

Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education

August 5, 2019

Commissioner Jeffrey C. Riley
Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
75 Pleasant Street
Malden, MA 02148

Dear Commissioner Riley:

The Massachusetts' state budget for fiscal year 2020, signed last week by Governor Baker, includes the largest increase in Chapter 70 and other state aid for education in over a decade. This, coupled with two previous years of substantive increases in Chapter 70 funding, amounts to a significant "down payment" on fulfilling the recommendations of the Foundation Budget Review Commission. Therefore, it is crucial that the money lead to greater equity and improvement in results.

Yet the education spending authorized by this budget is money with no strings attached. It allocates an additional \$268 million, the majority of which is intended to serve higher needs students, without any assurance that this money will be spent in the classrooms of those students and without plans or targets for how this money will close achievement and skills gaps.

The bills filed for consideration in this session, H. 70 by Governor Baker, H. 576 by Rep. Paul Tucker, et al., and S. 238 by Sen. Sonia Chang-Diaz, et al., as well as the FBRC report itself, all called for some level of planning and reporting with regard to new monies in support of low-income students and English Language Learners. Our hope is the legislature will pass a bill in the fall with these elements.

However, because the state budget contains significant new funding, putting us on a path toward correcting the deficiencies in the current foundation budget formula, there should be, especially as these funds become available for investment in schools and districts, some effort made toward ensuring they are used for effective practices and for the students most in need.

MBAE's recent analysis of in-district per-student spending has already identified many instances across the state where state funds sent to districts and intended to benefit economically disadvantaged students do not always follow them to the school they attend or get spent for their benefit. In fact, there are a fair number of districts spending more per-student in their least economically-challenged schools than in those with the highest percentage of low-income students. Increasing the amount of state funding without guardrails to ensure in-district equity and an investment in best practices will fail those students the funding is intended to benefit and negate the ultimate goal of funding reform.

School districts will be making important decisions about how to use new funding that will create obligations and expectations for how money will be used once an education reform bill is passed. If we do not lay a foundation for equitable, effective resource use this year, we may blunt the intended impact of education funding reform for years to come.

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Therefore, MBAE and its founding members, Associated Industries of Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Business Roundtable and the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, urge you to make use of existing powers granted to you under Chapter 69 Sections 1B and 1I to assure that the additional funding for schools in the FY2020 budget makes it to the students for which it is intended and is spent on evidence-based practices that close achievement gaps. More specifically, we urge you to:

- Require districts create, and make public, a plan, with community input, that ensures money allocated for low-income and ELL students is spent to serve those students and on practices that will close achievement gaps;
- Set clear and aggressive statewide and district targets for closing achievement gaps; and
- Require an end-of-year reporting on the impact of new funding in closing those gaps.

We believe that the use of current statutory tools that exist, at least on an interim basis until the legislature has the opportunity to determine what level of planning, reporting, and prescription should accompany a longer-term funding solution, is essential and a proper role for the Department to facilitate. Funding without additional reform and measurement of outcomes will not help the students we need to do a better job of serving.

We will continue to press for additional reform and initiatives in final legislation focused on outcomes, data and transparency, college and career readiness, and innovation. We hope that this recommended action will help prevent immediate decisions from preventing future progress.

We stand ready to work with you and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to support your efforts to ensure that historic investments in our K-12 education system have the largest possible impact on closing the achievement and skills gaps.

Sincerely,



Edward M. Lambert, Jr.
Executive Director
Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education



J.D. Chesloff
Executive Director
Massachusetts Business Roundtable



Eileen McAnneny
President
Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation



Katherine Holahan
Vice President, Government Affairs
Associated Industries of Massachusetts

Cc: Secretary Jim Peysler, Speaker Robert DeLeo, Senate President Karen Spilka, Representative Alice Peisch, Senator Jason Lewis, Katherine Craven, Leldamy Correa