



Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Office of the State Auditor
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Making government work better

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Supporting and Encouraging Regional School Districts

While highly regarded throughout the country, Massachusetts elementary and secondary public school districts share significant funding challenges. Moreover, many of the state's academic regional school districts (RSDs) face particular challenges due to factors such as changing demographics, changes in the level and sources of funding they receive, and issues of governance and operating structures.

The Office of State Auditor Suzanne M. Bump has conducted a study of the local cost impacts of state statutes, regulations and policies impacting RSDs, and provided recommended changes to support these educational institutions.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Structural Issues in the funding of regional schools discourage further regionalization.

- ⇒ The Commonwealth should provide financial incentives in amounts that allay and overcome municipal reluctance to regionalization.
- ⇒ The Legislature should fully fund its commitment to reimburse 100 percent of regional transportation expenses, or set a consistent level of reimbursement to support long-term planning.
- ⇒ DESE should develop a mechanism to provide earlier and more frequent reimbursement of transportation expenditures.
- ⇒ The Commonwealth should offer an efficiency-sharing stipend to encourage transportation cost-cutting.
- ⇒ The Legislature should allow certain uses of regional transportation authorities to provide school district transportation services.
- ⇒ The Commonwealth should consider providing planning grants to examine the combination of existing RSDs into larger groupings.
- ⇒ The Massachusetts School Building Authority should provide guidance on criteria used to determine if it seeks to recapture grand money provided to school districts that close school facilities that have previously received MSBA funding.

(cont.)

Regional agreements require periodic review and updating as financial, operating, and demographic changes occur.

- ⇒ RSDs should review their agreements every five years.
- ⇒ Agreements that require legislative action should be resolved to allow the normal process of district-based approval and DESE concurrence to move forward.

Enrollment-based annual assessments for member communities can cause conflict, inequities, and budget delays within RSDs

- ⇒ The Legislature should simplify the budget adoption process to allow RSDs with three or more member to approve budgets based on population.
- ⇒ The Legislature should empower DESE to pursue a pilot program that would result in a single tax rate across all member towns in a RSD.

Implementation of the Foundation Budget review Commission recommendations will have a positive impact for RSDs

- ⇒ The Legislature should adopt languages in S 217 to establish a commission on RSD funding.
- ⇒ State statutes affecting educational cost reimbursements should be revised, including educator evaluation, foster children and students in state care, and reimbursement aid for education of children on a military base.

The current system for inter-district choice and “tuition-in” stipends contribute to disparities in per-public reimbursements for RSDs

- ⇒ The legislature should work with DESE to revise the arrangement for inter-district choice reimbursements and tuition-in. Tuition-in communities should be encouraged to join regional districts.

ABOUT THE OFFICE OF THE STATE AUDITOR'S DIVISION OF LOCAL MANDATES

Enacted in 1980 as part of the Proposition 2 1/2 tax initiative, the Local Mandate Law gives the Office of the State Auditor the authority to determine if a proposed or existing state laws imposes an unfunded mandate on a city or town and to provide an analysis of the financial impact. Elected municipal leaders, appointed managers, school or educational collaborative officials, as well as lawmakers and legislative committees, may petition the Division of Local Mandates (DLM) for an opinion and request a cost impact analysis.