ESE news and information. The role of DSACs in improving access to timely information about upcoming changes and strategic initiatives of the Department was viewed as helping districts more effectively manage and integrate these changes into their own local improvement efforts, mitigating the potential for “initiative overload,” and increasing the coherence of their responses to these upcoming mandates.

Strategic Considerations for SY13

As with any new system, the new infrastructure and relationships reflected important foundational priorities in the early phases of the DSAC Initiative. Moving into SY12, the system demonstrated a marked shift towards leveraging this new infrastructure to provide services in support of its mission, a trend likely to continue into SY13 with DSACs continuing to support districts in making changes to improve student learning and achievement. As this occurs, strategic considerations identified through interviews and other evaluation data collection may need to be considered and addressed. The most commonly cited areas for improvement are as follows.

Reflecting the multiple levels at which DSACs may work (district and school), a few district leaders expressed the need for better communication and coordination related to this multi-level engagement. A few district leaders expressed a desire for better communication and coordination including more frequent communication regarding the ways in which DSAC team members were interacting within specific schools. Although it was noted that, in part, communication challenges may reflect problems within districts' own communication infrastructure, it may be worth considering whether and to what extent DSACs can build specific mechanisms for bidirectional communication.

The need to manage the “delicate balance” between regional customization and a common framework and approach remains an ongoing challenge. In SY12, the system evidenced an increased emphasis on efforts to build more commonality and coherence across regions through the development of new structures for sharing best practices, something that is common among systems as they move to maturity. That said, most DSAC team members that were interviewed viewed the innovative capacity of DSACs as crucial to being able to successfully meet the “subtle and complex” needs of districts. It was noted that the balance may shift between ongoing aspects of the work, which may become more standardized over time, and new aspects of the work, where DSACs may need to be more innovative and adaptable.

A few districts expressed a desire for further differentiation within regional offerings in light of districts' and schools' varying experiences. In the current context of new initiatives and increasing demand on leaders' and educators' time, customizing meetings to align more directly with the needs and background experiences of target audiences, and the development of regional study groups on specific high-interest issues, may take on increasing importance over time.

Several district and school leaders expressed the need for continued improvement with regard to professional development grants. Whereas nearly all district and school leaders that had been interviewed highlighted improvements in communication and planning regarding DSAC grants and professional development, several expressed a need for continued improvement in this regard, including the availability of information concerning timeframes and increased flexibility in terms of location and scheduling of professional development.

The need to increase DSAC capacity to meet increasing demand was a concern expressed by both district leaders and DSAC teams. As the work with districts and schools accelerated, several DSACs emphasized increasing workloads as placing a strain on staff capacity. Echoing this notion, several district leaders expressed concerns that their regional DSAC teams would not have sufficient capacity to meet increasing demand.

Contents

Summary i

Contents vii

Introduction 1

Methodology..... 4

I. DSAC Assistance Activities 6

II. Educators’ Perceptions of DSAC Assistance and Approach..... 13

III. Changes in District Culture, Capacity, and Practice..... 22

IV. Systemic Changes in ESE’s Capacity to Respond to District Needs..... 29

V. Recommendations and Strategic Considerations..... 32

VI. Conclusion 36

Introduction

This year-end evaluation report synthesizes findings from all data collection activities conducted as part of an evaluation of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (ESE) DSAC Initiative. It was prepared by the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI or the Institute), which serves as statewide evaluator for the DSAC Initiative. Findings reflect the comprehensive nature of the evaluation, which is designed to describe key areas of progress related to the Initiative's core activities, educators' perceptions of the DSACs and DSAC services, and the impact of the Initiative on the culture, capacity, and practices of the districts and schools that it serves.

The DSAC Initiative was launched in late fall 2009, and as such, throughout this report, the 2009–2010 school year (SY10) is referred to as the Initiative's launch year. The 2010–2011 school year (SY11) is referred to as the Initiative's first full year of operation, and the recently completed 2011–2012 school year (SY12) is referred to as the Initiative's second full year of operation.

The DSAC Initiative

In late fall 2009, ESE established six regional District and School Assistance Centers (DSACs) with the goal of helping districts and schools improve instruction and raise achievement levels for all students. The Initiative significantly expanded the Department's capacity to provide targeted assistance and improvement services to a broad range of struggling districts, including many small and medium-sized districts that may otherwise lack the infrastructure and human resources to deliver the complex array of supports necessary to further their schools' improvement efforts.³

In collaboration with partner organizations, DSACs use a regional approach that emphasizes the development of district capacity to accelerate and sustain improvement, and leverages the knowledge, skills, and expertise of local educators to address shared needs. By design, the Initiative is intended to be a demand-driven model, in which DSACs consult with districts to identify and provide assistance activities tailored to local needs and improvement priorities.

DSAC Districts and Priority Status

DSACs may serve all non-Commissioner's Districts in a region, but give first priority for assistance to Level 3 districts⁴, as outlined in the *ESE Framework for District Accountability and Assistance*. Level 4 districts not identified as Commissioner's Districts—Gill-Montague, Southbridge, Randolph, and Salem in SY12—also receive priority for DSAC assistance. Throughout this report, these Level 3 and 4 districts are referred to as DSAC "priority" districts. Resources permitting, DSACs may also extend support to districts designated at other levels: most notably, but not limited to, those in their first year after exiting priority status, which are referred to as "Legacy" districts. Throughout this report, priority districts and Legacy districts are referred to collectively as DSAC districts.

³ Previously, coordinated targeted assistance was provided to 10 large, high-need urban districts, identified as Commissioner's Districts, through ESE's Office of District and School Turnaround (ODST). Regional DSACs extended this infrastructure to provide increasing levels of service to additional districts and schools. The original Commissioner's Districts continue to be served primarily through the ODST. The 10 Commissioner's Districts are Boston, Brockton (Level 3), Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence (Level 5), Lowell, Lynn, New Bedford, Springfield and Worcester

⁴ Level 3 districts are not required to accept DSAC assistance.

Data made available by ESE show that in SY12, 47 districts were identified for priority status, including 43 in Level 3 status and 4 in Level 4 status. Of these, 36 (77%) had been identified as priority districts in SY11 and 11 (23%) were newly-identified for DSAC priority. Additionally, 13 districts in their first year out of Level 3 status continued to receive services as Legacy districts. Collectively, these 60 DSAC districts comprise 392 schools, over 14,000 educators, and more than 205,000 students (20% of the state's student's population). Nearly half of these students are classified as low-income, 19% receive special education services, 22% have a native language other than English, and 7% have limited English proficiency.

DSAC Structure and Approach

Each of the six DSACs comprises a team of staff and content area specialists that operate in the field under the direction of a regional assistance director (RAD), who coordinates the team's efforts. DSAC teams each include mathematics and literacy specialists, support facilitators with experience as former principals, at least one data specialist, and a professional development coordinator. The team provides a range of customized and targeted assistance services to districts and schools, including self-assessment and improvement planning, as well as support for the implementation of improvement plans.⁵ Additionally, the team plans and implements professional development, networking, study groups, and training events designed to build regional capacity. Since the launch of new statewide initiatives in SY12 (e.g., new Curriculum Frameworks, educator evaluation system), DSAC team members have played an important role in communicating information about those initiatives, and in some cases, offering implementation assistance.

Organizational Context

The DSAC Initiative marked a significant shift in the state's system of support to schools and districts through the development of a specific, regional infrastructure to provide coordinated assistance to an increasing number of high-need districts and schools. Reflecting the nature of this undertaking, during the Initiative's launch year and first full year of operations, foundational tasks—such as staffing the new organization, developing its service offerings, clarifying its mission and approaches, and building relationships with priority districts—comprised a large proportion of system activity. Evaluation findings during these years were reflective of the system's state of maturity at that time, documenting progress as it related to organizational development and the initiation of service delivery in priority districts.

As the Initiative entered into its second full year of operation, evaluation data evidenced a marked shift in the system's focus away from building infrastructure and relationships, and toward increasing delivery of services to priority districts, and deepening engagement with those districts. The beginning of this shift was documented in the SY11 evaluation, where high levels of engagement were reported with a number of early adopting districts, and many other districts anticipated intensifying engagement as a result of emerging relationships with the DSACs. In light of this shift, the SY12 evaluation reflects an increased emphasis on describing DSAC assistance activity and measuring the extent to which these activities are contributing to changes in culture, capacity, and practice within participating districts and schools.

It should be noted that the Commonwealth is making a number of significant changes to its education system, including but not limited to the curriculum changes around the Common Core and the development of a new educator evaluation system. Beginning in September 2012, all of those districts receiving Race to the Top funds will be required to implement the new system. According to ESE, an estimated 80% to 90% of the districts that

⁵ The Conditions of School Effectiveness (CSE) and District Standards and Indicators—upon which the self-assessments are based—articulate what schools and districts need to have in place in order to educate their students well. These conditions and district standards were voted into regulation by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in 2010. In addition to aligning services with key ESE expectations for improvement, DSACs use and model the continuous cycle for improvement as a process for supporting district change.

will be adopting the new educator evaluation system in SY12 are DSAC districts. ESE is also beginning to build new capacity around English language learner support, which is undergoing major changes in curriculum, assessment, and how teachers are trained in all content areas to work with students whose first language is not English. This area is also part of an emerging effort to develop capacity to support districts regionally. Given the scope of these changes and their direct relevance to DSAC districts, DSAC priorities will continue to be sensitive to changes in the broader educational context and its priorities.

Report Content and Organization

This report summarizes findings from data collection efforts conducted during SY12. It is organized into six main sections, covering the following topics:

1. *DSAC Assistance Activities*, which describes core DSAC activities and the focus of service delivery efforts during SY12;
2. *Educators' Perceptions of DSAC Assistance and Approach*, which presents data with respect to the perspectives of educators, with an emphasis on the relevance, quality, and usefulness of DSAC services;
3. *Changes in District Culture, Capacity, and Practice*, which describes perceived impacts of the DSAC Initiative in the following areas: leadership and planning improvement, improvement in the use of data, curriculum and instructional improvement, and impacts on professional staff culture;
4. *Systemic Changes in ESE's Capacity to Respond to District Needs*, which summarizes key changes within ESE, as described by DSAC teams as well as by ESE leaders and staff. Educators' perceptions of ESE's responsiveness to district needs are also summarized;
5. *Recommendations and Strategic Considerations*, which presents the perspectives of DSAC team members and educators; and
6. *Conclusion*, which offers a reflection on findings overall as well as additional context relevant to those findings.

Methodology

In collaboration with ESE, UMDI designed and implemented a comprehensive evaluation of the DSAC Initiative that began in earnest in January 2010. This evaluation report emphasizes progress at the end of SY12, and focuses on documenting the Initiative's ongoing implementation, providing formative feedback from the field, and presenting summative data relative to the Initiative's short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes.

Data collection was extensive, including substantive engagement with DSAC team members, ESE leaders and staff, and a relatively large sample of district and school leaders in DSAC priority districts.⁶ The following is additional detail related to each of the data collection methods, organized into three principal categories: interviews, surveys, and other data sources.

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach that combined data from program documentation, interviews with DSAC staff, ESE staff, and DSAC-engaged educators, as well as surveys of leaders and educators from DSAC priority and other DSAC-engaged districts. The collection of data from multiple sources and through multiple means enabled evaluators to gather information about the Initiative, its activity, and its outcomes from a variety of perspectives. Findings from all data collection activities were synthesized in this year-end evaluation report.

Interviews

Group interviews with each of the six regional DSAC teams were conducted in January and February 2012. These group interviews lasted approximately 120 minutes each, and were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol. The primary goals of these interviews were to understand the evolution and focus of the work in DSAC priority districts and schools during the Initiative's second full year of implementation, to document any major changes in the Initiative or in DSAC efforts to engage districts and schools, and to collect formative feedback concerning the management and infrastructure of the Initiative.

Educator interviews were conducted with district and school leaders and staff, from a total of 18 DSAC priority districts (3 from each region), between April and June 2012. This included a total of 105 educators, comprising 45 district leaders, 33 administrators, and 27 teachers and other school-level educators. Districts were selected in collaboration with ESE and regional DSACs to include those working with the DSAC in a variety of capacities and at varying levels of engagement. These interviews were intended to obtain information about overall satisfaction with DSAC services, to solicit suggestions for improvement, to gather field-level perspectives on perceived outcomes, and to learn about any potential challenges or barriers to engagement. All interviews conducted for the evaluation were transcribed and analyzed.

