

# 30

Three decades after passage of the groundbreaking Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, a look back at what we accomplished — and what still needs to be done — to bring equity to all students in the Commonwealth.

# YEARS

# WAITER

# Reflectere

---

From its earliest days, Massachusetts has been on the forefront of both education and education reform: establishing the first public school, the first public school district, the earliest law making public education guaranteed and compulsory, and a pioneering record on high standards and accountability.

On June 18, the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) of 1993 was signed into law and, 30 years later, remains as the state's most comprehensive education initiative. Among its highlights, the law created the Chapter 70 funding formula which established minimum spending requirements for each district, paved the way for the formation of public charter schools, and invested in a new system of assessment and accountability. This was no small undertaking, and it involved the perseverance and dedication of legislators, educators, and advocacy groups who were united in their belief that more had to be done to cultivate and support the academic success and proficiency of all of the Commonwealth's students.

A number of excellent reports have been written over the years to mark the 10th, 15th, and 20th anniversaries of MERA, and we embarked on this project to mark its 30th anniversary with a specific goal in mind: to look back and look ahead, noting where success has transpired and where there is still much to be done. As one of the key architects of MERA, former Secretary of Education Paul Reville reflected on the 20th anniversary that "we need to be modest enough to admit that we haven't achieved our original goal, which was that all of our students would emerge from high school as proficient." While another decade has passed since this statement, it is this ongoing quest for proficiency for all that propels the efforts of Education Reform Now Massachusetts — and so many of those we partner with — on a daily basis.

## The report is divided into three sections:

---

### Part I

#### A Look Back:

A Brief Reflection on 30 Years of Education Reform ..... **3**

### Part II

#### Where We Go From Here:

Six Strategies for an Equitable K–12 Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic..... **18**

### Part III

#### Future Promise:

Thought Leaders Share Their Visions for the Next 30 Years ..... **30**

---

**This report was made possible through the generous support of the Barr Foundation and The Irene E. & George A. Davis Foundation, and through the talented efforts of our two contributors:**

**Lory Hough** is the award-winning editor at *Harvard Ed.* magazine at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where she has worked for the past 15 years. Previously, she was a staff writer on the magazine at the Harvard Kennedy School and holds two master’s degrees, including one in creative writing.

**John A. Griffin** is a public policy analyst who previously served as Policy Director at Education Reform Now Massachusetts. He holds a Master in Public Policy degree from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

**A note for readers using the hard copy of this document:** Throughout the document, blue text signifies hyperlinks in the electronic version, leading to outside resources. For access to these resources, please see the electronic version of this document at the ERN Massachusetts website, <https://edreformnow.org/chapters/massachusetts/>.



MALDEN, MA — Governor William Weld signs the education reform bill at the Holmes Elementary School in Malden on June 18, 1993.  
(Photo by Suzanne Kreiter/The Boston Globe via Getty Images)

## PART I

# A Look Back: A Brief Reflection on 30 Years of Education Reform

---

On June 19, 1993, a headline at the top of page 10 of *The Boston Globe* read, “Weld Puts Lukewarm Pen to Education Reform Bill.”

The day before, Massachusetts Governor William Weld was at Holmes Elementary School in Malden signing into law what would arguably become one of the biggest political highpoints of his career: the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993. The legislation was years in the making and, despite the “lukewarm” signature, would completely upend the public education landscape across the Commonwealth. In fact, as David Driscoll, the state’s deputy education commissioner at the time and one of the legislation’s chief architects wrote in his book, *Commitment and Common Sense*, the reform bill “was the catalyst for everything that would happen” in education “over the next twenty years.” Now 30 years later, the bill’s main tenets are still going strong, even as some of the bill’s key supporters acknowledge that it didn’t go as far as they originally hoped it would.



## What was the act and why was it needed?

What exactly was the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993? In many ways, the bill that Weld signed was a political bargain, a “combination of carrots and sticks,” Driscoll said, hammered out between a Republican governor and a Democratic state legislature, with vigorous debate from the business community, parents, and educators from across Massachusetts. At the bill’s basic core, the state agreed to pump more money into schools through a new finance system in exchange for ambitious academic standards and increased accountability.

“The essence of the law was a deal,” wrote former State Representative Mark Roosevelt, another of the bill’s key authors, in a 2003 story for *Commonwealth Magazine*. “The trade was clearly articulated: money for accountability.”

It was also “a remarkable thing,” Driscoll wrote, “for a conservative Republican governor who had made significant reductions to balance the budget, to announce that he was committing to \$2 billion in new money over seven years” to carry out the bill’s components.

This wasn’t the first time the state had attempted to “fix” schools. “Education reform has long been the favorite pastime of Massachusetts’ state government,” *Commonwealth Magazine* noted in another story about reform from 2002. “Since 1888, more than 100 commissions and official studies

have put public education under the microscope.” But, as Driscoll wrote in his book, by the early 1990s, Massachusetts was a “proud state that had become weary over the fits and starts of fixing public education.”

Something clearly needed to change — and it needed to be big and it needed to be bold.

“The years prior to 1993 were dark times for education,” Roosevelt said, citing the lack of academic standards across school districts, the inadequate financial contribution made by the state to schools, and the growing disparity between what students in wealthier communities and poorer ones were receiving for an education. At the time, the economy was also slowing down after years of growth, and education was taking a big hit in the state’s budget. “We lost an entire generation of young teachers to pink slips,” Roosevelt said.

One of the biggest voices calling for change came from the business community. Leaders were concerned that schools across the state weren’t adequately preparing students for the workforce of the future.

**Something clearly needed to change — and it needed to be big and it needed to be bold.**

**“If the Commonwealth is going to be competitive in the 21st century, we need to re-engineer education.”**

**—Paul Reville  
Francis Keppel Professor of  
Practice of Educational Policy and  
Administration, Harvard Graduate  
School of Education, Former MA  
Secretary of Education**

Jack Rennie was among them. Rennie was founder of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) and the owner of a small technology and consulting company in Burlington. He had seen firsthand how difficult it was to find employees with the right skills, but he also knew there was a solution: vastly improve public education across the state.

At the time, Paul Reville was the executive director of Rennie’s nonprofit. As he told WBUR in 2013, the thinking was that “if the Commonwealth is going to be competitive in the 21st century, we need to re-engineer education.”

Rennie, Reville, and the team at MBAE decided to write a detailed school reform plan called *Every Child a Winner!* “Everyone needs to get in the boat and drink a little castor oil,” Rennie said at the time. The report tackled some of the biggest issues districts and schools were facing, issues around early childhood education, academic standards, curriculum, teacher evaluations, tenure, equity, governance, and professional development. The report also called for increased state funding — and equitable distribution of resources among school districts — in exchange for something they believed was crucial for that re-engineering: accountability from schools.

“If we don’t give educators the funding they need or clear away some of the regulatory obstacles they face, we can’t fairly call them to account if they fail

to produce results,” the report stated. “But if we don’t find ways to hold them accountable for results and to reconstitute schools which fail, there is little point to investing additional funds in our schools.”

Published in 1991, the plan ultimately became the blueprint for the Massachusetts Education Reform Act that Weld signed in 1993.

In his book, Driscoll wrote that while many deserve credit for the reform bill, including co-authors Roosevelt and Senate President Tom Birmingham, “for my money, education reform in Massachusetts happened because of the brains, will, doggedness, optimism, credentials, humor, personality, knowledge, passion, and relentless drive of an ex-Marine by the name of Jack Rennie.” Not only did Rennie create the plan that served as the foundation for the education reform act, but he also built critical partnerships, Driscoll wrote, “inside and outside government.”

And buy-in from various camps was crucial because the lead up to the ed reform bill was a long time coming — and included many bumps.

On the national scene, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* had been published in 1983 by the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education. The 18-member commission was created by U.S. Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell, an appointee of President Ronald Reagan, and included educators, government officials, and business leaders. The report contended that American schools were failing, and as a result, American students were falling behind. Way behind. “The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people,” the report stated. Like Rennie in Massachusetts, business leaders across the country were especially worried that students graduating from American high schools were not prepared for the changing work world. Often referred to as a “wake-up call,” the report sparked a wave of reform efforts at the local, state, and federal levels.

At the same time, in Massachusetts, public schools were facing a fiscal crisis that was caused, in part, by an economic recession and by Proposition 2 ½ — a 1980 ballot measure that capped property

**“School districts in Wellesley were receiving approximately \$25,000 per pupil, while students in Mattapan were receiving only \$6,000. As a result of the state’s broken educational financing system, countless urban minorities were trapped in failing public schools.”**

tax rates at 2.5 percent of assessed property value. The cap severely hampered the ability of cities and towns to raise money, which in turn had a huge effect on funding for education. A 1983 report by the Massachusetts Department of Revenue found that local education expenditures dropped by \$136 million during fiscal year 1982 — a 5.5 percent reduction from the previous year’s total. (At the same time, state expenditures for other services rose \$28 million, a modest increase of about 1 percent, but an increase nonetheless.) By 1982, the number of teaching and nonteaching positions in the state’s public schools had also declined 14.3 percent. And students participating in the school lunch program dropped: In 1980, more than 540,000 Massachusetts students received subsidized lunches; in 1981, the number plummeted by more than 130,000 students.

This financial crisis added to what Weld and Birmingham called “troubling disparities” in an essay they co-wrote for the 2018 book, *The Fight for the Best Charter Public Schools in the Nation*. “School districts in Wellesley were receiving approximately \$25,000 per pupil, while students in Mattapan were receiving only \$6,000. As a result of the state’s broken educational financing system, countless urban minorities were trapped in failing public schools,” with wealthy (mostly suburban) schools able to offer smaller class sizes and learning options, while poorer (mostly urban or rural) schools struggled to offer even basic services.

A few years earlier, in 1978, families from 16 lower-income communities sued the state, contending

in *Webby v Dukakis* that Massachusetts was providing them, “without justification, fewer and inferior education opportunities and advantages, solely because they reside in cities and towns with low property wealth.” In 1991, *Webby* was refiled and renamed *McDuffy v. Robertson* after Jami McDuffy, a Brockton sixth grader who said her classes often had more than 60 kids and there weren’t enough chairs or desks for everyone. Books had to be shared.

Three days before Weld signed the education reform bill in 1993 with that lukewarm pen, the state’s Supreme Judicial Court issued its decision in *McDuffy*. It was the state’s constitutional duty, the decision stated, to educate all public school students, without regard to their personal wealth or poverty or their district’s fiscal capacity. Although the 1993 reform bill was not, as *Commonwealth Magazine* noted, “an instant response to the *McDuffy* ruling — the bill had been under consideration for two years” — the lawsuit “hovered overhead like a cloud much of that time.”

Robert Blumenthal, an attorney at the Massachusetts Department of Education said in a *New York Times* article after the 1993 legislation was passed, “The reform act moves in the direction the court has pointed us. They dovetail: the opinion calls for greater equity and the reform act aims at greater equity.”

## What did the act actually do for districts and schools?

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 was written as a seven-year phase-in plan in order to give the state and districts time to make progress in two major ways: it pledged more state funding during those seven years to sharply reduce the massive gap in education spending between poor and wealthy communities, and it set new standards for achievement that schools would be required to reach — and they’d be held accountable if they didn’t.



