



March 6, 2025

Honorable Aaron Michlewitz
House Committee on Ways & Means
State House, Room 243

Honorable Michael Rodrigues
Senate Committee on Ways & Means
State House, Room 212

Dear Chairmen:

We look forward to working with you to pursue our shared goals of making sure that every student in the Commonwealth has access to high-quality public education, in PreK through higher education, that meets their needs and prepares them to thrive. Your wise decision to increase Fair Share spending from \$1.3 billion in FY25 to \$1.95 billion in FY26 provides an excellent opportunity to address the funding crisis harming the capacity of so many schools to meet the needs of their students and to continue our historic progress toward making debt-free, high-quality public higher education possible for all students in the Commonwealth who want to choose that path.

The Student Opportunity Act has expanded educational opportunities for many students, but that progress has been severely limited by way the formula caps aid in times of high inflation and by policy choices that did not restore those losses in subsequent years. In addition, there are many districts that received very little or no new aid as a result of SOA and are facing a severe fiscal crisis, which is leading them to lay off educators or be unable to hire the educators they need to serve their students. To address these needs in different types of districts with various fiscal challenges will require a combination of strategies.

We encourage you to craft a budget, including through the use of Fair Share funds, that uses a series of strategies to address the needs of students in districts across the state:

- **Mental health.** Perhaps no issue is more urgent in our public schools than the mental health and well-being of our students. Key to addressing this crisis is providing all school districts with resources they need to hire enough paraprofessionals, guidance counselors and other educators needed to support all students. This could be done in line with pending legislation to create the Whole Child Grant Program, which would direct \$123 million in urgently needed resources to support students and educators. However, an initial appropriation in the budget could be at a lower level and represent a key first step toward implementing the full program over time. Combined with the other school funding initiatives described later in this letter, that funding could significantly strengthen the capacity of schools to address the severe challenges faced by many of them.
- **Strengthening the Special Education Circuit Breaker (7061-0012).** Special education costs have been increasing significantly, stretching local school district budgets and

making clear that the current reimbursement program is inadequate. We urge that the FY26 budget enhances the circuit breaker program by increasing its reimbursement rate from 75% to 90% of eligible special education costs, while lowering the cost threshold for expenses to become eligible for reimbursement.

- **Fixing the Chapter 70 inflation glitch (7061-0008).** When inflation was 7% and 8% in recent years, the Chapter 70 formula capped adjustments at 4.5%. As a result, districts did not receive funds to cover a significant portion of the inflation that affected their expenses. The way the Chapter 70 formula originally worked, that would not be a long-term problem because the lost inflation would automatically be added back to the foundation budget in the following year. But a technical change made later inadvertently altered that. Now, when the cap reduces aid below the level needed to keep pace with inflation, that reduction is locked in forever and reduces future aid. We ask that you support phasing in a fix that will allow districts ultimately to receive the real dollar amounts promised in the Student Opportunity Act.
- **Reimbursing transportation expenses in all public school districts (7035-0006).** High inflation continues to drive up the cost of providing transportation to students, both in regional and non-regional school districts. To address this, we ask that the FY26 budget build on the governor's proposal to fund 95% of the regional school transportation reimbursement and begin to reimburse non-regional districts for transportation costs, which the Commonwealth has not done in over two decades.
- **Providing urgently needed resources for rural schools (7061-9813).** Rural schools often have costs that are not reflected in the foundation budget for school funding, which are mostly related to not having the same economies of scale as other districts. Rural districts also often have declining enrollments, which means they rarely get increases in Chapter 70 (other than minimum aid) since it is an enrollment-based formula. We therefore urge an appropriation of \$60 million in rural school aid to help offset some of these unique fiscal challenges for rural schools.
- **Strengthening the charter school reimbursement formula (7061-9010).** When a student leaves a public school to attend a charter school, the public school district is required to pay the charter school a corresponding tuition amount, a system that siphons hundreds of millions of dollars from Massachusetts public school districts and significantly stresses the budgets of impacted public school districts. One way to begin to address this issue is to strengthen the Charter School Tuition Reimbursement Program by adding a fourth year to the reimbursement schedule and raising the reimbursement rate in the second year to 80%.
- **Providing at least \$110 per student in Chapter 70 minimum aid (7061-0008).** Many minimum aid school districts, which represent a significant portion of all Massachusetts school districts, face similar fiscal challenges to non-minimum aid districts, but only receive a modest per-pupil increase in Chapter 70 funding. Many of the proposals mentioned above will provide immediate and long-term relief to these districts but increasing Chapter 70 minimum aid to at least \$110 per pupil is a critical piece in ensuring that all students and educators in Massachusetts have the resources they need.

