



District and School Assistance Center (DSAC) Evaluation:

Annual DSAC Evaluation Report: 2013

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

September 2013



Executive Summary

Introduction

Early in the 2009-2010 school year (SY10), 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 Initiative significantly expanded the Department's capacity to provide targeted assistance and improvement services to a broad range of struggling districts, including many small and medium-sized districts that might otherwise lack the infrastructure and human resources to deliver the complex array of supports necessary to further their educational improvement efforts.

The DSAC Initiative is overseen by the Regional Statewide System of Support 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. They collaborate with the districts in their regions to deliver customized and targeted assistance services to support self-assessment as well as development and implementation of effective improvement plans. 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. Additionally, the teams plan and implement professional development, networking, study groups and training events designed to build regional capacity.

During DSAC's launch year and first full year of operations, building relationships with priority districts comprised a large proportion of system activity. The subsequent two years have been characterized by increased levels of engagement and more intensive service delivery organized in four foundational services 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

DSACs give first priority for support to the state's lowest performing districts, with the exception of ten large urban districts identified as Commissioner's Districts. There were a total of 60 DSAC priority districts in SY13. Resources permitting, DSACs may also extend support to better performing districts. Most typically these are districts that were identified as priority districts in the prior year, referred to by the DSAC teams as legacy districts. Three legacy districts received DSAC services in SY13.

Key Findings

The University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute has served as external evaluator of the DSAC Initiative since its inception. This evaluation report emphasizes progress at the end of SY13 and focuses on documenting the ongoing implementation of the Initiative, assessing client satisfaction, and presenting summative data relative to intermediate outcomes on participating districts and schools. The following highlights key findings stemming from analysis of surveys, interviews and document review conducted in spring 2013.

❖ **Increasing levels of engagement reflect high levels of satisfaction with DSAC support, with district leaders generally perceiving greater impacts from DSAC support than do school leaders.**

While priority districts are strongly encouraged to take advantage of DSAC support, they are not required to do so. Nevertheless, participation data indicate that over time increasing numbers of priority districts are valuing the support provided by their regional DSAC. In SY13, 56 of the 60 priority districts worked with DSAC – an increase of more than 25% over SY12. Furthermore, the number of districts engaged *in ongoing sustained participation around a portfolio of integrated services* increased from 14 in SY11 to 41 in SY13.

Virtually all district and school leaders surveyed in SY13 expressed satisfaction with the assistance provided by their region's DSAC, with two-thirds reporting that they were very satisfied. District leaders offered positive comments about the quality of DSAC professional development offerings, accessibility and responsiveness, and the level of expertise and guidance available. The vast majority reported that DSAC assistance was relevant to their educational improvement priorities, reflecting positively on the collaborative nature of the Initiative and the ability of regional teams to identify and adapt their offerings in ways that address those specific needs and priorities. In general, district leaders perceive greater impacts from DSAC support than school leaders. In several areas (leadership and planning, effective data use, curriculum and instruction, integration of ESE priorities into local improvement efforts) district leaders' report greater impacts in SY13 whereas the percentage of school leaders reporting impact decreased from the prior year. Evaluation data gathered thus far does not suggest any hypothesis to explain this trend. ESE may want to consider including some focused inquiry on this topic as part of the SY14 evaluation plan.

❖ **The nature of district and school utilization of DSAC foundational services reflects a maturation of service offerings, specifically progress from assessing need and planning for improvement toward capacity building and implementation of improvement strategies.**

Survey results indicate that 77% of schools conducted a self-assessment at some point in the past three years. However in SY13, only about one-quarter of DSAC priority districts sought support for school self-assessment, down from 40% in SY12. At the same time, there was a notable increase in districts engaged with DSAC around enhancing capacity to implement and sustain effective practices, from 30 districts in SY12 to 53 in SY13. This reflects a natural progression of services from assessment and planning toward preparing for and implementing identified improvement strategies.

❖ **Most leaders indicate that DSAC support has contributed to positive changes at the classroom level, generally related to new lessons or curriculum and new methods of instruction. Classroom-level changes largely involve targeted groups prioritized by DSAC support, although some leaders emphasize broader changes resulting from DSAC work. However, many express concern about DSAC staffing capacity to sufficiently meet the need for ELA and math content support.**

Overall, leaders found value in the content area support provided by DSAC, with about one-third describing that support as extremely valuable. Leaders described classroom-level changes largely related to certain targeted groups that were prioritized by DSAC support, and *within* these targeted groups (i.e., Level 3 schools within a district, specific subject or grade levels within a school) changes were described as consistent, uniform, and widespread. Other respondents emphasized the broader school- or even district-wide change that they believed resulted from the very structural and systemic nature of DSAC's work.

The most common area of concern noted was the limitation in DSAC staffing capacity to meet the demand for assistance in math and ELA. In their written survey comments, some leaders referred to the existing DSAC staff as "spread too thin," while others commented on the absence of specific staffing positions and insufficient support, particularly in the areas of math and ELA. In a similar vein, some leaders expressed concerns regarding turnover in DSAC staff (primarily among math and literacy specialists) and the need to increase the amount of available time to provide support beyond offering professional development workshops.

❖ **DSAC has been relatively effective in its efforts to support ESE's major systems change initiatives and assist districts to integrate those initiatives into their own educational improvement efforts.**

The DSAC Initiative is a key component of ESE's strategy to more effectively support its overarching priority of making every school an excellent one. In particular, DSAC provides assistance for planning and implementation related to ESE's major systems change initiatives such as Educator Evaluation, Rethinking Equity for Teaching of English Language Learners (RETELL), the Massachusetts Tiered System of Support (MTSS), Edwin Analytics, and the implementation of the 2011 Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. The main focus of DSAC support around these initiatives is to help districts effectively align and integrate them with overall improvement strategies.

Most survey respondents reported that DSAC helped them integrate ESE initiatives into their improvement efforts. Leaders frequently cited consultations with DSAC staff around the identification of district needs and priorities as beneficial in illuminating the connections between those initiatives and the ways that their implementation might be integrated with district improvement goals. To many leaders faced with an overwhelming array of new initiatives, DSAC's ability to provide a sense of how they fit together in the bigger picture was itself a highly significant form of assistance.

DSAC assistance continues to evolve to support new ESE initiatives and the specific needs of districts. The Initiative is currently positioning itself to offer more specialized services as it enters SY14 including the expansion of high school networks, support for underperforming vocational and technical schools, support for implementing World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) standards for English language learners, the expansion of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Edwin Teaching and Learning, and fostering more widespread strategic planning utilizing the Level 3 *Accelerated Improvement Planning (AIP) Guide*.

❖ **District and school leaders particularly value DSAC support around effective data use.**

The number of priority districts accessing services related to implementation of effective data use systems and data practices more than doubled from 22 in SY12 to 48 in SY13. This may be attributable, at least in part, to the increasing integration of DSAC data specialists into the various areas of DSAC work, a trend that is highly reflective of the priority that ESE has placed on effective data use. 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 turn to DSAC data specialists to help build local capacity in effective data use.

About half the leaders surveyed reported that DSAC contributed to improvement in the mechanisms or processes for examining data at the district-, school-, or classroom-level. Many credited DSAC assistance with contributing to improvements in how data are used, including developing a culture of inquiry to inform decisions and creating opportunities for teacher collaboration around the use of data. Leaders often referenced their DSAC data specialist as especially beneficial to their improvement efforts and found that the work around data use integrated well with many of the other initiatives they were implementing including the new Educator Evaluation system, curriculum framework alignment, and Learning Walkthroughs. Several interviewees remarked that data interpretation was key to the process of identifying their educational improvement objectives and connected directly to the criteria by which teachers were to be assessed.

❖ **Leaders cite the critical opportunities for collaboration fostered through the regional networks and other cross-district initiatives (e.g. PLC institute) sponsored by DSACs.**

Regional networks have helped DSACs to engage a larger number of districts and educators and provide them with opportunities to learn more about key statewide initiatives. In addition to offering ongoing regional networks, several DSACs also planned, implemented, and supported other cross-district, regional or statewide work focused on common issues of interest. Surveyed leaders described these networks as

valuable to their improvement efforts. Participants were overwhelmingly positive about the outcomes of their experiences, particularly in relation to their efforts to become familiar with new ESE initiatives, exchange ideas with peers from other districts, gain new knowledge or learn new strategies, and apply those in their own districts. Interviewees frequently noted that the regional networks and other DSAC meetings fostered critical opportunities for collaboration between districts and among teachers in a given school.

Consistent with their value, the overarching sentiment was that the frequency, number and/or duration of networking meetings should increase. More specifically, district leaders indicated that they would benefit from more frequent and/or lengthier meetings, more time on task for collaboration during those events, and additional meetings intended for job-alike audiences. It was suggested that job-alike meetings could specifically target district and/or school-level math and literacy specialists, allowing participants the opportunity to share ideas and concerns with colleagues in the same line of work.