**It was the state’s constitutional duty, the decision stated, to educate all public school students, without regard to their personal wealth or poverty or their district’s fiscal capacity.**

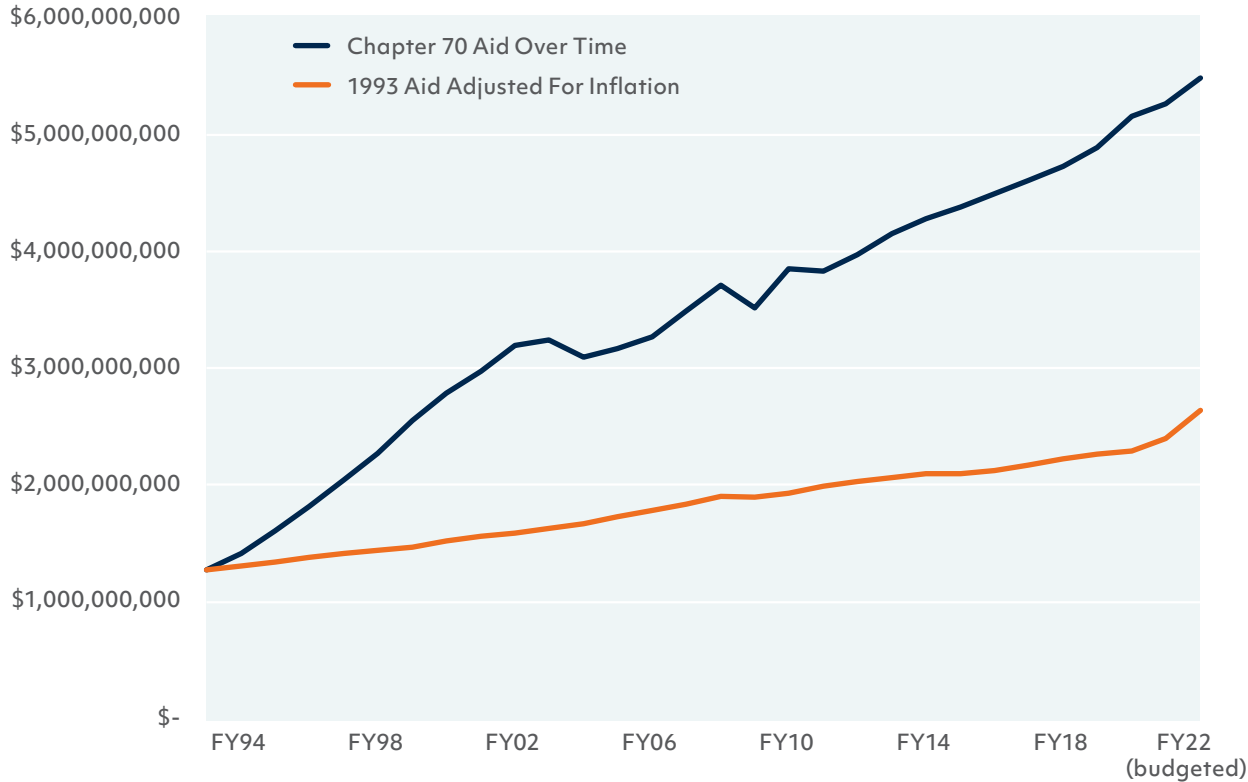
With funding, the goal was to bring all districts in the state up to what the law called a “foundation level” and put an end to what Driscoll called “education by zip code.” Referred to as Chapter 70 aid (because it was Chapter 70 in the Massachusetts General Laws), this formula required districts to spend enough per student to provide an adequate

education. To do this, the state would step in with funding when the district could not afford the required level on its own. In other words, poorer communities that were spending below foundation-budget levels would receive more from the state than those spending at or above that threshold. Since fiscal year 1995, the first fiscal year after Weld signed the 1993 act, the state has provided \$105 billion to districts through the Chapter 70 formula.

The reform bill also tackled standards. Prior to the bill being signed, Massachusetts had no statewide academic standards or benchmarks for what every student in a Massachusetts school should know by the time they graduated from high school. “The only subjects required by the state,” wrote Roosevelt in *Commonwealth*, “were civics and physical education.”

### Chapter 70 Funding Over Time

*Compared to inflation*





But, as Senator Patricia Jehlen, a former teacher, wrote in a 2018 report, *Rethinking School Accountability*, “education reformers argued that, if the state were contributing more of the funds for local education, it should have more control over local school quality.” The reform bill directed the state Board of Education to develop academic standards in core subjects with guidelines for what students should learn and know by the end of each grade, and to hold schools and districts accountable for making sure students met those standards. The expectation was that districts would develop curricula and teachers would create lesson plans that aligned with the standards.

One of the ways schools would do this was by giving students a series of standardized tests created by the state that became known by its acronym: MCAS. Meant as a way for schools to measure student knowledge, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests were based on new state standards and given annually to students in grades 3 to 10. Tests covered English language arts (ELA), math, and science and tech/engineering. The first MCAS test was given in 1998 and, starting with the class of 2003, students were required to perform at least in the “needs improvement” level in ELA and math in order to graduate from high school. Today, students must earn a passing score on the grade 10 MCAS tests in ELA and math, and one of the science and technology/engineering tests, in order to meet what is called a competency determination standard. That standard is updated every few years.

MCAS results are sent annually to schools and families, intending to show, on a basic level, if

**...the reform act of 1993 also brought other changes to the educational landscape in Massachusetts, including one that continues to have a big impact on students: the establishment of charter schools.**

students are “mastering” state standards and where they might need additional help. The results are also meant to show schools and districts how students are doing in core subjects. The data collected allows teachers and school leaders to then identify academic areas that need improvement across a grade or even an entire school. Assessments also help the state know where to focus more of its efforts — on individual struggling schools or on subject areas where they are seeing trends in low scores across the state.

Beyond massively changing financing and academic standards, the reform act of 1993 also brought other changes to the educational landscape in Massachusetts, including one that continues to have a big impact on students: the establishment of charter schools.

Charters in Massachusetts are public schools that are tuition free and independently run. Their teachers and staff are public employees, and, like their district counterparts, they are subject to the state’s collective bargaining laws. Charters are

open to all students in the state on a first-come, first-serve basis, or by lottery. The goal in creating charter schools was to give families some choice within and outside their districts and to give these new schools greater autonomy to develop curricula, personnel, and budgets, in exchange for greater accountability. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), once a new charter is approved, it is “allowed to control its own budget and hire (and fire) teachers and staff. In return for this freedom, a charter school must demonstrate good results within five years or risk losing its charter.” There was also hope that charters would stimulate the development of innovative programs. Early advocates “envisioned small-scale, autonomous schools run by independent mom-and-pop operators who would be positioned to respond to local community needs,” noted the authors of the 2010 book, *The Charter School Experiment*.

In Massachusetts, all charter schools are public and operate under a five-year agreement approved and monitored by the state’s Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. There are two kinds of charter schools in the state: Commonwealth, which operate independently from traditional school districts, and Horace, which operate as part of a district but with high levels of autonomy. When Governor Weld signed the reform act in 1993, the idea of charter schools in the United States was new. The first charter in the country had just opened in Minnesota the year before. California passed a charter law later that year; six states, including Massachusetts, followed in 1993.

Initially, charter schools in Massachusetts were capped at 25. The cap has been lifted several times since 1993. Today, there are 70 Commonwealth charters and six Horace Mann charters: 35 urban (not Boston), 21 in Boston, 14 suburban, and 6 rural. Enrollment has jumped, starting with 2,613 students at 15 schools in the school year 1995–1996 to a projected 46,959 for fiscal year 2024 (up from 45,829 in 2023), according to DESE. Currently, 74% of charter students are students of color, 57% low income, 35% first language not English, and 16% students with disabilities, notes the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association, which also

reports that charter school graduates attend college at about 71% compared to 62% statewide, and vote at a higher rate (41% to 35%).

While funding, standards, accountability, and charter schools are some of the bigger changes that resulted from the 1993 reform act, there were other changes mandated by the law that received less media attention but nonetheless have had a big impact on teaching and learning in the state.

For example, the legislation marked a shift in who makes decisions in schools. While district leaders still have a lot of power, the state’s authority expanded, including allowing for direct intervention in underperforming districts. The act also brought “significant changes in the way schools and districts are run,” according to *Education Connection Magazine*, put out in 2003 by the University of Massachusetts Amherst School of Education. This includes reduced school committee power over personnel issues, with superintendents and principals given more authority over hiring and firing. At the same time, tenure for principals was eliminated and the standard for dismissal was downgraded from “just cause” to “good cause.” The law also called for adding school councils at all schools, composed of parents, teachers, students, and administrators who make recommendations for the school and student improvement.

There were changes for teachers, too. A portion of state aid to local districts was earmarked for increased teacher professional development. The licensure requirements for new and veteran teachers were also expanded, which some say has had a significant impact on the gains students in the state have made since the reform act was first signed.

“Without the changes Massachusetts made to its entire system of teacher licensing,” writes Sandra Stotsky in her 2015 book, *An Empty Curriculum: The Need to Reform Teacher Licensing Regulations and Tests*, “it is unlikely there would have been enduring gains in achievement for students in all demographic groups and in all its regional vocational/technical high schools.” No other state did what Massachusetts did when the 1993 reform act was passed, she writes, which was to

“redo almost every aspect of its licensing system,” including adding required subject area licensing tests for all prospective teachers, tests for new teachers, and specific criteria for license renewal for veteran teachers.

## What went right?

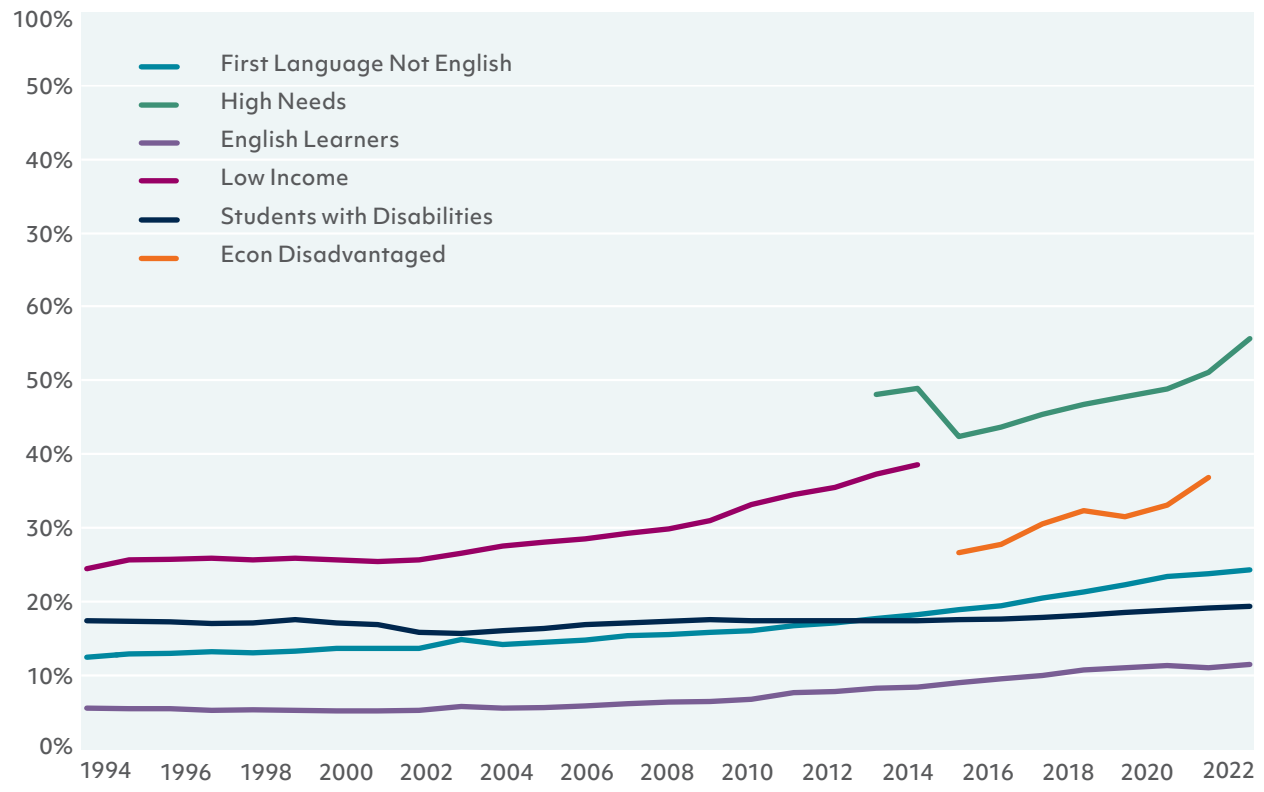
“A good education in a safe environment is the magic wand that brings opportunity,” said Weld when he signed the Massachusetts Education Reform Act back in 1993. “It’s up to us to make sure that wand is waved over every cradle.”

