

## **Briefing on: H3567/S2388 - An Act to provide a sustainable future for rural schools**

Battaglino: Frame Up: The Commissions work, timeframe, makeup, findings.

The 2019 Student Opportunity Act addressed the need for equitable and sustainable school funding throughout the commonwealth and established the Rural Schools Commission in recognition of the importance of supporting low and declining enrollment districts.

In May of 2021 Representative Natalie Blais (Sunderland, MA) – 1<sup>st</sup> Franklin District and Senator Adam Hinds (Berkshire, Hampshire, Franklin and Hampden Districts) brought together the Commission on the Fiscal Health of Rural School Districts.

We were commissioned to study the long-term fiscal health of rural school-districts facing declining student enrollment and to make recommendations that would:

- 1)improve and expand the rural school aid grand program
- 2)address low and declining student enrollment within the budget
- 3)expand the use of technology to deliver instruction
- 4)enable operating efficiencies
- 5)explore shared services
- 6)optimize schools
- 7)improve fiscal health and
- 8)identify other related matters

We spent a full year researching, reporting, discussing, and analyze the issues and we held many informational meetings where we invited experts, parents, administrators and teachers to speak to us about their day to day experiences in rural schools. Based on our findings, one year ago, we presented a comprehensive set of recommendations.

We found that many rural school students do not benefit from an education with the same level of resources and breadth of opportunity as their peers in the rest of the state – in other words, they get less than what they need and deserve. However, what is most interesting is our recommendations for improving the situation benefits all students in

Massachusetts. In special education, which is my background, we refer to that as “good practice for one is good practice for all.”

It will not come as a surprise, the commission found insufficient per-pupil funding is the heart of the problem and we identified a range of ways to overcome the inequity through low-cost interventions.

Rural school aid, transportation, declining enrollment, regionalization, shared services, special education funding, school choice, and health insurance discrepancies are all addressed within the recommendations.

In a nutshell, we recommended funding support in these areas that would provide creative and cost efficient remedies to problems impacting rural schools, but could reasonably be applied to urban and suburban districts facing similar issues. For instance, exorbitant special education-transportation costs in rural districts would benefit from employing strategies that may prove equally budget friendly in other cities and towns.

I’m happy to forward the full report to anyone interested and I urge you to look over the recommendations and consider the applications to the district you represent.

Thanks so much.