❖ **Increasing emphasis on the use of Targeted Assistance and Improvement grant funds to support in-district professional development and support reflects a desire to involve larger cohorts of teachers to maximize the impact of the professional development.**

In the past two years there has been a marked increase in use of Targeted Assistance and Improvement grant funds for DSAC support provided within the district, as opposed to buying “seats” in regional or statewide professional development sessions. This shift reflects districts’ desire 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 also encouraged to use data to make district- and school-level decisions about common needs. Examples of in-district work supported through these funds include Learning Walkthrough training, data team training, and action plan development to address key improvement areas. While these areas were also directly supported through the DSAC operating budget, grants were used to cover items such as teacher stipends to support participation outside of normal school hours.

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Introduction

Early in the 2009-2010 school year (SY10), 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 to a broad range of struggling districts, including many small- and medium-sized districts that might otherwise 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—especially the 10 high-need districts identified as Commissioner's Districts¹—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. The teams collaborate with the districts in their region to deliver customized and targeted assistance services to support self-assessment as well as development and implementation of effective improvement plans. 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.² Additionally, the teams plan and implement professional development, networking, study groups, and training events designed to build regional capacity.

District Eligibility and Engagement

The Massachusetts Framework for District Accountability and Assistance classifies schools and districts on a five-level scale, with the highest performing in Level 1 and the lowest performing in Level 5. Districts are generally classified into the level of their lowest-performing school. Schools are classified into Level 3 if they are 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. The lowest achieving or least improving Level 3 schools are candidates for classification into Levels 4 and 5, the most serious designations in the state accountability system.³

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.⁴ There were a total of 60 priority districts in SY13. A large majority (80%) of them had been previously classified as priority districts. Resources permitting, DSACs may also extend support to districts designated as Level 1 or 2. Most typically the non-priority districts receiving services are Level 2 districts that were classified as Level 3 in the prior year,

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

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

³ 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>

⁴ In SY13 those Level 4 districts were Gill-Montague, Southbridge, Randolph and Salem.

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, three legacy districts received DSAC services and grant funding in SY13.

While priority districts are strongly encouraged to take advantage of this support, they are not required to work with the DSACs. Nevertheless, participation data indicate that increasing numbers of priority districts are valuing the support provided by their regional DSAC. An analysis of SY13 district plan and progress reports shows that 56 of the 60 priority districts received direct support from DSAC—an increase of more than 25% over SY12. Furthermore, the number of districts engaged in *ongoing sustained participation around a portfolio of integrated services* increased from 14 in SY11 to 41 in SY13, representing 68% of all priority districts. DSAC team members credit this 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.

The inherent risk with relationship-based engagement strategies is that progress can be derailed by staff turnover within the districts and schools or within the DSAC teams. Regional Assistance Directors are keenly aware of the challenges posed by turnover among district leadership and describe proactive efforts to quickly establish relationships with new leaders in order to maintain the momentum of their support activities. Yet, a small number of school leaders have indicated that work with their DSAC was negatively impacted by changes in district leadership.

Evolution of the DSAC Initiative

During DSAC’s launch year (SY10) and first full year of operations (SY11), building relationships with priority districts and introducing them to the four broad areas of support available from their DSAC teams comprised a large proportion of system activity. The subsequent two years (SY12 and SY13) have been characterized by increased levels of engagement and more intensive service delivery as those relationships began to flourish. Regional Assistance directors attribute this to the development of relational trust between DSAC team members and districts and schools.

Shifts in the broader education system early on in the life of the DSAC Initiative have also influenced its evolution. The adoption of new curriculum frameworks in math and English language arts linked to the Common Core, as well as an 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). These strategies are all consistent with the overarching mission of the DSACs and many DSAC foundational services have supported districts preparing for implementation. The DSACs responded by adapting their services in ways that deepened districts’ understanding of new initiatives (e.g., by incorporating information and/or work sessions during regional DSAC network meetings), helped them see how new initiatives and reforms are interconnected, and helped them integrate these with their own district and school improvement efforts.

These and other adaptations, including changes in the DSAC foundational services are intentional in nature. The RSS Office incorporates regularly scheduled opportunities for reflection on multiple levels, including: bi-monthly meetings and an annual retreat with DSAC Regional Assistance Directors; 4–5 joint meetings per year with DSAC Regional Assistance Directors, ESE partners, and other external partners supporting the DSAC teams; 5–6 all-DSAC staff meetings per year; and 5–6 job-alike meetings. Each of these provide 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.

According to the RSS Office, DSAC teams will continue to pilot or expand the use of a number of new tools and strategies in the upcoming school year, some of which will be highlighted in the section of this report describing districts' use and perceptions of DSAC Foundational Services. These include the expanded implementation of an accelerated improvement planning tool adapted from one currently in use in Level 4 districts, an increase from four to 18 DSAC priority districts taking part in the Professional Learning Communities Expansion Project (part of Massachusetts' federal Race to the Top grant), and the introduction of new resources and supports for Level 3 vocational and technical schools.

Program Evaluation

The University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute (UMDI) has served as external evaluator of the DSAC Initiative since its inception. In the first two years the evaluation focused on documenting progress related to organizational development and initiation of service delivery in priority districts. More recently the scope has been 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.

Methodology

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

Web-based surveys were administered to four distinct constituencies in June 2012 and March 2013. Survey items were developed in close collaboration with ESE's Office of Regional Systems of Support, which oversees the DSAC Initiative. Invitation lists were compiled to ensure that respondents received only one of the four surveys. UMDI provided ESE with technical reports of statewide response frequencies and anonymized open-response comments for each survey item. Individual reports for each region and regional cross-tabulation reports were also provided for the district and school leader surveys. Regional breakdowns were not provided for the data and content surveys due to small sample sizes.

- The *District Leader Survey* was designed to capture a broad view of DSAC services, including critical information relative to overall impressions of the DSAC services received, the impact of those services, and expectations for future service needs. In 2013, this survey was revised to reflect relatively new aspects of DSAC work and to probe more deeply in (1) the area of data and effective data use, (2) the DSAC model of professional development, and (3) DSAC support related to new ESE initiatives. Recipients included all superintendents of DSAC priority districts and other district leaders (i.e., assistant superintendents and district leaders acting in a similar capacity) identified by DSACs as key contacts for their work. In total, 86 district leaders responded from a total of 57 districts, reflecting estimated response rates of 62% for respondents overall and 88% for districts.⁵ In those cases where more than one individual responded from a district, the evaluation team identified a "primary" respondent, typically the superintendent.
- The *School Leader Survey* was similar in format and content to the district leader survey. The survey also included modules to gather information about two specific core DSAC services—Learning Walkthroughs, Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessments—from schools that had utilized these services, since school leaders were frequently identified as the primary informant group for these services. Recipients included principals and assistant principals identified by DSACs as key informants regarding their work in schools. In total, 84 school leaders responded from a total of 75 schools, reflecting estimated response rates of 64% for respondents overall and 65% for schools. In those cases where more than one individual responded from a school, the evaluation team identified a "primary" respondent, typically the principal.
- The *Data Services Survey* was designed to measure the utilization and impact of services related to effective data use. Minor revisions were made to the instrument in SY13 to reflect new aspects of data-related work

⁵ Responses were included from those survey respondents that had completed at least half of the survey items that were relevant to them. Response rates were calculated as follows: Number of responses/Total survey invitations minus invalid invitations and email bounce-backs.

and associated impacts. Survey invitations went out to district and school staff identified by DSACs as direct recipients of data services. Once district and school leader survey invitees were excluded only 33 individuals remained. Of them, 30 responded reflecting a 91% response rate. In order to supplement those responses, many of the questions from this survey were added to the district and school leader surveys.

- The *Content Area Services Survey* was focused on the implementation and impact of services provided by DSACs to support planning related to implementation of the revised curriculum frameworks and improving classroom instruction in mathematics and literacy. Survey invitations went out to district and school staff identified by DSACs as direct recipients of content area services. In total, 33 educators responded reflecting an estimated response rate of 72%.

In June 2013, UMDI conducted brief *follow-up phone interviews* with 14 district leaders and 10 school leaders who had volunteered through the survey process⁶. Interviewees represented 18 DSAC districts from five of the six regions. These interviews were intended to obtain information about the extent to which DSACs have helped districts integrate new ESE initiatives into their improvement efforts and classroom-level changes resulting from DSAC support. All interviews conducted for the evaluation were recorded and summarized. It should be noted that UMDI had originally intended to conduct a more robust interview phase in the fall of 2012, but at ESE's request, shifted those resources into a greater degree of survey revision supplemented by these more limited follow-up interviews.

Finally, UMDI reviewed available *DSAC program documentation* including district activity reports, meeting agendas and notes, grant allocation information and professional development data. Given that DSAC was in the midst of transitioning to a new format for tracking Initiative activity not all of the activity reports contained updated information. This necessitated follow-up conversations with each of the six Regional Area Directors, which were helpful in addressing gaps in the documentation and building a stronger understanding of the support activities provided by each region. Through those discussions it became apparent that there had been some important changes in DSAC work for SY13. As a result, UMDI also held a phone meeting with ESE program staff to more fully understand the context for the work and any changes planned for SY14.

