



Supporting and Encouraging Regional School Districts

While highly regarded throughout the country, Massachusetts elementary and secondary public school districts share significant funding challenges. Moreover, many of the state's academic regional school districts (RSDs) face particular difficulties due to factors such as changing demographics, changes in the level and sources of funding they receive, and issues of governance and operating structures. Massachusetts faces the prospect of providing uneven educational opportunities to students in some communities if RSD's structural and funding issues are not addressed.

“Archaic funding, governance and operating structures disadvantage regional school students. These artificial obstacles must be removed. This report tells us how.”

**-Suzanne M. Bump
State Auditor**

State law provides towns with options to regionalize public education across municipal boundaries with the goal of reducing administrative costs. The state currently has 58 academic regional school districts, which enroll approximately 107,000 students in over 170 communities.

The Office of State Auditor Suzanne M. Bump has conducted a study of the local cost impacts of state statutes, regulations and policies impacting RSDs, and provided recommended changes to support these educational institutions.

Key Findings & Recommendations

Challenge: Financial issues discourage regionalization and hinder existing RSDs

- ⇒ The State should develop deeper incentives to encourage communities to regionalize, noting that the current incentives do not provide enough enticement for schools to give up some measure of local control.
- ⇒ The State should fund its commitment to reimburse 100 percent of regional transportation expenses, offer stipends to encourage efficiencies to reduce transportation costs, and allow the use of regional transportation authorities to provide RSD transportation.

Challenge: Governance and operating structures deter regionalization and create difficulties for existing RSDs

- ⇒ RSDs should conduct periodic reviews of their regional agreements.
- ⇒ The Legislature should empower DESE to work with a willing district to develop a pilot program that would result in a single tax rate across all member towns in a RSD.
- ⇒ The Legislature should streamline the budget adoption process for RSDs.

Challenge: Declining populations strain the resources of RSDs. Overhead costs, however continue to rise, and state funding is inadequate for many of these districts.

- ⇒ The Commonwealth should consider providing planning grants to examine the combination of existing RSDs into larger groupings.
- ⇒ The Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) should provide guidance on the criteria it uses to determine whether it will seek to recoup grant money provided to school districts that close school facilities that have previously MSBA funding.
- ⇒ The Legislature should consider allowing RSDs to use regional transportation authorities to provide school district transportation.

“Regional schools are facing real challenges — shifts in enrollment, unreimbursed costs including transportation, and a range of unfunded or partially funded mandates. My hope and expectation is that state and local leaders work together to consider and act on the recommendations within the report.”

-Dr. Peter Dillon

Superintendent of Berkshire Hills Regional School District

“As the superintendent of the largest regional school district in Massachusetts, I understand the importance of both state and local funding to provide our students with the high-quality education that they deserve. The Wachusett Regional School District has worked diligently to make the most of the funding, but we have had one of the lowest per pupil expenditures, which is well below even the state average. All regional school districts would benefit from 100 percent reimbursement for transportation, as well as making modifications to the funding formula which does not support the true costs associated with items such as health insurance and special education. It is important for leaders at the state and local level to work together toward finding solutions that will help regional districts thrive and our children prosper.”

-Dr. Darryll McCall

Superintendent of Wachusett Regional School District

ABOUT THE OFFICE OF THE STATE AUDITOR'S DIVISION OF LOCAL MANDATES

Enacted in 1980 as part of the Proposition 2 1/2 tax initiative, the Local Mandate Law gives the Office of the State Auditor the authority to determine if a proposed or existing state law imposes an unfunded mandate on a city or town and to provide an analysis of the financial impact. Elected municipal leaders, appointed managers, school or educational collaborative officials, as well as lawmakers and legislative committees, may petition the Division of Local Mandates (DLM) for an opinion and request a cost impact analysis.