MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

Testimony of Aaron Polansky, M.A.S.S. President,
on K-3 Early Literacy Implementation

Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) Meeting

November 16, 2026

Good morning, Chair Craven, Secretary Zrike, Commissioner Martinez, and members of the Board.

My name is Aaron Polansky. I am the Superintendent-Director of Old Colony RVTHS, M.A.S.S. President, and Immediate Past-President of the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators.

Beliefs inform expectations. Expectations drive outcomes. But it is our systems that determine whether those outcomes become a reality.

I believe the Department and the superintendents across this Commonwealth share fundamental beliefs about what students deserve. We share high expectations for student achievement, educational excellence, and accountability.

Our challenge is not a difference in beliefs or expectations. Our challenge is in the systems being used to implement them. Those systems, and the voices that drive them, deserve our attention.

Too often, initiatives are developed and advanced without meaningful consideration of the voices responsible for implementation.

Listening tours are valuable, but listening and hearing are two very different things. When concerns raised during early conversations must be revisited months later, often requiring intervention at higher levels of leadership, we need to ask ourselves whether our systems are working.

Consider investments in High-Quality Instructional Materials. Districts were encouraged through grants to adopt designated resources identified by the Department, only to see classifications subsequently change a short time later.

Consider the recent concerns from vocational leaders surrounding MEFA Pathways. Practitioners expressed legitimate concerns about flexibility, duplication, and existing investments in alternative platforms during listening tours. Those concerns ultimately required the Commissioner's attention.

Our Commissioner's experience as a practitioner brings an important understanding of the realities facing our schools. His willingness to engage and help navigate these challenges matters, but we should not need the Commissioner to resolve matters that could have been addressed through meaningful collaboration much earlier in the process.

There is an important distinction between a product and a curriculum. A product does not transform a classroom. People do. It is what skilled educators do with resources that ultimately determines student outcomes. There are skilled educators who could transform classrooms with limited resources, and other educators who may have less of an impact despite being provided all the resources in the world.

People drive our work. There is no substitute. Our people need to be supported, and better yet, inspired.

When we reduce educational improvement to data points (sometimes faulty), compliance measures, and prescribed products, we risk losing sight of the people who make the difference.

Superintendents and educators across Massachusetts increasingly feel as though they are drinking from a firehose. New requirements, overlapping initiatives, compressed timelines, and unanswered questions leave little room for thoughtful implementation.

Local control matters. The expertise of practitioners matters. When questions are raised, those asking deserve clear, timely answers.

This is not an argument against accountability. It is an argument for better systems of accountability, communication, and implementation.

We need structures that:

- elevate practitioner voice before decisions are finalized;
- distinguish meaningful feedback from procedural listening;
- eliminate unnecessary duplication, and;
- respect the capacity of our schools and educators.

I offer these thoughts not in opposition to the Department or its leadership, but in support of a shared mission and the importance of the people doing this work.

Ultimately, we cannot claim to value the voices of educators if our systems do not reflect what those voices are telling us. Beliefs inform expectations. Expectations drive outcomes.

If we want better outcomes for our students, we must build better systems, in collaboration with, and in support of the people who serve them.

Thank you.