

February 2022

Dear District, School, and Educator Preparation Colleagues,

As schools and districts work to manage ongoing staffing challenges, a key strategy to addressing both short- *and* long-term staffing needs continues to rest in the partnerships between districts and educator preparation providers. Over the past few weeks, the Commissioner has engaged directly with principals, superintendents, HR directors, and preparation program leadership. They discussed both existing and new ways to bring student teachers into classrooms, with an emphasis on meaningful, supportive placements that meet both immediate and long-term staffing needs. The following recommendations and flexibilities are designed to help districts and preparation program providers work together to place and support student teachers, emergency licensed educators, and paraprofessionals across multiple roles for the remainder of the 2021-22 school year and beyond.

Student Teachers

With more than 8,000 prospective teachers currently in the pipeline, we can expand opportunities for student teachers to work directly with K12 students and mentor teachers as they advance toward full licensure. The following recommendations reflect promising practices already underway in many districts throughout the Commonwealth. We encourage districts and preparation providers to partner closely to identify mutually beneficial approaches to supporting student teachers.

- **Pre-Practicum Experiences for Teacher Candidates:** Student teachers in the pre-practicum stage of preparation are making critical connections between theory and practice. Opportunities to work with small groups of K12 students, observe a mentor teacher, and receive feedback are integral to their preparation at this stage. Roles such as **tutors**, **small group support**, and **teacher aides** are ideal for these student teachers, as they provide targeted opportunities for direct engagement, scheduling flexibility, and proximity to feedback from a host teacher or program supervisor.
 - *Considerations for schools and districts:* Avoid more permanent placements (e.g., building substitute) that would interfere with ongoing coursework or demand greater levels of readiness. Coordinating small cohorts of pre-practicum students in a school or district also provides valuable opportunities for peer support and collective learning.
 - *Considerations for preparation providers:* Consider shifting coursework to afternoons or evenings, if possible, to allow for more flexibility for placements in schools. Work with districts and candidates to identify both stage 1 (observe and practice) and stage 2 (direct engagement with PK-12 students) in a given role, with opportunities to receive feedback on their practice. If a candidate is unable to meet the expectations outlined in the [Pre-Prac Guidelines](#), a waiver may be issued and documented in the candidate's file (see the [October 2021 Advisory](#) which further outlines flexibilities). Considerations for additional flexibilities can also be made based on previous experience (see [Program Flexibilities Advisory](#)).
- **Practicum Equivalent Roles for Teacher Candidates.** Student teachers approaching or within their final practicum placement may be well-positioned to assume more permanent roles in a school, such as a **long-term substitute** position or **teacher-of-record**. More advanced in their preparation, they bring important content and pedagogical knowledge to a classroom, and roles like this may position them for potential long-term employment in the school or district. Ultimately, any hours spent in a long-term substitute or teacher-of-record

position *within their licensure area* may count as practicum hours and be applied toward their license. Districts should work closely with preparation providers to determine if/when a teacher candidate is ready for a full-time role like this.

- *Considerations for districts:* Any practicum equivalent role must be in the licensure area sought by the candidate. Districts should work with preparation partners to identify a supervising practitioner/mentor teacher within the school to provide feedback and support to the candidate, and support regular observations of the candidate's practice (in-person or virtual) so they may successfully complete the [Candidate Assessment of Performance](#). Where possible, hiring candidates into teacher-of-record roles rather than long-term substitute positions is preferable.
- *Considerations for preparation providers:* The full set of required practicum field based experience hours, as per [regulations](#), remain in place, including hours in full responsibility of the licensure role. Up to half of the practicum may be waived based on previous and current roles and experiences. Traditional modes of observing a candidate hired into a practicum equivalent role may be expanded to be responsive to the position requirements, as well as health and safety needs. For example, supervisors might view a recorded lesson that was delivered in person or virtually, or observe a lesson "live" through video technology. Program Supervisors may also take on an expanded role to provide support and feedback to the teacher candidate in the practicum/practicum equivalent.

Emergency Licensed Educators & Paraprofessionals

Emergency license holders and paraprofessionals are playing a critical role in supporting staffing strategies in response to the pandemic. These educators bring varying degrees of content knowledge and/or educational attainment to their roles, and advancing to a more permanent license often requires a more customized route to meet individual educators' needs. Recommendations and supports for these educators include:

- **Pursuing Permanent Licensure.** Preparation providers may integrate additional flexibilities into approved licensure programs to support these educators in advancing to a more permanent license, so they can stay in the classroom and contribute to districts' long-term staffing needs (see [Program Flexibilities Advisory](#)). Specifically, approved preparation programs may waive certain course or field-based experience requirements, depending on an educator's prior coursework completion and school-based experience, in order to provide more flexible and responsive program options. Many districts are already partnering with local preparation providers to make available flexible options for paraprofessionals and emergency licensed educators at discounted rates, such as online or evening classes, MTEL preparation, and supervisory support. If districts haven't done so already, they should reach out to a regional provider to explore ways to support paraprofessionals and emergency licensed educators to pursue their teaching license.
- **MTEL Alternatives & Voucher Support.** If the MTEL is the remaining requirement for earning a license, the Department is providing the following supports:
 - **MTEL Vouchers:** The Department has purchased and made available five hundred MTEL vouchers to support emergency licensed educators employed in SY2020-21. We are prioritizing individuals who are taking an MTEL by 6/30/22. Districts and educator preparation programs may also have available vouchers, and many are working together to make these available to emergency license holders.

- **Alternative Licensure Assessments:** In [October 2020](#), the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved a pilot of alternative licensure assessments. To learn more about currently approved alternative assessments for the Communication and Literacy Skills and Subject Matter Knowledge MTELEs, please see the link [here](#). (The Department will update this webpage as additional alternatives are approved.)
- **Identify a mentor:** Educators who have passed the test may serve as valuable resources for knowing how to prepare. Pairing educators who hold specific licenses with those seeking the same license can be an effective tool to support guidance on preparation.

General Recommendations

Regular lines of communication between districts and preparation partner(s) are essential to a responsive, nimble, and effective staffing strategy. Monthly meetings, transparent communication around staffing needs (both immediate and anticipatory), regular resume-sharing, pre-emptive/proactive recruiting, and dedicated staff to coordinate onboarding and supervisory supports are hallmarks of effective and long-lasting partnerships. DESE will continue to encourage these partnerships in support of broader talent management efforts, keeping in mind potential long-term impacts on the educator pipeline. More resources and strategies are in the DESE-issued Talent Guide, available [here](#).

Thank you again for all that you're doing for Massachusetts students, teachers, and communities, as we work together to support one another during these unprecedented times.

With gratitude,
The Office of Educator Effectiveness