So, the question is, three decades after this landmark legislation was passed, was the wand truly waved?

The answer is — as is usually the case involving anything related to education — a maybe and a sort-of.

On the one hand, there are promising gains. The state’s dropout rate has decreased by nearly 50% since the signing. According to *Mass K–12 Education Policy Primer*, a report put out by Education Reform Now (ERN), between 1994 and 2021, the statewide annual dropout rate fell from 3.7% to 1.5%; between 2006 and 2021, the state’s four-year graduation rate rose steadily from 80% to 90%. This means about 7,348 students graduated in 2021 who would not have graduated under 2006’s graduation rate. And these improvements occurred, the report noted, as the student population grew more diverse. In 1994, for example, 79% of public school students in the

## Selected Population of MA Students



Source: MA School and District Profiles, DESE



state were white, 8% were Black, 9% were Latino, 4% were Asian, 12% did not speak English as their first language, and 24% were low-income. The demographics of students in the 2022–2023 school year are notably different: 56% are white, 9% Black, 23% Latino, 7% Asian, 24% speak a language other than English as their first language, and 56% qualify as high needs.

And in comparison to other states, Massachusetts is consistently held up as one of the top performing states in the country for public school education when looking at test scores and national assessments — something that surprised Birmingham back in 2018 when he was reflecting on progress since the reform act was passed. “If you had told me on the stifling day,” he wrote in a *Commonwealth Magazine* essay, “when Governor Weld signed the Education Reform Act into law at the un-air conditioned Holmes School in Malden that more than 90 percent of our students would pass MCAS; that we would have 13 consecutive years of rising SAT scores; or that our students would rank first in the nation in every category and in every grade tested on NAEP between 2005 and 2013, then again in 2017; and that they would place at or near the top on gold-standard international math and science tests, I would have thought you were unrealistically optimistic.”

Optimistic, but not necessarily wrong, as a *New York Times* story from 2013 noted.

“Although common wisdom is that American students are falling further behind, the stats from Massachusetts tell a different story,” the

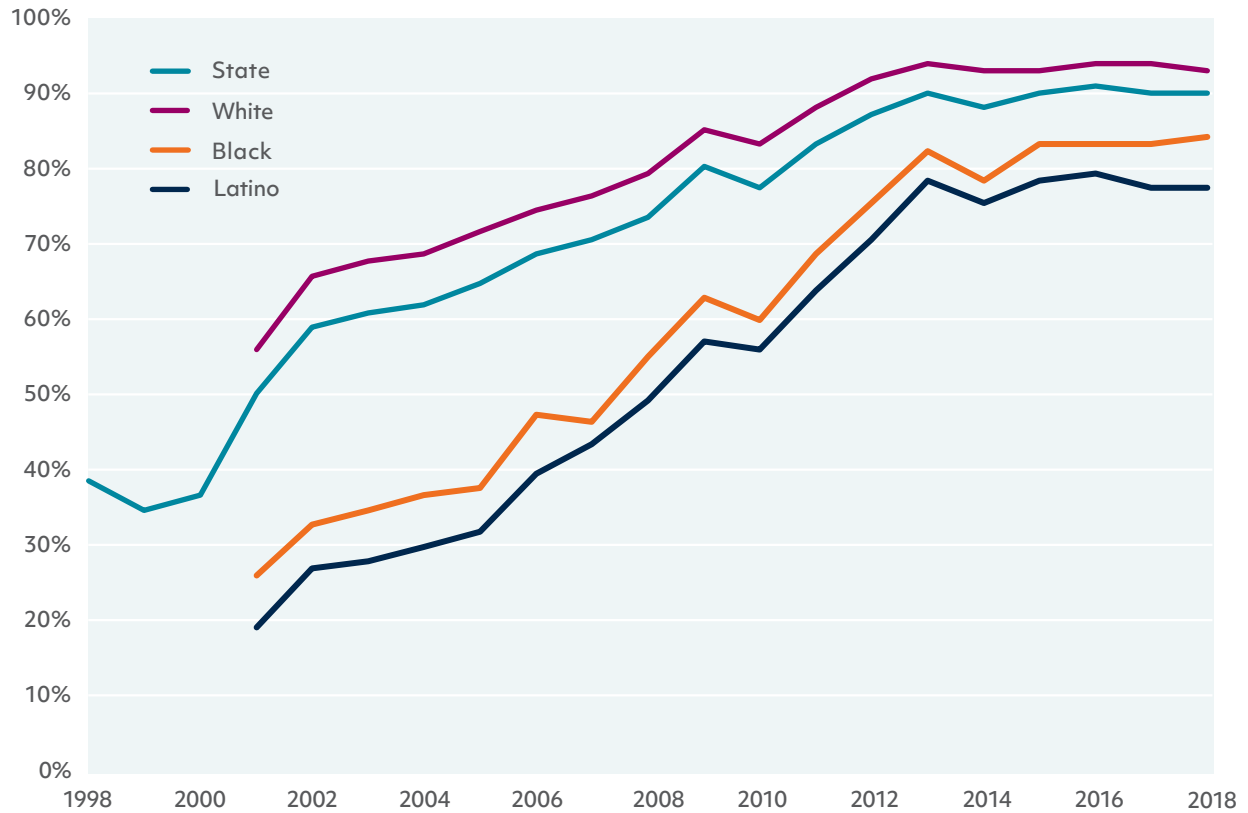
*Times* wrote, referring to data from TIMMS — the influential Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. If Massachusetts were a country, “its eighth graders would rank second in the world in science, behind only Singapore.” The article acknowledged that “achievement tests are incomplete indicators of educational prowess, but behind Massachusetts’ raw numbers are two decades of sustained efforts to lift science and mathematics education. Educators and officials chose a course and held to it.”

MCAS gains (until the pandemic) are another area held up as impressive, at least for some students. According to the ERN policy primer, between 1998 (the first year MCAS was used) until 2019, there was substantial statewide improvement in core subject areas when looking at all students. For example, the percentage of Massachusetts tenth graders scoring “proficient” in math rose from 24% to 78%. The percentage of students “proficient” in English language arts rose from 38% to 91%.

*The New York Times* article goes on to say that since the 1993 law passed, “there is still much disagreement over what were the crucial components to its success.” Some think it was the added money, others the addition of high stakes testing like MCAS that imposed accountability. Others point to the relatively clear standards that aligned everything from teacher preparation to classroom instruction to school and district responsibility. Driscoll said in the story that all three components “were essential.”

## Percent Proficient or Advanced

### 10th Grade English Language Arts



Significantly changing how schools are funded — the Chapter 70 formula — certainly had a huge impact on reforming education in the state with the infusion of more money. Driscoll noted in his book that the first decade after the bill was passed, “state aid to schools ... has grown from \$1.3 billion to about \$3.2 billion in FY03.” According to numbers released by DESE in 2022, Chapter 70 funding increased nearly every year since, with the exception of FY09 when it dropped from \$3.725 billion to \$3.563, then again in FY11, when it dropped from \$3.869 to \$3.850. More recently, in the fiscal year 2024 budget released by Governor Maura Healy, cities and towns will share \$6.585 billion in Chapter 70 school funding —

a \$586 million or 9.8% boost from the previous year and the largest percentage increase since 1999.

When Roosevelt was reminiscing back in his *Commonwealth* article at the 10-year-anniversary of the reform act signing, he said consistent increased spending for schools is itself a version of success, given the ups and downs of state budgets — and priorities.

“Perhaps the most significant story in Massachusetts since 1993 is that contrary to many people’s expectations, the state has honored its financial commitment,” he wrote. “An extraordinary amount of money ... has been sent primarily to poorer districts under a formula designed to ensure that every district in the

Commonwealth would spend at least at foundation budget level. This was the amount of spending deemed sufficient to provide every child with a minimally adequate education. By the year 2000, every district was spending at the foundation level and most districts were spending a good deal more. For many poor districts this meant almost tripling their per-pupil expenditures.”

Surprises aside, the question is, did this funding help? Did it accomplish the aim of ensuring that schools across the state were not only adequately funded, but also that the massive gaps between the Wellesleys and the Mattapans were closed?

In 1999, plaintiffs representing students in 19 school districts said no. In *Hancock v. Commissioner of Education*, they alleged that the state was failing to provide public school students the constitutionally required education outlined in the 1991 *McDuffy* decision and called for a major increase in funding. The case was initially tried in Superior Judicial Court before being heard in 2005 before the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. By a 5-2 margin, the court rejected the recommendation that Chapter 70 be examined and reformed, ruling that the state had invested \$30 billion in public schools since the 1993 reform act and was making “reasonable” progress.

“No one, including the defendants, disputes that serious inequities in public education remain,” wrote Chief Justice Margaret Marshall in the majority opinion. “But the Commonwealth is moving systematically to address those

deficiencies and continues to make education reform a fiscal priority.”

In a *Boston Globe* article following the *Hancock* decision, Driscoll said that while schools could always use more money, what really needed to happen was for districts to figure out how to spend the money they have more effectively.

“There’s been tremendous progress these past 10 years,” he said, “and the courts have acknowledged that. Our job is hardly done. We have got a long way to go.”

## So what now?

Reville, now a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, says the state should be “proud of what was accomplished in 1993, especially when compared to other states,” but, like Driscoll, he adds, “at the end of the day, we didn’t get to an equitable system. We need to be modest enough to admit that we haven’t achieved our original goal, which was that all our students would emerge from high school as proficient.”

Former Governor Deval Patrick agrees. Asked about progress made versus progress that needs to be made, he says, “We still have persistent achievement gaps, and the students stuck in them are poor, have special needs, or speak English as a second language. They are our kids, too, and deserve the kinds of tailored responses that enable them to reach their full potential.”

**“We need to be modest enough to admit that we haven’t achieved our original goal, which was that all our students would emerge from high school as proficient.”**

– Paul Reville

**Francis Keppel Professor of Practice of Educational Policy and Administration, Harvard Graduate School of Education  
Former MA Secretary of Education**

**"...25 years after the Massachusetts Education Reform Act, Black, Latino, and low-income students continue to have vastly different experiences in Massachusetts schools..."**

**– *There Is No Excellence Without Equity: A Path Forward for Education in Massachusetts***

According to *There Is No Excellence Without Equity: A Path Forward for Education in Massachusetts*, a 2022 report put out by the Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership, a coalition of education advocacy partnerships, "Underneath Massachusetts' high overall national rankings are glaring and persistent disparities in opportunity and achievement that separate low-income students and students of color from their peers. The fact is that 25 years after the Massachusetts Education Reform Act, Black, Latino, and low-income students continue to have vastly different experiences in Massachusetts schools than their white and higher-income peers — and these disparities have real consequences for students, their communities, and our Commonwealth's economy and democracy."

Kerry Donahue, chief strategy officer at the Boston Schools Fund said in the report, "The hard truth is that the same data that gives Massachusetts its number one status shows that the level of education that Black and Latino students receive in our state is more similar to that of the average student in the lowest performing states than to their peers in the Commonwealth."

For example, the percentage of Black and Latino third graders reading on grade level in 2018 dropped from 38% to 32% and 28%, while the grade-level percentage for white students stayed steady at 61%. In 2021, according to the report, only 58% of ninth graders from low-income families

passed all their classes, compared to 88% of their wealthier peers. That same year, only 39% of Latino high school graduates enrolled in college, while 69% of white high school grads enrolled.

