

AFT Massachusetts Special Resolution to Support the Thrive Act

WHEREAS, AFT Massachusetts remains committed to supporting policies that benefit students, families, educators, and communities, while opposing policies that have a harmful impact; and

WHEREAS, Massachusetts' high-stakes MCAS testing and accountability regime continues to harm students, families, educators, and communities, especially low-income communities and communities of color; and

WHEREAS, the damage caused by the state's high-stakes MCAS testing and accountability regime is exemplified by two interconnected education policies—state takeover of public schools based on low MCAS scores and the MCAS-based high school graduation requirement; and

WHEREAS, state takeover has exclusively targeted high-poverty school districts that predominantly serve low-income students and students of color, including the AFT-represented districts of Lawrence (entire district in receivership), Boston (two schools in receivership), and Springfield (where many paraprofessionals work within a quasi-receivership structure, the Springfield Empowerment Zone); and

WHEREAS, state takeover has failed to improve student learning everywhere it has been tried (even by the state's own metrics), while inflicting serious harms on targeted communities, including: disruption of promising school programs; a narrowing of the curriculum to test prep in math and English language arts; alarming teacher and administrator turnover; loss of local democratic control of schools; loss of collective bargaining rights for educators; and the silencing of student, family, educator, and community voices in how schools are run; and

WHEREAS, Massachusetts is one of only eight states in the country that still ties its standardized test to graduation, down from 27 states in the early 2000s, making Massachusetts an outlier in this regard; and

WHEREAS, the state's MCAS-based high school graduation requirement has prevented thousands of students from earning a high school diploma, forever hampering their futures, with particular harm caused to English learners, students with disabilities, and Black and Latinx students; and

WHEREAS, even students who pass the MCAS are harmed by the high-stakes accountability measures tied to the test, as their learning experiences are often reduced to a narrow focus on test prep in mathematics and English language arts, robbing them of the enriching educational experiences that lead to overall stronger academic performance and preparation for college and career; and

WHEREAS, these two top-down, harmful policies – state takeovers and the MCAS-based graduation requirement – are widening racial, economic, and educational inequities in our schools and communities, rather than narrowing them; and

WHEREAS, to help students, especially in high-poverty schools, we need a better system of assessment and improvement that considers the whole child, encompasses a wide range of student skills, and focuses on giving students and educators the tools and resources they need to succeed and thrive; and

WHEREAS, a bill called An Act Empowering Students and Schools to Thrive (a.k.a. the Thrive Act) was filed in both the Massachusetts House (HD.3162) and Senate (SD.2067) in January 2023; and

WHEREAS, the Thrive Act was shaped with substantial input from AFT Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Teachers Association, Citizens for Public Schools, and many other organizations affiliated with the Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance (MEJA), all of which have agreed to make the bill a major legislative priority during the current legislative session; and

WHEREAS, the Thrive Act has the potential to transform the educational landscape for generations to come, emphasizing support for high-need schools instead of punishment, and dramatically reducing the harm caused by the high-stakes, punitive use of MCAS tests; and

WHEREAS, the Thrive Act specifically would:

- End all existing state receiverships of districts within one year, including the receivership in Lawrence, and restore control to local communities and school committees;
- Eliminate the statutory authority for receiverships, thereby prohibiting future state takeovers of districts and schools;
- Provide real help to high-need schools by creating a democratic and locally driven process for improving them, with a focus on support and resources for evidence-based strategies such as smaller classes, community schools, and full staffing;
- Restore collective bargaining and other rights to educators working in high-need schools and districts;
- Establish a modified high school graduation requirement in which coursework as certified by the student's district would replace the MCAS as the basis for showing student mastery of the skills, competencies, and knowledge required by the state standards; and
- Create a special commission with a range of education stakeholders to shape a positive future vision for student/school assessment that is authentic, equitable, and focused on supporting the whole child; and

WHEREAS, the policies contained in the Thrive Act are fully aligned with the values and priorities of AFT Massachusetts and its local affiliates:

RESOLVED, that AFT Massachusetts, in concert with its coalition allies, shall advocate strenuously for passage of the Thrive Act in the Legislature and urge all local affiliates to do the same; and

RESOLVED, that AFT Massachusetts, in concert with its coalition allies, shall mount an aggressive education and organizing campaign across the state to build grassroots support for the Thrive Act among local elected officials, school committees, students, educators, families, and communities; and

RESOLVED, that a copy of this resolution, once approved, shall be sent to Governor Maura Healey; every senator and representative in the Massachusetts Legislature; Education Secretary Patrick Tutwiler; Education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley; and all members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.