

New COVID spending bill extends open meeting law flexibility

Under a COVID-19 response spending bill signed this month by Governor Baker, several pandemic-era policies have been extended, including remote open meeting law flexibility, remote notarization authorization, and flexibility for municipalities to lower town meeting quorums—until July 15.

The bill will also direct another \$101 million toward COVID relief spending including emergency paid sick leave, rapid tests, high quality masks, and vaccine access that lawmakers included in the supplemental budget (H.4430).

The new law calls for \$76 million in direct state spending aimed at boosting access to masks, COVID-19 vaccines and rapid tests, particularly for schools, congregate care facilities and homeless shelters. It also allots another \$25 million in available federal funds to the state's COVID emergency paid sick leave program.

One section that Baker returned to lawmakers with an amendment called

for the secretary of health and human services to craft and implement a COVID-19 vaccination equity plan with a goal of eliminating disparities in vaccination rates within 120 days. Baker's amendment strikes the 120-day target, a change that he said would "reflect the continuing challenge faced by nearly every country in the world and every state in the country of achieving total vaccine equity."

"Our administration is committed to continuing our efforts to reduce disparities in vaccination rates in Massachusetts," Baker wrote. "But the challenge of eliminating disparities in vaccination rates altogether is a project that will require us all to work beyond the 120 day deadline envisioned by the language of this section."

Baker added that he plans to comply with other language in the bill requiring the administration to file a vaccination equity plan within 30 days and regular progress reports every 60 days.

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IN MEMORIAM

Michael J. Cavanaugh 1929-2022

It is with great sadness that MASC notes the passing on February 10 of our dear friend and colleague Michael Cavanaugh.

A member of the Regional School Feasibility Study Committee that in 1973 established Pathfinder Regional Vocational Technical School, Mike served proudly on its school committee for over 40 years and was

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MASC 2016 President Jake Oliveira (Ludlow) presents the Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill award to Mike Cavanaugh at the MASC/MASS Joint Conference.

Child care program costs and closings add to hardships for American families

Nearly 16,000 child care programs across 37 U.S. states have permanently closed since the pandemic began, representing a 9% decline in the total number of licensed child care providers, according to a new report published this month by **Child Care Aware of America**, a national membership association that works to improve child care and the early childhood profession and that conducted the survey which was the basis for the report.

This loss of thousands of providers reflects an ever-worsening crisis in the field of early care and education, accelerated by—but not originating with—the arrival of COVID-19—and the effects are being felt by everyone touched by the child care industry.

The decline in child care providers—8,900 of which provided center-based care and 7,000 of which were family

child care programs—represents many more thousands of jobs lost along the way. Some of those early childhood educators sought and found other positions in the field, the report notes, but others may have decided to look elsewhere, determining that the challenges and stressors in the field had become hard to justify.

Across the country, families are experiencing the realities of these closures as the programs they have relied on have gone out of business and households are scrambling to find care that meets their needs—and their budgets.

More than just constraints on availability, the cost of child care has also increased materially, outpacing the rate of inflation on consumer goods. In 2020, the national average price of child care was \$10,174 for the year, a 5% increase from 2019.

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MA NEWS

NEW MCAS ACCOUNTABILITY STANDARDS PROPOSED

At the February meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, DESE Commissioner Riley put forward a proposal that would return districts to being accountable based on student performance on MCAS, following two years of COVID related learning and testing disruptions.

The Commissioner's proposal, which he described as "accountability lite," was crafted to begin to set a new baseline for student achievement in order to address the decline in MCAS performance during the pandemic. The revised baseline would include benchmarks such as measuring improvement in results.

The proposed standards would meet the minimum of what is required under federal rules, which require the state to identify and provide comprehensive support to the lowest-performing five percent of schools that receive federal funds for low-income students and any school whose graduation rates are below 66.7%. State education leaders would also retain the power to declare schools and districts underperforming or chronically underperforming based on a rank ordering of MCAS scores, graduation rates, and other barometers.

All students are expected to take the MCAS this spring.

