



In March and April 2012, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE)—in partnership with the New Teacher Center, a national non-profit organization dedicated to strengthening teacher practice, and an advisory group comprised of representatives from education advocacy groups active in the Commonwealth—implemented a statewide survey for school-based educators. The *Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning in Massachusetts Survey*, or TELL Mass Survey, involved 42,400 educators, or more than half of all school-based educators in the state. District- and school-level results were made available to all districts and schools in which educator response rates exceeded 50% and the total number of respondents was five or greater. Schools were encouraged and Race to the Top (RTTT) districts were required to use their TELL Mass results to develop and implement plans to improve educator working conditions. As described in the state’s RTTT application, the goal was for educators to:

...work collaboratively within the L[ocal] E[ducation] A[gency] to improve the climate, conditions, and school culture. Teacher retention and effectiveness is strengthened when administrators identify areas for improvement on the basis of evidence and work together collaboratively to resolve them.

In collaboration with ESE’s Office of Educator Policy, Preparation, and Leadership and Office for Planning, Research, and Delivery Systems, the UMass Donahue Institute engaged district leaders in a series of interviews from March to June 2013. The interviews were intended to understand district experiences related to TELL Mass and gather feedback for ESE in relation to its planned second administration of the survey in 2014. Interviews involved district-level leaders, including superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors of curriculum and instruction, and others from 11 RTTT districts.¹ District-level interviews reflect the first phase of a multiphase study, the next phase of which will involve school leaders in up to 12 schools and teachers in up to 4 schools to better understand school experiences with the data and changes that may have resulted from the use of those data.

This briefing, prepared for ESE’s Office of Educator Policy, Preparation, and Leadership and Office for Planning, Research, and Delivery Systems, summarizes key findings from those district-level interviews. The briefing is organized into three sections. The first discusses districts’ use of TELL Mass data including, where applicable, district leaders’ impressions of use of the data in schools within their district. The second offers feedback shared by district leaders, as well as their stated intentions regarding the 2014 administration. The third and final section offers a brief conclusions and summary of high-level findings.

I. Key Findings Regarding District Use of TELL Mass

All districts involved in the study used TELL Mass results in some way, although approaches varied greatly. Use of the data was frequently attributed to several factors including the RTTT requirement that districts use the data, as well as administrators’ interest in the results, their belief that they reflected something meaningful about building-level conditions, and their desire to make positive changes in school climate and culture. One interviewee explained:

We really buy into the belief that a healthy school climate leads to positive outcomes for students, so there’s a really direct connection between how teachers responded to that survey—what are they telling us about the conditions in their school— and how students perform.

¹ Districts asked to participate in the study were those that, as part of their RTTT plans, planned to use the TELL Mass results in 2012, the rationale being that these districts were those most likely to have experiences with using the data and/or would be able to reflect on challenges or concerns. Reflecting the study’s intention to involve districts and then, where possible, schools within those districts, the study focused on districts with multiple schools with TELL Mass results, and excluded charter and vocational districts. In total, 34 districts were asked to participate, and the 11 interviewed districts represent those able to be interviewed during the study timeframe. Participating districts ranged in size from a small relatively rural district enrolling fewer than 2,000 students to two larger urban districts with enrollments of 5,500 or more. Within the set of participating districts, response rates on the TELL Mass survey ranged from just under 50% to nearly 90%. Of the 11 districts participating, 3 had response rates between 49.5% and 66.5%, 4 had response rates between 66.6% and 74.9%, and 4 had response rates of 75% or greater.

The influence of the RTTT requirement on use was typically described in conjunction with other rationale for using the data, and in some cases, appeared to reflect time pressures. That is, in a context in which districts described a number of competing priorities for their time and attention, the association of TELL Mass with RTTT increased the relative priority of the survey and use of the results. In one district, meeting the RTTT requirement was described as the exclusive reason for that district's use of the data, but this was not the widespread sentiment among study participants.

It should be noted that this finding is limited to districts participating in the study, and as such, does not imply that all RTTT districts used TELL Mass data. In fact, it is likely that those districts that used the data were more inclined to participate in the study. Further, it is notable that one district contacted as part of the study had not yet used TELL Mass results, something that was attributed to substantial changes in leadership within the district. At the time, new leaders were not aware of the district's prior participation in the survey or the RTTT requirement regarding use of the survey but expressed interest in learning more and possibly using the results in the future. As such, they did not participate in the study and were referred to ESE's Office of Educator Policy, Preparation, and Leadership for additional information.

