

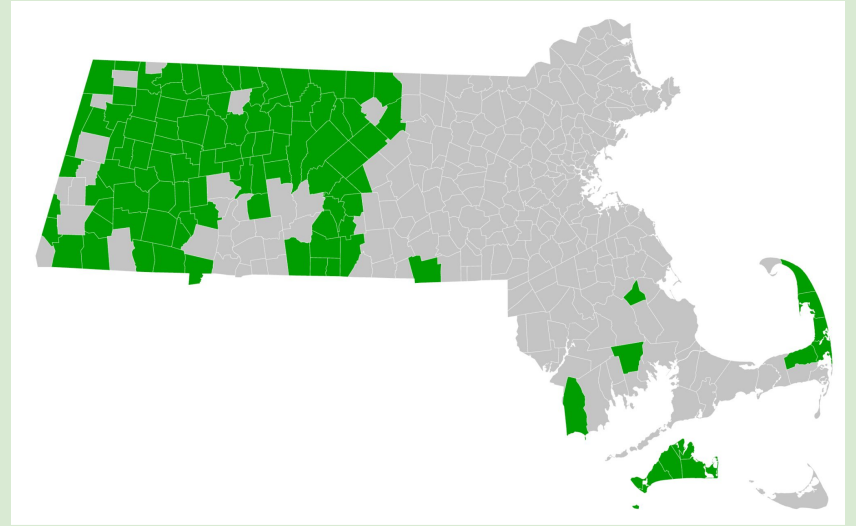
# The Fiscal Crisis in Rural Schools

Can it be fixed?

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February 28th, 2025

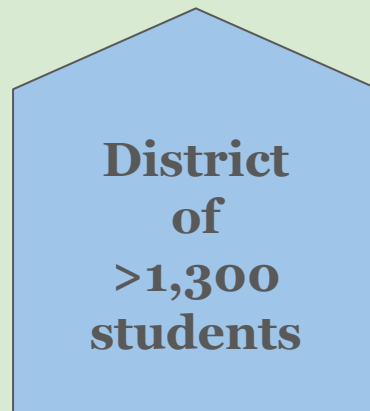
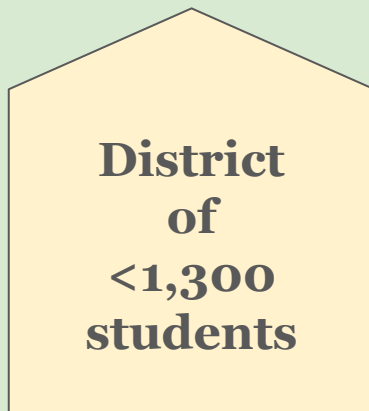
MASC Learning Lunch





# One Essential Idea

It costs more per student to provide a basic education in small districts than in larger ones.



Costs 16.7% more per pupil  
22.7% more if regional





# Who we are:

## Co-chairs of MASC's Rural Schools Committee



**Martha Thurber**

(she/her)

- Chair, Mohawk Trail Regional School Committee
- Lawyer



**Jessica Corwin**

(she/her)

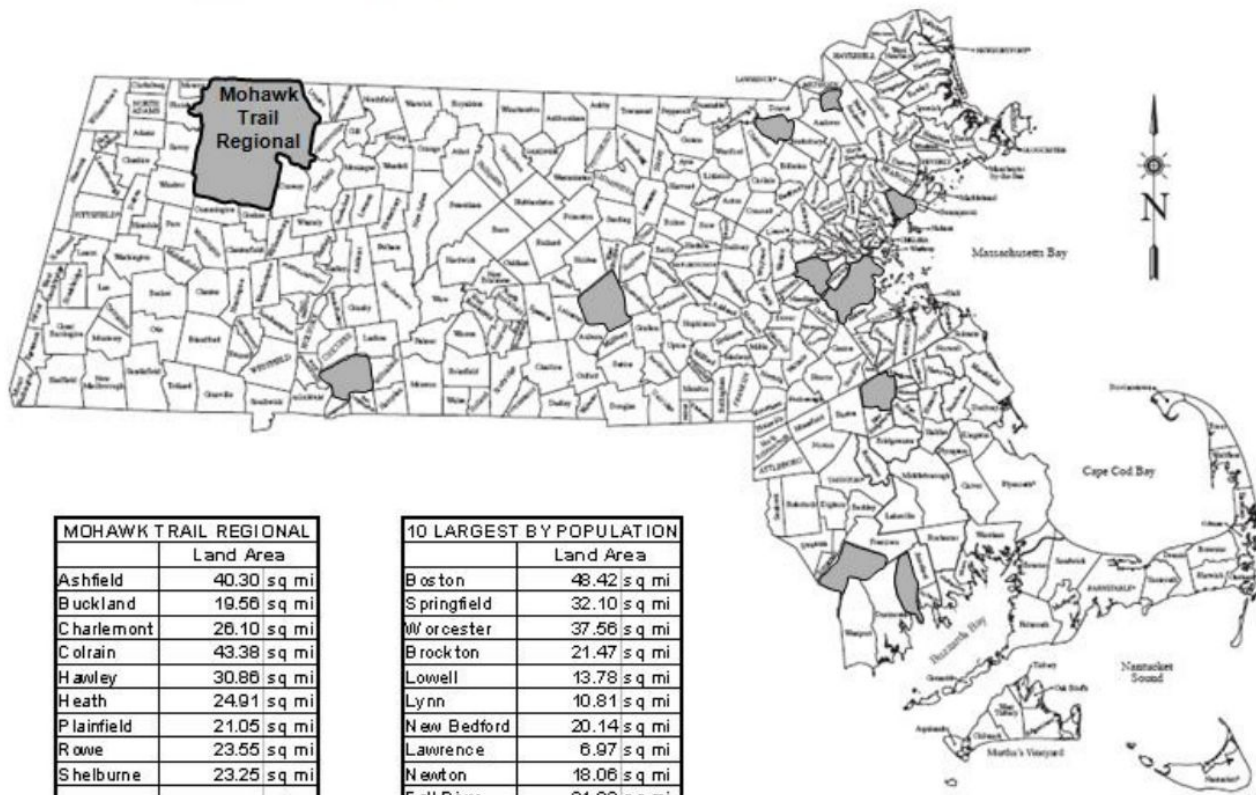
- Chair, Sunderland School Committee
- Member, Frontier Regional School Committee
- Teacher in Springfield





