

MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS
Testimony to the Joint Committee on Ways and Means

FISCAL YEAR 2022 BUDGET HEARING
Massachusetts State House (Virtual)
Tuesday, March 16, 2021

Good afternoon, Senator Lewis and Representative Donato and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means.

My name is Dr. Mary Bourque and I am the Director of Government Affairs for the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS). It is an honor to speak to you this afternoon on behalf of all public-school superintendents about the FY22 budget.

I want to begin my remarks this afternoon with gratitude to you, our Legislators for all your hard work this year to guide our State through the once in a generation global pandemic. It is time now to envision the future; time to transform the public education landscape by most immediately focusing on return, reopening, and acceleration. We can do this together, and we can do it by starting with our core values and how they are reflected in the Commonwealth's FY22 budget proposals.

We, MASS, believe deeply that decisions are easy when based on core values. MASS's core values include the responsibility of school district leaders to provide a high-quality education to each and every one of its students. As an organization, we do this by supporting and advocating on behalf of our superintendents so they are able to lead their school districts with all the resources and systems needed for our students.

The global pandemic caused by Covid-19 did not discriminate—in every school district across our state: urban, suburban, regional, vocational–technical, or rural -- superintendents have been and continue to be focused on addressing our students' ongoing food and housing insecurities, physical health and safety, social-emotional and mental health, and academic gaps and foundational learning losses. It is from our core values that I present to you today, the concerns and vision from our superintendents; after all, when we start with core values, our decisions are easy. When we start with the best interests of our students as our priority and understand that our job is to provide a high-quality education system to the next generation of leaders, then, all our decisions are easy.

1) We ask for the FY22 Foundation Budget be recalculated using October 1, 2019 or October 1, 2020 student enrollment, whichever is higher.

On January 27, 2021, Governor Baker released his proposed \$45.6 billion budget for FY22. The FY22 Budget, according to MASS School Finance Analyst, Roger Hatch, was built using October 1, 2020 student enrollment – which was an anomalous decrease of 30,579 students or 3.3% across the Commonwealth.

Why is this the student decrease important to our superintendents? First, we do believe the majority of the 30,000-student decrease will return to our public schools in September. Informal MASS data collection from the fall show approximately one third of the 30,000 students are currently in new home -school environments, one-third are kindergarten students held out of public school for a year, and one-third are students enrolled in private and parochial schools. If the FY22 budget is not adjusted then districts will not have the monies to address a larger student population who will return to our classrooms in the Fall. Without addressing the decrease in enrollment, districts will not have the resources to hire additional teachers to meet the larger class sizes anticipated. The increase in class size will be taking place simultaneous with PreK-12’s need to provide for even smaller classes in order to address post-pandemic social emotional and mental health needs as well as academic learning loss and academic acceleration; and, quite possibly continued social distancing requirements at a minimum of three feet.

Second, the “Hold Harmless” reference in the Foundation Budget is a misnomer as it does not provide for, nor hold harmless beyond the per pupil foundation amount. In other words, it does not hold harmless for low income or English Language Learner increment rates that are lost in the FY22 budget. This is a loss of funds felt in school districts across the state from Barnstable to Pittsfield. I list here from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education the enrollment comparison for the 25 urban school districts to illustrate a sample of the magnitude of potential monies lost.

DISTRICT	Enrollment Delta 2019-20 to 2020-21				
Boston	-2,368	Lawrence	-708	Springfield	-768
Brockton	-640	Leominster	-219	Taunton	-301
Cambridge	-413	Lowell	-411	Worcester	-1,058
Chelsea	-319	Lynn	-501	TOTAL	-11,165
Chicopee	-418	Malden	-361		
Everett	-174	New Bedford	-315		
Fall River	-231	Pittsfield	-249		
Fitchburg	-222	Quincy	-145		
Framingham	-355	Revere	-366		
Haverhill	-292	Salem	114		
Holyoke	-197	Somerville	-248		

2) We ask for the for the Student Opportunity Act to be funded at 1/6.

The Governor's FY22 budget proposed to fully implement the first year of the Student Opportunity Act (SOA), one year later than scheduled by law due to the pandemic. We contend that we cannot simply erase the year of funding that was to begin to address the systemic underfunding of our school districts since 1993. What was the right priority to fund last year should be made up this year—and rightfully called Year 2 of SOA.

SOA funds are important to our superintendents because in addition to failing to make up for the loss of Year 1 funding, SOA is funded this year using the same falsely deflated student enrollment for foundation budget calculation highlighted above. I highlight for you here that the identical inequity of funding previously explained because of lower student enrollment is now carried into the calculation of SOA- in essence, a false reduction of low-income and English Language Learner increment.

Clearly, both student enrollment and SOA funding are intertwined. Superintendents of smaller, non-urban school districts report running at deficit funding since last year. Using the lower enrollment in calculating the FY22 budget is effectively cancelling any financial benefit received from SOA.