Interviews were also conducted with selected ESE leaders and staff in February 2012. These interviews varied in duration from 30 minutes for individual interviews to 90 minutes for the group interview with ESE staff. The purpose of these interviews was to gather information related to the goals, strategies, and implementation of the Initiative, as well as to identify whether and how the DSAC Initiative contributed to any changes within ESE. In total, four ESE leaders and eight ESE staff were interviewed.

⁶ All findings are reported on a summary level, which is intended to protect the anonymity of respondents, who were told that they would not be identified for the purposes of this study. Although quotes are used throughout the report for the purposes of illustration, these statements are not attributed to any individual, district, or school.

Surveys

Targeted web-based surveys were administered to four distinct constituencies in June 2012:

District leaders. The District Leader Survey was intended to capture leaders' broad view of DSAC services, including critical information relative to overall impressions of the DSAC services received, the impact of those services, and expectations for future service needs. Recipients of the District Leader Survey included all superintendents of DSAC priority districts and other district leaders (i.e., assistant superintendents and district leaders acting in a similar capacity) identified by DSACs as key contacts for their work, regardless of priority status. In total, 67 district leaders responded from a total of 48 districts, reflecting estimated response rates of 68% for districts and 62% for respondents, overall.

School leaders. Similar in format and content to the survey of district leaders, the survey administered to school leaders was intended to capture school leaders' broad perspectives on the DSAC services and related outcomes. Recipients of the School Leader Survey included principals and assistant principals identified by DSACs as key informants regarding their work in schools. It should be noted that the School Leader Survey also included modules to gather information about two specific core DSAC services—Learning Walkthroughs and Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments—from schools that had utilized these services, as school leaders were frequently identified as the primary informant group for these two types of services. In total, 84 school leaders responded from a total of 76 schools, reflecting estimated response rates of 57% for schools and 55% for school leaders, overall.

Direct recipients of data services. The Data Services Survey was intended to measure the implementation and impact of services provided by DSAC to promote effective data use in schools and districts. This survey targeted district- and school-level educators in a number of roles, including administrators, curriculum and/or instructional specialists, data and/or technology specialists, teachers, and others who were the direct recipients of data services. In total, 55 educators responded, reflecting an estimated response rate of 44%.

Direct recipients of content-area support. The Content Area Services Survey was focused on the implementation and impact of services provided by DSACs to support planning for integration of the 2011 Massachusetts Frameworks and improving classroom instruction in Mathematics and English Language Arts/Literacy. Recipients of this survey included educators who were direct participants in content area services, or who were key contacts for the work in those areas. In total, 44 educators responded, reflecting an estimated response rate of 60%.

Other Data Sources

Point-of-service feedback forms were developed for administration by DSAC staff at DSAC-sponsored professional development, training, and other events. Feedback forms were developed collaboratively by the Institute, ESE program managers, and regional assistance directors from the six DSAC regions. From July 2011 through June 2012, 1,249 feedback forms were collected from 66 DSAC-sponsored events.

These primary data collection activities were supplemented by a review of DSAC-prepared district activity reports, and other ESE materials and resources.

I. DSAC Assistance Activities

One of the goals of the evaluation is to document system activity as a means to better understand the intensity, nature, and focus of DSAC engagement with districts and schools. By design, the DSAC assistance model involves the provision of a range of customized targeted assistance services in support of districts' local improvement efforts. In pursuit of these goals, DSACs use several approaches and strategies, as reflected in their foundational services document, which provides a summary of initiative-level assistance options available to districts. These include:

1. Providing funding, in the form of targeted assistance and improvement grants to support improvement efforts;
2. Offering direct, in-district targeted assistance services, including support for self-assessment and improvement planning, as well as training, modeling, and facilitating the implementation of effective practices through the use of ESE resources and tools; and
3. The coordination of regional opportunities to learn about and share effective practices, including a menu of professional development and cross-district regional networks activities.

The section that follows offers analyses and findings regarding system activity within each of these three areas, based primarily on data from district plans and progress reports and UMDI interviews with DSAC staff. It concludes with a brief discussion regarding the extent to which DSAC services align with ESE's statewide improvement priorities.

Targeted Assistance and Improvement Grants

ESE offered targeted assistance and improvement grants to identified DSAC districts. In order to support the effective use of these limited resources, regional DSAC teams were asked to assist districts in accessing these grants and help districts to think strategically about the use of the funds to support their local improvement efforts. To this end, regional assistance directors and their teams met with leaders of priority districts to discuss the grants and offer assistance in further assessing their needs and identifying appropriate targeted assistance and/or professional development opportunities that could help to address those needs. In this role, DSAC team members were described as important "strategic thinking partners" supporting the development of plans that were consistent with district and school improvement goals.

As in previous years, these grants were targeted primarily to districts with priority status through a current Level 3 or Level 4 designation. However, beginning in SY12, districts in their first year out of priority status, or Legacy districts, received a portion of their prior year's grant allocation. This change responds directly to concerns expressed by some district leaders in SY11 that changing access to DSAC resources and services as a result of annually-changing level determinations was not necessarily conducive to supporting improvement over the long-term. As such, the intent was to support districts in continuing improvement efforts so that positive changes and performance trends were more likely to be sustained.

In SY12, DSACs helped 60 DSAC districts access ESE targeted assistance and improvement grant funds totaling more than \$2.9 million.⁷ These grants could be used in a variety of ways, including to access seats in ESE-sponsored statewide and regional courses, to provide in-district professional development using contractors

⁷ This total represents a reduction of 15% from the total amount of funding allocated in SY11, which totaled more than \$3.4 million.

vetted by the Department, or, with the approval of the regional assistance director, to support other in-district professional development, staff collaboration, or targeted assistance—including participation in DSAC improvement services—in support of district improvement initiatives. Examples of other types of professional development included supporting teachers in pursuing dual certification in high-need areas such as ESL, or offering professional development in other high-priority areas not included specifically on the DSAC professional development menu.

An analysis of data from a survey of district leaders shows that 32 DSAC districts (53%) indicated that they used grant funds to access DSAC-sponsored course offerings, while 25 districts (42%) reported using those funds to support professional development or staff collaboration through the use of other contractors. A similar number of DSAC districts (27 or 45%) used those funds to support in-district work with their regional DSAC. These proportions exceed 100%, as resources could be used in multiple ways within a single district.

Evaluation data reflect a growing sense that targeted assistance grant resources are increasingly being used in strategic and targeted ways. Nearly all DSAC team members agreed that the districts with which they are working, on the whole, appear to be making professional development choices that are increasingly strategic, “driven by data,” and consistent with the cohort model advocated by both ESE and the DSACs. This reflected a shift relative to previous years, when the prevailing sentiment was that districts had approached the DSAC-sponsored professional development by allowing teachers to sign up for courses based on their own interests and preferences.

This shift was attributed by DSAC team members to a number of factors, most notably the stronger partnerships that DSACs have formed with districts, which resulted in DSAC staff having clearer understandings of district needs, thereby enabling them to make better recommendations regarding use of resources. Improved grant planning timeframes which allowed for a more thoughtful process and a growing perception among district leaders regarding the quality of the DSAC offerings were also identified as factors contributing to this positive trend.

Consistent with this shift, evidence suggests an increasing emphasis on the use of funds to support in-district professional development. As described by ESE and DSAC team members, an increasing number of DSAC districts have opted to use funds to contract directly with vendors to provide ESE-supported courses and trainings within their own districts. This shift, it was noted, reflects a desire on the part of districts to involve larger cohorts of teachers to maximize the impact of professional development. Offering professional development locally also provided districts with greater flexibility over scheduling, such that trainings could be offered during the school year or at other times that made sense within their own local contexts, while also minimizing travel burdens and associated costs.

It is anticipated that this trend is likely to continue; although it has been noted that this will require greater flexibility on the part of the system to continue to support regional courses to ensure that smaller districts with more limited funds continue to have access to the same level of quality offerings. This may involve bringing in a greater number of educators from non-priority districts to ensure that courses continue to meet required minimum participation thresholds.

In-District Targeted Assistance Services

In addition to providing resources to support improvement in the form of grants, regional DSACs also worked with districts to coordinate and deliver in-district targeted assistance services including self-assessment and planning, and training, modeling, and facilitating effective practices.

Overall, districts appear to be engaging more intensively with their DSAC, and, as it was described by DSAC team members, this engagement is becoming more focused and strategic. Districts’ level of engagement with their DSAC varied, from periodically meeting with DSAC staff (ongoing outreach or initial

planning), to a combination of meetings and initial participation in at least one service (initial or moderate engagement), to sustained and ongoing participation in a combination of integrated services (intensive engagement). An analysis of district plan and progress reports shows that the number of priority districts engaging intensively with their DSAC doubled from 14 in SY11 to 28 in SY12. In many cases, DSAC team members attributed this to the strong partnerships DSACs had been able to establish with districts, largely as a result of substantial outreach efforts that comprised a large focus of system activity in the Initiative's launch year and first full year of operations.

An analysis of district plan and progress reports submitted by DSAC regional teams shows that 44 of the 47 DSAC priority districts (94%) engaged with their DSAC in one or more direct assistance services (Table 1). Districts often received services in multiple areas, again reflecting the increasingly intensive nature of DSAC engagement.

Table 1: Focus of DSAC Services, Estimated Number of Districts

Foundational Services Provided In-District	Priority Districts	
	#	%
Supporting Self-Assessment and Improvement Planning	36	77%
District Self-Assessment	4	9%
School Self-Assessments	19	40%
Focused Planning for High Leverage Strategies	27	57%
Training, Modeling, and Facilitating Effective Practices	30	64%
Effective data use systems and practices using ESE data sources (e.g. Data Team Toolkit, EDW, Student Growth Model)	22	47%
Learning Walkthroughs	16	34%
Professional Learning Communities	11	23%
Massachusetts Tiered System of Support	1	2%
Identifying other resources/assistance to support high leverage strategies	11	23%
Total Number of Districts Receiving In-District Support	44	94%

Source: UMDI analysis of DSAC district plans and progress reports submitted by each of the six regions. The figures include data for all 47 of the DSAC priority districts. While reports were presented by June 2012, not all of the activity reports contained updated information. Additionally, it should be noted that an analysis of district plan and progress report data and subsequent conversations suggest that regions may be using this terminology differently. As such, figures derived from reporting, particularly those regarding a specific foundational service, should be viewed as estimates.

DSACs provided self-assessment and improvement support services to 36 of the 47 priority districts (77%). Most commonly, this involved focused planning for high leverage strategies (27 districts), an assistance activity encompassing a variety of activities that ranged from planning professional development, to meetings with district leaders focused on integrating the work of the DSAC and new ESE initiatives with district priorities.⁸ This role filled by DSACs was often highlighted in district and school interviews as being of particular importance, as many leaders underscored the value of having an outside party who could serve as a strategic thinking partner in planning improvement strategies and responding to new ESE initiatives and mandates.

DSACs also worked with 19 districts (40%) in the planning and implementation of school-based self-assessments. Schools identified as Level 3 or Level 4 are required to complete a self-assessment under *ESE's Framework for Accountability and Assistance*, and to support schools in meeting this requirement, ESE

⁸ DSACs will also play a role in consulting with priority districts on how to spend a portion of their Title 1 funds, a portion of which have been freed up by the waiver of No Child Left Behind.

developed a self-assessment tool aligned with its Conditions for School Effectiveness.⁹ DSAC teams provided resources, facilitation, and other support related to the implementation of these assessments. In many cases, schools using the Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessment process focused on a subset of the conditions, sometimes identified through an initial scan using the full instrument or through mapping to school improvement priorities. Data from the school leader survey indicate that in cases where schools focused more intensively on a subset of conditions, effective instruction and student assessment practices tended to be those most commonly explored.

Finally, a relatively small number of districts engaged with the DSAC in the area of district self-assessment. It is anticipated that this will become an increasing focus of DSAC engagement in SY13, as ESE is developing a simplified district planning process and a set of resources and tools, aligned with its District Standards and Indicators, to support DSACs in the delivery of this assistance activity.

DSACs provided training, modeling, and facilitation of effective practices to 30 of the 47 priority districts (64%). Within this foundational service, support related to the implementation of effective data use systems and data practices was the most commonly provided, with 47% of priority districts accessing services in this area. The specific assistance activities provided as part of this service category included, but were not limited to, supporting the establishment of district- and/or school-level data teams, mentoring data coaches, and training school-level administrators and teachers in the use of student growth data to inform instruction, among other activities.