Report Content and Organization

This evaluation report emphasizes progress at the end of SY13 and focuses on documenting the ongoing implementation of the Initiative, assessing client satisfaction, and presenting summative data relative to intermediate outcomes of the Initiative on DSAC-engaged districts and schools. It is organized into four main sections, covering the following topics:

- *DSAC Foundational Services*, which describes DSAC activities within each of the four foundational services areas, the level of utilization among priority districts, and educators' perceptions of the relevance, quality, and usefulness of those offerings.
- *Overall Perceptions of DSAC Assistance*, which describes overall perceptions of relevance and quality.
- *Impact on Participating Districts and Schools*, 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.
- *Support for ESE Priorities*, which summarizes district and school leaders' perceptions of the impact of the DSAC on the dissemination of ESE information and resources, and the contribution of the DSAC to the integration of new ESE reforms into local improvement efforts.
- *Conclusion*, which offers a brief summary and reflection on the evaluation findings

⁶ In response to the survey question about willingness to participate in a brief follow-up interview, a total of 43 district leaders and 34 school leaders indicated "yes" to this question. UMDI targeted a one-week period for interview, reached out to all volunteers via email, and proceeded with those who were available during that week.

DSAC Foundational Services

In collaboration with partner organizations, DSACs emphasize the development of district and school capacity to accelerate and sustain improvement and leverage the knowledge, skills, and expertise of local educators to address shared needs in the context of a changing statewide education landscape. DSAC consults with districts to identify and provide tailored assistance with activities drawn from four foundational services areas:

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

While this list of foundational services has remained relatively stable over time, services emphasized on a statewide level shift from year to year due to the maturation of the work. Regional variations also exist based on the identified needs of the districts within each region as well as the approach of each DSAC to the work. This section includes a brief description of the types of services available in each area and draws on evaluation data to reflect on the level of service utilization and perceptions of quality among DSAC priority districts.⁷

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

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

- **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 newly developed *Guide for Level 3 Districts: Focused Planning for Accelerating Student Learning* aimed at helping districts develop actionable Accelerated Improvement Plans (AIP).
- **Prioritization** – As follow-up to ESE Accountability District Review, prioritizing next steps from the review’s findings and recommendations and identifying strategies to support implementation of 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.

According to the program office, the DSAC teams intentionally sought to intensify their focus in this area partly in response to two ESE-funded analyses—one that analyzed effective school practices in Title I Commendation Schools and another conducting a similar analysis of effective practices in Level 4 schools that demonstrated accelerated improvements in student academic achievement. Both reports noted, among other things, the critical role successful leaders play in using highly-focused, integrated, and systematic approaches to school improvement that incorporate: structures supporting teacher collaboration, effective data use, and a shared

⁷ DSAC Foundational Services Summary of Targeted Assistance Options www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/dsac/services.docx

responsibility for student outcomes for all students.⁸ At the same time, DSAC staff identified a need for additional tools to support districts and schools in developing highly-focused strategic improvement plans. While the existing ESE tools and resources were useful in identifying areas of need, there was still a demand for resources that would help districts prioritize those needs, develop strategies to address them, outline steps for implementing those strategies and processes for monitoring them, and, finally, reflect on the efficacy of the new approaches.

Table 1: Utilization of Support Related to Planning and Implementation Strategies

Assistance Activities	Priority Districts	
	#	%
Planning and Implementation Strategies	48	80%
Focused Planning for High Leverage Strategies (including prioritization)	38	63%
School Self-Assessments	16	27%
District Self-Assessment	11	18%

Source: Analysis of DSAC district plans and progress reports submitted by each region (providing data for 58 of the 60 DSAC priority districts) as well as follow-up conversations with the Regional Assistance Directors. It appears that regions may be using some terminology differently. As such, figures derived from this reporting should be viewed as estimates.

Focused Planning and Prioritization

DSACs provided support related to *planning and implementation strategies* in 48 of the 60 priority districts. Similar to SY12, this most commonly involved focused district planning and prioritization. During 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. In many instances, the AIP process was used to respond directly to District Accountability Review findings and often in conjunction with district self-assessment activities. Because the AIP process is intensive, the ESE program office identified resources to add consultants with experience using the original planning tool in Level 4 districts to work along DSAC staff to support the AIP development process. Two other DSAC regions began implementing the AIP process with their assistance in SY13; the program office anticipates that this service activity will continue to grow in the future.

District and School Self-Assessment

Only 11 districts engaged with DSAC around *district self-assessment* – a small number over all, but a notable increase from 4 districts in SY12 suggesting that this is an emerging area of work for DSAC and the priority districts.⁹ In contrast, DSAC services in about one-quarter of priority districts involved support for *school self-assessment* using the Conditions for School Effectiveness.¹⁰ While this represents a decrease from 40% in SY12,

⁸ These reports include *Reflecting on Success: A Synthesis of Effective Practices of Title I Commendation Schools Receiving Dissemination Grants* and *Emerging Practices in Rapid Achievement Gain Schools: An Analysis of 2011-2012 Level 4 Schools to Identify Organizational and Instructional Practices that Accelerate Students' Academic Achievement*.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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;

it likely reflects schools' progression from self-assessment focused on identifying needs and priorities to implementing strategies to address those needs. Indeed, survey results indicate that 77% of schools conducted a self-assessment addressing the CSE at some point in the past three years.¹¹ Service utilization data related to the second foundational services area (enhancing capacity to implement and sustain effective practices) further reinforce this pattern of services shifting from planning to implementation (see following page).

DSAC support for school self-assessment included activities such as assisting in planning the process by which the self-assessment would be administered, providing information and training to educators, providing resources to support implementation, facilitating implementation of the self-assessment, and assisting in analysis or presentation of data collected through these self-assessments. 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 SY13 improvement efforts.

School leaders generally report positive perceptions of the CSE self-assessment process. Among school leaders who had received DSAC support for CSE self-assessment, strong majorities reported that it was valuable to their school improvement and professional development plans.¹² About half 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.¹³

Table 2: School Leaders' Perceptions of the CSE (SY13)

	Total # of Respondents	Proportion indicating...			
		Extremely Valuable	Somewhat Valuable	Not Very Valuable	Not at All Valuable
Value to School Improvement Planning	33	36%	58%	6%	0%
Value to Professional Development Plans	32	28%	56%	16%	0%
		Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	Somewhat Unlikely	Not At All Likely
Likelihood of Continuing to Use CSE	32	53%	38%	6%	3%

Source: UMDI Analysis of data from March 2013 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:

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.

¹¹ It is notable that 30% of these schools indicate that they have *not* worked with DSAC to support their CSE self-assessment process.

¹² Some school leaders' comments indicate that professional development in their districts is largely driven by central office, which may explain the lower perceived value of CSE assessment for informing professional development plans.

¹³ 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.

- 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, Rethinking Equity for Teaching of English Language Learners (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 (PPI) 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 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**.

As shown in Table 3, there was a notable increase in districts engaged with DSAC around enhancing capacity to implement and sustain effective practices from 30 districts in SY12 to 53 in SY13. This reinforces the previously stated observation that many districts were involved in a natural progression of services from assessment and planning toward preparing for and implementing identified improvement strategies.

Table 3: Utilization of Support Related to Enhancing Capacity

Assistance Activities	Priority Districts	
	#	%
Enhancing Capacity to Implement and Sustain Effective Practices	53	88%
Effective data use systems and practices using ESE data sources	48	80%
Identifying other resources/assistance to support high leverage strategies	34	57%
Learning Walkthroughs	29	48%
Professional Learning Communities	21	35%
Massachusetts Tiered System of Support	5	8%

Source: Analysis of DSAC district plans and progress reports submitted by each region (providing data for 58 of the 60 DSAC priority districts) as well as follow-up conversations with the Regional Assistance Directors. It appears that regions may be using some terminology differently. As such, figures derived from this reporting should be viewed as estimates.

Table 4: Perceived Value Selected Core Services to Improvement Efforts (SY13)

Assistance Offerings	Total # of Respondents	Proportion indicating...		
		Extremely Valuable	Somewhat Valuable	Not Very or Not at All Valuable
Learning Walkthroughs	35	57%	34%	9%
Data support	152	48%	51%	2%
Content area support	29	35%	52%	14%

Source: UMDI Analysis of data from March 2013 DSAC surveys, including the school leader surveys (Learning Walkthroughs and data support), the district leader surveys (data support), a survey of those receiving data services (data support), and services in support of curriculum and instructional improvement (content area support). This information is reported for priority districts only.

Effective Data Use

Similar to last year, 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 SY13. 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 into SY13. 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 (PPI). 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 turn 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 establishment of district- and/or school-level teams focused on examining data (e.g., data teams, Learning Walkthrough teams, instructional leadership teams, and professional learning communities¹⁴), 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. Some Regional Assistance Directors also noted that DSACs offered information, either through presentations or during informal meetings, to help districts understand the new methodology for identifying Level 3 and Level 4 schools. This methodology was described as somewhat more complicated than the previous method, often requiring analysis of the Composite Performance Index (CPI) associated with MCAS Alternate Assessment, the Performance and Progress Index (PPI), and the student growth model.

District and school leaders indicate that DSAC data support provides them with value. About 30% 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 SY13. Specific services cited include support with data analysis, specific professional development and technology resources to support district and school improvement, and assistance with establishing data teams.

