

DESE releases guidance on CTE admission regulations

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education recently released guidance regarding the updated Career and Technical Education regulations, which can be found through the Department's Office of College, Career and Technical Education page. This guidance should be used to update admissions policies for all CTE schools and for comprehensive districts with CTE programs. For those using the NEPN coding system, this policy would be coded JF.

All districts with middle schools that have access to CTE programs through their high schools or through a municipality's membership in a regional CTE district must create a Middle School Pathway Exploration Policy, which should include language that "documents how middle school students in the district are made aware of and gain exposure to the vocational technical programs to

which their district has access."

MASC recommends that districts with middle schools whose municipalities are part of a regional CTE district collaborate regarding local practices. MASC further recommends that this language be added to the district's Course of Study for middle school.

Because both of the above will vary widely by district, MASC has no plans at this time to circulate model policy language.

Both such updates, as with any policy, should be adopted by the full School Committee in a properly posted public session. The Department has set a deadline of November 1 for these updates to be submitted to the Department.

The full guidance report is posted on the DESE website: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/ccte/policies/admissions/default.html>

Health Insurance, food aid cuts could result in less school aid

A recent report from State House News Service shone a spotlight on the potential impact of the proposed Federal cutbacks in eligibility for public assistance programs like Medicaid on how MA counts low income students. This change could result in cuts in school aid by millions of dollars, even if the number of struggling families doesn't change.

In Chicopee, for instance, it would only take 50 to 75 students being dropped from the rolls of federal benefit programs to change how the district is categorized under the state's school funding formula. That could mean as much as \$5 million less in state funding, equal to about 62 teaching positions.

It might not seem like cuts to health care or food benefit programs would touch classroom budgets, but in Massachusetts, the two are tightly linked.

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MASC 2025 Division Elections

The following MASC Divisions are looking for members to serve as Division Chair, Vice-Chair, and Secretary-Treasurer: I, III, V, VII, and IX. These divisions are also looking for individuals to serve on the Nominating Committee – members of this committee are responsible for interviewing interested candidates for MASC Division Officers.

If you are interested in either serving on your local Nominating Committee or becoming a Division Officer, please email a letter of intent to the appropriate Division Representative from the list below. **To find your division visit www.masc.org/divisions/.**

- Division I: Jason Fraser, President jfraser@slrsd.org
- Division III: Mildred Lefebvre, Immediate Past President lefebvre4@gmail.com
- Division V: Denise Hurst, President-Elect hurst4kids@gmail.com
- Division VII: Stephanie Clougherty, Secretary-Treasurer mcd7masc@gmail.com
- Division IX: Beverly Griffin-Dunne, Vice President beverleygriffin@aol.com

All requests to be considered must be sent to the appropriate above-mentioned individual by September 30th, 2025. Please find more information about the Division Officer Responsibilities on the MASC website. <https://www.masc.org/masc-2025-division-elections/>

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT RESCINDS EL EQUAL ACCESS GUIDANCE

The U.S. Department of Education quietly rescinded Obama-era guidance meant to ensure English learners succeed in school by helping districts meet their needs.

The U.S. Department of Education has rescinded Obama-era guidance that called on states and districts to ensure English learners “can participate meaningfully and equally” in school and “have equal access to a high-quality education and the opportunity to achieve their full academic potential.”

The 40-page Dear Colleague letter, issued in 2015, commended districts for “creating programs that recognize the heritage languages of EL students as valuable assets to preserve.” (Dear Colleague letters are not legally binding, but are often used to communicate to education stakeholders administration’s priorities and policy interpretations.)

The department announced that it has rescinded the guidance because “it is not aligned with [Trump] Administration priorities.” The rescission of the guidance is part of a broader effort from the Trump administration to center the English language above all others.

The comprehensive and long-standing guidance included information on identifying and assessing potential EL students, evaluating EL students for special education services, ensuring their parents have meaningful access to information, and avoiding “unnecessary segregation” of EL students, among other tasks districts typically undertake when serving English learners.

