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Secretary of Education Dr. Patrick Tutwiler
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Good morning, everyone. Thank you, Chad d'Entremont, and to the entire Rennie Center team, for having me and for putting together this event every year.

I am glad to be here with all of you today at such a pivotal time for education – from early education through postsecondary education – in Massachusetts and across the country.

As I begin, I want to acknowledge that there are students and education communities who are scared or unsure about the future. Let me say to you without hesitation that in Massachusetts, we care about each other - whoever you are, however you identify, whomever you love. These values were true yesterday, are true today, and continue to center our work going forward, transforming our education systems to be more equitable, affordable, and accessible for all students.

It is through these values of equity, access, and excellence that we assess our progress and chart our path. They anchor our celebrations of success, drive our analysis of the impact of our work, and steer the work ahead.

For example, yesterday, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results were released. As my grandmother used to convey to all of her grandchildren, you can celebrate something every single day. And the release of these results, we can celebrate the hard work of students their teachers and educators. Of course, we are not where we want to be in terms of progress, not just in relation to the pandemic recovery context in which we currently are working, but more so as we look at results before the pandemic. That said, I am intimately familiar with the kind of effort it takes to maintain, to prevent the slide, and I'm grateful for that.

Massachusetts remains #1 in education – across all four assessments. Yet, the results also showed many students are experiencing challenges in reading. Too many gaps remain in student access and achievement. And so as we celebrate, we also intentionally plan how our work continues.

We have made progress, moving towards realizing an education system that truly delivers a high-quality, empowering education to every student in Massachusetts, regardless of their zip-code, background, or circumstance.

That progress has stood on three organizing principles. Some of you might recall. Stabilize, heal, transform. Coming to this role from the superintendency in a community hit hard by the pandemic, I knew full well that the road back was not going to be short – I am fully aware of the depth of the impact of that troubling time. And so, we hit the ground running with these three organizing principles as the underpinning of our work.

Today I want to use my time to share a few reflections on the progress made and outline our goals and priorities for the year ahead. I'm standing before all of you, educators, leaders, people who care about the education sector. You know as well as I that behind every initiative and every strategy is a person. A student, an educator, a caregiver. This time around, I want to lift up the impact we can have on individuals and to anchor these reflections through people and their stories.

Early Education

Let's begin with the experience of Tabitha Williams, the owner of Ashley's Preschool and Daycare in Salem. Ms. Williams has been able to leverage the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative (CPPI) to allow families to send their children to her program. We developed CPPI as a means towards universally accessible pre-k, through funds that provide private-pay families with discounted tuition. One family was able to use the money they now saved on tuition to pay for swim lessons for their child and obtain a pass for museums. Their child had been having difficulties and this level of affordability allowed them to engage in other activities that made them blossom. The child was able to do more and better interact with their peers.

That family's experience is an example of the magic of CPPI, which helps expand low to no cost pre-k through classes in public and community-based programs, thereby leveling the playing field for academic success in general and kindergarten readiness in particular.

I'd be remiss if I didn't highlight the second "P" in CPPI, "partnership." Not only does this initiative expand affordable access to preschool, but it also creates the critical partnership between districts and early education providers - aligning materials, strategy, and professional learning all in service of creating a seamless, supported, and impactful experience for the student.

This year, CPPI is supporting 203 affordable preschool classrooms that represent 2,981 seats for children across public and community-based preschool programs. We want to support all of the current grantees to expand access, adding more classrooms and seats. We want to also allow new communities to join, focusing first on gateway cities (we are currently anchored in 17 of the 26) and rural areas, and with the long-term goal for children to have access across all cities and towns.

CCPI is one of the three pillars of this administration's 'Gateway to Pre-k' agenda that prioritizes promoting affordable, accessible and equitable early education and child care.

A second pillar is the Commonwealth Cares for Children or C3 program. When other states faced a child care cliff as federal funding ended, Massachusetts did not, because we chose to invest in continuing the progress in access to early education and care. In fact, our investments have helped stabilize the system and grow beyond pre-pandemic licensed capacity.

This administration, in partnership with the Legislature, invested a historic amount in child care – including continuing C3 at \$475 million each year, which we propose to do again next year. This investment has added seats, reduced costs, increased wages for educators, and allowed providers to invest in quality programming. Under this administration, we have added more than 15,000 new seats for the children of working families across Massachusetts. A lot of that growth is thanks to C3.

The third pillar of our Gateway to Pre-k initiative is the significant reforms we have brought to our Child Care Financial Assistance Programs, which make it easier for families to access help paying for care and simpler for programs to administer.

This year, we want to fund these programs at \$1.1 billion to help families pay for care, especially for those families being served by the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Transitional Assistance.