DSACs also worked with 16 priority districts (34%) to conduct classroom observations using the Learning Walkthrough protocol and related tools and resources. Learning Walkthroughs reflect a process of collaborative inquiry designed to engage educators and leaders in a systematic method of gathering data, and DSAC teams supported the implementation of these practices by providing training in the walkthrough process, facilitation of initial walkthroughs, and support for the analysis, reporting, and use of walkthrough findings. It is noteworthy that, whereas in SY11, most districts that were engaged with their DSAC in the area of Learning Walkthroughs were at the initial stages, which typically involved informational meetings and trainings, in SY12, the work had progressed to the point where most districts had begun to conduct observations using the protocol.

With regard to other foundational services, DSACs worked with districts to organize and support professional learning communities (11 districts) and identify resources and assistance to support the implementation of high-leverage strategies (11 districts). Work related to this latter area included assistance with Commendation Schools Grants,¹⁰ networks in highly specialized areas, and leadership support. Support in the implementation of the components of the Massachusetts State System of Support (MTSS) was in a relatively early stage in SY12, as the system had just been established. It is expected that this work related to the MTSS will become a greater focus of DSAC support in the future.

According to district leaders, in-district targeted assistance services focused on a number of substantive areas, with mathematics improvement being the most common area cited in SY12. More specifically, 21 priority districts (64%) reported that this content area was a substantive focus area of their work with the DSAC.

⁹ ESE's Conditions for School Effectiveness reflect 11 conditions identified by the Department as necessary to educate students well. Conditions addressed in the assessment include: effective school leadership; aligned curriculum; effective instruction; student assessment; principal's staffing authority; professional development and structures for collaboration; tiered instruction and adequate learning time; students' social, emotional, and health needs; family-school engagement; and strategic use of resources and adequate budget authority. The eleventh condition, effective district systems for school support and intervention, is addressed in a separate district assessment instrument under development during SY11 and SY12.

¹⁰ As part of ESE's approach to district engagement, the Department commends schools for high performance and closing proficiency gaps, officially recognizing "Commendation Schools" that serve as demonstration sites for promising practices. Many of these schools are to receive incentives to collaborate with Level 3 schools in their districts.

Literacy improvement (36%) and effective instructional strategies/pedagogy, such as differentiation and tiered instruction (27%), were also cited as focus areas by a sizeable proportion of district leaders. By contrast, sheltered content/ELL instruction and inclusive practices/special education were the least emphasized areas, with fewer than 10% of district leaders indicating these as focus areas. The relatively greater emphasis of DSAC in-district targeted assistance on mathematics and literacy may be reflective of the composition of DSAC teams, and not necessarily of demand. That is, each DSAC team has embedded specialists in mathematics and literacy. Teams were also able to engage specialists in ELL and special education from ESE's staff to support their work in districts, but as it was described by both DSAC team members and district leaders, additional support may be needed to meet district's growing demand for services in these areas.

As DSACs reflected on their work with districts and schools, similarities and differences in regional emphases and approaches were apparent. Regional teams described offering a range of services, and reflected on the ways in which those services related to the DSAC foundational services, a list of initiative-level service offerings developed at the beginning of SY11 and updated in SY12. Recognizing that the foundational services reflect a broad array of offerings, it was noted that most DSACs had emphasized a somewhat smaller range of these services, and these emphases differed from region to region based on both perceived needs and DSAC capacities. For example, Conditions for School Effectiveness (CSE) self-assessments served as an entry point in several regions, but were a less substantial focus in other regions, where engagement focused on other services, such as Learning Walkthroughs or data teams.

Even when offering similar services, regional DSACs employed a range of approaches to those services. Generally, differences were more evident with regard to work promoting effective data use and content area improvement than with work facilitating school self-assessment or promoting Learning Walkthroughs, as common tools and resources for these latter offerings were described as providing a higher degree of structure and commonality. As one interviewee explained in the context of data support, "the reality is that the approach is very different in all the regions," with some regions focused on building system-wide capacity and others emphasizing building classroom teachers' ability to use data to improve instruction. A similar range of foci and points-of-service for engagement were described with regard to curriculum and instructional support in mathematics and literacy, where efforts are newer, and it was noted that common resources and approaches had yet to be developed.

Regional Opportunities to Learn about and Share Effective Practices

The third major category of DSAC assistance involves the creation of new, regional opportunities to learn about and share effective practice. This area of work includes the creation and development of regional networks related to leadership, data, and mathematics, the coordination of a menu of high-quality professional development courses, and workshops and study groups related to regional issues.

Regional Networks

In SY11, DSACs began to convene and organize regional networks, with the goal of facilitating collaboration and learning among district leaders to support specific improvement efforts. For the most part, these networks continued in SY12. Regional networks focused on mathematics, data use, and leadership, although not all regions supported networks in all of these areas. In addition, reflecting a larger trend towards increasing integration of services across the Initiative as a whole, some DSAC regions integrated their networks to focus on multiple topics. In total, two regions hosted integrated instructional leadership networks that combined content area and data topics; three regions hosted separate networks for mathematics and data; and one region hosted a series of data workshops, but had to discontinue its mathematics network when its mathematics specialist resigned.

Regional networks, it was noted, helped DSACs to engage a larger number of districts and educators than was possible through in-district assistance activities alone. Specifically, networks served as one forum by which

DSACs could continue to engage Legacy districts and, in some cases, other districts, depending upon resource constraints. In some cases, networks included school-level educators, and as such were described by DSAC teams as fostering high-level professional collaboration that could help to increase the involvement of teachers, and build teacher ownership and leadership for district and school improvement.

The events, it was noted, also provided districts with opportunities to learn more about statewide initiatives; most notably, the implementation of Common Core-aligned curriculum frameworks in literacy and mathematics. Other new initiatives, such as the Massachusetts Tiered System of Support, were also covered to familiarize districts with the key components of the new system and to help them get ready to use these new approaches.

Professional Development Course Offerings

In SY12, ESE continued to sponsor regional and statewide courses in high-need areas such as literacy, mathematics, Sheltered English Instruction (SEI), special education and inclusive practices, and leadership. As in the past, these courses were offered in a variety of formats, including, but not limited to: face-to-face trainings; initial trainings with follow-up and on-site professional development, as well as guided practice and/or modeling; online instruction; and hybrid courses. Reflective of ESE's view of effective professional development, these courses contained an administrator module and required the participation of a cohort of teachers that could work and plan together. These courses were accessible to all districts, although priority was given to the 60 districts receiving DSAC targeted assistance grant funds.

In total, 21 DSAC districts (almost one-third) purchased slots in ESE-sponsored regional or statewide courses in mathematics and/or literacy (Table 2). This included 19 districts purchasing a total of 176 slots in mathematics courses and 10 districts purchasing 79 slots in literacy courses. Additional courses were offered in other areas, although these data were not immediately available to the evaluation.

Table 2: ESE-Sponsored Courses in Mathematics and Literacy Offered Regionally and/or Statewide, Estimated Number of Enrollments (SY12)

Course Offering Topics	DSAC Districts		Other Districts	
	Districts	Enrollments	Districts	Enrollments
Literacy	10	79	1	9
Mathematics	19	176	6	32
Total (Unduplicated Count)	21	255	6	41

Source: Professional development course enrollment worksheets provided by ESE. Reflects the number of seats purchased; actual numbers of participants may have differed.

As alluded to previously, district participation rates in DSAC-sponsored regional mathematics and literacy courses were significantly lower than rates reported in SY11. This is not unexpected, given the finding that a larger number of districts opted to use funds to support in-district offerings of comparable courses in order to increase the number of their teachers able to participate.

Other Regional Offerings and Workshops

In addition to ongoing regional networks and the sponsoring of regional and statewide courses, several DSACs also planned and implemented regional study groups and workshops focused on specific regional issues. Described in interviews as an emerging and somewhat experimental area of work, these types of offerings were designed to allow districts to focus on shared needs and learn from one another, and it was noted that, in the future, this may become an increasing focus of DSAC efforts. Documents forwarded to UMDI as part of the processing of event feedback, indicate that regional offerings within this sub-category of assistance activities during SY12 included: a series of workshops on School Leadership for English Language Learners and a second series related to literacy action planning and instruction (Northeast), presentations and support related to a

World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) grant funded through the DSAC (Southeast), and trainings on mathematics coaching strategies and MTSS (Berkshires).

Alignment of DSAC Services with ESE goals

ESE is a large, complex, and multifaceted organization comprised of many specialized units, but it is working to ensure the coherence of these many units as it seeks to promote transformational change in support of improved student achievement. Recently, ESE identified five priority areas—with associated delivery plans for each goal—to which the units, initiatives, and programs within ESE contribute. These priorities include: (1) preparing students for college and careers, (2) strengthening curriculum and instruction, especially in literacy in the early grades and numeracy in the middle grades, (3) improving educator effectiveness, (4) turning around the lowest performing districts and schools, and (5) using data effectively to support student achievement.

Evidence demonstrates a strong alignment between DSAC services and the overarching goals set forth by ESE, suggesting internal coherence relative to targeted assistance services. A review of ESE goals and DSAC assistance activities demonstrates the alignment of DSAC service offerings with ESE priorities around three goals in particular. In fact, these goals—strengthening curriculum and instruction (focusing on literacy in the early grades and numeracy in the middle grades), improving educator effectiveness, and using data effectively to support student achievement—are an explicit focus of DSAC work. A fourth goal, turning around the lowest performing districts and schools, is also an explicit focus of the DSAC model as implemented, and is an end-goal for the provision of all of its services.

For example, with regard to curriculum and instruction, DSACs provide an avenue by which educators can access specific trainings and networking opportunities designed to improve their teaching in mathematics and literacy, as well as to support the planning and implementation of the 2011 Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for mathematics and English language arts. Additionally, DSAC teams work collaboratively to provide teachers with content area support and mechanisms for observing classroom instruction (e.g. Learning Walkthroughs), and assist teachers in looking at data within these specific content areas. With regard to educator effectiveness, DSAC-sponsored professional development and assistance offerings target this area, specifically focusing on administrators and teachers across the state, but particularly in the Level 3 and Level 4 districts. Lastly, in relation to effective data use, DSACs work extensively with districts to implement effective data use systems and practices, in multiple ways: from district and school data teams, to training school-level educators in the use of the Student Growth Model to inform instruction, to training and assistance provided to administrators in the use of the Education Data Warehouse, with the goal of retrieving data to inform planning decisions.

II. Educators' Perceptions of DSAC Assistance and Approach

The DSAC Initiative was intended to help districts and schools more effectively address their own needs and improvement priorities, and in this light, understanding educators' perspectives regarding DSAC assistance and DSAC approach can serve as an important preliminary indicator of the extent to which the organization is making progress towards this goal. Capturing overall perceptions of the DSAC, including satisfaction with its service offerings, on an ongoing basis is of particular importance, given the fact that, by design, the Initiative was intended to be a demand-driven model, such that leaders' initial impressions of the DSAC will likely have implications for the extent of their future engagement.

Using interviews with educators in a sample of DSAC priority districts, surveys of leaders and other DSAC-engaged educators in all priority districts, and the collection of feedback forms at DSAC-sponsored events and trainings, the evaluation sought to gauge educators' perspectives regarding the Initiative's progress and direction. The section that follows summarizes findings related to educators' impressions of DSAC assistance both overall and for selected core services, perceived value-added by the DSACs, and overall impressions of the DSAC and its approach. The section concludes with a brief discussion of challenges identified by district and school leaders as hindering engagement with the DSACs.

Overall Perceptions of DSAC Assistance and Approach

District and school leader surveys provided an opportunity to understand the way in which DSACs and their service offerings were viewed by district- and school-level leaders in DSAC priority districts. As described below, survey respondents reported favorable impressions of DSAC assistance, which was generally viewed as relevant to local needs and contributing to a high degree of satisfaction. Leaders also reflected favorably on the DSAC's approach to engaging with the field.

The vast majority (94%) of district and school leaders expressed satisfaction with the assistance provided by their region's DSAC (Table 3). Responding leaders from priority districts and schools expressed satisfaction with the assistance provided by their DSAC, including 70% who indicated that they were "very satisfied" with their DSAC. As one district leader explained, "our DSAC team continues to be a tremendous asset to the school system," adding, "they are responsive to our needs and have given us much assistance and support." In general, school leaders tended to report slightly higher levels of satisfaction than their counterparts, although very few respondents expressed dissatisfaction overall.

Table 3: District and School Leader Ratings of Satisfaction with DSAC Assistance in SY12

	District Leaders (N=32)	School Leaders (N=57)	Leaders Overall (N=89)
Very satisfied	66%	72%	70%
Somewhat satisfied	22%	25%	24%
Somewhat <u>d</u> issatisfied	0%	4%	2%
Very <u>d</u> issatisfied	13%	0%	4%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: UMDI Analysis of June 2012 District and School Leader Surveys. Reflects the perspective of leaders of DSAC priority districts and schools within those districts. In cases where multiple leaders offered perspectives from a single organizational unit (i.e., school or district), the perspective considered in this analysis reflects that of the superintendent (district) or principal (school).

These overwhelmingly high levels of satisfaction with DSAC assistance signal a positive trend relative to SY11, when perceptions tended to be more mixed and more dependent on local context and other factors. In general, educators attributed their increased satisfaction to improvements in DSAC approach, as well as to the relationships developed between educators and their regional DSAC, which contributed to increased familiarity with DSAC offerings and the ability to identify ways in which these could be aligned with local improvement priorities. One interviewee explained it thusly:

[There seems to be] a convergence of DSAC support and our own intentionality about how we want to improve as a system. We've been working toward that end and now we have the compatible and complementary resources to be able to accomplish what it is that we need to accomplish.

Leaders also expressed their view that the assistance provided was relevant to their district or school improvement priorities (Table 4) and sufficient to meet their needs. Overall, 94% of responding leaders from priority districts and schools indicated that DSAC assistance was relevant to their own improvement priorities, with a majority describing the work they were doing with their DSAC as “extremely relevant” to their efforts. This included leaders in over half (56%) of responding priority districts and approximately three-fourths (72%) of responding schools within those districts. This finding appears to reflect positively on the collaborative nature of DSAC assistance and the ability of regional teams to identify and adapt their offerings in ways that address those needs and priorities. It is notable that only 5% of leaders overall responded negatively to this item. Additionally, leaders from a substantial majority of districts (81%) and schools (86%) indicated that the support they received from their DSAC was sufficient to meet their needs in SY12.

Table 4: District and School Leader Ratings of Relevance of DSAC Assistance to Local Priorities

	District Leaders (N=32)	School Leaders (N=57)	Leaders Overall (N=89)
Extremely relevant	56%	72%	66%
Somewhat relevant	31%	26%	28%
Not very relevant	3%	2%	2%
Not relevant at all	9%	0%	3%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: UMDI Analysis of June 2012 District and School Leader Surveys. Reflects the perspective of leaders of DSAC priority districts and schools within those districts. In cases where multiple leaders offered perspectives from a single organizational unit (i.e., school or district), the perspective considered in this analysis reflects that of the superintendent (district) or principal (school).

Consistent with this general positive sentiment, leaders in the vast majority of districts anticipated future engagement with their DSAC to be at the same or an increased level of intensity (Table 5). Overall, leaders from 91% of districts and 86% of schools anticipated that they would continue to work with their DSAC at either an increasing or the same level of intensity in the coming year. School leaders in particular expected to increase their level of engagement in the future, with leaders from almost half (46%) of schools expecting to increase the level of DSAC engagement in SY13.

Table 5: District and School Leader Expectations of Future Engagement with the DSAC

	District Leaders (N=32)	School Leaders (N=57)	Leaders Overall (N=89)
Yes, at an increased level of intensity	28%	46%	39%
Yes, at the same level of intensity	63%	40%	48%
Yes, at a lower level of intensity	3%	9%	7%
No, I do not expect or plan to work with the DSAC next year	6%	5%	6%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: UMDI Analysis of June 2012 District and School Leader Surveys. Reflects the perspective of leaders of DSAC priority districts and schools within those districts. In cases where multiple leaders offered perspectives from a single organizational unit (i.e., school or district), the perspective considered in this analysis reflects that of the superintendent (district) or principal (school).

Very few district and school leaders indicated that they did not expect or plan to work with the DSAC, although a small number of district leaders indicated that they would continue to work with their DSAC because they were required to do so as a result of their designation, a finding that runs contrary to the demand-driven nature of the Initiative. While this may be important to consider, it should be noted that this was not the predominant sentiment, which was generally positive and indicative of high satisfaction with DSAC services.

Finally, district and school leaders reported strongly positive impressions of the region's DSAC and its approach (Table 6). Overall, leaders expressed a strong level of agreement in terms of DSAC approach on all survey items, although this positive sentiment was strongest in four areas. More specifically, district and school leaders indicated that the DSAC was respectful in its interactions (88%), collaborative in its approach (88%), committed to providing the highest quality assistance (84%), and uses evidence-based practices (82%). This positive sentiment tended to be least strong and there was comparatively more disagreement in terms of DSAC's accessibility, responsiveness to district needs, and DSAC's role as a strategic thinking partner, although even in these cases, a sizeable majority of respondents strongly agreed on these dimensions. It should be noted that agreement tended to be least strong with respect to DSAC's accessibility, and as described later in this section, some interviewees expressed concerns that DSACs may not have adequate capacity to respond to what they viewed as growing demand for services.

Table 6: District and School Leaders' Overall Perceptions of the DSAC, June 2012

	Total # of Respondents	Proportion indicating...			
		Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Readily accessible	82	68%	26%	5%	1%
Respectful in its interactions	85	88%	8%	2%	1%
Collaborative in its approach	84	88%	8%	1%	2%
Responsive to district and school needs	81	74%	20%	4%	2%
Uses evidence-based practices	83	82%	14%	1%	2%
Committed to providing the highest quality assistance	83	84%	11%	2%	2%
An important strategic thinking partner	79	72%	20%	4%	4%

Source: UMDI Analysis of June 2012 District and School Leader Surveys. Reflects the perspective of leaders of DSAC priority districts and schools within those districts. In cases where multiple leaders offered perspectives from a single organizational unit (i.e., school or district), the perspective considered in this analysis reflects that of the superintendent (district) or principal (school).

Perceptions of Assistance in Selected Core Service Areas

As mentioned previously, the evaluation also focused on understanding perceptions of a set of select core services as significant emphases of DSAC activity within priority districts. These services were identified by ESE and previous data collection efforts as core areas of work. Specifically, these included services related to Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments, Learning Walkthroughs, effective use of data, and content area improvement in mathematics and/or literacy.¹¹ In addition, the evaluation gathered district leaders' perspectives regarding the value of DSAC-supported professional development and regional networking to their improvement efforts.

The vast majority of survey respondents described these core services as valuable to their improvement efforts (Table 7). For each of these offerings, more than 80% of respondents indicated that services were either “extremely valuable” or “somewhat valuable” with regard to local improvement efforts and/or plans. Ratings appeared to be particularly positive with regard to Learning Walkthroughs and content area support, with nearly all respondents indicating that these services were at least “somewhat valuable”.

Table 7: Perceived Value of In-District Core Services to Improvement Efforts

Assistance Offerings	Total # of Respondents	Proportion indicating...		
		Extremely Valuable	Somewhat Valuable	Not Very or Not at All Valuable
Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments	34	56%	32%	12%
Learning Walkthroughs	21	57%	43%	0%
Data support	27	52%	30%	18%
Content area support	28	57%	39%	4%

Source: UMDI Analysis of data from June 2012 DSAC surveys, including the school leader surveys (Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments and Learning Walkthroughs), a survey of those receiving data support (data services), and services in support of curriculum and instructional improvement (content area support). Reported for priority districts only.

It is also noteworthy that leaders from virtually all schools (96%) that had implemented at least one Learning Walkthrough indicated that they were “very likely” to continue to use the Learning Walkthrough process (Table 8). Leaders in approximately half (51%) of schools that conducted Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments indicated that their schools were “very likely” to continue to conduct these assessments as part of their ongoing improvement process, and an additional 29% indicated that their schools were “somewhat likely” to continue using the assessments.

Table 8: Likelihood of Continued Use of Learning Walkthroughs and CSE Self-Assessments

Likelihood of Continued Use of...	Total # of Respondents	Proportion indicating...			
		Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	Somewhat Unlikely/Not Likely at All	It depends
Learning Walkthroughs	23	96%	4%	0%	0%
Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments	35	51%	29%	6%	14%

¹¹ Not a foundational service per se, but an overarching focus of engagement that could be addressed through a variety of activities and assistance services.

The vast majority of survey respondents offered positive quality ratings of content area services (Table 9). A survey of individuals that were substantively engaged with their DSAC in the area of content-area support was conducted to gain greater insight into this service. Overall, quality ratings were very positive for all of the services presented in Table 9, with 86% or more of all respondents indicating services were either “excellent” or “good.” It is worthwhile noting the comparatively high percentages of “excellent” ratings for content area support in mathematics, with 70% of respondents indicating that the planning for implementation of the 2011 Curriculum Frameworks for Mathematics was “excellent” and 60% indicating the same for support related to improving classroom instruction in mathematics.

Table 9: Perceived Quality of DSAC Content Area Services

Content Area Support	Total # of Respondents	Proportion indicating...			
		Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Planning for implementation of the 2011 Curriculum Frameworks for <u>Mathematics</u>	27	70%	19%	11%	0%
Improving classroom instruction in <u>mathematics</u>	20	60%	30%	10%	0%
Planning for implementation of the 2011 Curriculum Frameworks for <u>ELA and literacy</u>	35	39%	62%	0%	0%
Improving classroom instruction in <u>literacy</u>	14	43%	43%	14%	0%

Source: UMDI Analysis of data from a June 2012 survey of participants in DSAC-provided content area support.

DSAC-supported professional development was also viewed as valuable to improvement efforts (Table 10). As described previously, targeted assistance grant resources could be used in a variety of ways such as participating in DSAC-sponsored courses or procuring professional development from other contractors. Survey data show that both forms of professional development were viewed as contributing to overall improvement efforts, but access to DSAC-sponsored courses appeared to be particularly valuable, with leaders in 93% of responding priority districts describing these courses as valuable, including 62% who indicated that they were “extremely valuable.”

Table 10: Perceived Value of DSAC-Supported Professional Development to Improvement Efforts

Assistance Offerings	Total # of Respondents	Proportion indicating...		
		Extremely Valuable	Somewhat Valuable	Not Very or Not at All Valuable
DSAC-sponsored courses	29	62%	31%	7%
Professional development offerings using other contractors	29	48%	38%	14%

Source: UMDI Analysis of data from June 2012 DSAC District Leader Survey. Reported for priority districts only, with each district represented once.

These survey results are consistent with findings gathered through the interview process in which nearly all district leaders, school leaders, and educators described the DSAC-sponsored professional development courses as being effective and high-quality experiences. For instance, a number of interviewees described how the DSAC-sponsored professional development had supported changes in instructional practice. As one interviewee explains:

In this [professional development], you see an immediate impact in the classrooms. The teachers come back with understanding. They've had to go through things that our students go through, but in a different way, and they come back and immediately see the significance in changing some of their math instruction...it's neat to see them bring it back and start applying it to the classroom.

Finally, regional networks sponsored by DSACs were also described as valuable (Table 11). Overall, leaders from a vast majority (91%) of priority districts accessing regional networks provided by DSACs described the networking as valuable to their improvement efforts, half of whom felt that the networks were “extremely valuable.”

Table 11: Perceived Value of DSAC Regional Networks to Improvement Efforts

	Total # of Responses	Proportion indicating...		
		Extremely Valuable	Somewhat Valuable	Not Very or Not at All Valuable
Regional networks	22	50%	41%	9%

Source: UMDI Analysis of data from June 2012 DSAC District Leader Survey. Reported for priority districts only, with each district represented once.

Feedback from regional network participants was overwhelmingly positive about the experience (Table 12). In fact, analysis of feedback forms collected at regional networking events shows that nearly all respondents indicated that the organization, quality of materials and/or resources, and the clarity, relevance, and usefulness of the information at these events were either “excellent” or “good.” For example, 99% of participants described the overall quality of the event they attended as either “excellent” or “good,” with 72% indicating that the quality was “excellent.”

