

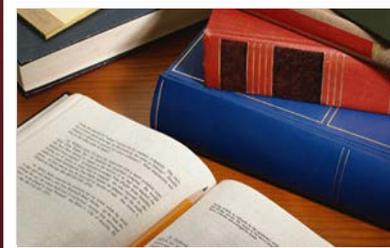


District and School Assistance Center (DSAC) Evaluation:  
**Final DSAC Evaluation Report: 2014**

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

September 2014



## Executive Summary

In fall 2009, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) launched six regional District and School Assistance Centers (DSACs) with the goal of helping high-need districts and schools improve instruction and raise achievement levels for all students. The DSAC Initiative significantly expanded the Department’s capacity to provide targeted assistance and improvement services to a broad range of struggling districts. This includes many small- and medium-sized districts that sometimes lack the infrastructure and human resources to deliver the complex array of supports necessary to further their educational improvement efforts.

DSACs give first priority for support to the state’s lowest performing districts (Level 3 and Level 4 districts under the state’s *Framework for District Accountability and Assistance*) with the exception of ten large urban districts identified as Commissioner’s Districts. In SY14, the six regional DSAC teams provided in-district support to 55 of 56 DSAC priority districts and helped 64 DSAC districts access grants. This includes 56 DSAC priority districts and eight “legacy” districts that exited Level 3 accountability status that same year. The key features of the DSAC Initiative, including its approach, philosophy, and core services, are shown below.

### Key Features of ESE’s District and School Assistance Center (DSAC) Initiative

DSAC Theory of Action:	Engage with districts to build district capacity to support lowest performing schools and develop systemic approaches to support using the cycle of inquiry process.
DSAC Approach:	A regionally-based approach (e.g., networks) complemented by customized in-district and in-school assistance. ESE’s Conditions for School Effectiveness and District Standards are the framework around which the work is organized. DSAC team members are expected to work collaboratively with districts and schools, serving as thought partners.
DSAC Services:	<p>DSACs developed and deliver a set of core services designed to support districts and schools in making systemic changes that help them more effectively make progress toward meeting ESE’s District Standards and Indicators and Conditions for School Effectiveness.</p> <p>These services, which are referred to as <u>DSAC Foundational Services</u>, include support in the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Planning and implementation strategies</li><li>• Enhancing capacity to implement and sustain effective practices</li><li>• Professional learning networks and professional development</li><li>• Funding and resource allocation</li></ul>
DSAC Staffing:	Each regional team is staffed by a team comprising a recently retired superintendent, recently retired principal(s), mathematics and literacy specialists, data specialists and professional development coordinators. ESE intentionally sought out highly qualified practitioners with significant district and school experience, whom district and school leaders in priority districts would find to be credible partners in the complex work of district and school improvement.

The University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute (UMDI) has served as the external evaluator of the DSAC Initiative since its inception. Evaluation work has focused on the Initiative's implementation and early outcomes, taking stock of its accomplishments and its evolution over a five-year span. Overall, findings are highly positive and suggest that the DSAC Initiative is of unique value to the field, contributing to a range of positive outcomes in district and school structures and practices.

## Key Implementation Findings

By design, the DSAC Initiative created a paradigm shift for ESE altering the balance from what had been largely a compliance monitoring organization to a more flexible and responsive assistance organization providing customized support to districts. In this new era of accountability, monitoring functions targeting a select number of high-need districts needed to be complemented by a system that provided assistance to a far greater number of districts that were struggling to make improvements in school performance. From this necessity, the DSAC system was born.

Analysis of survey data, interview data, and DSAC records indicate that the development and implementation of this bold new initiative was a positive change for schools and districts.

- ❖ Trust and relationship-building were critical platforms for the work. Building relationships with priority districts and introducing them to the four core areas of support available from their DSAC teams comprised a large proportion of initial system activity. This relationship-building laid the foundation for DSAC-supported improvement work. The importance of building and maintaining a positive relationship was recognized as an important ongoing effort requiring flexibility, commitment, and the capacity to identify creative, effective solutions to complicated problems. ESE's staffing decisions and the DSAC teams' approach to the work were instrumental in nurturing these strong, positive relationships.
- ❖ Engagement levels with the DSAC rose steadily over time. In fact, by SY13 the number of engaged districts almost tripled from SY11. In SY14, nearly all priority districts were engaged with their DSAC, with 55 of the 56 priority districts (98%) receiving direct in-district support. Furthermore, of those districts, it is estimated that 52 or 93 percent were engaged in ongoing sustained participation around a portfolio of integrated services. This dramatic shift is notable given that districts are not required to work with their DSAC teams.
- ❖ In addition to direct in-district support focused on self-assessment, planning, and implementing effective practices, districts also continued to access other forms of DSAC assistance in SY14. This includes ESE targeted assistance and improvement grants, ESE-sponsored courses, and regional networks.
  - ✓ DSACs helped 64 districts access ESE targeted assistance and improvement grant funds totaling almost \$1.9 million.
  - ✓ Fifty-four priority districts purchased nearly 1,500 seats in ESE-sponsored courses addressing a range of topics, including special education and inclusive practices, literacy, and mathematics.
  - ✓ Regional networks helped DSACs to engage a larger number of districts and educators than would be feasible through in-district assistance activities alone.

Over time, the Initiative demonstrated high levels of adaptability and responsiveness to the needs of the field and to the Commonwealth's changing education landscape. As such, modifications were made and more specialized services were offered in direct response to district needs and emergent ESE priorities. Analysis of district and school leader perspectives led to the following findings:

- ❖ DSAC assistance is relevant to district or school improvement priorities. The percentage of surveyed leaders reporting that DSAC assistance was *extremely relevant* increased from about half in SY13 to two-thirds in SY14.
- ❖ Leaders value the DSAC’s comprehensive service model, that is, the combined package of DSAC services offered.
- ❖ DSACs offer an added value that may be unique. District and school leaders cited a number of factors that contribute to this value, including: the DSAC teams’ professional and field-level experience, the ongoing and job-embedded nature of DSAC support, its differentiated model of assistance, and the DSAC’s place within ESE.
- ❖ DSACs played a critical role in helping district and school leaders manage and integrate a complex set of new initiatives as part of their own local improvement efforts. In many cases, the DSAC’s ability to support and promote integration of initiatives extended from their role as a strategic thinking partner, something that was strengthened over time as they built trust and established relationships.
- ❖ DSACs also played a critical role in connecting ESE initiatives to districts’ own improvement priorities, while building district and school capacity to use ESE resources in support of district and school improvement. By virtue of its place within ESE, the DSAC Initiative has adapted its services in ways that deepened districts’ understanding of new ESE Initiatives and helped them integrate these with their own district and school work.

## Key Impact Findings

Evidence indicates that DSAC assistance is not only valuable, but that it is having a real impact on priority districts and their schools. All of the leaders who were interviewed and/or surveyed were able to cite impacts of DSAC-supported work. Some of these impacts include:

- ❖ DSAC assistance has helped districts and schools accelerate their improvement efforts, implement processes and structures more consistently and effectively, and develop better quality products. Leaders reported that DSAC teams helped districts identify action steps, use relevant resources, implement professional development, put into effect processes deemed necessary for changes in culture and practice, evaluate progress toward goals, and maintain a focus on improvement priorities.
- ❖ DSAC helped promote consistency and continuity of initiatives within and/or across schools in their districts. For example, DSAC contributed to implementation consistency by supporting the use of DSAC processes, such as Learning Walkthroughs and PLCs, to encourage sharing of practices and resources, as well as by supporting teams focused on curriculum and instruction.
- ❖ Working with the DSAC helped to build capacity for leadership and planning, effective data use, curriculum and instruction, and a professional culture. More specifically, leaders reported that DSAC assistance contributed to each of the following:
  - ✓ The capacity of districts and schools to lead and manage change. This is encouraging given that building leaders’ capacity to support school improvement efforts is central to the DSAC theory of action. Approximately two-thirds reported at least moderate impact on their capacity to identify instructional strengths and improvement priorities, engage in a continuous cycle of improvement, and monitor progress toward improvement.

- ✓ Growth in principals' capacity as instructional leaders and a shift toward distributed models of leadership within schools.
  - ✓ Use of data in districts and schools, including: developing a culture of inquiry to inform decisions, identifying improvement priorities, identifying professional development needs, understanding instructional and assessment practices, and monitoring student progress.
  - ✓ Alignment of mathematics and ELA curricula with ESE's curriculum frameworks, which were implemented in 2011.
  - ✓ The quality of instruction, the use of effective instructional approaches, and teachers' content area knowledge.
  - ✓ Improvements in the professional culture of districts and schools, including positive changes in collaboration and communication.
- ❖ DSACs helped put districts and schools on what they perceive as a better path, but given the current stage of their improvement work, it is generally too soon to observe an impact on student outcomes. That said, some leaders were able to describe specific student-level changes occurring in their school or district that could be related to DSAC supported work. Reported impacts include increased student engagement, clearer student expectations for their own learning, and improved MCAS scores.

## Looking Toward the Future

Given the demands on the Commonwealth's public school systems, there were many calls for the DSACs to continue or even to expand their work in supporting schools and districts. It is also clear from the feedback of district and school leaders that maintaining the full menu of DSAC services, as well as the highly customized delivery model will continue to be important moving forward. School- and district-level improvement is multifaceted, complicated and involves multi-year work, as such continuity of DSAC services and supports is likely required to enable long-term success. This is also true given that the sustainability of DSAC-supported school and district improvement efforts is fragile. Program managers may need to consider the following:

- ❖ Continue to provide assistance at the Initiative's current level or even expand capacity, while maintaining the breadth of the portfolio of core services.
- ❖ Remain flexible and continue to align DSAC support with local needs.
- ❖ Continue to offer a holistic approach to supporting district and school improvement. That is, the value of DSAC services rests in the "comprehensive approach to improving the district" and that "what brings strength to the model is the fact that they are involved in all of it."
- ❖ Expansion of the DSAC role to encompass additional areas of work, without additional resources could exacerbate capacity issues and potentially compromise the DSAC's ability to do core work.
- ❖ Consider the potential for mission conflict. While being informed about and coordinating with ESE around initiatives and mandates was viewed as important, when those initiatives are perceived to focus on evaluation or accountability, this has the potential to blur the line between the regulatory functions of ESE and the adaptive/assistive functions of the DSACs. While ESE may have recognized this tension, as the DSAC organization continues to operate and adapt, this is likely to be a continued area warranting attention on the part of management.

- ❖ Continue to recognize and, to the extent possible, address threats to sustainability of DSAC-supported improvement efforts. These include, but are not limited to, lack of time, lack of funding for professional development, and district- and school-level turnover.
- ❖ Identify, build and/or leverage the factors that promote sustainability. These factors include district or school ability to prioritize improvement work, direct involvement of district staff and teacher in the improvement work, and sustaining the improvement structures and processes that have been put in place.

In this context of change—in terms of ESE’s new initiatives, evolving district priorities, and changes within DSAC such as the recent emphasis on increasingly specialized services and tools—the DSAC Initiative has moved in what appears to be a deliberate and responsive manner to building new capacity and to coordinate its work on a broader scale (e.g., with other ESE units, technical assistance providers). The work and approach of the DSAC system will continue to evolve as will the priorities and resources of ESE, districts, and schools. Accordingly, ongoing communication among statewide and regional DSAC leaders, other ESE stakeholders, DSAC partners, and the leaders of priority districts and their schools will remain essential to ensure the Initiative remains relevant and effective in the future.

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## Introduction

In fall 2009, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) officially launched six regional District and School Assistance Centers (DSACs) with the goal of helping high-need districts and schools improve instruction and raise achievement levels for all students. The DSAC Initiative significantly expanded the Department's capacity to provide targeted assistance and improvement services through a regional delivery system. The Initiative serves a broad range of struggling districts, including many small- and medium-sized districts that sometimes lack the infrastructure and human resources to deliver the complex array of supports necessary to further their educational improvement efforts. Previously, coordinated targeted assistance was largely limited to large urban districts—most notably the 10 high-need districts identified as Commissioner's Districts<sup>1</sup>—through ESE's Office of District and School Turnaround (ODST). DSAC extended this infrastructure to provide increasing levels of service to additional districts and schools. The Commissioner's Districts continue to be served primarily through ODST.

The DSAC Initiative is overseen by the Regional Statewide System of Support (RSS) Office. DSAC teams are led by part-time regional assistance directors (retired superintendents) working with support facilitators (former principals), data specialists, and content specialists in mathematics and literacy. Support facilitators specializing in career vocational/technical education, hired in fall 2013, support regional teams in this area. DSAC teams are intended to collaborate with districts to assess their strengths and needs, facilitate access to resources and professional development, establish partnerships and networks, and deliver individualized assistance to districts in order to build regional capacity. These efforts are guided by ESE's Conditions for School Effectiveness (CSE) and District Standards and Indicators, which articulate what schools and districts need to have in place in order to educate their students well.<sup>2</sup>

### District Eligibility and Engagement

The Massachusetts Framework for District Accountability and Assistance classifies schools and districts on a five-level scale, with the highest performers assigned to Level 1 and the lowest assigned to Level 5. Districts are generally classified into the level of their lowest-performing school. Schools are classified into Level 3 if their cumulative Progress and Performance Index is among the lowest 20 percent relative to other schools in their grade span statewide, serve the lowest performing subgroups statewide, have low MCAS participation rates, or have persistently low high school graduation rates. Schools displaying particularly low achievement or weak improvement are candidates for classification into Levels 4 and 5, the most serious designations in the state accountability system.<sup>3</sup>

DSACs give first priority for support to Level 3 districts and Level 4 districts that are not identified as Commissioner's Districts, referred to throughout this report as DSAC *priority* districts.<sup>4</sup> There were a total of 56 priority districts in SY14. A large majority (82%) but not all were classified as priority districts in previous years as well. Resources permitting, DSACs may also extend support to districts designated as Level 1 or 2.

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<sup>1</sup> The 10 Commissioner's Districts are Boston, Brockton, Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn, New Bedford, Springfield, and Worcester.

<sup>2</sup> The CSE and District Standards and Indicators were voted into regulation by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Description adapted from the Framework for District Accountability and Assistance (August 2012). Level designations are based on data from the prior school year. For more detail see <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/framework/framework.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> In SY14 those Level 4 districts were Athol-Royalston, Randolph, and Salem.

Most typically the non-priority districts receiving services are Level 2 districts that were classified as Level 3 in the prior year, referred to by DSAC teams as *legacy* districts. This transition year provides legacy districts with ongoing support at a reduced level as they make plans to sustain and deepen the implementation of their improvement efforts without DSAC support. According to records provided by ESE and regional DSAC teams, all eight legacy districts received DSAC services and grant funding in SY14, and three additional non-priority districts received DSAC support.

## Evaluation Questions and Methods

The University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute (UMDI) has served as external evaluator of the DSAC Initiative since its inception. In the first two years (FY11 and FY12) the evaluation focused on documenting progress related to organizational development and initiation of service delivery in priority districts. In FY13 and FY14, the scope was expanded to gauge the level of service utilization; the perceived quality and value of those services; and ultimately educators' view of the impact on the culture, capacity, and practice of their organizations. The evaluation also seeks to capture information on the extent to which the DSAC Initiative supports the integration of significant statewide reforms into local efforts to improve curriculum and instruction.

