

June 16, 2021

Chairman Jason M. Lewis  
Chairwoman Alice Hanlon Peisch  
Joint Committee on Education  
Massachusetts State House  
24 Beacon St  
Boston, MA 02133

Esteemed Chairman Lewis and Chairwoman Peisch,

As organizations committed to advancing educational equity in Massachusetts, we write to urge you to provide much-needed oversight of the supports provided to students and educators as our state shifts from pandemic response to recovery.

COVID-19 caused unprecedented disruptions in education. By the time the 2021-22 school year begins, many students will not have set foot inside a school building in 18 months. Despite the incredibly hard work of educators, families and students themselves, students' learning experiences during this time have been both uneven and unequal. The disproportionate health and economic impacts of the pandemic on communities of color, immigrant communities and economically disadvantaged communities, combined with the digital divide and the challenges of providing much-needed services for English learners and students with disabilities, mean that disparities in student learning – which were already wide before the pandemic – have grown.

In addition to COVID, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and too many others, the past year has also brought a new focus to the urgency of the fight for racial justice. In Massachusetts schools and districts, the incredible activism that has swept the country has created an unprecedented opportunity to tackle challenges that have undermined school experiences for students of color long before the pandemic, including insufficient diversity in our educator workforce and curricula that often don't represent, never mind affirm, the experiences and accomplishments of people of color. We deeply appreciate your commitment to advancing diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in our state's schools – including by putting forth the Educator Diversity Act.

The ways that schools and districts approach supporting students – and supporting teachers to support students – next school year will have long-lasting implications for our young people, families and our entire state. Will education leaders create learning environments where all students feel a sense of belonging and affirmation, and can find healing from the isolation and loss many have experienced during the pandemic? Will they offer all students rigorous, engaging and culturally responsive learning experiences that help them progress through the next grade level, while building critical skills that some may not have mastered this past year? Or will they revert to a pre-pandemic "normal" that didn't work for too many students, and certainly will not meet the scale and depth of student, family and educator needs after the past 18 months?

The good news is that for many districts, the financial resources are there: Between the Student Opportunity Act and federal relief and recovery funding, many districts will be working with thousands of dollars more per student than their pre-pandemic budgets. We know, however, that money is just one piece of the puzzle – how that money is used will determine whether our state moves toward an equitable recovery, or whether the disparities that grew during the pandemic are allowed to continue.

Unfortunately, right now there is little transparency or oversight of the decisions that district and school leaders make regarding the support that will be provided to students, families and educators. Created earlier this school year, districts' plans for return to in-person schooling by and large focus only on the physical logistics of reopening buildings – safety provisions, bus schedules, and so on. Most of the Student Opportunity Act plans collected by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education last December were written before the pandemic and do not address the current reality at all. Applications for federal recovery funding require only vague, limited reporting of the steps district leaders will take to meet students' academic and social-emotional needs.

**For that reason, we ask that you conduct a series of oversight and legislative hearings focused on pandemic recovery and concrete opportunities to advance education equity in this moment.** These hearings should shine a light on the needs of student, families and educators most affected by the pandemic, steps already being taken to address them, and areas for improvement. Importantly, we believe that in all of these hearings, it is critical for the Joint Committee on Education to hear not only from state, district and school leaders, but from students, families and teachers from communities that were particularly hard-hit by the virus and associated disruptions.

We stand ready to assist you however we can in making these hearings a reality.

With deep gratitude,



## Recommendations for Pandemic Recovery Oversight Hearings

### 1. Student supports to address social-emotional well-being and unfinished learning

It's been a tumultuous 18 months. The goal of this hearing would be to understand how schools and districts are approaching supporting students both academically and social-emotionally as the state returns to in-person learning. What are districts doing to build learning environments that support and affirm all students, including to prevent overreliance on punitive and exclusionary discipline? How are they ensuring access to mental health services for students who need them? What kinds of approaches are being used to address the impacts of missed instruction? How are districts leveraging increased student, educator and family comfort with technology to expand opportunity and equity for students?

