



December 5, 2022

Dear Governor-Elect Healey and Lt. Governor-Elect Driscoll,

Congratulations on the history you made on November 6 of this year. We look forward to the bold action that you will take as an administration with an understanding of and commitment to education. As a part of the transition to your administration, you will without doubt receive many proposals concerning an agenda for education in the Commonwealth. As an education policy and research organization with a focus on advocacy on behalf of the children in the Worcester Public Schools, we hope that our ideas are a useful complement to the thoughts of others as you develop your list of priorities for the coming years.

The brain-child of John Bassett, past president of Clark University, the Worcester Education Collaborative (WEC) opened its doors in the spring of 2010 with a simple aim: to demand educational excellence for each one of our children and to work toward that by catalyzing, coordinating, and driving action. WEC's mission is to advance excellence and equity in education for Worcester Public School students, with a vision of achieving a transformational education community that enables all Worcester Public School students to achieve their full potential.

Since 2010, we have earned a reputation as a knowledgeable contributor to the work of education and as a tenacious and critical friend of both our schools and our community—one that keeps the needs of our children unrelentingly at the fore. We are regarded as an honest broker and are consistently called upon to lend our expertise to projects and working groups focused on teaching and learning. We have placed a stake in the ground with work that falls into three broad areas: advocacy for and work toward education improvement and school and district accountability; community awareness, education, and capacity building; and educational achievement and attainment.

While the needs of Worcester's children and public schools center our work, we also recognize that our city does not operate in a vacuum. We are deeply involved in education equity efforts at the state level, including Democrats for Education Reform, Massachusetts Alliance for Early College, and the Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership, among others. Throughout the attached memo, we are intentional in using the 'wide angle lens' to offer ideas that will not only benefit Worcester, but our sister Gateway Cities and others of the state's 351 cities and towns.

Once again, congratulations on the historic win. WEC is very much looking forward to working with your administration in service of our children. We hope that the information attached is useful.

Sincerely,

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To: Governor-Elect Maura Healey, Lt. Governor-Elect Driscoll, and Administration
From: Worcester Education Collaborative
Subject: Advancing educational equity and excellence in Massachusetts
Date: December 2, 2022

Worcester Education Collaborative (WEC) believes that equitable access to resources, programs, and support is the first step toward ensuring equitable opportunities and outcomes, particularly for systemically underserved children and youth. We know well that targeted evidence-based educational opportunities drive engagement, achievement, and later success in life—yet as a Commonwealth we continue to fall short in supporting those opportunities.

While Massachusetts continues to lead the nation in education opportunity and outcomes, Gateway Cities like Worcester experience some of the widest race-based inequities in the country. We are failing to provide an education that works for low-income and black and brown children. Dated curricula and pedagogical practices, exhausted physical plants, insufficient transportation, a largely homogenous workforce, and biased institutional practices occlude student learning and dampen long-term life prospects. The pandemic further exacerbated these longstanding inequities in access, opportunity, and outcomes. We know how to do better and must summon the will and assemble the resources to do so. With new funds from state and federal sources, the Commonwealth has a rare opportunity to make deep, meaningful, and sustained change with a central focus on excellence in tandem with equity.

Achieving equitable and excellent education in the 21st century for ALL children and youth requires a new model—one that takes an inclusive, holistic approach to teaching and learning, one that dismantles the root causes of inequities, and one that activates our collective responsibility to educate our children. The change required for this new model must begin at the systems and institutional level.

As the Healey-Driscoll Administration refines priorities for the Commonwealth, we hope that the following might inform your conversation. We firmly believe that Worcester, like its sister cities on the cusp of sustained positive change, requires a specialized set of action from the state to address the deep-rooted, systemic issues particular to urban districts. The following details those issues and offers broad approaches for solutions.

1. School Building Quality

School building projects in Massachusetts are developed and funded through partnership between local school districts and the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA), a financing agency. In 2004, the Authority, a quasi-public agency, replaced the earlier school building assistance program housed in the Massachusetts Department of Education. The Authority is charged with the work “to support the design and construction of educationally-appropriate, flexible, sustainable, and cost-effective public school facilities.”

While the new Authority made significant reforms, many schools, particularly those in urban and rural areas, remain woefully inadequate for the needs of a 21st century education. In Worcester, 46 schools serve over 24,000 students. While our four comprehensive high schools will all have been replaced within the last ten years, it will be decades before the remaining forty-two schools rise in queue at the Authority. Our students cannot wait that long and continue to attend schools without the buildings and core infrastructure within those buildings to meet their learning needs. Many of these schools lack technology infrastructure, space for libraries and laboratories, gymnasiums, kitchens, cafeterias, and play spaces, and many have inadequate classroom space for the number of children enrolled. A few examples follow:

- ❖ Grafton Street School was built in 1887 and has never been renovated. The school has no library, no laboratory, no gymnasium, no auditorium, no cafeteria, no kitchen and an asphalt play space with low-cost plastic equipment. This technology infrastructure is severely inadequate for 21st century education.
- ❖ Chandler Elementary School was built in 1977 and was last renovated in 1990. The school does not have sufficient space for its 423 students and rents classroom space from the local YWCA. Portable classrooms installed as a temporary solution to overcrowding have been in place for forty years. There are nine other schools using 40 year old, woefully outdated modular classrooms for daily instruction.

