

November 9, 2020

Massachusetts State Legislature
24 Beacon St
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Members of the Massachusetts State Legislature,

As organizations committed to educational equity and to racial and economic justice, we write today with renewed hope for our country and our state. We know, however, that an election is just the first step in securing a more just future; to quote Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris, “Now, the real work begins.” In Massachusetts, that work must include addressing long-lasting inequities in our education system. That is why we write to urge you to do everything in your power to ensure that the 2021 state budget meets the needs of students that have long been underserved in the Commonwealth – even if that requires increasing revenues or shifting resources away from wealthier communities that can raise additional funds locally. Our more detailed recommendations for elementary/secondary, early, and higher education, respectively, are below.

Elementary/Secondary Education

Last year, the Massachusetts State Legislature and the Baker Administration acknowledged that the state had, for years, failed to meet its obligations to students of color, economically disadvantaged students, English learners, and students with disabilities — and through the Student Opportunity Act (SOA), pledged over \$1.5 billion to correct course. Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated pre-existing inequities. Communities like Chelsea, Brockton, Lawrence, Springfield and Worcester, which stood to gain the most under the SOA, were hit hardest by COVID-19, bringing staggering illness rates, loss of life, economic insecurity and deep trauma for children and families. Long-existing inequities in access to technology went from being a challenging barrier to a near-insurmountable roadblock to student learning. Long-delayed building renovations, coupled with rising COVID rates have led to the majority of Black and Brown students starting the 2021 school year online – while the majority of White students had the option of some in-person learning.

Today, delivering on SOA’s promise to historically underserved students is more important than ever. We commend the Legislature and the Baker Administration on the commitment to maintaining 2020 Ch. 70 funding levels (including \$108 million new dollars for inflation). We are concerned, however, that the Governor’s recently revised FY 2021 budget proposal forces our highest need communities to bear the brunt of funding shortages by deferring commitments made to them before the pandemic.

If it is not possible to identify additional resources to fully fund SOA implementation, we urge the legislature and the Baker administration to allocate available Chapter 70 funds in ways that provide promised increases to our state’s highest need districts – even if that means wealthier communities must receive less. We ask the Legislature to:

- Do everything possible to find resources to fulfill SOA’s promise to all communities, including considering raising revenues;
- If full funding for SOA cannot be found this year, however:
 - Direct the \$108 million in new dollars to districts serving the most economically disadvantaged students and English learners;

- Modify the Ch. 70 formula to direct more existing resources to districts with the highest needs.

Of course, money alone will not fix the deep and growing disparities in opportunity to learn. In their Student Opportunity Act plans, Education Commissioner Jeff Riley should require school districts receiving new resources to specify how they will ensure the safety, well-being, and academic success of students of color, English learners, those who are economically disadvantaged and those who have disabilities. Plans should describe concrete steps districts will take to address disparities in opportunity to learn and mitigate impacts of unfinished learning both now and following the pandemic. Such steps could include offering safe in-person instruction to students with the highest needs, providing one-on-one tutoring to students who are struggling academically, offering all educators high-quality professional development on remote instructional strategies, and partnering with community-based organizations to establish remote learning centers for families struggling with childcare. As stated in the law, district leaders should be required to seek input from families and community stakeholders to ensure the plans are responsive to evolving student and family needs.

Early Education

The essential nature of early education and care programs, as well as licensed out-of-school time (OST) school-age programs, has become ever more clear during the COVID-19 pandemic. From quickly establishing emergency care programs when the majority of the state stayed safe at home, to re-opening child care with new health and safety protocols at the end of June, to providing safe spaces for K-12 students to learn from while school buildings are closed, early education and OST teachers and staff have been and continue to be on the front lines. Safe, high-quality child care allows parents to work. Collaborations between school district and out-of-school time programs enables remote learning to happen when parents are unavailable during the school day.

But today, EEC-licensed programs are facing staffing shortages and depleted savings. To stabilize the child care sector at this critical time, we urge you to not only preserve current funding for early education and care in FY21 (as proposed in the Governor's October 2020 budget proposal), but to also provide additional funding to address pandemic-related challenges. In particular, we support recommendations submitted by advocates from 150 early education and OST programs, who have called for incentive pay for educators, stable monthly funding for programs, and the same rapid COVID testing protocols that are currently provided or become available to K-12 schools.

Higher Education

This fall, enrollment in Massachusetts community colleges and state universities – which disproportionately serve our state's Black and Brown students -- dropped by nearly 12% and 8%, respectively. Ten of our community colleges and four state universities are seeing their lowest enrollment in 25 years. These declines in college-going bode poorly for our state's economy, but could prove especially devastating to students and families for whom a postsecondary degree is the surest path out of poverty.

In these times of crisis, the Commonwealth needs to do everything possible to help all students who wish to pursue higher education do so. That starts with resources.

We commend Governor Baker and the State Legislature for proposing level funding for higher education. These amounts, however, are still nearly \$800 per student lower the state’s pre-Great Recession levels, even as tuition costs and fees at our state universities rose by upward of \$3,500 per student – leaving students holding the bag. These funding shortages already posed significant challenges for students from economically disadvantaged families. Now, for many, they are making college outright inaccessible.

We urge lawmakers to increase investment in Massachusetts’ community colleges and state universities – particularly in the programs and resources targeted to our highest need students, such as the MASSGrant Plus. The Massachusetts Department of Higher Education has led with the Equity Agenda, a statewide strategic plan to center equity in our higher education system’s programs, practices, and policies. Our funding priorities must follow this leadership. Failure to bolster higher education now will translate into layoffs, canceled programs, increases in tuition and debt, and deferred enrollment, exacerbating existing inequalities for low-income students, and higher debt burdens, particularly for Black and Brown students.

In addition to increasing support for students already pursuing higher education, it’s critical that the state continue to expand pathways to a college degree for historically under-represented and underserved high school students. For that reason, we strongly support Governor Baker’s proposal to provide level funding for maintaining and expanding early college programs, which have shown promising results in boosting college enrollment. We also support maintaining level funding for Advanced Placement Math and Science programs. Just as important is the need to improve access to and quality of school guidance counseling -- one of the many reasons why we urge the state to follow through on its SOA commitments to high-need districts.

State budgets are a testament to our collective values. Failing to address funding shortages for our state’s highest need students, or worse, cutting that support, will contribute to inequities in opportunity to learn heretofore unseen – inequities that do not reflect the values or spirit of our state. We urge you to ensure that next year’s budget expresses the commitment to equity that we know you share.

Respectfully submitted,



Amplify Latinx
Boston Schools Fund
Citizen Schools
Coaching for Change
EdNavigator
Educators for Excellence -- Boston
He is Me Institute
Higher Ground
Hyde Square Taskforce
Immigrant Family Services Institute
Latino Education Institute
Latinos for Education
March Forward Massachusetts Education Fund
Massachusetts Advocates for Children
Multistate Association for Bilingual Education - Northeast
NextGen Talent
OneGoal Massachusetts
Parent Villages
Propel America
Strategies for Children
Teach Plus
Teach Western Mass
Center for Teen Empowerment
The Education Trust
The Teachers' Lounge
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Urban League of Springfield
Worcester Education Collaborative
YMCA of Greater Boston