

DESE announces new standard for determining low-income student enrollment numbers

The decades-old method that the state has used to determine the number of low-income students in public schools is being replaced by a new standard, according to DESE Commissioner Chester who made the announcement at the June Board of Education meeting. The new methodology could have dire consequences for funding that districts receive from the state and federal government.

In place of determining low-income counts based on applications for free and reduced-price school lunches, the new approach will deem students “economically disadvantaged” if their families receive food stamps or other welfare benefits.

The new calculations could have

significant ramifications for many districts, impacting how state aid for needy students is distributed to local schools, and even how much school systems receive in state reimbursement for construction projects.

According to a follow-up investigation by the *Boston Globe*, the new standard would indicate far fewer students from impoverished homes in such cities as Boston, Chelsea, Lawrence, and Revere among others, than was indicated by the prior method.

Across the state, under the new standard, 26.3 percent of the 400,000 students enrolled in public schools are considered “economically disadvantaged” compared with 38.3 percent who had been previously deemed low-income.

In Revere, Superintendent Paul Dakin noted that under the new calibration only 37.4 percent of students are designated economically disadvantaged, down from 77.8 percent deemed low-income. He also expressed concern that large numbers of poor immigrant families whose children are enrolled in school are not tapping into welfare and other assistance programs.

For decades, Massachusetts and other states considered families who qualified for free or reduced-price lunches as the standard for measuring poverty. But because the federal program that subsidizes these meals is now available to all students regardless of income, many school systems

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Foundation Budget Review Commission approves preliminary report

The state commission that is crafting recommendations for how the state should adequately fund public schools has approved a preliminary report to submit to the Massachusetts Legislature next week.

At the June 23 meeting of the Foundation Budget Review Commission (FBRC), members put the final touches on a report that includes some initial findings on school districts’ health care costs and spending on special education students.

The committee members also agreed to include in the report that the FBRC plans to analyze a number

of other areas, including costs associated with lowering class sizes in early grades, wraparound services, extended learning time and educating English-language learners.

The foundation budget, which the commission is reviewing, is the base level of per-pupil funding that the state has determined each district needs to provide students with an adequate education. It was established in 1993 as part of the Education Reform Act. Since then, it has not been adjusted, except for inflation.

Currently, major gaps are present

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FINAL SICK TIME REGULATIONS RELEASED BY THE OFFICE OF ATTORNEY GENERAL

The following summary was prepared by MASC General Counsel Stephen J. Finnegan, Esq.

After a communication from Attorney Elizabeth Valerio (Deutsch Williams) as to whether the exemption from the Sick Time draft regulations (940CMR 33.00) for employees and employers of cities and towns also applied to school committees, I reviewed the law and concurred that such exemption did not cover school committees or its employees. On June 3, 2015 I sent my comments

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MA NEWS

ADDITIONAL DOLLARS FOR EXPANDED LEARNING TIME AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Earlier this month Commissioner Chester announced that \$2.761 million would be available in 21st Century Community Learning Center grants to expand learning time in some districts and, in others, to offer enrichment programs after school and during the summer. These grants, which are federally funded, will reach approximately 4,000 students in 12 school districts

Recipients of the expanded learning time grants are schools in New Bedford, Brockton, Salem and Fall River. Recipients of the out-of-school time grants are schools in Sheffield and Montague, Malden, Framingham, Randolph, Lawrence, Boston, North Adams, Leominster, New Bedford, Salem and Brockton.

Additional grant applications are under review. For more information: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/21cclc>

GOVERNOR ORDERS REVIEW OF ALL MANDATES

At a recent meeting of the Local Government Advisory Commission (of which MASC is a member), Lt. Governor Karen Polito announced that the Governor had issued an Executive Order calling for an agency-wide review of all existing regulations and mandates to determine the need for and costs involved in implementing them.

