

Education Commissioner Riley stepping down; Johnston appointed Interim Commissioner

Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley has announced that he will step down from his role, effective March 15, citing a need to spend more time with aging parents. Riley has served as Commissioner since 2018 and has spent more than three decades as an educator and administrator in MA public schools. He will stay on as an advisor through the end of the school year.

Appointed by Republican Governor Charlie Baker, Riley led the department through the COVID pandemic, making difficult, sometimes unpopular and/or contested decisions about closing and reopening schools, launching pool testing and social distancing requirements, and providing guidance on mask mandates.

In the years since schools reopened, Riley affirmed the department's main focus was to help students recover from the academic and social setbacks that being out of school caused.

He has also pushed to combat a rising tide of chronic absenteeism and get students back in the classroom, and recently oversaw the passage of new sex education standards that are more up-to-date and inclusive of LGBTQ+ people.

Riley started his teaching career in Baltimore before going on to work in the Boston Public Schools, where he served as a middle school principal. He was subsequently appointed the Academic Superintendent in charge of middle

and K-8 schools in the Boston Public School district. Prior to his appointment as Commissioner, Riley spent six years as the appointed receiver of the 13,000 student Lawrence Public Schools district, where he instituted programs to improve student achievement, raise graduation rates, lower dropout rates, and increase community and parent engagement. MASC has been closely with Riley and his successor in Lawrence to enable the district to return to local school committee governance.

Subsequent to Riley's announcement the Board of Education at its February 28 meeting named Russell



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MASC President addresses National School Boards Association and MA Ways and Means Hearing



Mildred Lefebvre, MASC 2024 President and member of the Holyoke School Committee, was introduced to the more than 500 attendees at the National School Boards Association's four-day Equity/Advocacy Symposium in Washington DC in early February. In addition to her leadership role at MASC, Mildred also serves as Chair of NSBA's National Hispanic Council and in a brief statement spoke to the need to engage the country's multiplicity of diverse students and constituents in the educational process.

On March 1, President Lefebvre represented MASC, giving testimony to the Joint Ways and Means Committee relative to school district concerns about the state's FY25 Chapter 70 allocations and the need for important legislative revisions to support additional funding. These include a rethinking of the inflation factor (this year 1.35%) that is the basis for the FY25 foundation budget calculations, as well as the recent reduction in the number of students (almost 7,000 in FY25) who are considered low-income—a significant factor when calculating foundation budget allocations.

These critical funding issues, and others, will be discussed at greater length in a special LEARNING LUNCH program at noon on Friday, March 15 (register online: www.masc.org) and at MASC's upcoming Day on the Hill on May 6. Check your mailbox for more information. President Lefebvre's full Ways and Means testimony can be accessed at: www.masc.org/fy25hearing

MA TOPS AP EXAMS

Public high school students in MA outpaced their peers across the country last year in Advanced Placement exams, and more students of color are taking the college-level tests according to the MA Department of Education.

More than 31 percent of MA public high school graduates scored a 3 or higher on an AP exam during high school, the highest-scoring state in the country. Nationally, about 22 percent of public school students scored a 3 or higher.

Following MA were New York at 28.9%, New Jersey at 28.6%, Florida

at 28.4%, Connecticut at 27.9%, Illinois at 27.5%, Maryland at 27.4%, California at 26.6%, Colorado at 26.5%, and Virginia at 25.5%.

More than 38% of Hispanic high school graduates in MA took an AP exam last year, up from 22% in 2013. More than 32% of Black graduates took an AP, up from 23% ten years ago.

GOV. HEALEY AND EDUCATION SECRETARY TUTWILER OPPOSE MCAS BALLOT EFFORT

Count Gov. Maura Healey and education secretary Patrick Tutwiler among the opponents of a proposed ballot question that would allow MA students to graduate high school with-

out achieving sufficient MCAS scores.

Tutwiler made clear in an interview last week that he and Healey believe the measure backed by the Massachusetts Teachers Association is the wrong approach, that could result in essentially 351 different standards for high school graduation. His remarks, did however, open the door to reforming the exams.

Tutwiler believes the field is already flooded with "misinformation" about the proposal, stressing that it would not eliminate the MCAS altogether but would instead decouple results from high school graduation requirements.

MA lawmakers will also be reviewing the measure, hearing arguments for and against the proposed MCAS ballot question ahead of a May 1 deadline for lawmakers to approve it or propose a rewrite.

If the Legislature takes no action by that date, sponsors of each ballot question need to complete one more round of signature-gathering to secure a spot on the November ballot.