One of the primary ways districts differed in their use of TELL Mass data was in terms of the level(s) at which they used the results. In general, most districts described using both district-wide and school-level results to identify overarching concerns in the district, as well as more specific opportunities for improvement within individual buildings. In this context, district-level concerns were most commonly identified through a review of overall results by district leaders, but also, in some cases, by reviewing what emerged as critical concerns from school-level conversations—an approach one leader described as “let[ting] the [work] percolate from the bottom-up.” School-level concerns, on the other hand, were identified either through building-level conversations—with districts asking principals to review and discuss the data with their leadership teams or, in several cases, their full faculties—or by reviewing school-level data directly with building-level administrators and discussing the results and changes that may be warranted.

While a majority of districts involved in the study leveraged the data at both levels, others described how specific factors or conditions warranted a focus on one level or another. For example, one district felt as though the fact that not all schools had reached the participation thresholds required to receive their results precluded them from requiring school-level review across the district, as this would necessarily involve some schools and not others. Conversely, another district described how substantial differences in their schools and the populations they serve led them to set aside plans for a district-wide review of the results and focus on supporting the use of the data as part of building-level improvement efforts.

Another way districts differed in their approach to using their TELL Mass results relates to the venues through which the results were analyzed and discussed. In a few cases, districts convened committees specifically for the purpose of analyzing the data and identifying improvement priorities and strategies. More often, however, districts endeavored to review and analyze the data using existing leadership and meeting structures. These included district-wide administrative team meetings (for district-level use); school leadership, instructional leadership, and/or full faculty meetings (for school-level use); or, in the case of districts that used TELL Mass for the purposes of staff development planning, district-wide professional development structures. To some extent, district decisions to use existing structures were attributed to practical considerations, such as a desire to be time-efficient in light of what were described as increasing time pressures, but also a desire to integrate and bring increased coherence to improvement efforts related to different initiatives.

As described in interviews, the extent to which districts collaborated with key stakeholders in their review of TELL Mass data was influenced greatly by the nature of the relationship between the district and those stakeholders prior to the survey. For example, district leaders that described productive working relationships with their unions prior to TELL Mass also described more substantive involvement of local union representation in ongoing conversations with TELL Mass. One district leader explains:

We meet on a regular basis [with the union]. We hide nothing from each other... a member of the union leadership is on every district-wide committee. Every key decision that's made, any ad hoc group that I have to make a



decision—about a curriculum resource or whatnot—always has union leadership as well. So in that regard, the union is a key and critical player in the development of our district initiatives. So when the TELL Mass results come out, I don't react to them defensively.

Those alluding to more contentious relationships on the other hand, including several who were involved in contract negotiations at the time the data were being reviewed, either did not attempt to involve unions or indicated that they were not successful in these efforts. One interviewee explained:

[TELL Mass results] came out in May or June of last year, and we were at that point preparing for contract negotiations and have been in contract negotiations since that time.... There are a lot of other issues going on, more around supervision and evaluation. So basically, that put an end to most conversations. It's unfortunate, that had we not been scheduled for reconsideration for our contract, I think there would have been a great deal more [involvement]. But, once contract negotiations began, most everything, any sort of dialog fell apart, because it all became about the contract....

It should be noted that the study did not engage local union leaders directly, and as such, reflects only district leaders' perspectives of local union involvement and challenges related to that involvement. However, given the complex nature of relationships between and among stakeholders and the role of these relationships in improvement efforts more generally, it is not necessarily surprising that relationships reflected the context in which TELL Mass data were reviewed rather than being substantively altered by the use of the data, at least in the short-term.

Further reflecting the desire to be time-efficient and make connections across improvement efforts, several districts reviewed TELL Mass results through the lens of specific district-level initiatives. For example, one district looked at the data primarily through the lens of professional development planning, two described using the data specifically to develop administrator and school goals in relation to their educator evaluation systems, and another opted to use TELL Mass data to help frame overarching conversations related to their evaluation system. Although these more focused approaches differ from the general process described in RTTT materials, leaders using these approaches described them as necessary in light of workloads, but also as contributing to greater focus and coherence. One interviewee described the district's approach and rationale for that approach as follows:

What we did was we looked at it in terms of how we can bring this into something else that we're required to do that we also think is a good thing [to do]... and how do we leverage everything that we're doing to focus it as much as possible.... I could look at the whole piece, all of that data, and probably come up with multiple things we could work on, which would be totally different from the things that we had to work on this year, but that would be too fragmented and not really possible to achieve given the other things we had to work on.

Although it was acknowledged that a more focused review of the data resulted in potentially different conclusions and focus areas, those using the data in these ways did not appear to differ in obvious ways from other districts in terms of the extent to which they saw the results as valuable to improvement efforts.

Nearly all districts participating in the study described TELL Mass results as at least somewhat helpful to their district improvement efforts. Overall, TELL Mass data were described as very helpful by leaders in five districts and as somewhat helpful by leaders in four districts.² Only one interviewed leader indicated that the data were not helpful at all.

