

October 21, 2019

Massachusetts House of Representatives
24 Beacon St
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Members of the House of Representatives,

As organizations committed to educational equity, we write to express our concern about the Senate's changes to Section 4 of the Student Opportunity Act, which weaken the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE's) ability to ensure that the substantial new investments pledged by the Act are used to improve outcomes for historically underserved students. We urge lawmakers to, at minimum, reinstate the Section 4 language from the version of the Act put forth by the Joint Committee on Education.

The recently released 2019 MCAS results underscore the importance of strong DESE oversight. These data show once again that too many of our students, especially low-income students, students of color, English learners and students with disabilities are not getting the learning opportunities and experiences they need to meet grade-level expectations. Consider:

- Only a third of Black, Latinx and low-income elementary and middle schoolers were on grade-level in English language arts and results were even lower in math.
- Less than 1 in 5 English learners and students with disabilities were on grade-level in math and English language arts, respectively.
- In most grades, student outcomes barely budged since 2017. And while some districts are making progress for historically underserved students, others have stagnated or declined.
- At the high school level, a new, more rigorous version of the MCAS revealed that roughly 1 in 3 Black, Latinx and low-income students, respectively – and even fewer students with disabilities and English learners -- have received the math preparation they need to be college/career ready.

The funding commitments in the Student Opportunity Act are critical to turning these patterns around. But new dollars alone won't guarantee improvement. Creating meaningful change for our state's young people — be it eliminating discipline disparities, increasing diversity in the teacher workforce, expanding access to rigorous coursework and early college programs, improving instructional quality, establishing dual language programs, expanding learning time, or expanding access to high quality early learning — requires reallocating resources to evidence-informed practices and supports, committing to change, and being willing to confront deeply ingrained beliefs about students' ability to succeed. And because these changes require deep work in addressing value systems and capacity development, they rarely happen without outside pressure and support.

Yes, educational improvement efforts will look different in every district, and should be driven by the collaborative work of people who know that district best – teachers, school and district leaders, families, and community advocates. But DESE has a critical role to play in setting goals for eliminating disparities in opportunity and outcomes in districts across the state, in verifying that the strategies districts select are

based in evidence of what works for students, and in ensuring that if student outcomes aren't improving, district leaders re-examine those practices and change course. Without that oversight, we risk spending millions of dollars on the same practices that have failed too many of our young people for years. Our students cannot afford that.

Respectfully submitted,

