

A FOCUS ON EQUITY:

THREE BIG THINGS WE ARE LOOKING FOR IN MASSACHUSETTS' SCHOOL FUNDING REFORM EFFORTS

This spring, policymakers and education leaders in Massachusetts have a responsibility to address the persistent disparities in opportunity and achievement that separate our state's low-income students, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities from their peers. Massachusetts' funding formula must be revised to address structural budget issues across the Commonwealth, with substantial new investments in education and resource allocation parameters that drive greater funding equity.

The choices that lawmakers make about how much to invest, as well as where and how to invest that funding, will significantly impact the educational outcomes and lives of students for years to come. As organizations committed to educational equity, we will be looking for the following in proposals to increase education funding:

1

Does the proposal remedy funding inequities between high-poverty districts and their wealthier counterparts?

In our September 2018 report, [Number 1 for Some](#), the Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership highlighted the fact that the Commonwealth must revamp its school funding formula to address systemic inequities that shortchange students of color, students from low-income families, and immigrant youth. Recent data show that today, districts that serve students with higher needs are often forced to make do with thousands of dollars less *per child* than districts in wealthier communities. These inequities leave the very districts that should be providing their students with more support — such as additional guidance counseling, supplemental learning time, and translation services to improve communication with families — with the least resources to do so.

Simply attending to shortfalls that affect all districts is not enough. In updating the state's funding formula, lawmakers must remedy these unjust patterns.

In reviewing funding formula proposals, we'll be looking for the updated formula to do the following:

- ***Provide significant amounts of additional funding to support meeting the needs of English learners and students from low-income families, and***
- ***Allocate new state dollars in a way that eliminates inequities in actual state and local spending between high-poverty districts and their wealthier counterparts.***

2

Does the proposal require districts to use funds in evidence-informed ways to improve the learning experiences and outcomes of historically underserved students?

Although funding inequities undoubtedly contribute to many of the disparities in opportunity and achievement documented in [Number 1 for Some](#), new dollars alone won't guarantee improvement. Creating meaningful change for students — be it eliminating discipline disparities, increasing diversity in the teacher workforce, expanding access to rigorous coursework, improving instructional quality, establishing dual language programs, expanding learning time, or building early literacy skills — requires reallocating resources to evidence-informed practices and supports, committing to change, and being willing to confront deeply ingrained beliefs about students' ability to succeed. And because these changes require deep work in addressing value systems and capacity development, they rarely happen without outside pressure and support.

We'll be looking for lawmakers to require that districts use these additional funds in evidence-informed ways to improve learning experiences and outcomes for historically underserved students, including students from low-income families, students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners. District leaders should be required to develop and annually demonstrate successful implementation of plans that:

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- Specify what leaders will do to improve the learning experiences and outcomes of historically underserved student groups;
- Explain why leaders selected particular strategies, including the research and evidence behind them and the district's theory of action;
- Explain how leaders will know whether strategies are working, including annual numeric improvement targets on multiple measures disaggregated by student group;
- Align with and, to the extent possible, incorporate the district's Title I and school improvement plans; and
- Demonstrate that the funds for meeting the needs of English learners, students from low-income families, and students with disabilities are being directed to serve those students.

Importantly, families, community members, and students should be at the table as district leaders make decisions about which challenges are most pressing and how to best invest available resources. District leaders should be required to meaningfully and continuously engage with families of historically underserved students, community members (including civil rights advocates), students, teachers, and school leaders in putting together the above-mentioned plan.

The final plan, measurable goals, and predicted outcomes should be displayed prominently on the district's website. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) should provide district leaders with technical assistance and support in plan development and implementation, including by disseminating information on effective improvement strategies.

3

How will families, educators, and the general public know whether resources are being used effectively?

Greater investment in education must come with greater transparency around both spending and student outcomes. DESE's new School and District Report Card website is a step in the right direction, but DESE must do more to help families, educators, and the public understand the state of opportunity and achievement in our districts and schools.

We'll be looking for commitments to greater transparency, especially as it pertains to equity in opportunity and outcomes, including DESE providing the following:

- An easy way of comparing per-pupil expenditures (including actual personnel salaries) between schools serving more students with higher needs and those serving fewer such students within the same district;
- An easy way of comparing data on students' learning experiences and outcomes (including discipline rates, chronic absenteeism rates, MCAS results, graduation rates, etc.) by student group within each district and school;
- A transparent method of measuring and reporting how well districts and schools are serving each group of students; and
- Systematic ways of collecting and disseminating meaningful input from students, families, educators, and the public.