In talking about the data, most leaders reflected on the fact that, although the results themselves were not necessarily surprising, having the information did contribute to their district improvement efforts in specific ways. For example, several interviewees described how TELL Mass helped to reinforce some concerns related

² As part of the interview, district leaders were asked to rate the extent to which TELL Mass results were useful to their district improvement efforts on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very helpful and 1 being not helpful at all. For the purposes of reporting, ratings ranging from 8 to 10 were classified as very helpful, those ranging from 4 to 7 were classified as somewhat helpful, and those from 1 to 3 were classified as not helpful at all. One of the districts focusing primarily on school-level use of the data did not provide a district-wide rating.

to climate and culture and increased collective focus on those issues, including one district where the benefit of the results was described in the following way:

[Issues identified in the TELL Mass data] were things that people were concerned [about] or aware of the possibility that they needed the focus, and I think the survey really supported those concerns and helped focus even more. Once [we] were able to hear the voice of all the administrators and the staff inside the building, I think it really helped—for those who weren't sure if this was really an issue, I think it helped them focus.

Another interviewee described the benefit of the data as follows:

There was strong affirmation, which really helps, because you know, it's one thing to come in as the district administrator to say 'I believe,' 'I think.' It's a whole other thing to say, 'well, we thought this was true, and now we have the data, and here's what the data says,' so that's far more powerful.

Survey results were also described as helping to validate staff concerns and resulted in staff feeling heard. In some cases, they may also have made apparent building-level concerns about which school leaders might not have been otherwise aware.

In addition, in working with their school committees, a few districts were able to use TELL Mass results to secure new resources to address concerns evident in those results. For example, one district was able to increase funds available for professional development after data showed staff desire for expanded offerings, whereas another was able to advocate for the purchase of new computers for schools where survey results showed that staff felt technology infrastructure was lacking. The latter example was viewed as a potential “quick win” for the district, which also pursued other long-term changes related to the results.

Only one district interviewed felt as though the data were not helpful at all (a rating of 1 to 3), something that was attributed to the fact that the district routinely collects what it views as more focused feedback from teachers in specific areas of interest, such as professional development. Further, in this district, it was also noted that the results were not viewed as particularly actionable, as district-level results were generally consistent with statewide results, and areas in which the data showed weakness were seen as things that could not be easily changed due to resource constraints—such as time and teaching loads—or as contextual factors outside of the district's control, such as parent and community involvement indicators:

Our leadership team had concerns about actually being able to, at a district-level, affect any change based on these general types of questions. Many teachers don't think there [are] enough hours in the day.... Given our budget, there's not a lot that you can do about that. So asking teachers, sometimes, those types of questions—do they think their class sizes are too big, questions like that—there's not really a lot schools can do about that.

It should be noted that concerns of this nature were not shared by all districts. In fact, those same areas—time and family and community involvement—were identified by some districts as areas in which they would pursue change and improvement as result of TELL Mass.

When asked, interviewees did not suggest any specific support ESE could offer that would have helped them make more effective use of the data. However, this would not preclude the Department from making a strategic decision to make connections across existing support initiatives or to develop targeted initiatives or resources to help districts consider changes in relation to specific focus areas. However, overcoming perceptions such as those described above regarding the feasibility of changes may be necessary to facilitate use of any resources or initiatives.

As might be expected, the districts offering the highest ratings of value tended to be those where the data were used in the most intensive and ongoing manner. Whether this apparent connection between intensity of use and value is the result of use contributing to value or perceptions of value driving use is impossible to determine. However, it is likely that the relationship is complex and multifaceted. For example, when asked what contributed to their success in using the data, leaders often highlighted the district's investment in the data and/or a “conscious decision... to productively use the data.” Another identified the district's outlook towards the results as the most important contributor to its success in using those results to make what they viewed as

positive changes. In this context, districts that viewed the data as meaningful were likely to be more committed to and invested in their use, and thus derived greater value.

Among those who described the data as helpful, but on a more limited basis, this rating was often attributed to the fact that these data are one source among many. That is, district leaders described how TELL Mass data, while valuable, reflect only one facet of improvement and need to be considered as such. One interviewee explained:

We're talking about district improvement planning, you know, the [TELL Mass survey]... didn't encompass all the goals that you want to set, but given the focus the survey had, I think it was reasonably important information for us to have.

Another district leader explained it thusly, concluding that the data need to be interpreted within a broader context that takes into account multiple perspectives:

There are some areas [in our survey results] that we knew we had to work on, but I also think there [are] some areas that teachers have to work on, and that doesn't get addressed in a survey like this [that is based on perceptions].

Contextual factors were also cited as limitations related to the data. For example, one district in the midst of contract negotiations felt as though its TELL Mass results were negatively influenced by tensions related to those talks. Another noted that although the district response rate met the threshold, a large portion of its staff had not participated in the survey, causing leaders to question the extent to which the results reflected staff sentiment overall. It is also notable that several districts did indicate that in the future, with the subsequent administration of TELL Mass, the ability to identify and track changes over time was likely to increase the value and relevance of the data.

