



STUDENT OPPORTUNITY ACT | Update | 2024-2025

Lowell Public Schools (LPS) is a large urban Gateway district in the Commonwealth serving approximately 15,000 students annually. LPS's student population identifies as 41% Latino, 21% white, 7.5% Black, and 26% Asian. In addition, 28% of students are identified as English learners, 20% students have disabilities, and 73% low-income. Based on the district's data described below, LPS needs to work on multiple fronts to effectively address the needs of all students. Examining progress on core MCAS achievement and growth metrics over the past five years, LPS concludes that the performance of Hispanic/Latino students, English learners, and students with disabilities has decreased. Notably, white and Asian students have seen gains since 2019, underscoring disparities in academic achievement.

Taking a closer look at the data, LPS identifies disparities in performance between student groups emerging as early as third grade - especially in English Language Arts (ELA), and widening throughout middle school into high school. The widest performance gaps are observed among English learners and students with disabilities at the high school level. These trends highlight disparities in learning experiences across grade levels. Additionally, in reviewing trends in elementary schools, a positive highlight emerges from the implementation of full-day pre-kindergarten programs. Latino students who participated in the program exhibited significantly higher proficiency rates, narrowing performance gaps. Similarly, students with disabilities in the pre-kindergarten program made notable progress compared to their peers who did not participate.

Additionally, college attendance across student groups is disproportionate, with an average of 31 percent Hispanic/Latino students, 31 percent of English learners, and 26% students with disabilities pursuing a college education, which is significantly lower than the 50 percent average for the district. This highlights a need for targeted interventions in high school to enhance post-secondary success for traditionally marginalized populations. Across all grades, students and staff report the need for increased access to SEL and Mental Health resources. Research shows that students who have access to mental health resources are better equipped to manage their emotions and focus on their studies. Similarly, staff members who receive support for their mental well-being can perform their duties more effectively. By openly addressing mental health, LPS aims to reduce stigma surrounding mental health issues for students and families, particularly in our identified student groups.

LPS has seen lower student engagement across the district over the past five years based on Instructional Walk-through data and attendance data. In summary, our deeper analysis has revealed three critical areas requiring attention.

Early Intervention and Readiness: Disparities in performance between student groups are apparent as early as third grade, particularly in ELA, underscoring the need for early literacy interventions.

Middle School Challenges: Growing challenges in middle school with student engagement contribute to increased disparities in ELA and math MCAS performance among Latino, English learners, and students with disabilities, demonstrating the need for additional SEL and Mental Health resources.

High School Engagement and College Persistence: Performance gaps remain wide in high school, accompanied by declining student engagement and low college attendance rates.

Below is a summary of how we plan to address the disparities across student groups that were revealed in our deeper analysis.

Early Intervention and Readiness: Expand our full-day pre-kindergarten program for 4-year-olds, which has shown promising results for our Latino students and students with disabilities. Implement a robust early literacy program for grades pre-K to 3 at our elementary schools, starting with a curriculum review of current Early Literacy programs.

Middle School Challenges: Create a comprehensive Mental Health, Behavior, and SEL five-year plan with particular focus on student engagement strategies for improved academic and attendance, with particular focus on Hispanic/Latino students, English learners, and students with disabilities.

High School Engagement and College Persistence: Enhance the Early College program at Lowell High School, focused primarily on students underrepresented in higher education and aligned to the Massachusetts Early College designation criteria. Focus on academic, SEL, and Mental Health interventions to counter declining student engagement, particularly in high school, and enhance college attendance rates across all student groups.

Lowell Public Schools has engaged in meaningful dialogue with families and caregivers throughout the years. LPS prides itself on its use of strategies that ensure inclusivity and responsiveness.

Key Engagement Initiatives: Integrated Family Engagement: LPS prioritizes family engagement in all professional learning and cultural initiatives led by the Chief Equity Officer.

Engagement Plan: Developed with the Chief Equity Officer and community-based organizations, this plan ensures culturally sensitive and responsive strategies.

Bilingual Parent Liaisons: Established a program where LPS engages parents through bilingual liaisons who share information and encourage caregiver involvement.

Early Childhood Home-Visit Program: An instituted program allowing staff to build stronger relationships with families.