- ❖ Rice Square School was built in 1914 and was last renovated in 1980. The school has no library, no gymnasium, and no auditorium.

The following statistics from the SBA website add to the picture:

- ❖ 21 Worcester Schools that serve over 11,000 students have never been replaced or renovated .
- ❖ 7 Worcester Schools are over 100 years old.
- ❖ 10 Worcester Schools are over 65 years old.

Worcester is not an outlier among its peer group in terms of the state of its schools. Its school building stock does, however, stand in stark contrast to the schools in contiguous suburban districts. This disparity raises significant questions about equity and reinforces the fact that while we are number one in education nationally, we are not number one for all within our Commonwealth. The state of the core physical plant of many schools also informs parents' choice to reside in the city—decisions that affect our efforts to attract, cultivate, and maintain a middle class.

As the Healey-Driscoll Administration considers its priorities, we urge a close look at approaches to school building funding that will address the pressing building needs across the state. Two solutions come to mind:

- ❖ Increase funding to replace or significantly renovate the 100 neediest schools in the state.
- ❖ Prioritize replacement or major renovation projects in the SBA queue that are in Gateway Cities and that are either over 100 years old or that have never undergone a major renovation.

2. Transportation

As a low wealth district, many children hail from families without cars and are fully reliant on school buses for transportation to and from school or out-of-school time programs. Except in special circumstances, Worcester policy does not allow for bus transport for students living within two miles of their school. This policy, driven by financial considerations, impacts a huge number of students. This poses a significant burden on families without transportation, with young children arriving at school spent from long walks or from facing inclement weather.

Like the rest of the Commonwealth, Worcester is in the midst of a chronic absenteeism crisis that predates the disruptions of the pandemic. While research is modest concerning the impact of a lack of yellow bus transportation on school attendance, a report in the Brookings Brown Center on Education Policy newsletter indicates that lack of access to school buses is a factor in student absenteeism. This is consistent with both anecdotal evidence and an informal report by Wrap-Around Coordinators in Worcester stating a correlation between poor weather, availability of transportation, and attendance. As the Brookings paper noted, “the findings encourage us to adopt a more positive approach about what it takes to be present, such as what existing school levers might exist to get children physically into school. The positive link between bus-taking (compared to any other form of commute option) and fewer absences therefore urges further dialogue about how getting to school is linked to going to school.”¹

Further, a recently published position paper by WEC’s Worcester Education Equity Roundtable indicates that many students in Worcester rely on school buses for transportation to out-of-school and afterschool programs. However, pandemic-related changes disrupted and ended this service, and many young people have been either unable to attend programs or only able to attend inconsistently. This has created a number of negative impacts:

- Inequitable access to programs, with some young people being forced to reduce or eliminate program time.
- Hardships for families, with some families diverting limited funds to private transportation or reducing or otherwise adjusting work commitments to accommodate school and program schedules.
- Increase in safety concerns, manifested as children at home without adult supervision and others walking dangerous routes to programs.

¹ Gottfried, “Children Who Take the School Bus have Fewer Absences” Brookings Brown Center on Education Policy. 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2017/05/17/children-who-take-the-school-bus-have-fewer-absences/>

We urge the Healey-Driscoll Administration to consider:

- ❖ Ensuring that Gateway Cities and other high-need communities can offer safe and reliable transportation through an amendment to Chapter 70 allowing high-need districts to provide buses to transport all children residing outside of one mile of their school. This would mean that no child would walk or bike ride more than two miles in total each day to school.
- ❖ Identify funds to allow for yellow bus transfer to out-of-school time programs.

3. Teacher Diversity

Studies are unequivocal that a diverse teaching force helps improve educational outcomes, reduces disciplinary problems, and improves educational outcomes for all students. However, school and district administrators continue to struggle with recruiting and retaining teachers of color.

Worcester is not immune from this issue. While the District has received DESE grants in service of teacher diversification through the support of paraprofessionals, there is still much work to be done. Participation in these programs pales in comparison to the level of engagement needed to make meaningful progress toward more representative teaching and support staff in our schools. As of 2021, Worcester Public Schools had made only modest gains in increasing diversity among new hires (25.5%). To make meaningful progress there must be a systemic investment in creating a range of creative options for increasing staff diversity, including work to retain current educators and cultivate paraprofessionals as licensed teaching staff.

We urge the Healey-Driscoll Administration to:

- ❖ Expand existing DESE “grow your own” programs that offer pathways to teacher licensure for paraprofessionals both with and without bachelor’s degrees.
- ❖ Streamline alternative licensure for professionals changing careers.
- ❖ Streamline certification programs for degree holders in related fields or areas of critical need.
- ❖ Develop programs to increase the diversity of school and district administrative leadership.
- ❖ Streamline the process for ELL licensure.

