

[Legislators: State's school funding formula has 'left us out,' call for changes at hearing held at UMass](#)

By Scott Merzbach, Daily Hampshire Gazette

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AMHERST — Five years after its approval, legislation aimed at improving K-12 education statewide known as the Student Opportunity Act is not infusing school districts in western Massachusetts with much-needed additional funding as promised.

Instead, the law “has left us out,” state Sen. Jo Comerford, D-Northampton, said during a Joint Committee on Ways and Means hearing Monday at the Campus Center at the University of Massachusetts.

Comerford made an appeal for immediately beginning to address the complexity of Chapter 70 school funding, which was amended as part of the Student Opportunity Act, adopted in 2019. The senator also wants the state to tackle the financial shortfalls numerous western Massachusetts school districts are facing, and to alter the calculation of the municipal contribution made by a city or town.

“We need to join these together,” Comerford said.

Yet, in speaking to members of the Healey-Driscoll administration, including Education Secretary Patrick Tutwiler, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Russell Johnston, Department of Early Education and Care Commissioner Amy Kershaw and Department of Higher Education Commissioner Noe Ortega, Comerford said the funding formula is an issue that can't wait and she is “monumentally disappointed” that Gov. Maura Healey's fiscal year 2026 budget proposal doesn't push for creating a new Foundation Budget Review Commission.

Tutwiler, though, said what the governor has put together is a strong local aid package, and the administration is willing to be partners with the Legislature on creating a new foundation review commission, once legislators figure out the approach to take to examine the funding formulas.

“We will follow the lead of the Legislature on this important conversation,” Tutwiler said, adding that there are disagreements on the approach.

At the hearing focused on state aid, with numerous high schoolers in attendance holding signs demanding better funding, and with people wearing T-shirts about the challenges of rural funding, the stress on the regional and rural schools was a constant theme. The administration was the first of nine panels that were to take deep dives into early education and care, K-12 education and higher education.

Johnston pointed to the 6% increase in Chapter 70 aid in the governor's budget, bringing that to \$7.3 billion for school districts. He said that is an increase of \$420 million over fiscal year 2025,

and guarantees minimum per-pupil spending of \$70. Johnston said that “investments, both sustained and new” will make progress toward stabilizing, healing and transforming education. But Sen. Jacob Oliveira, D-Ludlow, said nine of the 11 school districts he represents, including Belchertown and South Hadley public schools, are facing gaps of millions of dollars in funding to be able to provide level services at their schools and not have layoffs. Oliveira, too, blamed the foundation formula.

“The current Chapter 70 funding formula is not working for a majority of our school districts. Period,” Oliveira said.

Rep. Todd Smola, R-Palmer, said he was disappointed to see rural aid in the governor’s budget proposal remain at \$16 million. That, he said, is “woefully underfunded,” and instead needs to be closer to \$60 million.

Rep. Lindsay Sadosa, D-Northampton, said she is delighted to see the budget cover 100% of non-resident transportation for vocational school education, which the 600 residents in Plainfield have advocated for.

Sadosa, though, said she fears some of the school districts she represents are being asked to cannibalize each other to keep their schools open, especially after the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education granted an expansion request to the Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School in Hadley.

“Rural funding is something that we all need to partner and work on together,” Sadosa said. She asked Tutwiler what aspect of the budget will benefit rural districts the most, and he pointed to the Special Education Circuit Breaker being fully funded at \$682 million, an increase of \$132 million over this year’s budget.

Tutwiler said regardless of whether a district is rural or urban, this support will be evident. “Everyone will feel that impact,” Tutwiler said.

Oliveira said special education costs are out of control and the governor’s budget should lower the \$52,000 cap on special education when reimbursements begin.

In supporting all school districts, Tutwiler said the administration is confronting the “pain points.” “What we’re attempting to do is use mechanisms defined as local aid to address them,” Tutwiler said.

Tutwiler spoke about how the fiscal year 2026 budget proposal, supplemented with Fair Share Amendment money, will build on top of the best public school education system in the country. “We do not rest on our laurels,” Tutwiler said.

It also works to confront inequity that exists in K-12 education, insufficient child care seats, and persistent gaps in education for marginalized students.

The challenges for regional schools was also referenced by Rep. Meghan Kilkoynne, D-Clinton, whose district includes Wachusett Regional, as costs continue to rise. “We as a state are not keeping pace with that,” Kilkoynne said.

Kilkoynne and others also spoke about how the “hold harmless” provision of state aid, in effect when enrollment at a school declines and the state does not decrease aid, but holds the increase to the minimum amount allowable, is causing districts to fall further behind. This is prompting many cities and towns to seek Proposition 2½ tax-cap overrides this year.

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