Looking at results from PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) from 2015, the report found that "Massachusetts' results indicate that Black and Latino 15-year-olds in the Commonwealth score about two grade levels below their white peers." Using a similar *New York Times* analogy, if Massachusetts were a country, "its overall PISA scores would place the state first among the 35 participating OECD nations. But its scores for Black and Latino students would place Massachusetts roughly seventh from the bottom of this list."

The report also found huge gaps in college readiness and students taking the Advanced Placement test. In 2017, "less than one in three of Massachusetts' Black and Latino students who took the SAT scored at the college-ready level in reading and math, compared to 65% for white students and 71% for Asian students." Looking at AP test-taking rates, the report notes, Latino students comprise 18% of the high school population but only 9% of AP exam takers; Black students comprise 10% of the high school population but only 6% of AP exam takers.

COVID has also had an impact on students across the state. A newly released report from the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy (named after Jack Rennie), called the *Condition of Education in the Commonwealth 2023*, points out, "As schools

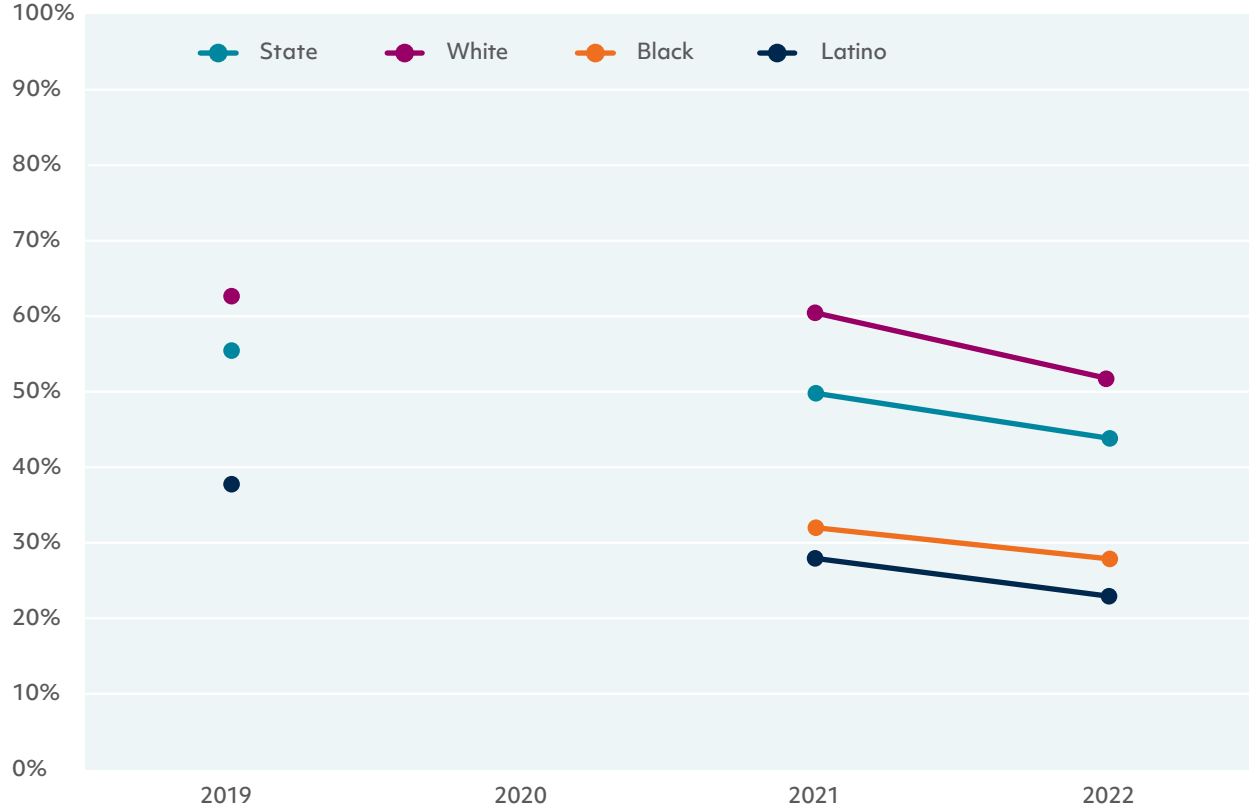
**"...As schools and communities are forced to navigate COVID-19 for a fourth straight year, it is abundantly clear that the pandemic has left a mark on every facet of the education system..."**

**– *Condition of Education in the Commonwealth 2023***



## Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectation

Grade 3 ELA MCAS



and communities are forced to navigate COVID-19 for a fourth straight year, it is abundantly clear that the pandemic has left a mark on every facet of the education system” — and on all students. The report adds that “while Massachusetts has remained committed to strong standards and inclusive learning settings, the pandemic contributed to declines in achievement and the widening of already substantial gaps in learning.”

For example, with MCAS, even with inconsistent data collection in 2020 (the beginning of COVID) and students taking an abbreviated version of the exam in 2021, on the English and language arts section, only 44% of students in grade 3 reached the “meeting” or “exceeding” benchmark — down seven points from the previous year’s tests (and

12 points from 2019). Broken out, 28% of Black students, 6% of low-income, and 23% Latino met those benchmarks. In math, 36.3% of eighth-graders met or exceeded expectations, up slightly from 2021 (32.1%) but down 10 percentage points from 2019 (46.4%). Broken out, 28% of Black students, 18% of low-income, and 17% Latino met those benchmarks. Even scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress test, often called the nation’s report card, fell slightly. The latest results from 2022 show that while the state is still one of the nation’s top performers, it lost its top spot in two of the four tests: In fourth-grade math, Massachusetts public school students scored second, behind Wyoming; in eighth-grade reading, the state was second to New Jersey.

**“Closing these gaps is our collective work for the next decade, and the SOA will fuel our efforts to ensure all students achieve at high levels and are prepared for success after high school.”**

**– Jeffrey C. Riley  
Commissioner of Elementary  
and Secondary Education**

Noting the effect the pandemic has had on students, Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Jeffrey C. Riley recently said, “We’re proud of the efforts of our students, families, and educators during these challenging years. At the same time, it’s clear our students have lost ground, and we have more work ahead to recover.”

New money from the 2019 passage of the Student Opportunity Act (SOA) could help. Through the act, the state will infuse \$1.5 billion in new funding to public education by 2027 to address achievement and opportunity gaps that existed before the pandemic but were made worse by COVID.

When the act passed, Riley said, “Closing these gaps is our collective work for the next decade, and the SOA will fuel our efforts to ensure all students achieve at high levels and are prepared for success after high school.”

There’s another growing concern for parents and educators beyond test scores — the mental health of students. According to a January 2023 statewide poll by the nonprofit Education Trust in Massachusetts, 44% of parents say they are either somewhat or very concerned about their child’s mental health. The concern is greater among parents who see their child as behind grade level (65% concerned) compared to those who see their child as at or ahead of grade level (37% concerned). The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 1 counselor to 250 students; in Massachusetts, the ratio across schools is about

1-to-307. When broken down by group, the ratio is even more startling. According to *School Counselors Matter in Massachusetts*, a report put out by Education Trust, during the 2015-16 academic year, in Massachusetts schools with the most students from low-income families, the average student-to-counselor ratio was 364-to-1 (compared to 317-to-1 in schools with the fewest) and in schools with the most students of color, the ratio was 344-to-1 (compared to 294-to-1 in schools with the fewest).

This could explain, in part, why there’s been a rise in the chronic absenteeism rate in the state, which is defined as the percentage of students who are absent from school for 10% or more of the days enrolled. Between 2021 and 2022, according to the Rennie Center’s *Condition of Education in the Commonwealth 2023* report, that number rose from 17% to 27% for all students in the state; the rate is higher for students of color. “When disaggregated by race, the 2022 data show that fully 42% of students identifying as Hispanic/Latino were chronically absent, along with 38% of students identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native, 32% identifying as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 32% identifying as African American/Black.”

As Alexis Lian, the director of policy at the Rennie Center told WBUR after the report came out, “At first glance, it’s worrying because students were back in classrooms in 2022. Those are days that students are missing out on instruction. Those are days that disrupt classroom culture — and access to mental health and social and emotional needs and healthy and stable meals for students.”

And it’s not only students who are suffering. As the Rennie report noted, “educator burnout is real,” especially among those who lead districts — the superintendents. Teacher retention rates are down by about 1 percentage point since 2021 while retention rates for superintendents decreased by 6 percentage points since 2020.

“We don’t have granular data from the people that left these positions to give exact reasons [for leaving],” explained Lian to WBUR, “but we can infer, given higher level trends, that it has been

**“The hard truth is that the same data that gives Massachusetts its number one status shows that the level of education that Black and Latino students receive in our state is more similar to that of the average student in the lowest performing states than to their peers in the Commonwealth.”**

**– Kerry Donahue  
Chief Strategy Officer  
Boston Schools Fund**

an incredibly traumatic, stressful, and difficult time for leaders in education for the past few years.”

Part of the problem is that too often, we are still not taking a “whole child” approach to public education, says Patrick, former Governor, in areas like art, exercise, mentoring, and in-school healthcare.

“We ask schools to do today what whole neighborhoods used to do,” he says, “but we don’t support the people and the services, or even the length of the school day and year, to enable that.”

In that way, says Reville, there are limits to what schooling alone can do to achieve our goals of equity and equal opportunity.

“Schooling is a necessary but insufficient strategy for achieving a level playing field on which every child has a fair shot at social mobility,” he says. “Schooling, after all, consumes only 20% of a child’s waking hours between kindergarten and grade 12. It is, on average, too weak an intervention to achieve proficiency for all at scale. Our results in Massachusetts and the national results prove that. We still have an iron-law correlation between socio-economic status and educational achievement and attainment. That’s not what [education reformer] Horace Mann envisioned.”

Asked what his former boss, the relentless, dogged Jack Rennie would say of the state of education in the Commonwealth 30 years after the passage of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, Reville says he no doubt would be proud — but he’d want more.

“If Jack Rennie were here, he’d give everyone a pat on the back for effort,” he says, “but he’d challenge them to do better and finish the job of making sure that, as in the title of MBAE’s seminal report, “every child (is) a winner.”

## PART II

# Where We Go From Here: Six Strategies for an Equitable K–12 Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic

---

The COVID-19 pandemic's disproportionate impact on students of color, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and those from low-income backgrounds is beyond dispute. In 2023, the question at hand is how Massachusetts will respond. The Education Reform Act offers the path forward: Massachusetts should employ the same principles that drove its success in the past 30 years to create an equitable recovery.

The Education Reform Act rested on the belief that every child has the potential to succeed, and that we can make meaningful progress by funding schools well, setting ambitious goals, measuring progress, and using those measurements to improve practice. Below, we offer six strategies that schools, districts, and the state should consider in crafting their COVID-19 pandemic recovery plan. Each of these strategies applies the Education Reform Act's spirit to the difficulties facing Massachusetts in 2023. As we led the country in improving educational outcomes since 1993, we can now lead the country in charting a K–12 recovery toward greater equity and achievement for all students.

Each strategy responds to a key inequity or insufficiency highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and each can be implemented quickly, including by deploying state and federal pandemic relief funding. We further suggest that DESE consider these ideas when encouraging districts to include more aggressive gap-closing measures in their Student Opportunity Act spending plans — a significant power the potential of which has thus far gone [largely untapped](#).

As Massachusetts Secretary of Education Patrick Tutwiler **said** in January 2023, there is now a need to “stabilize, heal, and transform” K–12 education in Massachusetts. In the following section of this report, we offer a brief account of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on K–12 education in Massachusetts and then outline six strategies that embody Secretary Tutwiler's words. They aim to stabilize schools and districts still struggling to recover from the pandemic; heal, to the extent school communities can, the trauma inflicted on students, families, teachers, and staff; and transform public education so all students achieve their fullest potential.

