

## [At state budget hearing at GCC, school officials share unique challenges faced by rural districts](#)

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GREENFIELD — At the Joint Committee on Ways and Means’ fiscal year 2025 state budget hearing on Friday, the focus was on statewide education and local aid. At the regional level, though, legislators, school officials and community members from up and down the Pioneer Valley honed in on one of the most important local education issues: rural school funding.

In an effort to directly communicate with the Legislature, rural school advocates arrived at Greenfield Community College prior to the 11 a.m. budget hearing to distribute handouts to attendees that highlighted the numerous challenges small, rural districts face — including limited state funding, declining enrollment and increasing costs amid limited tax revenue.

The work continues a long-running mission of advocacy for rural school districts around the state, an effort that picked up a lot of steam in the wake of July 2022’s Special Commission on Rural School Districts report. People like Sheryl Stanton, superintendent of the Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont regional school districts, want to ensure the state understands the challenges schools are facing, and that districts like hers are ready to partner with the Legislature and other elected officials to address the issue.

“We also feel the state has a role in addressing the additional costs of educating students in rural districts,” Stanton said.

At the state level, Education Secretary Patrick Tutwiler, outgoing Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley, Department of Higher Education Secretary Noe Ortega, and Department of Early Education and Care Commissioner Amy Kershaw gave an overview of Gov. Maura Healey’s budget proposal, with highlights including \$6.85 billion for Chapter 70 state school aid, extensive investments in early education and child care, and continued funding for higher education programs. Friday’s hearing was chaired by state Sen. Jo Comerford, D-Northampton.

“We have a four-year plan here and we’re only in year one. A successful administration is about building on progress,” Tutwiler said, emphasizing the principles of “stabilize, heal and transform.” “It shouldn’t matter where a student comes from. ... Every student deserves a high-quality education.”

When legislators began asking questions following the officials’ testimony, state Rep. Natalie Blais, D-Deerfield, who served on the Special Commission on Rural School Districts, quoted a passage from the report describing how rural school challenges compound one another and lead districts down a spiral.

“The situation that rural schools are facing is dire,” Blais said, adding that there is “extremely limited Chapter 70 growth for rural schools.” “I’m wondering, in your opinion, is rural school aid the only funding mechanism currently available to stop the self-perpetuating cycle of decline in rural schools?”

In response, Tutwiler noted the governor has proposed keeping the rural school aid line item at \$15 million, the same level as FY24 and triple the amount from FY23, and regional school transportation reimbursement is “projected to be at 80%,” which he noted would be the highest appropriation in state history.

“I know that’s not the end,” Tutwiler said. “What I’m committing to is partnering to develop a solution, while also acknowledging the challenges around declining enrollment and other factors.”

Regionalization is sometimes pitched as one of the potential solutions to these ballooning costs, but what happens when a district is already regionalized over 250 square miles? Martha Thurber, chair of the Mohawk Trail School Committee and a Buckland resident, said more state aid is needed and regionalization is not a feasible option for a district that already covers the vast majority of western Franklin County, without putting students on a bus for more than an hour each day.

Locally, the Gill-Montague and Pioneer Valley regional school districts, through the Six-Town Regionalization Planning Board, are exploring a merger that could potentially save money, but the amount of time students could spend on bus transportation is also a major concern.

Two parallel bills, introduced by Blais and Comerford, would have provided the sort of aid Thurber and others are requesting, as they called for fully funding the \$60 million recommendation from the Special Commission on Rural School Districts’ report. The bills were referred to the Joint Committee on Education and a hearing was held in October. Along with the millions in rural aid, the bills also propose a state review of school districts’ health insurance plans in search of cost savings, increased transportation funding, and technical assistance for regionalization and other shared services.

On Monday, the House bill was merged into [H.4425](#), which Thurber said “basically decimated the bill.” The new legislation removes the \$60 million in funding, but retains provisions related to health insurance review and special education funding.

With flat Chapter 70 funding at Mohawk Trail — Tutwiler’s office noted the Chapter 70 aid formula ensures schools don’t receive less than they got the year before — Thurber said many rural school districts don’t see the increased investments from the Student Opportunity Act, which increased state aid to schools, particularly for urban and gateway districts. In the proposed budget, the Student Opportunity Act is again fully funded for FY25.

“What other business, town or government could survive without an increase in its primary funding for 20 years?” Thurber said. “Give us 1% of that [Student Opportunity Act] money and we would be happy.”

Hawley resident and Mohawk Trail School Committee Vice Chair Suzanne Crawford said small communities, especially those like her own where much of the town’s land is state-owned, cannot continue to shoulder the growing financial requirements needed to fund a school district, while also supporting other departments such as public safety.

“Every child in Massachusetts deserves to have equal education opportunities, regardless of ZIP code,” Crawford said. “We have very dedicated citizens, who support schools. ... It just gets harder and harder [to support the financial burden.]”

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