

Lily Laux, PhD

January 13, 2025

Katie Rockman, Tatiana Oberkoetter, Arianna Williams, and Maria Connor
Isaacson, Miller
DESE Commissioner Search

Dear Search Committee Members,

I am writing to express my strong interest in the Commissioner position with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). With a proven track record of state education leadership and a deep commitment to equity and excellence, I am excited about the opportunity to build upon Massachusetts' standing as a national leader in K-12 education while addressing persistent equity challenges and advancing innovative solutions that serve all students.

I grew up in Massachusetts, where my public school education laid the foundation for who I am today. When my mom made the difficult decision to leave my father, she chose Western Massachusetts for two reasons: a job offer as a secretary and the strong reputation of its public schools. That choice reshaped my future, giving me an opportunity she never had – the chance to go to college. Still, as a first-generation, low-income student at an Ivy League university, I struggled with gaps in my academic preparation. These challenges, along with my own story, have shown me both the profound impact of Massachusetts' public schools and the meaningful work still needed to ensure every student is truly ready for post-secondary success.

Massachusetts' reputation for educational excellence is well-earned, but what particularly draws me to this role is the clear commitment to not just maintaining these high standards, but to ensuring they translate into success for every student across the Commonwealth's diverse communities. The vision outlined in your search materials – of an education system that develops students who are not only academically accomplished but also self-aware, empathetic, civically engaged, and prepared for lifelong learning – deeply resonates with my own educational philosophy and leadership approach.

Throughout my career, I have demonstrated the key qualities and experiences you seek in your next Commissioner. Until last year, I served as Deputy Commissioner of School Programs at the Texas Education Agency (TEA), where I led a team of over 270 staff supporting 1,200 school systems serving nearly 5.5 million students. In this role, I:

- Led a comprehensive literacy initiative that trained over 150,000 K-3 educators in the science of teaching reading, including a dedicated biliteracy pathway

- Redesigned career and technical education and the early college program, creating outcomes-based blueprints and launching 250 Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools (P-TECHs) in less than 5 years, with 39% of graduates earning associate degrees
- Developed and implemented open-source, high-quality instructional materials now used by more than 600 Texas districts, with 90% continuing implementation after year one
- Orchestrated a complete transformation of the Texas Assessment program to fully transition to online testing with enhanced question types, earning 86% stakeholder approval for improved instructional alignment
- Successfully managed the implementation of historic \$11.6 billion school finance reform and the agency's COVID-19 response, which included \$1.9 billion in discretionary grants to districts

My approach to organizational leadership is grounded in using data to drive continuous improvement. By establishing data-driven systems for monitoring progress and adjusting strategies, we identified key factors influencing student outcomes and refined our support and approaches accordingly. This systematic approach allowed us to showcase promising results, using data and concrete case studies as the foundation for proactive, transparent communication with legislators across party lines about the statewide impact of our educational initiatives. For example, while we used district case studies specifically tied to key initiatives, we also evaluated state and national data to evaluate efficacy. Texas's NAEP rankings from 2019 to 2022 showed notable improvements among student subgroups, with economically disadvantaged students advancing from 31st to 20th place in 4th grade reading and from 43rd to 22nd in 8th grade reading. These examples of achievement outcomes created bipartisan support for our work and results in a deeper investment in high-quality instructional materials in the 2023 legislative session.

Working closely with our diverse communities was central to our success. In a state where 62% of our students are economically disadvantaged and 23% are emergent bilingual/English learners, we prioritized stakeholder engagement through regular convenings, surveys, and other feedback portals. Throughout this work, we deliberately recruited educators, parents, and community members representing Texas's full diversity to serve on committees and provide feedback, ensuring our initiatives were shaped by and responsive to community needs. Key stakeholder groups maintained a 92% satisfaction rate.

Currently, as Executive Director at Economic Mobility Systems, I partner with K-12 districts, higher education institutions, and workforce organizations to improve college and career outcomes. A key driver of our work is building real-time data systems, supported by regional data sharing that prioritizes privacy and security. These systems enable partners to better track and support students' journeys through strong case management while building continuous improvement into their collective practice. This role has deepened my expertise in creating stronger alignment between education

systems and workforce needs, which is a critical priority for Massachusetts as it works to ensure opportunity for all students.

Looking ahead, I see tremendous opportunity for Massachusetts to build on its strong foundation while addressing urgent challenges. The combined impact of COVID-19 learning disruption and rapid technological change requires us to both accelerate recovery and transform our system for the future. This means strengthening early literacy through evidence-based practices and high-quality instructional materials, expanding support for a growing multilingual learner population, and building robust systems for student mental health. We must also reimagine career and technical education to align with emerging workforce needs while strengthening partnerships across K-12, higher education, and industry. Central to this work is supporting our educators through innovative professional development, particularly in our highest-need communities. By approaching these efforts with an equity lens, we can build an education system where every student sees themselves reflected in their learning and is empowered to shape their own path to success. I believe I have the skills and experience to lead these efforts in Massachusetts.

Educational excellence and equity are my life's work. I began my career as a middle school teacher before moving into roles as an instructional coach and teacher educator. My doctorate from the University of Texas at Austin, focusing on the intersections of critical race theory and critical disability studies, has informed my understanding of how to build truly inclusive educational systems.

It would be an honor to return to my home state to lead DESE's efforts for excellence and equity in this post-COVID era. I look forward to discussing how my experience and vision align with the Board's goals for Massachusetts' educational future.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lily

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Lily Laux".

Lily Laux, Ph.D.