



GATEWAY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

Blandford Chester Huntington Middlefield Montgomery Russell
12 Littleville Road, Huntington, MA 01050

April 16, 2025

Committee on Ways and Means
Massachusetts State House
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Chairman Rodrigues, Chairman Michlewitz and the Joint Ways and Means Committee,

My name is Kristen Smidy, and it is my pleasure to be the superintendent of the Gateway Regional School District serving the towns of Blandford, Chester, Huntington, Middlefield, Montgomery, and Russell. Yes—those were my fourth and eighth graders that testified for more school funding at the public budget hearing! I'm so proud of them. I am also a mother of two elementary school-aged children in the Westfield Public School system.

School districts across the commonwealth are in the position of being assigned the great responsibility to provide engaging and rigorous instruction to all students, while accommodating their individualized needs. I have been proud of the work that we have accomplished as educators in Massachusetts in my time in the profession.

However, we are at a critical point in our state's support for the education system, as you heard about during the public testimony at the budget hearing last week from many voices across the Commonwealth. **The deepening inequalities facing rural communities are putting students at serious risk of being denied the educational opportunities promised to them in the Education Reform Act.** The intent of the Chapter 70 formula is to ensure that every district has the resources necessary to provide an adequate education. Yet the reality on the ground tells a very different story. In communities like mine, with declining enrollment, districts are left with only a “hold harmless” increase — for Gateway, that amount is minimal and doesn't allow us to keep up with skyrocketing fixed costs. While we recognize that these cost increases reflect real needs across the system, our towns simply do not have the capacity to absorb them. In fact, they are at a breaking point.

Westfield, a much larger neighboring district and the home district to my children, is being forced to eliminate around 40 positions districtwide. At Gateway, we are cutting four positions — a significant loss for a small district — and now face the end of key grants that have helped us fill the gap. We are struggling to make essential salary adjustments to retain our talented and dedicated staff, but we are out of options. Meanwhile, several of our towns are challenged to provide even the most basic services, relying on the tireless efforts of volunteers just to meet core needs.

The choices we face are no longer about enhancing programming — they are about survival. Rural schools and towns are being forced to make impossible decisions: cut critical programs or risk fiscal insolvency. This is not the future the Education Reform Act envisioned, and without



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immediate, significant support, the damage to rural public education — and to the students we serve — will only deepen.

With the rural aid that we have received this year, we have been able to use some of those resources to pay for staffing positions—9 total district wide—as well as support essential programming like our two Chapter 74 programs that are not offered in any other vocational school in our area, required textbooks and instructional materials for all of our buildings, and professional development for staff. It's not enough to do everything we need, but we took advantage of what we did get and we stretched it to make an immediate positive impact for our entire community.

I cannot express enough how important it is for you to support funding Rural School Aid to at least \$30 million for the state's FY26 budget. This is only half of what the Rural Commission Report suggests is required for equity for our students in rural communities. The answer to allow all students across Massachusetts to have adequate and equitable funding is to fully fund the amount proposed in this Rural Schools Report at \$60 million. I know a recalculation of Chapter 70 is up for discussion, but I am acutely aware that will take years and the rural districts need support now. Every student should be provided with programming and staffing that matches their needs without needing to school choice to another district or pay for private school tuition.

Additionally, fully funding non residential pupil transportation, regional school transportation, and allocating more resources to charter school reimbursement and special education tuition costs would support the concerns that school districts are facing. The utilization of the additional revenue from the Fair Share Amendment would simultaneously satisfy these needs while accomplishing transparent steps towards a level playing field its creators and millions of voters envisioned.

I am very confident that funding rural aid is the right thing to do for our students, and it is a solution that can happen this next fiscal year. I am very excited to work with my teachers, students, and colleagues and show you the amazing work that students across the Commonwealth can do when they are provided with the opportunity to do so. I appreciate your time and support for this vital measure.

Sincerely,

Kristen Smidy
Superintendent of Schools
Gateway Regional School District