Table 12: Participants’ Ratings of DSAC-Sponsored Regional Networking Events

	Total # of responses	Proportion indicating...			
		Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Organization	609	75%	25%	0%	0%
Quality of materials/resources	603	69%	28%	2%	0%
Clarity of the information	605	69%	29%	2%	0%
Relevance of the information	607	76%	22%	2%	0%
Usefulness of the information	605	73%	24%	3%	0%
Overall quality	602	72%	26%	1%	0%

Source: UMDI analysis of feedback forms collected at DSAC-sponsored network events. Excludes respondents who selected the “Not applicable” option.

Consistent with the finding regarding relevance of the information, nearly all respondents (98%) indicated that they were likely to use what they learned at regional network events (Table 13). In fact, over three-fourths (78%) of respondents indicated that they were “very likely” to use what they had learned.

Table 13: Likelihood of Applying Regional Event Learnings

How likely is that you will use what you learned through this experience in your school/district?	Total # of responses	Proportion of all responses
Very likely	446	78%
Somewhat likely	114	20%
Somewhat unlikely	9	2%
Very unlikely	5	1%
Total	574	100%

Source: UMDI analysis of feedback forms collected at DSAC-sponsored network events. Excludes respondents who selected the “Not applicable” option.

Perceptions of Added Value

Another focus of inquiry for the evaluation involved gathering leaders’ perspectives regarding the extent and nature of DSAC contributions to their local improvement efforts. In these interviews, many district leaders were readily able to cite what they viewed as the “added value” that DSACs had contributed. These examples typically fell into three notable areas, including identifying local improvement priorities, serving as an impetus for change, and managing complexity with regard to the integration of new initiatives into local improvement efforts.

Several leaders described the DSAC as helping them to identify local improvement priorities. In a number of districts, DSAC teams were described as instrumental in providing direction, focus, and feedback with regard to district improvement efforts. This reflects one of the focus areas of the Initiative as a whole: namely, helping districts to conduct district and school self-assessments and to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement.

[The DSAC Initiative] was innovative on the part of ESE. It provides district support, and in this high accountability environment, it gave us direction and had helped focus districts on what they need to do and where they need to go. In that sense, they have been instrumental, at least in my district, in helping us move forward.

In addition, as external entities, DSACs were described as serving as an impetus for change, both by creating a sense of urgency and legitimacy for local improvement efforts, and by offering new ideas and approaches. In this sense, DSACs were described as providing a supportive foundation on which local improvement efforts could be built. In two districts leaders described DSAC involvement as being a key leverage point for school leaders wanting to introduce new processes and/or structures focused on understanding and improving instructional practices in their buildings. In another context, the DSAC presence was described as integral to getting specific new initiatives off the ground and creating the organizational conditions needed to move forward with and sustain improvement efforts.

I think the work would have disintegrated without them. They helped us break through some things that we needed to work on. [The work] kept it going because people weren't getting angry with one another...they had the freedom to say what they needed to say.

Further, many district and school leaders described how DSACs helped them to manage and integrate a complex set of new initiatives as part of their own local improvement efforts. More specifically, district leaders described their regional DSAC as not only an important resource for timely information, but also an important strategic thinking partner that could help them make connections across these new initiatives. This allowed new initiatives to be integrated into local improvement efforts in a coherent fashion, rather than as “add-ons” or replacement initiatives. Furthermore, high quality professional development and targeted assistance

services made available by DSACs were viewed as important resources on which leaders could draw to pursue their improvement efforts. This type of support, which was seen as invaluable to mitigating the potential for “initiative overload,” appears to reflect a deliberate emphasis of DSAC work during SY12. In interviews conducted in winter 2012, many DSAC teams described their own increasing focus on making purposeful connections between ESE initiatives, as well as increasing integration across their own service offerings.

In the interview process, **several leaders commented on specific characteristics of their DSAC’s approach that they felt contributed to their ability to add value to improvement efforts.** These include the following:

- **The expertise, depth of knowledge, and field-based experience of DSAC staff members,** which interviewees felt allowed them to both identify with the challenges districts and school leaders faced and to offer practical advice and solutions from an educator’s perspective. Interviewees also noted that field experience helped DSAC team members establish credibility as they interacted with school-based personnel in the delivery of services.
- **The job-embedded and ongoing nature of DSAC targeted support,** such that it is not “a one-shot deal,” but rather a continuous and reliable source of support that could help “fit the puzzle together...on an ongoing basis,” as districts and schools progress in their improvement efforts.
- **DSACs’ ability to understand district and school needs and differentiate their services in ways that reflect and respond to those needs,** which leaders described as “consistent with highly effective instructional practice.” Leaders believed that this level of differentiation and customization contributed to the increased relevance, and ultimate effectiveness, of the services they received from the DSACs. “It’s the flexibility in the people we work with,” one leader noted, in describing what made the DSAC support so valuable.

It is notable that these findings are consistent with the perceptions of leaders of districts who were early users of the DSAC during the Initiative’s first full year of operations, although such sentiments seemed to be more widespread during the Initiative’s second year. In some cases, it was noted that leaders saw an improvement in the responsiveness of their DSAC toward the end of SY11 and into SY12, as the organization responded to initial feedback and further refined its approach. This current positive view of the DSAC and its approach is generally consistent with survey data regarding leaders’ perspectives of their regional DSAC and its approach described previously.

Challenges to Sustaining or Increasing Engagement with the DSAC

While many district and school leaders were satisfied with their DSAC’s assistance and anticipated either maintaining or increasing their levels of engagement, some interviewees acknowledged that there were challenges to high-intensity engagement as described below.

The most frequently cited barrier was limited capacity on the part of districts and schools to access and take advantage of relevant DSAC offerings, particularly in light of competing priorities. “Part of the challenge is ours,” one district leader noted, adding that “we don’t have the infrastructure to take full advantage of what the DSAC has to offer.” It was noted that many of the individuals that would need to be involved directly with DSAC teams in the planning and delivery of services—including administrators, curriculum coordinators, department heads, and others—are already involved in a number of other initiatives, committees, and other planning efforts. This may not be surprising considering that the Initiative targets small and mid-sized districts that often do not have the resources or staffing capacity to meet all of their challenges. Similarly, one interviewee reflected on the need to balance teachers’ time out of the classroom with the potential value that could be gained from professional development.

Leadership turnover, particularly at the superintendent level, was also described as a significant barrier to engaging with DSACs, and sustaining the momentum of DSAC-supported improvement efforts. Some

of the key strategies advocated by the DSACs, such as Learning Walkthroughs and district data teams, require the commitment of high-level district leadership if they are to be meaningful, supported, and sustained; particularly given what were viewed as potential implications for district structures, schedules, and union agreements. It was noted generally that during transitions, as new leaders set their own priorities, initiatives may stall temporarily until new relationships and support for continuity of these practices can be established. During these periods, some interviewees remarked that the intensity of the relationship between the DSAC and the district and/or its schools may decrease. However, it was also noted that during these transitions, other district leaders can play an important role in helping to advocate for the continuity of important high-leverage initiatives, minimizing the potential sense of “initiative-churn.” In this context, interviewees underscored the importance of “hav[ing] a liaison at the district to continue the process and move it forward “in the midst of these transitions.”

A small number of interviewees identified concerns regarding whether they could obtain sufficient services in the future to fully support and maintain the momentum required for DSAC-supported improvement efforts. Sufficiency may be context-specific: for example, districts with lean administrative structures or those that move to Level 4 status and need to develop accelerated improvement plans may require more intensive support. In addition, the nature of the changes required will also likely have implications for the amount of support needed. More specifically, work on those “soft areas of reform,” such as fostering collaboration and making positive changes in district culture, may require additional support from the DSAC or an internal partner, as well as a multi-year timeframe that may span periods of turnover. For example, one interviewee described how change is “hard work and can't be done month-to-month...there needs to be a presence in some way every week,” particularly in periods of transition. Another interviewee described it as follows:

They need more staffing for the number of districts served, but they are there if we need support...when you have intermittent support at the school level, it can be tricky trying to figure out what's the best way to take advantage on an interim basis.

III. Changes in District Culture, Capacity, and Practice

ESE is particularly interested in understanding the extent to which its regional DSACs are contributing to changes in priority districts and schools. As such, the evaluation focused substantially on understanding, from the perspective of district and school leaders and other educators, the extent to which DSAC engagement and services had contributed to meaningful changes in culture, capacity, and practice in DSAC priority districts.

Inquiry related to outcomes emphasized three areas identified by ESE as a focus of DSAC work, namely: leadership and planning; use of data as part of a cycle of inquiry process; and curriculum and instruction. Survey measures were derived from ESE's Conditions for School Effectiveness as it related to these three areas. In addition, a fourth impact area, districts' and schools' professional learning culture was identified through interviews with districts and school leaders who suggested that DSACs had an important and positive influence in this regard. Preliminary impacts in each of these areas are described in the section that follows.

As potential impacts are considered, it should be noted that, as described in interviews with district and school leaders, DSAC assistance was typically integrated into broader district initiatives, adapted to local context, and changed over time as the development of new structures and capacities enabled new goal-setting and improvement efforts. One interviewee from a district that had been engaged with the DSAC for multiple years describes the trajectory of impacts in that district:

What DSAC did for us was help us create the structures...build the bridge to get from here to there—the Instructional Study Groups and the mechanics for how that would work; the Learning Walkthroughs, [which] forced us to define the educational jargon and develop a common language...Change in classroom instruction is a lot slower than ever imagined...[these are] small victories but the transformation of professionals or teacher capacities is a long process, but you can't skip any of the steps. We are noting changes in student achievement in a small scale at this point.

As such, the specific manifestations of impacts of DSAC assistance are likely to differ due to contextual factors, with different districts addressing various needs at various times, depending on where they are in their cycle of improvement.

Leadership and Planning

An overarching goal of the DSAC Initiative involves helping districts and schools develop the capacity to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement. As such, both interviews and surveys gathered data regarding the extent to which leaders believed their work with the DSAC had contributed to improvement in leadership and planning capacity within their schools and districts.

Overall, district and school leaders reported that their work with the DSAC contributed to improvement in a range of measures related to leadership and planning (Table 14). A majority of leaders indicated that working with the DSAC had contributed either “greatly” or “moderately” to all identified aspects of leadership and planning included on the survey. For example, leaders from over three-fourths (78%) of responding districts and schools indicated that work with the DSAC contributed “greatly” or “moderately” to improvements in their organization's ability to identify improvement priorities. This includes 86% of school leaders and 66% of district leaders. With regard to capacity to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement, leaders from approximately three-fourths (76%) of schools and approximately two-thirds (63%) of districts indicated that working with the DSAC contributed to improvement in this area to at least a moderate extent.

Table 14: Leaders' Perceptions of Impacts of DSAC Assistance on Leadership and Planning Capacity

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to leadership and planning improvement in each of the following ...	Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"...		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
Ability to identify improvement priorities	66%	86%	78%
Ability to identify instructional strengths	77%	78%	78%
Capacity to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement	63%	76%	70%
Capacity to address improvement priorities	59%	77%	70%
Capacity to monitor progress toward improvement	57%	72%	66%

Source: UMDI Analysis of June 2012 District and School Leader Surveys. Reflects the perspective of leaders of DSAC priority districts and schools within those districts. In cases where multiple leaders offered perspectives from a single organizational unit (i.e., school or district), the perspective considered in this analysis reflects that of the superintendent (district) or principal (school). Excludes those indicating "not applicable" or "too soon to tell."

Overall, school leaders were more likely to report DSAC contributions to leadership and planning, although, as mentioned previously, responses were favorable for both district and school leaders. This is not surprising given that support related to the implementation of *school* self-assessments was a much more commonly delivered foundational service than was support related to *district* self-assessments. School leaders whose schools had engaged with their DSAC on self-assessments were generally more likely to report positive impacts on measures related to leadership and planning than those whose schools had not engaged with their DSAC in this area. It should be noted that while school leaders' responses were more positive with regard to impacts on leadership and planning, district leaders were as positive as school leaders when describing impacts on the ability to identify instructional strengths.

It is noteworthy, however, that at the district level, leaders whose districts engaged with the DSAC in the area of Learning Walkthroughs were generally more likely to report moderate to great impacts with regard to all identified aspects of leadership and planning. For example, leaders from 80% of districts receiving assistance related to Learning Walkthroughs reported that the DSAC had contributed to their district's capacity to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement compared with slightly less than half (47%) of leaders in districts focusing on other areas.

