



THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
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March 22, 2019

The Honorable Jason M. Lewis
Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Education
State House, Room 511-B
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Alice Hanlon Peisch
House Chair, Joint Committee on Education
State House, Room 473G
Boston, MA 02133

Re: K-12 education finance reform legislation

Dear Chairman Lewis and Chairwoman Peisch:

In anticipation of the Joint Committee on Education's public hearing on School Finance, I am writing to express my support for a legislative update to the funding formula for our K-12 public schools to meet the needs of all of our state's students. Currently pending before the Committee are several bills that each address the four key areas of focus of the Foundation Budget Review Commission (FBRC): employee health insurance, special education, and supports for English Language Learners (ELLs) and low-income students. Any legislation must meaningfully implement the core FBRC recommendations in each of these areas to ensure that funding keeps pace with actual costs and every district has adequate resources to provide its students with the quality education they deserve.

As a state, one of our most important constitutional duties is to ensure an adequate education for all young people, as the Supreme Judicial Court affirmed in 1993. See *McDuffy v. Secretary of the Executive Office of Education*, 415 Mass. 545 (1993). Fulfilling this duty inures to the benefit of students, their families, communities, and our state. With a strong, adequately funded K-12 education system, young people have the opportunity to reach their full potential and to become happy, productive, and successful adults. Our state and economy reap the benefit of an educated workforce and civically engaged population.

More than twenty-five years ago, Massachusetts made important strides toward these outcomes by establishing the foundation budget mechanism that is still in effect today. To account for significant differences in school districts' tax bases, student populations, and other



factors, the foundation budget includes a sophisticated formula to meet the foreseeable needs of schools and students. While celebrating its underpinnings and lauding its goals, we must also recognize when it is time to revisit this formula to stay true to its original mission. It is clear to many of us that the time is now.

Fortunately, we have a roadmap for adjusting our funding mechanism, particularly in the four key areas -- health insurance, special education, and supports for English Language Learners and low-income students. As the FBRC concluded in 2015, the actual costs of health insurance and special education have outpaced the assumptions contained in our current formula. While school districts and municipalities stretch their budgets year after year to cover these costs, they are left with fewer resources for other crucial investments, including needed supports for low-income students and ELLs. This particularly impacts our poorest communities, where additional supports are often needed the most. Changes in federal law have only exacerbated the problem by making it more difficult to accurately count low-income students in our schools, especially for communities with a high immigrant population.

In Massachusetts, which ranks first in the nation on many education measures, we cannot tolerate inequities in education that create achievement and opportunity gaps for too many children. The good news is that we know more now than in 1993 about the range of strategies that are proven effective in preparing students to succeed, including early education, expanded learning time, and wraparound services. We also know more now about the impact of intergenerational poverty, violence, substance use, and other trauma on the academic and social-emotional development of young people. We must update our funding formula to reflect this knowledge so that schools can offer the interventions that are required to ensure that all students, no matter their zip code or background, can achieve academic success.

For these reasons, it is important that any bill reported out of Committee allows for full implementation of the FBRC recommendations relative to low-income students. As the FBRC found, districts with higher concentrations of poverty need more funding to provide the multiple concurrent interventions that are required to close achievement and opportunity gaps. Specifically, the FBRC recommended an additional 50 to 100 percent in per-pupil funding for high poverty districts to provide those multiple interventions.

In addition, I support proposals to address the undercounting of low-income students. While changes in federal law related to direct certification and community eligibility offer many benefits for school districts, they have also resulted in an unintended consequence. Particularly in communities where low-income families are less likely to sign up for government benefits, the funding formula does not accurately account for all low-income students. As a result, fewer resources are available for the districts and students most in need. We have an opportunity now to adopt a new or alternative mechanism for districts harmed by this change in law.

In considering the proposals before you, I urge the Committee to prioritize the Commonwealth's duty to our children and to our future and to work to meaningfully achieve the

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recommendations set forth in the FBRC report. With the right investments in each of the four areas addressed by the FBRC, we can continue to be a national leader in educational achievement, equality of opportunity, civic health, and economic prosperity for all.

Thank you for your consideration. I appreciate your work and attention to this important issue and stand willing to partner with you in this effort. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Gabrielle Viator, Deputy Chief of our Policy and Government Division, at (617) 963-2601.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Maura Healey", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Maura Healey