



Harvard Family Research Project

## A Profile of the Evaluation of the Academic Support Services Program

### Program Description

**Overview:** The Academic Support Services Program (ASSP) provides funds to Massachusetts school districts to develop or enhance academic support for students in second through tenth grade who performed poorly on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) or on other standardized assessment measures. Through ASSP grants, school districts provide intensive small group instruction and other programming during nonschool hours. Support services are primarily academic in focus and may include cultural, recreational, and community service learning activities. An additional component of this program is the Individual Reading and Tutoring Program, which provides targeted one-on-one tutoring programs for fourth grade students who scored at the “pre-reader” or “basic” category on the grade three Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) reading test.

**Start Date:** 1998

**Scope:** state

**Type:** before school, after school, weekend, summer/vacation

**Location:** urban, suburban, rural

**Setting:** public school

**Participants:** elementary through high school students

**Number of Sites/Grantees:** 317 ASSPs and 28 Individual Reading and Tutoring Programs in 1999

**Number Served:** 50,000 (projected 1998–1999 school year and summer combined)

**Components:** Programs occur during half or full days in the summer, after school, Saturdays, and school vacations. They provide instruction in English/language arts, mathematics, and/or science and technology. There are four main components to ASSP programs:

*Assessment Component* – Students are identified for the program based on poor

performance on the MCAS or, in the case of the Individual Tutoring in Reading program, on low performance on the grade three Iowa reading test.

*Curriculum Component* – Programs are required to use “innovative, research-based practices, and supports designed to engage and instruct identified students” (from the program’s Request for Proposals).

*Parental Component* – Individual Tutoring in Reading programs were encouraged to involve parents in tutor selection and reading improvement.

*Teacher Component* – Hiring of English/Language Arts teachers was encouraged in many sites. Funds could also be used to provide small-group instruction, additional tutoring/mentoring services, professional development, and staff incentives.

**Funding Level:** \$20 million in 1999

**Funding Sources:** Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE)

**Other:** The Massachusetts DOE Office of Accountability and Targeted Assistance administers ASSP.

## Evaluation

**Overview:** In 1999, the Massachusetts Education Reform Commission contracted with the Center for Education Policy at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, to study the implementation of ASSP in fiscal year 1999.

**Evaluators:** Center for Education Policy at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst

### **Evaluations Profiled:**

*Academic Support Services Programs in the Commonwealth: A Report on Implementation*

**Evaluations Planned:** none

### **Reports Available:**

Schneider, J. R. (2000). *Academic Support Services Programs in the Commonwealth: A report on implementation*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts, Amherst, School of Education, the Center for Education Policy. Available at [www.merrc.org/research/acadss.htm](http://www.merrc.org/research/acadss.htm).

## Contacts

### **Program:**

Pam Spagnoli  
Academic Support Services Program  
Department of Education, Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148-5023  
Tel: 781-338-6246  
Email: [pspagnoli@doe.mass.edu](mailto:pspagnoli@doe.mass.edu)

### **Evaluation:**

Andrew Churchill  
Assistant Director  
Center for Education Policy  
School of Education  
University of Massachusetts, Amherst  
813 North Pleasant Street  
Amherst, MA 01003  
Email: [achurchill@educ.umass.edu](mailto:achurchill@educ.umass.edu)

**Profile Updated:** November 6, 2003

## Evaluation

### *Academic Support Services Programs in the Commonwealth: A Report on Implementation*

**Evaluation Purpose:** To identify issues affecting the implementation of state-funded academic support services programs during the 1998–1999 academic year and the summer of 1999; to identify future policy issues affecting the delivery of state-funded academic support services programs to Massachusetts students; and to provide feedback to the Massachusetts Education Reform Commission on the effectiveness of the implementation of state-funded academic support services programs.

**Evaluation Design: *Non-Experimental:*** Program data were collected from all districts that received state funding through ASSP, with more in-depth data collected from selected site visits and surveys of superintendents administering ASSPs.

**Data Collection Methods:**

***Interviews/Focus Groups:*** Informal interviews were conducted with ASSP program staff during site visits in order to learn about program implementation.

***Document Review:*** Grant proposals from all ASSPs were provided to evaluators. Proposals included basic demographic information, strengths and weaknesses of the program, etcetera. DOE-required individual site evaluation reports were also provided to evaluators, when available.

***Observation:*** Site visits were conducted during the summer of 1999 to nine urban school districts to meet with program staff implementing ASSP summer schools and to observe classroom practices.

***Surveys/Questionnaires:*** A survey was distributed to the 202 superintendents of districts with ASSP programs. Sixty-one percent of superintendents returned surveys. Questions concerned programs' selection of students, services provided to students, outreach to parents, selection and training of staff, and policy and implementation issues that might affect ASSPs in the future.

**Data Collection Timeframe:** Data were collected during the summer and fall of 1999.

### *Findings:*

#### Formative/Process Findings

**Costs/Revenues:**

Almost half of superintendents indicated that they would not implement ASSPs for students without the availability of state funds.

Less than 20% of superintendents surveyed agreed that the foundation budget formula provides sufficient funds for ASSPs.

