

Governor proposes further investment in early education and child care

Citing efforts to ease financial pressures on housing, child care and education, Gov. Maura Healey focused on creating a more affordable Massachusetts during her first State of the Commonwealth address, delivered on Wednesday, January 17.

The day before, Healey announced plans to pursue about \$93 million in new child care spending in her fiscal year 2025 budget proposal, which will also request another \$475 million in grants to continue supporting early education providers.

Healey also announced a program aimed at improving literacy among the state's students. While the governor said Massachusetts has "the best schools in the country," she said a majority of the state's third-graders did not meet expectations in ELA on last year's MCAS and "many districts are using out-of-date, disproven methods to teach reading."

Healey said she would also expand a program that allows high school students to earn college credits, and another that provides job and trade training.

Healey's plan features four components: expanding a universal preschool program into all 26 "gateway cities" by 2026; making more low- and moderate-income families eligible for child care assistance; funding another year of the Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) grants; and an executive order calling for a "whole-of-government" approach to boosting access to child care.

A spokesperson said the fiscal

2025 budget Healey must file by Jan. 24 will propose using \$75 million in revenue from the new income surtax to increase the eligibility threshold for the Child Care Financial Assistance (CCFA) program.

Currently, families must earn no more than 50 percent of the state median income to qualify for the financial aid, meaning \$49,467 annually for a family of two or \$61,106 for a family of three, according to Healey's office. Her proposal would change that to 85 percent of the state median income, equivalent to about \$84,094 for a family of two or \$103,880 for a family of three. This higher threshold would help about 4,000 more families receive support.

Healey also wants to expand the state's Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative (CCPI) into every "gateway city" in the state. The initiative is behind preschool programs in various communities and provides subsidies to help families enroll children at low or zero cost.

The program currently operates in a dozen gateway cities: Brockton, Fall River, Haverhill, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn, Malden, New Bedford, Salem, Springfield and Westfield. State law defines gateway cities as mid-sized communities with lower-than-average incomes and educational attainment rates. Healey's proposal would expand the preschool initiative into the 14 other gateway cities by the end of 2026, starting with a \$38.7 million investment in the fiscal

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Eight K-12 trends to watch in 2024

From lagging academic recovery and looming fiscal cliffs to persistent cyber and physical threats to schools, the nation's schools face myriad challenges from all directions.

As 2024 gets underway and the K-12 sector grapples with curriculum censorship efforts, the influx of new technologies and more, the following eight trends will be key for school leaders to keep an eye on.

1. Finding an ESSER off ramp

Sept. 30, 2024, has been locked in the minds of school, district and state administrators for years, yet the obligation deadline for the federal emergency funding that has helped schools recover from COVID-19 setbacks is fast becoming an anxiety-inducing reality.

Many agree finding an off-ramp from the \$189.5 billion in ESSER funds is difficult. As school systems transition to more normal cash flows, leaders are asking questions around concerns including whether staff layoffs are needed, if summer programming should be pared back, and how both learning and mental health initiatives can be preserved.

Still, others with large allocations left over may have to plan for a frenzy of spending. Otherwise, unspent funds will revert to the federal government.

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Governor Healey makes midyear budget cuts, projects future adjustments

Governor Healey recently announced midyear budget cuts due to the first half of the 2024 fiscal year tax collections running below revenue benchmarks set for the year. The plan cuts \$375 million from the current FY24 budget while tapping a further \$625 million in non-tax revenue.

By paring back spending over the next six months, tapping into investment earnings that are generally not used in budgeting, and planning for basically flat growth next year, Healey administration officials said they think they will be able to get through fiscal year 2024 without having to make additional cuts and can then build a balanced budget for fiscal year 2025.

The plan is meant to address the existing revenue shortfall of \$769 million while also providing some breathing room for the second half of the budget year, when additional months of below-benchmark collections are expected.

The Governor has the authority to make such cuts via executive branch agencies under MGL Ch. 29, sec. 9C; such cuts thus are often termed “9C cuts.” Local aid, including state chapter 70 aid, is not impacted by the cuts.

In addition to cuts to MassHealth and Transitional Aid

to Families with Dependent Children, the cuts also reduce a number of education grant accounts to either amounts projected to be necessary or already awarded. Those accounts include extended learning time, dual enrollment, school-to-career connecting activities, student wellness school support, and advanced placement math and science programs. Additionally, the allocations for both the 21st century education trust fund and the STEM Pipeline were cut.

The Governor also downgraded the amount of tax revenue expected this year by \$1 billion to \$40.41 billion, including \$1 billion from the new surtax on income over \$1 million.

