

The Next Chapter of Education Funding in Massachusetts

By Gregory Sullivan, Charles Chieppo, and Jamie Gass



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Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to improve the quality of life in Massachusetts through civic discourse and intellectually rigorous, data-driven public policy solutions based on free market principles, individual liberty and responsibility, and the ideal of effective, limited and accountable government.



This paper is a publication of Pioneer Education, which seeks to increase the education options available to parents and students, drive system-wide reform, and ensure accountability in public education. The Center's work builds on Pioneer's legacy as a recognized leader in the charter public school movement, and as a champion of greater academic rigor in Massachusetts' elementary and secondary schools. Current initiatives promote choice and competition, school-based management, and enhanced academic performance in public schools.



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Table of Contents

State Public Education Funding, 1993–2019	4
Caution Flags: State responsible for pension liabilities	7
Other post-employment benefits (OPEB)	9
The Real Challenge: Narrowing the funding gap	9
Recommendations	11



The Education Reform Act can be reduced, in essence, to two propositions. We will make a massive infusion of state dollars into our public schools, and in return, we will demand high standards from all and accountability from all.

– Tom Birmingham, former Massachusetts state Senate president and co-author of the 1993 Education Reform Act

As state leaders consider needed updates to the Commonwealth’s school funding formula, they should remember just how well the approach taken by Birmingham and his co-authors worked. Beginning in 1993, Massachusetts’ SAT scores rose for 13 consecutive years. The state’s scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shot up, too. By 2005, Massachusetts students became the first to score best in the nation in all four major NAEP categories (fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math). Since then, they have repeated the feat on every subsequent administration of NAEP except one.

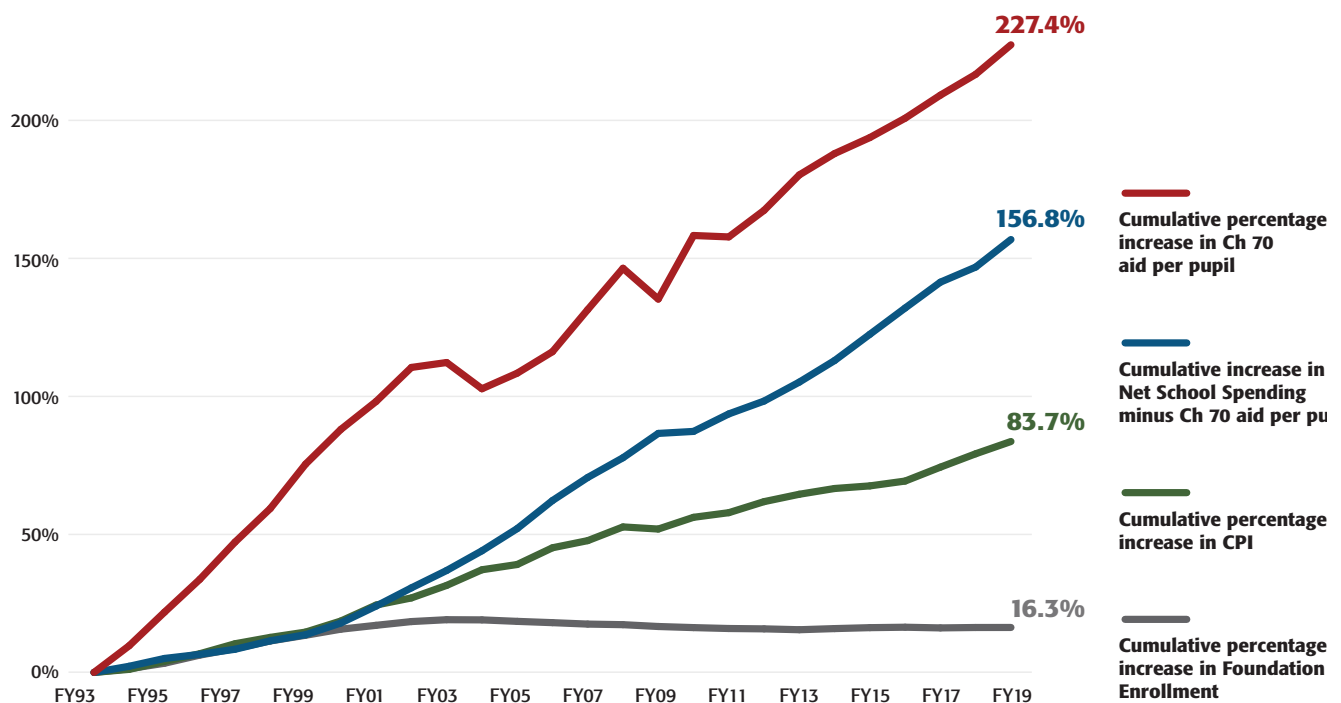
While American students as a whole lag behind their international peers, the 2007 and 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study results showed that Massachusetts students were competitive with their counterparts in places like Japan, Korea, and Singapore. In 2007, the Bay State’s eighth graders even tied for first place internationally in science.

State Public Education Funding, 1993–2019

The current formula for funding K–12 public education calculates a “foundation budget,” which is the minimum needed for a school district to provide its students with a quality education. Another formula determines how much each district can afford to contribute, and the state fills the gap between that amount and the foundation budget. Some wealthier districts contribute more than is required, but every district receives a minimum annual state contribution of about \$1,750 per student.