# MOHAWK TRAIL REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

## The Largest Geographic School District in Massachusetts



MOHAWK TRAIL REGIONAL	
	Land Area
Ashfield	40.30 sq mi
Buckland	19.56 sq mi
Charlemont	26.10 sq mi
Colrain	43.38 sq mi
Hawley	30.86 sq mi
Heath	24.91 sq mi
Plainfield	21.05 sq mi
Roue	23.55 sq mi
Shelburne	23.25 sq mi
TOTAL	252.96 sq mi

10 LARGEST BY POPULATION	
	Land Area
Boston	48.42 sq mi
Springfield	32.10 sq mi
Worcester	37.56 sq mi
Brockton	21.47 sq mi
Lowell	13.78 sq mi
Lynn	10.81 sq mi
New Bedford	20.14 sq mi
Lawrence	6.97 sq mi
Newton	18.06 sq mi
Fall River	31.02 sq mi
TOTAL	240.33 sq mi





# Today's agenda

1. History
2. The challenges facing rural schools
3. Some proposed solutions (and related barriers)
4. Shared concerns & the rural schools bill
5. The MASC Rural Schools Committee
6. Q&A





# History of rural school studies & advocacy in Massachusetts

- **2006:** Rural Schools Coalition established
- **2017:** Updating the Structure & Finance of Massachusetts Regional School Districts
- **2018:** DESE Fiscal Conditions in Rural School Districts
- **2018:** Improving Efficiencies Relative to Student Transportation
- **2019:** First Rural Aid in state budget. SOA establishes Commission.
- **2021:** Public Infrastructure in Western Massachusetts
- **2022:** Special Commission on the Fiscal Health of Rural Schools
- **2023:** An Act to Provide a Sustainable Future for Rural Schools introduced
- **2024:** MASC Rural Schools Committee established