UMDI worked collaboratively with ESE staff to design and implement the evaluation, which employs a mixed-methods approach (combining data from interviews, surveys, and available program documentation) to answer the following questions:

1. What specific services are provided to districts and schools in support of local improvement efforts?
2. To what extent do DSAC clients perceive the services provided to be of high quality, useful, and relevant to their educational improvement efforts?
3. To what extent is there evidence of changing practice in DSAC-engaged districts reflecting the Initiative's key objectives and other identified goals?
4. In what ways have DSAC-engaged districts enhanced their capacity to accelerate and sustain improvement efforts?

In November—December 2013, UMDI conducted a series of phone interviews with district and school leaders to learn about the evolution of DSAC-supported work, to obtain information about the impacts of the Initiative, and to explore issues of sustainability at these sites. Districts selected for interviews were identified in collaboration with ESE and the regional DSACs. Eligible districts included those working with their DSAC for a minimum of two years that were in priority status (i.e., Level 3 or Level 4 in 2013–14) or that had exited priority status in 2012–13 or earlier. District leaders and principals from 13 districts representing all six DSAC regions were involved in the interview process. Eleven of these districts were in priority status at the time of the interviews, while two had exited that status. In total, 35 leaders were interviewed, comprised of 21 district administrators (including 9 superintendents) and 14 school principals.

Web-based surveys were administered to district and school leaders in February—March 2014. Survey content—initially developed in 2012 and refined over time to reflect year-to-year changes—was developed and revised in collaboration with ESE's Office of Regional Systems of Support. The *District Leader Survey* and the *School Leader Survey* were designed to capture information relative to the impressions of 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 identified by DSACs as key contacts for their work. Similarly, the *School Leader Survey* targeted principals and assistant principals identified by DSACs as key informants regarding their work in schools. The overall response rate for district leaders was 69 percent, capturing the perspectives of 103 district leaders from 59 districts. With regard

to the *School Leader Survey*, 102 school leaders responded from a total of 90 schools, reflecting a response rate of 68 percent.<sup>5</sup>

In March—April 2014, UMDI conducted individual phone interviews with the six Regional Assistance Directors (RADs) and one group interview via phone with three members of the RSS office. These conversations focused on the evolution of the Initiative since its inception; new areas of DSAC work; and key successes, challenges, and lessons learned with regard to the management and implementation of the Initiative. RAD interviews also focused on perceptions of impact of DSAC assistance in their respective regions and the sustainability of DSAC-supported district and school improvement efforts.

Finally, UMDI reviewed available DSAC program documentation, including but not limited to district activity reports, meeting agendas and notes, grant allocation information, and professional development data.

## Report Organization

The report is organized into four sections, covering the following topics:

- *Implementation of the DSAC Initiative [Research Question 1 and Research Question 2]* which describes the key features and evolution of the Initiative. This section also summarizes DSAC foundational services, the level of service utilization among priority districts, and overall perceptions of relevance, quality and usefulness of those offerings. A description of how the DSAC Initiative supported the implementation of ESE priorities and its contribution to the integration of new ESE reforms into local improvement efforts is also offered.
- *Impact on Participating Districts and Schools [Research Questions 3 and 4]* which describes perceived impacts of the DSAC Initiative overall and in the following areas: leadership and planning, effective data use, curriculum and instruction, and professional staff culture.
- *Conclusion and Summary* which offers findings concerning the demand for ongoing access to DSAC assistance and the sustainability of DSAC-supported improvement efforts, as described by district and school leaders. This is followed by a set of recommendations, and concludes with a brief summary of key accomplishments of the DSAC Initiative.
- *Appendix A: DSAC Foundational Services*, which complements the implementation section of this report and provides more detailed information about DSAC activity and perceptions of value within each foundational service area.

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<sup>5</sup> UMDI provided ESE with technical reports for the *District Leader Survey* and the *School Leader Survey*. These reports contained statewide response frequencies and anonymized open-response comments for each survey item. Individual reports for each region were also provided.

## Implementation of the DSAC Initiative

One of the goals of the evaluation was to document system activity as a means to better understand the focus of DSAC engagement with districts and schools, and how it may have changed over time. By design, the DSAC assistance model involves the provision of a range of customized targeted assistance, through four core foundational service areas, in support of districts' local improvement efforts. This section describes the key features of the DSAC Initiative, with some information regarding its evolution. It also offers overarching findings regarding system activity within each of the four foundational service areas and perspectives regarding the value of DSAC assistance. It concludes with a brief discussion on the extent to which DSAC services align with and support ESE's statewide improvement priorities.

### Key Features of the DSAC Initiative

***The DSAC Initiative reflects a paradigm shift for ESE, from a compliance monitoring organization to a more flexible and responsive assistance organization that provides customized support to districts.***

In this new era of accountability, ESE leaders were faced with a great challenge. Systems initially designed to monitor district and school improvement in a select number of high-need districts needed to be complemented by a system that provided assistance to a far greater number of districts—many of which were outside the state's large cities—that were also struggling to effect improvements in school performance. From this necessity, the DSAC system was born.

In collaboration with partner organizations, DSACs were designed to emphasize the development of district and school capacity to accelerate and sustain improvement, and leverage the knowledge and skill of local educators to address shared needs within a changing education landscape. The key features of the DSAC Initiative, including its philosophy and approach to working with districts and schools, are shown in Table 1. This system represents a paradigm shift for ESE from an organization that focuses largely on compliance and monitoring to one that increasingly emphasizes assistance and capacity building.

In this new paradigm, **the DSAC Initiative demonstrated great adaptability to shifts in the broader education system and the needs of the districts it serves.** Shortly after the DSACs were launched, the influx of federal resources through the Race to the Top and the Longitudinal Data Systems initiatives allowed ESE to introduce and/or increase the pace of reforms to the statewide education system. These reforms include the implementation of the newly adopted curriculum frameworks, a new Educator Evaluation system, and the development and implementation of new tools and resources supporting teaching and learning (i.e., the Edwin system). Through the DSAC's adaptive capacity, responsiveness to the field, and focus on the instructional core, the Initiative has evolved and has continued to provide customized support to districts in addressing improvement priorities. It is worth noting that this focus on the instructional core was driven by the DSAC foundational services, which align with ESE's priority areas and initiatives.

**Table 1: Key Features of ESE's District and School Assistance Center (DSAC) Initiative**

DSAC Theory of Action:	Engage with districts to build district capacity to support lowest performing schools and develop systemic approaches to support using the cycle of inquiry process.
DSAC Approach:	A regionally-based approach (e.g., networks) complemented by customized in-district and in-school assistance. ESE's Conditions for School Effectiveness and District Standards are the framework around which the work is organized. DSAC team members are expected to work collaboratively with districts and schools, serving as thought partners.
DSAC Services:	<p>DSACs developed and deliver a set of core services designed to support districts and schools in making systemic changes that help them more effectively make progress toward meeting ESE's District Standards and Indicators and Conditions for School Effectiveness.</p> <p>These services, which are referred to as <u>DSAC Foundational Services</u>, include support in the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning and implementation strategies</li> <li>• Enhancing capacity to implement and sustain effective practices</li> <li>• Professional learning networks and professional development</li> <li>• Funding and resource allocation</li> </ul>
DSAC Staffing:	Each regional team is staffed by a team comprising a recently retired superintendent, recently retired principal(s), mathematics and literacy specialists, data specialists and professional development coordinators. ESE intentionally sought out highly qualified practitioners with significant district and school experience, whom district and school leaders in priority districts would find to be credible partners in the complex work of district and school improvement.

## Fostering Collaboration

***The DSAC Initiative became a bi-directional channel through which field-level concerns and needs could be regularly communicated to ESE staff and, conversely, ESE could more effectively communicate and support the field.***

The sharing of information enhanced ESE's ability to hear and respond to field-level perspectives and informed refinement of the work. This is facilitated by a complex set of formal communication structures the DSAC Initiative has in place, which supports knowledge development and information sharing across a wide spectrum of stakeholders.

Since the Initiative's inception, the RSS Office incorporated opportunities for reflection on multiple levels, including several all-DSAC staff meetings per year, regularly scheduled job-alike meetings, and RAD monthly meetings. In 2012 and 2013, a number of avenues were added through which DSACs could share their experiences. For instance, external partners (e.g., SchoolWorks and Public Consulting Group) and ESE program offices were invited to attend RAD meetings every other month to enhance coordination across the DSAC regions. Additionally, annual RAD retreats were organized. Each of these provides a context within which team

members share ideas; discuss approaches; revisit and calibrate the DSAC foundational services; make decisions about new approaches, resources, and tools; and develop plans for piloting, implementing, and assessing them.<sup>6</sup>

The RSS Office staff members work and/or act as liaisons to other ESE offices (e.g., Research and Evaluation, Career/Vocational Technical Education, Educator Evaluation) to stay connected and learn about initiatives relevant to DSAC priority districts and DSAC teams. In addition, each DSAC team has regular team meetings and meetings with their priority districts several times a year.

In all of these ways, the DSACs contributed substantially to the Department's ability to anticipate, gather, and respond to district-level needs and challenges by sharing the DSACs' field experience and relaying district and school concerns.

## Evolution of the DSAC Initiative

**Displaying a key habit of a learning organization, the DSAC Initiative made modifications in direct response to feedback from the field.** For instance, in the initiative's early stages, DSAC grants primarily targeted districts with priority status established through a Level 3 or Level 4 designation. Beginning in SY12 however, districts in their first year out of priority status, called legacy districts, received a portion of their prior year's grant allocation. This change responded directly to concerns expressed by some district leaders that fluctuating access to DSAC resources and services as a result of annually changing level determinations was not conducive to supporting improvement over the long term. As such, ESE altered its funding approach in order to support districts' continuing improvement efforts so that positive changes and performance trends were more likely to be sustained.

**Over time, more specialized services were planned and offered in response to district needs and emergent ESE priorities.** In some instances, services were expanded because **DSAC teams had identified gaps between the services that they were able to provide and district needs.** Teams either sought additional resources and/or funding from ESE offices to support the work or they provided additional focus to a specific high-interest area. Examples of these expanded services include support for underperforming vocational and technical schools, the expansion of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and assistance in implementing Edwin Teaching and Learning. Regional networks were also expanded to focus on targeted areas, such as coaching, high school leadership, middle school mathematics, and World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) standards for English language learners. Lastly, the Initiative extended beyond its initial emphasis on data use, mathematics, and English language arts. As needed, teams were able to engage specialists in ELL and special education from ESE's staff to support their work in districts.

In other cases, **DSAC teams piloted new services by adopting or adapting promising strategies, tools, and processes observed in the field or learned about through other ESE offices.** In SY12, one DSAC region began piloting an adapted version of the Level 4 Accelerated Improvement Planning (AIP) process—a requirement for some Level 4 districts—with an interested Level 3 district. In SY14, 14 districts from three DSAC regions were developing and implementing AIPs with support from their DSAC teams. Similarly, three RADs saw the potential of the Level 4 School Monitoring Site Visit protocol to help some Level 3 schools where growth had remained stagnant over time. Three DSAC districts, in SY14, voluntarily engaged in the monitoring process in order to identify areas for improvement and potential next steps in those schools.

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<sup>6</sup> DSAC teams and partners would regularly reflect upon formal and informal feedback from multiple stakeholders. This feedback was gathered informally, as well as through evaluation survey data and event satisfaction questionnaires.

## The Key Role of Relationship-Building

***Trust and relationship-building were critical for DSAC work to take hold in districts. The importance of trust endures as DSACs continue to support districts and help them sustain their efforts.***

Prior to the launch of the DSAC Initiative, most districts identified as priority districts were accustomed to interacting with ESE primarily around compliance issues. As such, it is not surprising that during the DSAC's launch year (SY10) and first full year of operations (SY11), building relationships with priority districts comprised a large proportion of DSAC teams' activities. Subsequent years were characterized by increased levels of engagement and more intensive service delivery as those relationships began to flourish, which RADs attribute to the development of trust between their DSAC team members and district and school staff.

RADs related that **the importance of building and maintaining a positive, trustworthy relationship with school and district leaders was key to the successful implementation of the DSAC initiative.** Trust was established by adopting an approach that emphasized helpfulness ("let's work together to figure out what supports you need from us") rather than prescriptiveness ("let us tell you what you need to do"). Sensitivity to a district's specific needs and persistence (quality work in this context takes place over a number of years) were also emphasized. While this relationship-building set the foundation for DSAC-supported improvement work, building a positive relationship does not happen on a predictable schedule. It is an ongoing effort requiring flexibility, commitment, and even an entrepreneurial spirit, and the capacity to identify creative, effective solutions to complicated problems. One RAD noted that complete trust is ultimately gained when positive changes resulting from DSAC-supported work can be observed by educators.

**ESE's staffing decisions were instrumental in nurturing these strong, positive relationships.** ESE intentionally hired individuals who already had extensive experience in the field—previous superintendents and other administrators, for example—and often also had experience within their respective regions. This positioned the DSACs well for a high level of credibility from the start.

Some leaders described working with the DSAC as "easy" from the start—citing a number of reasons for this including, but not limited to, prior relationships with RADs and openness to and desire for assistance. However, others noted that engaging with the DSAC occurred more slowly because they needed time to build relationships and establish trust. In reflecting on the Initiative's launch, one district leader remarked on this change in the relationship with the DSAC over time. This leader also noted that more targeted and clearer communication from ESE about the DSAC role and expectations for district engagement might have helped to reduce initial confusion and resistance.

*It was difficult at first and it got easier over time because we got to know each other. I think when it was a new structure, we as a district reacted the same way most people do to change, which is, "What is this? Why are you here?" ... When we got to know them and understand their mission and realize why they were here and how they were going to help give us a more cohesive view across all of our grants and across all of the work that we do, we embraced that.*

**District uncertainty about whether ESE was committed to providing DSAC support over the long-term was another factor that affected the early development of relationships between districts and DSAC teams.** Interviewees underscored that school improvement is a long-term process spanning multiple years, and noted that the assistance was tied to a district's designation as Level 3 or Level 4. As such, commitments from the DSAC and grants to support professional development and/or DSAC assistance services were provided on a year-to-year basis. This caused some to question whether services received from the DSAC would be sustained over the long-term, and factored into leaders' decisions about whether and to what extent to engage with their

DSAC. While district engagement with the DSAC has increased steadily over time, perceived stability and longevity of the DSAC Initiative remains an important consideration to both the relationships that have been built as well as district and school improvement.

## District Engagement and Use of DSAC Foundational Services

***Nearly all priority districts are engaged with their DSAC, reflecting a dramatic change over time. Districts also increasingly engage with multiple types of services.***

Engagement levels with the DSAC rose steadily over time, and by SY13 and SY14, a very large proportion of districts were intensively engaged with their DSAC. District engagement with regard to the Initiative's four foundational service areas in SY14 is described in the following pages. Reflecting the growth in relationships between the DSAC teams and their DSAC priority districts, a vast majority of surveyed district and schools leaders reported that they felt that their DSAC was committed to providing the highest quality assistance (96%) and was an important thinking partner (88%).

