



Jeffrey C. Riley
Commissioner

Massachusetts Department of

Elementary and Secondary Education

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MEMORANDUM

To: Superintendents, Charter School Leaders, and Educational Collaborative Directors
From: Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education
Date: June 26, 2019
Subject: Alternative Structured Learning Day Programs

This memorandum provides updated information to superintendents, charter school leaders, and educational collaborative directors on “alternative structured learning day programs.”¹ These programs include offsite educational programs for missed school days, “blizzard bags,” and “E-Learning Days.”

In the few years since some districts and schools began implementing alternative structured learning day programs, parents and other stakeholders have raised concerns about whether all students can have equitable access to these programs. Additionally, concerns have been raised regarding whether such programs meet the standards for “structured learning time.”

In response to these concerns, in October 2018, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) announced that it would convene a work group during winter 2018-2019 to review alternative structured learning day programs. With help from the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS), 10 school districts were identified to participate in the work group, representing both districts with locally approved alternative structured learning day programs and those without such programs. The work group also included representation from the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT-MA), and the Massachusetts School Administrators’ Association (MSAA).

Based on the review of the development and implementation of these programs and the concerns raised, **the Department will discontinue the alternative structured learning day programs pilot after school year 2019-2020.** While previous locally-approved programs may be implemented as needed through school year 2019-2020, districts and schools should take care to implement these in a manner that is consistent with state and federal law. While the Department recognized these programs as possible solutions to school closings due to an emergency or extraordinary circumstance that forces the closing of school for one or more days, the decision to discontinue the use of alternative structured learning day programs is based upon a variety of factors, including concerns about equitable access for all students.

¹ The Department adopted the term “alternative structured learning day” in place of “blizzard bags” because it reflects that students may access assignments in a variety of ways while outside of a school building.

As stated in the Department's February 2016 memorandum² on alternative structured learning day programs, the Department encourages leaders to examine alternatives for meeting student learning time requirements in ways that would enhance student learning while providing more flexibility to deal with unanticipated school closures due to an emergency or extraordinary circumstance. In addition to making every attempt to reschedule school days lost due to inclement weather, leaders should consider holding the first day of school prior to Labor Day. Other possibilities include scheduling a one-week vacation in March instead of week-long vacations in February and April.

The Department recognizes that this change in policy impacts districts and schools with current locally approved plans or those in the process of developing alternative structured learning day programs. Please contact Shay Edmond at sedmond@doe.mass.edu or Helene Bettencourt at hbettencourt@doe.mass.edu with any questions related to this memorandum.

² In February 2016, the Department for the second time (the first being in 2015) recognized locally approved alternative structured learning day programs as possible solutions to scheduling issues posed by inclement weather so the minimum student learning time requirement of 900 hours for elementary schools, 990 hours for secondary schools, and a total of 180 days may be met. (Those requirements are outlined in the [student learning time regulations](#)). The Department issued an initial memorandum related to alternative structured learning day programs in February 2016 and updated the memorandum in January 2018. This June 2019 memorandum replaces all prior memoranda and guidance from the Department regarding these types of programs.