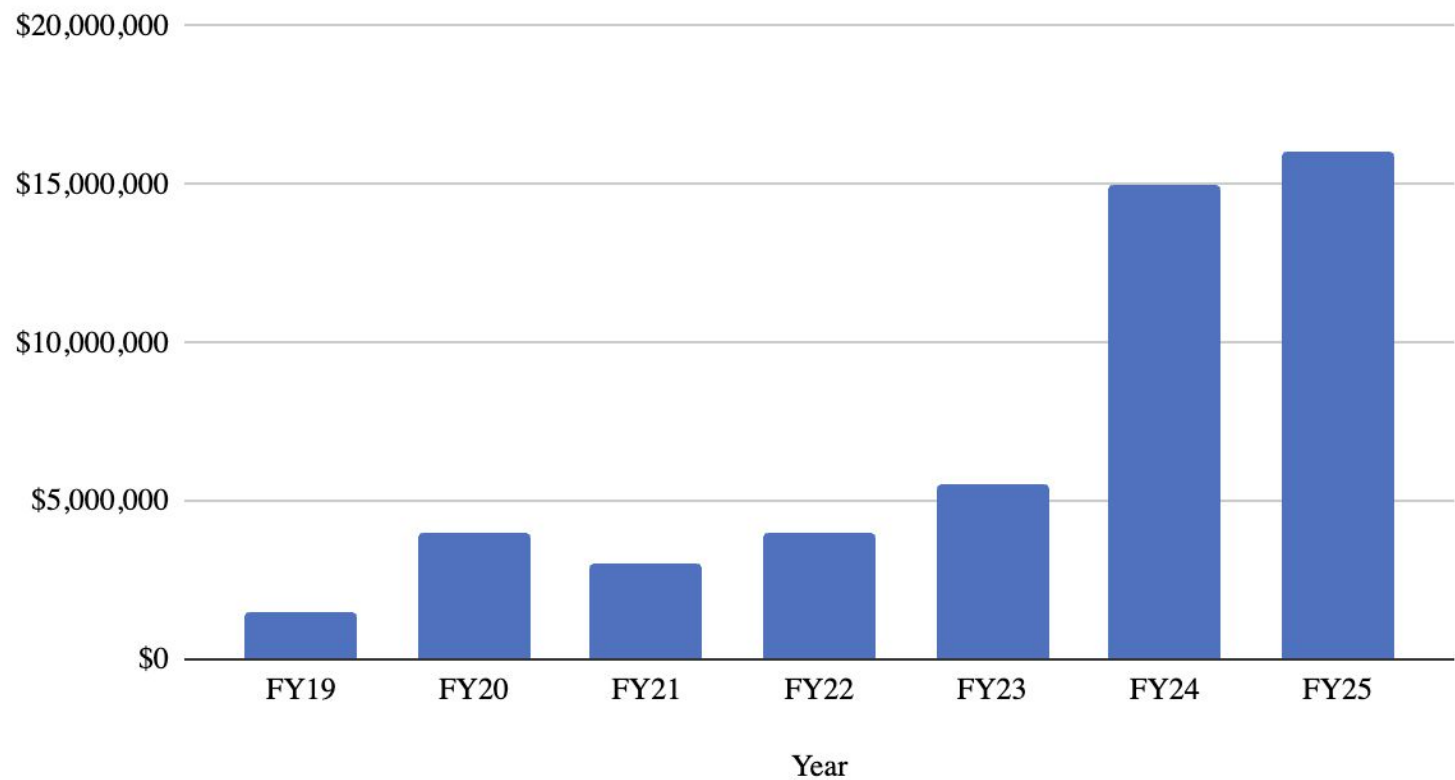
# What is Rural Aid?

- Line item in state budget since 2019
- Additional education aid for towns and regional districts that qualify based on income level and student population sparsity.
- Qualifying districts are sifted into 3 tiers of priority, with sparsest density districts receiving the largest portion of aid.