In June 2023, as the third pandemic-impacted school year comes to a close, we look back on 30 years of education reform in Massachusetts. When we look back on this moment in 2053, 30 years in the future, we hope that Massachusetts will be celebrating an equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and even greater progress in closing opportunity gaps. By building on the success of the Education Reform Act and employing the following strategies for pandemic recovery, Massachusetts will be taking the first steps toward realizing that future.

# Background

At the start of the school year in 2019, the Education Reform Act had been in force for 26 years. As described in the previous section, the Commonwealth's schools had seen substantial growth in both equity and overall achievement during this period: higher graduation rates and test scores, lower dropout rates, and better outcomes for students across demographic groups. The 2019 Student Opportunity Act built on this legacy by increasing funding, with a special focus on the highest-need districts — all while empowering the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to foster greater innovation in districts through its supervision of their three-year spending plans for the new funding.

In 2020, however, the COVID-19 pandemic required that schools, districts, and the state shift their focus to immediate needs arising from the public health crisis. With schools physically closed for months at a time, the Commonwealth's K–12 education community faced acute difficulties in serving students' needs while maintaining basic safety measures. Schools and districts were often left largely on their own to design virtual learning options, establish reopening procedures, and maintain services like school meals for students in need. The resulting impacts of the pandemic on K–12 education have been myriad and **disproportionately borne** by low-income students and students of color, as well as **students with disabilities** and **English learners** whose education most often involves additional school-based supports.

With the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic behind us, schools must address the trauma and widened opportunity gaps left in its wake. At the same time, this moment provides an opportunity to confront the longstanding, structural inequities that contributed to the pandemic's uneven effects. The principles of the 1993 Education Reform Act and, what we have learned from the past 30 years of its implementation, should inform a more equitable and resilient future for our public schools.



# Family Engagement

One of the COVID-19 pandemic's K–12 **widely-reported** educational outcomes was the strain it placed on school-family engagement. When schools physically closed in March 2020, many districts struggled to maintain contact with families, and students suffered as a result. In some cases, districts lost track of students entirely, contributing to **high levels** of chronic absenteeism. And, even as Massachusetts emerges from the pandemic, students who left public schools in 2020 and 2021 have not returned in the numbers expected.<sup>1</sup>

Paired with **reporting** on parent **dissatisfaction** with school and district outreach during the pandemic and **polling** on the same issues, these trends point to a clear need for a new approach to family engagement — one that will *help* schools and families to weather difficult circumstances, rather than contributing to their ill effects. The goal for Massachusetts — as its schools, districts, and families recover from the pandemic — should be to empower families to support student learning by way of a culturally literate, student-centered model of family engagement that gives all adults in a child's life the information they need to help their child succeed.

Achieving this goal requires recognizing that no single method of engagement will reach *all* families. Instead, schools and districts will need to combine multiple forms of outreach to ensure that each family is informed about their child's well-being and academic success. Strong family engagement will necessarily look different in different districts, schools, and classrooms — the very idea is that schools and educators should be

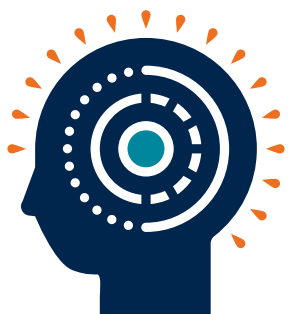
<sup>1</sup> In fall 2019, there were 948,828 students attending public schools in Massachusetts, from preschool through high school. That number dropped to 911,465 in fall 2020. As of fall 2022, it had only risen to 913,735. This pattern is even more pronounced when looking only at traditional, district public schools (therefore excluding charter schools, regional schools, vocational/technical schools, and other schools and districts other than local, traditional public schools). For a detailed discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on public school enrollment in Massachusetts, please see Education Reform Now's Massachusetts K–12 Education 2023 Policy Primer, 2nd Edition.

responsive to each family’s specific needs and communication preferences. As a result, different strategies will apply in different places.

Some ideas that districts and the state can begin implementing now include:

- Training educators to use **multiple modes of outreach** — including texting, phone calls, emails, and home visits — and tracking which families are receptive to each method. A Learning Heroes study **found** that 80% of parents respond well to texts and calls, which leaves 20% who also need strong outreach through other means. Districts should take the time management of this process into account and factor it into educators’ job expectations.
- Ensuring that school staff communicate with families **in their home language**. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many Massachusetts districts were **behind** on meeting the needs of a growing, multilingual student body. For families to feel truly engaged, districts will need to invest in translations and language justice, which the American Bar Association defines as policies advancing the right “to be able to communicate, understand, and be understood in the language in which [people] prefer and feel most articulate and powerful.” This means that districts will need to invest in the staffing and training needed to engage each family in a manner meeting this standard. The state should develop the capacity to provide both guidance and financial support to such efforts.
- Establishing a school- and district-wide commitment to **culturally responsive teaching**, or developing teaching strategies that “**incorporate students’ cultural identities** and lived experiences into the classroom as tools for effective instruction.” Especially given that Massachusetts educators are disproportionately white compared to students and their families, it is crucial that districts inculcate cultural competence and awareness of bias. A commitment to culturally responsive teaching also means working toward an educator workforce that more closely reflects the diversity of students in Massachusetts — and the state should adopt programs and **legislation** that encourage more educator diversity.
- Focusing on **engagement over mere involvement**. For family engagement to become a real tool for stronger, more resilient, and student-centered school communities, there must first be trust between schools and families. This means approaching engagement as an ongoing process, not just an “involvement” box to check in any given decision. Rather than a specific policy, this is a question of mindset: school leaders and educators should approach families as partners in their children’s education and view family input as a crucial piece of any decision. Family engagement should be a core part of any school or teacher’s “job description,” not just an afterthought.





## Mental Health and Student Support

Another key theme of the COVID-19 pandemic in K–12 education was its severe impact on students’ mental health. Amid school closures, isolation, illness, and loss, many students — as well as teachers and school community members — **reported** high levels of “grief, anxiety and depression.” Nationwide, more than half of schools **reported** in summer 2022 that student misconduct increased in the pandemic’s wake, with just under half reporting increased behavioral issues and disrespect to staff. In Massachusetts, nearly half of parents surveyed by MassINC polling in 2022 said they were **concerned** about their child’s mental health.

These trends mean that schools, districts, and the state will need to step up their mental health support as part of a strong and equitable K–12 recovery. The urgency of this work highlights schools’ responsibility both to nurturing, safe, supportive environments *and* to ensuring that each student has the opportunity to learn and reach their potential. Substantial research indicates that mental health predicts academic success, including **better grades, attendance, and test scores**.

DESE recognizes the importance of foregrounding mental health in the K–12 recovery and has implemented a **grant program** to assist 110 communities in that effort. These grants build on DESE’s pre-pandemic efforts to encourage both “**Safe and Supportive Schools**” and “**Trauma-Sensitive School**” practices. Many district leaders have also placed focus on this issue. In Worcester, for example, Superintendent Rachel Monárrez set mental health as a key priority and joined Governor Healey’s **transition team** to “give all students and families equitable access to the educational, social, emotional and behavioral supports they need.”

Still, wide variation characterizes mental health support in districts and schools: in the MassINC parent poll, 49% **said** their children had not been offered “mental health supports, like counseling, to help them this year.” This percentage was largely consistent across racial groups, but highest for parents from low-income households.

Combined with the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on low-income communities and communities of color, this variation means that **addressing mental health is necessary for combatting widened inequities in academic outcomes**. To rebuild a K–12 system in which all students have the opportunity to reach their full potential, schools and districts must address ongoing trauma from the pandemic and improve students’ social and emotional health.

Education Reform Now and many of its partner organizations have released several proposals on how states, districts, and schools can support students’ mental health as they recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. The U.S. Department of Education has also published **seven recommendations** on this issue. Some steps that states, districts, and schools can take now include:

- **Measuring mental health indicators and using them in decision-making.** Especially given the ongoing effects of the pandemic, districts will necessarily apply different strategies in supporting mental health. This decentralized approach makes it even more important that **outcomes are measured**. Decision-makers should have access to information about whether a given set of interventions is helping students feel more secure and ready to learn.
- **Increase funding for school counselors and psychologists.** Students will continue to have significant needs for professional mental health support, and schools need to provide these resources. That will mean **greater investments** in mental health professionals. In some cases, that may mean reallocating resources to account for this focus.

ILPs...are individualized educational roadmaps that begin at students' earliest interaction with public schools...



## Individualized Learning Plans

- **Build a stronger, more diverse pathway to becoming a mental health professional.**

We know that students are **more likely to succeed** when they have adults in their classrooms and school community who share their identity; this insight should also be applied to mental health professionals. In the long term, investing in students' mental health requires that we make the pipeline to mental health careers **more diverse and inclusive**.

- **Resist efforts to stigmatize vulnerable students, which will only compound the mental health crisis in our schools.**

At a time when so many students and school communities are struggling, there is no excuse for risking their mental health in pursuit of culture war battles. LGBTQ+ students, and especially LGBTQ+ students of color, continue to report **disproportionately high levels of difficulty** with their mental health. Advocates for equity and improved academic outcomes must resist efforts like Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill and **Congressional efforts** to restrict trans students' full participation in school life.

The COVID-19 pandemic's highly uneven impact demonstrated that children's educational outcomes are closely linked to a wide range of factors outside the classroom. Each student has individual needs that must be addressed. Yet, even as the pandemic heightened the need for personalized support to each student, many parents reported a **decline** in the level of personalized instruction available to their children. As Massachusetts moves forward from the pandemic, schools and districts can better meet the individual needs of each student by instituting Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) for all.

ILPs, sometimes also called **Student Success Plans**, are individualized educational roadmaps that begin at students' earliest interaction with public schools and follow them through the end of high school. They incorporate each student's specific needs, goals, strengths, and areas for improvement. As students move through their educational journey from preschool to high school graduation, they work with teachers and





counselors to update their ILP, set new goals, and obtain the resources needed to meet them.

Crucially, ILPs help schools and districts to address gaps in academic outcomes arising from disparities in the earliest years of life. Research is conclusive that children with potential developmental delays **benefit greatly** from **Early Intervention**, an individualized set of tools including home visits, targeted therapy, and skill development. Substantial research has similarly established that much of the educational achievement gap **flows** from inequitable access to resources, enrichment, and high-quality educational experiences during early childhood. Research also suggests that interventions are more **effective** in narrowing this gap when they occur earlier in a child’s life. An ILP necessarily focuses school staff on early intervention by requiring them to identify any such gaps as soon as a child begins education — and to develop a plan to narrow those gaps from the outset.

Schools and districts already have some experience with crafting individualized learning plans for students. *All* districts must use a similar process, the **Individualized Education Plan (IEP)**, for students with disabilities. Even adherence to this federally-mandated process appears to have declined during the pandemic, however: In Massachusetts, a quarter of parents of students with an IEP **reported** in November 2020 that their child had not received adequate services during the pandemic — or that they had not received services at all.

The **EdRedesign Lab** has been at the forefront of advancing individualized learning plans since well before the pandemic began. Describing the process, Redesign Lab director and former Massachusetts Secretary of Education Paul Reville **explained** in a 2019 informational video that an ILP “follows a child, ideally, from birth all the way to employment and kept kept track of ... what sort of needs does the child have, and how are we as adults in the community, through the school system or through other agencies, meeting those sets of needs.” The student’s individual needs, skills, and knowledge are thus incorporated into a preliminary roadmap for their education. Adults in the system then use

that roadmap to guide the student’s education while simultaneously updating it to reflect changing needs. EdRedesign further **highlights** four components crucial to any ILP process:

- Each student must have a “**navigator**,” or an adult responsible for maintaining a personal relationship with the student and their family and understanding the student’s goals, needs, and progress.
- A **plan** (the ILP) maintained by the navigator in collaboration with both the student and the student’s family and teachers.
- A coordinated **system of supports** employed to support the student’s needs. Some supports may be academic in nature — tutoring in areas where the student needs extra help, access to online resources, or homework help, for instance. They may also focus on needs *outside* the classroom, like food insecurity or difficulty finding transport to school.
- A **data platform** to ensure that information about the student’s academic and social-emotional progress is measured and incorporated into the ILP on an ongoing basis.