State funding, known as Chapter 70, jumped by 227.4 percent per pupil between 1993 and 2019, rising from \$1.592 billion to \$5.212 billion (see figure 1). This rate of increase exceeded the rate of increase in per pupil net school spending by municipalities (excluding Chapter 70 funding) of 156.8 percent, rising from \$3.704 billion to \$9.513 billion during that timeframe. It also exceeded growth in statewide enrollment, which rose by 16.3 percent, from 809,496 to 941,411 over that period. It also exceeded the rate of increase of the consumer price index for all urban consumers in Boston–Cambridge–Newton, MA which rose by 83.7 percent over that time period.¹

Figure 1: Percentage increase in Chapter 70 state funding per pupil was greater than in net municipal spending per pupil, in CPI for Boston/Cambridge/Newton, and in student enrollment, FY1993–FY2019



Source: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/chapter70/profile.xlsx>

Figure 2: Massachusetts ranked 8th among the 50 U.S. states and D.C. in total per-pupil spending, FY2017

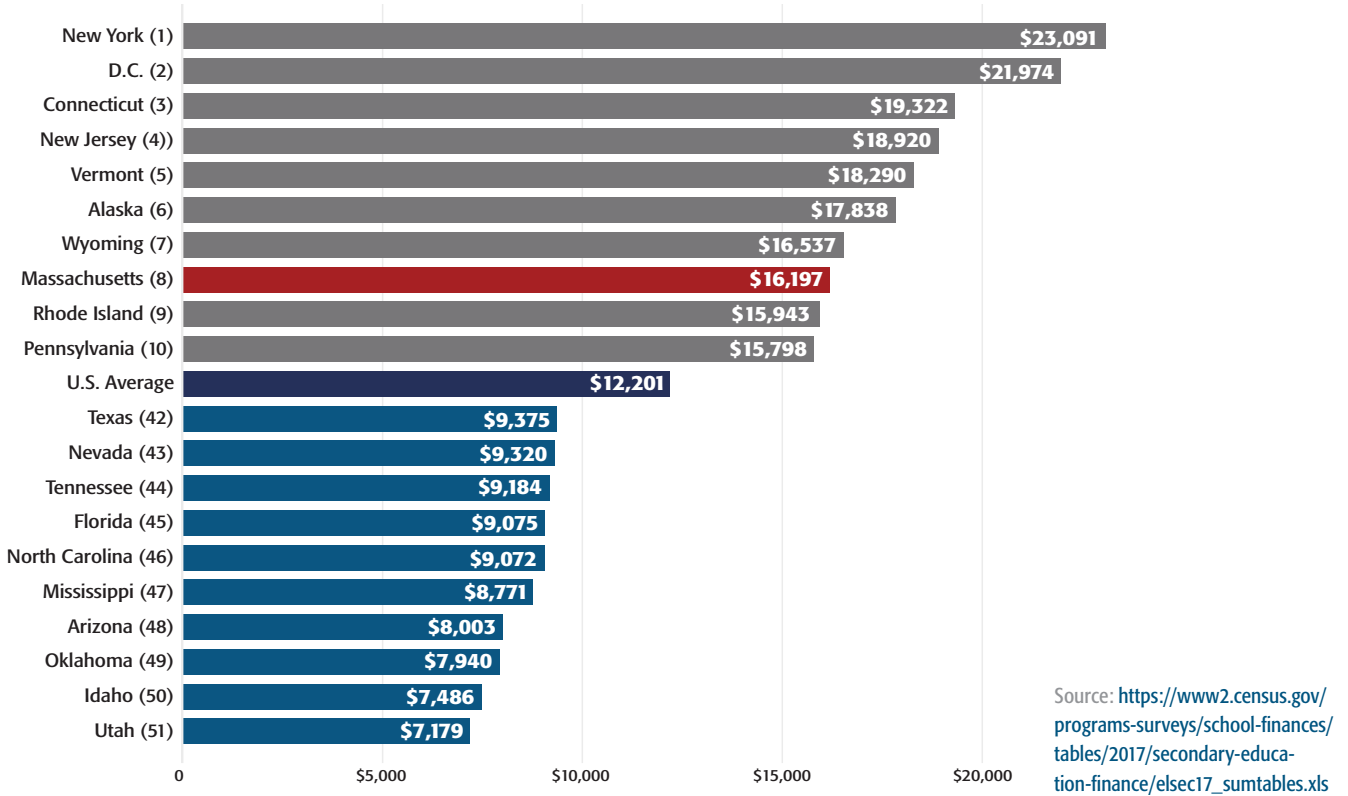


Figure 3: Massachusetts ranked 4th among the 50 U.S. states in local funding per pupil for elementary and secondary school, FY2017

