

Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District could see budgetary relief

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WILBRAHAM – There could be some budgetary relief in sight for the Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District (HWRSD).

The proposed state budget for fiscal year 2015 (FY15) recently approved by the state House of Representatives and Senate would offer, among other local support for education, a significant increase in regional transportation reimbursement compared with the district's estimates earlier this year, according to state Rep. Angelo Puppolo Jr.

"I am particularly pleased that we continued our strong focus on local aid, and the significant investment in [Chapter 70 school funding](#). Additionally, the full funding of the [Special Education Circuit Breaker](#), and the major increase in funding for school transportation to a 90 percent reimbursement rate, is very important for the [Hampden Wilbraham Regional School System](#), and I was pleased to successfully advocate for this key funding increase for our communities," he said.

HWRSD initially estimated a 58 percent reimbursement rate, or slightly more than \$1.1 million, in the proposed budget presented in March, a decrease of nearly \$63,000 from FY14. It increased that estimate to 66 percent in a budget update delivered in April, based on the House Committee on Ways and Means' recommendations.

Puppolo added that the special education Circuit Breaker, which was previously funded at 68 percent, is now fully funded.

Chapter 70 aid for the district would equal \$11.4 million. According to the district's budget, that represents an increase of \$81,300 or 0.72 percent.

HWRSD Superintendent M. Martin O'Shea said he was aware of the proposed budget, but declined to comment due to the fact that Patrick had yet to give the \$36.5 budget his final approval as of press time. Once the budget is ratified, the district's leadership team will review exactly what impact the additional funding would have.

HWRSD was forced to make a number of staffing cuts for the 2014-2015 school year, including teachers, and [raised tuition for the preschool program](#) in response to a budget deficit that O'Shea said was due in part to a lack of local aid.

Regional transportation funding has been one of the major concerns facing the district for years. According to the Code of Massachusetts Regulations, regional school districts that qualify – HWRSD does – should receive full reimbursement for costs related to providing students living in the district at least 1.5 miles away transportation to and from school once daily, as well as special transportation for students with special needs or enrolled in vocational schools in another district.

In spite of this directive, regional transportation has not been fully reimbursed.

The 90 percent reimbursement rate would be the highest for the state since FY08 when it was 89.9 percent and the district received \$1.8 million, according to state records. The following year, that rate dipped to 65.5 percent and continued to drop in FY10 – 57.8 percent – and FY11 – 57.6 percent.

Reimbursement funding rebounded a bit in FY12 and FY13 with a rate of 60.5 percent, a total of \$997,573 of \$1.7 million spent in FY12 and of \$1.1 million of \$1.8 million in FY13.

For FY14, the district was estimated to receive approximately \$1.2 million in reimbursement, according the FY15 HWRSD budget proposal.