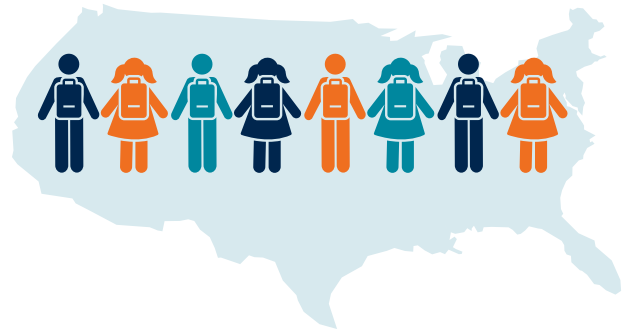
Some districts have **begun implementing** ILPs for all students, many in partnership with EdRedesign. Salem, for example, partnered with a student support organization called **City Connects** and then EdRedesign to implement ILPs for all students in preschool through grade 8. City Connects meets with teachers individually in the fall to discuss each child in their classes, subsequently working together to craft a success plan. **Louisville, Kentucky** is piloting ILPs with a subset of students already involved in a summer enrichment program. The Unity Point School District in Illinois is **starting** with 8th graders, focusing on the transition to high school.

In Massachusetts, expanding and refining ILP adoption could help address the disparate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and point toward a more agile and student-centered K–12 model. The Massachusetts’ Department of Elementary and Secondary Education already supports this work through its **Supporting SEL (Social-Emotional**

It is thus urgent for Massachusetts' K–12 pandemic recovery efforts to foreground opportunity gaps in children's earliest years — and high-quality, universal preschool is an evidence-based tool to do just that.

Learning) and Mental Health Grant, but the state could further incentivize ILPs by creating specific grant streams and prioritizing individualized instruction in its assessment of districts' pandemic relief spending plans. The state can also [help spur greater personalization](#) by providing districts with training in relevant areas, like data interpretation; creating forums to share best practices; and mapping public and nonprofit resources available to support ILP implementation.

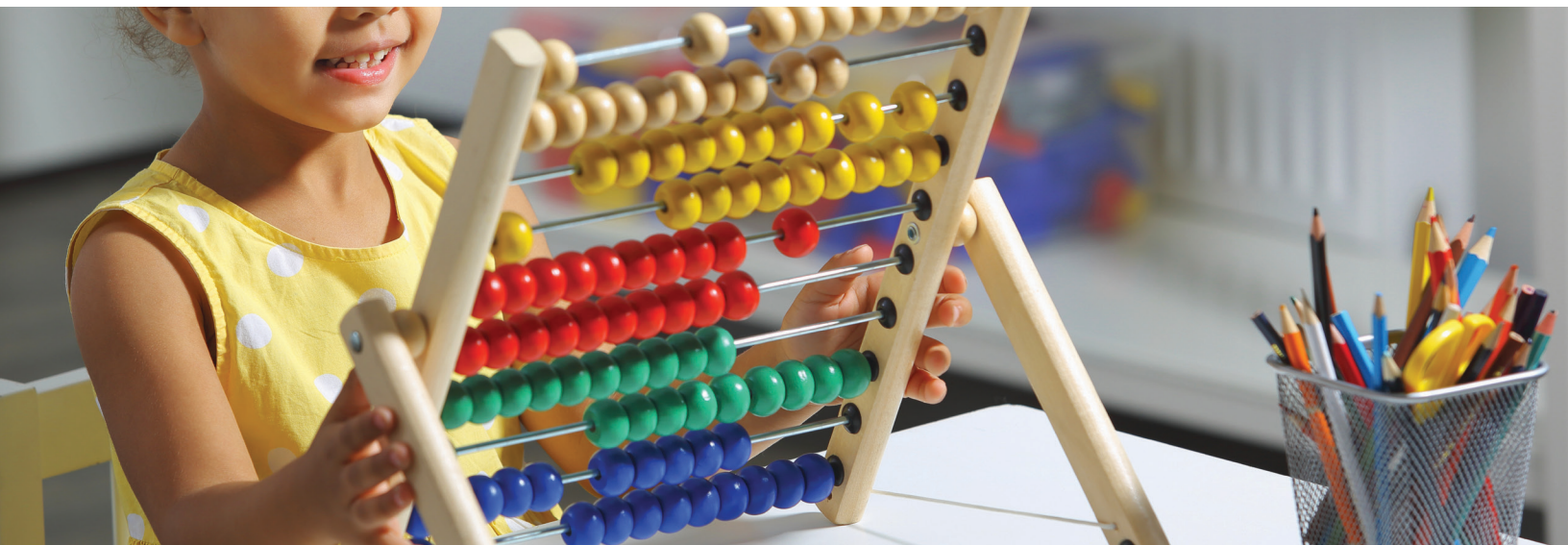
The COVID-19 pandemic presented evidence of the urgent need for individualized learning. Expanding and refining ILPs could help to address the specific impact of the pandemic on each student while pointing forward toward a more agile and student-centered K–12 model.



## Universal Preschool

When UMass Amherst [polled](#) the parents of school-aged Massachusetts children between October 2020 and February 2022, a clear pattern emerged in early education: While *all* parents indicated that their children's academic progress had suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic, the worry was greatest among parents of younger children. This pattern has been reflected in pandemic-era MCAS scores, with declines being [most pronounced](#) in English language arts for younger grades. After Massachusetts spent two decades narrowing the literacy gap, the pandemic likely widened it.

It is thus urgent for Massachusetts' K–12 pandemic recovery efforts to foreground opportunity gaps in children's earliest years — and **high-quality, universal preschool** is an evidence-based tool to do just that. Expanding access to high-quality preschool is one of the best-studied education interventions, and researchers have [tended to find](#) persistent, gap-closing benefits to the idea. Multiple studies have associated enrollment in preschool with increased test scores when students



enter later grades. As discussed in the “Preschool” chapter of Education Reform Now’s [2023 K-12 Education Policy Primer](#), the key takeaway from research on the topic is that preschool enrollment generally leaves children better prepared for kindergarten and correlates strongly with improved later-life outcomes. As we write in the Primer, “one of the [most-cited papers](#) drawing this conclusion draws on data from Boston, showing that students who were admitted to preschool in Boston via a lottery system showed higher levels of high school graduation, SAT taking, and college attendance, as well as lower levels of juvenile incarceration.”

At the same time, more recent research has added an important caveat to these benefits: for preschool expansion to work, the programs need to be **high-quality**, with highly-trained teachers and evidence-informed pedagogy. This means that the gap-closing impact of any preschool expansion program will likely depend on the strength of its quality guardrails.

Some districts in Massachusetts have already made headway on achieving universal, high-quality preschool, often with help from state and federal programs. [Boston](#) offers universal, full-day preschool to 4-year-olds; [Springfield](#) offers the same guarantee for both 3- and 4-year-olds via a mix of public and private options. Other districts offer free preschool seats via lottery, often with preference for students from low-income families and supported by federal Preschool Expansion Grants and subsequent grants from the state. [Holyoke](#) is one district that has made use of these grants, thereby doubling its number of preschool seats between 2015 (when the district went into state receivership) and 2020.

At the state level, there are several bills pending before the Massachusetts legislature in 2023 to improve the quality of preschool in the Commonwealth and expand access. In 2022, the Special Legislative Early Education and Care Economic Review Commission [published](#) recommendations for the “long-term stability of the [early education and care] sector and developing a sustainable system that provides

high-quality, accessible, and affordable care to families, prioritizing the most vulnerable populations.” While these recommendations encompass the entire early education and care system, they include multiple provisions that would benefit the quality and accessibility of preschool: basing reimbursement to programs on enrollment rather than attendance, raising the reimbursement rate for preschool students, coordinating with the business community to develop guidelines for employment best-practices in the sector, and increasing state support and oversight for private providers in the mixed delivery system. The recommendations are incorporated into two [pieces of legislation](#) before the Massachusetts legislature in the 2023-2024 legislative session and supported by the [Common Start Coalition](#).

There are also several bills before the legislature in the 2023-2024 session aimed principally at expanding preschool access. *An Act Ensuring High Quality Pre-Kindergarten Education*, supported by [Strategies for Children in collaboration with local leaders](#) across the state, would expand the community collaboration model of Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative, which currently funds preschool seats for 1,000 preschool-aged children in nine cities across the Commonwealth. Additionally, there are [multiple bills before the legislature](#) providing phased-in growth to the state’s existing Preschool Expansion Grant program and prioritizing funding for districts with high levels of need and low levels of early literacy.

Access to high-quality preschool has long been recognized as one of the strongest interventions for closing achievement gaps and improving student outcomes. Looking forward from 2023, it also addresses one of the most glaring academic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic: backsliding and widening gaps along lines of race and income in early literacy. With multiple bills seeking to leverage new funding toward preschool expansion, many districts and DESE should consider including this strategy in plans moving forward.



## Evidence-Based Reading Instruction

To address the growing gaps in early childhood literacy, schools, districts, and DESE can also focus on adopting strategies supported by research on how children learn to read. By ensuring that all students have access to evidence-based reading curricula, Massachusetts schools can increase the likelihood that students read at grade level by grade 3.

**Overwhelming evidence links** a child's reading level at grade 3 to later school and life outcomes, including college retention, college and career readiness, incarceration, likelihood to drop out of high school, and economic well-being. This relationship between early literacy and later life outcomes makes it especially troubling that third-grade reading scores appear to be on the decline. In both Massachusetts and nationally, scores began dropping in the mid-2010s after several years of growth, and they **fell further** during the COVID-19 pandemic. These declines disproportionately affected students from historically underserved backgrounds, pointing toward a widening effect on the opportunity gap.

To counter these declines, educators have a wealth of evidence on best practices in teaching children to read. Together, those practices provide an approach to early childhood literacy supported by the **overwhelming majority of current, academic research** on the topic. A key insight is that reading must be taught through explicit phonics instruction, meaning that most children learn to read best when they are taught to sound out and recognize words. Children must learn to decode new words, or break them down into familiar sound patterns and put those sounds together. Phonics-based methods help students

**This relationship between early literacy and later life outcomes makes it especially troubling that third grade reading scores appear to be on the decline.**

to actively learn new words and link those words to preexisting knowledge. Phonics instruction allows students to make a smooth transition from sounding out a word to rapidly recognizing it and reading it by sight — a transition that every **reader must make** to read fluently.

In the Massachusetts' 2023-2024 legislative session, there is a bill (**S. 263/H. 579**) before the legislature to ensure that all students have access to evidence-based reading instruction that sets them up for success. Drawing from similar legislation enacted in **Connecticut** and multiple other states, the legislation would take several steps, including:

- Enshrining evidence-based literacy in Massachusetts' state educational standards, ensuring that instruction and curriculum are informed by best practices;
- Providing pre-service training and professional development for reading instructional staff;
- Creating systems of reading assessment and parental notification;
- Building tiered systems of in-class and out-of-class intervention for students who need extra help to read.

The passage of these bills would put Massachusetts on the path to stronger early literacy while maintaining each district's ability to choose its own path to that goal. It institutes not a single program, but a comprehensive approach compatible with many possible programs. The end goal is reading comprehension — as well as the improved life outcomes that flow from early reading. By stemming the COVID-19 era's declines in third-grade reading through a focus on evidenced-based instruction, the Commonwealth can equip every student for success.



## Pathways to College and Career

Universal preschool and comprehensive literacy address the growing inequities at early stages of a child’s education. But the COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted inequities at the other end of a student’s K–12 journey: college **enrollment** has declined especially sharply among Black and Latino students, both **MassCore completion** and **high school graduation rates** show large disparities by race and income, and Massachusetts employers have **raised the alarm** about the need for a more diverse workforce with the knowledge required for jobs in the innovation economy.