Many interviewees noted the role of perceptions in the survey but offered different views on the implications of this for use of the results. In speaking about the results, several leaders reflected on the nature of TELL Mass data as manifesting a particular set of perceptions. In this context, it was sometimes noted that respondents interpreted questions differently and that teachers may not always have sufficient information to respond knowledgeably in relation to some of the specific items. That is, it was noted that they may not be aware of particular district initiatives or improvement efforts, the rationale behind some the district's professional development foci—such as the need to meet requirements and prepare for new initiatives—and of other specific constraints the district is operating under. In some instances, the issue of perception led leaders to question the validity of the results and the extent to which they could be useful. One leader talked about this specifically in relation to curriculum and instruction.

[Based on TELL Mass results], I believe teachers feel that they do personalize instruction... that they change their instruction and assessment according to students' needs. However, [based on the results of a different survey involving students] ... something like less than 30% of students feel that the teachers really personalize their instruction... so I don't know what kind of validity you can have for any of these if it's all their impression of what they do.

In other interviews, the role of perspective was also noted, but instead of being seen as a critical limitation of the results, it was viewed as indicative of a need to make changes and build a common understanding among administrators and staff. For example, an administrator described how TELL Mass results revealed two types of potential changes for the district—changes in practice and changes in perception.

When I'm meeting with principals... what I'm finding is that perceptions weren't always reality. The teachers had a perception of the way things might have been, but in reality when you dug a little deeper and started unpeeling the layers, it was a difference between perception and practice. But that's great. In the end, we changed practice where practice needed to be changed, and we changed perception where perception needed to be changed.

Another district leader described how survey results led the district to focus on improving communication, particularly in regards to professional development and teachers' vehicles to inform school-level decision-making.

[In working with our principals around survey results] we talked about what their perception was versus the perception of the staff and how interesting perception is. Because, you know, often times an administrator will think something is just fine and a teacher won't, or a teacher will think something is just fine and the student won't. So, perception is such an important thing, [as is] one's perspective. So we talked about that, and we talked about trying to come to some resolve about why the perception might be different and what plays into that and what we have to do to get all of our points of view closer. I don't think we're ever going to have exactly the same view, but if we improve the way that we communicate with one another we have a better chance of that.

For the most part, leaders who described using the data to identify perceptions that they could change tended to describe the data as more helpful than did those who saw this as a limitation and a concern about validity.

TELL Mass data were often described as a starting point for identifying issues; the deeper value emerged as a result of further conversation and study. Reflecting the general nature of the survey and the role of perception in the results, interviewees often described TELL Mass as helpful in identifying potential concerns, but it was noted that further conversation and analyses were typically necessary to begin to fully understand the reasons behind those concerns and, ultimately, consider potential solutions. One interviewee explained:

One way [TELL Mass] was useful is that it gave us data that we could bring back to the schools and illustrate that [an area of concern] was an area of need, but in terms of us having a plan for moving forward and how to move forward, it really didn't give us that plan.

Another interviewee described the "need to go below the surface," and explained how in that district, although the process of analyzing the data began at the district-level, the more intensive analysis occurred in individual school-buildings, where specific concerns and strategies to address those concerns were discussed and identified.

[District leaders] really analyzed it at a high surface level ... what happened in each building is once they identified the one area they wanted to work on, they developed a SMART goal with benchmarks and key actions. The conversation and change took place on the focus around that SMART goal, and we deliberately tied it to a merit [through salary incentives] so that the leader would take it seriously.

Just as overarching approaches within districts differed, so too did their approaches to conducting this deeper analysis. In some cases, such as in the district of the leader quoted above, it involved asking principals to engage in conversations with their staff to better understand the results and determine ways to improve. In others, it involved discussions, one-on-one and/or within leadership teams, among district administrators and building leaders. In another instance, the district, in collaboration with its local union, administered the Keys to Excellence for Your Schools (KEYS) survey to inform further action as one facet of a multi-pronged district improvement effort.

To some extent, leaders' views regarding the need for further conversation and analysis—whether it was a limitation of the data or just an expected part of the process—may account for some of the differences in ratings between those viewing the data as very helpful and those viewing the data as moderately so. This may suggest an opportunity to communicate this up front to help set more and consistent expectations in relation to the survey results and the process of making changes using those results.

Having strong, positive cultures and established processes and protocols for data analysis were described as important contributors to success in using the data. In many respects, the relationship between culture and data use resulted from the need to, as described above, discuss and examine issues in order to develop plans for moving forward. In this context, productive cultures and established protocols were important to facilitating the conversations and depth of analysis necessary to make effective use of TELL Mass results. For example, one interviewee whose district had previously trained administrators and some of its teachers in an analytic protocol to use data described the benefits of the use of the protocol in relation to TELL Mass results.

