

Brad Morgan

Superintendent of Schools
bmorgan@nmrsd.org
Tel. 978-597-8713



Gary Burboa-Reese

Assistant Superintendent
gburboareese@nmrsd.org
Tel. 978-597-8713

October 29, 2024

Governor Maura Healey
State House, 24 Beacon Street
Office of the Governor, Room 280
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Healey,

I am contacting you as a superintendent for a suburban regional school district in central Massachusetts.

As I am sure you are aware, the current funding formula for regional schools, especially those with little to no commercial tax base, does not come remotely close to adequately serving our students. The formula continues to be based on enrollment rather than student needs.

When looking at my district's demographics, our special education, multilingual learner, and Section 504 (Students with disabilities receiving education accommodations as outlined through the Americans with Disabilities Act) numbers are well over 30%, never mind the students with social-emotional needs. Some of these increases are still due to the fallout of the pandemic and our push to get students back on track.

In addition, my district has had to contend with the increased number of students requiring out-of-district placements and how the state has approved back-to-back tuition increases of 14% and 5%, respectively. Since the start of this school year, we are already \$1M over budget. Although the state provides some circuit breaker reimbursement, it is too late to help this fiscal year's budget.

In the past year and a half, we have hired 25 additional staff members in the aforementioned areas because they are all mandated by state and federal regulations, yet our funding has remained stagnant. These positions include but are not limited to:

- School Psychologists
- Adjustment Counselors
- Special Education Teachers
- Behavior Technicians
- Multilingual Teachers

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- Board Certified Behavior Analysts
- Speech & Language Pathologists
- Occupational Therapists

One could easily argue that public education as a whole, which is guaranteed to be “free and appropriate” for all students with disabilities, is, at best, a partially funded mandate.

During COVID, we received additional financial support from federal funding sources. However, post-COVID, many of the residual needs that a year and a half of disrupted education caused remain, yet the funding has dried up and disappeared.

For FY2025, we reduced our budget by \$1 million dollars in order for it to be passed by our three member communities. We also had a reduction of 17 staff members from our general education staff. If the formula does not change, we will have to continue cutting from the general education area, which directly impacts class sizes and the quality of instruction that can be provided to our students.

Regarding regional transportation, I have spoken to both the Solicitor General and the State Auditor in the past, and while both are well aware of the transportation bidding issue, nothing has changed.

I have already received notification from the town administrators of my member communities that they cannot afford an assessment increase of higher than 3% annually. To put a number to this request, that means that for FY2026, my budget increase cannot exceed a 1% increase. As you can imagine, collective bargaining agreements, health insurance, and transportation, which continue to be flawed and quite frankly an illegal bidding process, make this request impossible. For example, simply moving our level-service budget from FY2025 to FY2026 presents over a \$3M shortfall. In no way is this meant to take away from the challenges my member towns face, as they too are trying to make the most out of their funding. We know that cutting town resources like police and fire not only impacts the safety of our students and residents but makes our communities less desirable for potential suitors. Like any effective school district, strong town services are needed as well.

I realize this is familiar to you. Yet, our pleas for help continue to be ignored. While

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the Commonwealth of Massachusetts continues to find money for other emergencies, the state continues to not adequately fund public education and is falling well short of meeting the needs of our children. If the state can find funds for other causes, a strong argument can be made that our children, our future, must be a priority.

Hence this letter asking you for help. I know that my communities cannot afford these increases, and I welcome the opportunity to work with you on solutions to this ongoing issue. Additionally, I invite you to our district budget forum on Monday, November 18th, at 6:00 pm. The forum will be held at North Middlesex Regional High School in Townsend and attended by district and town leadership, Representative Scarsdale, Senator Cronin, and Senator Kennedy.

Sincerely,

Brad Morgan
Superintendent of Schools

cc: The Lowell Sun
NMRSD School Committee