

## **Providing Access to a Quality Education for All Students**

Horace Mann, widely regarded as the father of public education in Massachusetts and the nation, said “Having no other mines to work, Massachusetts has mined into the human intellect; and from its limitless resources, she has won more sustaining and enduring prosperity and happiness than if she had been founded on a stratification of silver and gold, reaching deeper down than geology has yet penetrated.”

Under Mann’s leadership in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Massachusetts led the way in providing access to a free public education for all children. Now, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Commonwealth continues to lead the nation, with our students’ test scores at the top on standardized tests compared to students in other states.

While we should celebrate this success, we must also recognize that these good test scores mask a number of daunting challenges facing public education. The future economic success of Massachusetts depends upon our ability to effectively tackle these challenges, and to fulfill the educational promise for all our children.

The first major challenge facing our state is the achievement gap that continues to plague schools and students in low-income and minority communities.

In 2008, 70% of English Language Learners and 40% of low-income students in the Class of 2010 failed to meet MCAS graduation requirements. On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP), Massachusetts ranked near the bottom of all states with regard to the difference in reading and math scores between low and higher income students.

The failure of some of our public schools to effectively educate our children costs our society enormously. High school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, be single parents, require public assistance, and become criminals and end up in jail. In fact, 82% of prisoners in America’s jails are high school dropouts.

Last week, the Massachusetts House of Representatives passed the most significant education legislation since the landmark Education Reform Act of 1993. This bill, “An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap,” is focused squarely on steps to help close the achievement gap.

The bill provides for a more aggressive intervention strategy in underperforming schools, enables all school districts to form new “Innovation Schools,” and allows more charter schools to be opened in the lowest performing districts.

At the same time that we work to close the achievement gap, we must also tackle the other major challenge facing public education in Massachusetts – how to ensure adequate, sustainable and fair funding for schools in all communities across the state.

Even before the current recession, many communities were struggling to maintain educational programs and services in the face of rapidly rising healthcare costs, special education needs, and new technology requirements. Federal stimulus funds specifically targeted for education have helped mitigate the impact of the recession, but these funds will soon dry up. And, with a slow economic recovery expected, state tax revenues (that fund public schools along with local property taxes) are not expected to rebound for many years.

Education funding in Massachusetts is based on the Chapter 70 formula. First, a Foundation Budget is calculated for each school district to determine the cost to educate the students in that district. Second, the Local Contribution (the amount that each community must contribute from its local revenues) is calculated based upon income levels and property values. Third, the state government provides Chapter 70 aid to fill the gap between the Foundation Budget and Local Contribution (or to provide a minimum state contribution). Finally, each community can choose to put more of its local resources toward education if it wants to spend an amount greater than the Foundation Budget.

The integrity of the Chapter 70 formula rests on the Foundation Budget, but most experts believe that the foundation budget formula, established by the Education Reform Act of 1993, is now outdated and no longer accurately reflects the true costs of providing a 21<sup>st</sup> century education. In particular, it underestimates expenses like healthcare, special education, and technology that have grown rapidly over the last decade.

During the debate on the bill in the House of Representatives, I introduced two amendments to improve the adequacy and fairness of education funding for all school districts. The first will begin the process of conducting an Adequacy Study to update the Foundation Budget and determine the programmatic and financial resources required to provide a quality education for our children. This study should also consider opportunities for greater efficiencies and cost savings within and among school districts through such means as consolidation and online/distance learning capabilities. The second amendment directs the Department of Education to analyze the inequities that have arisen over the years in the Chapter 70 formula, and to make recommendations to the legislature to address these inequities.

The bill now moves on to a Conference Committee to resolve differences between the House and Senate versions. The final bill is expected to be signed into law by Governor Patrick, and will be an important step forward in the effort to continue the work begun by Horace Mann to provide every child with access to a quality education.

I welcome your feedback on education policy and funding or any other issues. Please visit our website at [www.RepJasonLewis.com](http://www.RepJasonLewis.com). You can also reach me at 617 722-2060 or by email at [Jason.Lewis@state.ma.us](mailto:Jason.Lewis@state.ma.us).

Author's Note: Sanjeeve Martyn provided research assistance for this column.

Jason Lewis  
State Representative  
31<sup>st</sup> Middlesex District – Stoneham and Winchester