When we worked with the administrators we used a protocol to try to get them to the root of it ... we used a root cause protocol with the five whys. And so, that's always a helpful strategy to use that allows people to view something like this a little more objectively.... We're fortunate to have really hard-working dedicated people and when you have a staff like that, it's hard to not take things personally, because everybody is working so hard and trying to do the right thing, and so, I think those protocols are really important.

Similarly, the ability to have open and honest conversations at the level at which the data were being analyzed—between district and building administrators for district-level analyses and building administrators and their staffs for school-level analyses—was seen as important to moving from identification of issues evident in the results to understanding the sources of those issues and developing solutions.

Once a focus area was identified, districts described a number of ways they intended to assess progress in relation to that focus. Nearly all districts planned to use future TELL Mass results to assess whether positive changes were occurring in their districts. Further, a number of districts planned to administer selected items from the TELL Mass survey—or described how some school leaders intended to do this—as a way to assess progress sooner. Plans for targeted district-administered climate and culture surveys patterned on or influenced by subsets of TELL Mass questions appeared to be particularly common in districts where TELL Mass results were used to develop goals in relation to educator evaluation systems or in schools that incorporated TELL Mass-derived goals into their school improvement plans.

One district leader described how, prior to the 2012 TELL Mass survey, the district instituted a periodic in-district climate and culture survey based on the MassTELLs survey, the predecessor to TELL Mass. The value of collecting these data on an ongoing basis was described in the following way:

I was able to review those results with the principals to say 'where are we now...?' and it was very eye-opening and led to some conversations I could have never had without those data, because we think we know where the teachers are, but until you actually get them to participate in the survey, you really find out a lot more, and it led to some pretty healthy dialog, both between the administrators and me, as well as what I asked the principals to do, which was to have ongoing conversations with their building reps from their schools and develop an action plan based on the results... and we were able to monitor those things.... I don't remember if that was just our brilliant idea, but it seems to work and it seems to have worked for us, and is one that I would encourage other districts to think about.

That interviewee went on to explain the district's view that improvements in climate and culture could be changed quickly and can serve as a leading indicator of change more broadly.

The improvements were very impressive. You know, huge turnaround, which just shows you that if you get the right things in place, school climate doesn't have to stay entrenched where it is forever. It's maybe not as hard to change as, oh say reading scores. It's a part of changing the reading scores, but...if you just treat teachers well and do the right things, get the right structures in place, it can change. And so, it's very exciting to see that it did.

In addition, several leaders identified other ways they were assessing progress. These differed based on the specific focus area and included student behavior data and discipline logs (to assess progress related to student culture), parent contact logs, parent participation in open houses and family nights, numbers of parent volunteers (to assess progress in relation to parent involvement), and professional development participation and feedback from staff (to assess progress in relation to professional development goals). It was noted that in some cases, data were collected for the express purpose of monitoring progress toward an identified area of need in relation to TELL Mass, while in others, the data were in existence in the district, but TELL Mass had caused the district to focus more intensively on these data.

With respect to interviewees' impressions of schools' use of the data in their districts, interviewees reflected a similar level of variation in approaches and experiences. Most interviewees indicated that at least some of their schools used TELL Mass results, either as part of a district-wide initiative or individually at their own initiative. Interviewees described different levels of involvement with and depth of knowledge about the use of TELL Mass results in schools.

Among those who did offer insight into school-level use, it was noted that schools' approaches differed greatly—a finding that is not surprising in light of differences in district-level use. “Every school approached it differently,” one interviewee explained. In some cases, leaders reviewed the data on their own or with their leadership teams. Others assembled focused teams, in some cases supported by RTTT funds allocated by their districts, or leveraged existing cross-functional teams to review the data, identify concerns, and consider ways to improve. In others, the results were discussed with the entire staff in faculty meetings.

In reflecting on differences in approach, interviewees offered a number of factors that they believe played a role. School culture and leadership style were typically seen as the most important drivers of school approach and, ultimately, success in using the data. Generally, interviewees believed that principals using more inclusive and collaborative approaches tended to be more successful in using TELL Mass data to leverage change in their buildings. One interviewee explains:

In my experience, in our [several] schools, those principals that I would consider to be more collaborative were, in my opinion, more successful meeting their goal [in relation to TELL Mass]. We had one principal... that tried to lead the charge and struggled with it—fantastic goal, but struggled because he tried to lead the charge. In another building, the principal turned it over to the building and said, ‘this is my goal, but it’s a team goal, and we’ll work on it together,’ and [that principal] was met with an incredible amount of success.