Quarterly Leadership Meetings: Ongoing dialogue with PTO, School Site Councils, SpEdPAC, and ELPAC leadership for transparent communication.

Diverse Engagement Opportunities: LPS provides formal and informal opportunities for engagement, removing barriers to participation (e.g., social media outlets, childcare, food, a variety of times and formats). In-person and Virtual Workshops and Webinars, and Family Leadership Institute: LPS hosts sessions on a variety of topics for families in our community. Community Dialogues: Focused on Asian and Latino communities, further enrich our understanding and inclusivity efforts, ensuring that all stakeholders have a voice and are involved in our initiatives.

As three of the evidence-based programs listed are a part of ongoing efforts, continued from the 2020 SOA Plan and other priority district initiatives, the district will continue to engage with the stakeholders impacted by the plan through ongoing engagement efforts as it continues to implement and adapt these initiatives. These efforts will include continued attendance at SpEdPAC and ELPAC meetings and school site council meetings, and other task forces, discussing the initiatives with union leadership, and continued surveys from the family and student community and other stakeholders.

Measuring Family Engagement: Annual Family Engagement Survey: Conducted district-wide to gather feedback and assess the impact of initiatives. Consistent System for Attendance and Participation: Implemented to measure and analyze parent attendance, providing valuable data. Consistent System for Social Media Data Gathering: Implemented to measure responses (visits, likes, and answers) to the LPS webpage, Facebook, and Instagram, as well as direct phone outreach.

Engaging stakeholders is crucial for the success of Lowell Public Schools' initiatives. LPS has developed comprehensive strategies to ensure effective outreach. LPS partners with School Committee members, City of Lowell administrators, community partners such as the Barr Foundation, University of Massachusetts Lowell, Middlesex Community College, Fortaleza, and Greater Lowell Community Foundation. Through these efforts, we engaged the following groups: focus group of parents/caregivers, focus group of educators, focus group of local nonprofits and businesses, special education parent advisory council, EL parent advisory council, United Teachers of Lowell, discussions with local elected and appointed officials, and local community organizations.

Over the past two years, LPS has created a Department of Mental Health, Behavior, and SEL comprised of a Director of Mental Health, Behavior, and SEL, a Coordinator of Social Emotional Learning, and a District Support Specialist for Mental Health, Behavior, and SEL through grant funding. This department has assessed the district's SEL curriculum, assessments, and staff professional development. Moving forward, LPS will continue to work on focusing on the whole student, including the importance of students' social-emotional competencies alongside their academic competencies. As one of our focus areas for this three-year plan, by 2027, LPS will fully develop a five-year comprehensive school mental health plan that values inclusivity and equity, where every member, student, family, community partner, and staff collaborate to

serve the best interests and needs of students and families. As part of this plan, LPS will implement a SEL competency screener districtwide in grades 5-8. This expands on our adoption and implementation of SEL curriculum across elementary and secondary schools over the past 3 years. Implementation of the screener will include high-quality, aligned training for staff to support the administration and interpretation of the screener, guided by the Director of Mental Health, Behavior, and SEL. In addition to building the capacity of our existing staff, LPS plans to provide specialized professional development to staff regarding an MTSS response to students' social, emotional, and mental health needs.

In summary, by FY27, we will have added the following components to our district:

- Fund the Mental Health Departmental staff on the local budget;
- Assess and adopt high-quality instructional materials for SEL instruction, grades K-12;
- Adopt a screener for SEL competencies, grades 5-8, and
- High-Quality Professional Development for staff.

Professional development on screener implementation and interpretation will be conducted through a lens of culturally and linguistically sustaining practices, ensuring that all staff have a common language and approach to meet the unique needs of the students identified in the Hispanic and English learner student subgroups. Mental health presentations will be completed by staff in the Mental Health, Behavior, and SEL departments at the SPEDPAC and MLLPAC meetings.

LPS is in the early planning phases of developing a comprehensive approach to its early literacy programming. Research will guide the selection and implementation of an effective early literacy program, which will include:

Establishing school-based literacy teams, including school and district personnel, to:

Review high-quality, evidence-based literacy curricular materials for pre-K and grades K-3.

Review assessments that identify instructional needs and progress monitoring.