Taken together, key survey findings related to the positive impact of DSAC assistance on leadership and improvement planning are consistent with key findings derived from the interview process. More focused improvement planning and a greater alignment of professional development to identified needs were the most commonly identified areas of impact as described by interviewees. Similarly, a number of interviewees noted that their work with the DSAC contributed to the development of a district and/or school improvement plan that identified clear goals, targets, and/or implementation steps based on data and/or a more focused and informed professional development plan.

It has help[ed] people align things and see how things are starting to connect. They [the DSAC] have been very helpful with that. Different initiatives that we have going on have been driven by the work of the data team. And the initiatives are coming together more closely...Because we're focusing on specific goals, those things are all working towards the same initiative.

As illustrated in this quote, to some extent, the DSAC's impacts related to leadership and planning appeared to extend from, or overlap with their contributions in the area of effective data use which are described in more detail in the section that follows. That is, as improvement planning became increasingly data-based, in part as a result of DSAC support, improvement efforts were described as becoming increasingly focused and coherent.

\Effective Use of Data

Another area of focus for DSAC assistance involved building capacity among districts and schools to more effectively use data. Reflecting the fact that DSAC assistance related to data and effective use of data was delivered in a variety of formats with a variety of emphases, surveys included multiple measures related to data use. These ranged from improvements in system-level data use, such as identifying district or school improvement priorities, to those more closely related to student and classroom level activities, such as the use of data to make student placement decisions and provide timely interventions.

District and school leaders reported that DSAC assistance contributed to improvement in many identified aspects of data use (Table 15). More specifically, leaders reported that DSAC assistance contributed “greatly” or “moderately” to improvement in the use of data to identify improvement priorities (65%), identify professional development needs (60%), monitor student progress (60%), and understand current instructional practices (58%). Overall, 56% of leaders indicated that working with the DSAC had contributed to moderate or great improvement in their district or school’s mechanisms or processes for examining data. District and school leaders’ perspectives were notably different with regard to impacts on identifying professional development needs and monitoring student progress. In both cases, school leaders were markedly more positive than their counterparts.

Table 15: District and School Leaders' Perceptions of Impact of DSAC Assistance on Data Use

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to improvement in your district's/school's use of data in each of the following ...	Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"...		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
Identifying improvement priorities in your district/school	62%	67%	65%
Identifying professional development needs in your district/school	50%	66%	60%
Monitoring student progress	48%	68%	60%
Understanding current instructional practices in your district/school	55%	59%	58%
Making student placement decisions in your school	--	47%	--
Providing timely interventions to students in your school	--	48%	--

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to improvement in your ...	Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"...		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
District's/school's mechanisms or processes for examining data at the district level/school or classroom-level	59%	53%	56%

Source: UMDI Analysis of June 2012 District and School Leader Surveys. Reflects the perspective of leaders of DSAC priority districts and schools within those districts. In cases where multiple leaders offered perspectives from a single organizational unit (i.e., school or district), the perspective considered in this analysis reflects that of the superintendent (district) or principal (school). Respondents indicating “not applicable” or “too early to tell” were excluded from the analysis. Excludes those indicating “not applicable” or “too soon to tell.”

To some extent, the specific impacts reported may reflect the type of data support provided by the DSAC, particularly given the range of services offered in this area. For example, 48% of school leaders indicated that DSAC assistance contributed to improvement in their school’s ability to use data to provide timely interventions to students and 47% reported that it contributed to improvements in the ability to make student placement decisions. However, these may not have been an intended focus of the work in some schools. For example, in cases where schools engaged with their DSAC in the area of leadership team training, respondents more commonly indicated that the DSAC contributed “moderately” or “greatly” to their use of data for monitoring student progress (89% as compared to 52%), making student placement decisions (71% as compared to 32%), and providing timely interventions to students (71% as compared to 30%). Similarly, leaders whose schools had received content area support or assistance in the development of a professional learning community were more

likely to report great or moderate impacts on their school’s use of data to make student placement decisions (67% compared to 43%) and, not surprisingly, also with regard to their understanding of current instructional practices in their school (86% compared to 54%).

The impact of DSAC-provided data services can also be seen in the responses of educators who participated in those services (Table 16). For example, a vast majority of service recipients (87%) indicated that their work with the DSAC in the area of data use had a great or moderate impact on awareness of the tools and resources to support data work. Additionally, it should be noted that nearly three-quarters of respondents indicated that DSAC assistance in the area of data use contributed at least moderately to their ability to analyze data and integrate various kinds of data to address key lines of inquiry.

Table 16: Direct Recipients’ Perceptions of Impact of DSAC Assistance on Data Use

Indicate the extent to which the data-related support provided by the DSAC has contributed to improvement in each of the following ...	Total # of Resp.	Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"...
Awareness of tools and resources to support data work	31	87%
Ability to integrate various kinds of data to address a key question/line of inquiry	27	74%
Knowledge and/or skill with regard to data analysis	30	73%
Use of data to reflect on instructional practices (e.g. looking at student work, assessment data, behavioral data)	29	62%
Developing a culture of inquiry to inform district and/or school-level decisions	28	61%
Your school or district's capacity to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement	28	61%
Monitoring the implementation and outcomes of your school or district's improvement efforts	27	44%

Source: Ratings for content area support were derived from the Data Services Survey. Excludes those indicating “not applicable” or “too soon to tell.”

Consistent with these survey results, interview data reveal that leaders and educators perceive that DSAC data support has resulted in an increased sophistication in the use of data. Interview findings generally pertained to use of data for system-level improvement planning (as described in the previous section), but also for instructional improvement. For example, in a district where the DSAC had helped to establish instructional study groups, several teachers described how these groups provided a venue to reflect on instruction, and ultimately, led to changes in classroom-level practice among those participating. One teacher explains:

I think it helped me to differentiate more... and my math scores really went up a lot last year, and I think that was due to that—the pretesting, the post-testing, the differentiation, looking at the work closely. I think being more reflective of your teaching and the student learning, looking at the outcomes and really wondering... changing the instruction according to the data.

In another district, administrators and teachers described how the DSAC had helped to increase their understanding of the meaning and use of ESE-provided student growth data. It was noted that this increased knowledge had contributed to an increased acceptance of these data on the part of teachers and an interest in using the information to improve their instruction and further accelerate student learning.

Curriculum and Instruction

The third area of focus pertaining to changes resulting from DSAC assistance involved curriculum and instruction. As with support related to data use, DSAC assistance related to curriculum and instruction was delivered in a range of different formats and with different emphases. For example, in some districts, DSAC assistance was focused on building district-wide curriculum and capacity to support instructional improvement

system-wide, whereas in others, assistance involved direct engagement with teachers and classroom-level instruction. As such, survey measures reflected a range of potential impacts.

District and school leaders reported that DSAC assistance impacted a number of aspects related to curriculum (Table 17). More specifically, more than half of leaders indicated that DSAC assistance contributed “greatly” or “moderately” to improvement related to alignment of their mathematics curriculum to the 2011 Curriculum Frameworks (63%), the implementation of curriculum in mathematics (56%), and the alignment of their ELA curriculum to the new frameworks (53%).

Table 17: District and School Leaders' Perceptions of Impact of DSAC Assistance on Curriculum

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to curriculum improvement in each of the following ...	Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
Alignment of your district's/school's curriculum in mathematics to state frameworks	71%	58%	63%
Implementation of curriculum in mathematics in your district/school	56%	56%	56%
Alignment of your district's/school's curriculum in ELA to state frameworks	52%	54%	53%
Your district's/school's efforts to create and refine curricula on an ongoing basis	43%	52%	49%
Implementation of curriculum in ELA in your district/school	39%	43%	42%

Source: UMDI Analysis of June 2012 District and School Leader Surveys. Reflects the perspective of leaders of DSAC priority districts and schools within those districts. In cases where multiple leaders offered perspectives from a single organizational unit (i.e., school or district), the perspective considered in this analysis reflects that of the superintendent (district) or principal (school). Excludes those indicating “not applicable” or “too soon to tell.”

Overall positive impacts on a number of curriculum measures are consistent with interview findings highlighting improved alignment of district-level curricula to new frameworks as an emerging outcome area. Reflecting the fact that curricular alignment had become an increasing focus of DSAC work in SY12, several interviewees described how DSACs had contributed to their district’s ability to plan for and implement new Common Core-aligned frameworks. In many cases, this reflected work that was occurring as part of regional networks, as well as direct support offered to curriculum specialists in developing structures and processes by which to re-develop and align curriculum. In addition to these venues, one interviewee described how the DSAC had supported the district in convening teachers to engage in curriculum mapping, which ultimately resulted in the development of new curriculum maps aligned to the frameworks with buy-in from the teachers that would ultimately be implementing the new curriculum.

It is notable that district leaders more commonly reported DSAC contributions to curricular improvement in mathematics than literacy. For example, over two-thirds of district leaders (71%) indicated that DSAC assistance had contributed to great or moderate improvement as it relates to the alignment of curriculum in mathematics to the new state frameworks, compared with approximately half (52%) who reported a similar level of impact related to literacy. To some extent, this may relate to the previous finding that a significantly larger proportion of districts identified mathematics as the substantive focus of their work with the DSAC (64%) as compared to literacy (36%). It is also worth noting that DSAC mathematics specialists focus exclusively on DSAC districts, whereas the work of literacy specialists extends beyond the DSACs. It was noted that in the future, ESE would like to expand its capacity by staffing the DSACs with a cadre of staff focused exclusively on DSAC work.

District and school leaders also reported that the DSAC contributed to instructional improvement in many areas (Table 18). A majority of surveyed leaders indicated that their work with the DSAC contributed either “greatly” or “moderately” to the use of effective instructional approaches (62%), teachers’ use of data to reflect on instructional practices (59%), the quality of instruction in their district or school (58%), content area

knowledge among teachers (57%), alignment of instruction with student learning needs (54%), and the capacity to support instructional improvement (52%).

Table 18: District and School Leaders' Perceptions of Impact of DSAC Assistance on Instruction

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to instructional improvement in each of the following ...	Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
Use of effective instructional approaches in your district/school	52%	69%	62%
Teachers' use of data to reflect on instructional practices (e.g. looking at student work, assessment data, behavioral data)	62%	58%	59%
The quality of instruction in your district/school	48%	64%	58%
Content area knowledge among teachers in your district/school	52%	61%	57%
Alignment of instruction with student learning needs in your district/school	45%	61%	54%
Your district's/school's capacity to support instructional improvement	48%	55%	52%
Mechanisms or processes for providing quality feedback to teachers on their practice in your district/school	43%	54%	49%
Use of formative assessments in your district/school	31%	60%	48%
Your district's/school's capacity to accelerate student learning among high-need populations	29%	42%	36%

Source: UMDI Analysis of June 2012 District and School Leader Surveys. Reflects the perspective of leaders of DSAC priority districts and schools within those districts. In cases where multiple leaders offered perspectives from a single organizational unit (i.e., school or district), the perspective considered in this analysis reflects that of the superintendent (district) or principal (school). Excludes those indicating "not applicable" or "too soon to tell."

School leaders tended to report more positive impacts with regard to instructional improvement than their counterparts at the district level on most aspects. This holds true for eight of the nine measures of instructional improvement, but may be most notable as relates to the use of formative assessments where the number of schools reporting positive impacts (60%) was almost double that of districts (31%). Differences were also notable with regard to use of effective instructional approaches, quality of instruction, and alignment of instruction with students' learning needs.

Professional Staff Culture

Finally, a fourth area of inquiry related to changes resulting from DSAC engagement involved staff culture and the development of a strong, collaborative professional community of educators within districts and schools. A number of DSAC services have this outcome as a potential focus, as one DSAC team member explains:

[A professional learning community is a] way of living, thinking, and working with your colleagues and within your professional community. [Our]DSAC promotes the cultural proliferation of this kind of thinking and learning which is more sustainable than just hosting DSAC sponsored activities. With all the groups and individuals that we coach, educate, mentor and guide, we continuously model for them how to transform their schools to become a better and more productive professional community.

Overall, leaders reported that DSAC assistance contributed to improvements in their district or school's professional culture (Table 19). On the survey, leaders from a majority of districts or schools indicated that the DSAC had contributed "greatly" or "moderately" to improvements in identified aspects of their staff culture. For example, over three-fourths of leaders (77%) indicated that DSAC assistance contributed at least moderately to

an improved dialogue regarding teaching and learning in their district or school, and approximately two-thirds (66%) indicated that the DSAC made a similar level of contribution to improvements in staff collaboration around teaching and learning.

