

March 19th, 2019

Senator Jason Lewis, Senate Chair
Representative Alice Hanlon Peisch, House Chair
Joint Committee on Education
MA State House, Room 511-B
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Chairman Lewis and Chairwoman Peisch:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. As organizations committed to educational equity and justice, we write to urge you to keep the interests of our state's historically underserved students — students of color, students from low-income families, English learners and students with disabilities — at the core of efforts to revise the Foundation Budget formula this spring.

Massachusetts has long taken pride in its high rankings when it comes to education, and indeed, we have a lot to celebrate. But the same data that yielded those rankings also show deep inequities in our education system on every critical measure of opportunity and achievement. The fact remains that 26 years after the passage of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act, students of color, low-income students, English learners and students with disabilities continue to have vastly different experiences in Massachusetts schools than their peers — and these disparities have real consequences for students, their communities, and our Commonwealth's economy and democracy.

There is no excellence without equity. To truly be excellent, and to ensure the long-term health and vitality of our economy, our communities, and our civic society, Massachusetts must do dramatically better by students and families who have been underserved for far too long.

The decisions you make this spring about 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. We urge you to:

1. Not only address structural budget issues that affect all districts, but significantly increase funding to support our state's English learners and low-income students and eliminate inequities in spending between high-poverty districts and their wealthier counterparts.
2. Ensure that district leaders work with students, families, and community advocates to select and implement research and evidence-informed strategies for improving opportunity and outcomes for students of color, low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities.
3. Ensure that new funding comes with greater transparency around both spending and student outcomes.

Point 1: Our state's education system is deeply inequitable.

Massachusetts' high rankings mask pervasive disparities in opportunity and achievement that separate our students of color, students from low-income families, English learners, and students with disabilities from their peers. **As documented in our Number 1 for Some report:**

- In Massachusetts, fewer than 1 in 3 Black and Latino fourth graders are on grade level in reading — half the rate for the state's White students.
- Only 28 percent of low-income eighth graders are on grade level in math — again, less than half the rate for higher income students.

- 1 in 3 English learners don't graduate on time — and 1 in 7 drop out of school entirely.
- Fewer than 1 in 3 Black and Latino students who take the SAT meet college-readiness benchmarks in reading and math — compared to 2/3 of their White peers.
- Too many graduates of color don't enroll in postsecondary education at all, and among those that do, too many have to take remedial courses.

These disparities in achievement are the direct result of inequities in opportunity that begin in early childhood and continue throughout elementary and secondary education, both inside and outside the classroom. Today, 30 percent of Black and 36 percent of Latino children grow up in poverty in Massachusetts. In 2016-17, 20,000 children in the Commonwealth were homeless.

And inside the education system, low-income students and students of color get fewer resources that matter for educational success. Consider, for example:

- Latino students and students from low-income families are less likely to access early childhood education programs.
- Black and Latino students in Massachusetts are three times more likely than White students to be assigned to a teacher who lacks content expertise in the subject they teach.
- Less than 2/3 of Black graduates and just over half of English learners completed the MassCore curriculum.
- Black and Latino students are under-represented among students completing AP courses — and over-represented among students suspended out-of-school.

Although funding inequities are not the only cause of these disparities, they certainly play a role.

Point 2:

Massachusetts' current school funding formula shortchanges our state's most vulnerable students.

Massachusetts' current school-funding formula shortchanges our state's low-income students, students of color, English learners and students with disabilities. As demonstrated by the Foundation Budget Review Committee, the formula underestimates the cost of providing education services, especially in districts serving our highest need students. While districts in wealthier communities have the ability to supplement the Foundation Budget with additional local dollars, districts in high-need communities do not. The resulting funding inequities leave districts that should be providing the most support to their students — such as additional guidance counseling, supplemental learning time, and translation services to improve communication with families — with the least resources to do so.

Addressing structural budget issues that affect all districts — like healthcare and special education costs — is critical, but insufficient. Lawmakers must significantly increase state investment in districts that serve our highest-need students so as to eliminate inequities in funding and opportunity to learn between these districts and their counterparts in wealthy communities.

Point 3: The way money is used matters.

Although funding inequities undoubtedly contribute to many of the disparities in opportunity and achievement documented in *Number 1 for Some*, new dollars alone won't guarantee improvement. Creating meaningful change for students — be it eliminating discipline disparities, increasing diversity in the teacher workforce, expanding access to rigorous coursework, improving instructional quality, establishing dual language programs, expanding learning time, or building early literacy skills — 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.

To maximize the benefits of additional funding for students, district leaders should be required to work with their school community — especially their historically underserved students and their families — to implement strategies that research and evidence show work. District leaders should publicize what strategies they plan to use, why they chose these strategies, and how they will know these strategies are working (including clear, numeric improvement targets disaggregated by student group) on the district website.

As mentioned earlier, new funding should also come with greater transparency around both spending and student outcomes. Today, it is far too challenging for the average parent or member of the public to understand how well districts and schools are serving their students — and especially how well they are serving different student groups, such as English learners, low-income students, or students of different races or ethnicities. DESE's new School and District Report Card website is a step in the right direction, but the Department must do more to help families, educators, and the public understand the state of opportunity and achievement in our districts and schools.

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act demonstrated the power of coupling substantial, necessary investment in our highest-need districts with the push to raise expectations for what students should know and be able to do. As you move into this next phase of funding reform, we hope that you will build on what MERA got right — the “grand bargain” at the core of that law — to direct resources to districts serving our highest need students, and to ensure that those resources get used in ways that improve student outcomes, especially for students who have been underserved in our schools for too long.

Respectfully submitted,

