



**Testimony before the Massachusetts General Court
Joint Committee on Education
Public Hearing on Bills Pertaining to School Finance I
North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce
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Friday, March 22, 2019

Good morning everyone. My name is Christopher McDermott and I serve as the public affairs manager for the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce. We are a regional business organization that represents roughly 1000 employers across 17 communities along New Hampshire's border. We would like to commend Governor Baker and the legislature for tackling education reform. We believe there is no issue more critical to our Commonwealth and its future. The quality and accessibility of public education is vital to the health and prosperity of our state and regional economy.

We hear repeatedly from our employers that finding, training, and retaining qualified and skilled workers is among their top challenges. The problem is even more acute for our employers in the manufacturing industry. This is a particularly important sector for North Central Massachusetts as it represents the state's industrial hub. Over 440 advanced manufacturers call the region home, while one in every four jobs and a third of all wages in the region relate directly to the sector. Manufacturers today have some of the most well-paid, highly trained, and in demand employees in the workforce, operating advanced equipment and technology. Unfortunately, the industry is challenged with an aging workforce and negative false perceptions of what careers within it entail.

A report by the North Central Workforce Board found that 32% of the region's existing manufacturing labor pool was over the age of 55. Moreover, the results of a survey conducted by Deloitte and the Manufacturing Institute found that 18 to 24 year olds rank manufacturing dead last among industries in which they would choose to start a career. This, despite the fact that careers in this vital industry are engaging, have room for professional growth, and

provide an average wage of nearly \$80,000 a year! With these challenges in mind, the Chamber convened a taskforce of employers and educators and worked to identify solutions. The result was *Build North Central*, a report released earlier this year with recommendations for school systems and policy makers alike. As you proceed with discussions on how to best improve our schools and support our students, we would like to respectfully present several recommendations from our report for your consideration.

School Funding: First, much of the discussion so far has focused on providing additional funding - of up to and over \$2 billion - and adjusting the formula that the state uses to support school systems. It has been twenty-six years since the formula was first developed, so we agree that it is time to explore reforms and look to new investments in our schools. However, we believe that any new funding should be accompanied by meaningful reforms

which increase focus on career readiness and provide greater support for underachieving school systems. Meaningful reforms should be a condition to providing additional funding.

College and Career Readiness: Second, reforms should encourage an emphasis on creating career pathways in the schools and promote both college and career routes. Currently, high school success rates are measured heavily by college admissions, leading to curriculums that promote college preparation over other options, such as vocational training. State leaders should look at reforms that will better align school success with workforce needs. Partnerships with schools and employers should be incentivized by the state to ensure alignment with the students' career interests and the skills necessary to succeed in the workplace.

Expand Experiential Learning: We are staunch proponents of work-based learning which, provided alongside rigorous college-level coursework, has proven to be effective in preparing students for success academically and in the workforce. Programs such as internships, co-ops, apprenticeships strengthen the educational experience, help our schools engage local employers, and provide meaningful introductions to career opportunities. As you look at education reform, we encourage you to look for ways to expand work based learning in the schools, granting every high school student access to some type of experiential learning prior to graduation. The taskforce also recommends that career introduction programs be offered in the middle school to allow exploration of potential career opportunities before they and their parents begin discussing high-school coursework.

Expand Access to Vocational Technical Education: Vocational Technical schools in our state serve as models of how to best integrate academics with career preparation. Employers value the high caliber graduates coming out of these increasingly premier institutions, who leave prepared for both college and the workforce. This, in turn, has greatly increased competition for class space, leading to long wait-lists among those seeking admission. Reforms should include increased access to high-quality vocational education, achieved through expanding our technical schools; introducing vocational-technical elements into our conventional schools; and supporting partnerships between our high schools and our community colleges to fill the gap.

High-School Credentialing: Industry-recognized credentials are often used by employers to certify that an applicant has the appropriate level of skills to qualify for a particular job. We encourage the state to look for ways to encourage school systems to introduce high-school credentialing courses that are linked to the demands in the labor market. Students who earn industry certifications, which are often "stackable", are then better prepared to find high-demand, high paying jobs directly out of high school or to continue their education in a chosen career.

Standardized Metrics and Credentialing: School systems, educators, and employers should collaborate to establish common metrics, standards, and credentialing certificates. This maximizes their value to students, as the broad implementation of a set of standards will ultimately increase the number of employers exposed to and familiar with them. This benefits employers as well, likewise expanding the pool of potential employees with verified abilities from which to draw.

Basic Work Readiness Education: Finally, today's employers value more than just technical skills and academic knowledge. They want employees that have the important soft skills to succeed in today's economy, including punctuality, a strong work ethic, the ability to work both individually and in a team, communication skills and a friendly and cooperative attitude. We would encourage consideration of incorporating basic work readiness into the schools to ensure that students understand the basic expectations that any employer will have and better prepare them for long term success.

We appreciate your consideration of our views on this important issue. As you debate the school funding formula, we ask that you keep our recommendations in mind and act to

implement education reforms that prepare our youth to succeed and our state to excel in today's competitive environment.