

A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools

H.3567 & S.2388

Sponsored by
Representative M. Blais &
Senator Jo Comerford





Foundation Budget Review Commission

Makes recommendations in 2015 about the revisions needed in the Chapter 70 formula to support students across the Commonwealth.



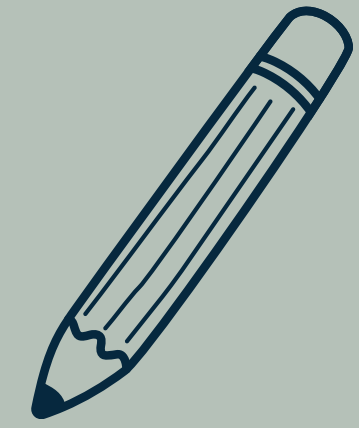
DESE Report on Fiscal Conditions in Rural School Districts

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) completes a report in 2018 that identifies key issues facing rural school districts.



Student Opportunity Act (SOA)

Passes in 2019, codifying recommendations of the Foundation Budget Review Commission, and provided more resources for educating students who have disabilities, are English learners, and/or are from low-income families



The Commission on the Long-term Fiscal Health of Rural School Districts

Publishes a final report in 2022, outlining the unique fiscal challenges of schools with low and declining enrollment and makes recommendations to support schools in rural areas that were largely unaffected by the passage of the SOA.

Funding Education Across the State

"The Student Opportunity Act has been pivotal in leveling the playing field for our schools in Taunton. As an urban district, the **resources we've been afforded are helping us to equitably uplift all students**, regardless of their background. However, the journey doesn't end here. **We must continue to advocate for sustainable funding solutions that adapt to our evolving needs and enable us to offer top-tier education to every student in our care.**"

John Cabral

Superintendent, Taunton Public Schools



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A Sustainable Future
for Rural Schools
builds upon the gains
made by the
Student Opportunity Act
and includes provisions
that will not only support
rural schools but all schools
across the Commonwealth.

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A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools

Provisions for Rural Schools

- **Rural School Aid**
- **Declining Enrollment Aid**
- **Accountability**
- **Technical Assistance to Maximize Health Insurance Benefits**

Provisions for All Schools

- **Transportation**
- **Shared Services and Regionalization**
- **Special Education**
- **MSBA Assistance**

Rural School Aid

Codify Rural School Aid and provide the funds necessary to support the long-term fiscal health of rural school districts

- The state legislature has appropriated Rural School Aid since FY20.
- In FY23, 65 school districts were eligible for Rural School Aid based on: student density (not more than 35 students per square mile) and per capita income (less than \$54,355 per capita)
- In FY24 the General Appropriations Act (GAA) included \$15 million for Rural School Aid.
- **The Commission found that costs far exceed this amount and that the program be funded at a minimum of \$60 million.**

Declining Enrollment Aid

Create a fund to assist districts with substantial & chronic enrollment decline

- Between 2008 and 2017, enrollment in rural districts declined by 4,289 students (14%) compared to a decline of 24,125 students (2.7%) in districts across the rest of the state.
- Declining enrollment leaves substantial legacy costs that are not provided for in the foundation budget formula.
- **The *Declining Enrollment Fund* would provide additional per-pupil aid to school districts with a decline in student enrollment of at least 35 percent in the past 20 years.**

Challenges for School Committees and Educators

"18 of the 20 lowest-paying school districts in the Commonwealth are ones that receive Rural Aid, and would directly benefit from this bill. My big wakeup call about the impacts of underfunding rural schools came when some dear colleagues and friends, with whom I had expected to work in Hatfield for another two to three decades, left the district because their **families could not afford for them to continue working in such a low-paying school.**"

Jessica Corwin

Teacher, Sunderland School Committee Chair, Parent

Technical Assistance

Identify Cost-Saving Strategies for Health Insurance Purchasing

- In a 2018 report, DESE found that “declining enrollment and increasing health insurance spending are driving up per pupil costs.”
- Since FY15, the average amount spent on health insurance for rural districts increased approximately 22% while non-rural districts increased only 19%.
- **An independent third party should be established to review a rural school district’s health insurance plans to determine if any alternative, cost saving plans or plan designs might be available to the district.**

Transportation

Fully Fund Extraordinary Transportation Costs Between Home and School

- Student bus rides in parts of Massachusetts exceed an hour and fifteen minutes.
- Rural districts spend approximately 50 percent more per pupil to transport students than other districts in the state.
- Requires that the state pay the full amount of extraordinary transportation costs for transporting students between home and school in rural school districts.

Technical Assistance

Debt Relief and School Building Reuse and/or Demolition Planning Assistance

- Directs the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) to relieve districts of the financial burden of closing and/or transitioning a school building when a school is closed as part of a regionalization effort.
- Requires that the MSBA, in collaboration with the Executive Office of Economic Development, assist municipalities in developing a demolition, reuse or retrofitting plan for school buildings that are closed as result of regionalization.
- Increases the amount of MSBA aid for the construction and renovation of school buildings to 90% of total project costs for regional school districts.

