



Franklin Public Schools

*Office of the Superintendent
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March 22, 2019

Massachusetts Joint Committee on Education
Massachusetts State House
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Honorable Chairs Lewis and Peisch; Honorable Vice Chairs Lovely and Tucker; Honorable State Senators DiDomenico, Hinds, Cyr, and O'Connor; Honorable State Representatives Walsh, Zlotnick, Tyler, Williams, Vargas, Carey, Haggerty, Ferguson, and Kelcourse:

Education is a deeply held value within the Franklin community. Franklin is the proud birthplace of Horace Mann, the father of American public education, as well as home to the first public lending library in the country.

The Franklin Public Schools serve 5300 students across 11 schools, from grades preK-12. Our district boasts numerous distinctions. We consistently rank as a top performing district by Boston Magazine. We are often recognized on the College Board's annual Honor Roll for expanding access to and maintaining high performance on Advanced Placement courses and exams. Our John F. Kennedy Elementary School earned the honor of being a 2018 Massachusetts School of Recognition for high achievement and high growth on the 2018 MCAS exam. Despite numerous academic and extracurricular accolades, the Franklin Public Schools is facing significant and ongoing financial challenges, which threaten the quality of education our children receive.

In FY20, the Franklin Public Schools is facing a shortfall of \$2.3 million. While some of this shortfall has been predicted by trends in municipal revenue and expenditures within the past few years, the magnitude of this budget gap is largely fueled by the relocation and expansion of the Benjamin Franklin Classical Charter Public School.

BFCCPS was one of the first Charter schools in the Commonwealth and originally served only Franklin residents. At a time when Franklin Public School enrollment is declining due to a reduction in birth rates, the Charter School has built a brand new facility and is doubling its capacity from 450 to 900 students. Next year, the Franklin enrollment in the Charter School will increase by approximately 32%, from 311 students to an anticipated 409. The school has expanded its region and it has been argued that this would limit the impact locally, however, Franklin students comprise nearly 60% of the school's total enrollment.

The impact financially couldn't be farther from the truth, highlighting the inadequacy of the way in which districts and charter schools are funded and the impact of a proposed change in the way tuition transition assistance is awarded. Based on preliminary budget figures, Franklin anticipates a *net decrease* of approximately \$1 million in aid due to the charter tuition assessment. Under the Governor's proposed budget, charter tuition transition assistance would now be based on a five year enrollment history. Since Franklin's charter enrollment was 428 students in FY 15, our anticipated transition assistance is minimal. We expect this trend to continue as the BFCCPS expands to 900 students. Furthermore, as a result of the relocation of the school, more students will reside beyond the two-mile boundary, increasing the cost the Franklin School District must bear to transport Charter school students. As Mayor Walsh said recently regarding the impact of charter funding on the Boston Public Schools, this is like, "robbing Peter to pay Paul."

As a new Superintendent last year, I heard from families time and again how they wished for more art and music programs as well as world languages for their young children. These programs had been eliminated from Franklin Public Schools during the years of the recession (FY 08) and have not returned. Additionally, we are unable to support the innovative instructional programs and social-emotional services we know are critical for our students to be successful in contemporary society as well as prepared for their futures. In our current budget, we are forgoing investments in instructional technology and STEM as well as the addition of necessary counselors to support our students' growing social-emotional learning needs.

The draw to the Charter School is attractive to many families. In a new facility, the school boasts brand new STEM labs for elementary students. They have robust arts programs as well as elementary world languages. Presented with another budget deficit, combined with mounting pressures to service students with growing special needs, we face further cuts to staff, programs, and services, as well as an anticipated increase in fees in order to stay afloat, much less add many of the programs that might retain students within our schools.

Franklin is not alone in its struggles; like Boston, questions arise in Franklin about school closings as a result of declining student enrollment, including the impact of 400 students attending the Charter School. The funding structure places us at a competitive disadvantage from which we are struggling to recover and is contrary to the will of the voters.

In 2016, the Commonwealth held a ballot question regarding expansion of the cap on charter schools in Massachusetts, which was soundly defeated: 62% opposed to 38% in favor of expanding the cap statewide. Locally, only 34% of Franklin voters voted in favor of expanding the cap and 66% voted against the proposed expansion of charter schools in Massachusetts.

As Franklin's Town Administrator and Deputy Administrator noted to our local senators and representatives in a recent letter, since FY 09, Franklin has transferred almost \$37 million to the Charter School from money that would normally be used in the Franklin Public School District.

On behalf of the Franklin Public Schools, I urge legislators to *reexamine the structure in which charter schools are funded*. The current formula has been penalizing public school districts for decades and should be overhauled as part of any education reform package.

At a minimum, I urge legislators to support an *increase in minimum aid* to communities like Franklin; while it will undoubtedly create a larger charter tuition assessment, an increase to the overall minimum aid would minimize our current deficit allowing us to retain more staff, programs, and services to serve the 5300 students and families within Franklin Public Schools.

Additionally, the special education Circuit Breaker funding is a critical resource in assisting districts, including Franklin, with reimbursement for high-cost special education bills, bills which charter schools do not pay. I urge the legislators to *fully fund the Circuit Breaker reimbursement* at the statutory 75%. Furthermore, I urge the legislators to expand Circuit Breaker to *include the cost of out-of-district special education transportation*, which is placing an increasing burden on expenses of public school districts like Franklin.

Lastly, I ask that you *consider the adequacy of the charter transitional assistance* not just in light of a five year enrollment history, but also taking into consideration enrollment trends within the district, so that impact of dramatic increases in charter enrollment is mitigated for all districts.

Sincerely,

Sara E. Ahern. Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

cc: Governor Charlie Baker
Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito
Senate President, Karen E. Spilka
State Senator Rebecca Rausch
State Representative Jeffrey N. Roy
Secretary of Education, James Peyser
Commissioner Jeffrey C. Riley, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Franklin School Committee
Town of Franklin Town Council
Town of Franklin Finance Committee
Mr. Jeffrey Nutting, Franklin Town Administrator
Mr. Jamie Hellen, Franklin Deputy Town Administrator
Mr. Tom Scott, Executive Director, Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents