

Thank you all for attending today. My name is Jessica Corwin. I am a public school teacher and the Chair of the Sunderland School Committee. I began my teaching career in the Boston suburbs of Weston and Westford, moved home to Western Mass and taught in Hatfield for eight years, and for the last two years I have taught in public schools in Springfield. This means that I am uncommon among teachers because I have taught in urban, suburban and rural school districts in Massachusetts.

It was my experiences as a teacher in rural Hatfield that drove me to run for Sunderland School Committee. Due to funding constraints, rural schools in my area are far more likely than larger districts to have health insurance benefits with high cost to employees. When I worked in Hatfield, the town was only able to contribute fifty percent of the cost of health insurance premiums for us, which meant that during the years that I had two children in daycare, my daycare bills exceeded my take home pay. In other words, I was working only for health insurance and my family was otherwise entirely supported by my spouse's job. Single parents can't afford to work in districts with such low benefits.

According to data published by MassLive, 18 of the 20 lowest-paying school districts in the Commonwealth are ones that receive Rural School Aid. Hatfield and Sunderland are both among those low-paying districts. My first big wakeup call about the impacts of underfunding rural schools came when some dear colleagues and friends unexpectedly left the district because their families could not afford for them to continue working in such a low-paying school. One of them told me that by crossing the town line to work next door in a small city, she was getting a pay increase of more than ten thousand dollars— and that was before factoring in the improved health care benefits. As a school committee member and regional negotiations chair, I understand that salaries are low because a shortage of funding forces districts to choose between student services (also known as staffing levels), and staff pay. These are impossible decisions to make. During my tenure in Hatfield, even before the pandemic, I watched as the district was forced to cut foreign language, all vocal music beyond sixth grade, and all middle school sports. These are also impossible decisions to make.

Rural towns are not luxuriously underpopulated suburbs. We have small tax bases and many of our towns have already increased our tax rates to some of the highest in the state. My own town of Sunderland has passed three overrides in the last six years to remain operational. Rural poverty is a very real challenge: approximately one-third of Sunderland's students come from low-income families, and these children face unique challenges because of the isolation and lack of access to resources in rural communities. Often, our rural schools are the only lifeline for families, connecting them with critical services and resources. The Student Opportunity Act was meant to provide support to students like this but due to declining enrollment, more than half of rural school districts in Massachusetts remain in hold harmless and have only received minimum funding increases after the first four years of the SOA.

I urge everyone here to give the rural schools bill your full support and honor the need for educational equity for rural students in Massachusetts. This critical bill would help to address gaps in salaries, wages, benefits, student programming, and the excessive strain on rural municipal budgets that currently dedicate as much as 70% of town spending to schools. To learn more or refer to some of the data mentioned today, you can visit an advocacy website that we have put together at [ruralschoolsma.org](http://ruralschoolsma.org), which I will put in the chat. Thank you all for your leadership and engagement and for keeping rural equity in mind.