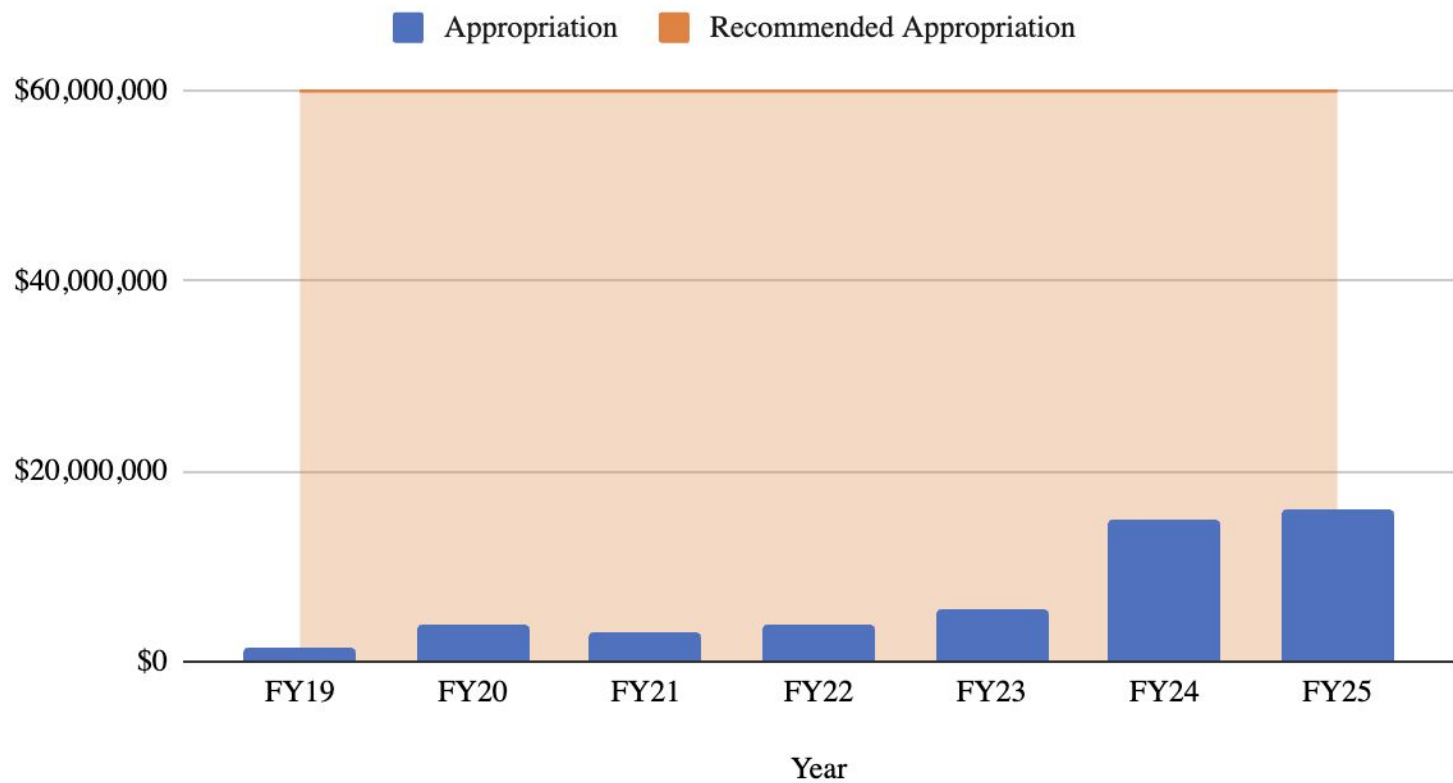
## History of Rural Aid





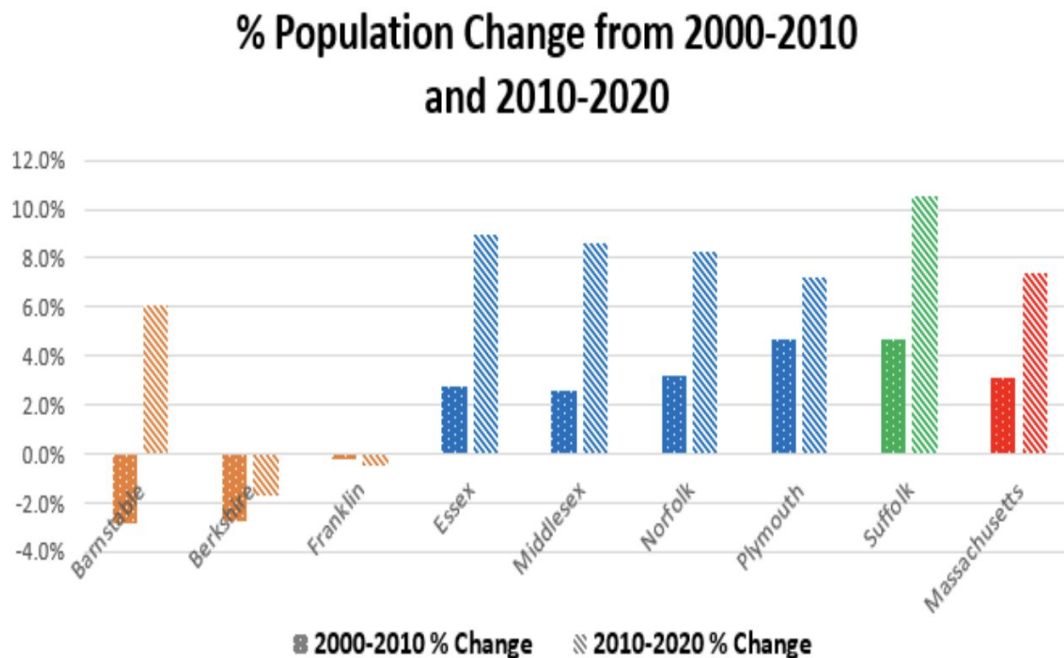


## History of Rural Aid





# Challenges facing rural