4. Assessment

The Federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) continues previous requirements for statewide testing. The requirements for assessment models under ESSA include: 1) producing an annual summative determination of grade-level achievement aligned to state standards, 2) measuring a student’s academic proficiency based on challenging state academic standards, 3) allowing for disaggregated assessment data (by gender, racial and ethnic group, disability status, etc.) and individual score reports, and 4) providing understandable information to parents, including those with disabilities or limited English proficiency.

The MCAS provides a wealth of data that is useful in comparing schools and districts across a range of aggregated and disaggregated academic measures. It does not, however, consider other factors, specifically those that impact school climate, which can significantly affect student performance and engagement. We believe that school and district performance measures are incomplete without consideration of school quality and equity.

We urge the Healey-Driscoll Administration to:

- ❖ Design and implement a measurement system that considers school quality beyond academic domains currently measured as a complement to the existing MCAS.

5. Early College

Early College is the single most promising education initiative in which Massachusetts can invest to improve college-going and college success rates. It is also particularly effective at boosting attainment outcomes for students historically underrepresented in higher education. Early College is a structured program of study and support that increases college success and career readiness. In Early College, high school students take strategically sequenced college classes and receive enhanced academic and guidance support to ensure that they thrive in rigorous college coursework and the challenging college environment. They graduate from high school with significant college credits, reducing the cost and time to degree completion, and with the confidence, habits, and skills needed to be successful in college and career. We know from both national and state data that Early College programs are

incredibly successful at driving increases in college enrollment, persistence, and completion. In Massachusetts, Early College students are 15 to 16 percentage points more likely to enroll and persist in college than their peers, even when controlling for differences in demographics, school type, and test scores. At scale, this means thousands more students annually accessing college and completing a postsecondary degree.

We urge the Healey Driscoll Administration to:

- ❖ Build on existing models as a way to bring Early College to scale.

6. Cultivating an Ecosystem Approach to Education

The disruptions of the pandemic not only revealed fractures in our education system, but also opportunities and current strengths. As the reality was driven home in our city that the schools cannot do their work in isolation, it was also clearly revealed that Worcester, like its sister cities, has a learning ecosystem composed of local higher education institutions, arts and cultural institutions, ethnic cultural organizations, parent groups, and youth-serving agencies. Aligning and activating this broad network was key in pandemic recovery and is now central to the work of reimagining teaching and learning across our city.

One such collective action partnership that arose amid the pandemic was WEC's Worcester Education Equity Roundtable—a group of over 40 partners engaged in the education and learning sector. Identifying a need for an aligned response to out-of-school time learning as school doors shuttered, the Roundtable founded Woo-Labs, a network of community-based organizations focused on strengthening Worcester's out-of-school time ecosystem. Woo-Labs brings together WPS, youth-serving organizations, higher education institutions, cultural and ethnic institutions, and rigorously trained college students to improve youth-serving agencies' capacity to provide culturally responsive project-based learning (PBL). Through Woo-Labs' systems-building approach, partners collaborate to develop research-based PBL opportunities, enhance program quality through a research-backed measurement system, and engage in a Community of Practice to promote continuous improvement in key youth development practices. Woo-Labs' first two years of results are promising: the network has reached over 1,800 students with 30+ high-quality PBL projects, expanded to 11 youth-serving agencies, and demonstrated significant impact in terms of program quality improvement and student social emotional skill gain.

We believe that this approach to education cultivated over time will yield deeper and broader positive outcomes for our children.

To further enable cross-sector partnerships and impact, we urge the Healey Driscoll Administration to:

- ❖ Create the infrastructure to allow for data sharing, consistent with FERPA, that will allow District and community-based organizations to share data for policy and program development and evaluation in service of shared goals.
- ❖ Designate funding to support the growth of robust school-community cross-sector partnerships that allow communities to holistically support young people's development inside and outside of school

7. Invest in Community Schools

Community schools provide a placed-based strategy to create an enriched and supportive environment for students, families, and neighborhood residents which generally includes extended days and hours of operation, and positions the school as a site for learning, recreation, and neighborhood building. Community schools view children and families holistically and work collaboratively with community partners to bring many essential services together under one roof—offering an effective, coordinated response to students' and families' needs.

Two concepts set community schools apart: the belief that teaching and learning are responsibilities shared between schools and communities, and that schools at their best, serve as a hub for community advancement. Community schools bring together multiple partners within the school to help maximize student achievement and remove obstacles to student learning. The work of these partners—parents, community members, and service providers—is thoroughly interwoven and directly affects student achievement. In addition, community schools provide on- and off-site health, mental health and social

services to students living in low-income communities, which often lack such resources. The benefits of these “full-service” schools are extensively substantiated by research demonstrating improved student learning, health and attendance, stronger family engagement, improved school climate and safer neighborhoods, among other results. (NCCS)

We urge the Healey Driscoll Administration to:

- ❖ Incentivize the development of Community Schools, public schools that provide services and support that fit each neighborhood’s needs, created by districts and communities working in tandem.