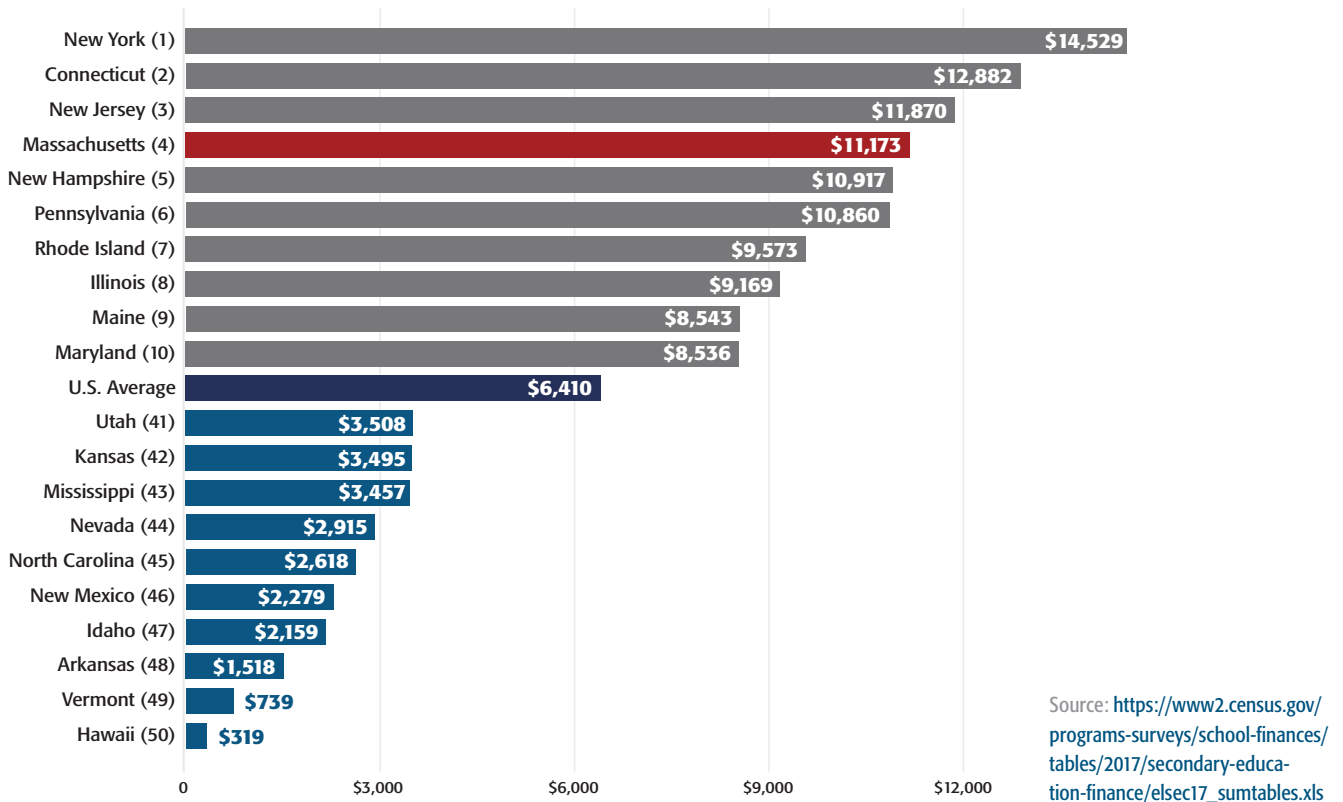
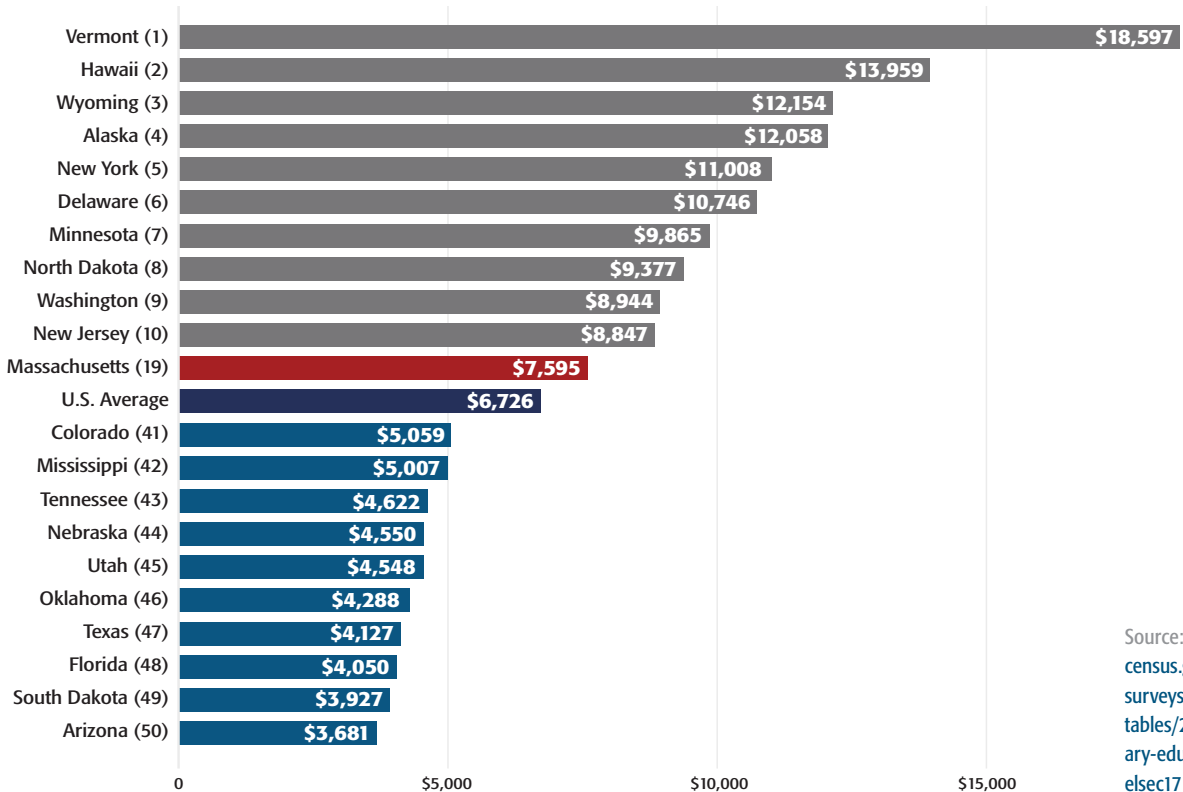


