

## DAY ON THE HILL UPDATE

### Legislators voice support for education funding relief

More than 300 MA school committee members, administrators, educators, and over 100 high school students, returned to (the newly renovated) Gardner Auditorium at the State House on March 30 for MASC's annual legislative advocacy program.

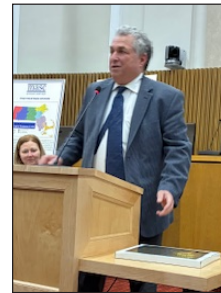
**MASC President Denise Hurst** convened the gathering before welcoming legislators and other special guests to report on current and pending issues and the financial implications of those that will impact public education in the



Denise Hurst



Sen. O'Connor



Rep. Gordon

upcoming budget process.

Hurst introduced the Board of Directors followed by presentations to **Senator Patrick O'Connor** and **Representative Ken Gordon** who were honored as MASC's 2025 Legislators of the Year. O'Connor, who sits on the Joint Committees on Way & Means; Education; Children: and Public Health among others, noted "It's very

easy right now to point fingers and say the state Legislature is not doing enough when it comes to education, I agree with you—we absolutely need to do more—and we need to do more together." Calling out health care as one of the across-the-board budget busters for the state and local districts, resulting from a complex mix of skyrocketing cost increases plus massive federal cutbacks, O'Connor acknowledged "this is the issue we need to begin to address."

Gordon, who chairs the House Committee on Education, acknowledged the wide range of challenges faced by urban, regional and rural districts and reported that the Committee is focused on providing remediation. "The Early Literacy priority raised by so many of you was taken up by the House late last year and is currently in conference committee. The

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## House Ways and Means budget released

On April 15, the House Ways and Means Committee released its \$63.3 billion proposal that would increase spending by 3.6% in fiscal year 2027 — a plan that leaders said they crafted while bracing for the potential impacts of ballot questions that could slash revenue "leaving us with no choice but to make significant budget cuts."



Budget writers had to account for a number of colliding fiscal challenges, including a sluggish economy, eroding federal support, growing discontent around a rising cost-of-living, and two potential ballot questions that could put dollars back in taxpayers pockets while taking a chunk of revenue away from the state budget.

The committee recommends slightly less spending, about

\$33 million less, than Governor Maura Healey did in her budget.

As always, the state's Medicaid program, MassHealth, is the largest chunk of the budget. House Ways and Means recommends funding it at \$22.41 billion, a \$282 million increase over last year.

One of the other biggest investments the budget makes is to local cities and towns, with nearly \$10 billion going to local aid through Chapter 70 education funding, unrestricted aid, special education circuit breaker funding and the sixth and final year of implementation of the Student Opportunity Act bringing an extra infusion of dollars to school districts.

The budget fully funds obligations of the Student Opportunity Act (SOA), the 2019 law that was meant to

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# NATIONAL NEWS

## LITERACY AND PERFORMANCE-BASED COMPENSATION GRANTS ANNOUNCED

The U.S. Department of Education announced last week some of the first elementary and secondary grant competitions under its new partnership with the Department of Labor. The partnership, announced in November, offloaded certain Elementary and Secondary Education Act education programs, including programming for low-income school districts, homeless youth, migrant students, academic supports, afterschool programs, districts receiving Impact Aid and other activities.

The two grant competitions announced Wednesday include one meant to advance literacy in high-need districts and schools, and a second to incentivize teacher and school leaders through a performance-based compensation system.

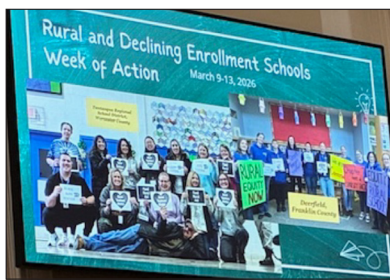
In deciding the award recipients, the agencies plan to prioritize, among others, those that include support for families providing at-home learning, emphasize merit, meet industries' needs, and return education to the states. The final awards will be distributed through the Department of Labor's grant management platform rather than the Education Department's.

