

February 23, 2025

Commissioner Search Committee  
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
135 Santilli Hwy  
Everett, MA 02149

Committee Members Driscoll, Tutwiler, Craven, Fisher and West,

With great enthusiasm and humility, I write to express my desire to be considered as the next Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Through this letter, my hope is to convey the core values that have served as guideposts throughout my leadership in service of children, and the set of skills gained along the way that apply to this important role for the state. My journey in public education has both traditional and non-traditional aspects, the sum of which, I believe, uniquely qualifies me to be the capable, innovative and aspirational leader that will best serve Massachusetts schools and districts in the years ahead.

From this letter I hope you hear the following: I am a systems thinker who cares deeply about children's success and have a demonstrated track record of caring for educators and the pipelines that help them enter this noble profession. And that, as the state's leader of schools, the next commissioner ought to be clear about the expected student outcomes, align resources and ecosystem partners in service of them, and foster innovations at all levels to close gaps in achievement and ensure all children can thrive.

### **Core Values**

**Educators move mountains.** My career in education began long before stepping into the old shop room at I.S. 184 in the South Bronx to teach social studies to 150 middle schoolers in 2005. As a first-generation college graduate, my life trajectory – and now my children's – was utterly transformed by an assistant principal in who saw some potential in one of Mrs. Smith's second graders. I was far too young to be a participant in the conversations about what would happen next, but that administrator's actions – his urging that my parents identify a school that could more fully support what I needed – have resonated throughout my life, even to this moment. At just 7 years old, the power of a great educator, one who acts with students' interests first, took deep root.

**Schools can transform lives.** There is, therefore, a clear connection between my K-12 school experience and the decision to become a lifelong educator. When that school administrator intervened, a chain of events ensued that landed me in a fantastic elementary school, full of opportunity, and one where everyone was expected to matriculate to post-secondary education and ultimately professional careers. Culture-shocked and in need of academic support, the exposure to a great school was transformative, and implanted the deep belief that such an experience should be universal for all children in our country. Every child deserves a school where each educator, each community member, each peer pushes one another to achieve and nurtures developing minds and hearts. Some days were challenging, and there were days I felt as though I didn't belong. But in each grade, there was a teacher, or a fellow student, or an administrator who looked out for me. Great educators create undeniably powerful school cultures, ones who can uplift students academically and spiritually, even on the hardest days.

**Humility creates understanding.** Despite a powerful K-12 and post-secondary experience, the most significant lessons I learned were as a first-year middle school teacher in the Bronx. Far away from my blue-collar Michigan home, I was forced to more deeply understand how my identity – a white, male, non-New Yorker, among other traits – would be received and impact my mostly African America and Latino students of many different backgrounds, many with immigrant roots if not immigrants themselves, and all with diverse learning needs. Actively building relationships with my students, their families, and my colleagues – and reading seminal works by authors who did not share my background – allowed me to embark on a journey that has pushed my thinking and perspective on how my identities, and our education systems writ large, affect people of color, those experiencing poverty, English-learners and so many more. The foundation of my beliefs about education systems is rooted in the life-changing experience I had with hundreds of

middle schoolers who, in the process, taught me how to work across lines of difference and, most of all, revealed their innate genius that, as in all children, can and should be fostered.

**Integrity matters most.** A universal truth to working with middle schoolers is to “always do what you say you’re going to do”. Having learned this fact the hard way in the early fall days of 2005 (when I told students some rules would have consequences and then failed to enact them), the definition of integrity has only grown with leadership experience. Now more than ever, communicating hard truths in ways that are accessible, deeply listening and responding to criticism in a way that creates confidence and trust and aligning actions with words without fail is paramount, especially in government. While sometimes imperfectly implemented and always in need of refinement, it is my job to create the conditions that allow these practices and principles to thrive in any organization I lead. High expectations coupled with honest feedback and an openness to change are the hallmarks of the teams I have had the privilege of leading.

**Vision, vision, vision.** Change management, innovation, transformation: all of these are impossible without vision. While founding MEWI and establishing Talent Together, many people shared reasons why our new non-profit and first program would fail. Loyalty to our vision undergirded our success. While remaining open to input and course adjustments, the best leaders are keepers of the vision. For Massachusetts, the next DESE commissioner must work closely with district leaders, students, parents, teachers, and communities to craft a vision that is worthy of the historically academically highest-performing state in the country. This vision must be rooted in achievement for all children, particularly those that find themselves, through no fault of their own, in schools and systems that are not currently serving them well. Moreover, Massachusetts can and should be a leader in education technology innovation, the adoption of A.I. research and best practices, and revolutionary new approaches to accountability, in the service of equitable outcomes for all.

### **Innovation with Systems Leaders**

The Board is seeking a leader who can represent DESE well, both locally and nationally, and set a vision by “building statewide consensus with diverse stakeholders and communities”. Strong state systems enable great schools, and strong commissioners not only make districts feel supported, but provide opportunities for them to *see themselves* in the state’s vision and plan. In 2025, it is imperative that state education leaders find ways to foster innovation at all levels, from classrooms to whole districts, while ensuring that schools are meeting children’s academic needs. While this can be a challenging endeavor, Massachusetts has countless assets in its favor: a collection of exemplary higher education institutions, a world-leading biotechnology and medical industry, and a population that prioritizes funding for education, to name just a few. Some states without these ideal conditions have produced strong results by aligning strategy to resources, building ecosystems that can support school systems in complementary ways, and ensuring that reliable, predictable accountability systems provide a backstop to persistent low performance.

