

THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES OUR STUDENTS DESERVE

Envisioning What Increased Funding Could Mean for Public Education





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INTRODUCTION

Massachusetts has outstanding public schools and colleges. Across the state, students engage in challenging coursework, enjoy a wide variety of extracurricular opportunities and build relationships with committed educators in school communities that support their full development. Our public colleges educate the vast majority of our working-class students, produce remarkable research and support the communities around them in myriad ways. Massachusetts *also* has schools and colleges that struggle. Far too many schools have classrooms without basic resources, offer a narrowed curriculum and provide little opportunity for students to know themselves and their world through a range of experiences. Many of our campuses have aging facilities and insufficient numbers of staff and faculty, and they send their students into crippling debt on their way to a degree. If we want the best for every student, we need to understand what an outstanding education looks like. We — all of us — need to think about and debate what kinds of schools and colleges our communities deserve.

This document presents a vision of what public education can and should be in Massachusetts. We propose a series of realistic changes that will help move us toward an excellent public education for every child in our state, from preschool through public higher education. We envision school systems and college campuses that value the joy of discovery, develop individual capacities and educate citizens who will grow up to build a greater Commonwealth.



WHAT EDUCATION CAN AND SHOULD BE

The schools our students deserve enable access to lifelong learning through teaching the whole child and serving as community institutions.

Enabling Access to Lifelong Learning

Engage our youngest learners: We affirm the value of an imaginative, intellectually engaged society in which all contribute to solving the pressing problems of the day. To that end, we take it as a given that students need access to free full-day public education from first grade through college. But some of the most important education takes place before first grade, so we need to provide free high-quality education for those years as well. Children currently enter kindergarten with dramatically different abilities. Free all-day preschool will lessen these disparities.

Extend through college: A college degree is virtually required to earn a living wage, and it provides intellectual and social enrichment that helps young people become active citizens. However, while more people graduate from college today than graduated from high school in 1940, we charge students tens of thousands of dollars a year for an education that we recognize they need to have. This closes off access to education for some and loads up others with debt. Quality public higher education should be available to all.

Teaching the Whole Child

Develop skills, abilities and capacities: Students should learn to read well and to enjoy reading; solve math problems and take pleasure in doing so; gather and evaluate evidence, distinguishing fact from fiction, assessing and taking account of uncertainty; reason from available evidence and experience; use their imaginations and experience themselves as creators of art, music and ideas, and more generally, develop the capacities needed to hold a job and participate as a fully informed citizen, helping to create a more just world.

For some children, it is art or music or physical activity that excites them and brings them pleasure, helping to draw them into the rest of the school day. Whether it is science or art, hands-on project-based learning is often the most memorable, meaningful and engaging. School is not just about workforce development; it is about nurturing the development of human beings. Therefore, time and resources must be given to the development of social relationships

and emotional supports and to making schools not only communities in their own right, but institutions that are fully integrated into a larger effort to achieve justice for all.

Provide authentic, culturally relevant learning and assessment: Students deserve schools that honor them as individuals and teach a curriculum that reflects and affirms the diversity of cultural experiences and understandings within the student body as a whole. Students need to emerge from public education confident that the world has a place for them — and that if there is no place, they have the ability to create their own. In these schools, students see themselves in what they are learning.

End destructive high-stakes testing: Students also deserve schools that see their effort and learning as more than a single test score. The same systems of oppression that created standardized curricula also created the test that mandates what matters and what does not. Assessment needs to be embedded in the work of the classroom, flexible, and educator-designed. The educators in these schools use their relationships with students and deep knowledge of the curriculum.

Respect educators and give them autonomy: Hire, retain and promote highly qualified teachers, aides, custodians, bus drivers, administrative personnel and others, then respect their competence and let them do their jobs. Teachers, for example, need the autonomy to decide what is best for *this* class at *this* time, what *these* students need to grow and flourish, and then shape the curriculum accordingly.

Maintain optimal staffing levels that reflect the student body: Since education is a deeply human endeavor and young people learn best in stable relationships with caring adults, schools should be fully staffed with highly qualified personnel in all areas of the educational environment. The ideal environment in which learners thrive includes caring adults who reflect all of the students' racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Serving as Community Institutions

The schools our students deserve . . .

Serve the greater community: Our public schools ought to function as hubs of multigenerational educational, cultural and civic activity, serving as centers for social engagement and services that strengthen the entire community. A public building should be beautiful, safe and inviting, and used by community members around the clock.

Promote justice and civic engagement: Students deserve schools that have a framework of clear expectations and guidelines to support students as they learn to interact with others in community spaces. In an ideal framework, students are taught social skills and encouraged to strengthen bonds by demonstrating empathy and responsibility for their actions. Programs that involve faculty, students and parents in creating schoolwide expectations and guidelines are more sustainable.

Address and confront racial and economic injustice: This applies not just to the classroom, but to the community. Overwhelming evidence shows that greater equality and economic security are good for children (and parents) and dramatically improve learning. Parents who are willing and able to work need to be guaranteed living-wage jobs with benefits. People of color need to know that they will be welcome wherever they choose to live and that they will not be discriminated against by employers or the police. Students in Weston and Newton deserve first-rate schools; students in Springfield and New Bedford deserve no less.

Uphold democracy: Public schools are essential to democracy. They must, therefore, be democratic institutions themselves. Educators, students, parents and the community need to be the decision-makers, to work together through democratic practices to ensure their vision for public education.



