

Massachusetts Association of School Committees

School Committee Members' Summary and Guide: 2014 Public Policy Priorities

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Legislators have a lot to know. You have to help educate them on our issues.

Legislators are exposed to more than 150 different areas of public policy at any given time. From school budgets to probate law reform, or environmental concerns to health care for all, citizens come to their state representatives and senators with problems that require a lot of special knowledge to address. Legislation for the aged population, working persons, migrating families, and children in general are all highly specialized matters of public policy. No legislator can possibly know all there is to know!

Because no one person could possibly master more than a few areas, legislators often depend upon their constituents to help them understand those issues that are important to you and your children. Public education, only one area to confront legislators, is particularly complex. Just think about it:

EVERY SCHOOL DISTRICT IS UNIQUE. Every school district is unique with varying levels of social, ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversity. Tax bases vary. Short and long range historical trends are important. Like families, they require careful attention to the best policies and strategies to serve students and families.

FINANCE AND BUDGETING IS COMPLEX. The Massachusetts education funding system is about as complex as any in the country.

Every district requires a calculation of its foundation budget which is an intricate series of calculations to determine what an adequate (foundation) budget for the school department would be. Once the "Foundation Budget" is set, another formula determines how much of that amount your cities and towns can afford to pay and how much the Commonwealth needs to provide to assure full funding. These formulas are defined in no less than 10,000 words of legal text.

Several other sources of revenue come to school districts, each with its own series of intricacies. These include the Special Education Circuit Breaker, Regional Transportation Aid, funding for Kindergartens, and several other accounts, each with its own constituency and advocacy base.

AND, local budgets need to be approved and are usually implemented **before** the state legislature and Congress complete their own budget deliberations for the same fiscal year.

Also, the cost of public education routinely increases at a rate 60% higher than the general consumer price index. This is largely because of retiree benefit costs, health insurance expenses, evolving technology, and supplies and equipment.

STATE AND FEDERAL REGULATION OF SCHOOLS IS EXCESSIVE. The state alone has issued hundreds of pages of regulations that further control almost every aspect of public education. Regulations exist on day to day administration, educator evaluation, school nutrition, bullying, school buildings, relationships with education collaboratives, student affairs, special constituencies and curriculum frameworks for just about every subject in the course directory. Every school district must comply with over 100 requirements to file information or fulfill directives issued by the Commissioner of Education. As a result, it is estimated that the average Massachusetts educator has to spend up to 160 hours of time per year simply complying with regulations rather than educating children.

UNFUNDED MANDATES PERSIST. Some legislative mandates and other tasks not even authorized by law are imposed with insufficient state appropriations to underwrite the cost. MASC annually distributes a list of unfunded mandates to its members as part of the Day on the Hill Advocacy Packet that can be downloaded from our web site.

NEW AND EMERGING ISSUES CONFRONT US. Every year, new issues come forward in the form of proposed legislation or in response to public trends and events. For example, the Newtown, CT tragedy has generated interest in public safety and gun control. In recent years, the emergence of virtual schools and charter schools, green building strategies, new and evolving technologies, and innovative strategies for education, science and businesses serving schools capture the attention of the public and end up as topics for legislators to debate. Demands for “21st century” education abound.

Also, continuing issues with charter schools persist. The charter school funding system jeopardizes the economies of scale for districts that lose children to these privately governed schools that are not accountable to the district whose funding they take away. Each year, new charter schools are approved over the objections of local officials who have no say in the matter.

Finally, three huge issues confront us:

1. The obligation to implement statewide educator evaluation processes for teachers and administrators at every level.
2. A requirement to provide extensive training to all educators who serve English Language Learners.
3. Preparations to implement comprehensive curriculum changes required for the Common Core Curriculum and to ready teachers and students for the new PARCC testing system that will be a major revision to MCAS.

Legislators should understand the mandates we face and the costs of compliance with government regulations that go along with them.

CONCLUSION

Legislators are expected to act on hundreds of laws covering dozens of areas of public policy. Education alone demands an almost unmanageable level of detail and mastery of policy.

It's your job to help your legislator understand our issues. That means making efficient use of your meeting time, getting to the point, and driving your message home.