Table 19: Leaders' Perceptions of the Impact of DSAC Assistance on Professional Staff Culture

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to improvement in each of the following ...	Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"...		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
Dialogue about teaching and learning in your district/school	71%	80%	77%
Staff collaboration around teaching and learning in your district/school	50%	77%	66%
Your district/school's responsiveness to teachers' needs	52%	74%	65%
Shared sense of accountability for student learning in your district/school	57%	67%	63%
Expectations for student learning in your district/school	55%	68%	63%
Faculty commitment to improvement goals in your district/school	41%	71%	59%
Teacher's input into decision-making in your district/school	45%	68%	58%

Source: UMDI Analysis of June 2012 District and School Leader Surveys. Reflects the perspective of leaders of DSAC priority districts and schools within those districts. In cases where multiple leaders offered perspectives from a single organizational unit (i.e., school or district), the perspective considered in this analysis reflects that of the superintendent (district) or principal (school). Excludes those indicating "not applicable" or "too soon to tell."

Overall, school leaders were more likely to report improvements in professional culture as a result of DSAC assistance than were district leaders. Among district leaders, the most commonly cited impact area involved improvements in the dialogue about teaching and learning in their district (71%). It is notable, however, that leaders from districts that had engaged with the DSAC in the area of Learning Walkthroughs were far more likely to report positive impacts on their district's professional culture than were those from districts not pursuing Learning Walkthroughs. As one example, leaders in 80% of districts engaging with the DSAC to conduct Learning Walkthroughs reported that DSAC assistance contributed "greatly" or "moderately" to a shared sense of accountability, compared with approximately one-third (33%) of leaders in districts that had not pursued Learning Walkthroughs. It should be noted that this relationship between Learning Walkthroughs and improvement in professional culture does not necessarily imply causation. For example, districts who engaged with their DSAC in the area of Learning Walkthroughs were often described as having in place characteristics or preconditions that contributed to their willingness or readiness to consider the use of the Walkthrough process, and these other factors may have had a substantive impact on perceived changes in staff culture. However, in interviews, those who had participated in a Learning Walkthrough often described the process as having a positive effect on staff culture, particularly when teachers were able to be involved. In many cases, DSAC facilitation was viewed as critical to creating a sense of "openness between administrators and buy-in from teachers."

IV. Systemic Changes in ESE's Capacity to Respond to District Needs

As described previously, the DSAC Initiative reflects a significant shift in the state's system of support for districts and schools across the Commonwealth. Through the creation of a specific infrastructure to provide coordinated targeted assistance services to an increasing number of high-need districts and schools, the DSAC Initiative reflects one strategy of the Department to increase its responsiveness to district and school needs, and ultimately, to more effectively support local improvement efforts and improve student outcomes.

Consistent with this goal, the evaluation gathered perceptions regarding the impact of the DSAC Initiative on overall ESE operations, culture, and practice through interviews with, and surveys of, leaders of DSAC priority districts, and interviews with ESE leaders and department staff involved with the DSACs. As described below, district and school leaders described the DSAC Initiative as helping the Department more effectively disseminate information, tools, and resources, and as contributing to the increased responsiveness of ESE as an organization. Interviewees from ESE and regional DSAC teams described a number of changes within ESE, in part as a result of the Initiative, that they feel have contributed to this increased responsiveness.

Perceived Impacts of the DSAC Initiative Overall

District and school leaders reported that the DSAC Initiative has enhanced ESE's responsiveness to district and school needs (Table 20). A majority of leaders surveyed from DSAC priority districts described the DSAC Initiative as contributing either "greatly" (28%) or "moderately" (38%) to ESE's responsiveness to their needs. In interviews conducted during both SY11 and SY12, educators described the DSAC as a point of contact that could help make connections with ESE and serve as an advocate for their needs when necessary. "If there's something that's not working or not workable," one interviewee explained, "you have a resource, be it [the RAD] or [the support facilitator], who you can have these conversations with." Further, some interviewees also described how their DSAC representatives point them to appropriate ESE offices, or even, at times, make requests for resources on their behalf—for example, access to funds or seats in ESE-provided professional development—which they said "opens doors" and makes ESE more approachable and less impersonal.

Table 20: District and School Leaders' Perceptions of the Overall Impacts of the DSAC Initiative, June 2012

Please indicate the extent to which the DSAC Initiative has contributed to each of the following...	Total # of Respondents	Proportion indicating...			
		Greatly	Moderately	Slightly	Not at all
Access to information about ESE services and policies	81	31%	38%	26%	5%
Access to ESE tools and resources	81	37%	41%	19%	4%
Use of ESE tools and resources	80	33%	44%	20%	4%
Responsiveness of ESE to district and school needs	72	28%	38%	25%	6%

Source: UMDI analysis of District and School Leader surveys. The ratings may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Percentages exclude respondents who selected a "too early to tell" or "not applicable" option.

To some extent, the DSAC's role in facilitating access to ESE was generally viewed as consistent with, and supportive of, an overall trend toward improved responsiveness of the organization more generally. Often, this general sense of increased responsiveness of ESE to the field was attributed to ESE's leadership and its focus on more effectively meeting district and school needs.

There has been a huge change in the Department, and they have a lot of new faces and new players, and moved people around recently. I've noticed that some of the calls that I've made recently, they've been very responsive to my needs...I think we're seeing a shift in structure.

Although interviewees continued to see a need for ongoing improvement in this regard, particularly as it relates to communication strategies and looking at districts and schools as individual units with unique needs, most felt that the Department had made substantial progress in recent years.

Evaluation findings also indicate that the Initiative has helped to enhance the dissemination and use of ESE's research-based tools and resources. In fact, over three-fourths (78%) of responding school and district leaders from priority districts felt that the DSAC Initiative contributed either “greatly” or “moderately” to field-level access to ESE tools, and a similar proportion described the Initiative as enhancing district and schools’ use of those resources. In interviews, many described how DSAC team members were able to suggest relevant tools and resources, such as the Learning Walkthrough resources, the Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments, and data and data analysis resources. Although many of these resources existed in some form prior to the Initiative, drawing on their relationships with districts and their understanding of local needs, it was noted that DSACs could help districts navigate available resources and select those that addressed their own needs and improvement efforts. Similarly, DSACs were able to help districts to develop their existing capacity to more effectively use these resources.

Finally, DSACs were described as enhancing access to information about ESE services, policies, and upcoming initiatives. In total, over two-thirds (69%) of responding school and district leaders indicated that the DSAC contributed either “greatly” or “moderately” to increased access to information from ESE. In interviews, school and district leaders described how regional DSAC staff, particularly their region’s assistance director, had become an important point-of-contact regarding ESE news and information. One interviewee describes:

[Our] connection with DSAC means getting a heads-up about upcoming changes. These are the things I can anticipate so I can begin to weave those into our overall improvement plan without throwing out the old and starting something brand new. I can ease into it a little...They keep us well informed about the upcoming changes and good resources to tap into.

As mentioned previously, the role of DSACs in improving access to timely information about upcoming changes and strategic initiatives of the Department was viewed as helping districts more effectively manage and integrate these changes into their own local improvement efforts, mitigating the potential for “initiative overload,” and increasing the coherence of their responses to these upcoming mandates.

Changes in ESE Operations, Capacity, and Practice as a Result of the DSAC Initiative

In interviews, ESE leaders and staff reflected on the Department’s increasing emphasis on the provision of responsive and coordinated assistance to struggling schools and districts, and described the DSACs as representative of and contributing to this strategic focus. One interviewee shared that the spirit of collaboration embodied by the DSAC had contributed to a change in culture at ESE, and created a growing sense that building relationships and trust with districts was of great importance for the work of the organization. The regional DSACs, it was noted, played an important role, both in the Department’s capacity to address district needs, and in bi-directional communication between ESE and educators.

Consistent with this view, DSACs were described as contributing to the Department’s growing ability to gather field-level perspectives as it develops and implements a complex new array of initiatives. Several interviewees saw the DSACs, and the Regional System of Support more broadly, as contributing substantially to the Department’s ability to anticipate, gather, and respond to district-level needs and challenges by sharing their field experience and reflecting back district and school concerns. This capacity was particularly valued by ESE

leadership, in light of the Department's increasing emphasis on collaboration with districts as it implements an ambitious set of reforms.

As an example, one interviewee had explained how the DSAC system had helped to "sound the alarm" regarding the growing sense of "initiative overload" on the part of districts and schools. As it was described, the DSACs were "instrumental" in helping the Department frame various initiatives, including the new educator evaluation system, implementation of new Common Core-aligned frameworks, and other initiatives, to show districts how they are connected, and how they support improvement.

Many cited the emergence of new venues by which DSACs could share field-level concerns with ESE and vice-versa as generally supportive of ESE's ability to gather and incorporate field-level perspectives.

Whereas in SY11, the venues by which DSACs provided feedback to ESE were primarily informal or ad hoc, in SY12, it was noted that a number of formal avenues existed by which DSACs could share their experiences and contribute to Department operations. One member of a DSAC team described the Department's emphasis on field-level perspectives, and the value that contributes to their work:

It's comforting to hear people who are primarily stationed in Malden ask questions and look for opinions and direction and be sensitive to it when we feel our capacity is stretched and the districts feel overwhelmed...it just helps us organize ourselves in ways that are more effective.

As an example of these new avenues of collaboration, it was noted that DSAC team members have been able to serve on ESE work groups involved in the conceptualization of new initiatives or refinement of existing initiatives. Although it was noted that it was important to minimize the amount of additional out-of-district work placed on the DSAC team members, those involved emphasized the value these efforts contributed to their work in the field.

These involvements of our team's members in the development of initiatives puts time constraints on their time, but adds incredible depth and richness to what we're doing.

Similarly, the emergence of quarterly meetings between regional assistance directors and DSAC partners—which included a number of ESE program offices and external organizations that have supported and provided professional development to DSAC staff—were also viewed as an important new avenue for bidirectional communication. As a result of these meetings, DSAC team members described being increasingly aware of major new initiatives, which translated to an increased ability to respond to district inquiries and make connections regarding their work and broader ESE priorities and initiatives.

V. Recommendations and Strategic Considerations

As the Initiative entered its second full year of implementation, program managers were interested in obtaining formative feedback from district leaders, school leaders, and educators, as well as their regional DSAC teams, in order to be able to continue to make refinements and improvements to the Initiative much as they had during its first year of implementation. For purposes of gathering formative feedback, the evaluation asked specifically what if any improvements were needed with regard to DSAC services, as well as what if any improvements were needed in terms of its management and infrastructure, such that its goals could be attained. Through the interview process—which ultimately engaged 18 priority districts and all 6 regional DSAC teams—educators and DSAC team members shared their perspectives in this regard. Common themes are presented in this section such that program managers can assess their relevance to their ongoing work and, if necessary, facilitate further discussion within the program office, DSAC teams, and initiative partners.

Recommendations Regarding Specific DSAC Services

In response to an interview prompt regarding suggested areas for improvement or concern, district leaders, school leaders, and educators shared their perspectives and/or offered suggestions for how the Initiative or its services could be improved. While these suggestions offer points for consideration, it is important to note that these suggestions/areas for concern were not pervasive in nature.

Whereas nearly all interviewees highlighted improvements in communication and planning regarding DSAC grants and professional development, several expressed a need for continued improvement in this regard. To some extent, this related to the complex nature of the planning process for regional courses, whereby the timeframes for offerings may not be established when educators are asked to sign up, or may change depending on whether a sufficient number of teachers sign up. This also created a challenge for teachers who did not know when they would be expected to participate.

Right now [our] money is tied up to be used in the summer, but it's May and I haven't been able to tell any of my teachers when this course will be run or where. If it does occur...a large piece of the grant is tied up in a course that I have no details on... and then information is released at the last minute. I just wish there was a way to streamline it.

Leaders also expressed a desire for increased flexibility in terms of course timeframes and locations, such that they could be run in ways that minimized principals' and teachers' time out of their school buildings:

The location still has to be flexible, but it is better this year. Before there was too much coming our way too fast... dates and times at the last minute...that has subsided and [it is] much more organized now. [The DSAC group] is growing and there are more people to get to know. They are running workshops out-of-district and that's always a tension...getting principals out of their buildings.

