

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

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EDUCATION CAMPAIGN URGES LEGISLATURE TO COME UP WITH \$1.5 BILLION

By Chris Triunfo

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, DEC. 18, 2018.....Students, educators, parents and local leaders with the Fund Our Future coalition on Tuesday gathered at the State House to call on Gov. Charlie Baker and the Legislature to invest \$1.5 billion into Massachusetts' public education system.

The coalition, which was started by the Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance (MEJA) and unanimously supported by the Massachusetts Teachers Association's board, launched its campaign earlier this month, with the goal of passing legislation in 2019 that would increase state funding for public higher education by \$500 million and public prekindergarten through grade 12 schools by \$1 billion.

The campaign comes on the heels of failed attempts from the Legislature to both raise money for education and pass bills designed to fill funding gaps.

When asked whether the coalition has proposed a plan on how to raise the necessary public funds for the reinvestment, MEJA president and executive director of Citizens for Public Schools Lisa Guisbond said that the point of the campaign is to bring attention to underfunding in public schools.

"We're not suggesting any specific way of getting the revenue, obviously the revenue has to be gotten," Guisbond said. "We trust the legislature can figure out how to do that."

Malden Public Schools Superintendent John Oteri and Juan Cofield, president of the New England Area Conference of the NAACP, are among those behind the campaign.



Malden Public Schools Superintendent John Oteri was among the speakers calling for what advocates described as a reinvestment in public education at the State House on Tuesday. [Photo: Chris Triunfo/SHNS]



"Twenty-five years ago, education reform paired new funding for local schools with strict accountability measures. Teachers, students and school districts have responded to those requirements for years, but the state hasn't lived up to its end of the bargain with adequate funding," said Oteri. "We live in a different world than we did 25 years ago, and the challenges our schools deal with have only grown."

Students from the public school system echoed Oteri's sentiments. Timmy Sullivan, a student at UMass Amherst, said that he has seen 19 of his friends drop out of UMass in the last year due to rising costs.

"Right now, our elected officials on Beacon Hill aren't working for us," Sullivan said. "Instead, they're forcing us to go into massive debt just to get the college education we need to participate in this economy, that we need to participate in a healthy democracy and that we deserve because we know that education is a fundamental right for all and not a privilege for the wealthy few."

In 2015, a state commission found that the formula used to determine the amount of state aid a school district receives does not adequately account for costs of health insurance and educating low-income students, English language learners and special education students. The House and Senate this session both agreed on the need to pass legislation to address the problem, but failed to reach common ground on disparate bills that attempted to fund those costs.

Meanwhile, last month, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education recommended its fiscal 2020 budget priorities to Education Secretary James Peyser, saying education aid should be funded "at the highest level possible based on available revenues."

The Fund Our Future coalition hopes to include the funding in the next academic year's budget in order for it to be in time for public college students to avoid tuition and fee hikes in the fall of 2019.

At a Board of Elementary and Secondary Education meeting in Malden Tuesday, Education Commissioner Jeff Riley expressed a need to "stay up on" efforts to address the school funding formula. He pointed to a supplemental budget Gov. Charlie Baker signed in October that included, among other spending items, \$7.5 million for a grant program for mental health services in schools. The bill Baker had originally filed in July funded the same line item at \$40 million.

"I know many people are hopeful this is going to be fixed in this coming session, but I would say after this summer when the supplemental budget was greatly reduced for education, for things like mental health services, that was in a time of abundance," Riley said. "I would just say that we need to be more vigilant and stay on top of that to make sure that that does go forward this spring."

[Katie Lannan contributed reporting]

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12/18/2018

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