DSAC team members work collaboratively with districts and schools to identify tailored assistance, with activities drawn from four foundational service areas:

1. Planning and Implementation Strategies (*supporting self-assessment, improvement planning, and systems for plan implementation and monitoring*)
2. Enhancing Capacity to Implement and Sustain Effective Practices (*targeted assistance through training, modeling and facilitating the implementation of effective practices*)
3. Professional Learning Networks (*enhancing regional opportunities to learn about and share effective practices to improve student achievement*)
4. Funding and Resource Allocation (*targeted assistance and improvement grants*)

**Leaders value the DSAC's comprehensive service model, that is, the combined "package" of DSAC services offered.** In the Initiative's early stages DSAC teams began engaging districts around one or two discrete services that served as the point of entry for their collaborative work. While the Initiative was initially conceived as delivering such discrete services, the service model quickly shifted to one that emphasized services that were combined and integrated. The field responded favorably to this shift.

When asked to identify which of the DSAC services were most useful to their improvement efforts, many interviewees cited two or more service areas. A few stated explicitly that identifying any one specific area as most useful was not an easy task given the complexity of improvement work. (More detailed information about these foundational services and perceptions of their value can be found in *Appendix A: DSAC Foundational Services*.) In the following pages, findings are presented regarding system activity within each of the four foundational service areas. Although findings about district engagement are presented discretely, it is important to bear in mind that districts, for the most part, access support in many of these areas simultaneously.

## 1. Planning and Implementation Strategies

The DSAC Initiative has placed increasing emphasis on leadership and planning at both the district and school levels. DSAC staff support districts to plan, implement, and track progress on a small set of focused, high leverage strategies intended to have direct impact on student learning. DSAC staff also support the implementation and use of district and school self-assessments.

**Almost all DSAC priority districts (55 of 56) received in-district support from their DSAC in SY14** (Table 2). More specifically, **DSACs provided support related to *planning and implementation strategies* in 53 (or 95 percent) of the 56 priority districts**, an increase from last year in which 48 (or 80 percent) of the priority districts received this assistance. These services focus on district planning and prioritization, and school self-assessments. The level of engagement in this area is not surprising. According to ESE, work typically begins with initial planning and self-assessment in year one, followed by assistance with the implementation of effective practices in subsequent years. At times, DSAC work with school and district leaders cycles back to the self-assessment or planning phases as part of the monitoring and reflection process.

**Table 2: Focus of DSAC Services, Estimated Number of Districts (SY14)**

Foundational Services Provided In-District	Priority Districts	
	#	%
<b>Planning and Implementation Strategies</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>95%</b>
Focused planning for high-leverage strategies (including prioritization)	43	77%
School Self-Assessments	42	75%
District Self-Assessment	11	20%
<b>Enhancing Capacity to Implement and Sustain Effective Practices</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>98%</b>
Effective data use systems and practices using ESE data sources	48	86%
Implementation of professional development & monitoring impact	45	80%
Applying ESE data	44	79%
Coaching leaders to establish conditions/systems for turnaround strategies	42	75%
Developing effective standards-based curricula	41	73%
Learning Walkthroughs	33	59%
Planning for / implementing major systems change initiatives	31	55%
Professional Learning Communities	23	41%
Massachusetts Tiered System of Support	20	36%
<b>Total Number of Districts Receiving In-District Support</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>98%</b>

Source: Analysis of DSAC spreadsheets submitted to UMDI by each of the DSAC regions. Regions may be using some terminology differently. As such, figures derived from this reporting, particularly those regarding a specific foundational service, should be viewed as estimates.

## 2. Enhancing Capacity to Implement and Sustain Effective Practices

DSAC staff partner with district and school leaders to enhance capacity and support the implementation of research-based practices designed to address targeted strategies in improvement plans. These practices (e.g., the effective use of data, implementation of professional development, coaching leaders to establish systems for turnaround strategies) are aligned with the Conditions for School Effectiveness and the District Standards and Indicators.

The DSACs offer a suite of services intended to support targeted strategies in improvement plans—**there was also a notable increase in the number of districts engaged with the DSAC, from 30 districts in SY13 to 55 districts in SY14** (Table 2). **This represents 98 percent of all DSAC priority districts.** This reinforces prior evaluation findings which indicated that over time, following the development of trust and a reduction of uncertainty regarding the Initiative's staying power, an increasing number of districts began working with their

regional DSAC.

The most commonly provided support within this service area was related to the implementation of effective data use systems and data practices. The number of priority districts accessing those supports more than doubled from 22 in SY12 to 48 in SY14. As noted in prior reports, this may be attributable, at least in part, to the increasing integration of data specialists into the various areas of DSAC work, a trend that began to emerge in SY12 and persisted thereafter. It is also important to recognize the priority that ESE has placed on effective data use as evidenced by initiatives such as Edwin Analytics as well as the Progress and Performance Index. While many districts have some internal capacity to support work in content areas such as ELA and mathematics, **relatively few districts have staff with expertise in such high-level data analysis. Thus many districts turned to DSAC data specialists to help them build capacity in that area.**

While services are presented separately in Table 2, it is worth repeating that districts typically access a package of services targeted toward their improvement priorities. According to DSAC-provided records, **the estimated number of districts engaged in ongoing sustained participation around a portfolio of integrated services increased from 14 in SY11 to 52 in SY14.<sup>7</sup> This represents 93 percent of all priority districts.** DSAC team members credit this positive development to the strong relationships they have established with priority districts through outreach efforts that were a substantial focus of activity in the Initiative's first two years.

DSAC core service areas also include support through professional learning networks (including access to professional development and networks/communities for educators) as well as funding and resource allocation. Key findings with regard to each of these areas are described below.

### 3. Professional Learning Networks

This category of foundational services encompasses a wide array of professional learning opportunities, including professional development, networks designed to support capacity building in districts, and professional learning communities (PLCs).

**Professional Development.** The Initiative offers access to a menu of high-quality courses, sponsored or approved by ESE, in leadership, mathematics, literacy, sheltered content, data use, and inclusive practices/special education. DSAC staff assist with planning and recommend professional development from the DSAC menu, but do not typically provide the training directly. Courses may be delivered regionally or within the district.

The DSAC model of professional development (PD) incorporates training and support components for participants, administrators, and coaches. This includes joint professional development sessions for different cohorts of teachers, administrative support modules, and additional training for site facilitators or coaches designed to help them provide embedded support for implementation. Survey responses from leaders of 44 districts show that 89 percent sent teams of teachers to DSAC-sponsored courses, 61 percent sent administrators to participate in support modules, and 55 percent sent administrators to participate in full courses with their teacher teams.

As shown in Table 3, in SY14 **1174 educators from 51 priority districts were participating in professional development activities and/or courses supported by DSAC grants, addressing a range of topics, including special education and inclusive practices, literacy, and math.<sup>8</sup>** Similar to last year, while special education

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<sup>7</sup> Districts were considered to be engaged in a portfolio of integrated services if they were receiving 3 or more services within the *Enhancing Capacity to Implement and Sustain Effective Practices* category.

<sup>8</sup> WIDA course enrollments were not included in this year's report because these were supported through other funds in FY14.

training was accessed by the largest number of districts, literacy had the highest number of participating educators, accounting for approximately half of the total number of estimated participants.

**Table 3: Estimated Participation in Professional Development supported by DSAC grants, by Topic (SY14)**

Professional Development Topics	DSAC Districts	Number of Participants
Special Education and Inclusive Practices/MFA	49	296
Literacy	19	597
Mathematics	21	281
Total	51	1174

Source: Professional development course enrollment worksheets provided by ESE. Reflects the number of estimated participants; actual numbers of participants may have differed. The total count of participating DSAC districts represents an unduplicated count. The total number of participants likely is not an unduplicated count given that some individuals may have participated in multiple courses or professional development activities.

**Networks.** DSAC staff also convene regional professional learning opportunities, including networks, to support capacity building in districts on topics including math, literacy, data use, and leadership. **Regional networks have helped DSACs to engage a larger number of districts and educators than would be feasible through in-district assistance activities alone.** Throughout the course of the Initiative, the networks not only allowed for engagement with current priority districts but also served as one forum through which DSACs could continue to engage former DSAC districts and include additional districts.

**Overall, the trend toward increasing integration of networks continued in SY13 and was maintained in SY14, reflecting a larger movement toward integration of services across the DSAC Initiative as a whole.** In SY13 and SY14, four regions—the Berkshires+, Central, the Pioneer Valley, and the Southeast—as compared to two regions in SY12, hosted integrated networks that covered a number of high-interest topics, including but not limited to content area topics, data use and practices, leadership, and the MTSS. Networking events also provided districts with opportunities to learn more about statewide initiatives, for instance the District-determined Measures and the new science frameworks. As such, a number of ESE staff were involved and presented at these network meetings.

The Northeast region continued to host separate networks for mathematics, literacy, and high school leadership. The last DSAC region, Greater Boston, discontinued its regional networks in SY13 in recognition that many of its districts were already engaged in other ESE-sponsored networks<sup>9</sup> and thus their available resources would be more effectively deployed to other support activities, including an emphasis on cross-district projects and partnerships. That said, while supporting cross-district projects, in SY14 Greater Boston also developed a new high school math network which grew organically out of a specific need.

**Professional Learning Communities.** In all, 23 DSAC priority districts (41%) worked with their DSAC teams on the implementation of professional learning communities (PLCs) in SY14. This is a slight increase from SY13, when 21 districts were engaged with their DSAC in this area. The support for PLCs has become more formalized over time. More specifically, in SY13, four DSAC districts in the Pioneer Valley and Berkshires+ regions participated in cohort 1 of the RTTT PLC Expansion Project. This project is intended to

<sup>9</sup> Many of the DSAC priority districts in the Greater Boston region are larger urban districts that were already being served by ESE's Urban Superintendent's Network, Urban Literacy Network, Urban Mathematics Network, and Urban Science Network prior to the launch of the DSAC Initiative in 2009. DSAC content area specialists attended those meetings and offered related in-district implementation support.

support effective data use—one of ESE’s core strategies—by supporting the development of structures and processes through which districts can implement data-driven, collaborative inquiry to improve instruction and increase student achievement. Pilot districts were trained using a new set of tools and guidance for PLCs. In SY14, seventeen DSAC districts drawn from all six DSAC regions are participating in cohort 2 of the PLC Expansion project—this represents over one-third of all DSAC priority districts.

#### 4. Funding and Resource Allocation

ESE offers grants to all of its DSAC priority districts in order to help support educator involvement in targeted assistance activities and professional development. In order to support the effective use of these limited resources, regional DSAC teams assisted districts in planning for these grants and continued to help them to think strategically about the use of the funds to support their local improvement efforts. To this end, RADs and their teams met with priority districts to discuss the grants and to offer assistance in further assessing their needs and identifying appropriate targeted assistance and/or professional development opportunities that could help to address those needs. They also worked with districts to identify other funding sources that could be used to support certain activities, thus freeing up DSAC funding for initiatives without other viable sources of financial support.

**In SY14, the DSAC grants provided 1.9 million in support to 64 districts.** As in previous years, grants primarily targeted districts with priority status through a current Level 3 or Level 4 designation. Beginning in SY12, legacy districts have been eligible for grant funding at a reduced level.<sup>10</sup> This change responded directly to concerns expressed by some district leaders in SY11 that fluctuations in DSAC resources and services as a result of annually changing accountability level determinations was not 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.

#### Satisfaction and Perceived Value of DSACs

***District and school leaders value DSAC services. DSAC assistance is perceived as extremely relevant and provides “added value” to district improvement efforts because it is comprehensive and supports integration of otherwise disparate improvement initiatives.***

**District and school leaders continue to express high levels of satisfaction with DSAC assistance and positive impressions of the DSAC approach.** Consistent with satisfaction ratings from previous years, virtually all surveyed district and school leaders expressed satisfaction with the assistance provided by their region’s DSAC, with two-thirds reporting that they were *very satisfied*. District and school leaders offered positive comments about DSAC work and described it as an invaluable resource. This was consistent with strong positive impressions of their region’s DSAC and its approach, in which a vast majority (90% or more) agreed that the DSAC was readily accessible, respectful in its interactions, collaborative in its approach, and used evidence-based practices. Most negative experiences are attributed to wanting or needing more support (in the form of funding, consultation, time) while recognizing that the high demand and limited staffing for DSAC teams make this ideal difficult to realize.

**Similarly, the assistance provided by DSAC was relevant to district or school improvement priorities.** The percentage of surveyed leaders reporting that DSAC assistance was *extremely relevant* increased from about half in SY13 to two-thirds in SY14. As with last year, the high overall ratings appear to reflect positively on the

<sup>10</sup> The program office currently uses a per pupil allocation to assign grant amounts to priority districts. The per pupil amount for legacy districts is 50% of the rate used for priority districts.

collaborative nature of DSAC assistance, the ability of regional teams to identify and adapt their offerings in ways that address those needs and priorities, and the relevance of DSAC expertise and guidance.

**District and school leaders shared broad agreement that DSAC support was important to their improvement efforts.** For some leaders, importance was tied to the DSAC's ability to delve deeply into specific areas of work, while others emphasized DSAC support related to "far-reaching" efforts (i.e., strategic plan development and leadership support). A couple of district leaders noted that the DSAC team filled gaps within their district's overly lean organizational structure, particularly in the areas of mathematics and English language arts (ELA). Only a handful of leaders characterized their work with the DSAC as limited. They attributed this to different factors, including having exited priority status, reliance on other partnerships and district staff to address areas of need, and limitations in the staffing capacity of the DSAC team which was described as stretched too thin.

**DSACs offer an added value that may be unique to this organization.** In current and previous annual DSAC evaluations, district and school leaders cited a number of key factors that contribute to the added value of the DSAC Initiative. Many of these factors are associated with the DSAC's strong connection to ESE, the DSAC teams' professional and field-level experience, the ongoing nature of DSAC support, and its differentiated model of assistance.

**DSACs helped district and school leaders manage and integrate a complex set of new initiatives as part of their own local improvement efforts.** District leaders described their regional DSAC as not only an important resource for timely information, but also helping them make connections across new initiatives and *integrate them into local improvement efforts in a coherent fashion*, rather than as "add-ons" or replacement initiatives. In many cases, the DSAC's ability to support and promote integration of initiatives extended from their role as a strategic thinking partner, something that evolved and that was strengthened over time as they built trust and established relationships. As one district leader explains:

*They completely listen to our ideas, they do not dismiss our thinking, and sometimes they will challenge it and fine-tune it from a very positive perspective .... They bring experiences and things that they are seeing in other districts ... to the table that really start to enhance our thinking and creativity, so they've been an integral partner in the process and we have improved since having them in the district ....*

Furthermore, professional development and targeted assistance services made available by DSAC were viewed as important resources to support district and school improvement. This type of support, which was seen as invaluable to mitigating the potential for "initiative overload," reflected a deliberate emphasis of DSAC work.

Leaders felt that the expertise, depth of knowledge, and field-based experience of DSAC staff members allowed the DSACs to both identify with the challenges that districts and school leaders faced and offer practical advice and solutions from an educator's perspective. It was also noted that field experience helped DSAC team members establish credibility as they interacted with school-based personnel in the delivery of services.

**District and school leaders noted 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.**

Also mentioned was the 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 an increasing level of relevance, and ultimately, the 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.

As noted earlier, **leaders value the package of DSAC services.** Reflective of both the integration across services and the integration of DSAC services with the district's (or school's) own improvement efforts, one district leader remarked:

*[The services] are all kind of ongoing for us. They're kind of like different strands that are constantly being orchestrated throughout the whole symphony.*

Linked to the value of this integrated package of services is the sustained relationship that leaders formed with the DSAC team members over time. Through this ongoing relationship, DSAC work became more intentional. That is, DSAC teams began using a process that involved coming to agreement and planning for the upcoming school year during the summer months, and then assisting districts and schools with the implementation of those plans throughout the year. A couple of leaders noted that this ongoing relationship as well as the team members' deep knowledge of local context and needs helped shape DSAC assistance in ways that were meaningful and helpful to districts and schools.

