

**PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION FROM
THE MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL COMMITTEES**

MASC Legislative Priorities for 2022

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 basic lack of resources including food, housing, health care, 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.

Full funding for the Special Education Circuit Breaker. The Special Education Circuit Breaker is an effective form of a “stop-loss” funding system to cover the costs of the education plans of high needs and high cost students. We have determined, in coalition with organizations representing special education, that full funding for FY 2023 would be \$ 460.675 million and have urged the legislature to appropriate this amount. The reimbursement for out-of-district transportation costs from the Student Opportunity Act (SOA) will go into its second scheduled year. (25% per year over 4 years.) This is estimated at \$40 million for this second year of implementation.

Support for Public Policy that Promotes Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. (Influence 100) MASC has supported state funding for this initiative designed to create a career ladder for educators of color. In addition, we have urged the legislature to provide incentives to support these educators and to allow the district greater discretion in screening and interviewing candidates for the superintendency as noted in the segment on Open Meeting Law items.

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 K-12 Coalition 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 implications 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 unless they are used exclusively to guide educators in tailoring 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. After a period of transition, the charter school lobby has emerged again seeking continuous growth of student enrollment. 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, but full funding of the mitigation program falls short. 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 while current schools continue to grow in many cases.

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 rather than a state regulated or imposed strategy. The state has agreed to allow most districts to implement changes to encourage a more diverse and equitable distribution of students in vocational and technical programs. It is our hope that the combination of more flexible consideration of such criteria as student discipline, coupled with a reasonable consideration of student diversity, will prove to be the best methodology rather than relying on the heavy hand of state regulation.

Annual Tribal Consultations. MASC supports efforts to ensure that the state and local school districts located within or near a tribe or tribal organization, be required to hold formal consultation with those local tribes and organizations. This is consistent with the Every Student Succeeds Act as a way of obtaining input from key stakeholders in the ongoing education of Native youth. Meaningful consultation supports dialogue, establishes a continuous improvement platform; increases educational opportunities; and advances the well-being of Native students. The consultation process provides 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.

Establish Incentives for the Most Potentially Competent People to Become Educators, remain in the field, serve students who need them most, and grow professionally to build a cohort of excellence at all levels and in each discipline. Such incentives could include loan forgiveness, state subsidized wage supplements for teaching in communities with high risk/high needs students, and other strategies to be determined.

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 appropriately¹.

Update Open Meeting Law. In light of what we have learned from our experiences during 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 meetings of statewide boards and other bodies 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 or participate in public comment meeting segments.
- 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 the initial confidential initial screening and interviews. Currently only a minority of board members may participate in initial screening and interviews.

Expedited Release from Districts in Receivership. Following on to the instructions from our Delegate Assembly, MASC is working with local advocates and the legislature to develop a strategy to return authority to the school committee in districts currently in receivership as determined by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. This is based on our belief that local officials are best able to oversee the improvement in student outcomes in most circumstances.

¹ Many 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.