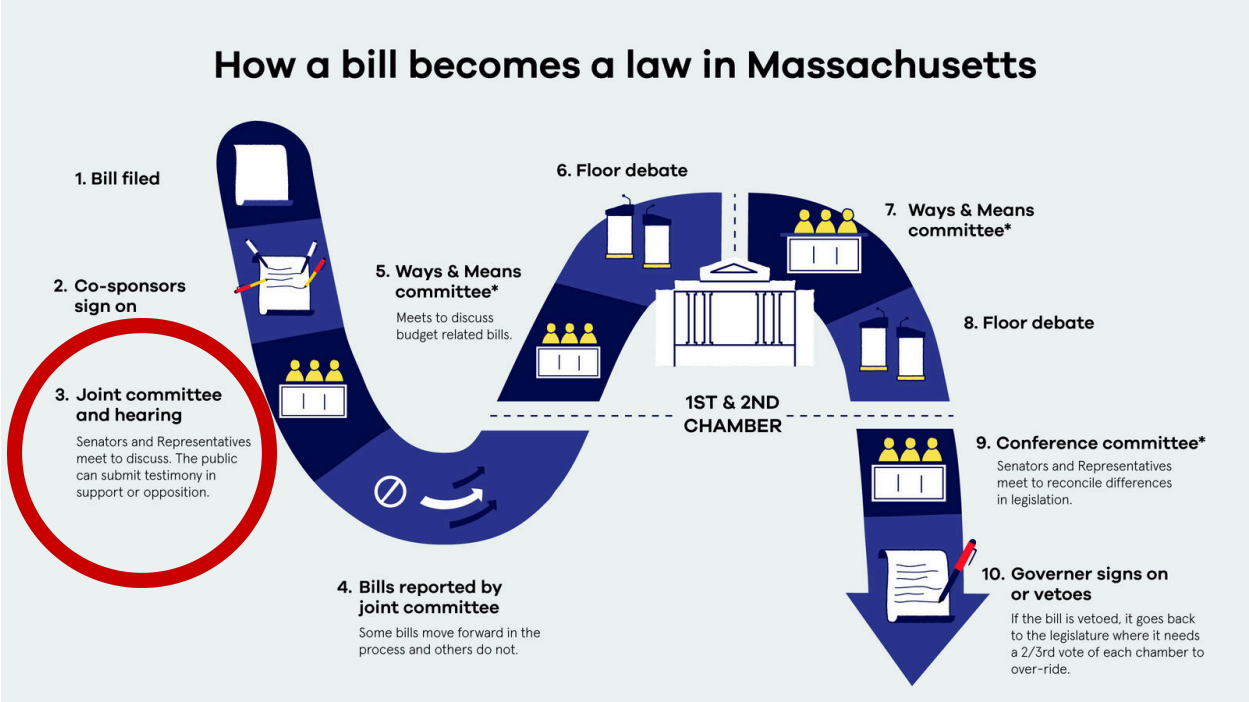
Testimony Tips & Talking Points
H.517/S.314 An Act to Provide a Sustainable Future for Rural Schools
June 3rd, 2025

This content is also available delivered as a presentation on video here. Passcode: h^P%08cm

Overview

- This is the second time the rural schools bill has had a hearing. Following the last hearing, the Joint Committee on Education removed almost all provisions with funding attached. We need to press for a different outcome this time.
- Written testimony is valuable, even (and sometimes especially) when it is brief. Written testimony may be submitted to the Joint Committee on Education at 24 Beacon Street, Room 473G, Boston, MA 02133 or by e-mail to fiona.brucebaiden@mahouse.gov and emily.reynolds@masenate.gov, CCing your own State Rep and Senator. Use the subject line "EDUCATION COMMITTEE TESTIMONY H.517/S.314" and provide the committee with your name, address, organization and phone number. The Committee will accept written testimony until June 10, 2025.
- In-person and virtual testimony are limited to 2 minutes. Register here.
- Due to lack of efficiencies of scale, it costs 17-23% more per student on average to provide a basic education in small districts in Massachusetts compared to all other districts. Small towns are struggling to make up this difference.



Graphic courtesy of [Project Bread]

Tips for your testimony

- Lead with a clear request: I urge you to report out favorably on the bills to provide equitable funding for rural schools.
- Make it personal. Tell a story from your district.
    - What has your district lost or might it lose without fair funding?
    - How has this impacted you/your students/your children?
    - How do your district's educational offerings fall short of those offered in larger districts in this state? Highlight inequalities.
- Provide clear, accurate information. Cite data from reliable sources that relate to your local stories.
- Be courteous. Begin and end by saying thank you to the committee for their consideration, service and leadership and/or for the opportunity to speak.
- If testifying live, mind the two-minute time limit. Practice your statement with a timer.