MASC recommends that you develop your talking points before you set up a meeting with your senator or representative, and, at minimum, ensure that they understand what is on the special handout:

We urge our members to ask legislators to keep these public policy priorities at “top-of-mind”:

1. It is time for appropriate research to determine the true definition of an “adequate” education, and **we urge the creation of an “Adequacy Study” to recalculate an appropriate level of a Foundation Budget for 2014 and beyond. Several bills have been submitted to address this priority.**
2. **State financial aid to public schools is a critical element of local assistance and should be increased if we are to keep up with the costs of education.** It is more important that money go to local school districts than to a state bureaucracy that does not serve children as do local schools.
3. At minimum, support is needed for **three most important fiscal line items in the state budget:**
 - **Chapter 70 Financial Aid.** We need general financial aid with the flexibility to deploy it as we determine it. Chapter 70 aid is distributed on the basis of financial need, but the legislature has recently provided an additional minimum per-student allocation to ensure that every district receives a real dollar increase. We support this per-student allocation but seek \$100 per students in FY 2015. **In addition, we urge a special calculation for students who are migrant, transient, or mobile in that they relocate during the year. (S-239)**
 - **Special Education Circuit Breaker.** This is like an insurance plan that protects districts when individual student special education service plans exceed four times the average per pupil spending level for the state (around \$35,000) by providing 75% of the cost of services. The importance of the Circuit Breaker is that, unlike Chapter 70, districts are reimbursed on the basis of real SPED costs. Since special education is important to every city, town and region, every district benefits when the circuit breaker account is increased. We also support raising the level of reimbursement to 100% for amounts over the threshold. **(H-511)**
 - **Regional Transportation Aid.** Regional school districts rely on transportation aid to cover the costs of getting students to school was, at one time, fully reimbursed but is now covered at less than 70%. In addition, please reinstate funding for local district transportation that was cut several years ago but not restored. **This does not require special legislation but is incorporated into state budget deliberations where amendments are offered on line item funding.**
4. School districts are being crushed by an increasing imposition of regulation from the state and federal levels. **You have to act to stop overregulation, including the addition of requirements to perform tasks unrelated to educating children in schools.** As legislators debate new measures, please consider the implications of state overregulation, unfunded mandates, and bureaucracy that do not support students and teachers in classrooms.

MASC PRIORITY LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES AND PRIORITIES FOR 2014

- **Restore to School Committees the authority to approve school improvement plans** as was required in the original Massachusetts Education Reform Act. School Improvement Plans are essential tools to measure the effectiveness of school leadership and student learning strategies. **(H-414)**
- **Funding for Ch. 222 of the Acts of 2012** that requires that upon suspension or expulsion, a student shall continue for the duration of their exclusion from school to receive educational services (the SJC in a case involving Quincy School Committee held that school committees are not responsible for providing education to students excluded from school)*. The State Auditor has determined this to be an unfunded mandate.
- **Require funding to implement the new statewide educator evaluation system** that we believe, especially for non-Race to the Top Districts, is an unfunded mandate*.
- **Reform Charter School policy** by a) requiring that the appointment of charter school trustees be approved by the elected representatives of the cities and towns from which they come **(H-495)** ; and b) adjust charter school reimbursement to reflect more accurately the level of services provided to clients of the special education programs **(S-222)**. It is the thesis of this legislative priority that charter schools receive greater funding from the foundation budget for “assumed in school special education” than they are otherwise eligible to receive based upon the students they actually serve. The MASC proposal corrects the inflated reimbursement.
- **Create a Special Commission for Mandated Reports and Data Submissions.** This anti-mandate legislation requires legislative authorization before new regulations are promulgated by DESE a financial and that programmatic audit must be conducted. **(H-512)**
- **Require Health Insurance Coverage for Medically Necessary Treatment in School.** This would require private health insurance to cover medically necessary expenses for special needs children. Currently, only Medicaid provides funding for certain diagnostic matters. **(H-2088)**
- Require that **schools that provide private, out-of-district services for special education report the aggregate MCAS scores** for special needs students. **(H-455 and S-205)**
- **Restore full funding of the METCO Program*.**
- **Expand early education opportunities** and opportunities for students to attend an **extended school day** program*.
- **Strengthen to improve student safety by regulating the sale of firearms.****

* Several items noted are generally included as part of state budget deliberations