While we address the current crisis, we look forward to working together on proactive initiatives to make major advances in how we can support all students:

- **Launching community schools.** Community schools bring together strengths from across the community so that schools can address the physical and mental health needs of students, provide nutritious food, make available enrichment opportunities, and empower students, parents and educators to work together to build a community that creates the conditions where all students can learn and thrive. We recommend funding planning grants for school districts and creating capacity within DESE to provide technical assistance.
- **Attracting a diverse and excellent educator workforce (7066-9805).** We ask for your support for two initiatives to reduce financial barriers: continuing to fund the Tomorrow's Teachers Scholarship Program and Educator Loan Forgiveness Program so that aspiring educators who commit to teaching in our public schools don't need to go deeply into debt to pay tuition and living expenses, and funding teacher residency programs that pay for student teaching. These programs can help both aspiring educators and those who are already educators, such as paraprofessionals, who want to become licensed teachers. In addition to continuing to invest in these key programs, we also suggest a technical change to both that would expand their impact and align their implementation with the original intent. Specifically, we ask for clarification that students enrolled in graduate degree programs, or who have outstanding student debt related to a graduate degree program, be allowed to access the Tomorrow's Teachers Scholarship Program and Educator Loan Forgiveness Program, respectively. As mentioned, graduate degree programs were meant to be covered by both programs, but a misinterpretation of the legislative language during implementation has resulted in them being ineligible. We would be happy to discuss this issue further and to provide legislative language that would clear up the misinterpretation.
- **Supporting educators providing high-quality literacy instruction (1596-2437).** We were pleased to work with you last year to advance the Literacy Launch initiative. We hope that progress continues with additional funding for curriculum and professional development, and with funding to help districts hire literacy specialists. However, we are deeply concerned about a provision in the governor's Fair Share supplemental budget proposal that relates to high-dosage literacy tutoring. This risks denying students access to highly trained public school educators for early literacy tutoring programs by opening the door to restricting the use of these funds to privately operated and for-profit virtual learning entities. It is critical to student success and the long-term sustainability of targeted tutoring in literacy that local educators – who undergo rigorous training, have access to resources which are aligned district programs and who understand the unique needs of their students – are provided with the resources and staffing levels needed to provide high-quality literacy instruction and tutoring in schools. We therefore strongly urge that these additional dollars be used to invest in public school staffing, including hiring additional literacy specialists, Education Support Professionals and retired teachers with expertise in early literacy instruction.

- **Building high-quality early education in public schools.** This can be accomplished by expanding the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative and adjusting Chapter 70 so that it includes full-day preschool in the foundation budget when districts provide full day preschool.

In higher education we celebrate the progress we have made together over the past two years, including substantial increases in MASSGrant Plus, free community college, the implementation of Tomorrow's Teachers and the expansion of SUCCESS. Making it possible for all students to have the opportunity to receive high-quality public higher education without going into debt is critical to expanding economic and racial justice, as well as building a more vibrant economy. To protect those victories and expand opportunity to more students, we ask that you include the following in your budget proposal:

- **Adjust salaries of faculty and staff** at our institutions of public higher education to ensure that students are able to receive the support they need and that all higher education workers are compensated fairly. This should include aligning faculty and staff salaries with those of educators in peer and neighboring states, after accounting for the cost of living.
- **Advancing adjunct justice.** While increasing the pay of adjunct faculty would be part of the wage adjustments described above, we ask that you also support these low-wage workers by beginning to fund retirement savings. Currently adjunct faculty are neither in the state pension system, nor Social Security. The only retirement savings system they have is that the state deducts 7.5% of their salary to put into a retirement savings account. We ask that the state pay this amount rather than deducting it from their paychecks.
- **Making debt-free, public higher education possible for Massachusetts students at four-year universities, as well as community colleges.** This could be done by building on the MassGrant Plus expansions to provide funding for tuition and fees and a reasonable living stipend for all low- and middle-income students, while expecting students to contribute earnings from a reasonable number of hours of work, a fair family contribution, and the use of existing aid.
- **Funding for community colleges** to address chronic underfunding and allow colleges to meet the needs of the thousands of additional students who are arriving. This would include funding to hire additional faculty and staff and increasing salaries to attract and retain educators by aligning their salaries with those of educators in peer and neighboring states, after accounting for local cost of living.
- **Doubling the funding for the SUCCESS program** (1596-2439 and 7100-4002) to provide support services including advising and mentors that help students have a great learning experience and find success in and after college.
- **Support \$125 million in higher education capital funding** (1596-2417) to address mounting deferred maintenance needs and to ensure safe, modern, decarbonized campuses that meet the demands of current and future students. We support the proposed dedication of \$125 million each year from Fair Share funds to raise approximately \$2.5 billion in new capital resources for our public higher education institutions over the next

10 years. In addition, we ask that additional funds be allotted to reduce existing campus debt and student fees, that new projects be fully paid for with state resources rather than student fees and that these resources not be used to advance private public partnerships that could have negative, long-term fiscal implications.