Another administrator described the influence of school culture and leadership style on data use as follows:

The schools where it was turned over to the teachers, those administrators have built a real data culture with school-based data teams and their administrators, as delicately as I can say it, are not afraid to relinquish control because they know their schools have been through the training, they’re used to using data whatever that data is, and they’re also used to comparing data [sources]. So they are much more comfortable in the facilitator/coach model... and the one school where that didn’t happen is a principal that’s really afraid to give up that control, and consequently, you have more of a push/pull, almost confrontational atmosphere.

As it was described, schools with largely positive results were also seen as more successful in using TELL Mass results, as they could be more focused in their efforts, but also because those positive results typically reflected productive school cultures that could be leveraged to affect change in the specific areas identified. Conversely, where results showed significant issues related to climate and culture, as reflected, for example, in overwhelming concerns related to trust and mutual respect, it was noted that these buildings may not have had sufficient relationships to leverage to productively begin to address those issues. Recognizing this, one district described how they saw facilitation and support as critical to addressing those issues, and intervened to provide those supports to begin to improve building culture.

II. District Feedback and Future Intentions Regarding TELL Mass

In general, interviewees described the process for administering the survey as proceeding smoothly, offering only minor feedback in relation to how it might be improved. One interviewee explained;

ESE made it fairly easy, which was good, and having the support through RTTT helped, because we’re all busy, and everybody thinks, ‘One more thing, oh no.’ And I think it probably was met with that kind of attitude, but once people got into it, they realized, ‘Oh this is pretty good information.’

ESE communication and support throughout the administration process was also viewed positively and as generally supportive of effective survey implementation.

They [ESE] were there for support if we [needed] it. I thought the help desk was great. They got back to you, for the most part, pretty quickly... they were very helpful. [The ESE staff member] was wonderful... so I thought the communication was very good, and the clarity of how to do it, it was very simple. Nobody was complaining about glitches and long wait times as you moved through the survey. Everything moved smoothly.

When recommendations were offered for improvement, they tended to be relatively minor. For example, although many interviewees highlighted what they viewed as strong communication from ESE in relation to the

survey, a few expressed a desire for even more communication as part of a coordinated campaign between and among ESE and its partners, including teachers union and local union representatives. In relation to union involvement, feedback was mixed, as some leaders felt as though statewide and local unions were very active and engaged in promoting the survey, and others described this as an area for improvement. This may be indicative of differences in relations between districts and their respective local unions. However, where local union representatives were actively involved in promoting the survey, this was often cited as an important contributor to district response rates.

In addition, some interviewees discussed or alluded to a need for increased clarity regarding who should take the survey from each building, particularly in relation to itinerant staff assigned to multiple buildings. One interviewee noted how it would be helpful to have a list of staff accounted for in building-level staff counts to make it easier to identify individuals that should take the survey for each building. Another leader noted that the survey did not include principals, which they described as a concern. However, principals were eligible to take the survey, and as such, further communication in relation to this may also be beneficial as part of future implementation.

Although the overarching process for administering the survey was viewed as straightforward and appropriate, interviewees did acknowledge some field-level challenges. For example, most described some level of reluctance among administrators and/or teachers as a challenge that needed to be overcome during survey implementation. Whereas some did not recall the specific nature of the concerns, others attributed them to questions about how the data would be used, as well as in relation to whether individual responses were truly anonymous. One interviewee offered some impressions of principals' concerns, and the importance of superintendent commitment to ensuring effective implementation in light of these concerns.

At first it was a bit of a challenge to get some principals to really contact their teachers and say, 'This is really important, and we need to get this done', but with the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent on board... they were encouraged, but I think some [principals], in talking to people in other districts, some were afraid that it could be a reflection of their abilities.

Others reflected on teachers' concerns, including one leader who explained:

We tried to communicate and have teachers try to communicate that the data were going to be anonymous, but I think there was still a level of concern about what would happen with the data.

It was noted that concerns of this nature were often greatest in buildings perceived as having cultural issues or, as one leader described it, "a level of mistrust," between administrators and staff, making it more difficult to get the level of response required for school-level reporting in those buildings.

Reflecting these challenges, leadership commitment to the survey was seen as critical to achieving high response rates, as was providing staff with dedicated time to complete the survey. As alluded to above, in light of time constraints and perceived concerns about the survey among building-level leaders and staff, districts with high response rates tended to be those that "really pushed this administratively." Leaders in these districts described a clear commitment on the part of the superintendent regarding the survey, as well as ongoing communication from the district to school leaders and staff regarding both the importance of the survey and the districts' intention to use the results.

Ongoing monitoring of results using a tool provided by the Department and sending targeted communication to administrators and/or staff in buildings that had not met required reporting rate thresholds were also commonly described in high-response rate districts. One leader explained:

It was really helpful that you could monitor [response rates] online, and so, any of the schools that were at-risk, I was on the horn, by email or by talking to principals to say, you've got to work with your teachers to figure out how to get the critical mass there.