Review for differentiations, scaffolding, and accommodations for the core curriculum that ensures equitable access for all students.

Review the implementation process of evidence-based interventions to address individual student needs.

Review initial and ongoing professional development and support to teachers, leaders, and support staff, through embedded instructional coaches and external PD providers.

Throughout the rest of this school year, LPS will begin planning for the initial stages of assessing current curricula and reviewing additional high-quality instructional materials to determine the most appropriate robust early literacy program for grades K-3. Key activities will include:

- Establishing school-based literacy teams,
- Ensuring instructional coaches and interventionists are in place at all schools,
- Providing teachers and school leaders with a mechanism to have a voice in the selection of the high-quality curriculum, and
- Selecting high-quality instructional material.

In Year FY25, we will focus primarily on reviewing ELA materials to support core instruction in pre-kindergarten and early elementary literacy. With support from instructional coaches, educators, students, and families, LPS will review and adopt instructional materials, participate in ongoing curriculum-specific professional development, and identify screening assessments that will inform instruction.

In the following years, we will focus more intensively on the effective implementation of the high-quality instructional materials and selecting appropriate interventions. Teachers will receive training on specific evidence-based interventions that complement the adopted instructional materials, while instructional coaches provide ongoing support to educators to implement core materials and interventions appropriately. LPS expects the early literacy program to be fully implemented across grades K-3 by FY26, with an established walk-through process in place to monitor fidelity of implementation.

Metrics

- Increase in the number of students exiting the “at-risk” category on iReady MOY and EOY;
- Increase in % of students meeting or exceeding the 3rd Grade ELA MCAS, and
- Increase in the number of students exiting the “at-risk” category on DIBELS MClass (early literacy screener).

In close partnership with Middlesex Community College, Lowell High School (LHS) will expand on its existing high-quality Early College program. LPS/LHS’s goal has been to serve students who have been historically underrepresented among postsecondary degree holders in our community. LHS's Early College program is aligned to the core model components outlined in the Commonwealth’s designation criteria and has acquired the state's Early College designation. LHS will expand programming to reach more students and families.

LPS hired a staff member dedicated to Early College management. This position builds and maintains a very strong and strategic relationship with our community and college partners, ensuring coordination of marketing materials, class schedules, and student outcomes.

LPS uses the five guiding principles of the Early College designation to design and enhance the program:

Equitable access: The LHS guidance department will work closely with middle school guidance counselors to begin recruiting students and their families in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades to emphasize the importance of the opportunity the program provides. We will focus on recruiting

students who express interest and commitment to Early College, but without consideration of prior academic performance.

LHS staff will work closely with Middlesex Community College staff to align curriculum and develop annual memoranda of agreement.

Further ensuring that as many students take advantage of Early College as possible, some courses will be taught by Middlesex Community College faculty during the regular high school day; students will take classes on the college campus in the 11th and 12th grades at no charge.

Guided academic pathways: Beginning in 10th grade, Early College students follow a sequenced set of courses aligned with local labor market needs, which are gateways to college-level courses that are college credit-bearing.

Students will earn at least 12 transferable college credits, but our block schedule will allow students to take significantly more credits – up to a full year’s worth of college credits.

Enhanced student supports: LPS will encourage students to access supports offered by our college partners, and Early College staff at Lowell High School will provide enhanced supports on the high school campus.

With our college partners, we will implement an early warning system that alerts LHS staff to points where students are struggling. Robust, individualized academic and guidance supports will then be developed and provided.

Relevant connection to career: LPS will offer multiple experiences that connect college with career. The 10th-grade advisory will include career orientation, with goal-mapping and exposure opportunities through business partners. College coursework will introduce students to opportunities in their chosen career pathways, and internship opportunities will be aligned with our pathways.

Robust partnerships: For years, many of our students have participated in Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment coursework with our college partners (Middlesex Community College and University of Massachusetts Lowell). While we recognize that dual enrollment and Early College are not the same, this has allowed us to establish close relationships.

Metrics

- Increase in pathway/program enrollment rates,
- Increase in 4- and 5-year graduation rates,
- Increase in college enrollment/persistence rates for all students, and
- Increase in college enrollment/persistence rates for students with disabilities, English Learners, and Hispanic/Latino students.