Talking points and data: pick ones that relate to your district's story

- It costs more per student to provide a basic education in a small district than a larger one. The state does not yet include this reality in their funding calculations. Until those formulas get fixed (which will take years!), Rural Aid is the emergency life vest needed to keep rural districts afloat.
    - Compared to districts with more than 1,300 students, districts with fewer than 1,300 students have to spend on average 16.7% more per student to provide a basic education. That number rises to 22.7% if the small district is also a regionalized one.[1] Of the 106 Massachusetts towns that benefitted from Rural Aid through their school districts in 2025, only 9 are not yet regionalized.[2]
- The rural schools bill would not only provide full funding of Rural Aid, it would guarantee it, allowing districts to plan for it in their budgets. Right now Rural Aid is an annual appropriation that is not finalized until the summer, months after school budgets are finalized. Districts do not learn their allocations until fall, leading to avoidable uncertainty in programming. Additionally, there is always the possibility that Rural Aid will be cut or eliminated in the annual appropriations process.
- Because the state calculates basic aid on a per-pupil basis that assumes districts of 2,500 students, districts with declining enrollment have increasing fixed costs but flat funding from the state.
    - While public school enrollment declined 3.8% across Massachusetts between 2010 and 2019, the three most rural counties of Franklin, Berkshire and Barnstable saw enrollment declines of 20.8%, 15.3% and 15.3% respectively.[3] Rural schools are disproportionately impacted and have been held harmless in state funding for decades. Many are not close to seeing Student Opportunity Act benefits due to the severity of their enrollment decline.
    - Between 2018 and 2023, rural school enrollment declined 5.5%, compared to 3.5% for non-rural school districts in

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[1] "The Rural Schools Report"— A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools by the Commission on the Fiscal Health of Rural School Districts, July 2022

[2] Spreadsheet on ruralschoolsma.org, derived from DESE Rural Aid FY25 data.

[3] "The Rural Schools Report"— A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools by the Commission on the Fiscal Health of Rural School Districts, July 2022

Massachusetts.[4]
    - In FY25, rural school districts account for 4.2% of total state enrollment in public schools and 4.1% of total Chapter 70 aid. The fact that rural schools are generally in hold harmless does not mean that they are receiving a disproportionately high amount of state aid. Rural schools have received only 2.4% of the increased funding from the Student Opportunity Act.[5]
- Rural districts have already cut costs. We still need assistance to make up for unavoidable lack of efficiencies of scale.
    - Regionalizing, closing schools, sharing services
    - Salaries: 28 of the 35 lowest average public school teacher salaries in Massachusetts are districts that receive Rural Aid[6]
    - Reduced programming: cuts to arts, foreign languages, sports and electives
- Regionalization is not a feasible solution in many situations.
    - Per state law[7], no school personnel can take a salary or benefit cut in a merger of districts; increased expenses for salaries and benefits can be cost-prohibitive when disparities exist.
    - Annual Town Meeting voters may reject regionalization proposals, especially when there is a likelihood of closing their town's school in the future for the sake of efficiency. In small towns with minimal to no commercial activity or social centers, the school building is often the sole community center for gatherings and events.
    - Some districts are already so maximally geographically regionalized that their students spend an hour and fifteen minutes each way on the bus every day. These students are not able to participate in afterschool activities (no late bus and parents can't transport), do homework on the bus (no rural cell signals along bus route) or work after school jobs like peers in non-regional districts with shorter commute times. This is a serious equity issue.
- For situations where regionalization/further regionalization is possible, the bills provide for a variety of state help (financial and technical assistance) to support these efforts and fund essential planning and transitional costs.

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[4] Spreadsheet on ruralschoolsma.org, derived from DESE FY20 and FY25 Chapter 70 data.
[5] Spreadsheet on ruralschoolsma.org, derived from DESE FY20 and FY25 Chapter 70 data.
[6] https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/teachersalaries.aspx
[7] https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71/Section42B

- Towns are struggling to make up for the gap between state funding formulas and rural needs. Rising education costs mean cuts everywhere else in town budgets. Some towns have repeatedly passed overrides simply to remain operational and are now approaching the levy ceiling, with nowhere else to go. Schools and towns have little left to cut, and dwindling, if any, reserves. In the meantime, student needs are increasing. As programming cuts are made, students whose families can afford to transport them utilize school choice to attend schools with more robust options, leading to a fiscal "death spiral" for the home district and inequitable opportunities for the economically disadvantaged students who remain.
- We all know that Massachusetts' Special Education funding formulas are not aligned with reality in any size district, presuming that only 3% of students in a public school receive Special Education services when in reality most districts serve upwards of 20% of their population. The rural schools bill would establish a Special Education Funding Commission to review the system for financing special education and make recommendations for a more equitable system that provides adequate funding to local school districts to meet the costs of providing high quality education to students with disabilities.
- Districts of all sizes in Massachusetts are struggling to hire qualified Special Education teachers. The rural schools bill (summary here) contains three separate provisions that would strengthen the pipeline of Special Education teachers, to the benefit of all districts.