MASC NEWS

Resolutions approaching expiration deadline:

In accordance with the recently passed (2023) MASC bylaw, resolutions that are presented at the annual Delegate Assembly will now expire after a three year period. The following is a list of MASC resolutions that will expire November of 2024. If your committee would like to champion one of the expiring resolutions, it requires a vote of your committee, and if passed, please send an email from the Chair and/or the Recording Secretary of the Committee to [Jason Fraser, MASC Resolutions Committee Chair](#) with the results of the vote. If five or more committees from two or more geographical MASC Divisions pass the same resolution, that resolution bypasses the Resolutions Committee and the MASC Board of Directors and goes straight to the voting members of the Delegate Assembly in November of 2025. Submissions of new resolutions are also being accepted at this time.

Expiring MASC Resolutions	Year Passed	Accomplished	Expiration Date
Pertaining to Educator Diversity and Professional Licensure	2019	No	11/2024
Full Funding of Transportation Costs for Students in Foster Care	2019	No	11/2024
Universal Quality Pre-Kindergarten Access in Massachusetts	2019	No	11/2024
Access to Menstrual Supplies	2019	No	11/2024
Charter School Reform	2019	No	11/2024
Lowering the Voting Age for Municipal Elections	2020	No	11/2024
Retention of Medicaid Revenue	2020	No	11/2024
Dedicated Funding for School Based Clinics and Services	2021	No	11/2024
IDEA Full Funding Act	2021	No	11/2024
Recess	2021	No	11/2024
Alternative to MCAS	2021	No	11/2024
Prohibiting the use of Native American Mascots	2021	No	11/2024
Climate Change	2019	Ongoing	11/2024
Poverty and Children	2019	Ongoing	11/2024
School Committee Anti-Racism	2020	Ongoing	11/2024
School Transportation	2019	Partial	11/2024
Homework Gap and WIFI/Internet Access	2021	Partial	11/2024



MASC Past President Andrea Wadsworth presents Senator Minority Leader Bruce Tarr (R-Gloucester) the Association's 2023 Legislator of the Year award at the State House. In his 30-plus year legislative career, Tarr has

been a strong and vocal champion for public education and passionate advocate for early education and regional school transportation. He has been in the forefront of sponsoring legislative initiatives supported by MASC including bills relative to charter school integrity; school safety; special education; and a study on the delivery of special education services.

"For more than 30 years, Senator Tarr has been the personification of hard work, civility, and commitment when it comes to talking about public education and our future," Wadsworth noted. The award was presented in the Senate's historic Reading Room in front of the picture of American educational reformer Horace Mann, who is also Wadsworth's great great grandfather.

Impact of inflation and low income on FY25 school budgets

The inflation rate within the foundation budget is intended to account for what we know to be the increasing costs of meeting the needs of our students. Budget drivers like transportation, health insurance, special education, utilities, and competitive collective bargaining agreements lead to budget projects that increase year over year.

For the past two years, the inflation rate has been 4.5%, the legislatively capped rate within the Student Opportunity Act; both the actual rate on which the foundation budget is based and the inflationary increases in school budgets were much higher than that.

This year, the rate in the foundation budget is 1.35%, a rate that is entirely out of line with increases in every budget category. This one factor has resulted in a drop in the number of

districts receiving real foundation aid increases and a drop in foundation aid increases for the districts that are receiving them. A low inflation rate hurts every district.

Also hobbling state aid for districts is the low income count. The state is in its first post-pandemic review of who is eligible for MassHealth benefits, and enrollment has declined as a result. Because enrollment in MassHealth is one of the markers used in community eligibility by the state to determine low-income status of a student, the enrollment of students in MassHealth is directly tied to the number of students counted as low income. Between the FY24 determination and the FY25 determination, the number of students counted as low income declined by 6,715 students, from 421,305 to 414,590.

The increment to support low income students within the foundation budget calculation is determined by the percentage of students in a district counted as low income; this is divided into twelve groups, with successively higher dollar amounts per student for a higher percentage of students who are determined to be low income. In the case of 49 districts, the drop in the count of low-income students resulted in the district also dropping a low income group. That multiplies the impact, as the dollar amount per pupil is then lessened from between \$149 to nearly \$450 per pupil.

Because the state uses a four year match period in determining student status, this situation will only worsen next year and the year after that, which are the final two years of the implementation of the Student Opportunity Act.

A special LEARNING LUNCH program on Friday, March 15 will elaborate on these issues. Register online at www.masc.org.