districts: population decline



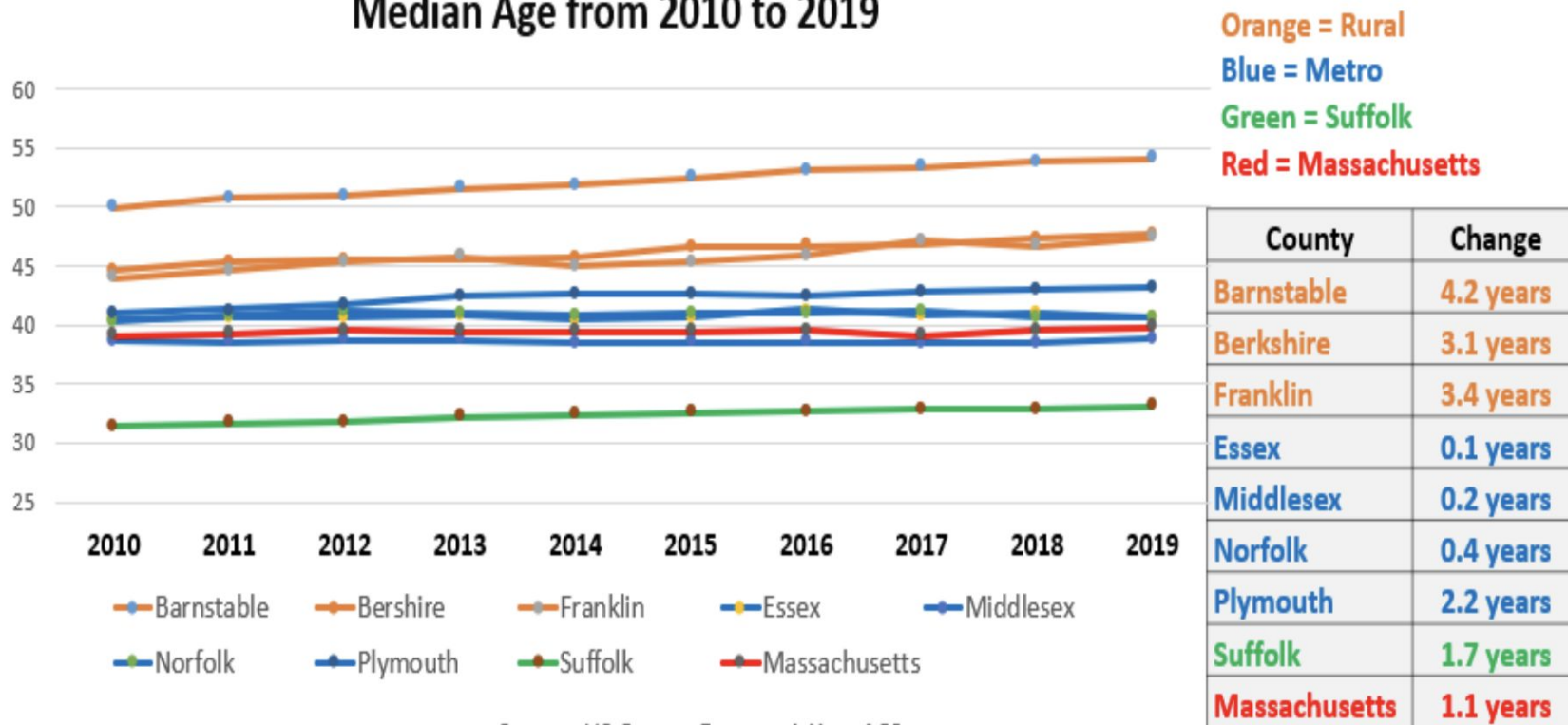
Source: US Census Bureau, 2000 Census, 2010 Census, and 2020 Census Redistricting Data





