



MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC POLICY HEARING *The Economic Impact of Federal Investments in Massachusetts*

Testimony

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Senator Warren, Senator Markey and members of the *Subcommittee on Economic Policy*, thank you for the invitation to testify before you today on the positive impact federal funds have made in our Massachusetts schools.

I am Dr. Mary Bourque, the Co-Executive Director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (M.A.S.S.) and former superintendent of the Chelsea Public Schools, an urban school district here in Massachusetts. I sit before you this afternoon representing the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (M.A.S.S.) which includes 276 superintendents, 254 assistant superintendents, and 24 Special Education Collaborative Executive Directors. MASS is the Massachusetts affiliate of AASA, The School Superintendents Association based in Alexandria, VA.

I want to commend you on choosing the term “investments” in the title and therefore the framing for this *Hearing*. Investment is a term that implies a return or appreciation overtime. In education, our investment return is our students- the next generation- who are prepared with the knowledge and skills to be the future workforce and leaders of our communities, state, and nation. And investing in our public schools is one of the greatest investments we can make as a country. As Kirabo Jackson of the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) wrote recently when schools get more money, students tend to score better on tests and stay in schools longer. Investing in education is one of the most important ways we can strengthen our economy and ensure our global competitiveness.

We are grateful for the federal support to our schools throughout the two-year pandemic and the multi-year recovery work that continues. School leaders were able to use the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds authorized in three separate federal laws to ensure a holistic, multi-year approach to educating students during and beyond the pandemic. In particular, the \$1.8 billion dollars MA received from the American Rescue Plan ensured district leaders were able to use these funds to address the immediate needs of our students, and also

plan through an equity lens for a post-pandemic transformation of how we *do* education and wrap our school district programs around both students and families.

Data collected this summer from AASA of school district leaders in Massachusetts and around the country found that the number one use of American Rescue Funds was adding instructional time and programming. This was echoed by data collected by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) which found that: addressing unfinished learning loss, supporting special populations and improving facilities and air quality, were the major ways in which districts invested their federal resources.

In MA, school districts selected among evidence-based programs to support educators in implementing high-quality, aligned curriculum; to improve inclusive co-teaching practices for students with disabilities and English learners; and to expand the capacity of all staff to address the social-emotional learning (SEL) and mental health needs of students and families. Others invested in research-based early literacy programs in pre-kindergarten and early elementary grades, building and sustaining culturally responsive learning environments for students; and, acceleration academies and/or summer learning programs to support skill development and accelerate advanced learners¹.

In addition to the ESSER funding, there are two very concrete areas of recent federal investment that has propelled positive change that I want to highlight to you today: educational technology and clean energy buses.

It is in the area of education technology that transformational change through an equity lens is the most noticeable. Prior to Covid-19, school districts across the Commonwealth were slowly moving forward with their technology plans. In most school districts students shared classroom sets of computers, laptops, or Chromebooks. In a very few, fortunate school districts, students were lucky enough to a 1:1 capability, but students were not allowed to bring the Chromebook home. Districts did not have the money to institute a repair and replacement plan as is done with textbooks. The digital inequality – those schools that had computers and those that did not (or only had a few to share among hundreds of students) and those families that had computers or Chromebooks and those who did not was noticed. The disparities in digital resources for learning were there, but we were comfortable saying, “we are working on it.”

With Covid-19, the shift to on-line learning shined the light on educational inequalities that had to be urgently addressed. Through a greater investment in the E-Rate program funded through the Universal Services Fund, ESSER monies, and federal funds mentioned earlier, districts were able to purchase the digital devices – Chromebooks and laptops; as well as hiring technology support staff trained to support the teachers, students, and families in the use of the devices. Second, the funds were used to address the access to internet issues and so the purchase of hotspots and community/family affordability plans were implemented. Third, as teachers changed the way they planned and executed lessons, they created daily lessons that required more connectivity capacity and reliability. Federal funds helped with the installation of

¹ MA DESE, Update on State Education Budget, ESSER, & SOA Spending; Slide 15.

Broadband internet which provided communities high speed connectivity that was reliable and stable.

Our rural and urban areas in particular benefitted from the increased technological access and opportunities to learn, but also highlighted longstanding inequities in who could and could not access the internet. Students from low-income households or those without access to technology and internet connectivity struggled to participate in distance learning, leading to disparities in educational opportunities. As many school district leaders proudly express, because of Covid-19 our school district is 1:1; for others, they are getting there. There is no going back to the way teaching and learning was conducted.

For us, as educational leaders, there is no going back – only going forward. - I want to pause to thank Senator Markey for his longstanding advocacy for the E-Rate program. We are excited to see orders from the FCC just this past week which would allow E-Rate to be used for wifi on buses. E-Rate is the bedrock of our connectivity in public schools and we are grateful for his championing of this program.

What does going forward look like? We build upon the resilient educational infrastructures initiated over the last few years and we expand where needed. We continue to uncover where there may be digital, access, and connectivity disparities and seek to close them. We continue to be creative and innovate – more online classes for low- enrolled courses; personalized learning opportunities for students; individual virtual tutoring; virtual workforce development experiences; virtual training modules for teachers and staff; social/emotional telehealth; learning multiple languages online and talking to peers in other countries; global field trips and virtual experiential learning; and, we have only begun to discuss the power and potential of using AI and virtual reality in education. It is exciting to envision what the classroom of the future can look like thanks to this investment in technology – we need to continue to invest in this work.

The second area I would like to highlight is the very real investment in our students' health. Federal funds in many school districts were directed to implementing new or upgrading existing HVAC systems, resulting in improved air quality within our schools.

To address air quality outside our school buildings, district leaders used a combination of federal resources to begin to purchase or lease electric buses and charging stations. It is here I want to thank Senator Warren for her work and vision to provide clean school buses to our communities. Most recently, her work with the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) - Clean Bus Program has been instrumental in bringing the benefits of electric buses to our communities. Five of our MA school districts have taken advantage of the rebate competition and awards: Fall River (11 buses), Bourne/Upper Cape Cod Regional Vocational Technical School District (1 bus), New Bedford (14 buses), west Springfield/Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative (25 buses), Lawrence (25 buses)².

² EPA News Releases, Oct.26, 2022.

The investment in clean buses is a value statement on so many levels. It demonstrates to students that their health is valued; the air quality of their community where they live is valued. We know diesel buses contribute to air pollution which in turn contributes to respiratory problems, such as asthma in our children. Our urban communities have been the most disproportionately impacted by air pollution with emissions from cars, public transit, trains, airports, all converging to create a clean air crisis for our families. Helping these communities in particular sends a message of their value and the environmental justice we seek for them. In addition to making a dent in air pollution, the zero emission buses are quieter thus reducing noise pollution; and overtime, we believe the buses with charging stations will be more cost-effective and sustainable for our school districts.

Our district leaders wanted to share that they are grateful for Round 1 and are eagerly awaiting Round 2 as they seek to replace their diesel buses with environmentally friendly, healthier transportation. One of our district leaders shared that his school district and city did not have the money to take on this initiative, “it would not have happened, if it were not for these funds and the award.”

Here again is an example of a deep transformational change that has begun and *must* continue and *will* continue with your ongoing support.

We can't go back when so much *good* has begun.

I thank you for listening to me today.