- Adequate funding for the State University Incentive Grants (7066-1400) and the Community Colleges Grants (7100-4000). While these items were not funded in the governor's budget proposal, they provide essential funding for our community colleges and state universities.

We also ask you to support three fundamental issues of economic justice for educators:

- **Allowing municipal educators to participate in Paid Family and Medical Leave.** Public school educators, a workforce that is primarily women, are among the only workers in the Commonwealth not included in our state PFML law. We ask that you support incorporating educators into the law and, in order to avoid an unfunded mandate, have the state pay the employer share. The MTA is proud to have helped win this benefit for virtually all workers in the state, and we believe that it is important that educators be included. This is an essential benefit that should be available to all workers.
- **Ensuring a living wage for all educators.** All educators deserve a true living wage that allows them to support themselves and their families and fair pay is critical to recruit and retain a high-quality and diverse workforce. Yet many educators, particularly our Education Support Professionals, earn far less than a living wage and their wages can vary dramatically from district to district. We propose increasing the statewide minimum salary for teachers, which has not been updated in decades, and creating a statewide minimum wage for ESPs. Under our proposal, the state would commit to providing reimbursements to school districts for the increases over several years.
- **Adjusting the pension COLA (Section 119) base** so that it is no longer paid on only the first \$13,000 of pension earnings. We thank you for recognizing the inadequacy of the current COLA system through the creation of a special commission to evaluate it. As we await that report, it is nevertheless clear that an increase in the COLA base is long overdue after more than a decade at its current level. We urge action in the FY26 budget to immediately increase the COLA base to better ensure that retired public employees can live with dignity and economic security.

We also want to identify one new policy proposed in the governor's budget that we strongly oppose: increasing the share of health care premiums paid by tens of thousands of active and retired state employees.

Finally, the Fair Share surplus funds provide an important opportunity to make investments that meet the needs of students and protect against attacks on public education. We recommend that

the following uses, along with others, be included in the supplemental budget allocating that funding:

- **\$123 million in funding to fully implement a grant program to address the mental health and fiscal crisis in public schools.** Grant funding would be provided to school districts to support hiring educators to help meet the needs of students, as described in the mental health item described earlier in this letter. That program could be funded in FY26 from the GAA or the Fair Share surplus supplemental budget.
- **\$25 million for high-dosage tutoring.** To be most effective, this funding should be provided as grants to school districts that commit to providing high-dosage tutoring using best practices and highly trained ESPs and other educators in the district who provide the tutoring. This will ensure that the tutoring is aligned with local implementation of Literacy Launch and other literacy work already happening in a district.
- **\$20 million for reimagining high school.** The most promising evidence-based policy for the reimagining of high school is the development of community schools (described previously) and we urge that the item be amended to reflect this critical goal.
- **\$50 million to support the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative.** We ask that the EEC capacity building funding be provided in other parts of the state budget since it is a violation of the state Constitution to spend Fair Share funds dedicated to public education on services that are not in public education. Investing in the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative can be a valuable step toward a more universal system.
- **\$150 million in funds to improve the Special Education Circuit Breaker** by paying for the state costs of reducing the threshold at which costs become eligible for reimbursement and increasing the share of the costs reimbursed by the state reimburses.
- **\$200 million for a reserve fund to protect the ability of our public higher education system to maintain staffing and meet the needs of students** if there are significant reductions in federal funding, and to fund wage adjustments that bring staff and faculty wages in line with their peers in other states, accounting for the cost of living.
- **Fund a portion of the pension liability associated with providing teachers hired before July 1, 2001, the opportunity to join the RetirementPlus program**, as done in [HD.3452/SD.2208](#).


Please let us know if you have questions or would like more information on any of these issues.

Thank you for your consideration of these important requests.

Sincerely,



Max Page, President



Deb McCarthy, Vice President

Massachusetts Teachers Association

Massachusetts Teachers Association