Figure 4: Massachusetts ranked 11th among the 50 U.S. states in state funding per pupil for elementary and secondary school, FY2017



Source: https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/school-finances/tables/2017/secondary-education-finance/elsec17_sumtables.xls

When it comes to total public elementary and secondary education funding (see figure 2), which includes state general formula assistance, state payments to teacher retirement and benefit plans, capital outlay and debt service programs, and state grants for programs including bilingual, gifted and talented, food services, early childhood and other programs, Massachusetts ranks eighth among the 50 states and Washington, D.C.²

A deeper dive shows that, compared to other states, a larger percentage of K–12 public education funding comes from municipalities than from the Commonwealth. Figure 3 shows that Massachusetts ranked 4th in the amount of per pupil elementary and secondary education that came from local sources in fiscal 2017; Figure 4 shows that Massachusetts ranked 11th in the amount contributed by the state.

It is often said during the debate over updating Chapter 70 that the funding formula hasn't changed in 25 years, but that is not true. The structure of the foundation budget was changed quite markedly beginning in fiscal 2007. That year the taxpayer equity component of the formula was completely revamped. The “aggregate wealth” method calculates each city

and town's ability to pay based upon its property value and income. A target local contribution is calculated and Chapter 70 makes up the difference to bring each district up to its foundation budget. It's hard to change a school formula, because changes create winners and losers. But that particular year there was a bipartisan effort on the part of the administration, Legislature, and professional organizations to work together to get it done. And the method has held up well each year since.

Other changes implemented during fiscal 2018 and 2019 include ramping up the health insurance component of the foundation budget. The Foundation Budget Review Commission, established by the Education Reform Act of 1993 so the foundation budget would be periodically revised or updated, reconvened and offered recommendations. In 2015, the Commission found health care to be the biggest problem with the whole calculation, and a seven-year phase-in to fix it is currently underway. The fact that this is happening right now makes it doubly frustrating to hear complaints about lack of changes being made to the formula.

Caution Flags: State responsible for pension liabilities

As legislators contemplate the financial needs of local school districts, they should keep in mind that they face an enormous parallel funding challenge over the next 17 years. Unlike in some other states, the Commonwealth—not municipalities—is responsible for the unfunded liability of two pension funds that serve municipal employees: the Massachusetts Teachers Retirement System (MTRS) and the Boston Teachers Retirement System (BTRS).

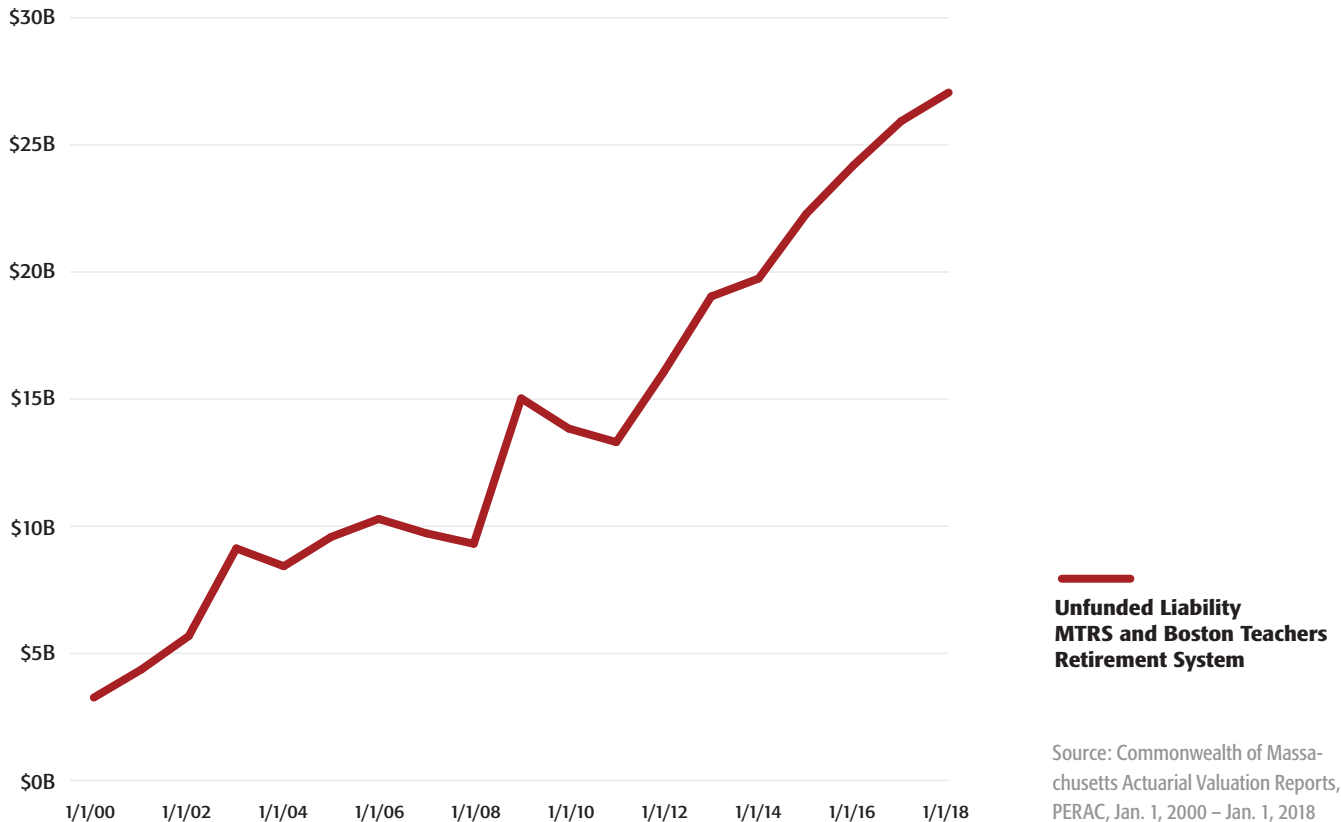
Massachusetts currently faces a combined \$41.26 billion unfunded liability for the pension systems of state employees, Massachusetts teachers and Boston teachers. Of that, the following chart (figure 5) shows nearly two thirds, or 65.6 percent of the total obligation is attributable to unfunded local teacher pensions.