In addition to communication from district leaders about the importance of the survey, leaders in districts with high response rates also described offering teachers time to complete the survey, which they viewed as important in light of increasing workloads and time pressures on building-level staff.

We gave people time off from mandatory faculty meetings if they had to fill out the survey. If they had any issue then, we said we'd give them coverage for 15 minutes.

In some cases, giving teachers time as part of faculty meetings or professional development and/or offering coverage to allow them to complete the survey at another time reflected a district-wide strategy. In other cases, it was the result of individual principals using these approaches, which then may or may not have been more widely adopted within the district more broadly. Either way, it was noted that these strategies had the practical benefit of giving teachers an opportunity to do the survey, but also conveyed administrator commitment to the survey, thus increasing the priority of the survey in their respective districts.

Other feedback was varied in nature, reflecting differences in the ways districts used the data and/or their view of the results. For example, as mentioned previously, some interviewees questioned the validity of survey results in light of their reliance on educator perceptions. These interviewees commonly expressed a desire for changes to the survey itself, such that questions were more specific, less open to respondents' interpretations, and gathered quantifiable data in relation to teacher practices. One interviewee explains:

I think there's got to be some sort of data, rather than just a 'yes I do this'... how about a question that would indicate whether or not they personalize instruction and then the survey would indicate what they said. It would be more valuable if it were triangulated with real facts.

Leaders in districts making extensive use of the data, however, offered different feedback, indicating that the survey should not be changed significantly, as that would make it difficult to monitor and track progress. One interviewee explained this view:

Don't change it again [referring to TELL Mass in relation to the MassTELLS survey], because we're using that information as baseline data, and we're looking particularly at culture and climate and making improvements in our district around culture and climate, using the TELL Mass data as baseline data for us, so don't shift it up to the point where it ends up not being baseline for us anymore.

Similarly, district leaders often referenced the importance of the timing of the survey, but offered different perspectives in relation to this. Not surprisingly, most leaders asked that the survey be coordinated with other efforts so that it would not occur during MCAS timeframes or simultaneously with other surveys administered by the Department or its partners.

I think just with all of the requirements right now that are going on with educators and for the administrators, finding time is difficult and there have been several surveys that have come out from the Department... sometimes the timing of it is really important. Make sure there aren't a few other surveys going on at the same time.

Snow days and mid-term exams were also offered by one district as potential considerations in relation to the planned January administration horizon. Beyond these logistical considerations, however, leaders offered different views of what the ideal timeframe for the survey would be. Some thought it would be better to administer the survey earlier in the year, so that issues could be addressed immediately.

Others felt that doing the survey later in the year, as was the case in 2012, would be preferable, with results being used to plan changes for the next school year. Again, this seemingly contradictory feedback appears to reflect differences in how and when districts hope to use results. What is apparent, however, is a potential relationship between timing of the survey and how the data will be used. As such, if ESE has a preference for whether the data are used to make immediate changes or plan for future implementation, it may want to consider this when making decisions about timing. The connection between use and timeline also implies a need to ensure that once timelines are announced, efforts are made to meet that timeline so that districts making plans to use those data at specific times and in specific ways are able to follow through with those plans, as explained by one administrator:

Meeting the timeline would have been great. We built a lot of our plans around that... so if they could match the timeline that would be great, or not tell us until it's actually set. You know, 'it will be sometime during the 2013-2014 school year and we don't know yet, but will let you know.'

Other feedback included a desire for the survey to incorporate district administrators' perspectives in some way, as well as to include the option for teachers to provide open-ended feedback to give administrators more insight into some of the underlying concerns influencing responses, although these suggestions may be difficult to address logistically in relation to survey administration and reporting.

Finally, district leaders said their districts were likely to participate in TELL Mass in 2014, but at the time of the study, most were not aware of plans for the second administration. While some said they would participate in the survey to comply with the RTTT requirement, a majority expressed a degree of enthusiasm for seeing the results and whether changes were apparent relative to 2012. For the most part, districts did not highlight any new challenges they anticipated for 2014. Finding time to promote the survey and discuss the results, it was noted, was likely to continue to be a challenge. Again, timing and communication were underscored as important to ensuring a successful survey administration, as was administrator commitment within districts.

In talking about the survey, some suggested that field-level anxiety in relation to the survey might be lessened in their districts now that administrators and teachers have had the experience of 2012 TELL Mass, at least in districts where those experiences were viewed as positive. "If the department decides to do this kind of survey again, I think it will be accepted much more readily," commented one interviewee, while another explained:

I think basically [the reason for initial reluctance on the part of staff] was the anxiety about the unknown and what is this really going to mean for my school or for the district, how is this really going to be used.... I think the fact that everything went as described... people will realize that nobody's going to be looking for a particular person's answer, they're just looking for the overall feeling of what's going on.