According to Polito, only those regulations which are mandated by law or essential to the health, safety, environment or welfare of Massachusetts residents will be retained or modified. In addition, to determine whether a regulation meets the above standard, each agency or governmental body must demonstrate:

- (a) that there is a clearly identified need for governmental intervention that is best addressed by the agency;
- (b) the costs of the regulation do

not exceed the benefits that would result from the regulation;

(c) the regulation does not exceed federal requirements or duplicate local requirements;

(d) less restrictive and intrusive alternatives have been considered and found less desirable based on a sound evaluation of the alternatives;

(e) the regulation does not unduly and adversely affect MA citizens and customers of the Commonwealth or its competitive environment;

(f) the agency has established a process and a schedule for measuring the effectiveness of the regulation; and

(g) the regulation is time-limited or provides for regular review.

Any regulation not meeting these standards would be rescinded on or before March 31, 2016.

In addition, the Governor further ordered that no new regulations shall be issued that do not meet the above standards.

MASC NEWS

NEW OPTION AVAILABLE FOR ONLINE POLICY SUBSCRIBERS

MASC has developed a new policy option for member districts currently subscribed to MASC's Policy21 online policy hosting service. If you have fallen behind on policy updates or aren't sure if your online policy manual contains all of the policies it should, MASC now offers an online policy review service.

The online policy review process will consist of MASC staff comparing your online policy manual to the MASC reference manual and providing the district with recommendations for additions, changes, and deletes to bring your online manual up to date. The cost of this new service is \$5,000 and the bill can be spread over up to 2 fiscal years.

For more information contact your field director or MASC's Policy Director, Mike Gilbert.

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on behalf of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees and accompanying recommendations to the Attorney General for her consideration. I pointed out that the school committee, not the city or town, is the employer of school employees (M.G.L. c. 150E, S.1), including regionals, educational collaboratives, school unions, vocational schools and employees hired pursuant to joint hiring agreements. The final regulations reflect my recommendations and state in the definition section, in part, as follows:

Employee – Any person who performs services for an employer for wage, remuneration, or other compensation . . . including full time , part-time, seasonal and temporary employees, except:

(3) an employee of a local public employer not covered by the term cities and towns, for example, school committees, including regional schools and educational collaboratives, shall be considered an employee only if M.G.L.c. 149, S. 148C, is accepted by vote or appropriation of the prudential bodies governing said entity; The above referenced provision is also found in the definition of

Employer.

Therefore, unless a school committee or collaborative board of directors etc. accepts the law by vote or appropriation, the Sick Time law does not apply.

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no longer ask families to fill out applications to receive the benefit.

The intent of the universal free meal program is to increase participation and eliminate the stigma.

The new methodology is based mostly on families receiving food stamps, but also considers participation in other programs such as foster care, Medicaid or transitional assistance for families with dependent children.

While MA is at the forefront in changing its methodology, other states are also grappling with finding a new way to measure student poverty. And while some believe that welfare participation statistics is a more accurate indicator of schools

that have the highest concentration of students in greatest need, there are important privacy concerns around accessing this and other similar data from the Department of Revenue.

Another concern is the consequence this shift in methodology will have on research into the performance of low-income students. The state will not be able to compare MCAS scores, graduation rates and other performance measures generated for “economically disadvantaged” students against the previous data for “low income” students because the two student groups may be significantly different. In addition, as states develop different strategies for calculating low-income, the lack of a consistent definition will

make it more difficult to conduct long-term national studies.

DESE has indicated that they are still working on recalibrating the threshold for what will be considered a high poverty district. The high-poverty standard used to be districts with about 70 percent or more of its students classified as low-income, but DESE has said that that could drop as low as 40 percent of students deemed economically disadvantaged.

MASC members have already taken to online and other news sources to express their concerns that an inadequate metric could result in less urgency and fewer funds to address the critical needs of the state’s neediest population, and leave already financially strained schools vulnerable to further funding cuts.

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between what the foundation budget says districts need and what districts are actually spending.

