

SENATE No. 2658

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

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**In the One Hundred and Ninety-Third General Court
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An Act to provide a sustainable future for rural schools.

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

1 SECTION 1. Chapter 15 of the General Laws is hereby amended by adding the following
2 section:-

3 Section 67. (a) There shall be within the department an office of shared services, which
4 shall be under the supervision and management of the director of shared services. The director
5 shall be appointed by the commissioner.

6 (b) The office of shared services shall oversee the formation of regional school districts
7 and superintendent unions in the commonwealth. The director of shared services shall assist
8 school districts that are considering forming or are in the process of forming regional school
9 districts and superintendent unions with the research, development and execution of shared
10 services projects and shared services agreements.

11 (c) Based on the review and analysis received from the center for health information and
12 analysis pursuant to section 25 of chapter 12C of the General Laws, the office of shared services
13 shall provide a report and make recommendations on strategies to improve coverage and reduce

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

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

22 Section 25. (a) For the purposes of this section “rural school district” shall mean a school
23 district with both of the following: (i) a student density of not more than 35 students per square
24 mile and (ii) a per capita income of less than the average annual estimated, state-wide per capita
25 income.

26 (b) The center shall perform a review and analysis of the range of health insurance plans
27 that are in use across rural school districts in the commonwealth and shall provide the review and
28 analysis to the office of shared services pursuant to section 67 of chapter 15 of the General Laws.

29 SECTION 3. Section 19 of chapter 15A of the General Laws, as appearing in the 2022
30 Official Edition, is hereby amended by inserting after the figure “71”, in line 83, the following
31 words:- ; provided, however that paraprofessionals seeking to obtain licensure as special
32 educators shall have priority for such grants.

33 SECTION 4. Section 2 of chapter 70 of the General Laws, as so appearing, is hereby
34 amended by inserting after the definition “Required net school spending” the following
35 definition:-

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

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

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

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

49 (g) A regional school district shall receive state aid for the transitional costs associated
50 with the establishment of the regional school district. A regional school district shall be entitled
51 to aid under this subsection for the first 3 years of its operation. The state treasurer shall, upon
52 certification by the commissioner, annually, on or before November 20, pay to each regional
53 school district in its first 3 years of operation \$200 per pupil enrolled by the regional school
54 district.

55 SECTION 7. Said chapter 71 is hereby further amended by inserting after section 16I the
56 following section:-

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

67 (b) A qualified school eligible for funding are towns and regional school districts,
68 excluding vocational schools, independent agricultural, technical schools and charter schools;
69 provided, that a school district shall be eligible for a school district regionalization grant if it is
70 considering forming, is in the process of forming or has formed within the past 5 years a regional
71 school district or regionalizing services; provided, that, that school district regionalization grants
72 shall be allocated equitably in the following priority order: (i) school districts with significant
73 enrollment decline; (ii) school districts where existing school space is underutilized; and (iii)
74 school districts where the regionalization proposal will produce significant expansion of
75 available academic resources and supports as a result of cost savings.

76 (c) Annually, not later than February 1, any district receiving funds under this item shall
77 submit a report to the department outlining the progress the district has made in studying,
78 planning or implementing regionalization or regionalization services.

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

84 (e) Every 5 years, the department shall determine the adequacy of funding for the
85 purposes of this section and recommend to the general court any necessary adjustment.

86 (f) A grant awarded to a school district pursuant to this section shall not exceed
87 \$1,500,000 over a 3 year period.

88 SECTION 8. Said chapter 71B of the General Laws is hereby further amended by adding
89 the following section:-

90 Section 17. (a) There shall be within the department a program to support the
91 development of specialized teachers with targeted funding for local educator preparation
92 programs for special education.

93 (b) The department shall facilitate the funding and implementation of the program so that
94 school districts can coordinate with educational collaboratives and other providers to build “grow
95 your own” programs and provide paid time off, or childcare stipends, to paraprofessionals
96 studying to become licensed special education teachers.

97 (c) The program shall provide similar support to teachers currently licensed in other
98 subjects to become special education teachers.

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

102 (b) The department shall request public comment and discussions with special education
103 advocates, educators, school administrators, parents, and experts to explore reform of regulations
104 under 603 CMR 28.00.

105 (c) The department shall publish a web page that serves as a one-stop resource to allow
106 the public to obtain information and provide comments on individual rules and guidelines under
107 review as well as the department's regulatory review program generally.