Learning Walkthroughs

DSACs also worked with 29 priority districts 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, facilitation of walkthroughs, and support for the analysis of walkthrough findings. In SY13, examples of the focus areas survey leaders described for these Learning Walkthroughs included student

¹⁴ In SY13 DSAC worked with 21 districts to organize and support professional learning communities – nearly double the number reported in SY12.

engagement, the use of differentiated instructional strategies, characteristics of standards based teaching, questioning techniques used to engage students in higher order thinking, level of student discourse, and use of formative assessments. Survey respondents also mentioned writing, vocabulary instruction, ELA, and mathematics as focus areas. One leader described the use of the Learning Walkthroughs as multi-faceted indicating that learning walkthroughs were used to inform instruction, plan for professional development, and conduct progress monitoring as relates to student achievement.

The vast majority of school leaders indicated that assistance related to Learning Walkthroughs was a valuable support for them. Specific benefits cited included: developing a common understanding of instructional issues, improved educator collaboration, collective reflection on teaching practice, encouragement to take risks to improve instructional practices, increased focus on facilitating student learning, evaluation of professional development and programs, and providing useful information for future planning or prioritizing. Among leaders whose districts had engaged with DSAC around Learning Walkthroughs, 80% indicated that they were very likely to use the Learning Walkthrough process next year.

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 indicated that classroom observations conducted through the Learning Walkthrough process complemented those conducted for the Educator Evaluation system. However, nearly 60% 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. In a telling comment about the value of Learning Walkthroughs, one school leader reflected on how the process helped to set the stage for the new Educator Evaluation system.

The collaboration and focus on facilitating student learning are the biggest benefits of Learning Walkthroughs. We have cultivated that collaboration and focus on student learning this year by establishing a data team and preparing to implement the new Educator Evaluation System.

Support Related to Curriculum Content and Instruction

DSAC services also focused on a number of substantive areas related to effective instruction, with mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA) and literacy being the most commonly cited areas in SY13. More specifically, 33 priority districts reported that mathematics was a substantive focus area of their work with the DSAC, and 30 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.

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 ELL 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 strategies, 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. Some special education strategies also reach relatively few districts. For instance, over the past two years the DSACs have offered a Special Education Academy attended by district leadership teams to address the issues, systems, and structures that might impede student progress for students with disabilities. While the RSS Office reports that response to the academy has been strongly positive, they are only able to make it available to a limited number of districts each year.

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, there is less readily available support in other areas, unless team members happen to have backgrounds in those areas. The program office seeks resources and strategies to address gaps in its services in various ways. For instance, after the ESE adopted the World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) standards as the Massachusetts standards for English language learners, the program office secured resources to hire and train “WIDA specialists” to work with DSAC districts to help them learn about the WIDA standards and make plans to implement them. Each DSAC team could tap 25 days of support from WIDA specialists for their districts in SY2012 and SY2013.

There are 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 to be 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.¹⁵ Supported by DSAC staff, each partnership will work with an outside math consultant to develop math professional development that will address the needs of their schools and develop applications for classroom settings. Second, DSAC worked directly with ESE’s Career/Vocational Technical Education Office to identify resources to fund a support facilitator who will specifically serve Level 3 vocational and technical schools across the state. This facilitator will work collaboratively with all of the DSAC Regional Assistance Directors and their Level 3 vocational and technical schools to customize support. Many of those schools are engaged in the math professional development partnerships.

Support for implementation of the components of MTSS was in its early stages in SY13. As one Regional Assistance Director noted, implementation of the MTSS may be more challenging because there is no specific funding for this initiative, and its implementation is not mandated by law. It should also be noted that cadres of educators were trained in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as part of its launch effort in order to strengthen Tier One instruction, and ESE offered a follow-up institute for those districts that had participated in these initial trainings. Additionally, some Regional Assistance Directors remarked that, while they may not have worked directly on MTSS, their teams worked with districts on establishing the foundational conditions needed (e.g., instructional leadership, aligned curriculum, and time for collaboration) for MTSS to be implemented successfully. Given that the Office of Tiered System of Support (OTSS) has recently been brought under the same ESE office that manages the DSAC Initiative, it is anticipated that greater integration will occur 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 already begun discussing strategies for coordinating and partnering with one another on this project.

Overall, school leaders found value in the content area support provided by DSAC, with about one-third describing that support as *extremely valuable*. The most common area of concern noted by district and school leaders was the limitation in DSAC staffing capacity to meet demand for assistance in math and ELA. In their written comments, some leaders referred to the existing DSAC staff as “spread too thin,” while others commented on the absence of specific staffing positions and insufficient support, particularly in the areas of math and ELA. Historically, the math and literacy specialist positions for the DSAC Initiative have been difficult to fill since ESE is competing with other organizations (including districts) for mid-career professionals that are highly qualified in these areas. In a similar vein, some district and school leaders expressed concerns

¹⁵ One partnership is in Eastern Massachusetts and the other in Western Massachusetts.

regarding turnover in DSAC staff and the need to increase the amount of available time to provide support beyond offering professional development workshops. As one school leader noted:

The turnover and periodic absence of math consultants makes any in-depth or ongoing training and support inaccessible in those areas, leading our school to access alternate support in math.

Although it draws on a much smaller number of respondents, data from the content area services survey suggest that SY13 support related to mathematics was of higher quality than that for ELA and literacy. Results were comparatively low in relation to improving classroom instruction in literacy, with only one-quarter of the respondents indicating that they received *excellent* support in this area and about 40% reporting that the support was *fair or poor*. One comment attributed this relative dissatisfaction to the fact that the literacy specialist did not engage staff during professional development events and meetings¹⁶ and that the content was not always relevant to the needs of the district. Another respondent noted that the support was of high quality but that the frequency and intensity of the support was insufficient to meet demand.

Table 5: Perceived Quality of DSAC Content Area Services (SY13)

Content Area Support	Total # of Respondents	Excellent	Proportion indicating...		
			Good	Fair	Poor
Planning for implementation of the 2011 Curriculum Frameworks for <u>Mathematics</u>	19	58%	32%	10%	0%
Improving classroom instruction in <u>mathematics</u>	16	56%	31%	6%	6%
Planning for implementation of the 2011 Curriculum Frameworks for <u>ELA and literacy</u>	13	46%	54%	0%	0%
Improving classroom instruction in <u>literacy</u>	12	25%	33%	33%	8%

Source: UMDI Analysis of data from a March 2013 survey of participants in DSAC-provided content area support. Reported for priority districts only.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Just over one-third of districts indicated that they worked with their DSAC teams on the implementation of professional learning communities (PLCs) in SY13. Some districts already had PLC structures and processes in place and DSAC teams provided support for districts' ongoing efforts to effectively implement PLCs. During 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 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. Eighteen DSAC districts drawn from all six DSAC regions are participating in cohort 2 of the PLC Expansion project beginning in summer 2013—roughly one-third of priority districts. All DSAC staff are participating with their districts in the five days of training, and will participate in the embedded coaching process to build DSAC team members' capacity to provide implementation support.

Support for Major Systems Change Initiatives

A majority of leaders indicated that DSAC support related to major systems change initiatives was sufficient to meet their needs. However, some were interested in receiving more support around certain initiatives that had not been prioritized in the DSAC work to date. They often added they had not received assistance around these initiatives because they had not yet requested it or that they were receiving support in those areas from outside vendors or other departments within ESE. By design, other ESE departments have primary responsibility for supporting districts on these major systems change initiatives, and as such, DSACs may be attentive to not

¹⁶ DSAC staff note that content specialists are not expected to directly provide PD to instructional staff. Rather the role is to help those districts and schools to identify, plan for, access, and deliver effective professional development.

duplicating efforts in this regard. The most commonly referenced initiatives in this regard were Edwin, WIDA/RETELL, and the Educator Evaluation system. A couple of interviewees also mentioned a desire for more clarity around District Determined Measures

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 ESE sponsored or approved courses 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 Education** – 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 facilitator/coaches designed to help them provide embedded support for implementation. Survey responses from leaders of 47 districts show that 87% sent teams of teachers to DSAC-sponsored courses, 60% sent administrators to participate in support modules, and 53% sent administrators to participate in full courses with their teacher teams. As shown in Table 6, 55 priority districts purchased more than 2,000 seats in ESE-sponsored courses addressing a range of topics including special education and inclusive practices, WIDA, literacy and math. While special education training was accessed by the largest number of districts, literacy courses had the highest enrollment accounting for 40% of the seats purchased.

Table 6: Estimated Enrollment in DSAC Courses by Topic (SY13)

Course Offering Topics	DSAC Districts	Enrollments
Special Education and Inclusive Practices/MFA	44	300
WIDA	39	447
Literacy	20	878
Mathematics	15	334
Other (e.g. leadership, instruction)	11	221
Total	55	2180

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.

As in SY12, 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 district staff to deliver professional development with 60% describing it as *very valuable*. In contrast, while DSAC-sponsored courses were considered valuable overall, the proportion of district leaders who reported these as *very valuable* decreased substantially from 62% in SY12 to 38% in SY13. While the RSS Office believes that

possible reasons for this decrease include market saturation or the higher cost of DSAC-sponsored courses, this may become an area of inquiry for ESE in the coming year.