Opponents and critics of the move have expressed concern that moving education grants under the Labor Department's wing would weaken oversight in education programs.

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## MA NEWS RURAL SCHOOLS WEEK OF ACTION

Over the week of March 9th, more than thirty rural and declining enrollment schools across the Commonwealth took part in the Rural and Declining Enrollment Schools Week of Action. At a series of events, students, staff, families, and community members spoke out on the challenges surrounding rural and declining enrollment schools.



Students at Frontier Regional in South Deerfield formed an SOS in the school gym; students at Clarksburg Elementary did the same on their school playground. Shutesbury Elementary's community surrounded the building, holding hands. Pelham Elementary students joined together in a "rural schools have heart" art project that was displayed in the school

gym the evening of a community budget information session. Many other communities held stand-outs before and after school to call attention to the challenges faced by their communities. Rural schools then brought this energy to the State House as part of MASC Day on the Hill. Rural Caucus co-chairs Martha Thurber and Jessica Corwin presented before those attending (see Day on the Hill update). This remains a key legislative priority for the Association. MASC will continue to call on the Legislature to fully fund Rural Aid at \$60 million annually; implement the recommendations of the 2022 report A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools; and update Chapter 70 to include a sparsity factor.

## Day on the Hill 2026

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proposed legislation to restrict cell-phone use in K-12 classrooms is also being addressed. When you visit your legislators, ask them to help move these bills to resolution."

Next on the agenda, **Doug Howgate**, President of the MA Taxpayers Foundation, shared his perspective on how what is happening at the



federal level is impacting MA state finances. These include cuts and reimbursement reductions in a number of federally funded programs including Medicare/Medicaid and SNAP benefits, which will have significant ramifications on the state's health safety net. In addition, tariffs and cuts to scientific and medical research at area universities will also impact the state's economy moving forward, and those reductions in federal aid will have to be picked up with state dollars. "Those dollars have to come from somewhere. There is no doubt that Chapter 70 funding is going to be affected. SOA attempted to address some of the larger funding inequities, but it was not the perfect solution and the entire formula needs to be reconsidered. Other challenges include the discrepancy between state tax collections which are currently flat (2.3%) and spending which is at about 6%. The state has been able to cover this mismatch up until now with supplemental/rainy day funds, but that can't continue."

One of the leading drivers of reduced educational aid for many districts, he added, has been declining enrollment. "Chapter 70 funding is based on enrollment and last year there were 14,000 fewer students, whether because of dwindling rural populations, fears around immigration enforcement, or

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# Day on the Hill

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charter or private school enrollment. When SOA ends next year there needs to be a reassessment of the formula and how district costs are derived and paid."

Another looming uncertainty that is likely to factor into the House and Senate budget proposals is the upcoming ballot question that would reduce the sales tax from 5 to 4%. This, Howgate said, would amount to a loss in revenue of approximately \$4 billion.

"I won't kid you. There are significant challenges ahead, which will not be easily resolved.

Where increased demands in the face of diminishing resources are concerned, we need to figure out how we do what we do in a better way."

## Education Committee Co-Chair

**Senator Jason Lewis** urged the school committee members in attendance to advocate for the three big education-related budget busters: Special Education, especially sky-rocketing out-of-district placements; transportation; and health care. "Inflation is taking a big bite out of your district's budget. ESSER money has been spent. We've covered some of the shortfall with Fair Share dollars, but that is not a reliable long-term solution. We need to take a thorough review of how the budget is calculated and how the state/local split is determined. SOA didn't touch the formula and we need to address the state/local balance share."

Lewis concluded, noting that this is being taken up in the Senate, and legislation to address the problem is currently in Ways and Means. "We're pushing to get this to the floor and in the budget, but we need your help and advocacy. Hopefully we can move this forward to address these structural issues."