**This comprehensive service model required a more team-based approach to the work.** In SY11 nearly all DSAC team members described an increased level of intra-team collaboration and a more cohesive approach to the work. This shift was attributed to the complexity of the work and the need to bring multiple personalities, perspectives, and expertise to bear in order to address issues and challenges. There was also a realization that the more "siloes" approach to service delivery, as the work had been originally conceptualized, was not having the desired effect in terms of district engagement. This team-based approach allowed DSAC team members to coordinate and strategize about the work, and proved to be a successful model of service delivery which has continued throughout the course of the Initiative. Further, ESE program leaders and DSAC teams incorporated lessons learned from two ESE-funded studies—one focused on effective practices in Commendation Schools<sup>11</sup> and the other on practices associated with rapid achievement gains in Level 4 schools<sup>12</sup>—which contributed to their greater focus on the integration of services.

**Increased teaming/partnering occurred both within the DSAC teams and outside of them. The Initiative began to integrate some of its work with that of other ESE units and technical assistance organizations.** Specifically, the work of DSAC teams has become more coordinated with that of other ESE staff (e.g., the Office of Tiered Systems of Support) and other statewide technical assistance providers (e.g., the Center for Collaborative Education). In some instances, coordinated work also occurred with district-based providers within individual DSAC regions, although the extent to which this occurred varies from region to region.

This intentional shift can be attributed to specific project opportunities, structural changes within ESE that facilitated cross-unit collaboration, the use of specific venues for collaboration, and strategic decisions on the part of DSAC teams to collaborate with other ESE staff and/or district-based providers. One RAD attributed increased partnering with district-based providers to greater familiarity with the DSAC, DSAC persistence in this regard, and a general realization of "the power of everybody rowing in the same direction."

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<sup>11</sup> *Reflecting on Success: A Synthesis of Effective Practices of Title I Commendation Schools Receiving Dissemination Grants* submitted by Evidence-Based Education Research & Evaluation (EBERE) to ESE in January 2013.

<sup>12</sup> *Emerging Practices in Rapid Achievement Gain Schools: An Analysis of 2010-2011 Level 4 Schools to Identify Organizational and Instructional Practices that Accelerate Students' Academic Achievement* submitted by the Institute for Strategic Leadership and Learning (INSTLL) to ESE in February 2012.

## DSAC Support for ESE Initiatives and Priorities

***The DSAC Initiative supported implementation of ESE initiatives and priorities throughout the state while building district and school capacity to use ESE resources in support of district and school improvement.***

ESE articulates the following goal and strategies as the focus of its efforts to promote transformational change in support of improved student achievement. The overarching goal is to prepare all students to succeed in the world that awaits them after high school by:

1. Strengthening curriculum, instruction, and assessment
2. Improving educator effectiveness
3. Turning around the lowest performing districts and schools
4. Using data and technology to effectively support student performance

In pursuit of ESE's overarching goal, Massachusetts is implementing a number of changes, including but not limited to curriculum changes around the introduction of the 2011 Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and implementation of a new Educator Evaluation system. Given the scope and nature of these reforms, feedback from district and school leaders suggest that the DSAC Initiative has played a key role helping them to see the alignment between the DSAC Initiative's assistance offerings, ESE's priority areas, and their own improvement priorities.

**District and school leaders often applaud DSAC for helping them to better understand and integrate new ESE initiatives into their improvement and planning efforts.** In particular, leaders frequently cited consultations with DSAC staff around the identification of district needs and priorities as helping them make connections between various initiatives and the ways that their implementation might be integrated with district improvement goals. In addition, DSAC-sponsored opportunities for regional collaboration, professional development for educators, and data and content area support were also described as helping districts and schools better integrate new initiatives into their work.

The important role DSACs played in supporting ESE initiatives is also evident in district and school leader survey results. On the SY14 survey, **most leaders (69%) reported that DSAC helped them integrate ESE initiatives into their improvement efforts.** Similarly, most reported that their regional DSAC contributed greatly or moderately to their capacity to use ESE tools and resources, access information about ESE services and policies, and access ESE tools and resources (Table 4). Further, a majority also reported that the DSAC enhanced ESE's responsiveness to district and school needs and to cross-district collaboration and sharing within their region.

**Table 4: DSAC Initiative as a Link to ESE (SY14)**

Indicate the extent to which your regional DSAC has contributed to each of the following in your district/school ...	Total # of Responses	Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately" ...
Capacity to use ESE tools and resources to support district/school improvement efforts	111	72%
Access to information about ESE services and policies	112	71%
Access to ESE tools and resources	114	70%
Responsiveness of ESE to district and school needs	109	66%
Cross-district collaboration and sharing in your region	111	60%

Source: Analysis of 2014 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 or principal. Excludes those indicating "not applicable" or "too soon to tell."

Surveyed district and school leaders indicated their DSAC provided information or directed their district or school to resources related to Edwin Analytics, changes in the Commonwealth's assessment system, or the Model Curriculum Units. Connections to information or resources related to other ESE initiatives, such as the Sheltered English Immersion endorsement course and WIDA, were also made, although typically in fewer districts and schools, possibly reflecting differences in district needs in relation to English language learners. It is also notable that it appears that over time and as these initiatives matured, DSACs increased their support and emphasis on connecting districts to ESE resources.

While making connections to ESE initiatives was viewed as an important DSAC function, some RADs raised concerns with respect to this emergent role. For example, given that district and school improvement is a substantial and complex undertaking, regional demand was often described as exceeding available DSAC resources and staffing. **Further expansion of the DSAC role to encompass additional areas of work without additional resources could exacerbate capacity issues and potentially compromise the DSAC's ability to do core work.**

Another consideration involves the potential for mission conflict. That is, the DSAC was initially conceived as an assistance organization, not one that is evaluative or involved heavily in ESE's accountability functions. Often this aspect of the initiative was seen as critical to their ability to build the relationships required to deliver foundational support services. Thus, **while being informed about and coordinating with ESE around initiatives and mandates was viewed as important, when those initiatives are perceived to focus on evaluation or accountability, this has the potential to blur the line between the regulatory functions of ESE and the adaptive/assistive functions of the DSACs.** While ESE recognizes this tension, as the DSAC organization continues to operate and adapt, this is likely to be a continued area warranting consideration and attention on the part of management.

## Impact on Participating Districts and Schools

While the ultimate long-term goal of the DSAC is to impact student achievement, UMDI's evaluation was purposefully targeted to measure mid-term outcomes more likely to be attained in the study period. As such, the evaluation focused on understanding the extent to which the DSAC contributed to improvement in a range of outcomes related to core areas of assistance, including leadership and planning, effective data use, curriculum and instruction, and professional culture.

Interview and survey data show that district and school leaders perceive DSAC assistance as valuable and as having a real impact on priority districts and their schools.<sup>13</sup> **District and school personnel report that DSAC teams are helping districts and schools improve more rapidly than would otherwise have been possible** without their support and that DSAC support has helped build capacity in a number of areas.

In SY14, interviews with district and school leaders gathered their perspectives on the impacts of DSAC work in broad terms while the District and School Leader Surveys delved more deeply into specific areas of DSAC work. All of the leaders who were interviewed and/or surveyed cited examples of the impacts of DSAC-supported work, although the extent, number, and types of change cited varied. These variations appear to be dependent on a number of factors, including the type of services received, the intensity of involvement with the DSAC, and local context. It is important to note that some leaders remarked that due to the complexity and multifaceted nature of their improvement efforts, this work is still in progress—and that improvement efforts need to continue for their goals to be fully realized.

### Impacts on Systemic Practice and the Pace of Change

***DSAC assistance helped district and school leaders accelerate their improvement efforts, implement processes and structures more consistently and effectively, and develop better quality products.***

**DSAC support allowed districts and schools to improve more rapidly than would otherwise have been possible.** Specifically, leaders reported that DSAC teams helped districts identify action steps, use relevant resources, implement professional development, put into effect processes deemed necessary for changes in culture and practice, evaluate progress toward goals, and maintain a focus on improvement priorities. One leader remarked,

*It's hard to initiate this kind of systemic cultural change. A lot of times, they've helped us when we've made mistakes with the encouragement to keep going. I think that without their support, encouragement, resources, and the expertise ... and to some degree having it come from the state ... a lot of this stuff wouldn't have happened without their involvement. It certainly would not have happened as effectively.*

<sup>13</sup> This evaluation is focused on the overall impact of the Initiative rather than assessing the impact of each foundational services area or the underlying individual support activities. This is in recognition of the fact that DSAC activity typically reflects an integrated portfolio of support services and that those activities are often further integrated into broader district initiatives.

**The characteristics of the DSAC teams, their connection to ESE, the sustained nature of the support provided, and the DSAC approach, contributed to districts' ability to accelerate improvement.** As regional extensions of ESE whose practices were perceived as research based, DSACs were described as having “credibility” which served to create a sense of urgency and legitimize local improvement efforts. These characteristics are consistent with earlier evaluation findings describing the DSAC Initiative when it was in its formative stage. A leader commented,

*We just don't have the capacity to maintain and do the kind of work that they did .... The mere fact that they are a piece of ESE gives them big credibility, coming in and doing the work, so I think it's a feather in ESE's cap that they have these people out here in the field, working closely with teachers and principals. The fact that they are part of ESE gives them clout in the building, so that when they talk, teachers listen .... There's strength to the message delivery because they are part of the state, and that's a good thing.*

Leaders also spoke to the expertise, depth of knowledge, and field-based experience of DSAC staff members; the job-embedded and ongoing nature of DSAC support; and DSAC's ability to understand district and school needs and then differentiate their services in ways that respond to those needs.

Only two district leaders reported that the DSAC did not help them gain any traction or accelerate their efforts per se, although they did consider some specific services to be useful. Some of the reasons cited for this include the current number of ESE mandates and initiatives that are “pulling the district in different directions” and the practical limits of DSAC's staffing capacity.

**DSAC helped promote consistency and continuity of initiatives within and/or across schools in their districts.** For example, leaders commented that DSAC contributed to implementation consistency by supporting the use of DSAC processes, such as Learning Walkthroughs and PLCs, to encourage sharing of practices and resources, as well as by supporting teams focused on curriculum and instruction. One leader also noted that content area work with the DSAC resulted in a common curriculum and common assessments throughout the district. Supporting strategic plan development, establishing a system for looking at data, and building educator capacity to use data for classroom-level change was also viewed as important in this regard.

*Yes, we have protocols ... of how to look at data, what we're looking for, and how to do it. Now we have a purpose and a reason, and understand the process .... There's now that consistency throughout the district .... There was no continuity whatsoever, and now we're very much a K-12 entity that is working—all three schools are working in the same direction and DSAC is helping us in that direction by bringing similar things across the schools. They'd been helping with the strategic plan last year, helping with data, getting better at looking at data, bringing in those protocols. They've been a major factor in the change here ....*

A similar idea was expressed by several interviewees with respect to professional development, with district leaders stating that they would not have been able to ensure the classroom implementation of the district's professional development without DSAC assistance. In one district, the fact that DSAC was able to “channel a lot of professional development that needed to happen for administrators to get them on the same page” was also noted as important for moving schools in the same direction.

A few leaders specifically noted that Learning Walkthroughs and PLCs were implemented effectively, and that improvement plans and curricula were of better quality because of DSAC involvement. DSAC-fostered communication between schools was also important to accelerating improvement. This was particularly true in cases where schools with similar contexts and challenges could come together to share lessons learned and support one another. Some respondents also described the informal role that DSAC team members played in disseminating innovations and lessons learned from one district or school to another. For example, one leader noted that DSAC teams shared work products and exemplars from other schools that were useful in moving their own curriculum work forward.

## Impacts on Leadership and Planning, Effective Data Use, Curriculum and Instruction, and Professional Culture

***Working with DSAC contributed to improvement in a range of outcomes and built capacity for leadership and planning, effective data use, curriculum and instruction, and a professional culture.***

### Leadership and Planning

In the area of leadership and planning, DSACs assist districts and schools in a number of ways, including but not limited to, supporting district and school self-assessments, improvement planning (including the Accelerated Improvement Planning process for districts), and the implementation and monitoring of improvement initiatives. DSAC teams also coach school and district leaders to establish the conditions and systems necessary to implement research-based turnaround strategies.

**DSAC support contributed to the capacity of districts and schools to lead and manage change.** Looking across the various dimensions of leadership and planning, about three-quarters of surveyed leaders reported either moderate or great impact on at least one dimension of leadership and planning. This finding is encouraging given that building leaders' capacity to support school improvement efforts is central to the DSAC theory of action. As shown in Table 5, approximately two-thirds reported at least moderate impact on their capacity to identify instructional strengths and improvement priorities, engage in a continuous cycle of improvement, and monitor progress toward improvement. Annual survey data show that leadership and planning impacts have remained relatively stable over time.<sup>14</sup>

**Table 5: Impacts of DSAC Assistance on Leadership and Planning Capacity (SY13 & SY14)**

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 ...	SY13		SY14	
	Total # Leaders Responding	% indicating "greatly" or "moderately"	Total # Leaders Responding	% indicating "greatly" or "moderately"
Capacity to address improvement priorities	71	73%	78	72%
Ability to identify instructional strengths and improvement priorities	73	76%	73	69%
Capacity to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement	64	67%	71	65%
Capacity to monitor progress toward improvement	63	65%	67	64%
Monitoring the implementation and outcomes of your district's/school's improvement efforts	56	65%	58	58%

Source: UMDI Analysis of 2013 and 2014 District and School Leader Surveys. This table 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."

As in SY13, leaders whose districts had engaged with their DSACs on district self-assessments and planning for the implementation of high leverage strategies were generally more likely to report stronger impacts on measures related to leadership and planning than those whose districts that had not engaged with the DSAC in these areas. In a similar vein, school leaders who had engaged with the DSAC on school self-assessments and school improvement planning and support were also much more likely to report strong impacts.

<sup>14</sup> Results are considered stable over time if the proportions from year to year do not vary by more than five percentage points. A variation of five percentage points or less may be considered a natural variation in the data.

Interviewees also noted strong leadership and planning impacts, particularly increased capacities within school leaders and leadership teams. On the school level, principals were described as being better “critical thinkers as a group” and involved in “vision-driven, focus-driven teamwork.” District leadership teams were observed as being more task-oriented, effective, and increasingly able to shift energies into particular problems in particular schools. It is also notable that district leadership team meetings were also occurring more frequently than they did prior to DSAC engagement.

*They're a coach for the executive leadership team as a whole .... They kind of grow our capacity to have reflective conversations, look at data, and determine our next step and our direction. And that has a trickle effect from the district-level executive leadership team right down to each building and to each classroom.*

## Effective Use of Data

Another core area of DSAC work involves assisting districts and schools with the implementation of effective data use systems and data practices intended to ultimately impact classroom practice. Examples of specific assistance activities related to this area include: supporting the establishment of district- or school-level structures and processes for analyzing and disseminating data (e.g., data teams, Learning Walkthrough teams, Professional Learning Communities), as well as providing tools and resources to support data analysis and reporting. DSAC teams also help educators to understand ESE's new accountability system and develop data-related skills applicable to the new Educator Evaluation system (e.g., developing SMARTer goals).