The current administration’s rescission of the guidance follows the department’s closure of the Office of English Language Acquisition, which was shut down entirely

as part of the agency’s downsizing efforts that began in March. Before its closure, that office helped ensure that English learners and immigrant students gained English proficiency and academic success, schools preserved students’ heritage languages and cultures, and that all students had the chance to develop biliteracy or multiliteracy skills.

In March, President Donald Trump issued an executive order declaring English the national language. The recent federal push to prioritize English over other languages and to reduce access for English learners comes at a time when the percentage of English learners in public schools is increasing.

There were approximately 5.3 million English learner students in fall 2021, compared with 4.6 million such students a decade prior, according to data from the Education Department last updated in 2024.

MA

DECLINING ENROLLMENT IN MA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A recent report on Massachusetts student enrollment reveals trends school committee members will wish to consider in their planning for the future. School Enrollment Shifts Five Years After the Pandemic, by Abigail Francis and Joshua Goodman of the Boston University Wheelock College of Education and Human Development, traces the enrollment of Massachusetts school districts since 2019. This research found:

1. Public school enrollment drops are higher in higher-income districts.

Enrollment declines are much larger in districts in the top twenty percent of income as compared to the rest of school districts in the state. The top quintile of districts as sorted by the smallest percentage of low-

income students had enrollment in the fall of 2024 5.7% below predicted levels; the other 80 percent had enrollment 1% lower.

2. The demographics of Massachusetts schools have shifted.

Enrollment losses are concentrated among white and Asian students. Statewide student enrollment in fall of 2024 was 3.1% lower than predicted for white students and 8.1% lower for Asian students.

This is in marked contrast to Black and Hispanic student enrollment, which not only have recovered to pre-pandemic levels; they have exceeded it. In fall of 2024, Black student enrollment is 7.7% higher and Hispanic enrollment 0.8% higher. The authors suggest that this is related to differences in educational concerns throughout the pandemic: while in many areas, white and Asian families and those in high-income communities were more likely to switch to non-public schools to ensure in-person schooling, Black and Hispanic families, and those of middle and lower income, were more likely to support temporary switches to remote or other modes of schooling (or to lack any other option).

3. Enrollment by grade level has substantially shifted.

Elementary grades have largely recovered enrollment to pre-pandemic levels, and high school enrollment has barely moved at all.

Middle school enrollment, however, is 7.7% below predicted. This loss in enrollment exceeds the total public school enrollment drop across all grades. While at least some of this can be traced to state population of that age—middle-school aged children has seen a 5.9% population decline—the enrollment exceeds the census figures.

In planning for the future, school committee members should make use of this data.

LEGAL ISSUES UPDATE

Mahmoud v. Taylor

This summer's 6-3 Supreme Court decision in *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, 606 U.S. ___ (June 27, 2025), continues to be the focus of much discussion and a fair share of misinformation. *Mahmoud* stands for the proposition that:

- A parent or guardian may, based upon their religious beliefs, request that their child be exempt from specific portions of the school's curriculum, and
- A school's failure to grant such an exemption under certain facts may violate the parent's or guardian's rights under the Free Exercise Clause of the Constitution.

Mahmoud does not automatically entitle parents/guardians to a blanket accommodation/opt out from all instruction, events, assemblies, or surveys that involve, however minimally, sexual education, sexuality, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Although the Plaintiffs in *Mahmoud* were concerned about curriculum featuring LGBTQ+ issues, this case provides a broader message for districts when confronted with a parental challenge to curriculum, based upon the Free Exercise Clause of the Constitution. Curriculum, as written and as presented, should not be vehicles of indoctrination and schools should narrowly tailor their actions in maintaining a safe school environment for all students.

As noted in an earlier advisory, districts must have procedures in place to deal with religious based challenges to curriculum; these procedures and resulting decisions are fact driven, may vary greatly depending on a district's curriculum and its particular circumstances, and require specific district and building based approaches.