Under the administration, child care financial assistance provider rates have increased by almost \$90 million. We have also made transformational changes to how rates are set, using the cost of providing care for the first time. This change has led to an improved rate structure that better covers infant and toddler care, while also addressing increased operational costs for all providers and making sure that providers are being paid a fair rate regardless of where they are located.

We are not stopping there. Last year, I joined you all right after Governor Healey signed an executive order to direct her cabinet to take a whole of government approach to early education and child care. With my co-chairs in Labor and Economic Development, we traveled around the state to hear from you on what was working well and where the challenges remain. I look forward to releasing for you what we learned and where we want to go next soon.

Early Literacy

As I shift now to sharing our work in Early Literacy, I want to introduce you to a couple of students whom Governor Healey and I had the pleasure of meeting on our fall visit to Clinton Elementary School, where we talked with 4th grade students about their love of reading. Clinton Elementary has been participating in DESE's Appleseeds grant program, which provides materials for teaching foundational reading skills in kindergarten through second grade.

One student, Emily Brunelle, shared with us that sometimes it can be hard to read. When she was in second grade, she didn't know that ph could make the "ffff" sound. Then, the Appleseeds lessons helped her learn phonics, which in turn enabled her to decode many, many words. Now, Emily expresses that reading helps her learn a lot at school, and that she loves to read not just at school but also in her spare time.

Emily's classmate, Femi Obutu, shared that Appleseeds helped him become a reader, that it was fun and that he loved learning the sounds. Now he reports that he knows so many more sounds and can read chapter books. Someday, when he is a football player, he'll tell kids how important it is to read.

What Emily and Femi experienced is what we want for all kids – but data continues to show us that many students are experiencing reading challenges. So, this year, we kicked off Literacy Launch, building off the success of Appleseed and other literacy strategies. Literacy Launch is our multiyear strategy to promote high-quality, evidence-based reading instruction so students can read— and read well. Thanks to our partners in the Legislature, this effort is funded at \$20 million in the current year. This is the hard work that will take time. We're talking not only about systems change in districts, but we're also talking about changing mindsets. We are asking for \$25 million for the second year to reach more districts, classrooms, educators and students.

In addition to evidenced-based reading instruction, research shows that high dosage tutoring can have an incredible impact on students, particularly those who are currently behind grade level. Therefore, we are also proposing an additional \$25 million for an early literacy high dosage tutoring initiative to help 10,000 students right now. This initiative will support Massachusetts public schools and districts to partner with approved providers to accelerate literacy growth for students in kindergarten through grade 3, with 1st graders prioritized. Our investment in high dosage tutoring will work in tandem with Literacy Launch.

We all agree that literacy skills are foundational to a student's ability to learn in all content areas and disciplines throughout their educational career. More broadly though, this is a foundational skill that impacts the quality of one's life. We have to get this right. We are deeply committed to this work, and therefore have proposed doubling early literacy funding next year to \$50 million in total.

Local Education Funding

Literacy funding is just one component of the financial needs of our school communities. I had an opportunity to sit down with 20 students from the Northampton Youth Commission last year

to talk about their experience and that of their peers. They were clear: funding gaps for communities like theirs are having an impact not just on experience but on things that they believe are fundamental to their growth, to their development, to their success.

We know that like many of us, school districts are facing increased costs and high inflation. For the last two years, the administration has fully funded the chapter 70 increases under the Student Opportunity Act. This year, we are doing that again and going even further to make sure districts have the resources to meet student need.

We want to invest the highest amount ever into special education circuit breaker funding to address the growth of both special education instructional and transportation costs. We want to increase education transportation reimbursement by \$21 million. Further, we proposed to start the conversation around minimum aid at \$75 per pupil, which is an historic starting point. These are investments that will touch all districts, but notably regional districts and those in rural communities that are struggling mightily.

Remaining High School

This administration has been focused on reimagining the high school experience – ensuring Massachusetts students are prepared to thrive in college or a career when they graduate high school. To stay competitive as the world that awaits them continues to change, students need to be prepared for today's workforce and skills – and tomorrow's. To be the leaders we know each individual can be, students need to be able to think critically, communicate clearly, collaborate effectively, embrace creativity, and understand themselves and the world around them. High school can and should be a vehicle to all of these ends. That's why we are deepening our investments in early college, innovation career pathways, and career technical education programs.

The administration has increased the number of students participating in early college by nearly 2,000 in past two years, a 31 percent increase, and added 16 new partnerships. We hope to expand early college programs to reach over 20,000 by 2030 so students can take college classes and earn college credit at no cost to them or their families.

We want to expand Innovation Career Pathways to over a quarter of the state's public high schools, giving approximately 7,400 students access to applied, hands-on coursework and work opportunities in high-demand industries, such as clean energy, manufacturing and information technology.