Many leaders credited DSAC assistance with contributing to improvements in how data are used in their districts and schools, including developing a culture of inquiry to inform decisions and creating opportunities for teacher collaboration around the use of data (Table 6).

Approximately half of the leaders surveyed reported that DSAC contributed to improvements in mechanisms or processes for examining data at the district, school, or classroom level. The smallest proportions of respondents cited DSAC-supported improvement in data use related to the Educator Evaluation system, particularly setting goals and monitoring progress toward those goals.

Impacts related to data use remained relatively stable in SY14 as compared to SY13, although decreases were noted in the districts' or schools' ability to develop SMARTer goals for district and school improvement plans and/or educator evaluation (13 percentage points) and making connections between district, school, and individual educator goals as part of the new Educator Evaluation system (8 percentage points). ESE offers a wide array of supports for Educator Evaluation. Although DSAC team members frequently field questions about the new Educator Evaluation system, hands-on support for its implementation is not a DSAC role, which may affect the perceived impact of DSAC assistance in this area.

**Table 6: Impact of DSAC Assistance How Data are Used (SY13 & SY14)**

Indicate the extent to which data-related support has contributed to improvement in each of the following ...	SY13		SY14	
	Total # of Responses	% indicating "greatly" or "moderately"	Total # of Responses	% indicating "greatly" or "moderately"
Developing a culture of inquiry to inform district-and/or school-level decisions	113	65%	62	60%
Opportunities for teacher collaboration around the use of data	107	57%	52	52%
Monitoring the effectiveness of PD in your school/district	93	46%	40	43%
Your district's or school's ability to develop SMARTer goals for district and school improvement plans and/or educator evaluation	91	49%	34	36%
Making clear connections between district, school, and individual educator goals as part of the district's new Educator Evaluation system	80	41%	30	33%
Measuring progress towards meeting individuals educators' goals as part of the district's new Educator Evaluation system	76	37%	28	32%

Source: UMDI Analysis of 2013 and 2014 District and School Leader Surveys, as well as the analysis of the 2013 survey of those receiving data services. For the school and district leader surveys, this table 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). Responses to the data survey (SY13 only), reflect perspectives of priority districts only. In all cases, respondents indicating "not applicable" or "too early to tell" were excluded from the analysis.

**DSAC support helped leaders use data to identify improvement priorities and professional development needs, monitor student progress, and understand current instructional and assessment practices (Table 7).** When comparing impacts on data use from SY13 and SY14, the impacts reported by leaders tended to be relatively stable.

**Table 7: Impact of DSAC Assistance on Application of Data to Improvement Priorities (SY13 & SY14)**

Indicate the extent to which data-related support has contributed to improvement in each of the following ...	SY13		SY14	
	Total # of Responses	% indicating "greatly" or "moderately"	Total # of Responses	% indicating "greatly" or "moderately"
Identifying improvement priorities in your district/school	66	70%	72	67%
Identifying professional development needs in your district/school	53	62%	58	56%
Monitoring student progress	47	53%	57	55%
Understanding current instructional and assessment practices in your district/school	42	52%	54	54%
Making student placement decisions in your school*	14	31%	24	43%
Providing timely interventions to students in your school*	23	47%	23	40%

Source: UMDI Analysis of 2013 and 2014 District and School Leader Surveys. This table 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.

\* The last two items on this table were posed only to school leaders.

Two measures asked only of school leaders had mixed outcomes over time. While the percentage of school leaders indicating great or moderate impacts as relates to providing timely interventions to students declined (7

percentage points), there was an increase in the reported impacts related to making student placement decisions in their school (12 percentage points).

## Curriculum and Instruction

According to ESE documentation, curriculum and instruction covers a wide range of assistance activity including, but not limited to, the following: curriculum mapping and alignment, support for the implementation of curriculum frameworks and model curriculum units, consulting and planning rigorous instructional activities and using/developing common assessments, and supporting content coaches and instructional leaders to build knowledge in instruction and content. Mathematics, English language arts and literacy, and effective pedagogy are substantive areas emphasized in this area of DSAC work.

**DSAC assistance contributed to improved alignment of mathematics and ELA curricula with ESE's curriculum frameworks, which were implemented in 2011.** As shown in Table 8, two-thirds of leaders reported improved alignment of mathematics, while more than half noted the same for ELA. Additionally, more than half of respondents indicated that involvement with the DSAC had at least a moderate impact on their ongoing efforts to create and refine curricula. Impacts on the *implementation* of math and ELA curricula were slightly less positive but sizeable.

**Table 8: Impact of DSAC Assistance on Curriculum (SY13 & SY14)**

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to curriculum improvement in each of the following ...	SY13		SY14	
	Total # of Responses	% indicating "greatly" or "moderately"	Total # of Responses	% indicating "greatly" or "moderately"
Alignment of curriculum in mathematics to state frameworks	49	56%	63	64%
Implementation of curriculum in mathematics in your district/school	40	45%	49	49%
Alignment of your district's/school's curriculum in ELA to state frameworks	45	53%	54	54%
Implementation of curriculum in ELA in your district/school	38	43%	42	43%
Your district's/school's efforts to create and refine curricula on an ongoing basis	35	48%	55	57%

Source: Analysis of 2013 and 2014 District and School Leader Surveys. This table 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."

Over time, the perceptions of impact remained relatively stable except on two measures. In SY14, there were increases in the proportion of leaders reporting that DSAC contributed greatly or moderately to improvement in the alignment of their math curriculum (8 percentage points) and in school or district effort to create and refine curricula on an ongoing basis (9 percentage points). Three DSAC regions experienced turnover in their math specialist positions during SY14; one DSAC region's literacy specialist also left the position, making these results somewhat unexpected.<sup>15</sup> ESE noted that they hired math consultants to provide interim support in two of the three regions, which may have contributed to these results.

**DSAC assistance contributed positively to the quality of instruction in districts and schools, the use of effective instructional approaches, and teachers' use of data to reflect on instructional practices.** Most interviewed leaders described this as a positive outcome of their work with the DSAC. Other leaders elaborated

<sup>15</sup> Two of these positions, one in mathematics and the other in literacy, were still vacant at the writing of this report.

further on teachers' use of data as relates to instruction. More specifically, they noted that data were used more frequently to differentiate instruction, reteach lessons to meet students' needs, and identify which students needed more assistance to achieve proficiency. Data were also used to identify appropriate interventions for students. Linked to the use of effective instructional approaches, interviewed leaders mentioned a greater emphasis on learning objectives, increased frequency of rigorous lessons, as well as increased use of student activities or lessons that emphasize higher order thinking skills. Leaders also remarked that instruction was less teacher-directed and more student-centered than in the past.

Slightly more than half of surveyed leaders also reported impacts on their district's or school's capacity to support instructional improvement and on processes for providing quality feedback to teachers on their practice (Table 9). Over half also indicated that DSAC support made strong to moderate contributions to improvements in teachers' content area knowledge. Consistent with this finding, a few interviewed leaders noted teachers had "better content knowledge, better understanding of the specific standards and some concrete ways to teach those standards." This was partially attributed to the fact that classroom content had been standardized across the district in each grade level, and that teachers were held accountable for delivering this content due to the implementation and follow-up with Model Curriculum Units.

**Table 9: Impact of DSAC Assistance on Instruction (SY13 & SY14)**

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to instructional improvement in each of the following ...	SY13		SY14	
	Total # of Responses	% indicating "greatly" or "moderately"	Total # of Responses	% indicating "greatly" or "moderately"
Teachers' use of data to reflect on instructional practices (e.g., looking at student work, assessment data, behavioral data)	57	62%	63	62%
The quality of instruction in your district/school	51	59%	60	60%
Use of effective instructional approaches in your district/school	56	64%	59	57%
Your district's/school's capacity to support instructional improvement	52	58%	55	53%
Mechanisms or processes for providing quality feedback to teachers on their practice in your district/school	48	58%	51	52%
Content area knowledge among teachers in your district/school	42	51%	53	52%
Customizing instruction to address student learning needs in your district/school	40	50%	47	50%
Developing common assessments aligned to MA curriculum frameworks	--	--	37	39%
Your district's/school's capacity to accelerate student learning among high-need populations	30	38%	35	36%

Source: UMDI Analysis of 2013 and 2014 District and School Leader Surveys. This table 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." While outcome measures remained mostly consistent from SY13 to SY14, wording changes were made to one measure in this table (i.e., developing common assessments aligned to MA curriculum frameworks).

In reviewing year-to-year trends, most measures remained relatively stable over time, while a few declined in terms of reported impacts. The reasons for this are unclear. The specific DSAC services that districts and schools engage in from year to year may contribute to these fluctuations. Several survey respondents suggested that their DSAC teams are increasingly being spread too thin and cannot provide the depth of service desired. DSACs become involved with an increasing number of districts over time; at the same time foundational services have expanded. Additionally this year, some teams experienced turnover in their math, literacy, and/or

data specialist positions. Even though some positions were filled throughout the year, some time was needed to integrate new team members into the DSACs' work.

Interviewed leaders remarked that DSAC support contributed to growth in principals' capacity as instructional leaders, and to a shift toward distributed models of leadership within schools. Some leaders noted a change in the role of the principal that involved a shift in focus from building management and operations to the instructional core. District leaders noted that principals conducted classroom observations more frequently, were better able to support teachers as they sought to improve instructional practice, and were more frequently monitoring the implementation of professional development. Areas of DSAC work described as contributing to this trend include, but are not limited to, support regarding the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, Learning Walkthroughs, data services, and leadership development. A few interviewees acknowledged that ESE's Educator Evaluation system and district support to principals have also contributed to this change.

### Professional Staff Culture

While professional staff culture is not an explicitly articulated area of DSAC work, promoting a positive and collaborative culture within districts and schools undergirds all DSAC assistance activity. The intention is to develop or maintain a positive culture that can serve as a foundation for change, improvement, and renewal.

**DSAC assistance contributed to improvements in the professional culture of districts and schools.** For a third consecutive year, leaders reported improved professional culture, with about three-quarters indicating that DSAC assistance contributed to improved staff collaboration around teaching and learning and two-thirds reporting that DSAC assistance affected a shared sense of accountability for student learning (Table 10). While most of the impacts remained stable over time, there was a decline in the shared sense of accountability for student learning and the expectation for student learning (decrease of 7 percentage points in both cases).

**Table 10: Impact of DSAC Assistance on Professional Staff Culture (SY13 & SY14)**

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to instructional improvement in each of the following ...	SY13		SY14	
	Total # of Responses	% indicating "greatly" or "moderately"	Total # of Responses	% indicating "greatly" or "moderately"
Staff collaboration around teaching and learning in your district/school	72	75%	79	74%
Shared sense of accountability for student learning in your district/school	66	73%	67	66%
Your district's/school's responsiveness to teachers' needs	50	59%	56	57%
Teacher's input into school-level goal setting and decision-making	47	58%	55	56%
Expectations for student learning in your district/school	51	59%	57	52%

Source: Analysis of 2013 and 2014 District and School Leader Surveys. This table 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."

Some district and school leaders described professional cultures that were more participatory in nature, which they attributed to the distributed models of leadership being established with DSAC support. Some schools were still in the formative stages of this process; others had reached partial or full implementation.

### Many leaders reported positive changes in professional culture, collaboration, and communication.

Almost all school leaders observed at least one change in their district's operation as a result of DSAC, and most described multiple impacts. School leaders commented on how isolated their schools were before DSAC intervention and noted that DSAC teams had facilitated communication and collaboration among schools in

their district. These changes were also perceived as occurring within district-level leadership teams, which included both principals and district leaders. Leadership teams were characterized as operating with a more supportive professional culture that promoted conversation about ideas for improvement in an atmosphere of collegiality, trust, and shared mission.

One district leader commented that the district's level of collaboration would not have been possible without DSAC support. Another district leader described the trickle-down and sometimes indirect effect of DSAC work in this regard. For instance, this leader noted that while the DSAC was not directly responsible for increasing collaboration across the district, leaders used DSAC's collaborative approach in engaging with the district-level administrators as a model for their own new collaborative approach with school leaders and teachers. Creating a mechanism that would allow for bi-directional communication was also deemed important to the collaborative process.

*Developing that leadership, learning, and data team to get teachers talking to us regularly, and giving all teachers a voice through those representatives, was critical. And the DSAC just really helped refine principals' and superintendents' ideas about how to keep teachers in that feedback loop and make it a good match.*

**Across the board, professional collaboration was seen as important for change and renewal.** It is evident that, as one leader noted, changing professional culture is a complicated process that cannot be accomplished by any single initiative, but it is also clear from some leaders' responses that important progress had been made.

### Perceived Impact on Students

***The DSACs have helped put districts and schools on what they perceive as a better path, but given the current stage of their improvement work, it is generally too soon to observe an impact on student outcomes.***

**In interviews, a sizeable proportion of district and school leaders indicated that it was simply too soon to observe student impacts given the stage of DSAC-supported work thus far. However some leaders were able to describe specific student-level changes occurring in their school or district that could be related to DSAC-supported work.** A few leaders noted that students were more engaged in their own learning and seemed to enjoy class more. Another saw "great impact on students not only understanding the objectives, but knowing what the expectation is and what they need to do to get there." Yet others emphasized gains in student achievement and indicated that they had noticed significant improvement in MCAS scores, with a couple of leaders reporting increases in the percentage of students in "advanced" and "proficient" levels in either math or ELA. One leader remarked on the improved quality of answers to open-response questions, while another noted improvement in student growth for students who had received an intervention.

By contrast, some leaders indicated that they did not, as of yet, have the evidence (e.g., formative or benchmark assessments) to measure classroom-level changes, although they were optimistic that they would see evidence of positive student outcomes relatively soon. One leader noted that while DSAC support was valuable, more in-school DSAC support would be needed in order to accelerate classroom-level change.

## Conclusion and Summary

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's District and School Center Initiative reflects a significant shift in the state's system of support to schools and districts. Launched in late 2009, the Initiative is a complex, regionally-based effort to support improvement in high-need districts across the Commonwealth, with priority given in SY14 to 56 districts designated as Level 3 and Level 4 under the state's *Framework for District Accountability and Assistance*. This section reflects on the future of the DSAC Initiative and offers recommendations that may be informative to ongoing system implementation. It concludes with a brief summary of the DSAC Initiative's key accomplishments.

### Looking Toward the Future

Many district and school leaders expressed a need for continued DSAC support to maintain and sustain improvement efforts. Further, the importance of continuing to offer a diverse menu of services that could be assembled and delivered in an integrated package, as opposed to stand-alone assistance activities, was also highlighted. This is unsurprising given that integrated support that addresses multiple needs simultaneously is generally accepted as a more effective way to promote improvement and sustain long-term change. The DSAC model, as designed and implemented, has been consistent with this principle by providing a broad portfolio of services that have been individually tailored to meet local needs.

***Demand for DSAC assistance continues to be high. A comprehensive and integrated package of services, as well as the highly customized delivery model, will continue to be important moving forward. District and school leaders expect to continue working with the DSAC in a variety of areas.***

**Given the demands on the Commonwealth's public school systems, there were many calls for the DSACs to continue or even expand their work in supporting schools and districts.** One leader went so far as to suggest that the DSAC Initiative be expanded to increase capacity to support Level 2 schools along with those in Levels 3 and 4. In a similar vein, another leader remarked that "ESE should reshuffle its resources to expand the DSAC."

