

March 23, 2025

Joint Committee on Ways and Means
Massachusetts State House
24 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02133

Chair Rodrigues, Chair Michlewitz, Vice Chair Comerford, Vice Chair Ferrante, and esteemed Members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means:

As you begin the challenging process of determining funding priorities for the certified FY24 \$1.4B Fair Share Act surplus and the FY26 state budget, I respectfully urge you to prioritize addressing the severe financial difficulties faced by all school districts, including the 232 minimum aid districts like Acton Boxborough Regional.

The Chapter 70 education funding formula relies on antiquated model student enrollment assumptions. Districts with enrollment below these assumptions are guaranteed to receive at least the same aid as the previous year, but the formula lacks protections to guarantee sufficient core funding for all essential components of a school district. Since the last update to the Chapter 70 formula in FY07, statewide student enrollment has steadily declined, leaving 232 school districts dependent on "hold harmless" status. As a result, these districts receive only minimal per-pupil aid increases in Chapter 70 funding. This situation shifts the full responsibility of covering budget increases onto municipalities, a burden that is unsustainable.

The state funding formula does not match the needs of minimum aid districts, and hasn't for some time. It assumes a certain percentage of students on IEPs. It caps inflation at 4.5%, and inflation has far exceeded that in recent years. This has put an unrelenting pressure on town budgets, especially towns with a low commercial/industrial tax base, as is the case with the towns of Acton and Boxborough comprising my district.

Acton narrowly passed an operating override last year at the Annual Election. Town projects were deferred to provide support to the schools, and the margin of *41 votes* approving the **\$6.6M** override funded the schools at a level of only 2/3 what was needed to fully fund operations and services. The school budget was the third in a row of significant staff and program cuts, and this year, we are entering a fourth year of painful cuts that will result in negative impacts, and reduced services, to all students and fewer supports for staff. The budget crisis last year drew down Boxborough's substantial untaxed levy, and the town faces an override next year for FY27. Both towns have expensive capital projects requiring debt exclusions, a DPW building for Acton, a fire station for Boxborough, this year or the year after next. *Taxpayers are increasingly unable to support tax increases outside of Prop 2.5, even in our relatively affluent*

communities, as they welcome an increasing number of low income households and strive to maintain affordability so that older residents on limited incomes can stay.

The drivers necessitating the first such override in nearly two decades for Acton were significant cost increases to health insurance, retirement benefits, transportation, special education tuition, as well as utilities and building maintenance. The town and district have implemented numerous cost-savings measures over the past several years, including cuts to staff, department reorganizations, sharing staff across communities, and the development of programs that keep students with special needs in-district. Both entities have also aggressively, and successfully, pursued grant funding as an alternative revenue source. *It's not enough.*

AB is still charging families for all-day kindergarten, both the town and district continue to defer critical capital projects, and positions to meet identified service needs are not able to be added. Both entities transitioned last year from a self-insured trust that served town and district employees and retirees (insolvent due to the extraordinarily high claims from a small number of subscribers) to MIIA. This should have resulted in savings, but instead, a 14.8% increase for the coming year has sent the administration of both town and district scrambling to make cuts in other areas of the budget, once again deferring needed projects, programs, and personnel, to cover this increase. The district has also developed programs to serve our students with special needs, lowering our out-of-district tuition costs. As with the change made to health insurance, the increase in special education tuition costs for the students who continue to need out-of-district placement is erasing the savings we have generated with this initiative.

Coinciding with cost increases is an increase in complex needs in our student population. The percentage of students with "high needs" has climbed from 23% in the 2014-15 school year to 32% in the 2024-25 school year. The district has had to add Special Education Teachers, Support Teachers, and English Language Teachers as a result, even as we have eliminated classroom positions aligned with declining enrollment. Still, staffing is insufficient to address the ballooning needs. A review called for additional ML teachers; the district was unable to add those positions. Each school has a single counselor, and many students with identified SEL needs are not receiving services. BCBAs are shared among schools meaning that behavior plans are delayed, and IEP consideration is pushed out to the end of the school year.