Tackling systemic challenges in partnership with school system leaders may be the strongest strategy the next commissioner adopts. At the Michigan Educator Workforce Initiative, we worked closely with a growing group of intermediate school district superintendents to create the second largest Grow Your Own teacher certification program in the country, and the largest Department of Labor registered apprenticeship program for teachers in the Midwest, garnering over 5,000 applications in just under 3 years. What began as an idea between a few systems leaders is now a public-private collaboration between 56 intermediate school district superintendents, yielding 1,100 teacher candidates (and counting) across the state, from the most rural parts of northern Michigan to urban centers like Detroit and Grand Rapids. Remarkably, over one-third of Talent Together’s candidates identify as people of color, nearly tripling the rate of racial diversity compared to Michigan’s current teacher corps (10%). The program has received bi-partisan support from the Michigan legislature, which has contributed over nearly \$80M in budget allocations, and helped bolster thousands of citizens from lower hourly wages to middle class salaries. Every county in the state has at least one Talent Together candidate, which speaks directly to the power of a clear vision, one of innovating with systems leaders and their teams, in service of all Michigan’s children.

Educator talent may be the most important driver to achieving stronger outcomes as a state, but it is not the only one. While serving as the Chief Innovation Officer for Chicago Public Schools, our office worked closely with school leaders

across the city to develop the School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP), a school accountability system that remained in place for a decade. School accountability can be controversial, however when built with and by educators, it can produce remarkable results. In just two years' time, the lowest performing charter schools moved from a warning list that threatened closure to rapid improvement. While a small handful of these schools voluntarily closed or changed management – in part because of the pending accountability mechanisms – the remainder saw dramatic improvement, with a few becoming among the city's highest-performing. Expecting that schools produce outcomes does not need to be arduous or feel repressive to educators. When done well, these kinds of systems can be liberating to educators, providing a north star toward outcomes that are immediately rewarded and recognized.

The Department's role is to set the stage for the state's school systems to flourish. Making clear to district leaders – with their support – what the “north star” is for achievement and providing aligned resources is the necessary policy work of the commissioner and their team. States that have achieved strong results incentivize proven strategies: from subsidized high-quality curriculum and materials, to adopting strategic staffing, to high-dosage tutoring, to early middle college and more. Massachusetts is already making promising investments in some of these areas. The next commissioner will need to assess where the DESE team, its resources, policies, and priorities must be transformed to maximize outcomes for all schools and children. While this will not be an easy task, it is the only way that Massachusetts can demonstrate its true potential: the home of Harvard, the Patriots, free community college, and the birthplace of democracy has the potential to be the shining exemplar of a 22<sup>nd</sup> century approach to state education agency leadership, years ahead of its time.

### **A Strong Fit**

My experiences leading K-12 systems and adjacent non-profits provides may be the ideal background for the next commissioner. There are a few priorities named in the posting that I would highlight for the committee:

- 1) *Implement strategies to enhance teacher retention and expand professional development opportunities, fostering a supportive environment for educators' growth and long-term success.*

This *is* the mission of the Educator Workforce Initiative and over the last 3 years, we have demonstrated not just technical expertise but the ability to build deep partnerships statewide, across education systems, traditional district and charter, to develop comprehensive strategies and solutions at many points of the educator workforce pipeline. From teacher retention to innovative programs to attract career-changers and upskill current school-based staff, to inspiring the next generation of high school students, to training systems talent leaders, our organization has a sterling track record of innovation and results.

- 2) *Develop a strategic plan to further transform DESE into a state-of-the-art resource, support, and service delivery center.*

Throughout multiple systems leadership roles, transforming “central office” to better serve schools to meet our collective goals has been one of the cornerstones of my approach. In Chicago, our office increased response times to school inquiries, reduced unnecessary and burdensome paperwork, and *listened* to what schools wanted and needed from the Office of Innovation and Incubation. From a substantially clearer school budget process with more equitable funding, to supporting new alternative schools and programs, we knew that our office was there to serve schools and not the other way around.

- 3) *Strengthen collaboration and alignment among EEC, DESE, and DHE to ensure cohesive education policies and streamlined decision-making processes.*

While at the Detroit Children's Fund, we coordinated weekly leadership meetings with the City of Detroit, City, County and State Health Departments, school operations experts, school districts across southeast Michigan, and the Governor's Office to ensure schools were receiving clear, accurate guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The creation of Talent Together required us to work with the local and national Department of Labor, hundreds of school districts across the state, 18 university-based higher education preparation programs, and more. There are many more examples of how I have led across systems in service of common goals and, most importantly, positive outcomes for children.

- 4) *Strategically balance incentives and accountability measures to drive innovation while empowering individual districts to tailor approaches that best meet their unique community needs.*

Creating a new framework for accountability – especially with innovations in workforce development and instructional delivery coming to the fore – will require a balance of outcomes and the space to innovate without fear of immediate consequences. Developing the School Quality Rating Policy in Chicago is a strong example of how we balanced clear accountability for charter schools with some built-in incentives for innovators and high performers to try new approaches without fear of harsh consequences. At Detroit Children’s Fund, we built strong accountability metrics into our approach to funding, but worked closely with schools to make adjustments to them when it was clear that doing so was in the best interest of children.

**Commitment**

The next DESE commissioner has an enormous opportunity and responsibility. Setting a clear north star of achievement and innovation for the state is a challenge I am both eager and excited to undertake. I look forward to engaging further in this important process and remain grateful to the committee for its consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jack J. Elsey Jr.", written in a cursive style.

Jack J. Elsey Jr.