



**A DIVERSE UNION
of EDUCATION
WORKERS**

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March 4, 2026

The Honorable Aaron Michlewitz
Chair, House Committee on Ways & Means
State House, Room 243

The Honorable Michael Rodrigues
Chair, Senate Committee on Ways & Means
State House, Room 212

Dear Chair Michlewitz and Chair Rodrigues,

We look forward to working with you to pursue our shared goals of making sure that every student in the Commonwealth has access to a great public education from prekindergarten through college.

As you craft the FY27 budget in these difficult times, there is one significant cause for celebration that creates a wonderful opportunity to protect against the federal assaults and advance policies that will help all of our students to thrive: the Fair Share Amendment, which we worked together to enact, is raising far more revenue than had been projected. The FY25 surplus will provide over \$1 billion to protect higher education from federal cuts, as you have proposed in the DRIVE Act, and could be used to achieve similar goals in K-12 education, while also funding targeted education initiatives to help our students meet the enormous challenges they are facing. In addition, the FY27 Fair Share revenue creates opportunities to address the flaws in our state education funding systems that are leading to a severe fiscal crisis in preK-12 schools and our colleges and universities.

Our prek-12 schools across the Commonwealth are suffering from inadequate funding at a time when the challenges are greater than ever: Many students are struggling with mental health difficulties and schools often lack the resources to meet their needs; costs for transportation and health care are rising rapidly; and special education costs continue to climb.

To address these needs in different types of districts with various fiscal challenges will require a combination of strategies. We encourage you to craft a budget, including through the use of Fair Share funds, that uses a series of strategies to address the needs of students in districts across the state:

- **Mental health.** Perhaps no issue is more urgent in our public schools than the mental health and well-being of our students. Key to addressing this crisis is providing all school districts with resources they need to hire enough paraprofessionals, guidance counselors

and other educators needed to support all students. This could be done in line with pending legislation to create the Whole Child Grant Program, which would direct \$123 million in urgently needed resources to support students and educators. However, an initial appropriation in the budget could be made at a lower level and would represent a key first step toward implementing the full Whole Child Grant Program over time. Combined with the other school funding initiatives described later in this letter, that funding could significantly strengthen the capacity of schools to address the severe challenges faced by many of them.

- **Address the public education funding crisis.** We recommend the following investments:
 - **Fixing the Chapter 70 inflation glitch.** When inflation reached 7% and 8% in recent years, the Chapter 70 formula capped adjustments at 4.5%. As a result, districts did not receive funds to cover a significant portion of the inflation that affected their expenses. The way the Chapter 70 formula originally worked, that would not be a long-term problem because the lost inflation would automatically be added back to the foundation budget in the following year. But a subsequent technical change inadvertently altered that. Now, when the cap reduces aid below the level needed to keep pace with inflation, that reduction is locked in forever and reduces future aid. We ask that you support phasing in a fix that will allow districts ultimately to receive the real dollar amounts promised in the *Student Opportunity Act*. With the Trump administration's attacks on immigrants appearing to reduce enrollments in districts with large immigrant populations, this fix is more urgent than ever as those districts might otherwise receive severely inadequate Chapter 70 allocations.
 - **Support districts facing enrollment declines.** Many districts serving large immigrant populations have seen enrollment declines that very likely are related to federal actions targeting students and families. As a result, those districts are receiving smaller increases in Chapter 70 than they would have otherwise. This is likely to cause unexpected and potentially devastating budget challenges in the impacted districts, which is why we urge the state to create a "pothole" account to provide immediate relief. We have a responsibility to ensure the health of all of our districts in the face of federal attacks, and it is essential that they are adequately resourced and staffed when our students return, as we all hope.
 - **Reimbursing transportation expenses in all public school districts.** High inflation continues to drive up the cost of providing transportation to students,

both in regional and non-regional school districts. To address this, we ask that the FY27 budget build on the governor's initial proposal in FY26 to fund 95% of the regional school transportation reimbursement line item and begin to reimburse non-regional districts for transportation costs, which the Commonwealth has not done in over two decades.