### **Parent/Community Involvement:**

A few programs saw free transportation as a barrier to program-family interactions. A number of superintendents mentioned that asking parents to transport students to and from the program allowed administrators and teachers to have more interaction with parents.

Many programs attempted to schedule their summer programs to coincide with family schedules, either by providing programming more days per week, or by offering different blocks of program hours, such as later afternoon or evening hours in addition to morning hours.

Staff/parent communication was used as a means of providing ASSP follow-up services to students and their families and included providing parents with student progress reports, test score results, and program report cards. Parents were also kept apprised of their children's progress using technological resources such as computer software that compiled student data and a website that provided ongoing updates on children's progress.

Face-to-face contact with parents was rated by superintendents as the most effective strategy for conducting outreach to parents. Informational letters and telephoning parents were also frequently mentioned as effective.

### **Program Context/Infrastructure:**

Superintendent surveys revealed that the most common reasons for offering state-funded ASSPs were: improving MCAS scores, the availability of state funds, and having staff committed to providing services to students. Raising MCAS scores was cited as the most important reason for implementing these programs—over 96% of superintendents agreed that this was a primary reason that they implemented the program. However, many survey respondents reported ambivalence when asked if raising MCAS scores should be the sole focus of ASSPs.

Nearly 90% of superintendents agreed that ASSPs should focus on content knowledge included in state curriculum frameworks.

Approximately 60% of superintendents agreed that ASSPs should focus exclusively on improving basic reading and math skills.

Less than 20% of superintendents agreed that ASSPs should focus only on improving MCAS scores.

### **Program-School Linkages:**

A slight majority (53.4%) of survey respondents indicated that their district established a formal process to provide follow-up information about student performance to teachers, guidance counselors, and parents. Suburban districts were more likely (61%) than other

districts to have established such follow-up services, while vocational districts were the least likely (39%). The evaluators concluded that the lack of follow up in nearly half of surveyed districts is a barrier to integrating state-funded ASSPs with the regular school year.

The two main ways that ASSPs provided follow-up services to teachers were: (1) by maintaining student portfolios and passing them on to the next year's teachers (in the case of summer programs) or to their regular school teacher (in the case of school-year programs) and (2) through the use of computer technology. (E.g., some sites set up systems where principals and teachers could access progress reports of students online, while other sites used special software to compile and print student data for teachers and school officials.)

When asked to identify future policy issues affecting the delivery of state-funded academic support services programs to Massachusetts students, only 25% of superintendents agreed that the current school year provided sufficient time to meet the MCAS performance standards required for high school graduation.

### **Recruitment/Participation:**

Approximately 90% of survey respondents indicated that standardized test scores were either somewhat or very important in the selection of students into ASSPs.

While superintendents reported that identifying students in need of ASSPs was relatively easy, they also commonly cited effectively recruiting students and maintaining their attendance as an implementation challenge.

Program factors identified by over 50% of superintendent surveys as somewhat or very effective in recruiting and motivating students to attend the ASSPs were: individual tutoring, project-based learning opportunities, small student/teacher ratios, free transportation, opportunity to improve MCAS scores, and use of computers.

A minority of programs found it effective to provide students with various financial incentives to encourage good attendance and participation. For example, one vocational school district provided students with \$100 to purchase tools, books, or educational software if they attended the ASSP summer program over 80% of the time. Two rural districts also mentioned asking students or parents to pay a deposit fee that was returned to them on successful completion of the program.

Only 10% of superintendents indicated that attendance at their ASSP was mandatory (although a higher percentage [26.3%] of superintendents in large urban districts indicated this). Despite this small percentage, over 70% of those who said attendance was not mandatory were considering making such a move. The percentage considering such a move was even higher in large urban districts offering summer school programs (85.7%).

**Staffing/Training:**

The largest class observed during site visits had 15 students to one teacher, while the smallest had a student to teacher ratio of 2:1. Grant proposals revealed that small student/teacher ratios were seen by the programs as a priority for quality program implementation.

Surveys indicated that principal and teacher recommendations, as well as formal job postings, were the most effective means of recruiting staff. Previous experience working with low-performing students and previous teaching experience in the district were the most commonly cited criteria for selecting staff. Many districts noted, however, that recruiting teachers to the programs was a difficult implementation challenge.

Over 60% of surveyed superintendents reported that staff were provided with professional development opportunities, including: workshops, weekly meetings with project leaders and/or consultants, program orientation, and funding to attend conferences.

All rural districts reported having sufficient resources to hire staff, as compared to 75–85% in other district types.

Only 30% of survey respondents indicated that their teaching staff was evaluated.

**Systemic Infrastructure:**

Grant proposals revealed that many programs emphasized the importance of working with and integrating ASSP programming with local recreational programs (e.g., YMCAs). Through this collaboration, districts felt that ASSPs would be better equipped to provide attendance incentives, encourage student effort, and supply families with extended day alternatives and transportation options.

When asked to identify future policy issues affecting the delivery of state-funded academic support services programs to Massachusetts students, nearly 80% of superintendents felt that summer school should be mandatory for students scoring low on the MCAS. Nearly 70% felt that a high school diploma should not be denied to a student with low MCAS scores if they had not received academic support service, and a similar percentage agreed that districts needed to add hours to the school day in order to meet MCS performance requirements.