



Make Massachusetts a State Where Kids Learn to Swim! A strategy paper for educators and policymakers.

Hello everyone! My name is Kareen A. Honecker and I have been involved in the worlds of coaching and education for over 17 years. I have been blessed to have worked in the fields of Therapeutic Recreation, Special Education, and Coaching. I am currently enrolled at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in the Masters of Education Program. As my time in this program is coming to an end, this briefing paper will represent my research for a capstone project titled: *Make Massachusetts a State Where Kids Learn to Swim! Swimming Policy Strategies for Children & Youth in Public Education.*

I have chosen to focus my research for this Master's program on implementing swimming education and water safety into the public education curriculum. Through my time as a competitive swim coach and swim lesson instructor, I have seen the many benefits to children of developing swimming competencies. I have also been witness to the many children (young and old) who have not had access to swimming instruction and seen what impact this has on their lives. Given my background in elementary education and special education, I began to wonder why we, as a public education system, have not taken ownership over this need to teach children to swim. Outside of the coaching and education world, I enjoy running, biking, and spending time outside with my two young children.

Make Massachusetts a State Where Kids Learn to Swim!

A strategy paper for educators and policymakers

*"To live means to develop. To live is like learning to swim.
Do not be afraid to make mistakes, because there is no other way to learn to live"*
- Alfred Adler



Drowning is one of the leading causes of unintentional death among children and youth

In 2015, drowning was the leading cause of unintentional death among children and youth in Massachusetts. During that year, there were 39 deaths and 223 near fatal injuries which required treatment at an acute care hospital (cdc.gov). In our state of Massachusetts, drowning deaths are not subject to strictly pools. They also often occur in open water (such as lakes, rivers, streams, and ponds). Most child drownings involve a brief lapse in supervision. For example, taking one's eyes off of a child to text or talk on a cell phone for even a moment gives way for drowning opportunities. Many people assume that if someone is drowning, they will be splashing, calling for help, or waving their arms. In reality, drowning is swift and silent. There is often no struggle or splashing, nor a cry for help. Many child drownings occur in the presence of other children or adults (mass.gov). Sadly, many more children are involved in nonfatal drownings, which very often cause severe and permanent brain damage. According to the CDC, these young drowning victims are usually male and under the age of 14 years. As a public education system, we need to be more vocal about the risks of drowning and implement water safety instruction and swimming lessons into our school curriculum.

***Everyone can help prevent child and youth drownings
Let's improve open water and recreation safety***

Together, the Massachusetts public education system along with local communities and organizations can promote, develop, implement, and evaluate legislative policies to improve water safety and swimming instruction for the children, students, and youth of the state of Massachusetts. Research shows that there is an 88% reduction in drowning for young children who take formal swim lessons (Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, 2009). By offering swim lessons and/or water safety education as part of the Massachusetts public school programs or through partnerships with organizations such as the YMCA, we can begin to prevent drowning among our children and teen populations. The following report will offer strategies and objectives for the Massachusetts Department of Education and local school districts with the intent to implement water safety and swimming instruction into the daily lives of our youth.



Strategies and Main Objectives

1. Increase the access to swimming for all school-aged students, especially low-income and culturally diverse children, teens, and adults.
2. Promote swimming skill competency and water safety education requirements for all school-aged youth.
3. Identify, implement and evaluate policies that promote learning to swim and open water survival skills among the youth in the state of Massachusetts.
4. With less than 300 pools (public and private) in the state of Massachusetts and over 404 districts encompassing 1854 schools, it would be safe to state that several options should be considered when determining the appropriate approach to implementing this curriculum. These options can be found under "Programs to Be Considered."

Programs for Swim Instruction Implementation

A. School based programming for schools with pool access on campus

These programs and school systems would offer age appropriate in-water swim classes as part of the school curriculum. Swim classes could be offered as an elective class, included in the physical education curriculum, or a required class for all students as part of the whole school curriculum.

Policy Recommendations:

- Include a swim assessment to evaluate the ability of each student. This would include the need for each student to demonstrate the ability to swim 50 feet in shallow water. The swim assessment would also include the observation of each student demonstrating the ability to jump into the deep end, resurface and tread water independently for 1 minute.
- Students who do not pass the swim assessment may be prohibited from the deep end.
- Maintain a safe pool environment through the following steps:
 - o Ensure there are approved life jackets available for all students in pool area
 - o Clearly mark off the deep and shallow ends of the pool
 - o Staff and train certified swim instructors and lifeguards
 - o Ensure that all staff and instructors attend risk management programming along with yearly follow-up training
 - o There must be no less than 2 lifeguards and 1 swim instructor on-site during the swim classes
- Implement classroom curriculum materials for water and boating safety to be carried out by classroom or physical education teachers. This material will reinforce what is being learned in the water, will address maintaining safety in open water spaces (rivers, lakes, oceans), and will also allow for supplemental information on water safety to be distributed.