- **Strengthening the Special Education Circuit Breaker.** Special education costs have been increasing significantly, stretching local school district budgets and making clear that the current reimbursement program is inadequate. We urge that the FY27 budget enhance the circuit breaker program by increasing the reimbursement rate for the program from 75% to 90% of eligible special education costs and lowering the cost threshold for expenses to become eligible for reimbursement.
- **Providing urgently needed resources for rural schools.** Rural schools often have costs that are not reflected in the foundation budget for school funding, which mostly relate to not having the same economies of scale as non-rural districts. Rural districts also often have declining enrollments, which means they rarely get increases in Chapter 70 (other than minimum aid) since it is an enrollment-based formula. In addition, rural school aid actually was cut in FY26, relative to FY25, so it is especially crucial that the FY27 budget includes a substantial increase in funding. The governor has provided a solid starting point with a \$20 million request. We urge increasing that appropriation to \$60 million in rural school aid, which is the amount recommended by the Rural Schools Commission and would help offset some of these districts' unique fiscal challenges.
- **Strengthening the charter school reimbursement formula.** When a student leaves a public school to attend a charter school, the public school district is required to pay the charter school a corresponding tuition amount, a system that siphons hundreds of millions of dollars from Massachusetts public school districts and significantly stresses the budgets of impacted public school districts. One way to begin to address this issue is to strengthen the Charter School Tuition Reimbursement Program by adding a fourth year to the reimbursement schedule and raising the reimbursement rate in the second year to 80%.
- **Providing at least \$150 per pupil in Chapter 70 minimum aid.** Many minimum aid school districts, which represent a significant portion of all school districts, face similar fiscal challenges to non-minimum aid districts but only receive a modest per-pupil increase in Chapter 70 funding. The inclusion of \$150 per-pupil in minimum aid in the FY26 budget was critically important for districts across the

state. The governor has proposed just half of that, at \$75 per pupil. Given the growing number of districts that rely on this aid, it is essential that the Commonwealth maintain at least the level of support it provided in FY26.

While we address the current crisis, we look forward to working together on proactive initiatives to make major advances in how we can support all students. We recommend:

- **Convening a Comprehensive School Funding Commission.** As we work to provide immediate relief to school districts through the funding streams detailed above, we must also work together to identify where our funding system is falling short and together chart a stronger and more equitable path forward. It has been over a decade since the Foundation Budget Review Commission was convened, despite the fact that state law requires that one be established at least every 10 years. The Local Contribution Study created by the Fiscal Year 2026 budget is a start, but we need a complete review of all aspects of state school funding in the Commonwealth – beyond just the foundation budget – if we are to ensure the long-term and sustainable health of our districts. That work has to start now so that we can have a plan of action in place as soon as possible.
- **Launching community schools.** Community schools bring together strengths from across the community so that schools can address the health needs, including mental health, of students, provide nutritious food, make available enrichment opportunities, and empower students, parents and educators to work together to build a community that creates the conditions where all students can learn and thrive. We recommend funding planning grants for school districts and creating capacity within DESE to provide technical assistance.
- **Attracting a diverse and excellent educator workforce.** We ask for your support for two initiatives to bring down financial barriers: continuing to fund Tomorrow's Teachers so that aspiring educators who commit to teaching in our public schools don't need to go deeply into debt to pay tuition and living expenses, and funding teacher residency programs that pay for student teaching. These programs can help both aspiring educators and those who already are educators, such as paraprofessionals, who want to become licensed teachers. In addition to continuing to invest in these key programs, we also suggest a technical change to both that would expand their impact and align their implementation with the original intent. Specifically, we ask that it be clarified that students enrolled in graduate degree programs, or who have outstanding student debt from their time enrolled in a graduate degree program, can access the Tomorrow's Teachers Scholarship Program and Educator Loan Forgiveness Programs, respectively. As mentioned, graduate degree programs were meant to be covered by both programs, but a misinterpretation of the legislative language during implementation has resulted in their exclusion. We would be

happy to discuss this issue further and to provide legislative language that would clear up the misinterpretation.