Figure 5: State unfunded pension liability broken down by system, in 000s

State	MTRS	Boston Teachers	MTRS & Boston Teachers	Total
\$14,208,361	\$24,595,585	\$2,462,823	\$27,058,408	\$41,266,769
34.4%	59.6%	6.0%	65.6%	100%

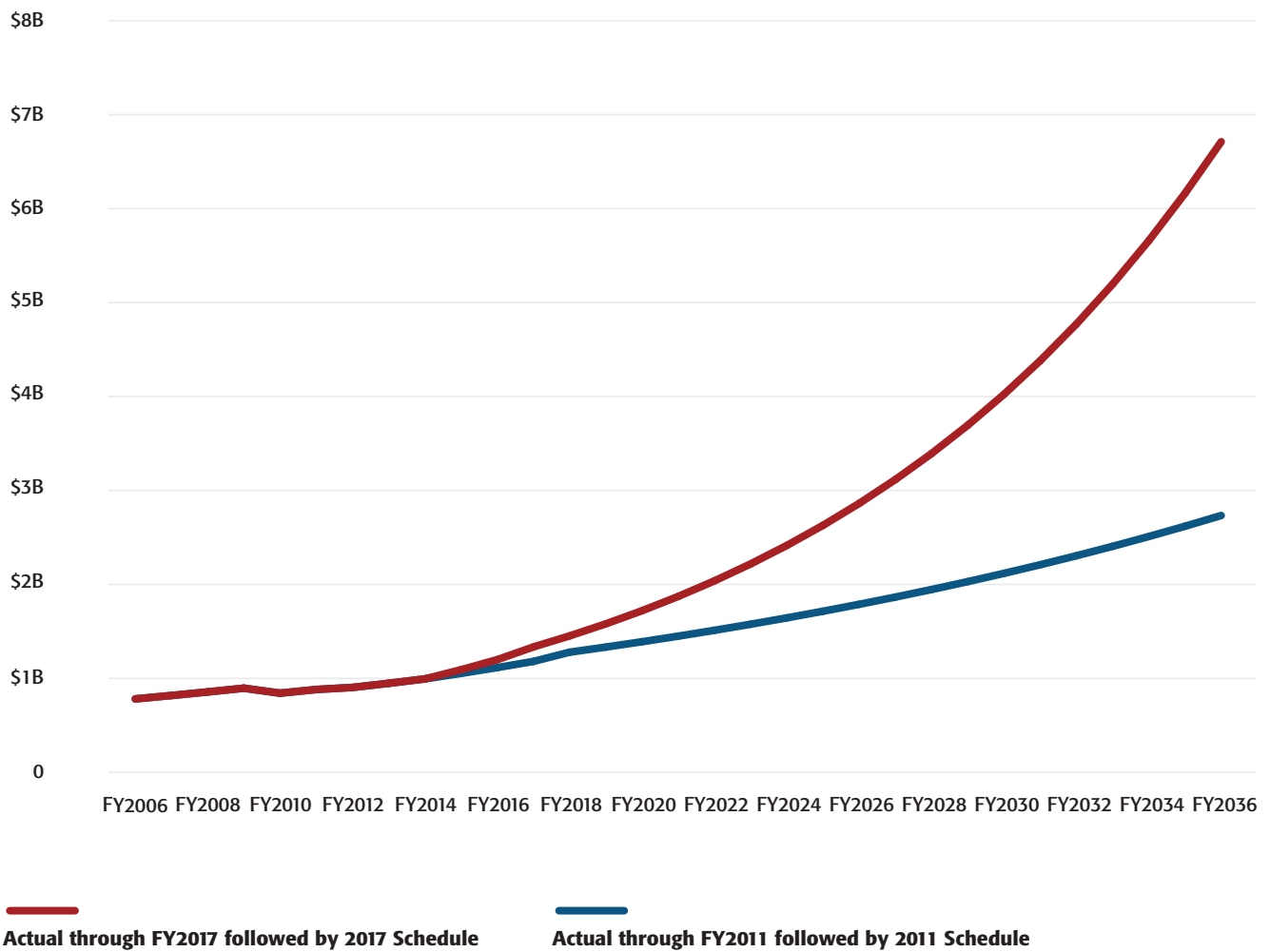
Between 2000 and 2018, unfunded liability for MTRS rose from \$2.7 billion to \$24.6 billion ([The online Appendix B](#)), an annualized rate of 13 percent. The unfunded liability for BTRS rose from \$0.5 billion to \$2.46 billion during that period, an annualized rate of 9 percent. The combined annualized rate of increase in unfunded liability was 12.47 percent. Both far outpace the 2.7 percent annual rise in teacher salaries over that time.