# Challenges facing rural districts: aging population

Median Age from 2010 to 2019

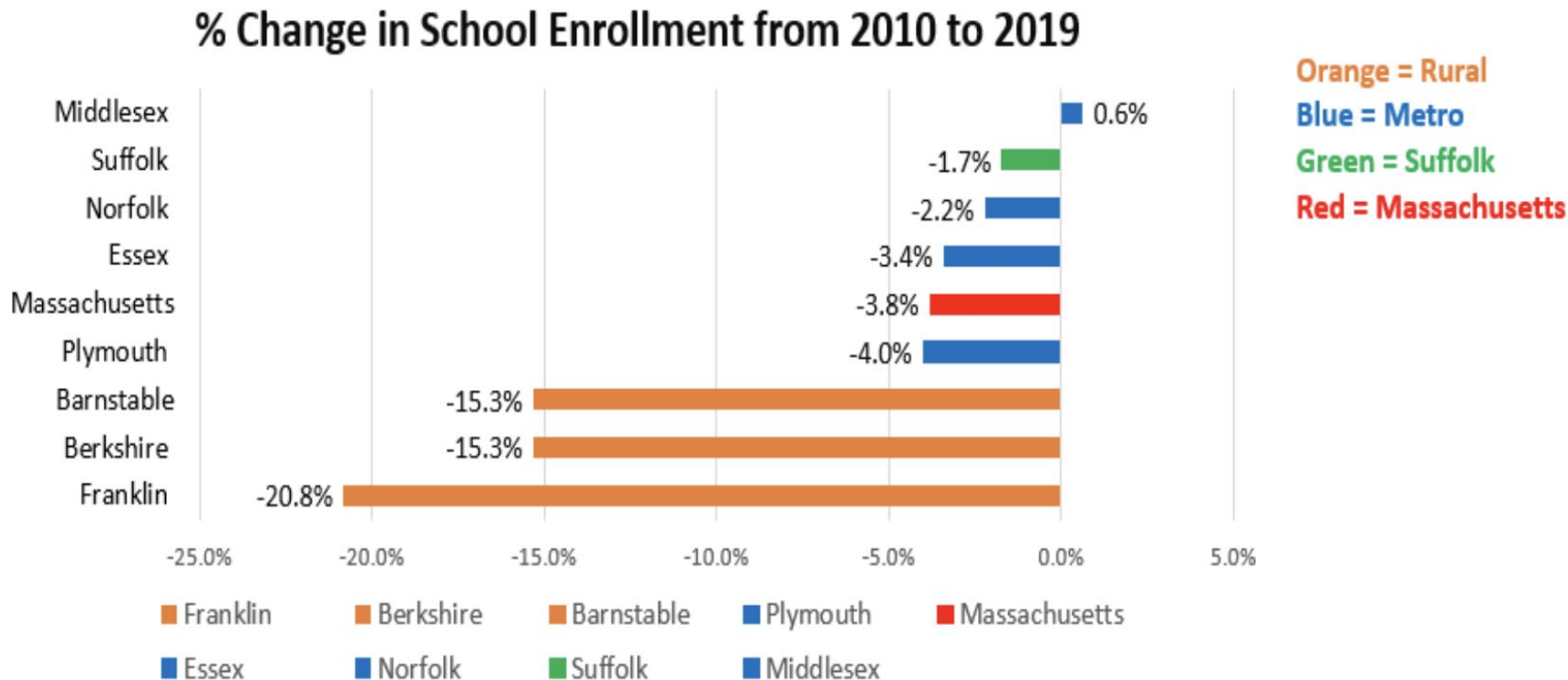


Source: US Census Bureau, 1-Year ACS





# Challenges facing rural districts: declining enrollment

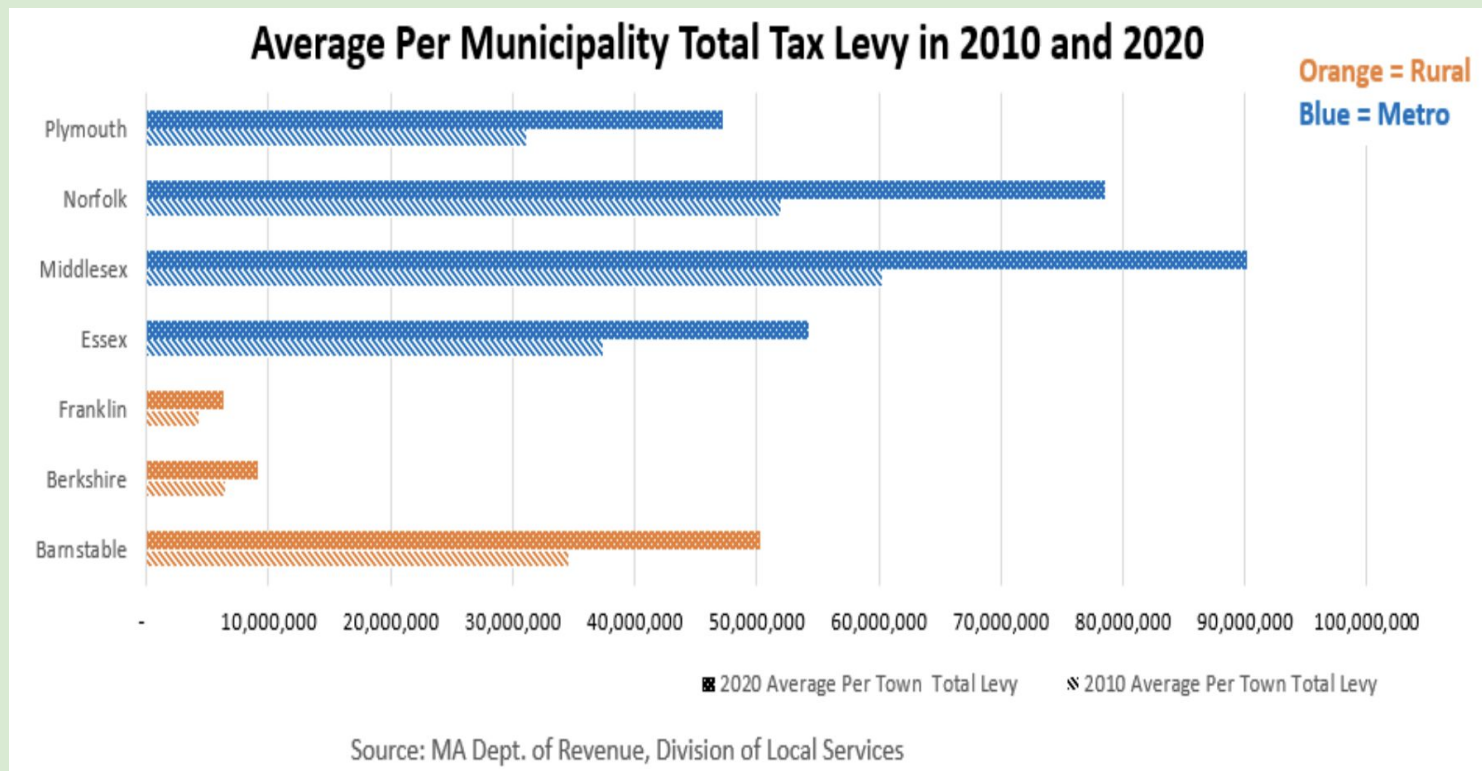


Source: US Census Bureau, 1-Year ACS





# Challenges facing rural districts: Small property tax base, no growth







# Challenges facing rural districts: Data outliers skew state aid calculations





# Challenges facing rural districts: **Per-pupil funding doesn't work.**

“The fundamental challenge for rural school districts is that when student enrollment declines... the costs of operating these schools do not decline at the same rate.”

– *Rural Schools Commission*





# Example from rural schools report

## Rural School

200 students  
2 classes per grade K-6  
14 homeroom teachers  
(~14 students per classroom)

Foundation budget \$3,310 per pupil

Assumed total cost:  
 $200 \times \$3,390 = \$662,000$

## Suburban School

300 students  
2 classes per grade K-6  
14 homeroom teachers  
(~21 students per classroom)

Foundation budget \$3,310 per pupil

Assumed total cost:  
 $300 \times \$3,310 = \$993,000$

**Foundation budget difference:  
\$331,000 or 33% less for exactly the same number of teachers.**







# Challenges facing rural districts:

## **Small schools cannot achieve efficiencies of scale.**

**FY20 Average Per Pupil Expenditures for Low Enrollment K-12 District**

	<b>Districts under 1,300 Students</b>	<b>Districts over 1,300 Students</b>	<b>Percent Difference</b>
Administration	\$748.30	529.22	41.3%
Teaching/Teaching Services	\$7,773.62	\$7,522.24	3.3%
Pupil Services	\$1,776.17	\$1,457.09	21.9%
Operations/Maintenance	\$1,413.69	\$1,247.48	13.3%
Insurance, Retirement, Other	\$3,367.89	\$2,879.90	16.9%
Total In-District Expenditures	\$17,834.38	\$16,146.24	10.5%





# Challenges facing rural districts: Transportation

Lack of adequate funding for

- Extraordinary costs associated with larger regionalized districts