Stepping Down

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Johnston, a longtime special education official, as Acting Commissioner. He will assume the role on March 16.

Johnston has a lengthy career in public education, including as a special education teacher, special education director, and Superintendent of the West Springfield Public Schools from 2010 to 2014. Most recently, Johnston was Deputy Commissioner for the state agency; prior to that, he was Senior Associate Commissioner overseeing the state's school accountability and special education systems. He also served as interim receiver for the Southbridge Public Schools, where he was temporarily charged with turning around the struggling district.

During Johnston's tenure at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Massachusetts developed a new parent-friendly Individualized Education Program, a document outlining a special education student's needs, the first update in 20 years. Johnston also

helped pass policies that led to a reduction in the use of physical restraints on students, according to the department.

Johnston holds a bachelor's degree from DePaul University in Chicago, a master's of education degree from Boston College, and a doctorate of philosophy and education, also from BC, according to the state Education Department. After post-college teaching stints in Arizona and Alabama, Johnston was a special educator for the Newton Public Schools, where he taught for five years before becoming the head of elementary special education for the Wellesley Public Schools.

The state board, which recommends the Commissioner for appointment by the Secretary of Education, will discuss its search for Riley's permanent replacement at its March 26 meeting.

Six of the board's 10 members remain Baker appointees. It's unclear whether the board will seek to name a new chief before Governor Maura Healey, a Democrat, is able to appoint a majority this summer when terms begin to expire.



Elementary Social Studies and Civics Curriculum available

Children Discovering Justice (CDJ) is a free MA standards-based social studies/civics curriculum for grades K-3. CDJ provides teachers with high quality, culturally responsive, standards aligned resources that fit within the confines of an elementary school day. CDJ embeds social studies with SEL, reading, and writing through engaging 20-35 minutes flexible lessons.

In the current school year, Discovering Justice partnered with nine school districts, providing professional learning to over 200 teachers and supporting implementation of CDJ in their K-3 classrooms.

To learn how CDJ can work for your school or district, contact Laura Brenner at lbrenner@discoveringjustice.org.

NATIONAL



SUPREME COURT DECLINES TO HEAR HIGH-PROFILE SCHOOL ADMISSIONS CASE

Late last month, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear *TJ v. Fairfax County School Board*, a closely watched case challenging admissions policies at Virginia's highly ranked Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology.

The parent plaintiffs in the case contended that a 2020 admissions policy change aimed at diversifying incoming classes, in which the Fairfax County School Board agreed to weigh "experience factors" and to drop entrance exam and teacher recommendation requirements, resulted in an intentional and discriminatory drop in Asian American enrollment. Asian American students made up 73% of enrollment prior to the change, and fell to 54% in 2021.

The 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the school board in May, 2023.

Parents appealed that decision to the Supreme Court within two months of the justices striking down race-conscious admissions in

higher education in a controversial case brought against Harvard University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Despite striking down race-conscious admissions as unconstitutional, the majority opinion left the door open for admissions standards that don't directly consider race when aiming to diversity enrollment.

In petitioning the high school case to the Supreme Court, the parents wrote that a "new species of racial discrimination has been spreading through . . . public school systems" that "takes the form of facially race-neutral admissions criteria intentionally designed to achieve the same results as overt racial discrimination."

The court's rejection means that the admissions policy may continue.

The court's decision not to hear the case followed multiple meetings on the issue. For a case to be considered, four of the Supreme Court's nine justices must agree to hear the case. Seven of the justices voted against moving the case forward.

Dissenting from the court's decision, were Justices Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas.

UPCOMING EVENTS

March 15 (F)

MASC LEARNING LUNCH SPECIAL

"What's Going on with Chapter 70 this Year?"

Time: Noon-1:00pm

March 27 (W)

DIVISION V MEETING

"Advocating for Public Schools" Greenfield Public Library

Time: 6:30pm

Friday, April 12 (F)

MASC LEARNING LUNCH

Day on the Hill preview

Time: Noon-1:00pm

Friday, May 3 (F)

MASC LEARNING LUNCH

Establishing an LPAC/SEPAC

Time: Noon-1:00pm

Saturday, May 4 (Sa)

CHARTING THE COURSE

South Shore Voc. Tech., Hanover

Time: 8:00am-4:00pm

Monday, May 6 (M)

MASC DAY ON THE HILL

Morning program: UMA Club, Boston

Lunch: Great Hall, State House

Time: 9:00am-2:00pm

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