Table 7: Perceived Value of DSAC-Supported Professional Development to Improvement Efforts (SY13)

Assistance Offerings	Total # of District Leaders	Proportion indicating...		
		Very Valuable	Somewhat Valuable	Not Very or Not at All Valuable
DSAC-sponsored courses	37	38%	51%	11%
PD offerings using other contractors	41	51%	37%	12%
PD using district staff	40	60%	28%	13%

Source: UMDI Analysis of data from March 2013 DSAC District Leader Survey. Reported for priority districts only, with each district represented once.

District and school leaders' reports of the benefits of DSAC-supported professional development were consistent with the broader perceived value of this work to improvement efforts. Overall, strong majorities 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/coaches' abilities to provide embedded classroom support. Taken together, these ratings 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 facilitator/coaches in additional training designed to support implementation.

Table 8: Perceived Contribution of DSAC-Supported Professional Development (SY13)

	Total # of District Leaders	Proportion indicating...			
		Greatly	Moderately	Slightly	Not at All
Shared understanding of content	33	42%	48%	6%	3%
Shared instructional approaches	35	34%	54%	11%	0%
Shared expectations for implementation of PD content and pedagogy	34	35%	44%	21%	0%
Administrators' ability to monitor implementation	34	21%	47%	26%	6%
Increased administrator support for providing opportunities for teacher collaboration around PD content and pedagogy	34	24%	41%	29%	6%
Site facilitators' and/or coaches' ability to provide embedded classroom support	30	27%	37%	27%	10%

Source: UMDI Analysis of data from March 2013 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. The networks not only allowed for engagement with current priority districts but also served as one forum by 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, reflecting a larger movement toward integration of services across the DSAC Initiative as a whole. In SY13, four regions—the Berkshires+, Central, the Pioneer Valley, and the Southeast—as compared to two regions the previous year, hosted integrated networks that covered a number of high-interest topics, including but not limited to content area topics, data use/data practices, and/or leadership.¹⁷ The Northeast region hosted separate networks for mathematics, literacy, and high school leadership. The new High School Leadership Network was initiated in fall 2012, and the DSAC region hired external consultants to support the facilitation of this network. The RSS Office, ESE's Office of College and Career Readiness, and the DSAC region are exploring the possible expansion of this high school network model on a regional basis across the Commonwealth. The last DSAC region, Greater Boston, discontinued its regional networks in recognition that many of its districts were already engaged in other ESE-sponsored networks¹⁸ and thus their available resources would be more effectively deployed to other support activities including an emphasis on cross-district projects and partnerships.

As in SY12, networking events provided districts with opportunities to learn more about statewide initiatives; most notably, the implementation of Common Core-aligned curriculum frameworks in ELA and mathematics. Other new initiatives, such as PARCC assessments, the Educator Evaluation system, and new resources such as model curriculum units, were also addressed through network events. In some instances, ESE staff presented on these topics, while in other instances practitioners were asked to share their own related promising practices. Examples of the latter included one regional network meeting where educators shared online resources for curriculum development and another meeting in which districts that had piloted model curriculum units shared their experiences with others.

In addition to sponsoring its own regional networks, DSAC teams support other regional strategies and activities *not* initiated by the DSACs. The Five District Partnership (5DP), for example, is a regional strategy that emerged at the grass roots level that both the DSACs and the Office of District and School Turnaround (ODST), also part of ESE's State System of Support, have worked to support. The 5DP developed when district-level staff in the urban districts of Chelsea, Everett, Somerville, Revere, and Malden recognized that they share highly mobile, at-risk students who often rotate through their districts. The districts are pooling their resources to collaborate on cross-district strategies to align curriculum, standards, assessments, and instruction with the goals of meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for their transient student populations. The ESE's State System of Support provides grant funding that supports the coordination of planning and implementation of cross-district activities. The DSAC team has provided content-based support to the 5DP and successfully advocated for additional ESE grant funds to support training for 5DP teachers in the Understanding by Design framework that they are using to develop model curriculum units. To date approximately 100 units, which will be shared across the participating districts, have been developed and implementation will begin in SY14. Some 5DP districts work with ANet, an ODST Priority Partner for Turnaround, and their work with those districts is also integrated into this effort.

All surveyed district leaders described ESE networks as valuable to their improvement efforts, including more than two-thirds who characterized them as *very valuable*. ESE network participants were also 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, learn new knowledge or strategies, and apply the acquired knowledge and/or strategies in their own districts.

¹⁷ In at least two regions, survey feedback was used by DSAC teams to identify areas of interest and high-need issues.

¹⁸ All of the DSAC priority districts in the Greater Boston region were provided access to ESE's Urban Literacy Network, Urban Mathematics Network and Urban Science Network. DSAC content area specialists attended those meetings and offered related in-district implementation support.

Table 9: Perceived Contribution of ESE Networking Events

	Total # of responses	Proportion indicating...			
		Greatly	Moderately	Slightly	Not at All
Gain familiarity with new ESE initiatives and/or policies	30	43%	43%	13%	0%
Exchange ideas with peers from other districts	31	48%	39%	13%	0%
Learn new knowledge and/or strategies	30	47%	43%	10%	0%
Apply the new knowledge and/or strategies acquired at the network in your district	28	32%	50%	18%	0%

Source: UMDI Analysis of data from March 2013 DSAC District Leader Survey. Reported for priority districts only, with each district represented once.

Interviewees frequently noted that regional networks and other DSAC meetings (e.g. PLC institute) fostered critical opportunities for collaboration between districts and among teachers in a given school. In addition to receiving wide general praise, these collaborative opportunities were regarded as highly useful in creating common understanding, particularly around how new ESE initiatives are connected.

In their comments, three district leaders also mentioned other benefits resulting from these meetings: mutual support from peers and colleagues; establishing collaborative relationships with other districts to share resources for school and district improvement (thus moving beyond the sharing of ideas to sharing of tools and resources); and more consistent messaging within their own districts. As one district leader commented:

I have greatly appreciated the DSAC's willingness to allow me to bring a small team of teachers to each network meeting. This has generated rich and ongoing conversations once we have returned to our district. This has probably been the most helpful aspect in helping leadership spread the information accurately and clearly to the rest of the staff, because each message is reinforced by their peers.

Consistent with their value to district leaders, the overarching sentiment was that the frequency, number, and/or duration of networking meetings should increase. More specifically, district leaders indicated that they would benefit from more frequent and/or lengthier meetings, more time on task for collaboration during networking events, and additional meetings intended for job-alike audiences. It was suggested that job-alike meetings could specifically target math specialists and literacy specialists allowing participants the opportunity to share ideas and concerns with colleagues in the same line of work. A few district leaders also provided some constructive feedback about meeting venues. For instance, a couple of leaders commented on the need for venues in closer proximity to their districts to allow for more regular attendance, with one respondent specifically suggesting more local Instructional Leadership Network meetings. One respondent also reported being unable to participate in specific events/conferences (those focused on English language learners and curriculum and instruction) because they were offered in venues with insufficient capacity to accommodate the size and needs of the region.

Funding and Resource Allocation: Targeted Assistance and Improvement Grants

- **DSAC targeted assistance and improvement grants** provide limited to funding to districts to support participation in professional development, networks and initiatives to support systemic approaches to accelerate student achievement.
- Regional Assistance Directors consult with districts on **targeting other federal and state grants as well as resources such as Title I reservation funds** to support alignment with priorities.
- DSAC teams **enhance school and district capacity to prioritize resource allocation and insure sustainability of successful initiatives** by facilitating reflection on strategic resource management, and

by supporting identification of impact benchmarks for district and school strategic initiatives to build and sustain capacity within the limitations of available resources.

DSAC Targeted Assistance and Improvement Grants

ESE offered targeted assistance and improvement grants to the vast majority of DSAC priority districts. 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 work 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.

In SY13, DSACs helped 58 districts access ESE targeted assistance and improvement grant funds totaling \$2 million. 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.¹⁹ 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 purchase seats in ESE-sponsored statewide and regional courses; to provide in-district professional development using contractors vetted by the Department; or, with the approval of the regional assistance director, to support other in-district professional development, staff collaboration, or targeted assistance—including participation in DSAC improvement services—in support of district improvement initiatives.

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 26 districts reported using those funds to access DSAC-sponsored course offerings (as described in relation to the Professional Learning Networks foundational services area). 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-supported courses and trainings within their own districts²⁰. 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 also encouraged to use data to make district- and school-level decisions about common needs. This trend appears to have continued in SY13 as an estimated 40% of

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ Outside vendors must be included on the list of DSAC-approved providers, which requires that they: identify specific links to the curriculum frameworks, provide evidence that their courses have been effective including early indicators of success. All training funded through the DSAC grants must address the state's new professional development standards and provide an administrator module.

math and ELA courses were offered in-district.²¹ The survey data also reveal that approximately half of responding DSAC districts used those funds to support in-district work with their regional DSAC. Examples of in-district work with the DSAC supported through these funds include Learning Walkthrough training, data team training, and action plan development to address key improvement areas. While these areas were also supported directly through the DSAC operating budget, grants were used to cover items such as teacher stipends. Lastly, 18 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).

²¹ Course offerings with 12 or more participants and a fixed, flat-rate fee were assumed to have been offered in-district. ESE records of the WIDA and Massachusetts Focus Academy (MFA) course offerings were maintained separately and did not contain sufficient information to estimate the proportion of courses offered in-district in those two areas. As such, it is unclear precisely what proportion of courses, overall, were offered in-district versus regionally or statewide.