The debilitating challenges



**Jessica Corwin (left) and Martha Thurber**

facing small and rural districts were outlined in detail by **Martha Thurber**, a member of the Mohawk Trail Regional School Committee, and **Jessica Corwin**, a member of the Sunderland and Frontier Regional School Committees. These include funding inequities that have reduced state support for these communities, compounded by declining



**Kathy LaNatra**

enrollments that have led to lower reimbursements and significant cuts to staff and programming. These districts, they noted, are under extraordinary pressure not only to fund education, but also social services and public safety with small tax bases in a large geographic area. A rural schools funding bill originally proposed by Senator Jo Comerford and former Representative Natalie Blais would have targeted funding and resources to help rural districts. The bill was reported out favorably by the Joint Education Committee but in a very modified version that removed much of the original intent. Thurber and Corwin urged attendees to ask their legislators to support key priorities for rural schools, including: fully funding Rural Aid at \$60 million; adding a sparsity factor to the Chapter 70 formula; and moving forward the recommendations outlined in the 2022 Special Commission on Rural Schools report.

"You need budget stability in what is unfortunately a volatile, unpredictable environment," observed **Representative Kathy LaNatra**, a member of the House Committee on Federal Funding, Policy, and Accountability, and MASC's 2024 House Legislator of the

Year. When budgets aren't stable, schools aren't stable, programs and positions are lost and students suffer the consequences. LaNatra reported on two pieces of pending legislation that can help districts manage unanticipated costs. These would establish a special education reserve fund account of up to 5% annual net school spending (an increase from the current 2%) and a regional school assessment reserve fund for use in years when the regional assessment increases by more than 3.5% over the prior year. These bills, she explained, are currently in Third Reading. "Ask your legislator to report out those bills. Your advocacy can help them get to the finish line. They won't fix everything, but they are practical steps in the right direction."

MASC Division I (North Shore) Chair/MASC Legislative Committee Chair **Bridget Garabedian** concluded the program with a review of MASC priorities, noting the four key "asks" for the current legislative session: Adjusting Chapter 70 aid for past and future inflation; Improving the fiscal health of rural school districts; Increasing and establishing reserve funds for school committees; and Protecting public education in the state budget. Garabedian reminded the audience of the importance of building relationships with students, colleagues, legislators, and administrators. "We are all in this together, and we have to support each other." (Note: MASC Legislative Session and FY27 Budget Priorities are posted in detail on the MASC website: [www.masc.org/advocacy](http://www.masc.org/advocacy))

**Tony Martin, a student at Springfield Virtual School was one of the more than 100 students attending Day on the Hill. He serves as the student representative on the Springfield School Committee and hopes to continue being involved with education—as an early education teacher!**



# House budget

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make school funding more equitable. Schools received \$7.3 billion last year, and would receive just over \$7.6 billion under the committee budget, similar to the governor's proposal. That includes \$550.5 million of SOA funds, which are supported by the 4% surtax on high-earners.

Of the \$2.7 billion that budget writers plan to spend in surtax revenues, the committee is recommending a 63.89% / 36.11% split between education and transportation initiatives. This is a similar split to past years, and tends to even out as lawmakers later in the year take up a supplemental budget to allocate surplus surtax funds. Those supplements have weighed much more heavily towards transportation initiatives.

With \$1.725 billion in education spending of surtax funds, the committee is fully funding the SOA's requirements, as well as \$365 million in child care grants to providers to continue a pandemic-era early education program; \$198 million for universal school meals; \$127 for free community college; an \$85 million financial aid expansion; \$62 million school transportation reimbursements; and other programs.

The House budget also plans to use \$52.2 million towards minimum per-pupil aid, which representatives are recommending to raise to \$160 per child. That would be an increase from \$150 per child in fiscal year 2026, and more than double what Healey recommended at \$75 for all districts.

On the transportation side, the committee appropriates \$975 million, providing \$470 million to the MBTA, \$184.8 to regional transit authorities, a \$220.2 million transfer to the Mass Transportation Trust Fund, and \$100 million for health and human services-related transportation.