Similarly, some interviewees noted the importance of highlighting how the data were used in 2012 to illustrate its benefits and encourage greater participation rates. "I think in the long run, staff will be more willing to complete some type of survey like this if they know they're empowered to change the outcome," suggested one administrator.

However, it was also noted that because staff perceptions, and thus, survey results, are influenced by contextual factors, the overarching climate when the survey is administered will likely need to be considered when looking at results. One interviewee explained:

It sounds pessimistic, but we're moving so quickly in this state around accountability. I think the accountability climate [when the survey is readministered] will dictate the success. I can tell you right now, if the DESE were to readminister TELL Mass right now, our data would be substantially lower in a number of places because people are feeling frazzled. People are exhausted, and I know that my superintendents group has articulated this to our commissioner. We're feeling like we're underwater, never mind our mouth and nose a little bit above it, and I'm speaking on behalf of our teachers.

Finally, some of interviewees' questions and comments indicate that, at the time of interviews, many were not yet aware of ESE's plans to administer the survey during the 2014 school year. This is not surprising, given that interviews were conducted between March and June 2013, when the 2014 survey was still in the planning stages. However, it does underscore the need for future communication as districts focus more intensively on planning for the 2014 school year so that activities related to administering TELL Mass and using the data can be incorporated into those plans.

III. Conclusion

ESE's TELL Mass initiative is intended to gather information about educator working conditions to inform statewide, district, and school improvement efforts. Interviews conducted with a sample of RTTT districts using

their TELL Mass results suggest that the data were able to be used for that purpose, although reflecting differences in context, the specific ways in which TELL Mass data were used varied greatly. This was reflected in differences in the level(s) at which results were used, the venues through which the results were analyzed and discussed, and in some cases the specific foci of data analysis—most commonly administrator evaluations and professional development planning.

Although districts participating in the study had different approaches and experiences, survey results were typically seen as at least somewhat helpful to improvement efforts. In fact, nearly half of interviewed leaders considered the results very helpful. Results were largely characterized as reinforcing existing concerns, but it was noted that having the data directly from staff through the survey ultimately helped to increase collective focus on the issues identified, validated staff concerns, resulted in staff feeling heard, and in a few cases, contributed to the allocation of new resources to address concerns evident in those results. Many interviewees noted the role of perceptions and subjectivity in the survey results, describing instances in which results were seen as inconsistent with other data sources, district initiatives, and policies. Where perceived inconsistencies were seen as opportunities to change perceptions and build more common understanding—as opposed to a limitation on the overall utility of the results—this appeared to be associated with more positive experiences with the data. As such, it is possible that providing information and/or materials highlighting how to address differences in perceptions and/or perceived inconsistencies as part of ESE communication in relation to TELL Mass could help facilitate greater use of the results in the future.

Somewhat related is the fact that results were often described as a starting point for identifying concerns. Fully understanding and addressing those concerns, on the other hand, typically required deeper analysis, further conversation, and study. To this end, existing relationships within the district; strong, positive cultures; and established processes and protocols for data analysis were described as important contributors to success in using the data to productive purposes. An extension of this finding is the fact that districts and schools with significant climate and culture concerns that could potentially benefit the greatest from using TELL Mass results may, in fact, be those that are least well-positioned to use the data for this purpose absent additional support and/or external facilitation.

Overall, the process for administering the survey was considered straightforward and clear, and ESE communication and support was seen as helpful and productive throughout. However, interviewees acknowledged field-level challenges in the form of reluctance among some administrators and/or teachers, which they characterized as “fear of the unknown.” In general, commitment of district leadership to the survey, as reflected in ongoing communication, an expectation of school participation in the survey, and the provision of time for staff to complete the survey, was viewed as critical to helping to ensure high response rates. It was noted that implementation challenges and concerns were greatest in places perceived as having significant cultural issues or “a level of mistrust.” Again this suggests that districts and buildings with the greatest need for change might not be reached directly through TELL Mass absent external support and/or pressure to participate in the survey from their districts or the Department.

Finally, looking forward, most districts planned to participate in a future administration of TELL Mass. Reflecting positive impressions of 2012 administration and logistics, most interviewees offered only minor recommendations for how administration might be improved. Typically, these related to a desire for a continued and increased campaign on the part of ESE and its partners, as well as increased clarity regarding who should take the survey from each building, particularly in relation to itinerant staff assigned to multiple buildings. Other feedback was varied in nature, reflecting differences in the ways districts used the data and/or their view of the results. Finding time to promote the survey and use the results, it was noted, was likely to continue to be a challenge. Timing and communication were underscored as important to ensuring a successful survey administration. In the near term, beginning to communicate with districts about the plan for a second administration in 2014 may help them better plan for activities related to implementing TELL Mass, using the results, and, ultimately, contribute to a successful survey implementation.