Overall Perceptions of DSAC Assistance

Virtually all 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 leaders offered positive comments about the quality of the DSAC professional development offerings, accessibility and responsiveness, and the level of expertise and guidance available.

Table 10: Overall Satisfaction with DSAC Assistance (SY13)

	District Leaders (N=48)	School Leaders (N=67)	Leaders Overall (N=115)
Very satisfied	67%	66%	66%
Somewhat satisfied	31%	34%	33%
Somewhat <u>d</u> issatisfied	2%	0%	1%
Very <u>d</u> issatisfied	0%	0%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: UMDI Analysis of March 2013 District and School Leader Surveys. The 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).

The vast majority of respondents reported that the assistance provided by DSAC was relevant to their district or school improvement priorities. The high ratings overall appear to reflect positively on the collaborative nature of DSAC assistance and the ability of regional teams to identify and adapt their offerings in ways that address those needs and priorities. This ability may be particularly important given the current context in which districts are planning, implementing, and integrating a number of new ESE initiatives into their improvement work. At the same time it is important to note that the percentage of leaders reporting that DSAC assistance was *extremely relevant* declined somewhat from two-thirds in SY12 to about half in SY13.

Table 11: Relevance of DSAC Assistance to Local Priorities (SY13)

	District Leaders (N=48)	School Leaders (N=67)	Leaders Overall (N=115)
Extremely relevant	58%	48%	52%
Somewhat relevant	38%	51%	45%
Not very relevant	4%	2%	3%
Not relevant at all	0%	0%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: UMDI Analysis of March 2013 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).

Most leaders reported that DSAC support contributed to their strategic planning efforts, their ability to focus on a narrow set of highly integrated activities designed to support improvement, and enhanced capacity to implement sustainable long-term improvement. District leaders report more positive impacts of DSAC assistance overall than school leaders. The greatest difference in this area was in the establishment of a narrow set of highly integrated activities, with 77% of district leaders reporting at least moderate impact in this area compared to 64% of school leaders.

Table 12: Impact of DSAC Assistance on Planning and Improvement Efforts

Indicate the extent to which your regional DSAC has contributed to each of the following in your district/school ...	Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"...		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
Capacity to implement sustainable, long-term improvement	77%	68%	71%
Focus on a narrow set of highly integrated activities designed to support district/school improvement	77%	64%	69%
Strategic planning efforts in your district/school	67%	59%	62%

Source: UMDI Analysis of March 2013 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."

Consistent with this general positive sentiment, most leaders expect to continue to work with the DSAC at a similar level of intensity in SY14 and about one-quarter expect that level of intensity to increase. Very few leaders indicated that expected the intensity of their engagement with DSAC to decrease or be discontinued in the coming year. Of these, four commented that they did not anticipate qualifying for assistance in the future because of expected improvements in their accountability status, and one district leader remarked that limits to DSAC staffing capacity and resources were a limiting factor.

Table 13: Expectations of Future Engagement with the DSAC (SY13)

	District Leaders (N=48)	School Leaders (N=67)	Leaders Overall (N=115)
Yes, at an increased level of intensity	23%	28%	26%
Yes, at the same level of intensity	60%	58%	59%
Yes, at a lower level of intensity	13%	12%	12%
No, I do not expect or plan to work with the DSAC next year	4%	2%	3%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: UMDI Analysis of March 2013 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).

Finally, district and school leaders continued to report strong positive impressions of their region's DSAC and its approach. Overall, leaders expressed a strong level of agreement with all positive statements about the DSAC approach. Survey comments echoed the overall positive impressions of DSAC assistance and approach. As one district leader wrote:

[DSAC team members] in particular have been terrific partners for us. They are extremely focused and have been able to help us focus on the issues in our district. They respond quickly to emails and questions, and provide valuable help with grant writing. Their presence at meetings is very supportive and they provided us access to professionals who have the expertise we need (i.e. data specialist). Finally, the DSAC folks have treated us with respect and as partners in a collaborative relationship.

Table 14: Overall Perceptions of the DSAC (SY13)

	Total # of District Leaders & School Leaders	Strongly Agree	Proportion indicating...		
			Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Readily accessible	109	64%	34%	2%	0%
Respectful in its interactions	111	90%	8%	2%	0%
Collaborative in its approach	111	86%	14%	1%	0%
Responsive to district and school needs	111	71%	27%	2%	0%
Uses evidence-based practices	108	78%	22%	0%	0%
Committed to providing the highest quality assistance	108	80%	19%	1%	0%
An important strategic thinking partner	108	63%	30%	6%	1%

Source: UMDI Analysis of March 2013 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).

In response to requests for recommendations for DSAC improvement or additional support needed, leaders provided feedback that was generally very positive, emphasizing satisfaction with support provided, praise for DSAC accessibility and responsiveness, relevance of specific expertise or guidance, and the positive impact of work with the DSAC. In their interviews, school and district leaders also expressed a strong desire for the support to continue. In some instances, however, leaders shared some concerns and constructive feedback related to the initiative's structure and management, which are addressed in the foundational services section of this report.

Impact on Participating Districts and Schools

ESE is particularly interested in understanding the extent to which its regional DSACs are contributing to meaningful changes in culture, capacity, and practice within priority districts and their schools²². To date, the evaluation's efforts in this area have been focused on gathering district and school leaders' perspectives on outcomes in specific areas identified by ESE as a focus of DSAC work. Those areas are leadership and planning, use of data as part of a cycle of inquiry process, curriculum and instruction, and professional learning culture.

Leadership and Planning

Overall, leaders continued to report that their work with DSAC contributed to improvement in a range of outcomes related to leadership and planning. About three-quarters indicated that work with the DSAC contributed *greatly* or *moderately* to improvements in their organization's ability to identify instructional strengths and improvement priorities as well as their capacity to address these priorities. About two-thirds reported at least moderate improvement in their capacity to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement, monitor progress toward improvement, and monitor outcomes of their improvement efforts.

It is notable that district leaders whose districts had engaged with their DSACs on district self-assessments and planning for the implementation of high leverage strategies (e.g., collaborative work on school and district improvement planning drawing upon ESE District Accountability Reviews and/or the AIP process) were generally more likely to report stronger impacts on measures related to leadership and planning than those whose districts had not engaged with the DSAC in these areas.

Table 15: Impacts of DSAC Assistance on Leadership and Planning Capacity (SY13)

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to leadership and planning improvement in each of the following ...	Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"...		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
Ability to identify instructional strengths and improvement priorities	82%	72%	76%
Capacity to address improvement priorities	79%	69%	73%
Capacity to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement	72%	64%	67%
Capacity to monitor progress toward improvement	73%	60%	65%
Monitoring the implementation and outcomes of your district's/school's improvement efforts	71%	62%	65%

Source: UMDI Analysis of March 2013 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."

Overall, district leaders were somewhat more likely than school leaders to credit DSAC with contributions to leadership and planning capacity. Interestingly, a comparison of SY12 and SY13 data related to these outcome measures shows that, while the impacts reported by leaders *overall* have remained relatively stable from year to year, reported impacts for each of the two distinct groups (district leaders and school leaders) are moving in

²² Recognizing that DSAC activity typically reflects on integrated portfolio of support services and that those activities are often further integrated into broader district initiatives, the 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.

different directions. That is, while the district leaders' reported impact of their work with the DSAC in leadership and planning is more positive this year (with increases in reported *great* or *moderate* impacts of 9 to 20 percentage points across comparable measures), school leaders' responses are somewhat less positive this year (with decreases ranging from 8 to 13 percentage points). The greatest positive change for district leaders related to capacity to address improvement priorities, with 59% reporting at least moderate impacts last year as compared to 79% this year. As noted earlier in this report, the district leader results likely reflect the expected maturation of district activity, and associated DSAC support, from self-assessment and planning toward implementation of improvement initiatives. It is not exactly clear why the school leader results would be trending in the opposite direction. One possible explanation offered by the RSS Office is that DSACs may have moved beyond the planning work with schools (which typically involved the Conditions for School Effectiveness self-assessment) to more specific targeted assistance work based on the plans set in place during the self-assessment process.

Effective Use of Data

About half of the leaders surveyed report that DSAC contributed to improvement in mechanisms or processes for examining data at the district-, school-, or classroom-level.

Table 16: Impact of DSAC Assistance on Mechanisms/Processes for Examining Data (SY13)

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to improvement in your ...	Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"...		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
District's/school's mechanisms or processes for examining data at the district level/school or classroom-level	62%	42%	51%

Source: UMDI Analysis of March 2013 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.

Looking more closely, most respondents report that DSAC data-related support contributed to general knowledge and skills around data analysis including awareness of tools and resources to support data work, the ability to integrate various kinds of data to address a key question or line of inquiry, and the ability to understand and use measures related to the new district and school accountability system.

