



Building on  
What Works  
COALITION

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[www.buildingonwhatworks.org](http://www.buildingonwhatworks.org)

# A Call to Action in 2015

Standing at the peak of the global knowledge economy, we see plentiful opportunity for workers with advanced skills in high-growth sectors. But in the other direction, the view reveals increasingly fewer options for workers who lack specialized skills in Massachusetts. With new technologies steadily automating and outsourcing jobs, experts predict the divide that marks our Commonwealth’s new economic landscape will become more difficult to cross. The remedy is building education systems that ensure all residents are able to develop the skills required by 21st-century industries.<sup>1</sup>

This pivotal work rests largely with cities and towns where—from birth through high school graduation—young learners receive their formative educational experiences. For a select set of cities and towns that serve a disproportionate share of students with the greatest and most diverse needs, helping all youth develop a strong foundation will be particularly challenging.<sup>2</sup> The increasing concentration of poverty that these communities must shoulder is itself a byproduct of growing inequality. If these cities and towns cannot provide the educational opportunities their residents require to be upwardly mobile, it will be difficult to break the cycle whereby widening inequality leads to reduced economic opportunity for those with limited means.

Many of these communities are striving to respond. Lowell and Pittsfield are building collaborative cross-sector initiatives to improve early literacy. Fall River and Malden have aggressive strategies to prevent students from dropping out. Lawrence, Salem, and Springfield are taking dramatic steps to turn around low-performing schools. While these efforts are promising, too often they are under-resourced, and many have been made possible with unsustainable federal grants.<sup>3</sup>

It is critical that we ensure that these community-driven initiatives succeed and expand. As compelling research by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston makes clear, the defining feature of a community’s success is its ability to work collaboratively to respond effectively to long-term challenges.<sup>4</sup> Without exception, providing the public education today’s economy demands is now the highest-order challenge for cities and towns in Massachusetts. To give communities confidence to keep pushing for success, it is imperative that we recognize and support their collective effort.

## Acting Now to Build on What Works

A growing collection of educators, business leaders, and elected officials, unified by a common desire to empower communities acting to improve their learning systems, have formed the **Building on What Works Coalition**. The Coalition recognizes that cities and towns serving large concentrations of high-need students will require additional resources to provide their youth with equal opportunity. This understanding is grounded in lessons from two decades of education reform that suggest giving disadvantaged students the learning experiences they need to succeed calls for additional quality learning time, through both early education and a longer school day and/or

year in grades K through 12. It also requires the capacity to maximize education resources by continuously seeking out and testing innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

While the dollars communities require to prepare every child for success are limited under current fiscal constraints, the Commonwealth must not let this be a barrier to making continued progress. In 2015, the state can act by creating a new fund that:

- Bolsters community-driven initiatives by supporting local leaders working together to get the most out of teacher talent, technology, external partners, and public resources;
- Establishes the merit of making investments in more learning time in high-need communities by rigorously demonstrating effective models in several Massachusetts cities and towns at significant scale; and
- Helps communities build both programming and accountability structures that can be brought to scale in a relatively timely manner when additional resources become available.

This white paper outlines the core set of principles for structuring a fund that can achieve these three critical goals, describes the rationale for concentrating the fund on three focus areas, and elaborates on the urgent need to include this funding in the FY 2016 budget.

## CORE PRINCIPLES

Designing a fund that will have maximum benefit with limited dollars requires great care. Building on What Works Coalition members spent many hours debating the best approach. We arrived at three core principles: choice & competition, place-based investment, and robust accountability.

### Choice & Competition

Choice and competition are critical because resources are limited. The state's current budget simply does not allow for the establishment of a pool of funds large enough to provide additional learning time and to support innovation at scale in all of our high-need communities. Even if more funding were available today, it is not clear that all of these communities would be ready to productively put the dollars to use. Competition provides an incentive to all eligible communities to set priorities for improvement and an avenue to invest the limited resources we have in places where they can demonstrate impact and bolster the argument for greater levels of investment in the future.

The competitive process will also yield valuable information about where cities and towns across the state fall in terms of both their appetite to pursue this work and their readiness to embark upon these efforts collaboratively. The process will create opportunities for external partners to support communities by focusing on common goals and applying the best expertise available.