- **Supporting educators providing high-quality literacy instruction.** We appreciate your focus on literacy and ask that you strengthen the state's commitment to helping all children learn to read with two important policy adjustments to existing grant programs. While the wording may allow flexibility, we are very concerned with the high-dosage literacy tutoring program's focus on outsourcing that risks denying students' access to highly trained public school educators for early literacy tutoring programs. It is critical to student success and the long-term sustainability of targeted tutoring in literacy that local educators, including retired educators — who undergo rigorous training, have access to resources which are aligned district programs and who understand the unique needs of their students — are provided with the resources and staffing levels needed to provide high-quality literacy instruction and tutoring in schools. We therefore strongly urge that these additional dollars be used to invest in public school staffing, including hiring additional literacy specialists, Education Support Professionals and retired teachers with expertise in early literacy instruction. We also ask that the Literacy Launch grant language be adjusted, as the House has proposed in its literacy bill, to allow those funds to be used to hire educators who specialize in teaching reading, as having those educators in more classrooms is the most important step that can be taken to make sure we are effectively teaching all students to read.
- **Supporting a Fair Fix for RetirementPlus.** Language that allowed teachers hired before July 1, 2001, who did not elect initially to join RetirementPlus, to have a new opportunity to join was a subject of the FY26 budget conference committee. But it was not included in the final version of the budget. When RetirementPlus was introduced, many teachers encountered a confusing enrollment process. Some never received an enrollment form, while others were led to believe they were automatically enrolled in Retirement Plus, only later learning they were not. We ask that this issue be addressed as part of the FY27 budget or in separate legislation.

In higher education, we celebrate the progress we have made together over the past three years, including substantial increases in MASSGrant Plus, Mass Reconnect and free community college, the implementation of Tomorrow's Teachers, the expansion of SUCCESS and the likely passage of the BRIGHT Act, now passed by both chambers. To protect those victories and expand opportunity to more students, we ask that you include the following in your budget proposal:

- **Making debt-free, public higher education possible for Massachusetts students at four-year universities, as well as community colleges.** This could be done by building

on the MassGrant expansions to provide funding for tuition and fees and a reasonable living stipend for all low- and middle-income students, while expecting students to contribute earnings from a reasonable number of hours of work, a fair family contribution and the use of existing aid.

- **Begin to address issues facing adjunct faculty.** Massachusetts public higher education increasingly relies on adjunct faculty who do not receive employer-provided health insurance or retirement benefits. At many community college and state university campuses, adjuncts teach the majority of courses — more than 75 percent at some institutions. Many adjunct faculty work half- to full-time hours educating students across the Commonwealth and yet do not receive adequate benefits for their service. We ask that language be included in the budget that would provide the state with the data and systems needed to begin to tackle longstanding obstacles and create a pathway to provide adjunct faculty with benefits comparable to those provided to other state employees.
- **Providing reasonable wages and benefits for all faculty and staff — including adjunct faculty.** This should include aligning faculty and staff salaries with those of educators in peer and neighboring states, after accounting for local cost of living. As evidence reviewed by the CHEQA commission found, when faculty and staff are severely underpaid, it significantly harms their ability to meet the needs of students and help them succeed and graduate. The center of this commitment should include providing essential health care and pension benefits to all adjunct faculty who work at least half time.
- **Funding for community colleges** to address chronic underfunding and allow colleges to meet the needs of the thousands of additional students who are arriving. This would include funding to hire additional faculty and staff, and to increase salaries to attract and retain educators by aligning their salaries with those of educators in peer and neighboring states, after accounting for local cost of living. While investing in the workforce is crucial to providing students with the support they need to progress and graduate, it also is critical to increase the existing stipend to allow students to pay for food and housing without working excessive hours.
- **Doubling funding for the SUCCESS program** to provide support services to help students succeed.
- **Fully Fund Formula Grant line items** for community colleges and state universities.

We also ask you to support, and fund in the budget, three fundamental issues of economic justice for educators:

- **Allowing municipal educators to participate in Paid Family and Medical Leave.** Public school educators, a workforce that is primarily women, are among the only workers in the Commonwealth not included in our state PFML law. We ask that you support incorporating educators into the law and, in order to avoid an unfunded mandate, have the state pay the employer's share. This is an essential benefit that should be available to all workers.
- **Ensuring a living wage for all educators.** All educators deserve a true living wage that allows them to support themselves and their families and fair pay is critical to recruiting and retaining a high-quality and diverse workforce. Yet many educators, particularly our Education Support Professionals, earn far less than a living wage and their wages can vary dramatically from district to district. We propose increasing the statewide minimum salary for teachers, which has not been updated in decades, and creating a statewide minimum wage for ESPs. Under our proposal, the state would commit to providing reimbursements to school districts for the increases over several years.
- **Adjusting the pension COLA base** so that it is no longer paid on only the first \$13,000 of pension earnings. In December, the COLA special commission, created in section 202 of the FY25 budget, released a report that included several possible ways to improve the current COLA for retirees. The commission's recommendations included the creation of a COLA base trust fund which would be used to fund an increase in the COLA base, which has been set at \$13,000 for over a decade and the establishment of an "enhanced COLA" for those retired for a decade or more who have been most impacted by the failure of our current COLA to keep pace with inflation. We urge action in the FY27 budget to act on the recommendations of the commission, to ensure that retired public employees can live with dignity and economic security.

