

June 16, 2023

The Honorable Aaron Michlewitz
Chair, House Committee on Ways and Means
24 Beacon Street, Room 243
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Ann-Margaret Ferrante
Vice Chair, House Committee on Ways and Means
24 Beacon Street, Room 42
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Todd M. Smola
Ranking Minority, House Committee on Ways and Means
24 Beacon Street, Room 124
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Michael Rodrigues
Chair, Senate Committee on Ways and Means
24 Beacon Street, Room 212
Boston, MA, 02133

The Honorable Cindy Friedman
Vice Chair, Senate Committee on Ways and Means
24 Beacon Street, Room 313
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Patrick O'Connor
Ranking Minority, Senate Committee on Ways and Means
24 Beacon Street, Room 419
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Esteemed Members of the FY24 Budget Conference Committee,

On behalf of the students, educators, and families across the Commonwealth we work with and support, we — the undersigned civil rights, educational equity, and social justice organizations — write to express our appreciation for the many provisions included in House and Senate FY24 budgets that reflect a strong commitment to educational equity and justice.

As you engage in the Conference Committee process, we recognize that you have many competing funding priorities to negotiate. Yet, few are as integral as supporting and investing in policies and programs that uplift and advance the Commonwealth's commitment to racial, economic, and educational equity. This budget, which comes at a pivotal moment as our state transitions to a time of pandemic recovery, presents an opportunity to not only address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning, outcomes, and experiences – especially for systemically underserved students who were disproportionately impacted – but also to address the long-standing systemic issues affecting our state's educational system. To successfully meet this moment, the Legislature should commit to investing in programs and policies that have the most significant impact, including programs that serve and support improved outcomes for students of color, students from low-income families, English learners, students with disabilities, and immigrant students.

To that end, we urge you to include the following in the final FY24 conference committee budget:

1 Investments in early childhood education and care. High-quality early childhood education is critical to children's future success. Unfortunately, children of color and children from low-income families in Massachusetts do not have the same access to high-quality programs as their White and more affluent peers. Moreover, the high cost of child care puts early education out of reach for many families, especially for educators in the sector — many of whom are women of color — often making only minimum wage. To address these interrelated challenges and ensure that all children get the start in life they deserve, we urge you to include the following appropriations in the final FY24 conference budget:

- **\$475 Million (Senate Level) for Child Care Stabilization (C3) Grants**
- **\$15 million (Senate Level) for Childcare Grants for Early Ed Providers (1596-2430)**

- 2 Invest in universal free school meals.** Recent data show that [nearly one in 5](#) households still struggle with food access, with Black and Latinx families disproportionately impacted. The Universal School Meals program not only helps to address food insecurity, but the program also helps to reduce financial stress for families, improve health outcomes for students, reduce regulatory burdens and costs for schools, and reduce the stigma associated with food assistance, especially for students from low-income backgrounds. All children and students deserve access to nutritious food that enables them to come to school prepared to learn and thrive. Therefore, we urge the conference committee to **fully fund the Universal School Meals program at the House level of \$161 million.**
- 3 Invest in financial aid.** When compared to other states, [Massachusetts is currently ranked 28th](#) for public spending on student financial aid. While both chambers have made historic investments in postsecondary education during this budget cycle, college affordability continues to be a significant barrier for many of our state’s highest-need students. Therefore, we urge the conference committee to **appropriate at least \$92 million for line item 1596-2414 to expand financial aid assistance in Massachusetts**, which represents the midpoint between the House and Senate funding levels.
- 4 Invest in college access and affordability for ALL.** Currently, Massachusetts only offers in-state tuition rates to DACA and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) recipients, leaving more than 90% of our state’s undocumented population without affordable access to higher education, even though many have spent most of their lives here. All residents of the Commonwealth deserve equitable access to affordable higher education opportunities, which will ultimately lead to a more educated and robust workforce, and in turn, a stronger economy. For these reasons, we strongly urge you to adopt the **Senate provision to extend in-state tuition rates to undocumented students.**
- 5 Continue to enable the growth and expansion of Early College Programs.** In a few short years, Massachusetts has taken a significant step forward to promote educational equity by investing in and expanding Early College Programs, which [data show](#) double the odds of a student immediately enrolling and persisting to a second year of college. In previous state budgets, Massachusetts has funded Early College Programs through two line items (7009-6600) and 7066-0019). However, in their FY24 budget, the administration proposed a third line item (1596-2413) to enable Question 1 revenue to be used for Early College Programs, and the Senate also included this line item in their budget. **We strongly urge you to appropriate at least \$27.6 million for Early College Programs utilizing a combination of these three line items**, thus setting a precedent for appropriating Question 1 funds towards this evidence-based program.

The decisions you make now on how much to invest, as well as where and how to invest that funding, will significantly impact the educational outcomes and lives of students for years to come.

Thank you for your attention to this letter. Please reach out to the undersigned groups if we can share more information about how these investments would support the success of the students and families we represent.

Respectfully submitted,