Consistent with this, survey data show a wide appreciation for a diverse range of services and reflect that the demand for continued service is focused on a wide range of needs (Table 11). Survey responses also reflect that all of the DSAC services are of value, with sizeable proportions of leaders—ranging from 37 to 69 percent on any given service—reporting that ongoing access to DSAC support would be "*extremely valuable*" to their future improvement efforts. The most frequently selected services include access to DSAC grant funding, improvement planning, leadership support, and professional development. Many of these areas also surfaced as valuable in the district and school leader interviews.

**Table 11: Value of DSAC Assistance with regard to Future Improvement Efforts (SY14)**

Overall, how valuable do you feel ongoing access to DSAC support in each of the following would be to your future district/school improvement efforts ...	Total # of Responses	Proportion of district and/or school leaders indicating "extremely valuable"
Access to DSAC grant funding to support participation in professional development, networks, and initiatives	78	69%
Focused district planning for accelerating student support	56	62%
Leadership team training, facilitation, and/or support	64	60%
Content area support in mathematics and/or literacy	62	56%
Assistance in professional development planning, implementation, and/or follow-up	58	52%
Access to specialized professional development institutes	55	50%
Assistance in identifying high quality PD providers via the pre-qualified DSAC PD provider list	55	49%
Implementing structures and practices supporting effective data use	55	49%
Using ESE data tools and resources to access, display, and make sense of ESE data	54	47%
Learning Walkthrough training, facilitation, and/or support	52	46%
Understanding and analyzing ESE data	52	46%
Professional Learning Community training, facilitation, or support	51	45%
Prioritizing next steps after an ESE Accountability District Review	42	42%
School self-assessments	46	41%
Supporting the implementation of MTSS	45	41%
Supporting leaders in planning for and implementation of major ESE systems change initiatives	44	40%
District self-assessments	36	37%

Source: UMDI Analysis of 2014 District and School Leader Surveys. This table 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 "don't know" were excluded from the analysis.

**Similarly, interviewed leaders reported that continued support in a number of different areas would be of value to their continued improvement work. In particular, some leaders noted that professional development, in varied delivery mechanisms, is critical for future district and school improvement efforts.**

Interviewed leaders hoped that DSAC would be able to maintain levels of course offerings as well as job-embedded professional development. Some even called for an expansion into deeper content-specific work or into other areas outside of DSAC's current focus on ELA and mathematics, specifically science. Most of the interviewees cited lack of expertise or internal capacity as the reason for their content-specific professional development needs. Both school and district leaders stressed the importance of professional development for teachers, with one district administrator stating,

*I can't live without that .... I can do some of the reflections, the growth of my principals, and all of that myself, but it's the hand-over-hand supporting those teachers in that trusting way that our specialists do—that's what I can't do without.*

Some of those who cited professional development emphasized needs in other areas, including those related to state educational initiatives such as initial or follow-up training in the Educator Evaluation system, Rethinking Equity for Teaching of English Language Learners (RETELL), and Edwin. There were also several calls for sustained work in data analysis.

Interviewed leaders also noted that continued DSAC support in the area of improvement planning and leadership is needed. Some interviewed leaders described their desire to keep DSAC on hand as consultants, as experts to review their improvement plans and provide input on difficult decisions. There seemed to be great satisfaction with the DSAC's role in this area thus far. DSAC team members were described as already familiar with school- and district-specific needs and thus could recommend speakers, research resources, and make recommendations that were relevant to particular local circumstances.

***The sustainability of school and district improvement efforts is fragile. School- and district-level improvement is multifaceted, complicated, and involves multi-year work. Continuity of DSAC services and supports is likely required to enable long-term success.***

Overall, the extent to which leaders felt they could sustain DSAC-supported efforts and continue to move the work forward, absent DSAC assistance, varied. This variation depended upon a combination of factors, including but not limited to the amount of training or support received, the relative newness and complexity of the work, and local context (e.g., district-level capacity in terms of human and other resources, turnover rates). Given that districts and schools were often involved with their DSAC in multiple areas of work—some of which were likely to be at different stages of implementation—capacity to sustain was varied even within a school or district, depending upon the specific area of work considered.

A few leaders also indicated that they would try to continue the work but that without DSAC holding the administration accountable, the work may not be given priority. Others still felt that they may be able to continue the work but that it may prove difficult to get all of their personnel on board with the changes if they came only from the administrators, as DSAC's expertise, perspective, and credibility all seemed to be valued highly by teachers and staff. A few leaders felt that they did not yet have the internal capacity to continue the data, curriculum, and other DSAC-supported work on their own. As one leader described,

*[We are] taking baby steps forward, but the expectations and demands are high on the district and schools, [there is a lot] going on in terms of new mandates/initiatives. We need to put more resources into supporting districts around curriculum, evaluation, and data teams because it's almost like they are half-formed; we need to close the deal .... [The work is] in its infancy. We have a solid core of teachers on the data team ... but we need to expand beyond that core. We could use more support.*

## Recommendations

Given that demand for a comprehensive package of services remains high and district and school capacity to sustain improvements is limited, it is clear that the DSAC Initiative should do the following:

**Continue to provide assistance at the Initiative's current level or even expand capacity,** allowing DSAC team members to share more of their time and expertise with districts and schools. Several district leaders recognized that the DSACs are in high demand with limited resources, and that the DSACs risk being spread too thin, if they have not been already. As such, resources for staffing DSAC teams may need to be augmented to

satisfy district- and school-level needs. Many cited the positive and dramatic impacts on district improvement efforts as a reason for their desire for increased support in the future.

**Maintain the breadth of the portfolio of services.** Given the high demand and need for each of the DSAC services, the Initiative may need to maintain this broad range of services in order to support schools and districts in their future improvement efforts.

**Remain flexible and continue to align DSAC support with local needs.** District and school leaders expressed the desire for tailored support to continue. The DSAC's flexible but targeted services and expertise were considered essential to supporting school and district improvement, and interviewees seemed unsure whether they would be able to obtain this type of customized service and non-prescriptive help elsewhere.

Though this sentiment was not unanimous, it was predominant among those leaders interviewed. While it is clear that flexibility has been central to the DSAC's ability to effectively work with and support districts, this poses a challenge with regard to program management, performance measurement, and evaluation. *Ensuring that the goals and core underlying principles of the DSAC Initiative remain in focus as services and tools are adapted will continue to be important.*

**Continue to offer a holistic approach to supporting district and school improvement.** The value of the DSAC services according to several leaders rests in the "comprehensive approach to improving the district" and that "what brings strength is the fact that they're involved in all of it." Another interviewee also spoke to this holistic approach, emphasizing the value of the CSE self-assessments as a part of this first step in the process to "determine where your deficits are, where your strengths are, and what you need to build upon, and then [get] support based off of that."

**Continue to recognize and, to the extent possible, address threats to sustainability of DSAC-supported improvement efforts. These include, but are not limited to, lack of time, lack of funding for professional development, and district- and school-level turnover.** In some cases, these will be conditions that DSAC will have to work within, while in others, DSACs may be able to work with districts and schools to affect changes in these conditions. The most common concerns expressed by leaders with regard to sustainability were related to time (particularly as linked to the planning and implementation of new ESE initiatives and mandates) and funding. Leaders indicated that, with all of the other new ESE initiatives that they had to manage and integrate into their work, efforts that had been previously supported by the DSAC would be pushed to the margins. Leaders also expressed concern that, even in cases in which the work would be sustained, there would not be enough time to provide teachers the proper training or professional development for the work to continue adequately. The lack of time for training was tied to the lack of fiscal resources to see the training through. Some noted that teachers must be paid for their training time, and with free services like DSAC as well as grants like Race to the Top ending in many districts, district and school leaders were uncertain that they could sustain the same level of professional development on their own.

Turnover among district leaders, school leaders, and teachers was also frequently noted as a concern. Interviewees described DSAC's unique ability to integrate and train new administrators and teachers in the DSAC-supported strategies that were being implemented. Leaders expressed some uncertainty regarding the capacity of their school or district to identify who needed to be trained and were also unsure if the DSAC-supported strategies and structures would remain.

**Identify, build and/or leverage the factors that promote sustainability. These factors include the district's or school's ability to prioritize improvement work, direct involvement of district staff and teachers in the work, and structures and processes that have been put in place.** For instance, a few interviewed leaders highlighted that continued prioritization by principals and superintendents, and involvement of professional staff was important. More specifically, at least one leader noted the importance of having district personnel directly involved in the work by continuing to deliver in-house professional development and build relationships with

teachers to keep up momentum. Some also remarked that having engaged with teachers collaboratively—not only to build educators’ knowledge, skill, and capacity, but also to develop their sense of ownership—positioned them well in this regard. In terms of building school-level capacity, a few leaders described how the DSAC used a “gradual release model” to this end. By design, the DSAC assumed a bulk of the responsibility for the work at the outset, while simultaneously providing training in the tasks. Gradually, as capacity was developed, the responsibility was transitioned to those educators and school leaders involved in the efforts.

Two leaders also remarked that they felt they could sustain efforts because they had the structures, processes, and other grant funds in place that allow for dedicated time and resources. Based on leaders’ range of responses, it is evident that sustainability depends on many factors that include both the local and broader education context. One leader described it as follows:

*For continuing Learning Walkthroughs and PLCs, we have the capacity because our superintendent supports it. These are priorities that we have adopted, we have the structures to continue this, and we use grant funding to try to connect those things, but it’s hard to keep up given all the new state initiatives. The structures we have [in place] have helped us, it’s just trying to connect those initiatives and do them in a way that’s integrated rather than separate. But DSAC has helped with that integration—some of it is just explaining the connections, and some of it is having the structures like the PLCs and Admin Council that help us make those connections. With a better leadership structure it’s easier to continue.*

## Summary of Accomplishments

Evidence suggests there has been considerable 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, and increasingly intensive work with districts in subsequent years. In fact, by SY13 the number of engaged districts almost tripled from SY11. This trend continued in SY14 with 98 percent 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’ beneficial characteristics and approaches to the work.

An overarching goal of the Initiative is to partner with districts and their schools to support systemic approaches to accelerate student achievement. In this vein, DSACs continued to receive acknowledgment for contributions to a variety of intermediate outcomes including positive effects on leadership and planning; use of data as part of a cycle of inquiry process; curriculum, and instruction; and professional staff culture. For three consecutive years through SY14, district and school leaders have reported favorable ratings of DSAC assistance in terms of its value to districts’ improvement efforts, its high relevance to local needs, and its high degree of overall participant satisfaction.

In a context of significant statewide reforms, the Initiative also continued to expand its role in supporting the integration of new ESE initiatives into school- and district-level improvement efforts. The DSAC Initiative supported implementation of ESE initiatives and priorities throughout the state by enhancing access to ESE information, services, tools, and resources, while building district and school capacity to use those resources in support of improvement efforts.

The DSAC Initiative has moved in what appears to be a deliberate and responsive manner to build new capacity and to coordinate its work on a broader scale (e.g., with other ESE units, technical assistance providers). The work and approach of the DSAC system will continue to evolve as will the priorities and resources of ESE, districts, and schools. Accordingly, ongoing communication among statewide and regional DSAC leaders, other ESE stakeholders, DSAC partners, and the leaders of priority districts and their schools will remain essential to ensure the Initiative remains relevant and effective in the future.

## Appendix A: DSAC Foundational Services

The DSAC Initiative emphasizes the development of district and school capacity to accelerate and sustain improvement, and leverage the knowledge and skill of local educators to address shared needs within a changing education landscape. DSAC teams consult with districts to identify and provide tailored assistance with activities drawn from four foundational service areas:

1. Planning and Implementation Strategies
2. Enhancing Capacity to Implement and Sustain Effective Practices
3. Professional Learning Networks
4. Funding and Resource Allocation

Although the four broad foundational service areas have remained stable over time, individual services within these areas have been added and/or refined over time. Additionally, due to the maturation of the work, some of the services emphasized on a statewide and regional level have shifted from year to year. These variations are at once based on the identified needs of the districts within each region as well as the approach of each DSAC to the work.

As noted in the *Implementation of the DSAC Initiative* section of this report, districts and schools typically engage in multiple services, which were often cross-cutting and integrated with one another. District and school leaders value the DSAC's comprehensive service model, that is, the combined "package" of DSAC services offered. When asked to identify which of the DSAC services were most useful to their improvement efforts, many interviewees cited two or more service areas. A few stated explicitly that identifying any one specific area as most useful was not an easy task given the complexity of improvement work.

As a complement to the implementation section of this report, this appendix includes a more detailed description of the types of services available in each broad foundational service area, the level of service utilization, and perceptions of quality among DSAC priority districts.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Planning and Implementation Strategies: Supporting Self-Assessment, Improvement Planning, and Systems for Plan Implementation and Monitoring***

DSAC describes the first foundational services area as targeted planning for implementing a small set of focused, high-leverage strategies that have direct impact on student learning. Assistance activities include the following:

- **Focused District Planning for Accelerating Student Learning** – Defining a narrow set of strategic objectives, identifying and implementing well-defined initiatives to meet the objectives, and systematically monitoring the implementation and impact of those initiatives. A key resource for this support is the *Focused Planning for Accelerating Student Learning: District Guide for the Development and Implementation of Accelerated Improvement Plans*, aimed at helping districts design actionable improvement plans.
- **Prioritization** – As follow-up to the ESE Accountability District Review, prioritizing next steps from the review's findings and recommendations and identifying strategies to support implementation of

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<sup>16</sup> For the "DSAC Foundational Services Summary of Targeted Assistance Options," see

[www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/dsac/services.docx](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/dsac/services.docx).

high-leverage improvement efforts responsive to the greatest areas of need.

- **District and School Self-Assessments** – Using ESE’s *District Standards and Indicators and Conditions for School Effectiveness (CSE)* with an emphasis on alignment between self-assessment and planning.

**Focused Planning and Prioritization**

DSACs provided support related to *planning and implementation strategies* in 53 (or 95 percent) of the 56 priority districts, an increase from last year in which 48 priority districts received this assistance. As in the past, this most commonly involved focused district planning and prioritization. In SY13, one DSAC region in particular was heavily involved in piloting *Focused Planning for Accelerating Student Learning: District Guide for the Development and Implementation of Accelerated Improvement Plans (AIP)* a planning tool adapted from one in use in Level 4 districts, with a number of its districts. According to District Leader Survey data, five of the six DSAC regions are involved in supporting districts through development and implementation of their AIP. Based on RAD interviews, at least three of these regions are involved in supporting the formal AIP process, and another region borrowed portions of the AIP—especially its progress monitoring methods—to use in other, more limited ways. In many instances, the AIP process was used to organize and formalize improvement efforts based on ESE’s District Accountability Review findings and often in conjunction with district self-assessment activities. As one RAD noted, the AIP was an effective way to turn the recommendations from district reviews into actionable plans.

**Table A1: Utilization of Support Related to Planning and Implementation Strategies (SY14)**

Assistance Activities	Priority Districts	
	#	%
<b>Planning and Implementation Strategies</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>95%</b>
Focused planning for high-leverage strategies (including prioritization)	43	77%
School self-assessments	42	75%
District self-assessment	11	20%

Source: Analysis of DSAC spreadsheets submitted to UMDI by each of the DSAC regions. Regions may be using some terminology differently. As such, figures derived from this reporting should be viewed as estimates.