Reflecting the multiple levels at which DSACs may work (district and school), a few district leaders expressed a desire for better communication and coordination related to this multi-level engagement. For example, in two instances district leaders expressed a desire for more frequent communication regarding the ways in which DSAC team members were interacting within specific schools, particularly if this work dovetailed with broader district efforts.

In another instance, leaders noted that DSAC team members' communication with schools regarding DSAC grants and the availability of professional development created confusion in light of district decisions regarding how to use those seats. Although it was noted that, in part, communication challenges may reflect problems

within districts' own communication infrastructure, it may be worth considering whether and to what extent DSACs can build specific mechanisms for bidirectional communication, both to preempt district concerns of this nature, but also to help increase the alignment of their work with specific schools to broader district-level initiatives and vice-versa. It is notable that in DSAC team interviews, some DSAC teams expressed this as an emerging focus and specific emphasis of how they planned and structured their engagement with districts.

While many interviewees noted that DSAC tools were valuable resources, in two districts, leaders described challenges related to the implementation of a survey based on the Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessment. The CSE Self-Assessment is designed to be used at the school level by leaders, those responsible for day-to-day instruction, and key stakeholders to conduct a scan of current practice, identify areas of strength, and highlight areas requiring greater focus. In a number of instances, to include a larger number of stakeholders, this tool was used in a survey format. However, some interviewees raised a concern, that in its current form, the tool does not lend itself to use as a survey instrument. In at least one case, the involvement of parents and community members as part of the self-assessment process further complicated these efforts, as it was noted that the facets were not constructed in sufficiently common language to provide confidence that respondents understood what was being asked of them. The result was a concern regarding the validity, and thus, the usefulness of some of the survey results. Considering this, when using the CSE in a survey format, DSAC teams may want to consider adapting the tool so that its measures are easily understood by potential respondents.

Three districts indicated the need to further differentiate and tailor regional DSAC network meeting and workshop content to meet the needs of districts or schools with varying experiences. For example, one district leader noted the need to differentiate training on the Massachusetts Tiered System of Support based on prior district experiences with the Reading First Initiative, as follows:

We don't need Massachusetts Tiered System of Support 101, because we were involved in Reading First. We would need Massachusetts Tiered System of Support 102. ...It's knowing your audience, where they are in the process, knowing what came before and anticipating [what they may need]...[so if you have a] bunch of Reading First districts that have this background or foundation, then they may need help figuring out how to expand it.

In the current context of new initiatives and increasing demand on leaders' and educators' time, it was noted that the value derived from these meetings is directly related to the relevance to participants. As such, customizing meetings to align more directly with the needs and background experiences of target audiences, and the development of regional study groups on specific high-interest issues, may take on increasing importance over time.

Strategic Considerations for Management and Infrastructure

Below is a summary of findings derived primarily from interviews with DSAC team members who were asked to reflect on any changes in terms of the management, infrastructure, communication and collaboration with ESE and partner organizations in support of their work in the field. While DSAC teams generally described being well-supported in their efforts, they did mention some areas of concern or improvement. It should be noted that one of the concerns raised, that of staffing capacity to address districts' needs, was echoed by several district leaders, as described below.

As the work with districts and schools accelerated, several DSACs emphasized increasing workloads as placing a strain on staff capacity. "The needs of the districts outpace our available time," one interviewee noted, adding that this had increased the need to prioritize district requests, with particular implications for the level of support that could be provided to Legacy districts and even, in some cases, less challenged Level 3 districts. This was particularly identified as a concern with regard to the support facilitator role, the hours for which were reduced in SY12. Expansion of DSACs' capacity with regard to special education and support for

English language learners, possibly through the inclusion of embedded specialists in these areas on the teams, was also identified as a staffing need in light of the state's increasing focus on improving subgroup performance and closing achievement gaps.

Echoing this notion, several district leaders expressed concerns that their regional DSAC teams would not have sufficient capacity to meet the increasing demand. For some leaders, this reflected the notion that, as needs are identified, the nature of service needs may shift to more direct services in support of classroom-level change, which involves more intensive service delivery. In other cases, this involved what districts saw as increasing needs as they relate to new and large-scale ESE initiatives, in light of limited administrative capacity within their districts to plan, integrate, and support implementation of these efforts. One interviewee highlighted what he viewed as a need for expanding DSAC capacity to fully address the extent of district needs:

It's really important to have resources available to districts. ESE has grossly under-funded this effort...it has tremendous potential for helping districts in ways they have never done before.

Staffing challenges continued to present issues for some regions. As of March, it was reported that all DSACs were staffed with literacy specialists, and nearly all had mathematics specialists—two positions that had been particularly difficult to fill. Lacking specialists in these areas for extended periods, it was noted, limited some teams in their ability to provide content-area support, including with regard to planning for implementation of the Common Core. This was a particular challenge for one region, which spent much of the year without specialists for either mathematics or literacy. As a result, that region's mathematics network, viewed as an important way to help content leadership support curricular and instructional improvement, was discontinued for SY12.

The need to manage the “delicate balance” between regional customization and a common framework and approach remains an ongoing concern. As mentioned previously, individual DSACs employed a variety of approaches as they sought to engage districts and respond to their unique needs, challenges, and capacities. While most described this high degree of adaptation and customization as a necessary component of the system, several reflected on the challenges this posed.

That's the challenge with a statewide organization that's implemented regionally is you have to have some common framework or you're not going to be able to compare or gather data that is equitable for each region, because you can start from the same point and get so far afield, that you're a different entity.

As the system has matured, existing structures to promote cross-regional integration and sharing, namely job-alike and all-DSAC meetings, continued to be supported, and new structures for integrating the work, most notably work groups related to particular tools and strategies, emerged. This increased emphasis on sharing best practices across regions to build increasing commonality and coherence into the system is common among organizations as they move from development to maturity. That said, most interviewees viewed the innovative capacity of DSACs as crucial to being able to successfully meet the “subtle and complex” needs of districts as they relate to improvement, such that identifying the appropriate balance in a highly dynamic and complicated environment was likely to remain an ongoing priority for the system. Further, the balance may shift between ongoing aspects of the work, which may become more standardized over time, and new aspects of the work, where DSACs may need to be more innovative and serve as “research and development” units to establish effective modes of engagement in those areas.

Finally, while interviewees reflected a substantial and increasing level of engagement with districts and schools, the scope and nature of this activity is not fully reflected in internal reporting. ESE has identified a need to develop a sufficiently robust internal reporting infrastructure to enable external reporting of system activity and progress in order to build support for, sustain, and if necessary, expand the organization. Program managers launched initial templates for reporting district plans and progress, although given increasing demands on staff time in the field and the broad array of service offerings and multiple modes of engagement, the system

does not yet fully reflect the scope and extent of DSAC activity. Additionally, the use of this reporting system may warrant a more common understanding of the foundational services across regions as they relate to reporting, such that it accurately captures activity information and any regional variations in approach.

Similarly, given the broad domain in which DSACs operate and the subtle and slow nature of change, some interviewees reflected a need to further clarify the DSAC theory of action and articulate the anticipated changes associated with DSAC work, in order to enable regional teams to better assess and monitor their progress on an ongoing basis.

At some place, whether it's the [regional] team or the DSAC or the Department, [the Initiative] has to really solidify its theory of action about, if we do this, what can we expect.

Within this context, building a robust and responsive reporting infrastructure may warrant continued conversation within the DSACs. Reflecting on the desire of some interviewees for ways to assess their own progress for formative purposes, to the extent that the system could provide information that is meaningful to the teams as well as external audiences, this could likely be of particular value.

VI. Conclusion

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s District and School Center (DSAC) Initiative reflects a significant shift in the state’s system of support to schools and districts. Launched in late 2009, the Initiative reflects a complex, regionally-based effort to support improvement in high-need districts across the Commonwealth, with priority given in the SY12 school year to 47 districts designated as Level 3 and Level 4 under the state’s *Framework for District Accountability and Assistance*.

The evolution of this relatively new system reflects a range of developmental and operational priorities, which extend from building organizational infrastructure and capacity to serve districts, to outreach and accelerating engagement, to outcomes, as depicted in the figure below.

Figure 1: Key Developmental and Operational Priorities of the DSAC Initiative and Regional DSACs

Org. Development	Vision and Approach	Establishment of the vision and mission at the Initiative-level; identification of core service offerings, as reflected in the DSAC foundational services menu; and identification of priority status.
	Capacity-Building	Staffing the DSACs with experienced personnel; development of common tools and resources to support those personnel; and delivery of training and support in key strategies.
	Refinement of Approach	Establishment of team norms, modes of engagement, and specific emphases of outreach and assistance at the regional DSAC-level. Integration of these efforts at the Initiative-level.
DSAC Activity	Outreach and Engagement	Build awareness for the new regional centers and reach out to individual priority districts and schools, often as full teams, to build relationships, understand needs, and present service offerings.
	Initiating Service	Begin to provide services to address identified needs and district/school improvement priorities; typically by identifying "a match" between districts' perceived needs and DSAC offerings.
	Intensifying Service	Relationships and engagement intensify as DSACs develop a deeper understanding of district and school needs and can offer increasingly targeted services; Work becomes increasingly strategic.
District /School Outcomes	New Structures and Practices	Districts and schools develop new structures, such as data teams, and adopt new practices, such as learning walkthroughs or self-assessments, with support from the DSAC teams.
	New Improvement Capacities	New structures and practices, operating with DSAC support, result in new district and school new capacities. As these capacities develop and strengthen, DSAC involvement may begin to decrease.
	Instructional Improvement	With new systems and structures in place, districts and schools more effectively support instructional improvement in their own classrooms. DSAC involvement may further decrease.
	Improved Student Outcomes	Improved classroom practice results in improved student learning outcomes, although given the nature of engagement, these may be difficult, if not impossible, to attribute to the DSAC.

Source: UMass Donahue Institute Analysis of DSAC team interview data.

As would be expected for any system, evidence suggests progress in the system’s evolution, from the focus on organizational development tasks which built a foundation for the Initiative’s work in its launch year, to increasing levels of engagement with districts in SY11, to increasingly intensive work with districts in SY12. In fact, this year the number of intensively engaged districts doubled from the previous year, with 94% of DSAC priority districts engaged with their DSAC in one or more in-district services. This increasingly intensive engagement resulted from relationship-building efforts over time as well as DSAC teams’ characteristics and approaches to the work. Favorable impressions of the DSAC assistance also contributed to increasing levels of engagement, with DSAC services described as valuable to districts’ improvement efforts, highly relevant to local needs, and contributing to a high degree of satisfaction.

As the work intensified with districts, DSACs were described by district leaders as strategic thinking partners and external entities that could provide impetus for change. Additionally, DSACs were acknowledged as having

contributed to a variety of district- and school-level outcomes. These impacts included positive effects on: leadership and planning capacity; capacity to use data as part of a cycle of inquiry process (ranging from improvements in system-level data use to those more closely related to student and classroom-level activities); curricular changes (such as the alignment of local curricula to the new ELA and mathematics state frameworks); and instructional improvement. Positive changes in districts' staff culture were also noted.

Additionally, as the Commonwealth develops and implements a complex new array of educational reforms, the Initiative contributed to the overall effectiveness of ESE targeted assistance and support for districts. More specifically, evidence suggests that the Initiative contributed positively to the strategic use of ESE targeted grant funds, the enhanced dissemination and use of ESE's research-based tools and resources, and enhanced access to information about ESE services, policies and upcoming initiatives. The latter is of particular importance given the number and significance of ESE's educational reforms. In this context, DSACs contributed to ESE's growing ability to gather field-level perspectives as it seeks to develop and implement these new Initiatives in collaboration with districts, as well as—through the strong alignment of DSAC activity to ESE's overarching goals—progress toward ESE's priority areas.

Even as the system's emphasis shifts towards service delivery and outcomes, it should be noted that some organizational development priorities are likely to remain important aspects of the system. As the needs of priority districts change and/or new initiatives are introduced, new capacities will likely need to be built. Further, within a context in which "every aspect of education is being updated", DSACs acknowledged that they may need to play an important role in helping districts prioritize and make connections between and integrate what might otherwise be viewed as discrete mandates. As such, ongoing communication and building of DSAC team members' awareness of and knowledge related to new initiatives and programs is likely to remain important. In addition, ongoing refinement of DSAC approaches as the system moves from development to maturity, as well as the integration of regional efforts, are also likely to reflect ongoing organizational priorities and needs of the Department.