Districts should:

- Have a clear chain of command with all inquiries directed to the building principal, who will then notify a designee at the district's central office.
- Identify and confirm the specific basis of the objection and/or request for exemption in writing.
- Consult with the principal, the curriculum director and the classroom teacher in order to thoroughly examine the interplay between the objection/exemption request, the actual curriculum, the curriculum objectives and if applicable the logistics of permitting an accommodation, if one is required
- Consider whether an accommodation is necessary where the objectionable material is not required and/or the material is one of several options already available to the student.
- If it is determined that accommodation is called for, then an administrator in consultation with the appropriate staff member(s) should consider if an alternative assignment is warranted. That decision is fact driven, and under many circumstances there may be no need for an alternative assignment, especially where the challenged material is a minor component of the lesson at hand.



The discussion of a poem that takes place during 10 minutes of a single class is one example where an alternative lesson may not be required. However, if the material is the focus of a 7-week module in ELA, then the practical question becomes what that student will be doing for those 7 weeks. If no alternative is offered that student for 7 weeks, then the legal question becomes if the student has been deprived of their educational rights due to their religious beliefs and now subject to a discrimination claim. And just to make the hypothetical more challenging, how is the dynamic changed if it's not just a single student but 20% of the grade level?

- Develop a substantively well documented rationale if it is determined that an accommodation is inappropriate or an alternative learning opportunity will not be offered.

This subject is fraught with too many opportunities for missteps specific to your District's particular circumstances. Your district counsel is in the best position to protect you from the potential serious consequences associated with a Constitutional violation and should be consulted before formally responding to any request.

Please note that MASC will be hosting a virtual Learning Lunch on Friday, September 26th at Noon which will focus on the impact of *Mahmoud v. Taylor*. Please go to www.masc.org to register.

Wage Transparency Act

Districts should be well aware by now of the Commonwealth's "Wage Transparency Act" enacted in 2024. A section of the Act that initially went into effect in February 2025 dealt with several data reporting requirements. Members may be more interested in the portion of the Act that goes into effect October 29, 2025. It applies to employers (public and private) with 25 or more employees. The Act requires the employer:

- To disclose the pay range in the job posting for any position.
- To provide any employee or prospective employee with the pay range for a position upon their applying for a position, promotion, transfer, or beginning a new position
- Upon request, to provide an employee with the pay range for their current position.

Employees exercising their rights are protected from retaliation.

For additional information please see the following: The Act can be found at: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/h4890-signing/download>.

The Attorney General's Advisory on the Act can be found here: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/pay-transparency-in-massachusetts>

As always please feel free to reach out to us with any questions, comments, or concerns.

—Patrick Francomano, General Counsel

Less school aid continued from page 1

In fiscal year 2026, the state expects to cover about 59% of school costs across Massachusetts, leaving the remaining 41% to cities and towns. The mix varies from community to community, depending on enrollment and how much the state calculates each district can afford to contribute through property taxes.

The state aid is distributed through the Chapter 70 formula and the 2019 Student Opportunity Act, which added new funding meant for districts with greater need. The formula weighs many factors – from enrollment and transportation to special education costs – and one of the most important variables is how many students come from low-income families. To figure that out, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) uses “direct certification,” matching students to benefit programs such as MassHealth (the state’s Medicaid program), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC). If a child shows up in one of those databases, the state counts them as low-income, meaning their household income is below 185% of the federal poverty line, the standard set under the Student Opportunity Act.

This system saves schools from the expensive and time-consuming work of verifying every family’s income. But it also creates a risk: if families lose eligibility for benefits because of federal policy changes, their children can disappear from the state’s low-income count – even if their actual household income hasn’t budged. Under Chapter 70, each low-income student adds extra dollars to a district’s “foundation budget,” and districts are grouped into 12 categories based on the share of low-income students they serve. Moving down even one group can translate into millions less in state aid. Families may be unaware of the school funding intricacies, but their children’s needs don’t change because of a new federal law. For districts, the stakes are measured in teachers, support staff, textbooks and after-school programs.