- “Late buses” that would enable equitable access for all students to participate in sports and after-school activities
- Transporting students to field trips, internships, work-study, and dual enrollment opportunities.

This is an equity issue!





# How has the SOA affected rural districts?

	No. Rural Aid districts	% receiving minimum aid
<b>FY21</b>	51	78%
<b>FY22</b>	68	89%
<b>FY23</b>	67	63%
<b>FY24</b>	68	71%
<b>FY25</b>	67	85%





# What does the inflation factor mean to rural schools?

Welcome, Tracy!





# **Rural towns are in crisis.**

Rising education costs mean cuts everywhere else.

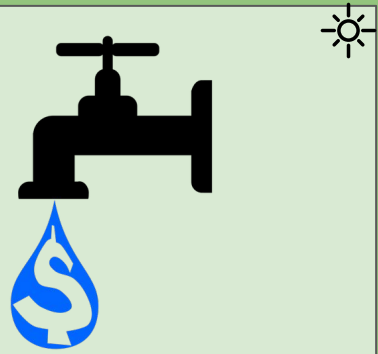
Towns are approaching the levy ceiling.

Schools and towns have little left to cut  
and dwindling, if any, reserves.

Student needs are expanding.



# Proposed solutions



What have rural towns already done?

- In-house/External feasibility studies
- Regionalized, closed community schools (where politically possible)
- Shared services like superintendency unions
- Reduced staff
- Cut programming (arts, languages, sports, electives)
- Opened to School Choice
- Tight lid on ALL expenses
  - Rural districts pay 18 of the 20 lowest average teachers' salaries.



# Proposed solutions: Regionalization

## Roadblocks

- Lack of resources to fund regionalization studies/implementation
- Current size: further regionalization may be impossible. Some students already spend more than an hour on the bus in each direction.
- Divergent contracts: pay scales, benefits must reconcile upward upon merger
- Politics: Annual Town Meeting voters want to protect local control, schools as critical community centers



# Proposed solutions: Legislative



- Rural Aid
  - Thirty states have some sort of Rural Aid program.
- Piecemeal legislation to address various elements, or the Rural Schools bill ([HD.3619](#)/[SD.2178](#)). More on this later.
- Inclusion of a rurality/sparsity factor in the next overhaul of Chapter 70 funding formulas.