To ensure the process is fair and transparent, proposals should be evaluated by a committee composed of both state education officials and independent experts. This highly qualified review board should judge the proposals according to the strategic quality of the plan, the community's capacity to implement effectively, and the level of innovation the proposed

## The Foundation Budget Review Commission and the Road to Education Reform 2.0

The FY15 state budget created a Foundation Budget Review Commission to examine the Chapter 70 formula. Many education leaders are hopeful that the Commission will be a precursor to a new wave of reform akin to the state's groundbreaking legislation in 1993. To understand the significance of this moment and how the Building on What Works proposal is complementary, one must recall the history.

The 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) defined a "foundation budget" equal to the amount of money necessary to provide an adequate education to all students. Based on each municipality's fiscal capacity, the law established the Chapter 70 formula to calculate the share of this foundation budget to be funded by the state. MERA also introduced rigorous academic state standards and the MCAS assessment. Additional funding for high-need districts coupled with greater accountability were the heart of the law, which has been widely credited with propelling Massachusetts students to first in the nation.

But there are mounting concerns that what served us well for the past two decades will not be sufficient to maintain our edge for the next two. The state is no longer providing high-need districts the funding equity as MERA intended. The law did include provisions to index the foundation budget to inflation, but the legislature has not always been able to keep pace with the rising cost required to fully fund Chapter 70. In recent years, several independent reviews have been issued suggesting that the state is underfunding an adequate education according to the foundation budget by at least \$2 billion.<sup>5</sup> And this relies on 1993 assumptions. While MERA called for regular foundation budget reviews, it remains essentially unchanged for more than two decades.

MERA was designed to provide a remedy to the Supreme Judicial Court's ruling that unconstitutional disparities existed in the educational opportunities Massachusetts afforded students. If the formula is no longer working, it raises serious

questions about whether the state is honoring its constitutional obligation to provide all children with an adequate public education.

Many also believe a new accountability structure is needed. MERA sought to ensure that all students would graduate with fundamental skills in literacy and numeracy by placing a heavy emphasis on MCAS scores in English and math. Today there is increasing recognition that while these academic skills are crucial to providing students with a strong foundation, social and emotional skills are at least equally important to lifelong success.

We also appreciate more fully that giving all students the educational experiences our economy demands is no simple undertaking. In addition to great teaching and learning, it means ensuring children are well housed, fed, and receiving access to appropriate medical care. Investing limited public resources to meet individual needs will require careful calibration.

The Foundation Budget Review Commission is expected to issue a report in June outlining its recommendations. Rather than taking on this broad set of issues, many anticipate that the report will focus primarily on adjusting the Chapter 70 formula to more accurately account for health care and special education costs.

Regardless of its focus, the Commission's report will kindle a debate that will take time to resolve. In the interim, the Building on What Works proposal will give high-need communities opportunities to model a process for investing effectively in the future by providing more rigorous accountability, demonstrating the results they can produce with additional investment spent well, and establishing systems in their communities for scaling evidenced-based practices as funds become available.

activities would bring to our education system. Funding should go only to communities with solid plans for investing the additional dollars.

Based on conversations with district leaders in midsize cities, we believe an investment on the order of \$5 million to \$7 million annually, per community, would be sufficient to provide meaningful impact, but distribution decisions would be based on the quality of proposals. Ideally, the state would fund six to 10 communities in this range to show results in a variety of settings.

## Place-Based Investment

Place-based investment will allow the state to target these funds to the highest-need districts.<sup>6</sup> The concentration of poverty in these communities clearly presents a challenge in and of itself. These communities also provide economies of scale in serving disadvantaged students.

Educating a large concentration of high-need students should be the only requirement for participation. While a strong argument can be made for targeting limited resources directly to struggling schools, communities need the flexibility to determine where funding can be most effective to develop valid proof points for making these investments at scale. Furthermore, since it is generally accepted that communities serving large concentrations of high-need students require additional resources, reaching the lowest percentiles of performance should not be a prerequisite for receiving access to this funding opportunity.

Awarding these funds to places will also encourage cities and towns to think about their strategies holistically, as opposed to in discrete segments (i.e., pre-K, K through 12, post-secondary). While funding community-driven initiatives should be the priority, it is also important to structure the competitive process to position cities and towns to work effectively with a wide range of external partners—from school districts in neighboring communities to nationally recognized nonprofits—that can bring expertise in improving complex delivery systems.

