

GATEWAY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Superintendent's Corner

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I was pleased to note that our town officials were at least as disappointed with the Governor's House One budget as I was when we met for our monthly joint Facilitated Discussion/Hilltown Collaborative meeting. It was obvious during the discussion that we all felt that the Governor and his top officials (the Secretary of Education and the DESE Commissioner) were not cognizant of the issues facing small towns and rural school districts in Massachusetts (particularly those of Western Massachusetts and the Cape), did not study the past efforts to further consolidate regional schools, are not moving to close the gap between what students in small and rural districts have for educational opportunities compared to those in urban/suburban districts, have little idea of the commitment of local officials who essentially run our towns on a volunteer basis, and have no clue to the difficulty of balancing expenditures and revenues in our small towns.

Perhaps it is difficult to wrap their heads around the idea of having only a few people per square mile, of the distances between services, of the significant travel time between regional school districts (or of the percentage of dirt roads that still exist outside of I-495), and the reality of volunteer fire and police departments. We certainly give the Governor and his cabinet kudos for providing grant funds to help establish collaborative services in small towns and for establishing a 'commission' to study the problems of declining enrollment in small school districts. The problem is that this does not address the immediate and pressing need for support while this process plays out (just look at the 'speed' of Chapter 70 study and reform or the 'speed' of implementing broadband services or another turnpike exit in Western Massachusetts). As a result, we are likely to see further restrictions on student services and potentially the failure of small districts and their supporting towns while waiting for a funded solution.

This is extremely frustrating given the fact that just this year the small/rural schools coalition finally got the legislature to partially fund a program to help. This program was funded at \$1.5 million dollars for the current fiscal year and would require only \$5 million to be fully funded moving forward, certainly a drop in the bucket to support many schools for which small amounts of money make such a large difference in offsetting assessments to member towns (and compared to the hundreds of millions of dollars being suggested for our larger school districts, a real bargain). Even regional school transportation reimbursement (with the law stating 100% reimbursement) isn't even level funded with this year's amount leaving Gateway with almost \$60,000 less in reimbursement for the next school year.

Fortunately, the Governor's House One budget is only the starting point in the state budget process and provides us opportunities to convince representatives and senators to modify the Governor's budget to do a better job of supporting the majority of schools that will see little or no additional funding from the House One budget. For Gateway, the Governor's budget means that our 1.9% increase in the budget will result in a 3.75% increase in town assessments, proving that Gateway's state aid for education isn't even keeping pace with a budget increase that's almost half that of the 'official' inflation rate the state is using in calculating expenses for themselves. It will be up to all of us, working together, to convince the legislators to increase funding for regional transportation reimbursement, to advocate for increasing funding for the small and rural schools funding formula, and to raise the minimum per student rates for the majority of schools in the Commonwealth that are subsisting on a 'hold-harmless' basis. Town and school officials will also be working with our local legislators

to eliminate the 'clawback' money we're paying to the school building assistance program as a result of further regionalizing within our own district (which seems inconsistent with what the Governor and cabinet are suggesting in his budget).

As we progress in this process, please support your local officials, towns and schools by contacting your own legislators and calling for increased support for small and rural school districts across the state. If you want to review our line item budget, or share this with your legislatures, it is now a public document on ClearGov that can be accessed from the Gateway website (www.grsd.org/ > Information > Budget > Line Item Budget).

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