Figure 6: Combined unfunded liability of the Massachusetts and Boston Teachers Retirement Systems, 2000–2018



Every three years the Secretary of Administration and Finance is responsible for establishing a funding schedule pursuant to Chapter 697 of the Acts of 1987. As Pioneer Institute has pointed out previously, the Commonwealth has been deferring responsibility when it comes to paying down its \$41.26 billion unfunded pension liability, which includes the MTRS and BTRS. Every three years, the new schedule is more heavily backloaded, easing the rate of increase over the short term and further increasing payments in out years. Figure 7 ([The online Appendix B](#)) shows the extent of the backloading. A contribution to pay down the MTRS and BTRS unfunded liability, which was \$2.7 billion in 2036 (when unfunded liability is scheduled to be retired) under the 2011 schedule, is now \$6.7 billion under the 2017 schedule.

Figure 7: Annual contributions for MTRS and BTRS under the 2011 and 2017 state pension payment schedules



Source: Current Funding Schedule for Pension Obligations January 18, 2011. <https://archives.lib.state.ma.us/bitstream/handle/2452/432636/ocn962926235.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>. Current Funding Schedule for Pension Obligations January 13, 2017 <https://emma.msrb.org/ES1279349.pdf>. Note: In FY2018 PERAC reported that MTRS and BTRS represented \$1,435 billion of the Commonwealth's \$2.39 billion appropriation (59.9 percent) to the Pension Liability Fund.

Other post-employment benefits (OPEB)

Municipalities face a serious challenge when it comes to funding post-retirement health care benefits for retired teachers and municipal employees. Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA) Executive Director and CEO Geoff Beckwith reports that “Over the next 30 years, communities and the Commonwealth will face a combined unfunded liability of more than \$46 billion to pay health insurance benefits for their retired employees, a staggering burden that is clearly unaffordable for taxpayers.

Although the cities and towns, not the Commonwealth, are responsible to pay for health care plans for retired teachers and other municipal retirees, the Legislature appropriated \$54.1 million in FY2016 and \$51.38 million FY2017 and FY2018. Starting In FY19, the budget consolidates funding group insurance premiums for current employees (1108–5200) with funding premiums for retired municipal employees (1108–5350) and teachers (1108–5400).³

Legislators would be wise to keep these pension and OPEB obligations in mind as they fashion updates to Chapter 70.

The Real Challenge: Narrowing the funding gap

At the time, the funding formula adopted on the heels of the Education Reform Act was the nation’s most progressive. But in recent years, unacceptable gaps between spending in poorer and more affluent school districts have reemerged.

The Chapter 70 funding formula is based on factors that include percentage of English language learners, low-income students and a local wage adjustment factor. [The online Appendix B](#) to this paper reports per-pupil contributions from local funds by community for fiscal 2018; how much each receives in Chapter 70 aid; and how much each receives in grants from the state and federal governments and from revolving funds such as athletic fees, transportation fees, and lunch revenue.

These data demonstrate the immense gap between rich and poor Massachusetts communities in total per-pupil spending. Municipalities with large property tax bases, such as Cambridge, Weston, Dover, and Concord, spend much of that revenue on schools. In FY2018, Cambridge spent \$25,929 per pupil in local funds to supplement its relatively meager \$1,904 per pupil in Chapter 70 aid from the Commonwealth. Its total per-pupil spending was \$29,478.

On the other end of the spectrum are cities like Lawrence, New Bedford, Brockton, and Springfield, which provide less than \$3,000 per pupil in local funding. These cities receive much more Chapter 70 aid, all in the range of \$10,000 per pupil. But because of relatively meager tax resources, their total per-pupil expenditures are far less than in high-income communities, with total per-pupil spending in the range of \$14,000 to \$15,800, about half what Cambridge spends. This is the primary issue that updates to the Chapter 70 funding formula must address.

The goal of making K–12 public education funding more equitable can be achieved through increases along the lines of the plan put forth by Gov. Baker. Between FY2008 and FY2019, annual Chapter 70 school aid grew from \$3.73 billion to \$4.91 billion, an average of 2.88 percent per year. The Governor’s proposal would increase Chapter 70 funding to \$6.16 billion by FY2026, an average of 3.66 percent per year from the FY2019 base level. The Governor has also proposed an extra \$62 million for school safety in FY2020. Proposals such as the Promise Act, which would add \$2.4 billion over seven years, are more than is necessary to effectively update the formula.

As mentioned previously, the foundation funding formula has been revised and updated several times in recent years. Some additional tweaking is warranted, but the fact remains that wholesale changes are not in order. The communities left behind are the older industrialized cities and towns, such as listed in Figure 8, from Worcester and Orange to Springfield and Lawrence. Lawmakers should focus on the fiscal needs of these communities. They should also tie this additional investment to a policy strategy that is most likely to lead to better educational accountability and student outcomes in those key cities and towns.

Whatever new funding comes from the state should be tied to reform. Over the last decade, Massachusetts has retreated from some of the key reforms that drove significant progress on student achievement for all students, e.g., adoption of weaker academic standards in ELA, math, science, and history, the transition to the watered down MCAS 2.0, the loss of an independent district accountability agency, and the erosion of legislative support for proven school reform innovations, including charter schools. Over that time, the Commonwealth has experienced declining MCAS and SAT scores, and Massachusetts is among a minority of states in which NAEP scores have fallen between 2011 and 2017.