To summarize another way, the Governor's FY22 budget is effectively built upon layered savings – structural inequities that will have : a) savings from a FY22 budget built on a false student enrollment- a blip if you will of the pandemic- that saves 30,000 per pupil foundation dollars and saves low-income and ELL increment rates; b) SOA built upon the same false enrollment and resulting in an additional savings of low-income and ELL increment; and c) SOA implemented a full year later than the law states—a year of savings. According to MASS School Finance Analyst, Roger Hatch, the adjusted budget cost of the higher enrollment and 1/6 SOA would be an additional \$152 million. A second point made by Mr. Hatch is the advantage of the higher enrollment and 1/6 SOA funding adjustment is that it smooths out the cost for the state over two years; otherwise there will likely be an enormous increase in FY23.

3) We ask to support our non-Title I school districts who are also struggling.

We ask for our legislators to use the federal funds: ESSER-1, ESSER-2, and ARAP (ESSER-3) to address the needs of districts that are non- Title I and yet, have been adversely impacted by Covid-19 with the same universal student needs of safe and secure homes and school buildings, food access, social-emotional and mental health needs, and academic learning loss. We ask our legislators to think strategically about long-term and sustainable transformational change for all districts. We urge legislators to advocate to use the federal 10% set aside awarded to DESE to go to our non- Title I school districts.

4) Fully fund Circuit Breaker, Regional, and Homeless Transportation

Circuit breaker was funded in the Governor's budget at \$367,654,803 while advocates believe full funding will be in the area of \$392,338,170. We ask that circuit breaker be fully funded, per SOA within the four-year timeline. Included in this item, we ask that there be full funding of Special Education transportation. My colleague from the Massachusetts Association of School Committees will address this further in her remarks. We also ask for full funding of regional, and homeless transportation. Regional transportation is funded -\$6,322,109 less than FY21 and Homeless transportation is funded -\$2,350,105 less than in FY21.

5) Charter Schools

Fully fund 100% charter reimbursement within the three-year timeline written into SOA.

6) Implement solutions to address accurate low-income student count per SOA

A working group met December 2019 to discuss methods to address the accurate count issue of low-income students. The working group left the meeting reaching consensus to a possible method to be implemented which would be a combination of using the direct match of students on the Health and Human Services database and a local district outreach to families not included in a direct match on the database. The local district outreach to families discussed was the possibility of families to complete an income eligibility form; a form to be developed by DESE. Covid – 19 shut down the state during the spring 2020 and so to any additional conversations regarding a methodology fix. As a result, Chapter 132, Section 24 was amended to allow for an additional year of Hold Harmless:

“that in fiscal year 2021, (insert: and fiscal year 2022) the number of low-income students in each district shall be the greater of: (i) the current direct certification count implemented by the department; or (ii) the share of the low-income students based on such measure used in section 3 of chapter 46 of the acts of 2015 applied to the foundation enrollment for the district.”

In November 2020, DESE released its *“Report on Matters Related to the Identification of Low-Income Students.”* In it DESE states it will need to provide detailed instructions and procedures by early 2021 to guide the process by which an updated methodology for determining low-income headcounts is established. We ask that the intended resolution have input from stakeholders and that the process is implemented as soon as possible to allow local districts to conduct the necessary outreach. Otherwise, we will need to return to the Legislature later in June 2021 to amend Chapter 132, Section 24, yet again, to reflect fiscal year 2023 language.

7) Per SOA, convene rural school funding study.

Per SOA, there shall be a special commission to study and make recommendations concerning the long-term health of rural school districts that are facing or may face declining student enrollment. This work has been delayed due to Covid-19.

8) Envision 24/7 – 365 days per year access to learning

We ask our legislators to support reliable and affordable internet accessibility for ALL in Commonwealth of MA—make internet access/ broadband a utility. Families need 24/7 – 365 days per year of stable connectivity; fast track the work of the Special Commission established pursuant to section 2A, Chapter 4 of General Laws to study equity and access to telecommunications services.

I end with the following. I began my career in education as a history teacher, so I instinctively look at life through the question lens of what will history record? I know there will be much written about the history of how we met the challenges of this global pandemic. Our successes and our failures will be assessed and described in great detail. But history is not done being written. For every great event or challenge in humanity – in the world --in our country --history also records how we recover; what we learned from the event, how we rebuilt and improved as a people – as a humanity; who we prioritized as a society. Let the history of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts record that you, our legislative leaders, had the courage to envision an *equitable* PreK-12 school system that although derailed one year in addressing systemic funding injustices in our neediest and hardest hit school districts – you corrected for it the following year. Let history record your leadership to envision the use of the federal funds for sustainable and deeply transformational support to all school districts, in particular our non-Title I school districts. Let history record that the Legislators of our state saw recovery, reopening, and acceleration work in our PreK-12 schools as a core value and therefore, putting PreK-12 students' needs first, was an easy decision for you.

We, at MASS look forward to working with the Joint Ways and Means Committee on the FY22 budget. I thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.