However, Riley plans to ask the federal government for flexibility on other reporting measures, most notably giving schools a one year pass on how much progress, or not, they make in meeting state improvement targets or in closing the achievement gap.

Rob Curtin, DESE's chief officer for data, assessment and accountability, said the change was necessary because only a portion of students took the MCAS last spring following a one-year testing hiatus and the results declined from the last full administration in 2019.

Curtin also reported that the Department intends to bring forward a recommendation around the competency determination for the class

MASC hosts program for student representatives to the school committee

Braving an unexpected early morning snow-storm, more than 35 student representatives to the school committee, met in Marlborough on Sunday, February 13 with MASC Board of Directors members and staff for a professional development program designed for these student representatives.



Organized by Cambridge school committee representative Anaïs Killian together with Worcester representative Stacia Zoghbi and Billerica representative Sean Forbush, the half-day program focused on the role of student representatives, and guidance on how to be effective student members. In breakout discussion groups, the students brainstormed about their school districts and considered ways to take initiatives around issues including mental health; curriculum and achievement; student communication; and COVID-19 protocols. Attendees were also able to work from a newly released resource handbook for student representatives that was prepared by Killian and MASC staff during the summer and fall of 2021.

of 2026—this year's 8th graders—and beyond. The current passing standards, which are similar to those from the former MCAS assessment, were extended through the class of 2025 because of pandemic learning disruptions.

EARLY ED COMMISSIONER STEPPING DOWN

The state's early education commissioner plans to resign next month after about two and a half years on the job. Samantha Aigner-Treworgy, who stepped into her role in August 2019 and has led the Department through the COVID-19 pandemic including the early closures of programs and implementation of new health protocols during their reopening, plans to leave March 8. The Board of Early Education and Care meets that day and is expected to name an acting commissioner.

Her departure comes as child care needs undergo close examination and as Massachusetts is also about to embark on a search for its next commissioner of higher education, with Carlos Santiago planning to leave that post at the end of June. A commission examining early education funding

faces a March deadline to produce its report. Sen. Jason Lewis, who chairs that panel with Rep. Alice Peisch, said that the Education Committee plans to use that report as a basis for a bill he hopes to bring to the Senate that will "strengthen our early education and child care, as well as out-of-school-time system in Massachusetts."

MASC NEWS

UPDATED FACE COVERINGS POLICY

MASC has recently released its updated EBCFA-Face Coverings policy, adapted to reflect the February 9 announcement by Governor Baker and Education Commissioner Riley that lifts the mask mandate in schools effective February 28, 2022.

Districts should note however that it is within the purview of the School Committee to opt to maintain the current mask requirement if the Committee so votes, and that some students and staff may continue to wear masks based on personal preference.

In addition:

- students and staff returning from 5-day quarantine following a positive COVID test must follow strict mask use, other than when eating, drinking, or outside, and conduct active monitoring for symptoms, through day 10 of exposure;
- masks will be required in all school health offices;
- by federal public health order, all students and staff are required to wear a mask on school buses.

The updated policy is available for download on the MASC website (www.masc.org).

NATIONAL NEWS

UPDATES TO SCHOOL MEAL NUTRITION STANDARDS ANNOUNCED

Earlier this month, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced new updates to school nutrition standards for the coming academic years as part of an effort to make school meals healthier while schools also work to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

These transitional nutrition standards, set to be implemented in the next two school years, are intended to give schools time to transition from the current pandemic operations, toward more nutritional meals, according to the USDA. These standards include updates to milk, whole grains and sodium requirements for school meals.

This comes as schools across the country have struggled to serve students meals amid a spike in food prices and supply chain disruptions.

Under the new standards, schools may offer flavored low-fat (1%) milk in addition to other nonfat and low-fat milk options; at least 80% of grains in school breakfasts and lunches per week must be whole-grain rich; and starting in the 2023-2024 school year, there will be a 10% decrease in the weekly sodium limit for school lunches. The weekly sodium limit for the 2022-2023 school year will remain at current levels.

The USDA also announced that more long-term nutrition standards are expected to be established for the 2024-2025 school year. The USDA last made major updates to its school nutrition standards in 2012.