Figure 8: Haves and have-nots: Examples of rich and poor communities and school spending, by local per-pupil expenditures, 2018

District Name	FTE Enrollment	Low Income Pct (2019)	ELL Pct (2019)	Ch. 70 per pupil	Grants & Revolving per pupil	TOTAL per pupil	Local Funds per pupil
Cambridge	7,603	34.8%	8.1%	1,904	1,654	29,478	25,920
Weston	2,139	6.0%	2.7%	1,673	2,157	25,367	21,537
Dover	506	3.7%	2.7%	1,517	1,179	24,039	21,343
Nantucket	1,636	29.7%	18.9%	1,904	1,256	22,568	19,408
Concord	2,149	7.7%	2.8%	1,503	1,271	21,450	18,676
Watertown	2,748	28.4%	13.0%	1,784	2,090	22,301	18,427
Burlington	3,628	13.5%	4.8%	1,689	1,878	21,840	18,272
Waltham	5,751	39.9%	22.2%	2,092	1,804	21,649	17,753
Lincoln-Sudbury	1,554	7.1%	0.3%	1,932	2,430	21,778	17,416
Dover-Sherborn	1,211	4.5%	0.6%	1,691	2,098	20,970	17,181
Sherborn	434	6.7%	1.2%	1,529	1,049	19,463	16,885
Southern Berkshire	784	38.7%	1.2%	2,484	2,634	21,985	16,866
Dedham	2,754	25.3%	7.1%	1,672	1,950	20,291	16,669
Wellesley	5,076	6.4%	2.2%	1,655	2,186	20,365	16,524
Boston	67,288	63.4%	29.2%	3,241	2,254	21,929	16,434
Newton	13,042	11.2%	6.9%	1,747	1,756	19,396	15,892
Bedford	2,691	9.5%	6.1%	1,719	1,369	18,903	15,816
Amherst	1,271	38.1%	17.3%	4,766	1,521	21,717	15,430
Lexington	7,355	7.0%	7.4%	1,903	1,491	18,747	15,353
Wayland	2,775	6.3%	3.3%	1,537	2,088	18,751	15,126
Westwood	3,150	6.8%	1.0%	1,622	2,158	18,690	14,909
Worcester	28,713	62.7%	33.2%	8,540	1,650	14,469	4,279
Orange	682	57.3%	1.5%	7,683	2,157	14,062	4,222
Clarksburg	247	37.9%	0.0%	7,244	1,770	13,213	4,199
Gardner	2,692	52.5%	3.5%	7,252	1,480	12,839	4,107
Lowell	16,636	60.5%	25.2%	8,660	1,903	14,635	4,072
Fitchburg	6,051	63.6%	12.9%	8,235	2,354	14,471	3,882
Lynn	17,447	64.0%	22.1%	9,000	1,471	14,016	3,545
Chelsea	7,374	69.3%	35.3%	9,915	1,228	14,668	3,526
Fall River	12,051	69.6%	14.7%	9,330	2,241	14,910	3,340
Brockton	17,865	60.5%	23.4%	9,603	1,617	14,491	3,272
Athol-Royalston	1,884	47.8%	2.2%	9,193	1,709	13,888	2,986
New Bedford	14,190	71.8%	28.7%	9,720	1,685	14,233	2,828
Springfield	30,588	77.2%	15.0%	10,887	2,508	15,798	2,403
Lawrence	15,886	71.5%	34.2%	11,369	1,967	14,899	1,563

Source: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/chapter70/profile.xlsx>

Recommendations

The opportunity for change that comes with significant new money should not be lost. To ensure that additional resources provide a return on taxpayer investment, Pioneer offers the following recommendations.

Accountability for results

1. **Grant the state the power of appointment to local school boards proportional to the state's contributions to net school spending.** In all districts where the state provides a majority of net school funding, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) would have the power to appoint a majority of the school committee members to ensure a focus on improvement and accountability.
2. **File legislation to adopt a "Lawrence-plus" district-wide receivership model for the *worst performing* districts.** Given both the paucity of evidence in Massachusetts or nationally that single school turnaround efforts have succeeded and the solid improvements achieved by the Lawrence school district receivership, DESE should expand the application of its district-wide turnaround model. In Lawrence, a superintendent was appointed and vested with the powers of the local school committee, the power to amend or suspend provisions of district contracts, and broad flexibility to innovate (e.g., decentralization of decision making, intensive tutoring, counseling, and engagement of outside partners).
3. **Develop a "portfolio of options" for *underperforming* districts.** The Commonwealth should assemble, develop, and evaluate a high-quality portfolio of innovation options for schools and districts, from which the districts and municipalities can choose the option most appropriate to their needs. The state should in turn ensure and reward improved performance. This comprehensive portfolio should include university partnerships, private management, Horace Mann charter public schools, Commonwealth charter public schools, statewide pilot schools, vocational-technical schools, scholarships to independent and parochial schools, inter-district choice (e.g., METCO, Inc.) and contract schools (school-based management as in Barnstable).
4. **Ensure that the \$10 billion-plus state and local investment in public K–12 education is spent wisely and efficiently by reconstituting an authentic and independent district and school audit function.** As part of the landmark 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA), the state created an independent office authorized to conduct audits of local school districts. Until 2008, the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA) conducted 50 school district audits annually, scrutinizing MCAS data, leadership, curriculum

and instruction, teacher and student assessments and evaluations, and financial operations. In 2008, EQA was replaced with a small unit inside the DESE that conducted a small number of district reviews annually and limited the scope of those reviews dramatically. Massachusetts needs a robust accountability office that operates independently from the department.