College and career pathways offer potent tools to address these inequities in students’ transitions from K–12 education to college or the workforce. Pathways are personalized plans that guide each student toward a strong entrance to college or a high-value career. Massachusetts currently recognizes three **kinds of pathways**: vocational programs that prepare students for a specific occupation, early college programs, and Innovation Pathways that are focused on partnerships with employers in high-demand industries. These programs help to close existing gaps in college and career preparation, and they are **increasingly popular** with students.

This moment is especially promising for pathways because of opportunities for federal funding. Recognizing that “the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a heavy toll on college and career preparation opportunities and the ability of students to successfully transition into postsecondary education,” the U.S. Department of Education **announced** that states may use funds from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) to support pathways-related

programs. These include dual enrollment opportunities, career and college advising, work-based learning, and giving students the option to earn industry credentials. Similarly, USED **advised states** in February 2023 that they may use funding under the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act “to develop, improve, and support Registered Apprenticeship (RA) programs.”

There are efforts underway in several states to implement high-quality pathways programs. **Rhode Island**, as reported by ExcelinEd, created a cross-agency group charged with producing an action plan on how each agency can contribute to better outcomes through pathways. **Arkansas** passed a 2019 law providing tiered funding for career centers and start-up grants to districts for career and technical education programs. And **Colorado** offers several postsecondary credit options for high school students, including concurrent enrollment, schools that allow students to earn associate degrees or industry credentials, and the Path4Ward program, which provides students from low-income households with funding to take full-time college or career training courses if they complete high school in three years. **Louisiana’s** efforts to increase dual enrollment led to 53% of high schoolers graduating with some college credit in the 2020-2021 school year. Looking forward, **Indiana** is considering a bill to put Perkins funding toward the establishment of a career advising program for high school students.

At the federal level, Senators Maggie Hassan and Todd Young have proposed a **Fast Track to and Through College Act** to increase the uptake of early college pathways across states. If passed, the bill would create a competitive grant program to incentivize state education agencies to create more pathways for students to earn postsecondary course credits during high school.

In Massachusetts, the **Student Pathways to Success Coalition** is mobilizing to achieve progress on pathways in the 2023-2024 legislative session. With participation from a wide range of industry, K–12, civil rights, and advocacy partners, the Coalition has established as its goal a “personalized learner pathway” for all Massachusetts students by 2030, with structured pathways in every public

high school and a range of pathway options available to each student. Its pathways [Policy Playbook](#) offers several steps Massachusetts can take to make this goal a reality, including:

- Setting a statewide goal of universal access to high-quality learner pathways and adopting interim metrics in consultation with key stakeholders
- Strengthening and expanding existing pathway programs, including Early College, Career-Technical Education, industry credential-granting programs, and work-based learning. This step would also include bringing to Massachusetts the P-TECH school model, in which students earn both a high-school diploma and a STEM-related technical associate degree over six years.
- Investing in guidance and career counseling, including requiring that all students participate in [MyCAP](#) (My Career and Academic Plan), a tool that helps students set and achieve academic, social/emotional, and career goals.
- Ensure that high schools are equipped to prepare all students for post-graduate success by expanding MassCore uptake and diversifying the educator workforce.
- Equip the Workforce Skills Cabinet with robust governance authority over pathways programs, including by establishing a position in the Governor's Office focused on college and career pathways in coordination with the Cabinet.

**Ensure that high schools are equipped to prepare all students for post-graduate success by expanding MassCore uptake and diversifying the educator workforce.**

- Collecting data on the outcomes of pathways programs, making that data available to the public, and using it to inform future decisions.

As of spring 2023, there is a bill pending in the Massachusetts legislature that would enact significant new progress toward a college and career pathway for every student. The "[Student Pathways to Success](#)" bill, introduced by Rep. Chynah Tyler and Sen. John Cronin, would expand student access to pathways, establish the Workforce Skills Cabinet in the governor's office, and require DESE to investigate how to remove barriers to work-based learning for students. Further, standalone [legislation](#) would provide high schools with \$1,000 for every student who earns a high-value, [industry-recognized credential](#); expand access to computer science coursework; stand up the Workforce Skills Cabinet; and require participation in MyCAP for all high school students by the 2026-2027 school year.



Another pathway to college success is the **Advanced Placement (AP) program**. Students who participate in the program take college-level classes that culminate in exams for which many colleges and universities grant credit toward graduation. In some cases, students can therefore “test out” of college classes, decreasing their total higher education tuition in the process. Even in cases where students’ institutions of higher education do *not* grant credit for passing an AP exam, the course itself offers experience with college-level coursework. As of 2023, there is a **bill before the Massachusetts legislature** that would **address existing inconsistencies** among the Commonwealth’s colleges and universities in granting AP credit; under the proposed legislation, any student at a public college or university who receives a score of 3 out of 5 (5 being the maximum for all AP tests) would qualify for credit toward satisfying degree requirements. Credits would be transferable among all of Massachusetts’ higher education institutions and there would be no cap on the number of credits a student could earn through passing AP tests.

Together, these policy proposals would provide a strong set of programs to support students as they prepare for life after K–12. By building more robust pathways through high school and to college and careers, Massachusetts can address disparities in high school exit outcomes while preparing students for postsecondary success.

## Conclusion

---

As Massachusetts’ schools and districts build a post-pandemic future, the breadth of the work yet to be done can seem daunting. Students, families, and teachers are struggling socially and emotionally; by some measures, including the National Assessment of Academic Progress (NAEP), decades of academic improvements appear to have vanished; and thousands of students have yet to return to public schools. The 2019 Student Opportunity Act brought the hope of further narrowing opportunity gaps and building stronger school communities by increasing state investment in schools, but the COVID-19 pandemic brought pain, disruption, and uncertainty.

Schools and districts have an opportunity to prioritize equity, achievement, and evidence-based policy in their recovery plans. With increased funding through the Student Opportunity Act and multiple COVID-19 pandemic relief packages from the federal government, districts should heed the legacy of the Education Reform Act in choosing how to allocate resources — and DESE should use its powers under the Student Opportunity Act to encourage districts to do so. By investing in evidence-driven strategies like the six described above, Massachusetts can build more stable, equitable, and student-centered K–12 schools.

By starting with these strategies, the Commonwealth will renew its commitment to the ideals enshrined in 1993’s Education Reform Act — and set the stage for another 30 years of progress.

## Part III

# Future Promise: Thought Leaders Share Their Visions for the Next 30 Years

---

It is not uncommon for any of us to ponder what the future may look like, and those who work in or around education are no different. Given what we know and have witnessed in the 30 years since the passage of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, we prompted thought leaders to share their own visions for what Massachusetts public schools and/or districts could look like in 30 years. As we realize today, our schools are not so different than they were 30 years ago; and while we have made significant strides since 1993, we have yet to make tremendous leaps — especially for students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners. What is that long-term vision we should be striving for? Where do we need to be 30 years from now? And what can we get done with the right amount of planning, financial support, and political will? These are the questions we have asked, and will continue to ask, in the months and years ahead as we strive for all of the Commonwealth's students to achieve not only proficiency — as the architects of MERA intended three decades ago — but also the equity of opportunity that has eluded so many students for so long.



## Dr. Almudena “Almi” Abeyta

**Superintendent  
Chelsea Public Schools**

We know that Massachusetts is top in the nation for student achievement; however, we are not top for 50% of our students — mostly children of color. Thus, in the next 30 years, I imagine an education in Massachusetts to be one that has worked to increase access for our children of color. To do this, we will have to recruit and retain diverse teachers and leaders because we know that representation matters. Also, teacher licensure requirements will have to be rigorous but flexible to provide more access to candidates of color. I imagine a school day with more flexible schedules and shared teaching positions to better meet the needs of our teachers and students. And, I believe that learning experiences will be more engaging and provide real world experiences for our students to learn through apprenticeships, internships, and community partnerships. We also have to ensure that when we are making policy decisions, that educators’ voices are in the decision making. Now is the time to re-imagine education and move Massachusetts education forward to meet the needs of all our students.

## Ronda “Nikki” Barnes

**Executive Director  
KIPP Massachusetts**

In the year 2053, public schools in Massachusetts will have a unique set of challenges that are informed by the challenges that the world and our country will be simultaneously facing. The best and worst of society — like now — will show up in our schools everyday. In 2053, we have embraced this reality and finally create student and teacher experiences deeply rooted in standing our vision where we create public schools where students and teachers thrive. This means we leverage A.I. and ChatGPT while ensuring our students are critical thinkers and our teachers are honing their craft.

We expand our definition of “teaching & learning” and provide personalized learning opportunities using virtual academic coaches — during the school day. We engage the whole student and assess their mental health upon entry into school and every year thereafter building a powerful story of their “becoming” — that we share with families. We create learning experiences that lead to a variety of post-secondary paths and our students talk more about what problem they want to solve in the world (or for their family or themselves) than what job they want to have. We co-author with families and build relationships through conflict using “dialogues of discomfort” as there will surely be a societal issue that is hotly debated and shows up in our work everyday. In 30 years public schools in Massachusetts will rally around a powerful vision — not just data — and work together to create schools and communities that thrive.

## Dani Charbonneau

**2022 State of Massachusetts Teacher of the Year**

**English Teacher and Program Coordinator  
for the Project Vine Alternative Program at  
Martha’s Vineyard Regional High School**

On the other side of the pandemic, we ought to embrace shifting paradigms. But, education seems determined to steam along on broken tracks, knowing the outcomes already. More voters are wondering why they should support systems which perpetuate trauma. Educators are leaving, and future educators are turned away, in part at being a contributor to that sustained trauma.

So what to do? This shouldn’t be a radical idea: let’s make school fun. At the very least, as one of my students once put it, let’s make it “suck less.” We have the science to show us very obvious things that are causing damage to student affect, such as early start times, excessive homework, lack of access to mental and physical health care, food and housing insecurities, and irrelevant or not culturally responsive curriculum. The schools of the very near future need to do away with those educational traditions which do the biggest



damage to the student experience so that students, and our society, can continue to enjoy the benefits of public, free schooling.

So, where to start? Massachusetts is already behind California in recognizing the need for later start times, which I believe are a key component to making the institution of public education sustainable for future students and staff. We are considering universal, permanent meals for all students, which I think is an excellent and needed step! Beyond that, we should strive for models where we pay attention, even at the secondary level, to Maslow's hierarchy (I think the expression when I was in graduate school was "Maslow before Bloom!") Student mental and physical health, and the explicitly taught skill of students themselves identifying problems with their own health and working with school staff to address those problems, should be central to the task of preparing students for life after high school. When that foundation is built and cared for, the real, in-depth learning that challenges, invigorates, and sustains all young minds can really take shape.

## Erika Giampietro

**Founding Executive Director  
Massachusetts Alliance for Early College**

I start with a core belief: our differences as people make us stronger as a community. Each person, each student, has different strengths and leanings in them that, when enabled to thrive, contribute

meaningfully and critically to a well-functioning, healthy society. So the job of our education system fundamentally is to enable students to become the best versions of themselves — to identify their talents, to develop them, and to guide them into fulfilling careers and healthy civic engagement.

In 30 years, I hope students describe their education with words like these: engaging, relevant, motivating. And most of all, I hope they see themselves as highly capable members of a society full of opportunity. I hope they have reason to believe that hard work pays off and that they have adults they can count on for support.

To do this, we need stronger links between our education system and our workforce needs. Not because career preparation is the only goal of education, but because without it, it is hard for students, and especially students from families with less access to privilege, to connect their education with their life goals.

To do this, it's going to mean tighter connections between K12, college, and employers. It's going to mean an honest assessment of what skills and qualities our future workforce and citizenry will require, and a readjustment of our K-16 curriculum and programming to deliver those skills and qualities. Deep partnerships between K12, higher education, and employers will be critical.

Change is hard, but we have an incredibly talented, hopeful, and student-focused set of education and workforce leaders in Massachusetts, which makes it infinitely more possible.