NEWS YOU CAN USE

THREE WAYS TO STRENGTHEN THE SUBSTITUTE TEACHER WORKFORCE

ECS (Education Commission of the States) released a special report earlier this month that considered the impact of the substitute teacher workforce during the pandemic and suggested strategies for ensuring that substitute teachers provide education, not just supervision. The report was prepared by researchers at **Substantial Classrooms**, a non-profit whose focus is building capacity and quality of substitute teaching.

By the time they graduate from high school, the average US student will have spent a full year of their education with substitute teachers. During the pandemic, the shortage of substitute teachers became a crisis, prompting policymakers across the country to look for ways to alleviate the pressure on school systems.

The following insights from Substantial Classrooms offer guidance that school leaders can use to assess policies that support and grow the substitute teacher workforce, including:

Ensuring that substitute teachers can provide education, not just supervision.

The role of the substitute teacher is to keep students' education progressing when a regular teacher isn't available. Too often, especially in times of crisis, the language and decisions around substitute teaching become transactional, as if success is measured by simply getting someone – anyone – to supervise the students. To keep the focus on enabling education, policymakers can root policies in a broader vision—attracting, supporting and retaining people who are equipped to teach students.

Approaching the education workforce as an ecosystem.

The "Great Resignation" has hit the education workforce broadly and deeply. When leaders make changes to the design, compensation or requirements for one education job, it can cause ripple effects throughout the system. For example, when one district significantly increased pay for substitute teachers, staff from their afternoon school provider decided to apply. As their supply of subs increased, the after-school program suffered. In a crisis, it's sometimes necessary to plug holes, but taking the education ecosystem into account can lead to stronger policies and better outcomes for the sector overall.

Understanding that the substitute teacher shortage is an equity issue.

Nearly all schools are struggling to find enough substitute teachers to meet their needs, but the problem is more severe in schools with lower incomes and schools with higher proportions of students of color, even when those schools are within the same district. This compounds any challenges that these schools are already facing. As with all issues with equity implications, one-size-fits-all policies may not provide appropriate solutions.

Using these lenses for evaluation, policymakers can make changes – either temporarily or permanently – that support schools struggling with a substitute teacher shortage:

• Broaden eligibility

Most states can play a major role in determining who can substitute teach. By changing eligibility criteria, states can expand who districts can recruit. Already, states and districts are lowering education requirements, increasing caps on teaching days, waiving waiting periods for retired teachers and creating new permits. It's the fastest way to increase the number of people who can substitute teach, but it doesn't typically address the quality of teaching or disparate availability of subs.

CHILD CARE continued from page 1

The rising costs of child care can, in part, be attributed to the pandemic. It was neither free nor cheap for child care providers to put in place mitigation measures over the last two years. The cleaning supplies, protective gear and other safety efforts came at a price. And sometimes, programs would have to add staff or lower their enrollment to get within more acceptable teacher-to-child ratios during the worst outbreaks. Other times, lower enrollment was a natural byproduct of the pandemic, and providers, already operating on tight margins, were forced to offset the losses and additional costs somehow.

Though the average cost of child care has risen significantly, it was unaffordable for many families well before the pandemic. The report's findings track a trend from crippling high costs a couple of years ago to crippling higher costs today.

Child Care Aware examined the burden of child care costs regionally across the U.S. as well as state-by-state. In California, a married couple with an infant could expect to pay nearly 17 percent of their household income on center-based child care. In Rhode Island, it would cost nearly 12 percent of a married couple's household income to place their infant in family child care. Of all the states, Massachusetts tops the list in average infant-4-year old costs for both center-based and full-time family care expenses; only the District of Columbia had more expensive child care.