Also announced this week was the consensus revenue figure on which the coming fiscal year 2025 budget will be based. That figure is \$40.202 billion, with an additional \$1.3 billion in surtax revenue. The consensus figure is \$208 million less than the figure used originally to calculate the 2024 fiscal year budget, with the surtax revenue increasing \$300 million for this fiscal year.

Governor Healey has until January 24 to file her proposed fiscal year 2025 budget with the state legislature.



Trends to Watch

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2. Protecting student safety

With last year's record high number of school shootings on K-12 campuses, school leaders this year will continue seeking solutions to reduce gun violence and address other school safety concerns.

District and state budget plans indicate physical investments in security at facilities, including weapons detection technology, secure windows and doors, and visitor vestibules. Also expected are the development of resources and best practices for creating safe environments and addressing student substance use and mental health needs. However, some worry that pushback to certain approaches, such as social-emotional learning and inclusive LGBTQ+ efforts, will stunt progress on creating safe and welcoming school climates. Education leaders are also concerned about the increase in extreme weather and how schools' physical vulnerabilities factor into building design and safety plans.

3. Bolstering academic recovery

Disappointing math and reading scores dominated education conver-

sations in 2023, but this year, there is more optimism among educators, parents and researchers that investments in post-pandemic academy recovery will pay off.

While many 2023 state assessment results showed students were below pre-COVID performance levels, several states recorded small upticks in scores compared to 2022, according to test score data briefs published by the COVID-19 School Data Hub.

With academic recovery – including investments in tutoring and the science of reading – being one of the priority spending categories for ESSER funding, many believe student learning outcomes will remain on the upswing.

But there are challenges. Enrollment, particularly for the youngest students, is not yet back to pre-pandemic levels. School leaders and advocates are also raising alarms about continued struggles with chronic absenteeism.

4. Ed tech grapples with AI, data privacy concerns

It's been a little over a year since the public was introduced to ChatGPT, forcing schools to quickly navigate student and staff access to generative artificial intelligence tools while understanding the role AI could play in the classroom. As some school leaders

and educators flagged concerns of plagiarism, others saw an opportunity to enhance student learning and teacher workflow efficiencies.

AI also continues to spark concerns over school staff and student data protection. Even before generative AI existed, students' personal information was already vulnerable to exposure in data breaches often stemming from cyberattacks on school systems.

5. Staffing concerns persist

Like last year, comprehensive data to gauge the gravity of nationwide teacher shortages remains to be seen, but anecdotal evidence and research has found the issue is a persistent one.

As the final ESSER obligation deadline approaches this fall, some school districts may also have to consider laying off teachers. That's because they are relying on federal relief funds for those positions, which could lead up to an estimated 250,000 education jobs to potentially be cut.

Teacher salaries – a key factor in recruitment and retention – also took a hit despite the influx of federal cash to districts. A September report by

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Early literacy screening assessments report issued

Last month, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education issued “A First Look at Early Literacy Performance in Massachusetts,” a report on the early literacy screenings assessments funded by certain state grants in 2020-21 and 2021-22 in districts across MA. The report looked at approximately 10% of the state’s K-3 population from 43 districts and 159 schools that were eligible for the state grants, many of which represent economically disadvantaged students and English learner students.

While screening assessments used for early literacy vary in design, in administration, and, perhaps most importantly, in how “at risk of reading difficulty” is defined, this report does provide an early look at possible policy implications of the state’s new required assessment of each kindergarten to at least grade 3 student at least twice per year.

A few conclusions of note:

- Students enrolled in schools with

the highest mobility rates, lowest attendance rates, highest discipline rates, fewest experienced teachers, lowest teacher retention rates, and highest percentages of historically marginalized student groups among grantees were more likely to be below benchmark and to stay there from the beginning to the end of the school year than were their peers in schools without those characteristics.

- Economically disadvantaged students, ELL students, students receiving special education services, Black students, and Hispanic students were more likely than their peers not in those groups to score below benchmark at least once during the school year and to stay below benchmark over the school year.
- Although ELL students were more likely to be identified as at risk than non-English learners, English learner students with low English proficiency as measured by ACCESS were not necessarily always below benchmark on screening assessments.

- Most students identified as at risk of reading difficulty at the beginning of the year are still at risk at the end of the year; conversely, most students meeting assessment benchmark at beginning of the year also met benchmark at end of the year.
- However, 40% of students who were at risk at beginning of the year were able to meet benchmark by the end of the year assessment, and students who got on track by the middle of the year were significantly more likely to meet benchmark at end of the year than those who were classified at risk at middle of the year, suggesting that enhanced literacy learning strategies are making a difference.

