

MASC Legislative Priorities for 2021

Full funding for the Student Opportunity Act. Federal COVID stimulus funding has made it possible for the legislature to fulfill its commitment to Chapter 70 and incremental adjustments to charter school mitigation, regional transportation funding, and special education transportation. We urge the legislature to oversee that commitment and to advocate for additional funds as the federal government may provide to cover the extraordinary costs of services to children during the pandemic.

Children's Services Safety Net. For over two decades, MASC has advocated for funding those agencies that support children and their families in need of essential social services and economic support. Schools alone cannot compensate for the threat of hunger, need for health care health care and mental health services, and the economic stimuli that provide income to families seeking work. These agencies and programs need full legislative support and MASC has always viewed them as no less important than public education for the long term well-being of children and families.

Full funding for the Special Education Circuit Breaker. The Special Education Circuit Breaker Account was funded at \$367,654,803 in the governor's proposed budget, which is less than the consensus among advocate organizations, including MASC, for full-funding which is \$392,338,170. The reimbursement for out-of-district transportation costs from the Student Opportunity Act (SOA) will go into effect this year (25% per year over 4 years). This is estimated at \$22.5 million for the first year of implementation.

Earmarking Special Funding to Study Efficiencies and Economies for Small and Rural Districts, including regions of the state with declining enrollment and limited economic growth. As an example, we cite the work of the Berkshire County Education Task Force that has developed a multi-faceted approach to collaboration, use of technology, and vision for the future. The task force has had earmarked support from the legislature, and MASC hopes that the legislature would create a more permanent base of support. Such research may have significant advantages for other similar areas including Franklin, Hampshire and Barnstable Counties.

Rethinking the Appropriateness of Testing and Accountability. COVID has disrupted school for most students. It is widely recognized that standardized tests are of little value except to guide for educators to tailor education strategies to students. Our membership has called for a moratorium on the use of testing for punitive or sanction purposes. Further, we have urged the legislature to act to restore local graduation requirement standards to school districts rather than incorporating a high stakes test (i.e., MCAS) into the process.

Retention of Medicaid Reimbursement for Covered Services. Local school districts should be allowed to retain 100% of reimbursements for special education services covered by Medicaid or other insurers.

Charter School Oversight and Reform. The legislature should ensure that no charter school or school district or individual school restructuring will be imposed or expanded by the state upon a community without its consent; that all charter school proposals must include an academic and economic impact study relative to the community on which it would be imposed; and guarantees that representatives selected by the community will be among those who serve as trustees of charter schools.

While the public rejection of a cap-lift on charter school enrollment was unambiguous and consistently rejected by the voters and the public, DESE has quietly allowed certain schools to increase enrollment within the permitted levels under the local caps. This has taxed further the ability of school districts to meet the needs of their students. DESE has been cautious about expanding the number of charter schools in the pandemic, but new applicants emerge annually.

METCO. MASC continues to support full funding for the METCO program at a level to support current and future students. METCO has proven to be a successful program for students and families who seek alternatives for their children within the public school districts of Metropolitan Boston and Springfield.

Vocational Technical School Enrollment. MASC has supported a negotiated approach to the question of admissions standards for vocational technical high schools. We view this as preferable to a state regulated or imposed strategy. It



is our hope that more flexible consideration of such criteria as student discipline coupled with a reasonable consideration of student diversity, is the best methodology rather than the heavy hand of state regulation.

Establish Incentives for the More Students to Become Educators. remain in the field, serve children who need them most, and grow professionally to build a cohort of excellence at all levels and in each discipline. Such incentives for students could include loan forgiveness, state subsidized wage supplements for teaching in communities with high risk/high needs students, and other strategies to be determined. We have encouraged the colleges and universities to provide more opportunities for students to prepare for teaching careers. Many of our liberal arts institutions, for example, do not at this time provide key elements of teaching preparation.

Continued Support for Leadership Development Incentive (including Influence 100 as an example) to recruit and retain a diverse pool of highly qualified educational leaders for an increasingly diverse student population.

Counting Students Where They Live. Provide a mechanism for the counting of all students in every school district in the general census, including the population of English Language Learners, immigrant children, Native Americans, members of minority and underrepresented census cohorts, and students at economic disadvantage, including those students who may be undocumented. This will allow districts that enroll all persons in their communities to be reimbursed adequately by the state for them.

Addressing the Concerns of Native Americans in Massachusetts. Diversity, equity and inclusion are key priorities for MASC and the National School Boards Association. Among the initiatives and priorities is addressing the status of Native American families in Massachusetts. In fact, the Mashpee School Committee has been recognized nationally by NSBA in 2021 for their outreach and consultation with the Native American community. MASC urges the legislature to promote meaningful consultation, support dialogue, seek establishment of a continuous improvement platform, and promote increased educational opportunities and advancement the well-being of Native students. The consultation process should exist at every level for the building of strong, healthy, trusting, and collaborative relationships on which to determine how Native students should be taught and who should teach them.

Retain a Powerful Voice for the Community in the Oversight and Governance of its Public Schools and in the protection of their financial resources as part of the fiduciary responsibilities of the school committee, city council, town council, select board, and town meeting. We continue to warn about efforts to authorize DESE or any other state agency to effectively dissolve elements of local government at its discretion by coercing district consolidation against the will of the communities affected as was attempted during the previous administration.

Protect the Right to Privacy as a Matter of Equity. MASC believes it is important to acknowledge that any effort to achieve “equity” should target not only finances and allocation of financial resources, access to curricula, safety and security at school (including environmental as well as physical safety), capital resources, but also protection of the civil rights of vulnerable students including protecting privacy and security of data that is collected on students and families. We will want assurances that data are gathered and used or shared appropriately.

Update Open Meeting Law. In light of the pandemic, the legislature should embark on a study to determine how the Open Meeting Law may be revised to meet the needs of local officials in the 21st Century. Such reforms may include:

- Continuation of remote participation in appropriate circumstances including statewide boards whose members may reside long distances from meeting sites, and accommodations for individuals with family caregiving responsibilities who may not be able to meet in person.
- Restore the original legislative intent to permit school committees, city councils, town boards, and select boards who are engaged in recruiting and hiring key administrative personnel, including superintendents of schools, town managers and town administrators to conduct confidential initial screening and interviews.

¹Many classroom teachers have embraced the array of websites and applications available to supplement and support student learning before and during the pandemic. The companies that have created these websites and applications thus have access to an enormous amount of information about students: names, ages, grades, ability and skills measures, disciplinary data, and more. Rarely is anyone at the classroom, school, or district level reviewing and evaluating the policies that companies may or may not have regarding this student information, and it appears that few are overseeing access to this data.