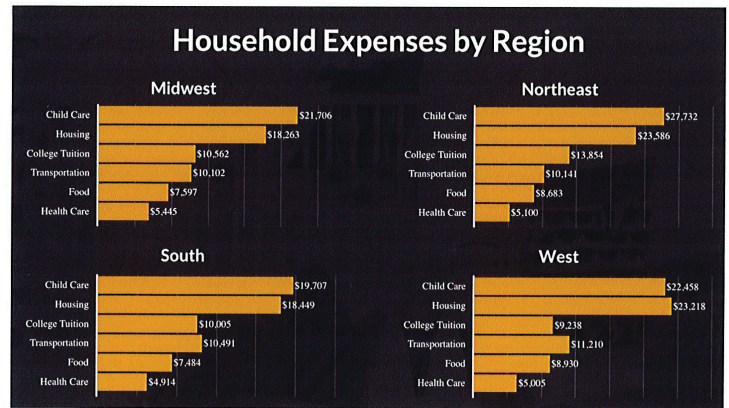
Out of four U.S. regions—the Midwest, Northeast, South and West—the report revealed that the average cost of center-based child care for an infant exceeds the average cost of housing in three of them. The only exception is in the West, where housing costs—average monthly rent or mortgage payments—slightly surpass child care costs. In all four regions, annual child care costs exceed the cost of one year of in-state tuition at a public four-year college. The impact on families' abilities to seek job opportunities, pursue higher education, or even purchase a home are stunted by the astronomical cost of child care.

The report also highlights a number of painful realities in the child care sector, but none of them are new. The pandemic has worsened the situation considerably and pushed these issues into the public discourse.

"Families cannot afford to pay any more, and child care providers cannot afford to charge any less," according to the report. "Providers are already struggling to stay afloat, and the workforce is underpaid. Providing a safe, quality environment costs money. The most viable way to lower the burden on parents and ensure that providers stay in business is to invest public funds in child care."

The early childhood provisions of the federal Build Back Better bill, which includes efforts to reduce the cost of child care on families and to improve the early childhood profession, could begin to address these challenges.

The bill, which has stalled in Congress, would limit child care costs to 7% of income for middle-class families (compared to the 10 to 20 % many families currently pay) and guarantee access to free, universal pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds in the U.S., among other forms of assistance for the field.



Source: Child Care Aware of America

State and local efforts do exist, and they can make a difference. New York is currently considering universal child care at the state level. In Washington, D.C., local officials have signed off on a plan to give one-time payments between \$10,000 and \$14,000 to child care workers as part of a larger effort to boost their pay.

Still, short of a federal solution, experts say, providers will likely continue to close their programs; families will continue to be saddled by the inordinate costs of paying for care; and child care workers will continue to need public assistance to get by, if they don't leave the field altogether.

This summary appeared in the February 11, 2022 issue of EdSurge. The full report can be accessed at: www.childcare.org.

Michael J. Cavanaugh 1929-2022

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honored to have been the longest active serving school board member. A native of Palmer, he also served a number of years on the Palmer High School Committee.

A long-time chair of MASC's vocational technical Division VIII, Michael was a familiar face at numerous Association events: a regular attendee at the annual conference, Pathfinder's representative to the annual delegate meeting, and an invaluable participant and contributor at Association professional development programs and on numerous MASC subcommittees. Elected to MASC's All-State School Committee and Life Membership in the Association, in 2016 he received MASC's highest honor—the Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill award for lifetime service to students and public education.

Mike will be remembered as the model of an outstanding school committee member: a cheerleader for students, a mentor to his fellow school committee colleagues, an ardent proponent for strong vocational technical schools and programs, a community leader and a champion for children, especially those in social, economic and physical/emotional health need.

His like will not pass this way again.

news you can use

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• Provide training and development

States can offer centralized professional development to alleviate pressure on school districts and raise standards for the sector. Right now, only 56% of substitute teachers receive any training before starting their role, and just 6% receive ongoing professional development. HR teams typically don't have capacity—or funds—to offer more. When states step in, it can increase the quality of

substitute teaching and make the role more attractive to candidates.

• Invest in Research and Innovation

States can provide grants or other financial incentives for districts to develop innovative staffing models. Substitute teaching has worked the same way, in most districts, for over 100 years. The legacy system is effective at keeping costs low, but it wasn't designed to advance student learning or create sustainable jobs. School districts may need guidance

and resources to better identify the impact of the current system, and to develop and test new models.

