

SENATE No. 2870

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

In the One Hundred and Ninety-Fourth General Court
(2025-2026)

SENATE, December 29, 2025.

The committee on Education to whom was referred the petition (accompanied by bill, Senate, No. 314) of Joanne M. Comerford, Vanna Howard, Michael D. Brady, Jacob R. Oliveira and other members of the General Court for legislation to provide a sustainable future for rural schools, report the accompanying bill (Senate, No. 2870).

For the committee,
Jason M. Lewis

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In the One Hundred and Ninety-Fourth 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. Section 2 of chapter 70 of the General Laws, as appearing in the 2022
2 Official Edition, is hereby amended by inserting after the definition “Required net school
3 spending” the following definition:-

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

7 SECTION 2. Chapter 71 of the General Laws is hereby amended is hereby amended by
8 adding the following section:-

9 Section 100. (a) There is hereby established and set upon the books of the commonwealth
10 a separate fund known as the Rural Schools Aid Fund. The fund shall be credited with: (i)
11 appropriations or other money authorized or transferred by the general court and specifically
12 designated to be credited to the fund; (ii) funds from public and private sources, including, but
13 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 of elementary and secondary education to support the long-term fiscal health of rural school districts to be administered by the department in accordance with this section.

(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 rural school aid if a school district has a student density of not more than 35 students per square mile and an average annual per capita income of not more than the average annual per capita income for the commonwealth for the same period; provided further, that rural school aid shall be allocated equitably in the following priority order: (i) school districts serving less than 11 students per square mile; (ii) school districts serving not more than 21 students per square mile; and (iii) school districts serving not more than 35 students per square mile;

(c) Annually, not later than the first day of December, the department shall submit a report to the house and senate committees on ways and means detailing: (i) its recommendations for additional adjustments to the rural school aid calculation for the upcoming fiscal year to improve the accuracy and equity of the student density component and the per capita income component; and (ii) the calculation and planned distribution of funds to school districts; and provided further, 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.

(d) 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.

SECTION 2. 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 3. The definition of “Instructional costs”, in subsection (a) of said section 5A of said chapter 71B of the General Laws is hereby amended by adding the following sentence:- Instructional costs shall include partial costs of salaries for specialized staff when a full-time equivalent staff person is not needed but a full-time salary is necessary to procure a qualified professional.

SECTION 4. Subsection (c) of section 5A of chapter 71B of the General Laws, as appearing in the 2022 Official Edition, is hereby amended by striking out the fourth sentence and inserting in place thereof the following sentence:- The costs of programs shall be reimbursed at 80 per cent of all the instructional and transportation costs that exceed the approved costs threshold; provided, that such reimbursement shall be paid in the year in which the costs are incurred.

SECTION 5. 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 child care 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 6. (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, school administrators, parents, and experts to explore reform of regulations under 603 CMR 28.00.

SECTION 7. Chapter 15 of the General Laws is hereby amended by adding the following section:-

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

(b) The office of shared services and regionalization shall oversee the formation of regional school districts, superintendent unions in the commonwealth, and any sharing of services between districts. The director of shared services and regionalization shall assist school districts that are considering forming or are in the process of forming regional school districts, superintendent unions, or any sharing of services between districts with the research,

development and execution of shared services and regionalization agreements by (i) sharing best practices; (ii) offering technical assistance; (iii) providing any available grant funds; and (iv) offering support to the districts throughout the process of regionalization, creating a superintendent union, or sharing any services between districts.

SECTION 8. Said chapter 70B of the General Laws is hereby further amended by adding the following section:-

Section 22. (a) Upon the closure of a school as a result of a school district regionalization effort, the authority shall relieve any debt that was accrued as a result of the establishment and maintenance of the school's facilities that is owed to the authority by the municipality wherein the school is located.

(b) Upon the closure of a school as a result of a school district regionalization effort, the authority, in collaboration with 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 9. Section 16D of said chapter 71 of the General Laws, 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 the twentieth of November, pay to each

regional school district in its first 3 years of operation \$200 per pupil enrolled by the regional school district.

SECTION 10. Said chapter 71 is hereby further amended by inserting after section 16I the following 3 sections:-

Section 16J. (a) There is hereby established and set upon the books of the commonwealth a separate fund known as the School District Shared Services and 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 and shared services 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 entity 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 and shared services 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 shared services; provided that school district regionalization and shared service grants shall be allocated equitably in the following priority order: (i) school districts with significant enrollment decline as defined by the department of elementary and secondary education; (ii) school districts where existing school space is

underutilized; and (iii) school districts where the regionalization or shared services proposal will produce significant expansion of available academic resources and supports as a result of cost savings or economies of scale.

(c) Annually, not later than the first day of February, 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 shared services.

(d) Annually, not later than the first day of December, 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.

SECTION 11. Said chapter 70 of the General Laws is hereby further amended by inserting after section 10 the following section:-

Section 10A. The department and the department of children and families shall jointly apply for reimbursement from the United States Department of Education, pursuant to any and all applicable federal laws, including, but not limited to the Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 USC § 6301, for the costs incurred by a school district for transportation of a child in foster care between the foster home and the child's school of origin, if placement in that school has been determined to be in the child's best interests. The school district shall certify its costs for such transportation on a form designated by the department for this purpose and complete the form in

143 accordance with the department's instructions. The department shall transmit any reimbursement
144 amounts received from the United States Department of Education to the school district.

145 SECTION 12. Section 1E of said chapter 15 of the General Laws, as so appearing, is
146 hereby amended by inserting after the fourth sentence the following sentence:- Not less than 1
147 member of said board shall reside in the counties of Berkshire, Franklin, Hampden and
148 Hampshire.

149 SECTION 13. The office of shared services and regionalization established pursuant to
150 section 67 of chapter 15 shall identify and analyze the barriers to regionalizing, establishing a
151 superintendent union, or districts sharing any services. As part of their analysis, the office of
152 shared services and regionalization shall consider the following factors: (i) school funding and
153 other resources; (ii) school transportation; (iii) school facilities and other infrastructure; (iv)
154 potential impacts on students requiring special education services or other supports; and (v) any
155 other potential barriers to regionalizing, establishing a superintendent union, or districts sharing
156 any services. Further, the report shall make recommendations to address any potential barriers to
157 regionalizing, establishing a superintendent union, or districts sharing any services. The office of
158 shared services and regionalization shall submit its report to the clerks of the house of
159 representatives and senate, the house and senate committees on ways and means, and the joint
160 committee on education no later than December 31, 2026.