The hearing should feature testimony from students and families about what is and isn't working for them, from educators and administrators about current school and district approaches, and from advocates who can share additional ideas for steps that schools and districts can take.

### 2. Teacher preparation and support

Our schools have long struggled with the kind of instruction that this year will require. Strong professional development, supportive learning communities (including adult mental health supports) and collaborative planning time will be critical in helping teachers maintain high, grade-level expectations, differentiate instruction and provide the right just-in-time support for students. The purpose of this hearing will be to hear from teachers regarding the support they believe teachers need to navigate the transition back to in-person teaching this fall, as well as from administrators regarding support they are currently planning to offer.

### 3. Uses of federal recovery funding and implications for Student Opportunity Act plans

By October 4, 2021, every Massachusetts local education agency (traditional district and charter school) will need to submit an application to DESE outlining how it will use federal relief and recovery funds. The goal of this hearing would be to better understand district decisions around funding use, how they arrived at those decisions (e.g., what data they considered and which stakeholders they engaged), and the implications of these decisions for how districts plan to use their Student Opportunity Act dollars. The hearing should include testimony from district administrators, DESE, and community groups engaged in district decision-making.

### 4. Transparency and public reporting

Massachusetts is a state that is data rich, but information poor – a challenge that is particularly significant following this year. This hearing would seek to understand what information students, families, advocates and others would like to see about students, districts and schools (e.g., student learning, attendance, discipline, and more). Students, families and community advocates can share the successes and difficulties they have experienced determining what data is public and accessing that information. State and district administrators can share steps already being taken to ensure transparency, and reflect on work yet to be done.

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## Recommendations for Hearings to Advance Opportunity and Equity in Massachusetts

### 5. Educator diversity: What efforts are already underway and what more can be done?

Access to a racially and culturally diverse teacher workforce is beneficial for all P-12 students, and particularly for students of color, who often thrive in classrooms led by teachers [who share their racial and cultural background](#). In Massachusetts, however, teachers of color make up just [8.5% of the teacher workforce](#) – and that number has barely changed in the last decade. The goal of this hearing would be to inform the Educator Diversity Act ((HD.3641/SD.2208) and related bills by a) hearing directly from educators of color about their experiences and the challenges they see throughout the educator pipeline, b) better understanding existing state and local diversity-related efforts, and c) identifying areas of the work that could be strengthened or advanced through legislation.

### 6. Culturally responsive curriculum: What are students learning now and what needs to change?

Although research clearly shows the importance of representation, students in our schools continue to read books written primarily by White authors, learn about the accomplishments primarily of White men, and study historical narratives that fail to reflect the experiences of people of color in this country. These curricular shortcomings harm both students of color, for whom the lack of representation further undermines the sense of belonging in school, and White students, who receive both a narrow and inaccurate glimpse of the society in which they dwell. This year, as millions of people across the country took to the streets to demand an end to systemic racism, there is increased urgency to ensure that curricular materials be both inclusive and actively anti-racist. A [recent survey](#) of more than 1,500 parents and caregivers, for example, found that 80% consider modifying curriculum to ensure greater representation of the experiences and accomplishments of people of color a priority.

The goal of this hearing would be to inform legislation such as the Racially and Culturally Inclusive Curriculum Act (HD.3219/SD.1965) and related bills by a) highlighting the impact of exclusionary curriculum on student engagement and motivation, b) building understanding of existing state and local initiatives already underway, and c) identifying areas of the work that could be strengthened or advanced through legislation. The hearing would feature testimony from students and parents, educators, state and local administrators, and advocates and researchers with expertise in culturally responsive curriculum design.

### 7. Delivering on the promise of previously passed legislation

In recent years, the Massachusetts legislature has passed several state laws – including the LOOK Act and the Student Opportunity Act -- aimed at increasing opportunity for historically underserved students in the state. Due to a variety of challenges, including capacity shortages and the onset of the pandemic, implementation of these laws has been slower and more limited than expected. The goal of this hearing would be to hear from state and local education leaders and advocates about the current status of implementation, successes and challenges experienced to date, and plans for accelerating and deepening implementation in coming months.