As policymakers seek to address this crisis, it's an opportunity to build a stronger and more modern system, rooted in research about what makes a job attractive and sustainable. For more information and resources, visit Substantial Classrooms at www.substantialclassrooms.org. *Resources at Education Commission of the States can be accessed at: ecs.org.*

Covid Spending Bill

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A second amendment Baker offered deals with public employees who come out of retirement to resume working for their former employer. Lawmakers proposed extending a pandemic-era waiver on earnings and hours caps for those workers through the rest of the year, and Baker instead suggested linking the extension to the public health emergency so it is “tied to a specific time period where

a heightened response may be necessary.”

Lawmakers can choose to override Baker's vetoes with a two-thirds vote in either chamber, where Democrats hold supermajorities.

The mid-year spending bill also officially sets the statewide primary election for Sept. 6, two weeks earlier than the default date under existing state law. Secretary of State William Galvin had warned that the original Sept. 20 date for this cycle would not provide him enough time to make ballots ready for military

and overseas voters.

Other pandemic-era extensions include allowing assisted living facilities to waive certain staffing and training requirements until July 15. The bill would also temporarily revive through the end of February liability protection measures for health care workers in situations where patient care may have been impacted by COVID-19.

Other sections would revive an early education and care review commission and give it a March 1 deadline.

MIAA 101: An MASC Learning Lunch Update

MASC's recent Friday Learning Lunch featured newly appointed MIAA executive director Robert Baldwin who provided a light-hearted but informative hour on “Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About How the MIAA Operates,” including an update on structural, governance and mission changes down the road.

Baldwin, who previously served 16 years as Fairhaven's superintendent and, during his teaching career, as a district coach, shared his goals for the future of MIAA including changing the perception of the organization as insular and siloed. “I want to reimagine who we are and what we can do to help. And sometimes, that just starts with listening and answering a lot of questions.”

Baldwin believes that a lot of behaviors that were simmering prior to COVID were exacerbated by the pandemic and need to be addressed. “We all need to have a better understanding and clarity of our roles and our responsibilities to the 374 schools, 230,00 athletes and 730 contributing members to the various MIAA committees that constitute our membership.”

Following a detailed outline of the MIAA governance board membership and structure, Baldwin addressed the increased number of student—and adult—dysregulated behaviors. The organization is looking to focus on an enhanced diversity and equity agenda across the board: “we are about all, not just the few,” he emphasized. “Being in athletics is a privilege, not a right, and we need to hold people accountable. We have to find a way to get civility and kindness back into play—and place. The ongoing exodus of school committee members, superintendents, and principals is often because of the way they are being treated, and the problem isn't always the kids! We are currently working on new priorities which we will be releasing. These will focus on respect and how we treat others, and how we can ensure safe, fair and equitable competition with the goal of increasing student membership.”

The learning lunch session was recorded and can be accessed on the “workshop recordings” link on the MASC website home page: www.masc.org.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Saturday, March 12
Charting the Course (virtual):
Part I
8:00am-noon

Saturday, March 19
Charting the Course (virtual):
Part II
8:00am-noon

Friday, April 8
MASC Learning Lunch:
Advocacy Strategies
Noon-1:00pm

Thursday, April 14
MASC DAY ON THE HILL
(virtual)
9:30am-12:30pm

Friday, May 6
MASC Learning Lunch:
ESSER update
Noon-1:00pm

Saturday, May 14
Charting the Course, Essex
Tech., Danvers
8:00am-4:00pm

Saturday, May 21
Charting the Course, Franklin
County Voc. Tech., Turners Falls
8:00am-4:00pm

Friday, June 3
MASC Learning Lunch:
Goal Setting
Noon-1:00pm

Saturday, June 11
Charting the Course, Upper
Cape Voc. Tech., Bourne
8:00am-4:00pm

Saturday, September 17
Charting the Course, Pittsfield
High School
8:00am-4:00pm

Saturday, September 24
Charting the Course, Canton
High School
8:00am-4:00pm

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