Table 17: Impact of DSAC Assistance on Knowledge and Skills for Effective Data Use (SY13)

Indicate the extent to which data-related support has contributed to improvement in each of the following ...	Total # of Responses	Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"
Knowledge and/or skill with regard to data analysis	121	80%
Awareness of tools and resources to support data work	124	74%
Ability to integrate various kinds of data to address a key question or line of inquiry	112	72%
Your district or school's ability to understand and use measures of the new accountability system e.g. CPI, PPI, student growth percentiles	109	61%

Source: UMDI Analysis of data from March 2013 DSAC surveys, including the school leader survey, the district leader survey, and a survey of those receiving data services. For the school and district leader survey, responses included in this table reflect 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 reflect perspectives of priority districts only. In all cases, respondents indicating "not applicable" or "too early to tell" were excluded from the analysis.

Many also credited DSAC assistance with contributing to improvements in how data is 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. 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. This is a relatively new focus for the field as well as DSAC staff. It is likely that demand for Educator Evaluation-related data support will increase in SY14 as the final round of districts begin to implement the system for the first time. It should be noted that while DSACs may offer support in this area, ESE offers other support mechanisms related to the new Educator Evaluation System.

Table 18: Impact of DSAC Assistance How Data is Used (SY13)

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

Source: UMDI Analysis of data from March 2013 DSAC surveys, including the school leader survey, the district leader survey, and a survey of those receiving data services. For the school and district leader survey, responses included in this table reflect 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 reflect perspectives of priority districts only. In all cases, respondents indicating "not applicable" or "too early to tell" were excluded from the analysis.

Most leaders also reported that DSAC support had helped them apply data to identify improvement priorities and professional development needs, monitor student progress, and understand current instructional and assessment practices. When comparing impacts on data use from SY12 and SY13, the impacts reported by district leaders tended to be relatively stable. However, there was a notable increase in the proportion reporting that DSAC support had helped them better use data to identify professional development needs (from 50% in SY12 to 71% in SY13). There was also a small increase (5 percentage points) in the proportion citing DSAC data support as contributing to identification of improvement priorities. As noted in last year's evaluation report, DSAC impacts on leadership and planning appear to extend from, or overlap with contributions in the area of effective data use. That is, as improvement planning becomes increasingly data-based, in part as a result of DSAC support, improvement efforts become increasingly focused and coherent. This is further reinforced by interviewees' remarks that data interpretation was key to the process of identifying school or district improvement objectives. As such, it is not surprising that increases in both areas would occur simultaneously.

Table 19: Impact of DSAC Assistance on Application of Data to Improvement Priorities (SY13)

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to improvement in your district's/school's use of data in each of the following ...	<u>Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"...</u>		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
Identifying improvement priorities in your district/school	68%	72%	70%
Identifying professional development needs in your district/school	71%	57%	62%
Monitoring student progress	46%	58%	53%
Understanding current instructional and assessment practices in your district/school	55%	50%	52%
Providing timely interventions to students in your school	--	47%	--
Making student placement decisions in your school	--	31%	--

Source: UMDI Analysis of March 2013 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.

Again, in contrast the increasingly positive perspective offered by district leaders, in most areas school leaders' responses revealed less positive perspectives in comparison to SY12. More specifically, the percentage indicating that DSAC assistance contributed to improvement decreased in relation to: improvement in providing timely interventions to students (17 percentage points), monitoring student progress (10 points), identifying professional development needs (9 points), and understanding current instructional practices (9 points). As above, it is not clear why school leaders' have reported a decreased level of impact on effective application of data to district improvement priorities.

Curriculum and Instruction

More than half of the surveyed leaders indicated that DSAC assistance contributed to improved alignment of their mathematics and ELA curricula to the 2011 Curriculum Frameworks. Nearly half also indicated that involvement with the DSAC had at least a moderate impact on their ongoing efforts to create and refine curricula. Impacts on *implementation* of math and ELA curricula were slightly less positive but sizeable.

Table 20: Impact of DSAC Assistance on Curriculum

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to curriculum improvement in each of the following ...	<u>Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"</u>		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
Alignment of your district's/school's curriculum in mathematics to state frameworks	64%	51%	56%
Implementation of curriculum in mathematics in your district/school	49%	43%	45%
Alignment of your district's/school's curriculum in ELA to state frameworks	65%	44%	53%
Implementation of curriculum in ELA in your district/school	45%	41%	43%
Your district's/school's efforts to create and refine curricula on an ongoing basis	45%	49%	48%

Source: Analysis of March 2013 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, 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."

When comparing SY12 and SY13 survey data, it appears that the perceptions of impact remained relatively stable with the exception of impact focused on the mathematics curriculum. The percentage reporting that

DSAC contributed to improvement declined in relation to both curriculum alignment (9 percentage points) and implementation (11 points). Given the fact that three DSAC regions were left without a math specialist for at least a portion of SY13, this finding may be related to issues of staffing capacity, which may have slowed the momentum and impact of mathematics support this year.

Most leaders indicated that work with DSAC contributed either *greatly* or *moderately* to the use of effective instructional approaches, teachers' use of data to reflect on instructional practices, the quality of instruction in their district or school, the capacity to support instructional improvement, mechanisms or processes for providing quality feedback to teachers on their practice, and use of assessments. Respondents were less positive about DSAC's contributions to teachers' content area knowledge, customizing instruction to student learning needs, and the capacity to accelerate learning among high-need student populations.

Table 21: Impact of DSAC Assistance on Instruction

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to instructional improvement in each of the following ...	Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
Use of effective instructional approaches in your district/school	69%	62%	64%
Teachers' use of data to reflect on instructional practices (e.g. looking at student work, assessment data, behavioral data)	70%	56%	62%
The quality of instruction in your district/school	52%	63%	59%
Your district's/school's capacity to support instructional improvement	60%	57%	58%
Mechanisms or processes for providing quality feedback to teachers on their practice in your district/school	53%	61%	58%
Use of assessments in your district/school (e.g. formative, benchmark, unit assessments)	57%	54%	55%
Content area knowledge among teachers in your district/school	59%	46%	51%
Customizing instruction to address student learning needs in your district/school	47%	52%	50%
Your district's/school's capacity to accelerate student learning among high-need populations	48%	32%	38%

Source: UMDI Analysis of March 2013 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 outcomes measures remained mostly consistent from SY12 to SY13, slight wording changes were made to two measures in this table (i.e. customizing instruction to address learning needs and use of assessments in your district/school).

As described by district and school leaders, multiple areas of DSAC work contributed to positive classroom-level changes. Most of the interviewed leaders asserted that they had seen changes in classroom practice, generally related to new lessons or curriculum and new methods and objectives for instruction (e.g., student engagement, communication between students, and/or data-driven instruction). Many leaders also cited the math and/or ELA curriculum work of DSAC specialists, the modeling of lessons, and efforts directed towards Common Core alignment (in particular) as measures resulting in noticeable classroom change. They often mentioned that DSAC had presented or given workshops or professional development trainings to targeted groups of faculty (e.g., in a particular grade level, or teacher leaders across grade levels) and credited these presentations for generating conversations within the school around instructional practice. The DSAC work related to the use of data was frequently referenced as having this same effect. It is important to note that there

were a few leaders who felt that their work with the DSAC had not yet reached the classroom. However, usually these leaders had been working with the DSAC for only a short time and the assistance had focused on leadership development rather than classroom practice.

Classroom-level changes largely related to certain targeted groups that were prioritized by DSAC support, and within these targeted groups, changes were described as consistent and widespread. Target groups included specific schools within a district (i.e., Level 3 schools), as well as specific subjects or grade levels within a given school which had been identified as especially needing support. In that sense, interviewed leaders noted that change could be described as occurring in “pockets.” However, it should be noted that, across the board, leaders who responded to this interview question also emphasized that *within* the targeted group the change was consistent, uniform, and widespread. Other respondents emphasized the broader school- or even district-wide change that they believed resulted from the very structural and systemic nature of DSAC’s work. For example, leaders mentioned that Learning Walkthroughs created chances for teachers of different grade levels to observe each other, and that this led to cultural and instructional change that cut across grades and subject areas.

Consistent with the findings related to both Leadership and Planning and Effective Data Use, district leaders tended to report more positive impacts with regard to instructional improvement than their counterparts at the school level. This holds true for seven of the nine measures of instructional improvement, but most notably as relates to the capacity to accelerate student learning among high need populations with approximately half of the districts reporting positive impacts compared to about one-third of the schools.

Again, the trends in the perceived impact compared to SY12 showed improved perceptions among district leaders and less positive perceptions among school leaders. The most substantial increases for district leaders were in the use of assessments (26 percentage points), capacity to accelerate student learning among high-need populations (19 points), and use of effective instructional approaches (17 points). Among school leaders, the areas of greatest decline included content area knowledge of teachers (15 percentage points), capacity to accelerate student learning among high need populations (10 points), and customizing instruction to address student learning needs (9 points).

Professional Staff Culture

For a second consecutive year, leaders reported that DSAC assistance contributed to improvements in professional culture. About three-quarters indicated that DSAC assistance contributed to improved staff collaboration around teaching and learning as well as a shared sense of accountability for student learning. Data from the past two years suggest that improvements in staff collaboration may tie into DSAC support for Learning Walkthroughs with many leaders whose districts and schools engaged in that activity describing teachers who were more reflective or receptive regarding improvement efforts and benefited from a common vocabulary and conceptual framework for discussing the work.²³

²³ It should be noted that this relationship between Learning Walkthroughs and improvement in professional culture does not necessarily imply causation. Districts that engaged with DSAC in Learning Walkthroughs were often described as having characteristics or preconditions that contributed to their willingness or readiness to consider the use of the Walkthrough process, and these other factors may have had a substantive impact on perceived changes in staff culture.