“At best, it’s going to make things more complicated for schools and the state to calculate accurately the number of low-income students in each school district. At worst, it could lead to an undercounting of the number of low-income students,” said Sen. Jason Lewis, co-chair of the Joint Committee on Education and one of the authors of the Student Opportunity Act. Under the SOA, designed to invest heavily in schools over six years, districts would not get less Chapter 70 aid than the year before, Lewis said, but could get a smaller increase than they should if low-income students are undercounted.

State education officials confirmed that cuts to Medicaid or SNAP could affect the low-income count, though not overnight. That’s because students are categorized as low-income for Chapter 70 purposes if they qualified at any point during the prior 12 months.

In practice, that means it could take up to a year for federal changes to filter down into state education funding. Lewis stressed that the SOA requires the state to count every student from a family earning at or below 185% of the federal poverty line. The law does not prescribe how DESE must do that, he said, only that all eligible students be included.

While DESE has relied on “direct certification” matching through programs like MassHealth and SNAP as an efficient tool, Lewis noted that process was never written into statute. If fewer students show up in those benefit databases, DESE and districts still have the authority – and obligation – to count them manually. In addition, SNAP and Medicaid cuts could have other impacts on district budgets, including cuts to special education budgets.

Medicaid directly funds services for students with disabilities, including speech, physical and occupational therapy, as well as screenings and evaluations. Without Medicaid’s coverage, schools may be forced to divert money from other areas to pay for them. Free school meals are also at risk. Massachusetts is one of a handful of states with universal free school meals, a program that allows every student to eat breakfast and lunch at no cost. The state covers part of the tab, but a large share is reimbursed by the federal government based on how many students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

If fewer students are counted as low-income because they’ve fallen off programs like SNAP or Medicaid, the federal reimbursement to Massachusetts could shrink. That could force the state to spend more from its own budget to keep universal school meals alive.

Coming soon to your mailbox

MASC 2025 Delegate Manual/Annual Report

MASC/MASS JOINT CONFERENCE 2025



November 14, 2025

80th ANNUAL MEETING
DELEGATE MANUAL
and 2025 Annual Report

Delegate Assembly

Friday, November 14, 2025

Emerald Resort, Hyannis

Have you registered your delegate yet?

Delegate registration form is available online:
www.masc.org



ONE SESSION WITH REGGIECAT



by Tina M. Chilliast, MS, CCC-SLP, Speech Language Pathologist, Reingold Elementary School, and Sally Cragin, Director/
Founder, Be PAWSitive Therapy Pets and Community Education

The start of the new school year can be both exciting—and scary—for some students, and for others who are experiencing learning or emotional challenges. Learn how the Reingold Elementary School in Fitchburg has turned to furry therapy to help struggling students engage in the classroom.

A and E are first graders with bright smiles. A very rarely speaks, but E never speaks. However, when Sally arrived with Reggiecat the girls' faces lit up with delight. E immediately began meowing at Reggie, and A said "kitty!"

Sally talked about Reggie and what a nice cat he is. She carries a tape measure and said, "shall we measure him" She took out the cloth tape measure and held it out. A began counting as she moved fingers on the numbers. A got to the number 104.

A's teacher reported that A may be working on counting at home; however she had not yet demonstrated that skill at school. She was thrilled with the presentation of this evidence of skill as often delayed communication skills can impact students' ability to demonstrate developing skills.

During the therapy session with A and E, the presence of Reggiecat created a positive and engaging environment that encouraged both girls to interact and communicate. The use of pets as a therapy tool has been shown to enhance motivation and reduce anxiety in children, particularly those with communication and social emotional differences (Lee Jensen, (2025); VonLintel & Bruneau (2021)).

The immediate delight on A and E's faces upon seeing Reggiecat suggests a strong emotional connection. Research supports that animals can reduce stress and promote a sense of safety, which is essential for fostering communication in children with speech and language delays and selective mutism (Boyer, V. E., & Mundschenk (2014); Lee Jensen (2025); Tielsch Goddard & Gilmer (2015)).