Ensure that students receive a well-rounded education

5. **Fund the MCAS graduation requirement for U.S. history.** MERA, which set the Commonwealth on a path to become the top-performing state and internationally competitive, requires instruction and MCAS testing in U.S. history, the same treatment given English language arts, science and math. The U.S. history MCAS test was readied in 2009 but never implemented. Without the test, many schools are reducing the amount of time they dedicate to U.S. history instruction. Polling shows 70 and even 80 percent approval of more instruction in U.S. history.

Fund Innovation

6. **Invest in effective urban school models.** Even as urban district schools continue to struggle, there are district, regional and non-district public schools and programs that are achieving impressive results. The state must:
 - a. **Fully fund charter school reimbursements and fairly fund charter public school facilities in a way that will, over time, approximate district school facility funding.** Failing to fund reimbursements to school districts creates unnecessary tensions among educators and obstacles to student success. Regarding facility funding, Commonwealth (unlike Horace Mann) charter schools receive only about 60 percent as much state facilities funding on a per-pupil basis as school districts do.
 - b. **Fairly fund METCO and regional vocational-technical schools and, if possible, expand the programs.** METCO's annual budget has declined in both nominal and real terms since the 1990s; as a result, facing enrollment growth, some partnering suburban districts have considered terminating their participation. The program's performance justifies more funding, as does the notion that unfunded mandates on localities should be avoided. The state's regional vocational-technical schools have demonstrated great success over the past two decades, with fast-rising MCAS scores and graduation rates, and low dropout rates. A number of these schools now have significant waitlists.

Sound fiscal management

7. **Commit to fully funding teacher-related pension obligations and stop deferring massive Massachusetts and Boston Teachers Retirement Systems liabilities to the next generation.**
8. **Assemble a blue-ribbon commission to address runaway local special education costs.** State policymakers must consider ways to ensure that state statutes and regulations are not forcing school districts to absorb unnecessarily high costs for mandated services. The *ad hoc* commission of state and local experts should conduct a comprehensive review of the issues, including assignment practices and prevention, and the costs of out-of-district tuitions and transportation, with the goal of advancing accountability and financial predictability.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/CUURA103SA0> (Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers: All items in Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH 1/01/1993 to 1/01/2019)
- 2 2017 Census of Governments: Finance — Survey of School System Finances. Complete definition of total state aid included in Appendix A and B of 2017 Census of Governments: Finance — Survey of School System Finances https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/school-finances/tables/2017/secondary-education-finance/elsec17_sumtables.xls
- 3 <http://www.massretirees.com/article/issues/state-gic/retired-municipal-teachers-insurance-program-saved>

About the Authors

Gregory Sullivan is Pioneer’s Research Director, and oversees PioneerPublic and PioneerOpportunity. Prior to joining Pioneer, Sullivan served two five-year terms as Inspector General of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts by appointment of the Governor, Attorney General, and Auditor. As Inspector General, Greg directed many significant cases, including an investigation that led to the conviction of House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi, a forensic audit that uncovered substantial over-billing by health-care providers to the state uncompensated care pool, a study that identified irregularities in the approval process of the state charter school program, and a review that identified systemic inefficiencies in the state public construction bidding system. Prior to serving as Inspector General, Greg held several positions within the state Office of Inspector General; his work included leading a project that identified systematic under-reporting of Big Dig cost-to-complete estimates, an investigation that led to the state’s recovering a misappropriated patent on an invention made in the state Biologic Laboratories, and an investigation that led to the conviction of the former budget director of the committee on ways and means of the Massachusetts State Senate for receiving kick-backs as financial advisor to the Massachusetts Water Resource Authority. Sullivan was a 17-year member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, serving on the committees of Ways and Means, Human Services, and Post-Audit and Oversight. As a legislator, Greg was a fiscal conservative. Working with the Pioneer Institute, he introduced legislation that was passed by the House of Representatives and State Senate to institute a workfare requirement in Massachusetts. He also sponsored legislation that resulted in the establishment of the Massachusetts research and development tax credit. Greg is a Certified Fraud Investigator, and holds a bachelor’s degree from Harvard College, a master’s degree in public administration from The Kennedy School of Public Administration at Harvard, and a master’s degree from the Sloan School at M.I.T., with a concentration in finance.

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Jamie Gass is Pioneer Institute’s Director of the Center for School Reform. At Pioneer, he has framed, commissioned, and managed over 100 research papers and numerous policy events on K-12 education reform topics, including several with Pulitzer Prize-winning historians. Jamie has more than two decades of experience in public administration and education reform at the state, municipal, and school district levels. Previously, he worked at the Massachusetts Office of Educational Quality and Accountability as Senior Policy Analyst-Technical Writer and in the state budget office under two Massachusetts governors. In the 1990s, Jamie worked for the Dean of the Boston University School of Education/Boston University Management Team in its historic partnership with the Chelsea Public Schools. He has appeared on various Boston media outlets, as well as talk radio shows throughout the country. He has been quoted in *Bloomberg/Businessweek*, *The Economist*, *Education Week*, and *The Boston Globe*, and his op-eds are regularly published in New England newspapers, as well as in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The Hechinger Report*, *Breitbart News*, *The Daily Caller*, *The Federalist*, *Education Next*, and *City Journal*. He’s won school reform awards in Massachusetts and Florida for his work on U.S. History/civic education, vocational-technical schools, and digital learning. Jamie speaks on academic standards, school choice options, and school accountability at events across the country.

About Pioneer

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