



# SHREWSBURY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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**Foundation Budget Review Commission  
Public Hearing of February 28, 2015  
Florence Sawyer School, Bolton, Massachusetts**

**Testimony of Joseph M. Sawyer, Ed.D.  
Superintendent of the Shrewsbury Public Schools**

Madam Chairs Senator Chang-Diaz & Representative Peisch, and Members of the Foundation Budget Review Commission:

My name is Joe Sawyer, and I am the superintendent of the Shrewsbury Public Schools. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today.

Last year, I had the privilege of serving on the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents' School Finance Task Force, and I endorse its findings and recommendations, which have been submitted to you at an earlier hearing. My testimony will illustrate how its findings are supported by my own district's experiences.

Like others around the Commonwealth, for many years my community has coped with a significant opportunity cost problem, where important investments in our instructional program and in maintaining our infrastructure have been deferred because funding has been diverted to areas where there have been explosive cost increases. Even though our school district has consistently been among the lowest 10% in the state for per pupil expenditures, the Foundation Budget is still far below the level of actual need. For example, in Fiscal Year 2014 our actual expenditures in the Foundation Budget categories were more than \$13 million greater than the formula allotted. The reality is that while our district spent millions *less* than the Foundation formula allots in some categories, we spent many millions *more* in other categories. One such area was special education, where out-of-district tuition expenditures alone have grown by almost \$4 million in just four years, a 144% increase, but with only a 14% increase in the number of students being tuitioned out. Additionally, even though our health insurance costs are among the very lowest in the state on a per pupil basis, our community spent almost \$4 million more in this category than the Foundation Budget allotted.

Last year our district spent \$2.4 million more than the Foundation for classroom teachers, yet had an unprecedented class size crisis where the majority of our classes were in the high 20s to low 30s. Fortunately, we are in a much better situation this year due to local funding from our town's first ever operational override. However, sustaining this investment will prove

challenging without adequate state financial support for actual costs. For example, a double digit estimated increase in health insurance premiums for next year is a major factor that is challenging our town to provide enough funding to the School Department to even meet the modest increase estimated to maintain our improved status quo.

Our district has been creative in controlling costs where it can. We estimate that we are saving well over a net of \$2 million per year through in-district programs for high-needs special education students who otherwise would be tuitioned out. These in-district programs are also saving millions in Circuit Breaker costs that the state would be bearing if these students were educated even in the least expensive out-of-district placements. I strongly suggest that any revisions to state funding mechanisms provide a financial incentive for districts to provide such in-district programs, which keep students in their community schools while helping both local and state budgets. Reforms should also address the current reality that when high-cost students in out-of-district placements move to a new community, it can be extremely disruptive to the budget, such as when our district needed to absorb a \$300,000 residential tuition this year when a student moved from out of state. Such uncertainties and surprises exacerbate the opportunity cost problem for local districts. Finally, I suggest that you recommend that a reliable revenue stream be used to fund Chapter 70 and Circuit Breaker support, similar to what the Massachusetts School Building Authority has via the sales tax, so that funding is more predictable and reliable.

I am extremely grateful for the significant investments that Massachusetts has made in public education since the education reform era began in 1993. However, I think it has become painfully apparent that the Foundation Budget formula is no longer performing as intended due to the significant changes that have occurred over the past two decades. This places the state's constitutional mandate to provide an adequate education to its children in question, and I wonder whether a case similar to the McDuffy and Hancock cases could be made today. While there is no question it will take political will and courage, I urge this Commission to make recommendations that will provide the resources that are truly necessary to meet our duty under the Massachusetts Constitution to effectively educate all of the Commonwealth's children. Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak, and thank you for your service in this very important endeavor.