Governor Baker’s budget proposal last week kicked off the first year of the seven-year implementation of the landmark Student Opportunity Act (SOA), and now is the time for AFT Massachusetts members and allies to ensure that the resources won in the SOA go to programs and services that directly benefit students. Read on to learn how the law will affect your community next year, and what you can do to take action at the local level.

The new law commits the state to achieving equitably funded public schools over a seven-year span. Once fully phased in, it will deliver $1.5 billion in additional annual state aid to local public schools, with the bulk of those resources going to the schools with the greatest need: those in low-wealth communities serving high numbers of low-income students.

The SOA does this by changing the state’s antiquated foundation budget formula, which determines how much state school aid—or “Chapter 70 aid”—local communities need to provide students with an adequate education. The law’s changes address all four major recommendations of the Foundation Budget Review Commission, the bipartisan group that studied the funding formula four years ago: more resources for educating students who have disabilities, are English learners, and/or are from low-income families; and adequately funding the rising cost of health insurance for staff and retirees.

The law also:

- Expands the special education circuit breaker program, which reimburses districts for extraordinary special education costs, to include transportation costs in addition to instructional costs, phased in over four years at an estimated annual cost of $90 million;
- Fully funds charter tuition reimbursements, which provide transitional aid to help districts when students leave to attend charter schools, within a three-year timetable; and
- Increases the annual spending cap for Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) projects by $200 million to $800 million.

“The strength of this new law is a testament to the tens of thousands of AFT members, parents, and activists who poured their hearts and souls into this multiyear struggle for equitably funded public schools. It’s a true game-changer for low-income students and their communities,” said AFT Massachusetts President Beth Kontos after the signing of the legislation. “Make no mistake: Our hard work and dedication paid off. The Legislature and governor heard our voices and saw our determination. Consequently, we won a great victory for students, educators, and parents.”

The SOA also requires districts to develop three-year plans outlining how new funds will be spent to address educational disparities. The plans are to be developed by the superintendent, who must consider input and recommendations from parents, educators in the district, and other relevant community stakeholders. The plans must then be reviewed by the state commissioner of education, who can require districts to amend any plans “deemed not to conform with the requirements” in the bill that spell out what the plans must include.

Understanding Next Year’s Budget

Last week, Governor Baker released his FY 2021 budget proposal (for the period from July 2020-June 2021), the first annual state budget to contain money promised in the SOA. It includes $355 million in new state K-12 spending, including $303.5 million in increased funding for Chapter 70 education aid, as well as $23.2 million for additional charter school tuition reimbursement and $17.3 million in additional support for special education circuit breaker reimbursement for cities and towns.

In this budget, the governor used a different approach for calculating the Chapter 70 aid annual increase than his administration had originally used in projecting the impact of the SOA. As a result of this change, some districts are receiving different amounts under this budget plan in FY21 than these projections originally estimated. However, by FY27, all districts should get the total amount to which they are entitled — as long as the Legislature and governor fulfill their commitment to fully funding the SOA.

In addition to increased Chapter 70 funds, many districts will benefit from two other changes included in the SOA: adding transportation costs to the special education circuit breaker and increasing that allocation, and increasing...
charter school reimbursements. Go HERE for ‘cherry sheet’ information that provides more details on the amount of money that the City of Pittsfield will receive for their schools under the governor’s budget.

The next step in the budget process is for the state House of Representatives to release their version of the budget in April, followed by the state Senate in May. Any differences must then be worked out before a final budget goes to the Governor for his review and signature, most likely in June.

The Need for Local Advocacy

As the FY2021 budget is finalized at the state level, educators and community members need to organize to influence their local school budgets to ensure that the new state aid is used in ways to benefit students.

“We were happy to see that the bill requires district plans to consider input from parents and educators — something we fought for,” said AFT Massachusetts President Beth Kontos after the signing of the SOA. “We will need to remain vigilant and engaged during implementation to ensure that parent and educator voices are respected, and to make sure that new funds are spent on the correct priorities — direct supports and services for students.”

Local union members can reach out to fellow members and parents through 10-minute meetings, local union meetings, community forums, and other outlets to build a consensus about how money should best be spent in schools.

These meetings and forums can be designed around the question: What would/should a fully funded school look like? Based on the discussion, stakeholders can create a document with their priorities, and then take that document to the superintendent and school committee for endorsement. This can influence the plan that superintendents are supposed to submit to the state, as they are mandated to include parent and educator feedback.

Local union members and stakeholders can also ask their city council or town meeting to endorse the plan, and/or ask their mayor to pass the best possible budget for their schools.

Local union leaders are encouraged to contact AFT Massachusetts for assistance with strategies for ensuring that SOA resources are deployed wisely and effectively.