We also urge you to allocate funding to provide access to legal counsel for immigrants who are at imminent risk of deportation and cannot afford an attorney, in line with the provisions of the Immigrant Legal Defense Act (S.1127/H.1954). Access to legal defense is critically important, as immigrants are five times more likely to win relief from deportation if they are represented by counsel and detained immigrants with a lawyer are 10 times more likely to win such relief.

Finally, the Fair Share surplus funds provide an important opportunity to make investments that meet the needs of students and protect against attacks on public education. We see this initiative as part of a broader opportunity related to the wonderful news that the Fair Share Amendment is estimated to have raised \$1.687 billion more than initially projected in FY25. That provides an extraordinary opportunity to meet urgent education and transportation needs across the Commonwealth. While \$189 million of those funds has been spent, and the governor has filed a supplemental budget proposing various uses of the funds, we ask that a significant

portion of those funds be used to meet several crucial needs in our public schools, colleges and universities:

- \$200 million to our public colleges and universities to help offset cuts made by the Trump administration, including cuts to TRIO programs and other student support services.
- School districts across the state continue to face enormous costs to provide needed services for students with special needs. We ask that you increase the share of costs that the state pays, pursuant to the special education circuit breaker, to 90% of the cost over the threshold. We estimate that would cost \$114 million, which could be funded in FY27 with surplus or ongoing Fair Share funds.
- As noted above, the FY26 budget reduced Rural School Aid to \$12 million. We ask that you use surplus dollars to continue the progress of recent years and increase the appropriation to \$60 million.
- If a cell phone ban is enacted in schools, as the MTA hopes, there will be costs to districts to implement the new requirement. We recommend setting aside \$15 million to cover those costs.
- There are enormous needs for funding deferred maintenance and capital improvements at our districts' public schools, colleges and universities. We recommend \$400 million to pay down existing debts and fund new capital expenditures.
- School transportation costs are a significant and growing budget challenge in regional and non-regional school districts. We recommend \$16.6 million in additional funding for regional school transportation reimbursements, to fully fund that line item in FY26. In addition, we recommend that an additional \$40 million be allocated to reimburse non-regional school districts, such as Boston and Fall River, for a portion of their transportation costs. Such reimbursements are required under state law but have not been funded in two decades.
- \$123 million in funding to fully implement a grant program to address the mental health and fiscal crisis in public schools. Grant funding would be provided to school districts to support hiring educators to help meet the needs of students, as described in the mental health item toward the top of this letter. That program could be funded in FY27 from the GAA or the Fair Share surplus supplemental budget.
- \$100 million as a reserve fund to protect the ability of our public higher education system to maintain staffing and meet the needs of students if there are significant reductions in federal funding.

We also want to express our strong concern with the governor's proposed line item 1596-2605 of the Fair Share surplus supplemental budget. This would provide \$10 million to the Department and Elementary and Secondary Education to target a potentially broad swath of schools and districts for state intervention. The language in this item is alarmingly vague, and our concern is that it could authorize DESE to have a back-door method of intervening in schools in harmful ways that undermine deeper learning by pushing districts to focus on tests scores and test prep, rather than providing high quality education for students. We urge the Legislature to demand clarity from DESE as to the exact purpose of this item and to clarify that such an initiative be subject to review and approval by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education so that there can be an informed and public-facing discussion before it moves forward. We must ensure that this does not become another opportunity for DESE to undermine local control as it has done through receivership, or school takeovers. Particularly now, in light of the severe fiscal challenges noted above, schools and districts could benefit significantly from an additional \$10 million that could be invested in the educators and programs that are at risk in districts across the Commonwealth.

The Fair Share funds give us an historic opportunity to meet the needs of our students. It would be a devastating and lost opportunity if those funds were used instead to supplant funding that already has been provided. We look forward to working together to seize this opportunity.

Sincerely,



Max Page, President
Massachusetts Teachers Association



Deb McCarthy, Vice President
Massachusetts Teachers Association

CC: The Honorable Ronald Mariano, Speaker of the House of Representatives
The Honorable Karen Spilka, President of the Senate