A fully funded foundation budget for both public schools and colleges will allow us to imagine what is possible. How might we use this funding to give our students the schools they deserve, from prekindergarten through college? What demands might we make of the state regarding these funds? Below is a list of possibilities.

PreK-12

Class sizes: Almost without exception, teachers report and studies confirm that smaller classes produce better learning. Smaller classes make it possible to give more individual attention. For students in grades K-8, class sizes of 13 to 18 are recommended, with variations depending on student age, population and subject area.

Full-day kindergarten: Most, but not all, Massachusetts school districts already have full-day kindergarten. To correct this inequity, all districts should institute full-day kindergarten.

Clinical support personnel: The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) recommends a ratio of one social worker with a master's degree to every 250 students. The National Association of School Nurses used to recommend a minimum staffing ratio of one nurse to every 750 students *when the student population is healthy* and a ratio of one nurse to 225 (or fewer) students when the student population suffers from significant health problems. The American School Counselor Association recommends a maximum counselor-to-student ratio of one to 250 in a healthy population.

Wraparound services: Wraparound services are a well-researched and successful method to address barriers to student success, such as poverty, housing insecurity, abuse and other family stressors. Coordinated wraparound services include mental health, dental care, primary care, family engagement, adult education, preschool learning, academic enrichment, after-school learning support, summer programming, mentoring, postsecondary education and career option awareness. In order to ensure the holistic well-being of all students, public schools should act as community centers for providing such services.

Special education: Public schools have an obligation to meet the needs of every student. Students with special learning needs require respected, well-compensated, certified educators, appropriate levels of intervention, and active participation in the broader school community. Students deserve special education support staff who have expertise in autism, physical disabilities, emotional and behavioral difficulties, and learning/cognitive challenges in each school. In

order to serve them properly, educators need the time and resources to give them the appropriate supports to succeed. Special educators should have no more than 16 students in their caseloads, eight if they are serving students with more severe special needs. Paraprofessionals should not have more than eight students in their caseloads.

Full-day preschool: Studies show that social and educational outcomes improve for children who have had the benefit of preschool. Free access to high-quality full-day preschool, provided by fully certified teachers, should be provided to all children starting at age 3.

Libraries: Every school should have a fully resourced library with a certified librarian and adequate support staff. The evidence is clear that school libraries staffed with certified librarians have a direct and measurable impact on students' learning, reading comprehension and academic achievement and that these positive results are magnified for students in low-income communities of color.

Art, music, world language and physical education: To support whole-child education goals, all students should have frequent and regular access to music, the fine arts, world languages and health/physical education courses and programs taught by licensed teachers.

Higher Education

Debt-free public higher education: Ideally, all public higher education would be free in the same way that k-12 education is free, and people would be encouraged to engage in lifelong learning. To truly make public higher education accessible to those with the lowest incomes, we must consider the full living expenses of our students when calculating financial need. As an interim measure, we can and should provide one year of free public higher education as a way to lessen debt and help students graduate on time.

Small classes: Class size matters in higher education as well as in preK-12. Each semester, every student should have at least one class taught by a faculty member with no more than 20 students. The best way to do this is to hire full-time, tenure-system faculty (in part drawn from the adjunct faculty ranks).

Adjunct faculty: Our respect for learning and education is reflected in how we treat our educators at all levels. In an effort to cut costs, too many higher education campuses are replacing full-time tenure-track faculty positions with lower-paid part-time adjuncts who receive no benefits and no job security. Adjunct faculty members should have pay parity (that is, be paid the same per-course rate as full-time faculty) and health insurance and pension benefits, and they should have a chance to get full-time positions that open up.

Support for at-risk college students: In theory, it takes two years to get an associate's degree and four years to get a bachelor's degree, but for many students it takes far longer. Some students need to take remedial courses; others are working long hours at outside jobs while in school, or they suffer financial (or family) setbacks that cause them to drop out. Some don't get the guidance they need to take the right courses in the right order. As a result, they are in school for extra years and may drop out with high levels of debt and no degree with which to increase their earning potential. Intensive counseling, with a range of support services (including emergency financial aid) and individualized attention, substantially raises graduation rates.



CONCLUSION

To realize this vision, the deficiencies in funding for public education in Massachusetts must be addressed. The foundation budget formula must be fixed and fully funded. These proposals are not free, but their cost must not prevent them from being pursued. The Massachusetts Constitution provides that public education in the Commonwealth is to be “cherished.” Citing that mandate, a 1993 school funding decision in *McDuffy v. Secretary of the Executive Office of Education* makes it clear that the Commonwealth has a “duty to provide an education for all its children, rich and poor, in every city and town of the Commonwealth ...” Further, the *McDuffy* decision found that “children in the less affluent communities (or in the less affluent parts of them) are not receiving their constitutional entitlement of education as intended and mandated by the framers of the Constitution.”

As a result of that decision, the Legislature established the foundation budget, which determines the minimum amount of money each school district must spend on educating students. The budget further determines how much should come from local resources and how much from the state. While that formula led to an important infusion of funds in the state’s public schools, the formula is now out of date and the funding has fallen behind the need. Specifically, the Legislature’s nonpartisan Foundation Budget Review Commission determined in 2015 that education funding is more than \$1 billion below what is needed: Students in Massachusetts are, once again, not receiving the education to which they are entitled.

The Public Schools and Colleges Our Students Deserve provides a set of proposals describing what our public education system needs in order to move closer to meeting the Commonwealth’s obligation to its young people.



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