A report by MassBudget, an advisory member of the FBRC, gathered and analyzed data from the state’s 328 operating districts. The study found the current funding formula does not reflect increased health insurance and special education costs.

“The consequence of that in the classroom is that districts are spending well below the foundation budget assumption on regular education teachers,” said Luc Schuster, deputy director of MassBudget and author of that study (and a former member of the Cambridge School Committee). “Many schools in the commonwealth have larger class sizes than were intended originally, teachers are having fewer prep periods to prepare and collaborate with each other between classes.”

The biggest point of contention at the meeting came as the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education representative recommended the creation of an “innovation fund” in the state funding formula that schools or districts would compete for in order to access the funds.

Others FBRC members, including

MASC President Patrick Francomano said that introducing a competitive component that will only give some districts funds if they agree to use the funds in a certain way goes against the foundation budget’s design.

“The foundation budget as it was established is an entitlement budget. It’s what do we need based upon our population of students, what is an adequate amount of money to be spending,” said Francomano. “To introduce a competitive component to the foundation budget is really inconsistent with its purpose.”

In addition, Francomano said, it assumes that the reason that districts seek money is because they have wasted their funds, not that they are using the existing funds to cover costs that the foundation budget does not currently cover.

“When you’re attaching strings to an allocation, that’s almost implying that we’re not managing it well,” said Francomano.

The FBRC will submit the final, public version of their preliminary report to the Legislature before the end of the month. The FBRC plans to continue meeting over the summer. A final comprehensive report will be submitted by November 1.

PARCC shortens testing time and moves to later in school year

In response to the growing opposition to the proliferation of mandated testing, the PARCC consortium recently announced that the 2015-2016 tests will be 90 minutes shorter and will shift the start of testing to later in the year.

The redesign of the test was approved last month by the board of governors of PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) which is made up of the eleven states and District of Columbia which belong to the consortium, which created tests aligned to the Common Core State Standards. The revised design will take effect in the next round of tests administered to students in grades 3-11 in English/language arts and math.

Massachusetts is a member of the consortium and MA Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education Mitchell Chester is Chair of the consortium’s governing board.

In addition to shortening the test, the new design folds PARCC’s current two testing windows into one 30-day window and requires that states wait until three-quarters of the way into the school year before starting the testing.

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Currently PARCC states have a 12-week window between February 16 and May 8 to give the longer, more complex performance tasks. They also have an eight-week window, April 13 to June 5 for the end-of-year component which contains shorter-answer items. Within those windows, states choose a 20-day period in which to administer the tests.

Next year, states will have one 30-day period to give the tests and testing cannot begin until 75 percent of instruction has been completed (day 133 in a 180-day instructional year) and it must end by the time 90 percent of instruction as been completed.

The redesigned test would also reduce the number of sessions that students must sit for, it will lengthen them a bit as well. Students now take the PARCC test in eight or nine units depending on grade level and those sessions vary from 60 to 90 minutes each. Next year, students will take six or seven units and sit for sessions of 75 to 110 minutes each.

Overall testing time will be reduced by 60 minutes in math and 30 minutes in English/language arts because there will be fewer short-answer items.

MASC discusses education concerns with Senator Elizabeth Warren



On June 26, MASC President-elect Jake Oliveira (Ludlow) met with Senator Elizabeth Warren in her Boston office, along with other representatives of the MA Partners consortium. Oliveira presented Warren with a portfolio of materials explaining MASC priorities and concerns and discussed specific education funding issues including the proposal that Title I funding become “portable” thereby enabling the funding to be directed to charter or parochial schools should a Title I student leave the public school for a private institution. Oliveira also indicated the need for “maintenance of effort” so that districts don’t use federal dollars as an excuse to cut their budgets. He was also adamant on children’s issues, including support for the Children’s Services Safety Net and how the Affordable Care Act expanded Medicaid benefits thereby enabling districts to be reimbursed for services they provide to Medicaid-eligible students.