E's initiation of meowing demonstrates motivation to communicate, even if it's not through conventional speech. This behavior is a step toward verbal expression at school

that had not previously been demonstrated at school. Encouraging consistent response to non-verbal communication over several prior sessions appears to have been effective in building confidence and trust as the groundwork for initiating vocal expression (Tielsch Goddard & Gilmer (2015)).

A's use of the word, "kitty" represented a breakthrough in her limited verbal initiations. Evidence suggests that low-pressure environments, such as those provided by animal-assisted therapy, can stimulate motivation and help children feel more comfortable expressing themselves and to take learning risks (Boyer, V. E., & Mundschenk (2014); Lee Jensen (2025); Tielsch Goddard & Gilmer (2015)).

E's participation in counting while measuring Reggiecat demonstrates her ability to engage in a structured activity and use numerical language. This not only supports her expressive language skills but also reinforces her understanding of numbers and counting, which are foundational numeracy skills (Hinton et al., (2016)).

Overall, the session demonstrated promising signs of engagement and communication from both A and E. This is but one example of breakthroughs and connection brought about with the assistance of this long-standing, adaptable, and valuable partnership.

Reggiecat and other therapy animals will be in attendance at the upcoming MASC/MASS Joint Conference in Hyannis, November 12-14. Sally Cragin and other members of the Be PAWSitive team will be on-site to discuss how your students may benefit from the introduction of a therapy animal program or classroom visit.

Articles references:

Boyer, V. E., & Mundschenk, N. A. (2014). Using Animal-Assisted Therapy to Facilitate Social Communication: A Pilot Study. Canadian Journal of Speech-Language Pathology & Audiology, 38(1), 26–38.

Lee Jensen, S. (2025). How My Therapy Dog Changed My Practice Forever. ASHA Leader, 30(1), 56.

Tielsch Goddard, A., & Gilmer, M. J. (2015). The Role and Impact of Animals with Pediatric Patients. Pediatric Nursing, 41(2), 65–71.

VonLintel, J., & Bruneau, L. (2021). Pathways for Implementing a School Therapy Dog Program: Steps for Success and Best Practice Considerations. Journal of School Counseling, 19(14), 1–32.

MASC/MASS Joint Conference UPDATE

To help school leaders prepare for the upcoming conference **(November 12-14 in Hyannis)**, a schedule of panels and other events has been mailed to all school committee members and superintendents, and is posted on the MASC website.

Be advised that some sessions may be subject to change between now and November. These will be noted on the website.

In addition, three sessions have been added since the schedule went to press. They include:

- **Strategic Investments in K-12 Leadership:** Developing your Principal's Leadership for Equitable Postsecondary Outcomes (Wednesday, November 12, 10:30-11:45)
- **Bristol Community College Holocaust and Genocide Center:** Programs and Resources for Schools and Communities (Friday, November 14, 10:30-11:45)
- **Lunch is Where the Heart Is:** Falmouth School Chef Celebrates Cultures and Locally-Sourced Foods for Students (Friday, November 14, 10:30-11:45)

Upcoming Events

Friday, September 12

MASC Learning Lunch

Topic: Equity 101

Saturday, September 13

MASC Charting the Course

Smith Voc., Northampton

Friday, September 26

MASC Legal Learning Lunch

Topic: Implications of Mahmoud Case:
Parental Opt-out

Friday, October 3

MASC Learning Lunch

Topic: Equity 201

Saturday, October 4

MASC Charting the Course

Tri-County Voc., Franklin

Friday, October 17

MASC Learning Lunch

Topic: Conference/Delegate
Assembly Review

Wednesday, November 12-

Friday, November 14

MASC/MASS Joint Conference
Hyannis

Saturday, December 6

Charting the Course
Location TBA

Friday September 26

MASC Legal Learning Lunch

Smith Voc., Northampton

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