## Robert Hendricks

**Chief Executive Officer**  
**He Is Me Institute**

---

In 30 years, students in Massachusetts will be the most diverse in history. This means having students that represent various ethnicities, races, gender-identifications, languages, physical and intellectual abilities, family structures, experiences, etc. Massachusetts, a long-time leader in education and in equity, will have the people, systems, and structures in place to support the intersectionalities of all of their students. That support is measured by long-term and short-term student outcomes. In order to meet reach equitable outcomes, students will:

- Engage in a curriculum that reflects themselves and the modern world. Many of today's and tomorrow's professions did not exist 30 years ago. When students grapple with interesting, rigorous, and relevant content, they will be more engaged and more successful.
- Interact with technology in every aspect of school. Having technology incorporated into the bedrock of the physical school as well as in instruction will allow schools to better support students, as they all have different needs and interests.
- Learn from high-quality personnel from the teacher to the superintendent. The adults who support them will be skilled and will represent the intersectionalities of the students. Many of the district staff will be from the communities in which they work.
- Learn from teachers who are highly satisfied with their jobs. The people who support our children everyday need to feel properly elevated, compensated, and appreciated at work.
- Engage with the community. Students can find holistic support beyond the school building. Through collaboration, their attendance, participation, and engagement with outside institutions can directly support their achievement in school.

## Ed Lambert

**Executive Director**  
**Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education**

---

**Former Mayor**  
**Fall River**

The Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) envisions an evolved education system that features new models of schooling that are student-centered and personalized, and curriculum that gives all students a deeper and broader range of knowledge, skills, and competencies. EVERY high school student is on a structured pathway to college and career that is anchored in personalized and ongoing career and college counseling and navigation supports, allowing for opportunities to earn college credit, participate in work-based learning, and attain industry-recognized credentials.

Student learning across the K-12 system will take place anywhere and anytime, both within and outside schools. Educators will personalize teaching, tailoring instruction for each student based on where the student is, regularly assessing and adapting their approach in light of progress, and responding to the student's needs, interests, and aspirations.

Students will take a more active role in their own learning, and receive feedback to help them understand their strengths and learning challenges. Learning will be competency based, with students progressing on mastery of knowledge and skills rather than by age or the number of hours completed. A lot of the content needed to succeed in high school will be available online at home. Going into school is still the expectation, but no two days are the same. They involve a mix of individual study, teamwork focused on solving problems, seminar discussions about the content learned at home, classes with top lecturers from leading universities — beamed in as holograms — and one-to-one sessions with a personal tutor reviewing progress on an individual learning plan.

## Susan Lusi

President and CEO  
Mass Insight Education & Research

---

What Education in Massachusetts will look like in 30 years:

- Students will be able to progress in their learning based on their ability to demonstrate that they know and can do the things articulated in the state's/community's standards, as opposed to by age grading, seat time, Carnegie units, and the like.
- Students will progress based on what they know, not how they've come to know it, or where they've learned it.
- Every student will have an individual learning plan that makes use of universal offerings, e.g., classes, in addition to individualized learning. This plan will be revisited and progress monitored by educators, students and families on a regular basis, and aggregate results will be monitored and shared by the district/municipality, and also by the state.
- What we now call "schools" will be multi-service center hubs that serve educational and other needs of children and families in culturally competent ways. They will be funded using blended funding streams, e.g., education, children's services, health, and their mission will be to create and execute on collective responsibility for child and family well-being of which education is a crucial part.
- We'll know how to assess learning (both knowing and doing) in ways that are authentic, valid, and reliable and in ways that can be administered when the learner — whether a student or a future teacher — is ready, as opposed to on a one-size-fits-all timeline.
- There will be an unrelenting focus on equity by addressing gaps in access, opportunity, and outcomes, with a particular focus on systematically marginalized students and families.

## Devin Morris

Co-Founder and Executive Director  
The Teachers' Lounge

---

In 30 years, I believe Massachusetts can and will serve as a beacon of hope for what is possible in public school education when we ensure equitable and fair educational opportunities for all students, not just some.

Following the lead of Massachusetts public schools, other states will begin to prioritize the fair and equitable allocation of resources, providing diverse learning opportunities, and demonstrating a commitment to equity and fairness across the districts and across the Commonwealth.

We will show the impact of prioritizing equity centered hiring and retention strategies and practices, ensuring we have diverse and representative classroom teachers, school leaders and district leaders; expanding our definitions of, and approaches to, learning; eliminating achievement, learning, and opportunity gaps; and leading our next generation of critical thinkers and empathetic community members and leaders.

And students, families, and community partners will be fully engaged and empowered in a whole-child/whole-community approach toward student success and well-being in our public school education system and beyond.

## Senator Pavel Payano

Massachusetts State Senate  
First Essex District

---

In the 30 years since the 1993 Education Reform Act, Massachusetts has made significant progress in improving its education system. However, there is still work to be done, particularly in addressing the achievement gap for students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners. To achieve a transformational vision for education in Massachusetts, we need to focus on several key areas.



First and foremost, we must ensure that all students have access to culturally competent educators who are equipped to meet their unique needs and backgrounds. Recent data from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education showed that while 44% of public school students in Massachusetts identify as students of color, only 10% of their teachers do. In order to close this gap, we must focus on strengthening and growing the pipeline of BIPOC teachers and implementing policies to retain them. Additionally, we must invest in urban schools and provide more support for K–12 education in underserved areas.

We also need to expand access to higher education and career training for all students. Early college programs, which blend elements of both high school and college curriculum, can help students gain exposure to college-level coursework and career opportunities while reducing the time and cost of earning a degree. [A study done by MassINC](#) showed that 69 percent of students who participated in early college programming immediately attended either a two- or four-year college after graduating high school. This is compared to only 54 percent of their peers. The data clearly indicates that early college programs are effective, and Massachusetts should continue to expand this initiative.

Finally, we must address the systemic issues that perpetuate educational inequity, such as funding disparities and the overreliance on standardized testing. By adopting more holistic approaches to education and addressing the root causes of

inequity, we can create a more just and inclusive education system that prepares all students for success in the 21st century.

Achieving this vision for education in Massachusetts will require a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, and communities across the state. But with the right amount of planning, financial support, and political will, we can build an education system that truly serves all students and prepares them for a bright and prosperous future.

## Paul Reville

**Francis Keppel Professor of Practice of Educational Policy and Administration  
Harvard Graduate School of Education**

**Former Massachusetts Secretary of Education**

---

I have a dream. Three decades from now, our education system has been dramatically redesigned to personalize education, to meet children where they are and give them what they need, both in school and out, in order for all children to acquire the skills, knowledge, and disposition to be upwardly mobile in our society. Every child has a customized success plan describing all the supports and opportunities that child needs to thrive. Every child and family has a navigator — a caring, knowledgeable adult capable of steering the family to the resources they need. Learning is engaging, often applied, project-based, collaborative, career-oriented, community-centered, and available

year round, all day and weekends. Each student is guaranteed the quantity and quality of instruction needed to master high levels of competency in all subjects. Educational time is structured to meet learners' needs and assure their mastery.

All students have equal access to high-quality early education (from birth), enrichment activities, food, health care, and stable housing so that they routinely come to school ready to learn. Every child has a hobby and a group of friends. Every family feels fully engaged with their children's educators. Every teacher feels valued, supported, and in deep relationships with their students and families. Schools are integrated by income, race, and ethnicity. Technology is deeply employed to accelerate learning and bridge boundaries of time and space. Society has invested in the highest quality education facilities to nourish and support the work of students and teachers. School finance is finally equitable. There is a new social compact that regards children and families holistically and guarantees that through collaborative action, our communities and their schools, governments, nonprofit organizations, philanthropies, businesses, unions, and others place the highest priority on guaranteeing that each and every child achieves success.

## Keri Rodrigues

**Co-Founder and President  
National Parents Union**

As a former student and the mother of five current students in the Massachusetts public school system, I have had a front row seat to the rollercoaster ride that education reform has been over the last 30 years.

Education reform in Massachusetts has been a mixed bag for families and communities. While the past 30 years have brought significant progress, as parents and families, we must continue to push for greater transparency around education funding, academic assessment, and accurate information about our child's proficiency. On funding, parents deserve to know how their tax dollars are being

spent on education and whether those funds are being distributed fairly. Another critical area is the continued need for rigorous academic assessment to measure learning and growth, and to hold the system accountable for inequity. Communication between educators and parents should be clear and transparent, and report cards should adequately reflect where our children are academically. We must also get MCAS data back faster to make smarter and more effective decisions.

We also need to recruit and retain a more diverse pool of educators, as well as supporting ongoing professional development to ensure that all educators are prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners. We know that students do best when they have access to a diverse range of educators who reflect their backgrounds and experiences.

Finally, every child in Massachusetts deserves a pathway to economic mobility. This requires a multi-faceted approach, including not only academic preparation but also career and technical education, apprenticeships, and other forms of work-based learning. We need to ensure that our education system is preparing our youth to succeed in the jobs of tomorrow.

As we look to the future of education in Massachusetts, there remains much work to be done. We must continue to push for greater transparency, accountability, and innovation to create a more equitable and effective education system that serves the needs of all students and families. By working together, we can ensure that every child in Massachusetts has access to a high-quality education and a pathway to economic mobility that prepares them for success in the years to come.

## David Rose

Neuropsychologist best known for his central role in developing the field of **Universal Design for Learning**

Founder  
CAST

Lecturer  
Harvard Graduate School of Education

As we endure, recover, or accelerate from the first three or so confusing months of ChatGPT's unexpected and uninvited arrival in American classrooms, it seems presumptuous to try to predict what will be happening in 30 years. So, of course, like everyone would, I asked ChatGPT what to expect. As is typical from ChatGPT, I got a short page-full of predicted trends. The first was easy (and self-referential):

1. More technology

Two others were not particularly surprising:

2. Increasing diversity
3. Greater emphasis on equity

Of most self-interest to me was this one:

4. "Inclusion for all students: Inclusive education is about creating environments where all students feel welcome, respected, and supported. In the future, we will see a greater emphasis on inclusive practices, such as **universal design for learning**, which allows for multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement to support diverse learners." (Emphasis mine.)

Since virtually all my own work has been on **Universal Design for Learning** (UDL, ChatGPT apparently does not like to capitalize it), it was gratifying to see a projection that includes UDL as alive in 30 years. But on second thought, such an outcome would be disappointing. Instead, I hope that UDL will essentially have disappeared, its principles invisibly absorbed into a wonderful mix of new technologies, greater diversity, and more equity for all. But that wonderful mix would just be called public education.

\*And it might be noted — the principles and practices of UDL were formulated here in Massachusetts and in collaboration with many, many, public-school teachers and students in this state.

## Dr. Steven Zrike

Superintendent  
Salem Public Schools

I hope that we redefine what success looks like in Massachusetts schools so that our young people will truly be prepared for the world of work, higher education, and citizenship. Schools should be preparing young people for what industry, post-secondary education, and community leadership are projected to be and not what they look like at the moment. Learning should have no walls or boundaries, and students should have the opportunity to earn credit and demonstrate proficiency through virtual offerings, workforce development opportunities, courses on college campuses, design labs based in the community, deep understanding of regional cultural and historical assets and the authentic problem solving of real-world challenges. A heavy emphasis should be placed on communicating effectively — clearly and with purpose — via the most timely and relevant tools.

Additionally, students should be expected to demonstrate cross-cultural empathy and openness to the ideas, perspectives, and experiences of others. To reach this end, we must be bold, innovative, and be willing to challenge the traditional models of schooling that have not changed since the inception of public education. While our state has been first in the nation for some, it has not consistently delivered on the promise to deliver the highest-quality experience for students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners. We have a moral imperative to design an educational system in our state where all students regardless of their zip code can thrive.

**ERN**  
MASSACHUSETTS