AB has taken a proactive stance by onboarding a literacy curriculum that aligns with the science of reading. The loss next year of four Reading Assistants will diminish our capacity for reading intervention by about a third at the elementary level. The reduction in reading intervention services comes at the same time the state has increased attention on early literacy and dyslexia screening. Even increasing group size for the remaining interventionists cannot fully make up for the lost capacity. Fewer students who are falling "significantly below grade level benchmarks" will be able to receive dedicated, consistent, pull-out reading intervention services.

With fewer reading and math interventionists, it will also be more challenging to identify students who need individualized education plans. Currently, students need to be given

tier 2 interventions and complete cycles of help before being considered for further testing. Without these specialists working with students it will not only be difficult to provide the additional skill development, it will also take longer to identify if they need more specialized instruction.

Our kindergartners who are English language learners are not afforded EL supports. Other kindergartners are not afforded supports even after scoring significantly below the standard on assessments because there are too many other students with greater needs. We are seeing more students with greater SEL needs, but we are unable to provide support to meet those needs. This is not acceptable. *Research clearly shows that interventions provided at an earlier age are the most beneficial.*

Finally, I want to bring your attention to the increasingly regulated environment of public education. The laws governing public education in the Commonwealth that have been newly adopted or updated in the past twenty years are numerous and significant, none of which have been delivered with complementary increases in funding necessary for their implementation.

These new and updated mandates enacted since the Ch70 funding model was last updated include: attendance monitoring and reporting, student discipline, bullying prevention, addressing incidents of hate and bias, monitoring practices relative to gender identity, required McKinney-Vento coordinator for every district, foster care point of contact for every district, Title IX, mandated reporter requirements, medical and behavioral health emergency response plans, multi-hazard evacuation plans, measures to reduce gun violence, federal civil rights data reporting, suicide prevention, training, and screening, substance use education and prevention, prevention of physical restraints and data collection, student opportunity act plans, state frameworks, state testing, comprehensive literacy instruction, genocide education, multilingual education, new teacher induction and mentoring program and reporting, civics projects, NAEP testing, expansion of scope and requirements associated with educator evaluation, CORI and fingerprinting reporting, educator licensure requirements, expanded mandatory annual staff training, EDCO personnel records, tiered-focused monitoring, ESSA grant programs monitoring, public records law requests, and student records requests.

I respectfully present the requests below both for one-time FY24 Fair Share Act surplus funding and the proposed FY26 state budget line-item increases. By providing a school district with additional FY25 funds, the district can exercise its statutory right to use this revenue source to fund FY26 special education (Circuit Breaker) and/or regional school student transportation expenditures. The legislation allowing a school district to use such funds in this manner, recognized as best practice, is included in regulations regarding Circuit Breaker promulgated by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and in M.G.L. Chapter 71, Section 16C regarding regional school transportation. These funds would need to be expended by June 30, 2026 and would help to offset significant budget increases in FY26.

Funding Proposals for FY25

Increase to Circuit Breaker reimbursements: cover 90% of eligible tuition costs and 75% of eligible transportation costs

Increase to Regional School Transportation reimbursements to cover 100% of eligible transportation costs

Increase to McKinney-Vento Homeless Student Transportation reimbursements to cover 100% of eligible transportation costs

Funding Proposals for FY26

Reconvene K-12 Funding Review Commission in FY26

Inflate Chapter 70 Formula to Better Match Recent Cost Growth

Maintain Minimum Per Pupil Aid at current FY25 levels of \$104 per student

Increase to Circuit Breaker reimbursements: cover 90% of eligible tuition costs and 75% of eligible transportation costs

Increase to Regional School Transportation reimbursements to cover 100% of eligible transportation costs

Increase to McKinney-Vento Homeless Student Transportation reimbursements to cover 100% of eligible transportation costs

I am grateful for your tireless efforts and commitment to supporting our students and school districts. *I submit, though, that the state MUST provide a complementary increase in funding to enable districts to meet the increasing requirements for educating our students laid out by the state as well as to meet the increasing needs presented by those students.*

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alissa Nicol', with a stylized, cursive script.

Alissa Nicol, Acton Select Board Member