The committee is recommending \$40 million for the MBTA Academy

to support workforce training and recruiting, and also supports water transportation and income-eligible reduced fares.

The budget also proposes reforms to out-of-district school transportation, after lawmakers required the inspector general last year to review the skyrocketing costs and provide recommendations to help districts save dollars. Districts say transportation is one of their most burdensome costs with out-of-control growth.

The committee is proposing that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education maintain an electronic database for procurement and contract documents, establish best practices for districts, and study the special education school marketplace to identify areas for more transparency and improve competition for contracts. It would also require each school district to get a breakdown of detailed cost components from vendors, which could include costs on a per-trip basis, labor, fleet acquisition, fuel and vehicle maintenance, insurance, overhead, profit, and other costs.

Advocates have been at the State House for the last several months lobbying lawmakers on how federal immigration policies are affecting school budgets. Cities and towns around the state with large immigrant populations have seen steep enrollment declines over the last year, says the Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance, as families have been deported or voluntarily returned to their home countries amidst heightened anxiety. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids and deportations in these communities have now produced a ripple effect on school budgets, the group says — with declining enrollment, the districts receive less money from the state to run their schools.

The House Ways and Means budget includes a \$10 million reserve for school districts that have experienced “unexpected enrollment reductions”

in non-native English speaking students.

School committees, superintendents, educators and students have also been advocating for years for the state to change the Chapter 70 school funding formula altogether, which relies heavily on enrollment and has caused fiscal crises in districts with declining populations.

House Ways and Means Chair Aaron Michlewitz has noted that with the final infusion of the SOA being implemented in this budget, it may finally be time to open the conversation about a Chapter 70 school funding revision.

House Speaker Ron Mariano also referenced two revenue-related ballot questions that threaten to further complicate the fiscal picture. “If these questions become law, the commonwealth’s ability to fund services—our residents rely on, from the MBTA to MassHealth to public schools—will be hampered significantly, leaving us no choice but to make significant budget cuts, and consider alternative sources of revenue.”

If a ballot question reducing the income tax from 5% to 4% over three years passes in November, the revenue losses begin “almost immediately” and could have an \$800 million impact on the FY27 budget.

*Information in this article was supplied by Sam Drysdale, State House News Service.*

## Upcoming Events

**Thursday, April 30**

6:00pm

**Divisions 1, II meeting**

Doubletree Hotel North Shore,  
Danvers

**Saturday, May 2**

8:00am-4:00pm

**MASC Charting the Course**

Higgins Middle School,  
Peabody

# House Passes Bill to Protect Children from Social Media, Prohibit Cell Phones in Schools

The Massachusetts House of Representatives has passed a bill requiring social media companies to implement age verification systems to prohibit users under the age of 14, and require parental consent from prospective social media users aged 14 and 15. Additionally, the bill will protect students from distracting technology during the school day by prohibiting the use of cell phones from school arrival through dismissal. The bill will also require districts to educate students in age-appropriate ways about the responsible use of social media, including potential harms to emotional and mental health and bullying. Following are key components of the legislation.