Right now, Massachusetts has an opportunity to bring the definition of what it means to graduate from high school to new heights. In her State of the Commonwealth Address, Governor Healey announced that she has established a Massachusetts K-12 Statewide Graduation Council. We are bringing together a large table of diverse stakeholders to examine how our state can ensure that all students graduate with the skills necessary to succeed, regardless of their background or location, and demonstrate these qualities through a

consistent statewide set of expectations. I am eager to get this work underway and look forward to keeping you all updated as it progresses.

Mental Health

The country has been facing a youth mental health crisis that has manifested in many ways and that requires a multitude of responses. We got to work reducing chronic absenteeism so that students were in school getting access to the education opportunities they need, but also the other supports reflective of meeting students' hierarchy of need – like universal school meals and counselors.

We also invested in funding at DESE and EEC for mental and social-emotional health student supports, which we are looking to fund at almost \$21 million this year. And we kicked off the work to create a statewide birth-through-higher-education framework for mental and behavioral health so we could measure the problem and track progress across early education through higher education.

We also know that research continues to show cellphones in the classroom can be a harmful distraction that impacts emotional wellbeing and impedes a student's ability to learn. I continue to hear feedback from caregivers, teachers, and staff that a more comprehensive approach is necessary to ensure children's academic success and social and emotional wellbeing and look forward to working with the Attorney General and Legislature this year to address that.

Higher Education

Last August, Karen Araujo and her family were losing hope she'd be able to attend Framingham State University in the fall. Karen aspired to be the first in her family to go to college, but the nearly \$13,000 bill for the fall semester was out of reach. But with MassGrant Plus, her bill for the semester ended up being less than a third of the initial price tag, at \$3,600. In her words: "My parents have worked hard all of my life, but college is expensive... Before we knew it, I was a senior, and I was figuring out how to fill out a college application." Then came the bill, and the worry. But, with the financial support from MassGrant Plus, she told us that "all of the stress melted away." She has been able to avoid taking out student loans, and if this level of financial aid continues, she may graduate debt-free. "College is not easy, but it's worth it," she said. "Don't give up on your dreams."

We're not giving up on our dream of ensuring that all students can access postsecondary opportunities and persist through to graduation.

Under this administration, we have doubled state funding for financial aid, making community college free and four-year institutions more affordable. Massachusetts now has one of the most accessible, equitable and comprehensive free community college programs in the country – which has led to a preliminary 24% increase in community college enrollment over the last two years.

We also expanded MassGrant Plus, making four-year colleges and universities tuition and fee free for Pell Eligible students and cutting out of pocket costs in half for middle income. This expansion has led to the first growth in enrollment for Massachusetts' public four-year campuses in over a decade.

This year we want to maintain all of these historic expansions.

Yet, we know that access is only a part of it – we also want to see students persist and graduate. For the first time this year, we expanded SUCCESS funding to Massachusetts' nine state universities. This program has been available at community colleges the last few years to promising results. These funds support services such as peer mentors, academic skills workshops, and academic, career and scholarship advising aimed at increasing graduation rates, particularly among historically underserved students. We aim to continue this investment again this year.

As enrollment increases, we also want to make sure that students are going into modern, green and innovative spaces that set them up for success in today's workforce. That's why Governor Healey filed the BRIGHT Act, the largest proposed infrastructure investments in Massachusetts' public higher education system in decades to transform the UMass system, state universities, and community colleges. Over the next 10 years, this will modernize campuses, including new labs, classrooms and improved mental health facilities – to ensure Massachusetts' public higher education system can best serve students and keep the state economically competitive.

All of the intentional investments I've just described have led to incredible progress. This progress is a win for our students, workforce, communities and state – showing why Massachusetts is the best place to live, start a family, go to school, and work.

As I used to tell my students when I was a high school teacher, perhaps the most important element of educational attainment is to secure control over your own life. That can mean pursuit of a career of your choice and interest, engaging in activities and initiatives that are important to you and your community, and actively participating in our democracy. That remains the foundation for why we all do this work – the love for each individual student. Every initiative spearheaded by this administration is done so with this goal in mind. We know that in order to achieve this aim, we must invest in and support education from the first years of a child's life through whatever point in their adulthood they seek to complete it. Our efforts to empower today's students to secure control over their own lives in turn allows them to empower the students of the following generation, and then those students to empower the generation after that. Intentional investment in education has exponential impact.

In Massachusetts, we have a long history of educational excellence. Everything we are doing today is because of our commitment to carry this educational excellence into the future. We will continue to lead the way in making sure our schools reflect our communities and our values. Our students deserve nothing less.

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