Transportation

Codify and Fully Fund Non-Resident Pupil Transportation

- Estimated claims for this line item were estimated at \$4,133,645 in FY22. FY23 projected claims were estimated at \$4,178,864. However, the program was only funded at 6% of the total claims (\$250,000).
- Formally establishes a Non-Resident Pupil Transportation Fund outside of Chapter 70 school aid to reimburse schools for the costs of transporting students who attend school outside their home district.

Reimburse 100% of Special Education Transportation Costs in Year Incurred

- Provides 100% reimbursement for school transportation costs for students receiving special education outside of the home district in the year the costs were incurred.

Shared Services and Regionalization

Creates An Office of Shared Services within DESE

Office will oversee the formation of regional school districts and superintendent unions, and assist school districts that are considering forming or are in the process of forming regional school districts and superintendent unions. The office will assist with research, planning and execution.

Provides Regionalization "Bonus" Aid at \$200 per pupil, for 3 years

Replaces a provision in current law that calls for declining "regional bonus aid" payments of \$50, then \$40, \$30, \$20 and \$10 per student during the first five years of a regional school district's establishment.

Covers the Costs of Temporary Employee Salaries Associated with Regionalization

Authorizes the payment of state aid to cover the salaries of temporary school district employees, including but not limited to an assistant superintendent, assistant business manager, assistant information technology director and assistant pupil services director, during the first two years of a regional school district's operation.

All Schools

Shared Services and Regionalization

Establishes 3 Specialized Grant Programs for Regionalization Planning and Implementation

Regional School District Foundational Aid Fund

Makes up shortfalls in assistance to regional school districts during their first five years if the district's constituent schools received more foundational aid before regionalization than the regional district. Amounts provided by the fund will not be considered chapter 70 aid for the calculation of the minimum required local contribution for the following year.

Superintendent Union Formation Grant Fund

Provides assistance to school districts that are considering forming, are in the process of forming or have formed within the past five years a superintendent union. A superintendent union allows multiple smaller districts to share a single superintendent. The grants will not exceed \$250,000 annually.

School District Regionalization Grant Fund

Assists school districts that are considering forming, are in the process of forming or have formed within the past five years a regional school district or are regionalizing services. Priority for the funds shall go to school districts with significant enrollment decline, school districts where existing school space is underutilized, and school districts where the regionalization will produce significant expansion of available academic resources. The maximum grant award will not exceed \$1,500,000 over a three-year period.

Special Education

Establishes A Special Education Financing Legislative Commission

to review the system for financing special education and make recommendations for a more equitable system that provides adequate funding to local school districts to meet the costs of providing high quality education to students with disabilities. The Commission will review the current financing system and make recommendations to achieve the following goals:

- Special education funds shall be sufficient to allow all schools to provide a high quality education in the least restrictive environment that meets the unique needs of each eligible student;
- Special education funds provided to school districts shall recognize the variation in the resources that are required to provide students with different disabilities a high quality education;
- Districts with more students receiving special education services shall equitably receive more state special education assistance funding than districts with fewer students receiving special education services;
- Districts with less local resources shall equitably receive more state special education assistance funding than districts with more local resources;
- Special education funds shall be relatively predictable and stable to enable school districts to budget effectively and implement multi-year plans;
- The special education funding system shall promote the efficient use of funds without incentivizing the under or misdiagnosis of students with disabilities;
- The special education funding system shall promote flexibility and innovation in providing high quality education;
- The special education funding system shall limit local financial responsibility for providing education to students with extraordinary needs; and
- The special education funding system shall provide sufficient funds to meet the costs of transportation of special education students.

Special Education

Reimburse 100% of Special Education Tuition Costs in Year Incurred

- Provides 100% reimbursement of special education costs incurred by school districts for transportation and tuition for students receiving education out of their home district in the year in which the costs occurred.
- Current law limits this reimbursement to 75% of costs above an amount set in law.

Special Education

Development of Alternative to the MA Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL)

Directs DESE to develop special education instructor assessments that can be used as an alternative to the MTEL.

Incentives to Attract and Retain Highly Specialized Professionals

Allows the payment of full-time equivalent salaries for highly specialized part-time staff to obtain a qualified professional.

Incentivize Paraprofessional and Special Educators' Education and Licensure

Gives priority to paraprofessionals seeking licensure as special educators in the state's grant program for paraprofessionals in public schools who are pursuing a bachelor's degree at a public higher education institution to become a certified teacher.

Fund Local Educator Preparation Programs for Special Education

Supports school districts that coordinate with educational collaboratives and other providers to build "grow your own" programs and provide paid time off, or child care stipends to paraprofessionals studying to become licensed special education teachers.

Student Experiences

"I believe in the potential that exists here in the Commonwealth and the future of it. As someone who has endured the long bus rides during my education, who has seen first hand, and has had countless conversations about the current inequities statewide when it comes to our rural schools, and as someone who has over time made a promise to my school community to leave it better than how I found it, a goal I and many students have for Massachusetts as well; I ask that no matter what zip code you are in and represent, how many students attend your local schools, and of current achievements surrounding education, that you support this legislation, and in doing that, **support an investment for a even better, brighter, and more equitable Massachusetts for students to learn in, and thrive in.**"

Joey Pisani

Rising Senior at Gateway Regional High School

Thank You for Supporting

A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools

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