You can link to the full report at: <https://www.wested.org/resources/ma-early-literacy-supporting-students-early/>

For more information from DESE on this early literacy study: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/ela/research/default.html>

Further investment

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2025 budget using combined general fund and surtax money. This amount represents an increase of \$18.1 million over fiscal 2024 funding for the program.

Healey’s office said her annual budget will also propose \$475 million in C3 grants using a combination of general fund and surtax revenues, mirroring the amount to which the governor and Legislature agreed in fiscal 2024.

C3 grants launched during the COVID-19 pandemic with federal funding before Massachusetts elected officials opted to keep the program going using state dollars. Last year, Education Secretary Patrick Tutwiler warned that allowing the funding to expire would lead to “a serious swath of child care closures.”

Healey’s office said C3 grants have supported more than 42,000 educa-

tors, kept more than 7,000 programs open, and added about 10,000 slots for children.

With tax collections running short of expectations, Healey last week cut \$375 million from the current state budget. Her budget team and top legislative Democrats expect fiscal 2025 tax collections to grow about \$1.1 billion, or about 2 percent compared to its latest estimates.

Much of the spending push Healey outlined for early education and care would make use of surtax revenues, which voters approved to be earmarked just for education and transportation revenues, with some additional money from the state’s general fund.

Massachusetts has some of the highest child care costs in the country, and a lack of available, affordable slots imposes strain on the state’s economy by preventing many —especially women—from working. Many Bay State business leaders have

urged policymakers to address the issue, arguing they need better child care options to attract and retain workers.

DIVISION IV Networking Event

February 8, 2024 - 6-9pm
Apex Entertainment Center
21 Apex Drive, Marlboro

MASC Division IV leadership invites you to join them and your school committee colleagues from across the region for a night of socializing/networking. Connect with colleagues to discuss shared challenges, solutions and the latest trending topics in education. Appetizers and cash bar will be available.

Please RSVP by February 4 to
Michelle Bodin-Hettinger at
mbodinhettinger@mps-edu.org

Trends to Watch

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the Economic Policy Institute found rising inflation further widened the wage gap between teachers and other similarly situated professionals.

6. Growing focus on addressing chronic absenteeism

As schools persist in their post-pandemic recovery efforts, they are challenged by high levels of absenteeism. According to Attendance Works, an advocacy organization closely tracking the issue, chronic absenteeism skyrocketed to nearly 14.7 million students in the wake of COVID, with 6.5 million more students missing at least 10% of the school year in 2021-22 than prior to the pandemic.

While data pointed toward a slight decrease in 2022-23, it also showed that it's likely the high levels remained relatively steady overall during the last school year.

As schools continue to grapple with absenteeism in 2024, the White House, Education Department and education organizations have called for an "all-hands-on-deck" approach. They've pointed to interventions like making home visits, communicating in families' native languages, and engaging in after- or before-school

activities.

The Education Department also said in late 2023 that it would "hold States accountable for ensuring they fulfill commitments they have made to collect chronic absenteeism data and monitor States on the interventions they use."

7. Growing spotlight on student mental health

Closely tied to absenteeism and a host of other challenges schools face is students' mental health, which schools will likely continue to monitor and support as part of their COVID recovery efforts.

Teens ages 13-18 said in a spring survey that their mental health, motivation, relationships with friends and overall happiness have improved since the early months of the pandemic. However, only a third of 1,000 teenagers polled said they feel supported by their schools when it comes to mental health, according to the survey conducted by Morning Consult, a business intelligence company, and EdChoice, a nonprofit that advocates for school choice.

8. Culture wars continue to hit classrooms

School censorship, which ramped up concerns for educators under the Trump administration, continues to

vex schools nearly three years later. With many laws restricting LGBTQ+ and race-related curriculum now in effect in conservative states, the controversy has progressed to lawsuits against school districts – and to high-profile companies coming under scrutiny – in the wake of such laws. In 2023, Scholastic, the largest publisher and distributor of children's books, came under fire from the public and educators after it created a separate collection for diverse titles in school book fairs. Similarly, College Board, which administers AP courses, also received pushback after it made changes to its AP African American Studies curriculum, following state restrictions on race-related content.

Districts are also caught between state laws restricting curriculum on one hand and civil rights obligations under the Constitution and federal laws like Title IX, which protects students from sex discrimination, on the other.

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