B. School-based programming for schools without pool access on campus where community pools are nearby

These programs would build partnerships with community pools/water recreation sites to provide options for school-aged students to learn and continue to develop swimming skills at a local pool near the public school or student's home.

Policy Recommendations:

- The school will provide vouchers for students that enable access to free or low-cost swim lessons at the local pool. This collaboration will work to share the costs associated with accessing pools, swim lessons, as well as transportation to and from the school/home to the pools.
- The public school will offer in-class water and boating safety education as part of the school curriculum. This can be presented as part of the health, physical education, or classroom curriculum. Administrators will seek out speakers from local pools, beaches, public parks, swimming organizations, etc to talk about water safety and drowning prevention. Paired with these speakers will be the distribution of supplemental water safety materials for school-aged students in the public school program.

C. Recommendations for public school systems with no local pool access

These school districts are in a tougher position but have options for presenting swimming education materials. These programs would need to train teachers on water and boating safety curriculums as well as offer age appropriate in-classroom water and swimming instruction education. This information would be presented to students in the classroom setting within the course of a school day.

Policy Recommendations:

- Provide students and parents with clear instructions on where they can go to learn to swim.
- Discuss water safety in pools, as well as open water spaces.
- Emphasize the importance of learning to swim while presenting educational material on learning to swim and water safety awareness.
- Provide supplemental water and boating safety education materials to students and parents on the importance of swimming and water safety.
- Assess the information retained by students on water and swimming safety (tests, projects, class discussions, etc).

Scholarship Recommendations

It would be recommended that the public school systems provide scholarships for swimming lessons based on proof of participation in Medicaid, Head Start, the National School Lunch Program as well as other programs provided for low-income youth. In 2017, USA Swimming Foundation conducted a study which found that over 60% of children are a drowning risk – because they don't know how to swim safely. Low income areas saw even higher rates of the problem; therefore, widely offered scholarship opportunities should be made available to students of need.

Online as well as paper scholarship application forms (in multiple languages) should be provided that ensure the forms are easily understandable. The collection of all personal details on these forms will make data accessible for audits and state review.

Basis for Programming Recommendations

Australia

When researching other approaches to swimming instruction, my findings brought me to several studies in Australia, a country known for their professional and elite-level swimmers. Every child in Australia learns to swim during their school-age years. In a longitudinal study conducted over 4 years by professor Robyn Jorgensen titled, *The Early Years, Adding Capital to Young Australians*, many benefits to swimming education were found ranging from the lifelong benefits of swimming, to decreases in fatalities surrounding water, as well as the positive educational connections. The many developmental, academic, social and emotional benefits that arise in children due to early swim lessons were vast and the study concluded that students who participated in swim lessons were also better prepared to begin formal schooling and found more initial success when transitioning to school. Children who participated in formal swimming lessons scored higher on not only typical physical development of gross motor skills, but also in visual motor skills and areas of literacy and numeracy. This information is a catalyst to study the methods of incorporating swimming safety and lessons into public education system in Massachusetts.

Minnesota

Within the United States there are several smaller movements to incorporate swimming into the public education system. States such as Texas and Florida have moved to make swimming instruction part of their mandatory curriculum, yet making these policies mandatory across the country would require that all schools had access to pools. A work group report in 2016 conducted in the state of Minnesota through their Department of Education assessed the finer points of ensuring that every school district in their state had a pool and was able to implement swimming instruction. The four focus groups assessed curriculum needs, resources necessary to implement swimming instruction, access to pools, personnel needs, and the other costs that would be incurred by the state. The findings concluded that in total it would cost tax payers \$550 million for all new pools per district. The work group offered two recommendations to the Legislature of Minnesota. (1) Having a school-day approach to water-based swimming instruction is a huge undertaking. Therefore, the state should incentivize community partnerships that exist. (2) The Department of Education should expand their focus on swimming instruction to include drowning prevention education. This also offers options for land-based instruction and can be taught to everyone in the state.

Washington

From 2011-2016 the state of Washington implemented an open water drowning prevention policy which offers strategies and programs that form partnerships between the school districts and local organizations with pools. In 2016 Washington also implemented the Everyone Swims policy initiative to aid in increasing access to swimming--especially among low-income and culturally diverse children and families. They have provided an Everyone Swims Toolkit (www.seattlechildrens.org/dp) which contains information on how communities can roll out their own Everyone Swims program. These initiatives in Washington resulted in the following lessons: (1) Partnerships between community health clinics and water recreation facilities or between school districts and water recreation facilities is an effective way to reach low-income and culturally diverse communities. (2) For groups that cannot swim in mixed-gender pools, single gender swim programs can increase swimming and water recreation opportunities. (3) Increasing academic requirements and reduced funding for schools are barriers to requiring swimming through school-based programs. Therefore, partnering with local facilities and programs to facilitate pool access and working on a school district level may be an effective option.

We Can Do This

Let us find value in the need for implementing swimming instruction and water safety skills into our public education curriculum in the state of Massachusetts. Through creative partnerships and collaboration, we can instill into our youth the appreciation and love for water safety and swimming instruction.