# Shared Concerns: Rural issues are also every district's issues!



- Special Education funding reform
- Full funding of Circuit Breaker
- Charter school tuition reimbursement
- End one-Bidder Transportation Contracts (2023 MASC Delegate Assembly resolution)
- Fully fund transportation: regional, homeless students, out-of-district, vocational, foster children
- Adequate workforce, especially Special Education

**Most of these issues are covered in the Rural Schools bill.**





# The Rural Schools Bill ([HD.3619](#)/[SD.2178](#))

- Contains provisions for
  - **Out-of-district transportation funding**
  - **Foster care transportation**
  - **Special Education Finance Commission**
  - **Out-of-district tuition reimbursement**
  - **Strengthening the pipeline of Special Education teachers**
  - Rural Aid, Declining Enrollment Fund
  - Fully funding regional transportation
  - Equitable geographical representation on BESE
  - DESE examination of regulations as they relate to rural schools
  - Financial & practical support for regionalization



Rep. Natalie Blais  
Deerfield



Sen. Jo Comerford  
Northampton





# The Rural Schools Bill ([HD.3619](#)/[SD.2178](#))

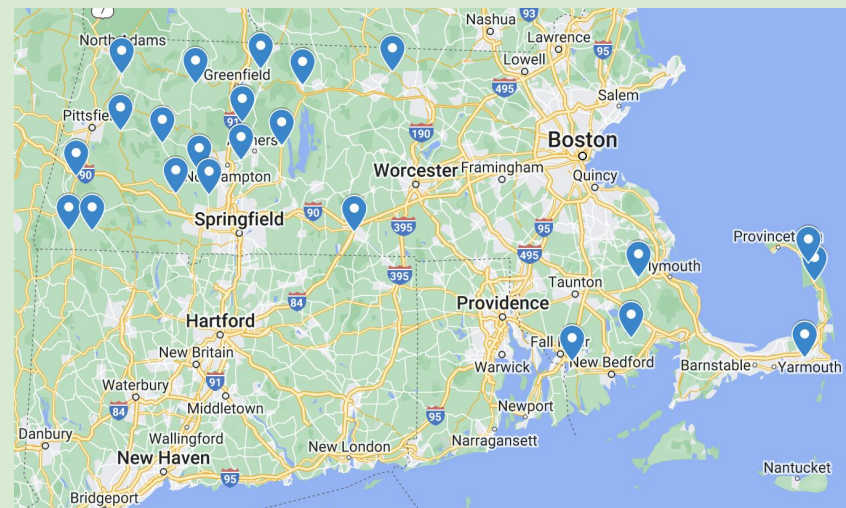
- Currently co-sponsored by
  - Senators: Brady, Comerford, Oliveira
  - Representatives: Berthiaume, Blais, Connolly, Domb, Duffy, Elliott, Flanagan, Hawkins, Higgins, Howard, Marsi, Sabadosa, Sena, Uytterhoeven
- This is the re-introduction of the bill.





# MASC's Rural Schools Committee

- Established May 2024
- 23 members representing 23 school districts from the Berkshires to the Cape
- Current priorities
  - FY26 Rural Aid appropriation
  - The rural schools bill
  - Outreach and education focused on legislators representing rural districts



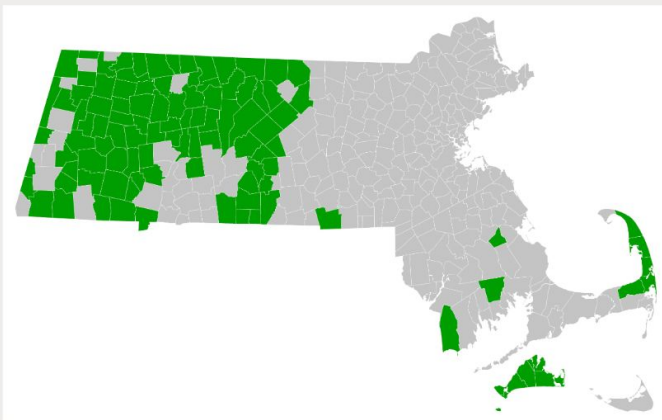


Learn more at [ruralschoolsma.org](https://ruralschoolsma.org) and [tinyurl.com/ruralma](https://tinyurl.com/ruralma)

## Rural Schools Advocacy in Massachusetts

[Home](#) [Rural Needs](#) [The Bill](#) [In the Media](#) [About/Contact](#)

[Take Action](#)



### Legislative Updates

In January 2025, State Representative Natalie Blais (D-Deerfield) and State Senator Jo Comerford (D-Northampton) introduced [HD.3619/SD.2178](#) An Act to Provide a Sustainable Future for Rural Schools. Please request that your legislators become co-sponsors of this essential bill.

In the same month, Governor Healey recommended level funding Rural Aid next year at \$16 million, far short of the \$60 million recommended by the legislature's Commission on the Fiscal Health of Rural Schools in 2022. Please urge your State Representative and State Senator to fully fund Rural Aid at \$60 million in



Q & A