Because the AIP process is intensive, the ESE program office identified resources in SY13 to add consultants with experience using the original planning tool in Level 4 districts to work alongside DSAC staff in this area. These consultants modelled practices for the DSAC teams and also helped to relieve some of the time-consuming “heavy lifting” of initial implementation—that is, training and supporting leaders in the planning process and helping them develop the plan. An ancillary benefit of the AIP process is that it provides an opportunity for districts to establish more explicit benchmarks for progress monitoring.

Progress in relation to the stages of the AIP process varies from district to district. Stages of the AIP process include: developing an AIP, an initial self-assessment, narrowing strategic objectives and identifying related initiatives, implementing these initiatives, collecting and analyzing implementation and outcome data, and making mid-course corrections based on those data. DSAC-provided support cuts across these areas. Approximately one-third of leaders indicated that their districts’ level of engagement in working with the DSAC and/or AIP consultants was very intensive this year. Another third reported that their level of support was somewhat intensive. A vast majority indicated that the amount of support provided was sufficient to meet the district’s needs.

**Most leaders also indicated that the AIP greatly helped to focus and drive major work at the district level, and about three-fourths remarked that the implementation of AIP initiatives led to at least moderate changes in instructional practices.** Unsurprisingly, 64 percent of district leaders noted that the AIP was extremely valuable for driving forward district improvement processes that focus on the instructional core. A

strong majority indicated that they were very likely to continue developing and/or implementing the AIP next year.

### ***District and School Self-Assessment***

Only 11 districts engaged with DSAC around *district self-assessment*—a small number overall but the same as last year and a notable increase from 4 districts in SY12, suggesting that this is an emerging area of work for DSAC and the priority districts.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, DSAC services in about three-quarters of priority districts involved support for *school self-assessment* using the Conditions for School Effectiveness.<sup>18</sup> This represents an increase from 27 percent in SY13. According to ESE and through a review of the survey data, **it is highly unlikely that all of these districts had schools that conducted a full-fledged CSE self-assessment in SY14. Rather, it is more likely that schools revisited their original CSE self-assessment with their DSAC team to reflect upon progress made toward targeted improvement areas and/or to define new areas of focus. In one DSAC region, the CSE was a thematic focus for its regional leadership network in SY14, which involved multiple districts.**

In the formal CSE self-assessment process, DSAC support for school self-assessment includes activities such as assisting in planning the self-assessment administration process, providing information and training to educators, providing resources to support implementation, facilitating implementation of the self-assessment, and assisting in the analysis or presentation of data collected through these self-assessments. In SY13, some DSAC Regional Assistance Directors also noted that many schools that had conducted a CSE self-assessment in the previous school year were encouraged and supported in the continued use of those data to inform current improvement efforts.

School leaders generally reported positive perceptions of the CSE self-assessment process. Among school leaders who had received DSAC support for the CSE self-assessment, strong majorities reported that it was valuable to their school improvement and professional development plans.<sup>19</sup> About one-quarter of those leaders indicated that they are very likely to revisit the CSE self-assessment on an ongoing basis as part of the school's continuous cycle of improvement.<sup>20</sup> Although this number is encouraging, this represents a decline from SY13 in which about half of school leaders indicated the same.

In a new and related area of work this year, three regions began piloting monitoring site visits to Level 3 schools as a way to help districts and their schools identify areas for improvement and potential next steps. This process was an adaptation of the Level 4 School Monitoring Site Visit protocol and focuses on six standards of the Conditions for School Effectiveness. For Level 3 schools, the site visits are conducted by DSAC team members and would ideally include a member of the district's leadership team. In these multi-day site visits, the visiting

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<sup>17</sup> Phase 1 of the AIP process involves conducting a district self-assessment. Although districts are not required to use ESE's District Self-Assessment tool, it is referenced in the AIP guide.

<sup>18</sup> Level 3 and 4 *schools* are required to complete a self-assessment. To support this requirement, ESE developed an assessment tool aligned with its Conditions for School Effectiveness (CSE). Through the CSE assessment tool, ESE defines 10 conditions necessary to educate students well including: 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. An eleventh condition, effective district systems for school support and intervention, is addressed in the District Standards and Indicators assessment.

<sup>19</sup> Some school leaders' comments indicate that professional development in their districts is largely driven by the central office, which may explain the lower perceived value of CSE assessment for informing professional development plans.

<sup>20</sup> The continuous cycle of improvement typically includes self-assessment and analysis, goal setting and plan development, plan implementation, formative assessment and evaluation, and summative evaluation.

team conducts classroom observations, as well as focus groups and/or interviews with stakeholders. This process concludes with a debriefing and prioritization session intended to help school and district leaders learn about the findings and identify priorities to be addressed. While RADs have noted that this process appears to be valuable, maintaining the distinction between Level 3 school site visits (purely intended as demand-driven assistance) and the Monitoring Site Visits performed by the ESE's accountability office will be critical.

**Table A2: School Leaders' Perceptions of the CSE (SY14)**

	Total # of Respondents	Proportion indicating...			
		Extremely Valuable	Somewhat Valuable	Not Very Valuable	Not at All Valuable
Value to school improvement planning	43	21%	67%	7%	5%
Value to professional development plans	43	16%	65%	14%	5%
		Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	Somewhat Unlikely	Not At All Likely
Likelihood of continuing to use CSE	42	26%	64%	2%	7%

Source: UMDI analysis of data from 2014 DSAC School Leader Surveys. This information is reported for priority districts only.

***Enhancing Capacity to Implement and Sustain Effective Practices: Targeted Assistance through Training, Modeling and Facilitating the Implementation of Effective Practices***

In this second foundational services area, DSAC staff partner with district and school leaders to enhance capacity and support implementation of research-based practices designed to address targeted strategies in improvement plans. Assistance activities include the following:

- Supporting leaders in **planning for and implementing major systems change initiatives** through integrating, aligning, and finding efficiencies within the contexts of districts' overall improvement strategies. Examples of such initiatives include Educator Evaluation, RETELL, and Curriculum Frameworks.
- Supporting districts in **developing effective standards-based curricula** through guidance on curriculum mapping, assessment development, utilizing Model Curriculum Units, and Edwin Teaching & Learning.
- Implementing **effective data use systems and practices** using ESE data tools, including the District Data Team Toolkit, Edwin Analytics, and District Analysis and Review Tools (DART).
- **Understanding, analyzing, and applying ESE data** such as the Student Growth Model, Early Warning Indicator System (EWIS), Performance and Progress Index, and Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).
- **Conducting classroom observations** using the *Learning Walkthrough Guide* to enhance systems for collecting, tracking, analyzing and adjusting instructional practice based on data.
- Supporting school and district leaders to **implement professional development and monitor its impact on classroom practice**.
- Providing training for and supporting ongoing **Professional Learning Communities** to establish systematic structures for improving instruction and organizational culture.
- Supporting implementation of the **Massachusetts Tiered System of Support (MTSS)** by facilitating self-assessment, training, and guidance on establishing components of the system.

- Coaching leaders to **establish the conditions and systems necessary to implement research-based turnaround strategies.**

**There was a notable increase in districts engaged with DSAC around enhancing capacity to implement and sustain effective practices, from 30 districts in SY13 to 55 districts in SY14 (Table A3), representing 98 percent of all DSAC priority districts.** This reinforces prior evaluation findings which indicated that over time, an increasing number of districts became engaged in working with their regional DSAC in multiple service areas.

**Table A3: Utilization of Support Related to Enhancing Capacity (SY14)**

Assistance Activities	Priority Districts	
	#	%
<b>Enhancing Capacity to Implement and Sustain Effective Practices</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>98%</b>
Effective data use systems and practices using ESE data sources	48	86%
Implementation of professional development & monitoring impact	45	80%
Applying ESE data	44	79%
Coaching leaders to establish conditions/systems for turnaround strategies	42	75%
Developing effective standards-based curricula	41	73%
Learning Walkthroughs	33	59%
Planning for / implementing major systems change initiatives	31	55%
Professional Learning Communities	23	41%
Massachusetts Tiered System of Support	20	36%

Source: Analysis of DSAC spreadsheets submitted to UMDI by each of the DSAC regions. Regions may be using some terminology differently. As such, figures derived from this reporting should be viewed as estimates.

**Table A4: Perceived Value of Selected Core Services to Improvement Efforts (SY14)**

Assistance Offerings	Total # of Respondents	Proportion indicating...		
		Extremely Valuable	Somewhat Valuable	Not Very or Not at All Valuable
Learning Walkthroughs	17	47%	41%	12%
Data support	94	54%	40%	5%

Source: UMDI analysis of data from 2014 DSAC surveys, including the School Leader Surveys (Learning Walkthroughs and data support) and the District Leader Surveys (data support). This information is reported for priority districts only.

### **Effective Data Use**

As in the past, the most commonly provided support within this foundational services area related to the implementation of effective data use systems and data practices. **The number of priority districts accessing those supports more than doubled from 22 in SY12 to 48 in SY14.** As noted in prior reports, **this may be attributable, at least in part, to the increasing integration of data specialists into the various areas of DSAC work,** a trend that began to emerge in SY12 and persisted thereafter. It is also important to recognize the priority that ESE has placed on effective data use; one of ESE's core strategies to prepare students for success after high school is using data and technology to support student performance. ESE has invested substantial resources into improving its data systems; developing new user-friendly analytic tools and resources (e.g., Edwin Analytics, Edwin Teaching and Learning, a new Early Warning Indicator System) and funding initiatives designed to support effective data use in districts and schools (e.g., the Professional Learning Communities Expansion Project). Whereas many districts have some internal capacity to support work in

content areas such as ELA and mathematics, relatively few have staff with expertise in such high-level data analysis. Thus many districts turned to DSAC data specialists to help them build capacity in that area.

According to survey data, the specific assistance activities related to effective data use systems and data practices included, but were not limited to: supporting the establishment of district- and/or school-level structures and processes for analyzing and disseminating data (e.g., data teams, Learning Walkthrough teams, Professional Learning Communities), providing tools and resources to support new structures and processes for looking at data, and providing tools and resources to support data analysis and reporting. DSAC teams also supported the implementation of the new Educator Evaluation system (e.g., developing SMART goals using student-level measures) and the understanding of ESE's new accountability system. The new methodology for identifying Level 3 and Level 4 schools became more complicated than the previous method, often requiring analysis of the Composite Performance Index associated with MCAS Alternate Assessment, the Performance and Progress Index, and the student growth model.

District and school leaders continued to indicate that DSAC data support provided them with value. About 20 percent of leaders referenced work related to data when prompted to describe one service provided by their DSAC team that was of particular value to them in SY14.

### ***Learning Walkthroughs***

DSACs worked with 33 priority districts (as opposed to 29 in SY13) 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. School Leader Survey results show that DSAC teams supported the implementation of these practices by providing training in the walkthrough process, facilitating the walkthroughs, and supporting educators in the analysis of walkthrough findings. In SY14, surveyed leaders described focus areas for these Learning Walkthroughs that were similar to those reported in SY13. These included student engagement, the use of differentiated instructional strategies, characteristics of standards-based teaching, questioning techniques used to engage students in higher order thinking, the level of student discourse, and the use of formative assessments. Additionally, one school leader noted that the process was used to observe the implementation of a newly adopted literacy program.

Similar to previous years, the vast majority of school leaders indicated that assistance related to Learning Walkthroughs was a valuable support for them. **Specific benefits cited include improved educator collaboration, common understanding of effective instruction, teachers' examination of their instructional practice, and improved core instructional practices.** Among leaders whose districts had engaged with DSAC around Learning Walkthroughs, 67 percent indicated that they were very likely to use the Learning Walkthrough process next year. This is a decline from SY13 in which 80 percent reported the same.

In an effort to understand how Learning Walkthroughs interact with the new Educator Evaluation system, school leaders were asked to reflect on the relationship between these two areas. The vast majority (80%) indicated that classroom observations conducted through the Learning Walkthrough process complemented those conducted for the Educator Evaluation system. However, half also agreed that the school's focus on Learning Walkthroughs had been limited by the time constraints imposed by classroom observations conducted for the Educator Evaluation process.

### ***Support Related to Curriculum Content and Instruction***

As in SY13, leaders commonly cited mathematics, English language arts and literacy, and effective pedagogy as the substantive areas supported by DSAC services. More specifically and very similar to last year, 32 priority districts reported that mathematics was a substantive focus area of their work with the DSAC, and 31 priority districts reported the same for ELA and literacy. Pedagogy cutting across all content areas (e.g., differentiated

instruction, tiered instruction/interventions, and Universal Design for Learning) was also cited as a focus area by a sizeable proportion of district leaders.

According to ESE documentation, the work conducted by math and ELA content area specialists engaged a majority of DSAC districts and covered a wide range of areas including, but not limited to, the following: curriculum mapping and alignment, support for the implementation of curriculum frameworks and model curriculum units, consulting and planning rigorous instructional activities and using/developing common assessments, and supporting content coaches and instructional leaders to build knowledge in instruction and content.

Districts reported relatively less emphasis on effective instruction for (1) students with disabilities, (2) English language learners (ELLs) and (3) the integration of technical and academic learning. This is unsurprising with regards to ELLs and integration of technical and academic learning given that not all DSAC districts have sizeable ELL populations and relatively few vocational and technical schools have priority status for DSAC assistance. However, it should be noted that pedagogical approaches and strategies that cut across content areas, such as tiered instruction/interventions and Universal Design for Learning, are intended to help schools design and deliver their instruction in ways that address the needs of all students, including students with disabilities and English language learners. Additionally, assistance for targeted populations is embedded within the mathematics work conducted by the DSAC math specialists, who focus first on addressing the challenges of students with disabilities in the context of math performance.

The composition of DSAC teams also contributes to the reduced emphasis in some of these areas. While each region has embedded specialists in mathematics and literacy, support in other areas is less readily available unless team members happen to have backgrounds in those areas. Over the course of the Initiative, the program office has sought resources and strategies to address gaps in its services in various ways.

There is a relatively small number of Level 3 vocational and technical schools across the state that have a unique set of issues that the DSAC teams have struggled to adequately address. In part this struggle reflects the reality that some DSAC teams do not have experience in vocational settings. These schools also find that regional strategies don't typically address their particular issues and needs. In response, DSAC has developed two strategies that they piloted in SY14.

First, multiple offices and staff within ESE worked collaboratively to identify funding to support two partnerships among vocational and technical school teachers.<sup>21</sup> Supported by DSAC staff, each partnership worked with an outside math consultant to develop math professional development intended to address the needs of their schools and develop applications for classroom settings. Two-and-a-half days of training in support of implementation occurred in the summer of 2013 with vocational teachers, special education teachers, and general math education teachers, as well as administrators from some schools. According to ESE, this was a very successful model, and as such the Initiative is working to develop a similar course for literacy.

Second, DSAC worked directly with ESE's Career/Vocational Technical Education (CVTE) Office to identify resources to fund support facilitators that would specifically serve Level 3 vocational and technical schools across the state. In October 2013, two CVTE support facilitators were hired and began working collaboratively with the DSAC teams, one covering the western regions and one the eastern part of the state. The facilitators' work has involved, but has not been limited to, consulting with and conducting observations in the vocational-technical schools, participating in trainings (particularly with the PLC project which three vocational-technical schools are involved in implementing), and curriculum mapping. While in some DSAC regions, the amount of CVTE facilitator support was deemed sufficient, a couple of Regional Assistance Directors remarked that their

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<sup>21</sup> One partnership is in Eastern Massachusetts and the other in Western Massachusetts.

regions would require more CVTE facilitator time or an additional CVTE facilitator position to adequately meet school-level needs.