## Robust Accountability

For over two decades, Massachusetts has been a leader in building strong accountability systems to ensure that state investment in public education produces quality learning experiences for students. As thinking about the set of learning opportunities students need to receive to be successful in the 21st century evolves, Massachusetts must develop new accountability metrics. The transition to next-generation assessments is one step forward in measuring academic outcomes, but there are other domains in which measurement is equally important and currently missing. The competition provides a unique opportunity to experiment with new approaches that span four dimensions:

- Academic outcomes
- Social-emotional/non-cognitive outcomes
- Kindergarten readiness
- Work readiness, post-secondary enrollment, and persistence

Tracking the development of social-emotional or non-cognitive skills is one area that educators agree must be incorporated into the accountability system in the future. Research reveals that these skills are central to success in the workplace and lifelong well-being. The urgent need to place greater emphasis on social-emotional learning is also backed by employers, who are concerned that too many students enter the workforce today without having fully developed these crucial skills.<sup>7</sup>

Accountability structures must also evolve so that they encourage communities to think more deeply about how they prepare young children to learn, as well as how they support graduates as they move on to post-secondary training. Two decades ago our conception of learning was very different. Today there is much greater appreciation that students and families need seamless support to navigate the learning pathway from cradle to career.

## Building on What Works: Boston KIDS

Boston is working hard to develop partnerships with community-based providers to provide more kids with high-quality pre-K experiences. The Boston KIDS initiative builds on the district's successful effort to add pre-K classes for 4-year-olds throughout the district. Students who enter Boston Public Schools through these pre-K classrooms are outperforming their peers by an average of nine percentage points on the third-grade MCAS English Language Arts examination.

Boston KIDS combines city, state, and private resources to provide affordable year-round pre-K. Offering the programs in community-based centers enables the city to bring quality programming to scale. To improve educator quality and

stability in community settings, the program offers financial support to increase teacher salaries. Programs must score at level 3 or above on the state's QRIS quality scale and receive accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Educators must have at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and a minimum of three years of early childhood teaching experience. Programs receive professional development from BPS and follow the district's evidence-based early childhood curriculum.

The program currently operates 14 classrooms in 10 community-based programs. Preliminary outcomes suggest that children improve their language, literacy, mathematics, and social-emotional skills.<sup>8</sup>

To seed innovation, rather than follow prescriptions on how communities should measure progress on these four dimensions, applicants for the competitive grant should select their own comprehensive set of indicators. These measures should be consistent with the activities they propose and communities should be able to demonstrate meaningful gains on them within three years.

## ► THREE FOCUS AREAS

Coalition members have a diverse set of views about 21st-century learning, but they believe firmly that the formula for providing high-need students with the skills today's industries demand includes providing more quality learning time both in early childhood and in K-12. They also recognize that with limited resources, communities will need to work collaboratively and creatively to foster innovation that will improve the delivery of education to all students in a cost-effective manner. Consensus on these points leads us to propose that the state set three focus areas for the competitive fund:

- Expanding access to high-quality early learning opportunities
- Expanding learning time available to K–12 students
- Designing innovative learning systems

Communities should be encouraged to integrate the activities in a multifaceted proposal. However, if they see a targeted approach as the best way to make the most out of the resource, they should not be penalized for selecting only early education, extended learning time, or redesign.

## Expanding Access to High-Quality Early Learning

The impressive body of research demonstrating the connection between high-quality early education and lifelong success is widely known. But far too many low-income children in Massachusetts still lack access to high-quality early learning experiences. As a result, most of these children will enter kindergarten far behind their peers, creating an achievement gap that is stubbornly difficult to close: In 2014, only 39 percent of low-income children in Massachusetts scored proficient in third-grade reading, compared with 71 percent of non-low-income children. Investing in early education to close this wide gulf, which

## **Building on What Works: Kuss Middle School**

In 2004, Kuss Middle School in Fall River became the first school declared “Chronically Underperforming” by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, a status that prompted greater state intervention and oversight. Though a low point for the school, the state takeover also ushered in a time of possibility—an opportunity to transform the school. By chance, efforts to drastically improve student outcomes at Kuss coincided with the appearance of a new school reform opportunity in Massachusetts, the Expanded Learning Time Initiative, which provides state funds to qualifying schools that present solid plans to redesign their educational program with 300 more hours per year for all students.

Since first adding time and embarking on their transformation, Kuss has seen dramatic improvements in a number of key academic measures. Highlights include: school-wide gains in math and English Language Arts; narrowing the achievement gap, especially in math; enhanced science proficiency; high rates of attendance; and low rates of misbehavior. A decade later, leveraging the resource of more time to accelerate learning, deepen student engagement, and improve instruction, Kuss has achieved Massachusetts’s highest accountability rating.

has persisted for more than a decade, is perhaps the best way to ensure that our state’s knowledge economy offers opportunity to all.

