

MASC PUBLIC POLICY PRIORITIES



2024

FUNDING

- **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.

We appreciate the basic support to the SOA 70 but note that the full commitment would preserve charter school mitigation, regional transportation, and the Special Education Circuit Breaker.

We also call to the attention of the Legislature two structural issues with Chapter 70 and the Foundation Budget that have implications for FY 24, 25, and 26. They include calculating the inflation factor to be more closely aligned to actual economic indicators, and adjusting for the declining number of economically disadvantaged children who have been recategorized and therefore will no longer be counted as economically disadvantaged because of the reduction in the Medicaid population.

MASC has supported establishment of a special working group to research and review and make subsequent recommendations for the calculations and disbursements of Chapter 70 funds. Several budget amendments including those drafted by Representatives Carol Doherty and Steve Ultrino were offered to achieve this goal.

- **Full funding for the Special Education Circuit Breaker.** The Special Education Circuit Breaker account was originally projected at \$552,738,989 based on original estimates for FY25 when funded at current levels according to the Coalition for Special Education Funding. However, MASC has supported a higher reimbursement of 90% and a 25% lower threshold should this be feasible.

- **Establishing Regional Reserve Assessment Funds and Expanding Vocational Education Reserve Funds** as approved by the MASC Delegate Assembly. This would allow for a greater fiscal safety net in lean years.

- **Earmarking Special Funding 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.

- **Support for the Massachusetts School Building Authority.** With increasing construction costs, school districts need the state partnership of the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) more than ever. In an effort to better support the rising costs of both new construction and well as costs of renovating/retrofitting existing buildings, the MSBA Board raised the reimbursement for school building projects last year. While this change was overdue, it means the capped amount of funding available to the MSBA will not go as far. For this reason, the MSBA suspended the accelerated repair program--support specifically for roofs, windows, and boilers--for this year. Whether the need is for a new building or for a needed core repair, the chances of a school district being able to access adequate funding from MSBA is currently that much less due to these increased costs.

In order to appropriately support school building construction, MASC requests that the Legislature uncap the MSBA from its \$800 million limit and provide funding that more appropriately reflects current needs. Raising the funding cap would enable reinstatement of MSBA's accelerated repair program, thereby ensuring core functional-

ities of schools have state support. The Legislature should further explore developing an additional program in between accelerated repair and a major renovation rebuilding program. Finally, the cost of inflation in current building projects should be covered by the state's American Rescue Plan funding, rather than by local communities, or the limited accounts of the MSBA.

- **METCO.** MASC continues to support full funding for the METCO program at a level to support current and future students at an estimated additional cost of \$3.5 million. 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.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

- **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 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 wellbeing of children and families.

This includes:

- Free breakfast and lunch for all students.
- Expanded opportunities for early education.
- **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 was 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.
- **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 gathered are used or shared appropriately.
- **Protecting Student Due Process Rights.** MASC opposes recent initiatives that would make it easier for administrators to suspend or expel students without appropriate due process.

ISSUES REQUIRING LEGISLATIVE ACTION

- **Re-forming of the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education** to permit current educators and school committee members to serve, and to increase the size of the board in order to allow the governor to achieve a working majority.
- **Rethinking the State Accountability System** by rethinking the purpose of MCAS testing, eliminating the graduation requirement, and limiting the use of test results to diagnostic and professional practice improvement for educators. As an alternative, we support developing a wider, more consensus-built strategy for an evaluation system with meaningful input from legitimate stakeholders.
- **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 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 was cautious about expanding the number of charter schools in the pandemic, but new applicants with emerge annually while others continue to expand over the objections of the communities who lose state Chapter 70 aid as a result.

- **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 or yielding to a grand-standing lawsuit.

In addition, we support additional state and federal (Perkins Act) financial aid apportioned—and not through a block grant subject to administrative discretion—to allow for expansion of vocational school enrollment.

- **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 and to accommodate those statewide boards to which some members may need to travel as much as six hours to attend. 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 all members of 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; and to permit initial interview questions to be developed in executive sessions and remain confidential until the initial interviews have concluded.

FUTURE OF EDUCATION

- **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.

LOCAL CONTROL

- **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.

- **Retaining the Evaluating Authority of Elected School Committee.** MASC strongly supports maintaining the evaluating authority of elected school committees and rejecting recent efforts by superintendents to appeal the results of their evaluations to the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education.