Support for implementation of the components of MTSS increased significantly in SY14, with 20 districts engaged in this work compared to five districts in the prior year. Last year, the Office of Tiered System of Support (OTSS) was brought under the same ESE office that manages the DSAC Initiative which may have led to greater integration of DSAC and OTSS work in SY14. One vehicle for deepening this integration is The Partnership Project (TPP), a federally funded project in which six districts, one in each region, receive intensive training and support in developing their own tiered systems of support and will serve as a local model for other districts in their regions. Five of the six districts selected to serve as model sites are either DSAC priority districts or legacy districts. The OTSS and the DSAC teams have coordinated their work and are partnering with one another on this project. The first year of MTSS implementation has been devoted to self-assessment work and baseline data collection. ESE in conjunction with the DSAC and OTSS is working to determine which tools and strategies provided by the outside providers will be used when the project is expanded to include more than just the six grantee districts.

DSACs, to some extent, have been integrating their knowledge of the MTSS into their work with other districts in anticipation of scale-up of this work. For instance, the DSACs have been working with the OTSS office to provide assistance to other districts that received planning grants intended to support MTSS self-assessments, prioritization, and planning related to one or more components of the MTSS.

### ***Professional Learning Communities***

In all, 23 DSAC priority districts (41%) worked with their DSAC teams on the implementation of professional learning communities (PLCs) in SY14. This is a slight increase from SY13, when 21 districts were engaged with their DSAC in this area. In SY13, some districts already had PLC structures and processes in place and DSAC teams provided support for their ongoing efforts to effectively implement PLCs. That same year, four DSAC districts in the Pioneer Valley and Berkshires+ regions participated in cohort 1 of the RTTT PLC Expansion Project. This project is intended to support effective data use—one of ESE’s core strategies—by supporting the development of structures and processes through which districts can implement data-driven, collaborative inquiry to improve instruction and increase student achievement. Pilot districts were trained using a new set of tools and guidance for PLCs.

In SY14, seventeen DSAC districts drawn from all six DSAC regions are participating in cohort 2 of the PLC Expansion project—over one-third of priority districts. DSAC staff participated with their districts in the trainings provided by the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE). As a result of talks between CCE and the DSACs, the trainings for the second year of the project included approaches to tie together the PLC work with several other initiatives, including Learning Walkthroughs, District-determined Measures, and the Educator Evaluation. DSAC teams also participated in the embedded coaching process to build DSAC team members’ capacity to provide implementation support. The CCE coaches also attended DSAC team meetings to coordinate and plan their collaborative work with the districts. These shadowing efforts were aimed at easing DSAC’s transition to playing a larger role in supporting the PLC initiative once RTTT funding ends, as it was unclear whether ESE would be able to identify additional fiscal resources to extend CCE’s role beyond its second year.

### ***Professional Learning Networks: Enhancing Regional Opportunities to Learn About and Share Effective Practices to Improve Student Achievement***

DSAC groups its activities in this foundational services area into the following categories:

- **Professional Development** – Access to a menu of high-quality courses, sponsored or approved by ESE, in leadership, mathematics, literacy, sheltered content, data use, and inclusive practices / special

education. DSAC staff assist with planning and recommend professional development from the DSAC menu, but do not directly provide the training. Courses may be delivered regionally or within the district.

- **Networks and Learning Communities for Educators** – DSAC staff convene regional professional learning opportunities, including networks, to support capacity building in districts on topics including math, literacy, data use, and leadership.

### **Professional Development**

The DSAC model of professional development incorporates training and support components for participants, administrators, and coaches. Specifically, this includes joint professional development sessions for different cohorts of teachers, administrative support modules, and additional training for site facilitators or coaches designed to help them provide embedded support for implementation. Similar to last year, survey responses from leaders of 44 districts show that 89 percent sent teams of teachers to DSAC-sponsored courses, 61 percent sent administrators to participate in support modules, and 55 percent sent administrators to participate in full courses with their teacher teams.

As shown in Table A5, in SY14 **1174 educators from 51 priority districts were participating in professional development activities and/or courses supported by DSAC grants, addressing a range of topics, including special education and inclusive practices, literacy, and math.**<sup>22</sup> Similar to last year, while special education training was accessed by the largest number of districts, literacy had the highest number of participating educators, accounting for approximately half of the total number of estimated participants.

**Table A5: Estimated Participation in Professional Development supported by DSAC grants, by Topic (SY14)**

Professional Development Topics	DSAC Districts	Number of Participants
Special Education and Inclusive Practices/MFA	49	296
Literacy	19	597
Mathematics	21	281
Total	51	1174

Source: Professional development course enrollment worksheets provided by ESE. Reflects the number of seats purchased; actual numbers of participants may have differed. The total count of participating DSAC districts represents an unduplicated count. The total number of enrollments likely is not an unduplicated count given that some individuals may have enrolled in multiple courses or professional development opportunities.

As in SY13, leaders viewed DSAC-supported professional development as valuable to improvement efforts. Collectively, the leaders of responding priority districts seemed to place particular value on the use of other contractors as well as their own district staff to deliver professional development, with slightly over 60 percent describing both of these options as *very valuable*. For professional development using district staff, perceptions of value were very similar to last year, whereas for PD using other contractors, the proportion of district leaders indicating that this option was *very valuable* increased by 11 percentage points. In contrast to these two professional development options, the proportion of district leaders who reported that DSAC-sponsored courses were *very valuable* is lower (46 percent). It is worth noting that this proportion increased slightly from last year

<sup>22</sup> WIDA course enrollments were not included in this year's report because these were supported through other funds in FY14.

in which 38 percent of district leaders reported the same. The RSS Office believes that possible reasons for the lower proportion of district leaders include market saturation or the higher cost of DSAC-sponsored courses.

**Table A6: Perceived Value of DSAC-Supported Professional Development to Improvement Efforts (SY14)**

Assistance Offerings	Total # of District Leaders	Proportion indicating...		
		Very Valuable	Somewhat Valuable	Not at All Valuable
DSAC-sponsored courses	44	46%	39%	16%
PD offerings using other contractors	42	62%	29%	10%
PD using district staff	44	61%	30%	9%

Source: UMDI analysis of data from 2014 DSAC District Leader Survey. Reported for priority districts only, with each district represented once.

The benefits of DSAC-supported professional development reported by district leaders were consistent with the broader perceived value of this work to improvement efforts. Overall, sizeable proportions of leaders indicated that this professional development *contributed greatly* to a shared understanding of content, shared instructional approaches, and shared expectations for implementation of professional development content and pedagogy. Respondents also cited positive outcomes of the professional development on administrators' ability to monitor implementation and support teacher collaboration, as well as facilitators' or coaches' abilities to provide embedded classroom support. **Taken together, these ratings continue to reflect positively on the professional development model espoused by ESE**, which includes (1) cohorts of teachers participating in the same professional development experiences, (2) participation of administrators in administrative support modules and/or full courses with their teachers, and (3) participation of site facilitators or coaches in additional training designed to support implementation.

**Table A7: Perceived Contribution of DSAC-Supported Professional Development (SY14)**

	Total # of District Leaders	Proportion indicating...			
		Greatly	Moderately	Slightly	Not at All
Shared understanding of content	40	35%	45%	15%	5%
Shared instructional approaches	40	35%	45%	15%	5%
Shared expectations for implementation of PD content and pedagogy	39	36%	31%	28%	5%
Administrators' ability to monitor implementation	38	24%	40%	26%	11%
Increased administrator support for providing opportunities for teacher collaboration around PD content and pedagogy	41	32%	34%	24%	10%
Site facilitators' and/or coaches' ability to provide embedded classroom support	38	29%	32%	34%	5%

Source: UMDI analysis of data from 2014 DSAC District Leader Survey. Reported for priority districts only, with each district represented once.

### **Networks and Learning Communities**

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. Regional networks have helped DSACs to engage a larger number of districts and educators than would be feasible through in-district assistance activities alone. Throughout the course of the Initiative, the networks not only allowed for engagement with current priority districts but also served as one forum through which DSACs could continue to engage former DSAC districts. In some cases, the DSACs were also able to include additional districts.

For the most part, **the trend toward increasing integration of networks continued in SY13 and was maintained in SY14, reflecting a larger movement toward integration of services across the DSAC Initiative as a whole.** In SY13 and SY14, four regions—the Berkshires+, Central, the Pioneer Valley, and the Southeast—as compared to two regions in SY12, hosted integrated networks that covered a number of high-interest topics, including but not limited to content area topics, data use and practices, leadership, and the MTSS. Networking events also provided districts with opportunities to learn more about statewide initiatives, for instance the District-determined Measures and the new science frameworks. As such, a number of ESE staff were involved and presented at these network meetings. ESE staff also noted that Level 2 districts are becoming the point of information dissemination to Level 3 districts through leadership network meetings, and they hope this trend will continue.

The Northeast region continued to host separate networks for mathematics, literacy, and high school leadership. The last DSAC region, Greater Boston, discontinued its regional networks in SY13 in recognition that many of its districts were already engaged in other ESE-sponsored networks<sup>23</sup> and thus their available resources would be more effectively deployed to other support activities, including an emphasis on cross-district projects and partnerships. That said, while supporting cross-district projects, in SY14 Greater Boston also did develop a new high school math network which grew organically out of a specific need in the region.

Reflective of the Initiative's demand-driven model and the increasing emphasis on specialized services, two regions recently developed and hosted specialized networks. Through a piloting effort, ESE made DSAC grant funds available to support regional projects addressing areas of need identified by the regional DSAC teams. Districts organizing and/or participating in regional activities were eligible to apply for additional DSAC grant funding to take part in those projects. For example, the Southeast developed a middle school math network focusing on special education that involves eight DSAC districts. The Northeast, on the other hand, established a WIDA-related network focusing on English language learners. The four districts participating in the WIDA network involved teams of teachers that came together to write and develop lesson plans in math, science, social studies, and ELA for one grade level. The Northeast also implemented two seminar series: one in math, with a focus on math curriculum standards, and the other in literacy, focusing on adolescent literacy and reading informational texts. There is also a new workshop series on curriculum and instructional leadership. From ESE's perspective, this piloting effort was a positive development that allowed for a regionally adaptive approach to building capacity across districts.

Consistent with last year's findings about the value of networks, **all surveyed district leaders described ESE networks as valuable to their improvement efforts, including approximately two-thirds who characterized them as *very valuable*.** ESE network participants also continued to be overwhelmingly positive about the outcomes of their experiences with networking events. **Strong majorities reported either great or moderate contributions in a number of areas, including their efforts to: gain familiarity with new ESE initiatives, exchange ideas with peers from other districts, acquire new knowledge or learn new strategies, and apply the acquired knowledge or strategies in their own districts.**

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<sup>23</sup> Many of the DSAC priority districts in the Greater Boston region are larger urban districts that were already being served by ESE's Urban Superintendent's Network, Urban Literacy Network, Urban Mathematics Network, and Urban Science Network prior to the launch of the DSAC Initiative in 2009. DSAC content area specialists attended those meetings and offered related in-district implementation support.

**Table A8: Perceived Contribution of ESE Networking Events (SY14)**

	Total # of responses	Proportion indicating...			
		Greatly	Moderately	Slightly	Not at All
Gain familiarity with new ESE initiatives and/or policies	36	33%	61%	6%	0%
Exchange ideas with peers from other districts	36	58%	28%	11%	3%
Learn new knowledge and/or strategies	36	39%	47%	14%	0%
Apply the new knowledge and/or strategies acquired at the network in your district	36	28%	47%	25%	0%

Source: UMDI analysis of data from 2014 DSAC District Leader Survey. Reported for priority districts only, with each district represented once.

### **Funding and Resource Allocation: Targeted Assistance and Improvement Grants**

#### **DSAC Targeted Assistance and Improvement Grants**

ESE offers targeted assistance and improvement grants to DSAC priority districts which provide limited funding to support participation in professional development, networks, and initiatives to support systemic approaches to accelerate student achievement. In order to support the effective use of these limited resources, regional DSAC teams assisted districts in planning for these grants and continued to help them 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 priority districts to discuss the grants and to offer assistance in further assessing their needs and identifying appropriate targeted assistance and/or professional development opportunities that could help to address those needs. They also worked with districts to identify other funding sources that could be utilized to support certain activities, thus freeing up DSAC funding for initiatives without other viable sources of financial support.

DSAC priority districts are also expected to consult with their DSAC Regional Assistance Directors as they develop their plans for other federal and state grants targeting district improvement, school improvement and/or teacher capacity-building (e.g., Title I reservation funds, Literacy Partnership Grants). These consultations are intended to: facilitate district reflection on strategic resource management, ensure that funds are well-aligned with their improvement priorities; and support the identification of implementation and impact benchmarks for district and school strategic initiatives to build and sustain capacity within the limitations of available resources.

In SY14, the DSAC grants provided 1.9 million in support to 64 districts. As in previous years, grants primarily targeted districts with priority status through a current Level 3 or Level 4 designation. Beginning in SY12, legacy districts have been eligible for grant funding at a reduced level.<sup>24</sup> This change responded 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.

As in previous years, these grants could be used in a variety of ways, including to support educator participation in regional DSAC courses or in-district professional development using contractors vetted by the Department;

<sup>24</sup> The program office currently uses a per pupil allocation to assign grant amounts to priority districts. The per pupil amount for legacy districts is 50% of the rate used for priority districts.

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.

According to analysis of data from a survey of district leaders, 38 responding DSAC districts indicated that they used grant funds to support professional development through the use of other contractors or district staff, while 25 districts reported using those funds to access DSAC-sponsored course offerings (as described in relation to the Professional Learning Networks foundational services area). These numbers are very similar to those reported in SY13. In SY12, evidence suggested an increasing emphasis on the use of funds to support in-district, as opposed to regional or statewide professional development. As described by ESE and DSAC team members that year, an increasing number of DSAC districts had opted to use funds to contract directly with vendors to provide ESE-vetted courses and trainings within their own districts.<sup>25</sup> This shift, it was noted, reflected a desire on the part of districts to involve larger cohorts of teachers to maximize the impact of professional development. This trend is also reflective of the fact that beginning in 2011–2012, the RSS Office recognized the power of this approach, and through the DSACs, began encouraging districts with enough staff and grant funds to opt for in-district professional development and support. Simultaneously, districts and schools were encouraged to use data to make district- and school-level decisions about common needs. This trend appears to have continued in SY13 and in SY14 as approximately 50 percent of courses (in mathematics, ELA, and other areas) were offered in-district. It is worth noting that in SY14, only three DSAC regions—Berkshires+, Pioneer Valley, and Central—offered regional courses to their districts. The survey data also reveal that 57 percent of responding DSAC districts used those funds to support in-district work with their regional DSAC. In-district services provided by DSAC team members are delivered at no cost to districts; DSAC grant funds are typically used to cover teacher stipends to support their participation in DSAC-delivered activities (e.g., Learning Walkthroughs, attending network meetings). Lastly, half of the responding districts indicated that the funds supported staff collaboration through the use of other contractors or district staff (e.g., for curriculum mapping and formative assessment development).

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<sup>25</sup> Districts may also use DSAC grant funds to purchase professional development from vendors that are not on the list of DSAC-vetted providers. Districts that use other vendors must provide additional documentation in their grant application demonstrating that the course addresses ESE’s new professional development standards and provides an administrator module.