## **Social Media Ban for Children**

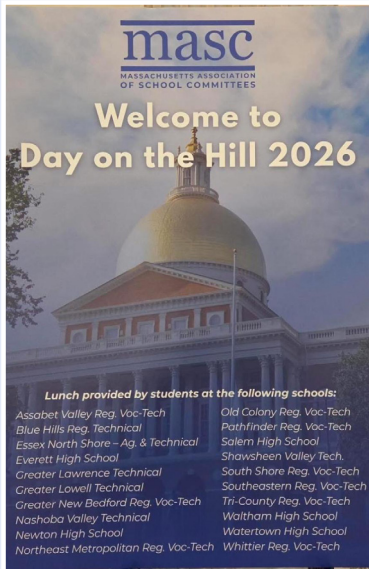
- Requires social media companies to implement an age verification system based on the best technology available in order to reasonably and accurately identify a current or prospective user's age
- Prohibits minors under the age of 14 from social media platforms, by requiring platforms to terminate users under said age and delete associated personal information effective October 1, 2026.
- Requires social media platforms to acquire verifiable parental consent for 14- and 15-year-old users of their platforms
- Platforms must publicly post information related to:
  - The number of users processed using the age verification system
  - The number of users granted access to the social media feed due to the age determination appeal process
  - The number of users denied access to the social media feed due to the user not meeting age requirements
  - The number of users granted access to the social media feed after providing the platform with verifiable parental consent
  - The number of account user age verification review requests
  - The number of accounts subsequently terminated for not meeting age requirements due to account user age verification review requests
- Platforms found to be in violation of these requirements will be subject to civil fines.
- Prohibits social media platforms from sharing information about a minor's LGBTQ+ status or other characteristics protected under state law.
- Directs the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), the Attorney General's Office (AGO) and the Department of Public Health (DPH) to provide guidance to districts on effective instruction on social media use.
- Directs the AGO to promulgate regulations for online protections, annually review the definition

of "social media platform," and maintain a public platform for reporting potential violations.

## **Requirements for School Districts**

- Must implement a policy prohibiting the use of personal electronic devices as determined by the School Committee. Districts must implement the policy during the school-day and during school sponsored activities occurring during the school-day. Districts must also notify parents of said policy and ensure that parents still have the ability to contact their children during the school day and vice versa. This prohibition can be put into effect by way of:
    - Secure storage of personal electronic devices
    - The use of technology that renders personal electronic devices inoperable
    - Other methods, which will require the approval of DESE
  - Must file their policy annually, no later than September 1st, to DESE.
  - Districts must make accommodations and exceptions as necessary, including for students with: IEPs or disabilities that require the use of personal electronic devices; documented medical needs, including to treat or monitor a health condition; language access and translation needs, as authorized by the superintendent or a designee. Accommodations and exceptions must also be made in the event of an emergency.
- Requirements for DESE
- Provide guidance, recommendations, and a model policy to help districts with developing and implementing effective policies regarding the prohibition of personal electronic devices during the school day
  - Includes discipline safeguards to ensure that expulsion/suspension can't be imposed solely for violating device policies.
  - Includes DESE reporting requirements on implementation device policies, and effects of social media education.

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## MASC thanks the students and chefs from the 20 vocational schools who prepared and catered the outstanding buffet lunch.

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|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Assabet Valley Reg. Voc. Tech.      | Old Colony Reg. Voc. Tech.       |
| Blue Hills Reg. Voc. Tech.          | Pathfinder Reg. Voc. Tech.       |
| Essex North Shore Tech.             | Salem High School                |
| Everett High School                 | Shawsheen Valley Reg. Voc. Tech. |
| Greater Lawrence Reg. Voc. Tech.    | South Shore Reg. Voc. Tech.      |
| Greater Lowell Reg. Voc. Tech.      | Southeastern Reg. Voc. Tech.     |
| Greater New Bedford Reg. Voc. Tech. | Tri-County Reg. Voc. Tech.       |
| Nashoba Valley Reg. Voc. Tech.      | Waltham High School              |
| Newton High School                  | Watertown High School            |
| Northeast Metro Reg. Voc. Tech.     | Whittier Reg. Voc. Tech.         |

## Social Media Bill

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### Pilot Program

- DESE must issue a request for proposals for a pilot program in which 10 districts may participate that shall provide for a technological means of rendering a personal electronic device inoperable on school grounds during the school day.
- DESE may select one or more bidders to provide such technology. In making such selection, DESE must consider the technology's:
  - Compliance with state and federal privacy laws;

- Flexibility to allow districts to provide access to applications other than those designed for texting or talking;
- Ability to allow parents and students to communicate with each other;
- Ability to allow communication between students and emergency providers (911)
- The geo-fencing pilot includes privacy safeguards, including that providers can't collect data for advertising or profiling.
  - The bill passed the House of Representatives 129-25. Having passed the Senate already, the bill now goes back to the Senate for further consideration.

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