Table 22: Impact of DSAC Assistance on Professional Staff Culture

Indicate the extent to which your district's/school's work with the DSAC has contributed to improvement in each of the following ...	<u>Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"...</u>		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
Staff collaboration around teaching and learning in your district/school	83%	70%	75%
Shared sense of accountability for student learning in your district/school	69%	76%	73%
Expectations for student learning in your district/school	58%	60%	59%
Your district/school's responsiveness to teachers' needs	71%	52%	59%
Teacher's input into school-level goal setting and decision-making	45%	68%	58%

Source: Analysis of March 2013 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, 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."

Support for ESE Priorities

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 these goals, Massachusetts is implementing a number of changes, including but not limited to curriculum changes around the Common Core and implementation of a new educator evaluation system. Given the scope and nature of these goals and reforms, the DSAC Initiative is a key component of the ESE's strategy to more effectively support its overarching priority of making every school an excellent one. Accordingly, there is strong alignment between the DSAC Initiative's assistance offerings and ESE's priority areas.

Most survey respondents (70%) reported that DSAC helped them integrate ESE initiatives into their improvement efforts, a finding echoed in follow-up interviews. Leaders most commonly reported that their DSAC provided their district or school with information or directed them to resources related to curriculum frameworks, changes in the Commonwealth's assessment system, or the Model Curriculum Units. Relatively few indicated that DSAC connected them with information or resources related to newer initiatives such as the Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) endorsement course, WIDA, and new data resources from the Edwin Analytics system. Typically, DSAC provides less support during the piloting stages of an initiative or resource and increases that support during full-fledged implementation. As such, it is likely that DSAC will more actively work to connect districts with such resources in SY14 as the relatively new initiatives begin to expand.

Table 23: Information and Resources Related to New ESE Initiatives and Tools (SY13)

To what extent did your regional DSAC provide your district/school with information and/or direct you to resources relevant to each of the following new ESE initiatives and/or tools this year....	Proportion indicating "to a great extent" or "to a moderate extent"...		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
Academic Curriculum Frameworks/Technical Education Frameworks	62%	30%	42%
Changes in the MA assessment system (e.g., MCAS, PARCC)	43%	38%	40%
Model Curriculum Units (a component of Edwin Teaching and Learning)	42%	34%	37%
Massachusetts Tiered System of Support	40%	29%	33%
Educator Evaluation System	34%	31%	32%
Early Warning Indicator System reports, Post-Secondary Readiness and Success reports (i.e., new data resources from Edwin Analytics)	36%	23%	28%
WIDA	36%	20%	26%
SEI Endorsement Course (a component of RETELL)	33%	11%	20%

Source: Analysis of March 2013 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."

Leaders also described various forms of assistance that they viewed as helpful to the integration of new ESE initiatives, including consultation with DSAC staff, DSAC-sponsored opportunities for collaboration, professional development for teachers, and data and content area support. Leaders frequently cited consultations with DSAC staff around the identification of district needs and priorities as beneficial in illuminating the connections between various initiatives and the ways that their implementation might be integrated with district improvement goals. To many of these district and school leaders, faced with an overwhelming array of new initiatives, DSAC's ability to provide a sense of how they fit together in the bigger picture, was itself a highly significant form of assistance. The extent of this role, however, may deserve further attention, as some leaders mentioned that they and their colleagues—because of their closer contact and communication with DSAC representatives—often have a better sense of how initiatives fit together than teachers and staff. This is reinforced by the survey data which show that the proportion of district leaders reporting that DSAC provided information or resources regarding curriculum frameworks was more than double that of school leaders.

Respondents often referenced their DSAC data specialist as especially beneficial to their improvement efforts and found that the work around data use integrated well with many of the other initiatives, including the Educator Evaluation system, the curriculum frameworks, and the Learning Walkthroughs. The interpretation of data was seen as key to the process of identifying school or district improvement objectives and thus connected directly to the criteria by which teachers were to be assessed.

Most leaders reported that the DSAC Initiative enhanced access to ESE information and resources, increased organizational capacity to use those resources, and enhanced ESE's responsiveness to district and school needs. Again, district leaders reported greater impacts than school leaders, with the greatest difference in the area of ESE responsiveness to local needs; 76% of districts reported great or moderate impacts in this area as compared to 54% of schools. The fact that district leaders are more likely than school leaders to be engaged with their DSAC team around efforts to access funds and resources and/or coordinate professional development—areas in which there may be relatively high levels of direct contact between ESE and the field and corresponding opportunities for issues to surface and be resolved—may at least in part serve to explain this difference.

Table 24: DSAC Initiative as a Link to ESE (SY13)

Indicate the extent to which your regional DSAC has contributed to each of the following in your district/school ...	Proportion indicating "greatly" or "moderately"...		
	District Leaders	School Leaders	Leaders Overall
Access to ESE tools and resources	80%	73%	76%
Capacity to use ESE tools and resources to support district/school improvement efforts	79%	72%	74%
Access to information about ESE services and policies	80%	69%	73%
Responsiveness of ESE to district and school needs	76%	54%	63%
Cross-district collaboration and sharing in your region	63%	53%	57%

Source: Analysis of March 2013 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."

Although still a majority, the smallest proportion of leaders surveyed cited DSAC as contributing to cross-district collaboration and sharing within their region. Yet responses to open-ended items frequently noted DSACs role in facilitating critical opportunities for collaboration between individual districts and between teachers in a given school. Specific instances cited included the DSAC network meetings, the PLC institute, and the Instructional Leadership Networking meetings. These collaborative opportunities not only received general praise but were also regarded as highly useful in the efforts to create common understanding about the connections between initiatives.

Conclusion and Key Findings

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's District and School Center (DSAC) Initiative reflects a significant shift in the state's system of support to schools and districts. Launched in late 2009, the Initiative reflects a complex, regionally-based effort to support improvement in high-need districts across the Commonwealth, with priority given in SY13 to 60 districts designated as Level 3 and Level 4 under the state's *Framework for District Accountability and Assistance*.

As would be expected for any system, evidence suggests progress in the system's evolution, from the focus on organizational development tasks which built a foundation for the Initiative's work in its launch year, to increasing levels of engagement with districts in SY11, and increasingly intensive work with districts in SY12 and SY13. In fact, in SY13 the number of intensively engaged districts almost tripled from SY11, with 93% of DSAC priority districts engaged with their DSAC in one or more in-district services. The total number of districts engaged with their DSAC increased from 44 in SY12 to 56 in SY13, representing an increase of 27%. This increasingly intensive engagement resulted from relationship-building efforts over time as well as DSAC teams' characteristics and approaches to the work. For a second consecutive year, district and school leaders continued to report favorable impressions of the DSAC assistance in terms of its value to districts' improvement efforts, high relevance to local needs, and high degree of overall participant satisfaction.

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 its 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 staff culture. Leaders also described more overarching impacts such as the enhanced capacity to implement sustainable, long-term improvement.

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 Initiative enhanced access to and use of ESE's research-based tools and resources, including those most relevant to the new ESE initiatives. Also, it is clear that DSACs played an important role in helping districts prioritize, make connections between, and integrate new ESE initiatives into local improvement efforts.

- ❖ Analysis of surveys, interviews and document review conducted in spring 2013 surfaced the following key evaluation findings. Increasing levels of district engagement reflect high levels of satisfaction with DSAC support and particularly value DSAC support around effective data use. However, district leaders generally perceive greater impacts from DSAC support than do school leaders.
- ❖ The nature of district and school utilization of DSAC foundational services reflects a maturation of service offerings, specifically progress from assessing need and planning for improvement toward capacity building and implementation of improvement strategies.
- ❖ Most leaders indicate that DSAC support has contributed to positive changes at the classroom level, generally related to new lessons or curriculum and new methods of instruction. Classroom-level changes largely involve targeted groups prioritized by DSAC support, although some leaders emphasize broader school or even district-wide changes resulting from the very structural and systemic nature of DSAC's work. However, many express concern about DSAC staffing capacity to sufficiently meet the need for ELA and math content support.

- ❖ DSAC has been relatively effective in its efforts to support ESE’s major systems change initiatives and assist districts to integrate those initiatives into their own educational improvement efforts. Importantly, DSAC assistance continues to evolve to support new ESE initiatives and specialized needs of districts.
- ❖ Leaders cite the critical opportunities for collaboration fostered through the regional networks and other cross-district initiatives sponsored by DSAC.
- ❖ Increasing emphasis on the use of Targeted Assistance and Improvement grant funds to support in-district professional development and support reflects districts’ desire to involve larger cohorts of teachers to maximize impact of the professional development.

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 will need to continue to define its priorities, build new capacities, and find relevant expertise. As such, ongoing conversations and capacity building efforts involving DSAC teams, other ESE stakeholders, and DSAC partner organizations as well as leaders from priority districts and their schools will remain important for the Initiative as it enters SY14.