Massachusetts currently lacks a plan and multi-year funding commitment to significantly expand access to high-quality early learning. While waiting for state guidance, several local communities are prioritizing early education, and would be ready to put new funding to good use. Five communities will benefit from a new federal grant to expand pre-K; however, many more communities would benefit if more funding were available. The Building on What Works proposal empowers communities that are ready to expand early learning, and would yield lessons in implementation that could guide future state policy. Enhancing our current mixed-provider system so that all low-income children get an adequate dose of high-quality learning is a technical challenge. Recognizing the increasingly urgent need to get all of our students performing at the peak of their capabilities, we would be well served to support communities that step forward today with creative plans to build 21st-century early learning systems.

## **Expanding K-12 Learning Time**

Massachusetts students typically spend less than one-fifth of their waking hours in school. To develop the skills today’s economy demands, students require significantly more time in structured learning environments. Families with means are able to get this time for their children by spending increasingly large sums on enrichment activities (nearly three times more than a generation ago). Today, children in the highest income quintile receive the equivalent of nearly six extra months of school, while enrichment spending in the lowest quintile amounts to less than three additional weeks. This disparity helps cement the achievement gap established by unequal access to high-quality early learning.

A long trail of evidence shows that offering expanded learning time is a core feature of high-poverty schools where low-income students perform at the same level as their peers with greater means. Recognizing the promise of this model, Massachusetts has been a leader in expanding learning time. In 2005, the Commonwealth pioneered a first-in-the-nation competitive grant program—the Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time Initiative—and through flexibility and autonomy, it has enabled several traditional district and charter schools to become national models for expanded learning time.

More than 130 schools in Massachusetts now provide expanded learning time. These schools are twice as likely to be high-growth in math and 2.5 times as likely to be high-growth in English Language Arts, as compared to low-income schools with a regular schedule.

Through work with these schools, we have learned how to design impactful high-quality expanded learning time. It is critical that schools redesign and expand their schedules by a significant amount of time (e.g., a minimum of 200 hours per year) for all students in the school. The new time should be balanced between additional time for core academics, enrichment classes, and time for teacher collaboration. Additionally, when redesigning the schedule, schools should work collaboratively and gain buy-in from the entire school community, including the district and school leaders, teachers, union officials, parents, and community organizations.

## Building on What Works: The CORE Districts

CORE is a collaboration among 10 California school districts that are working together to significantly improve student outcomes. Together CORE districts serve more than one million students and families. In 2013, they were the first districts to receive a waiver from No Child Left Behind that enabled them to develop an innovative school accountability system focused on ensuring that all children graduate college and are career ready.

The approach creates infrastructure to support collaboration across schools and districts to build knowledge and share practices. For example, CORE identifies highly successful

schools and pairs them with lower-performing schools to provide coaching and support. Responsibility for school improvement is shared both across and within districts.

The CORE districts are innovating with a next-generation accountability system that more holistically defines success. In addition to academic performance, their school-level accountability system incorporates measures of both social-emotional skills and school culture and climate. CORE piloted social-emotional and culture/climate measures during the 2013-14 and 2014-15 schools years. Their full accountability system will roll out in 2015-16.<sup>9</sup>

In 2014, Massachusetts had 261 schools where more than 50 percent of the students were high-need. Working to help more of these schools successfully convert to expanded learning time schedules would powerfully complement efforts to increase access to high-quality early learning by helping to ensure that low-income students receive fully engaging educational opportunities in grades K through 12.

## Designing Innovative Learning Systems

Preparing students for a rapidly changing global economy creates a fresh set of challenges. And these challenges must be met in an era of constrained resources. To respond accordingly, Massachusetts will need to continually develop creative new approaches for deploying educator talent, technology, and public resources.

“Reform” by mandate from the top down will not lead to the thoughtful implementation needed today. New ideas must be generated, tested, and demonstrated to be replicable by those committed to success. The challenge of creating “schools of the future” capable of continuous improvement requires us to support educators in their efforts to innovate in collaboration with industry and higher education.

For example, the first generation of education technology has made basic content, information, and instruction available to anyone to use anytime and anywhere. The task now is incorporating innovative pedagogies and blended learning approaches rapidly across the state, while developing cutting-edge mechanisms for discerning the most effective ways of implementing these practices at scale. Massachusetts must also work to see that efforts to accelerate the rate of adoption of high-quality innovation leave an imprint on the system by fostering a lasting culture of continuous adaptation and improvement.

The fund proposed by the Building on What Works Coalition would provide the only public source to support the thinking and innovation needed to sustain the high level of performance that Massachusetts citizens have come to expect from their education system. Applicants would be able to propose whatever tools they believe will work best, and connect with allies with whom they do not traditionally interact to support new, promising ideas to improve educational opportunities for students.

