

EDUCATION

Taunton-area school districts hit budget wall. What should state do?



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The Taunton Daily Gazette

Updated Feb. 16, 2026, 9:42 a.m. ET

Many people are talking about the need for the state to provide more education funding, but not everyone is talking about how the state would pay for it.

Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents Executive Director Mary Bourque told the Gazette the state's formula to distribute education funding "is not working because costs are now exceeding any amount of money that is in the formula."

She said that schools are facing increasing costs due inflation and other factors, and that her association would be "advocating for increases in most of the areas of the governor's budget."

In a 2024 analysis, the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center said state education aid for local school districts — known as Chapter 70 funding — did not increase proportionately with inflation in the prior school year.

The center said that adjusting state education funding for inflation would require \$465 million in additional funding annually.

Finding that additional money is easier said than done. When asked if "are you talking about more revenue for these schools," Bourque said "I believe we are, yeah." However, when asked "would that come from increased taxes, or where would that come from?" Bourque said that "I'm not saying that at all."

"I think you're asking for me to do definitive answers when I have more questions for our policy makers," she said. "We need to get another foundation budget reform commission and start putting those questions on the table."

Here's what we know about the state of education funding in Massachusetts and how Gateway Cities like Taunton have been able to avoid some of the budget challenges facing many other school districts.

How 2019 law effects Taunton, other school districts

School districts outside of Taunton, such as [Bridgewater-Raynham](#), [Berkley](#), [Dighton-Rehoboth](#) and [Middleboro](#) have all laid off teachers or are staring down that prospect. Bridgewater-Raynham attempted to pass two override votes to raise taxes in order to generate funding for schools, but [voters rejected the tax increases in 2025](#). This year, [the town of Berkley is considering an override vote to raise taxes as well](#).

Taunton Public Schools, meanwhile, has avoided the layoffs and override votes that have plagued nearby districts.

Taunton has also seen substantial increases in the amount of aid it receives from the state. The district's Chapter 70 funding from the state increased by \$10.4 million this year, from \$95 million in the 2024-25 school year to \$105.4 million in the current 2025-26 school year. For the next school year, Taunton is projected to receive an extra \$4.2 million in Chapter 70 aid under the governor's proposed budget.

Taunton benefits from Student Opportunity Act

One reason why Taunton has seen funding increases from the state is because of a 2019 law called the Student Opportunity Act, Taunton Superintendent of Schools John Cabral told the Gazette.

"We've been really blessed as a school system and as a city, we really benefited from the Student Opportunity Act, given the amount of funding we received over the last

seven years," he said.

"The Student Opportunity Act was a real gamechanger for communities like Taunton and other urban centers that addressed the rising costs in special education, the rising costs in healthcare," he said.

Staff sound alarm over safety [Taunton school worker fires back, says violence is 'the norm'](#)

Student Opportunity Act gives more money to higher-need districts

The Student Opportunity Act was created to address funding inequities by allocating more state funding to school districts that have students that require higher levels of services.

"Prior to the Student Opportunity Act, we identified that our urban districts in particular were being disproportionately underfunded, because they had disproportionately the higher concentration of students needing extra support," Bourque said.

"Urban districts had a higher concentration, and still do, of children in poverty, of English language learners and special education (students)," she said.

Anthony Clough, a policy analyst for the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, said the Student Opportunity Act is a seven-year commitment that slowly raises the amount of funding that districts who have more students with higher levels of needs receive. He said that after the next school year, the Student Opportunity Act will be fully implemented and that the overall ratio of funding different districts receive would not change further.

Cabral said that he "will always advocate that funding at the state level should always be proportional to the makeup and the demographics of a community, especially urban communities such as Taunton, Fall River, New Bedford and Brockton."

"I believe the Massachusetts funding formula is one of the better funding formulas in the country," he said. "But I do worry at the federal level and at the local level, depending on, it could be numerous matters, that funding for communities like us could be impacted, and that would impact the level of services we're able to provide our students.

Does Student Opportunity Act address inflation?

The increases in funding from the Student Opportunity Act have helped districts like Taunton increase revenue at a time of high levels of inflation.

