The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

In the One Hundred and Ninety-Third General Court (2023-2024)

SENATE, March 28, 2024.

The committee on Education, to whom was referred the petitions (accompanied by bill, Senate, No. 2388) (subject to Joint Rule 12) of Joanne M. Comerford and Natalie M. Blais for legislation to provide a sustainable future for rural schools, report the accompanying bill (Senate, No. 2658).

For the committee, Jason M. Lewis

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

In the One Hundred and Ninety-Third General Court (2023-2024)

An Act to provide a sustainable future for rural schools.

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Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:

- SECTION 1. Chapter 15 of the General Laws is hereby amended by adding the following section:-
- Section 67. (a) There shall be within the department an office of shared services, which shall be under the supervision and management of the director of shared services. The director shall be appointed by the commissioner.
 - (b) The office of shared services shall oversee the formation of regional school districts and superintendent unions in the commonwealth. The director of shared services shall assist school districts that are considering forming or are in the process of forming regional school districts and superintendent unions with the research, development and execution of shared services projects and shared services agreements.
 - (c) Based on the review and analysis received from the center for health information and analysis pursuant to section 25 of chapter 12C of the General Laws, the office of shared services shall provide a report and make recommendations on strategies to improve coverage and reduce

costs including, but not limited to, recommendations related to membership in purchasing groups, combining plan design changes with health cost reimbursement arrangements and any other cost-reducing strategies that will not increase insurance costs for employees. The report shall be delivered to the clerks of the house of representatives and senate and the joint committee on education, the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools and posted publicly on the center's website on or before December 31, 2025.

SECTION 2. Chapter 12C of the General Laws is hereby amended by adding the following section:-

- Section 25. (a) For the purposes of this section "rural school district" shall mean a school district with both of the following: (i) a student density of not more than 35 students per square mile and (ii) a per capita income of less than the average annual estimated, state-wide per capita income.
- (b) The center shall perform a review and analysis of the range of health insurance plans that are in use across rural school districts in the commonwealth and shall provide the review and analysis to the office of shared services pursuant to section 67 of chapter 15 of the General Laws.
- SECTION 3. Section 19 of chapter 15A of the General Laws, as appearing in the 2022 Official Edition, is hereby amended by inserting after the figure "71", in line 83, the following words:-; provided, however that paraprofessionals seeking to obtain licensure as special educators shall have priority for such grants.
- SECTION 4. Section 2 of chapter 70 of the General Laws, as so appearing, is hereby amended by inserting after the definition "Required net school spending" the following definition:-

"Rural school district", a school district with both of the following: (i) a student density of not more than 35 students per square mile and (ii) a per capita income of less than the average annual estimated, state-wide per capita income.

SECTION 5. Said chapter 70B of the General Laws is hereby further amended by adding the following section:-

Section 22. Upon the closure of a school as a result of a school district regionalization effort, the authority, in collaboration with the executive office of housing and livable communities and the executive office of economic development shall offer assistance to the municipality wherein the school is located for the development of a plan for demolition or use of the school building for other purposes, including any technical assistance for school building reuse and the retrofitting of school buildings for other purposes.

SECTION 6. Section 16D of said chapter 71, as so appearing, is hereby amended by striking out subsection (g) and inserting in place thereof the following subsection:-

- (g) A regional school district shall receive state aid for the transitional costs associated with the establishment of the regional school district. A regional school district shall be entitled to aid under this subsection for the first 3 years of its operation. The state treasurer shall, upon certification by the commissioner, annually, on or before November 20, pay to each regional school district in its first 3 years of operation \$200 per pupil enrolled by the regional school district.
- SECTION 7. Said chapter 71 is hereby further amended by inserting after section 16I the following section:-

Section 16J. (a) There is hereby established and set upon the books of the commonwealth a separate fund known as the School District Regionalization Grant Fund. The fund shall be credited with: (i) appropriations or other money authorized or transferred by the general court and specifically designated to be credited to the fund; (ii) funds from public and private sources, including, but not limited to gifts, grants and donations; and (iii) any interest earned on such money. Amounts credited shall not be subject to appropriation and shall be expended by the department to fund a grant program for the study, planning and implementation of school district regionalization efforts to be administered by the department in accordance with this section; and provided further, that grant funds awarded pursuant to this section shall be distributed evenly over a 3 year period.

- (b) A qualified school eligible for funding are towns and regional school districts, excluding vocational schools, independent agricultural, technical schools and charter schools; provided, that a school district shall be eligible for a school district regionalization grant if it is considering forming, is in the process of forming or has formed within the past 5 years a regional school district or regionalizing services; provided, that, that school district regionalization grants shall be allocated equitably in the following priority order: (i) school districts with significant enrollment decline; (ii) school districts where existing school space is underutilized; and (iii) school districts where the regionalization proposal will produce significant expansion of available academic resources and supports as a result of cost savings.
- (c) Annually, not later than February 1, any district receiving funds under this item shall submit a report to the department outlining the progress the district has made in studying, planning or implementing regionalization or regionalization services.

(d) Annually, not later than December 1, the department shall submit a report to the house and senate committees on ways and means and the joint committee on education detailing the calculation and planned distribution of funds to school districts; provided, that, funds distributed from this section shall not be considered chapter 70 aid for the calculation of the minimum required local contribution for the upcoming fiscal year.

- (e) Every 5 years, the department shall determine the adequacy of funding for the purposes of this section and recommend to the general court any necessary adjustment.
- (f) A grant awarded to a school district pursuant to this section shall not exceed \$1,500,000 over a 3 year period.
 - SECTION 8. Said chapter 71B of the General Laws is hereby further amended by adding the following section:-
 - Section 17. (a) There shall be within the department a program to support the development of specialized teachers with targeted funding for local educator preparation programs for special education.
 - (b) The department shall facilitate the funding and implementation of the program so that school districts can coordinate with educational collaboratives and other providers to build "grow your own" programs and provide paid time off, or childcare stipends, to paraprofessionals studying to become licensed special education teachers.
 - (c) The program shall provide similar support to teachers currently licensed in other subjects to become special education teachers.

SECTION 9. (a) Notwithstanding any general or special law to the contrary, the department of elementary and secondary education shall conduct a review of special education regulations of the department as they pertain to the needs of rural school districts.

- (b) The department shall request public comment and discussions with special education advocates, educators, school administrators, parents, and experts to explore reform of regulations under 603 CMR 28.00.
- (c) The department shall publish a web page that serves as a one-stop resource to allow the public to obtain information and provide comments on individual rules and guidelines under review as well as the department's regulatory review program generally.