## Notes

- 1 There is a robust economic literature predicting and demonstrating the impact of technological change on wage inequality and suggesting that it will likely intensify. Much of this research has been spearheaded by Bay State economists, including MIT professors David Autor and Frank Levy, and Harvard professors Claudia Goldin, Lawrence Katz, and Richard Murnane.
- 2 MassINC's analysis has shown that the number of Massachusetts residents living in neighborhoods with highly concentrated poverty (Census tracts with poverty rates over 40 percent) has nearly tripled since 2000. The concentration of poverty in Gateway City schools is particularly alarming. In 1993, less than half of students in Gateway Cities were low-income; that figure is quickly approaching three-quarters, with the percentage accelerating at a particularly fast pace during the last decade. Over 90 percent of Gateway City students attend high poverty schools.
- 3 For example, see David Jacobson. "Improving the Early Years of Education in Massachusetts: The P-3 Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Project" (Malden, MA: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011).
- 4 Yolanda Kodrzycki and Ana Patricia Muñoz. "Economic Distress and Resurgence in US Central Cities: Concepts, Causes, and Policy Levers" *Policy Brief 13-3* (Boston, MA: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, 2013).
- 5 For example, see Edward Moscovitch. "School Funding Reality: A Bargain Not Kept" (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, 2010).
- 6 The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education defines "high-need" as students who are English language learners, former English language learners, with special needs, or eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.
- 7 For example, see James Heckman and Tim Kautz. "Fostering and Measuring Skills: Interventions that Improve Character and Cognition" *Working Paper 19656* (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2013).
- 8 Adapted from "Achieving the Vision: Priority Actions for a Statewide Education Agenda" (Boston, MA: Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, 2015).
- 9 John Fensterwald. "Eight California districts receive historic NCLB waiver" (Oakland, CA: EdSource, August 6, 2013).
- 10 For more perspective on the competitive need to accelerate innovation, see Michael Barber and Simon Day. "The New Opportunity to Lead" pp. 12-13 (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, 2014).

## ► THE FY 2016 BUDGET AND BEYOND

The Building on What Works Coalition respectfully submits these ideas for legislators hard at work fashioning the FY 2016 budget. With many worthy programs competing for finite resources, the establishment of a competitive fund for community-driven initiatives is a cost-effective opportunity to improve the performance of local education systems in high-need cities and towns, while simultaneously laying critical groundwork for next-generation learning systems.

The Baker administration's budget request included a new "Partnership Schools Network" fund that is consistent in a variety of ways with the framework proposed by the Coalition. The most important difference, however, is the Partnership Schools Network fund is envisioned for targeted intervention in districts with unacceptably low performance. The Coalition believes that rather than designing the approach for the handful of extremely problematic situations, the state's leadership must provide support for communities working collaboratively to serve high-need students. These places stand the best chance of providing models that we can successfully learn from and replicate.

By investing in the Building on What Works proposal, legislators can also affirm the value in a collection of diverse groups from communities across the Commonwealth coming together to help develop smart approaches to take evidence-based education policies to scale. Coalition members aim to be central figures in initiatives supported through this fund in their cities and towns. As a group of connected leaders committed to the approach, they will be able to provide an important voice for effective implementation. They will also be well positioned to help identify and celebrate early successes and provide thoughtful input on how to further this program so that future policy development is complementary to lessons learned.

Above all, the call for the establishment of this fund reflects the urgent need we see to provide greater support to communities working diligently to improve their learning systems. After a flurry of activity in recent years, we simply cannot afford a lull. This sentiment is shared by voters in the cities and towns serving our most disadvantaged students. Recent polling shows that these voters are more likely to perceive improvement in the schools in their communities over the past five years, but they also see considerable room for additional progress and favor more radical change.

For years, Massachusetts has been at the forefront supporting community-driven educational innovation. Our competitors clearly recognize the benefits this has had for our economy, and they are looking to leapfrog ahead with bold initiatives to help all students develop the skills they will need to be college and career ready in the 21st century.<sup>10</sup>

Keeping pace means not missing opportunities to act, for innovation in education is an incremental process of developing and testing new ideas, assessing their results after a period of years, and refining. Every fiscal budget represents a powerful chance to articulate our priorities and aspirations as a Commonwealth. By including the Building on What Works proposal in the FY 2016 budget, legislators can reaffirm the state's commitment to remaining first in the nation in ensuring all residents receive high-quality educational opportunities.