However, the Student Opportunity Act funding increases were designed to address inequities in funding by providing districts with higher levels of student needs, such as Taunton, with additional funding. The Student Opportunity Act was not intended to be used just to offset inflation.

The Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center said, in [its 2024 report on state education funding](#), that "the SOA is adding over \$875 million annually in funding to K-12 schools, particularly concentrated in the Gateway Cities" such as Taunton.

However, the report said that the increased funding had been "eroded" by higher levels of inflation.

"Over the past two years, however, unprecedented inflation levels (that were unaccounted for in the formula) have eroded the value of the SOA and will continue to depress funding each year moving forward," the report said.

Increasing state education funding to account for inflation would "require \$465M in additional annual funding," the report said. However, that funding would go to both the gateway cities that are benefiting from the Student Opportunity Act as well as other school districts as well. Of the \$465 million in additional funding, more than half of that — \$248 million — would go to Gateway Cities, the report said.

Why hasn't state education aid kept up with inflation?

The reason why Chapter 70 has not fully addressed inflation, Clough said, is that "the state caps the inflation adjustments at 4.5%, when actual costs have gone up by a lot more than that."

Proposition 2 1/2 limits how much cities and towns can increase taxes to pay for education

Increasing state education funding to take into account increased costs would presumably require increased revenue or cuts to other areas of the state budget or both.

In Massachusetts, the cost of funding education is shared between the state and local cities and towns — which fund their portion largely through property taxes.

When voters have had the opportunity to boost local school funding through Proposition 2 1/2 overrides that would increase their property taxes, voters in Massachusetts towns have often said no.

In Bridgewater and Raynham, the school district put forth a budget in 2025 that required voters approve overrides in both towns. [And both towns shot them down.](#) Subsequently, [class sizes increased in the middle schools and high school, and students say they are spending more time in study hall and less time in classrooms because extracurricular classes were cut.](#)

The state government might have an easier time raising taxes compared to cities and towns, because the state is not bound by Proposition 2 1/2 — which requires cities and towns in Massachusetts to get voter approval to raise the total amount they collect in property taxes by more than 2.5% a year, plus an allowance for new construction.

What Gov. Maura Healey says

A spokesperson for Gov. Maura Healy said in a statement that, "Governor Healey wants every student to get the high-quality education they deserve, no matter where they live."

"That's why she's fully funded the Student Opportunity Act every year while also proposing significant increases in rural school, regional transportation, special education and per-pupil aid," the statement said. "This is in addition to new investments in essential programs like early literacy tutoring and Early College. We will continue working closely with municipalities and school districts to address their needs and support our hardworking educators."

'Chapter 70 funding continues to fail small districts'

Berkley Public Schools Superintendent Melissa Ryan — whose [district underwent layoffs](#) and is [facing a potential 6% cut if an override vote to increase taxes doesn't pass](#) — harshly criticized state education funding in an email to the Gazette. The Town of Berkley has a population of approximately 7,000 people while the city of Taunton has a population of approximately 62,000.

"Chapter 70 funding continues to fail small districts like Berkley by providing the appearance of stability without addressing the real cost of educating students," Ryan said.

"In the Governor's FY27 budget, the minimum per-pupil increase was reduced from \$150 in FY26 to \$75, resulting in Berkley receiving an increase of \$44,925, which does not come close to covering rising fixed costs such as special education tuition, transportation, utilities, and contractual obligations," she said. "It places us in a budget deficit before we even begin planning."

"While 49 districts will receive larger per-pupil increases, 270 districts remain inadequately funded," she said of the current condition of state education funding. "When one district receives a \$19 million increase while another faces \$550,800 in

reductions and the loss of 10-15 educators, it is clear that the funding system is inequitable."

"The state has failed to move forward with a long-discussed commission to review and modernize the Chapter 70 formula," she said. "Chapter 70 does not recognize that small districts face the same mandates, regulations, and student challenges as larger districts, just on a smaller scale and with significantly fewer staff and support systems. Berkley is required to provide the same special education services, educate a growing population of students whose first language is not English, and address increasing mental health and social-emotional needs while meeting the same compliance timelines."

"The Town of Berkley is calling on the Governor and state legislators to do the right thing by adequately funding school districts through a meaningful and equitable minimum per-pupil rate," she said.