



To: Joel D. Boyd, Ed.D Superintendent  
From: Latifah Phillips, Chief Equity and Engagement Officer  
Date: December 22, 2022  
Re: Proposed Legislative Agenda 2023

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This memo is written in response to a motion submitted by School Committee Member Susie Chhoun on October 5, 2022:

*Request the Superintendent develop a legislative agenda for the Committee's consideration which advances the policy interests of Lowell's students and families at the state level ahead of the next legislative session.*

Research for this proposed agenda was conducted by Jen Myers, Communications Outreach Strategist, Mike Ortiz, Staff/Student Counsel and Lisa Van Thiel, Early Childhood Coordinator.

### **Legislative Agenda January 2023**

#### **Introduction**

As an urban school district with a Prek-12 enrollment of more than 14,000 students in the fifth largest, and one of the most diverse cities in the Commonwealth, our State House delegation, the elected and appointed leaders, staff, and faculty of Lowell Public Schools are uniquely positioned to recognize and advocate for legislative change. These changes further the goals and objectives of our 2020-2025 Strategic Plan.

#### **1) Equitable access to safe and welcoming schools.**

*Update statutory language to allow school districts and municipalities to access funding for facilities upgrades and improvements.*

- Massachusetts is home to some of the oldest schools in America. Aging facilities, locally and across the Commonwealth, require ongoing improvements and maintenance to meet the needs of students now and into the future.
- Statutory updates are needed within Chapter 71, section 7 of Massachusetts General Law to refine and clarify antiquated, ambiguous and/or vague language. This would benefit

school districts and municipalities across the Commonwealth as they collaboratively work to maintain and sustain safe and welcoming school buildings and campuses for students, families and staff.

## **2) Increase MSBA funding flexibility.**

*Support access to MSBA to recalculate project costs based on inflation and COVID-19*

- In times of extraordinary inflation, such as what happened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) should have the authority to recalculate the cost/reimbursement rate of previously approved projects.
- This could be achieved through the creation of a MSBA reserve/emergency contingency fund or by giving the agency the authority to go out to bond to raise funds in these unusual circumstances.

## **3) Improve fiscal stability for school districts.**

*Update statutory language to provide school districts with the flexibility to carry over revenue surpluses across fiscal years.*

- Sustainable fiscal health for any organization requires a multi-year approach to budget management - strategizing during years of revenue surplus to account for the potential of future years in which unexpected costs arise.
- The Commonwealth's current laws governing public school finances limit the types of resources which can be carried forward across fiscal years. Enabling school districts to maintain non-categorical cash reserves (similar to the structures in place in other states and mirroring the flexibility already offered to charter schools in Massachusetts) would provide a logical and necessary option for districts as they work to stabilize their long-term operations on behalf of students and families.
- This type of updated statutory language presents particular value in the aftermath of COVID-19 which affected all sectors of the economy, resulting in extraordinary budget volatility for public schools.

## **4) Ensure support for the recruitment and retention of school personnel.**

*Support incentives and flexibilities which enable districts to recruit and retain high-quality, diverse school personnel.*

- a) Increase diversity among educators.
  - A solid first step toward reaching this goal is to support legislation which opens the door to a more diverse workforce in the classrooms of Massachusetts – racially, ethnically, culturally and linguistically.
  - Create an alternative assessment tool to the narrow scope of the MTELS for educator licensure; The MTELS have been criticized for not taking the experiences and

strengths of educators from diverse background, or for whom English is not their first language, into account.

- b) Champion efforts to enhance loan forgiveness programs for school personnel
  - Cost of higher education and licensure programs can create barriers to creating and maintaining education pipelines.
  - Loan forgiveness programs can create an incentive for students and working professionals to consider the field of public education by minimizing the cost to completing the education requirements.

## **5) Ensure support for resources and funding that addresses needs for student success**

*Support efforts which provide new resources and funding targeted toward creating greater equity for districts' most vulnerable students.*

- a) Continue support for Universal Pre-K funding.
  - Pre-K education is a critical stepping stone for children, especially in high-needs districts, to foster school readiness and promote social emotional learnings.
  - Increase Chapter 70 funding to allow for 100% reimbursement rates for full-day pre-K students.
  - Increase funding for the expansion of the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative which enables access for all children, including children with and without disabilities, in addition to alignment of community and public school programs within a municipality.
- b) Advocate for greater efficiency of out-of-district transportation.
  - Amend M.G.L. Chapter 71, Section 89 to include statutory language which allows greater flexibility for the development of a school transportation plan which enables a cost-effective transport system for all schools within a municipality.
- c) Increase access to vocational education options.
  - Amend M.G.L. Chapter 74 to include language which requires equitable access to admissions, which may include a move toward a lottery-based admissions system.
  - Reject admissions policies that include discipline records and attendance as admissions criteria for vocational education programs which present barriers to admissions for at-risk students who may thrive under a vocational education structure.