

## [Two local school advocates tapped to lead state's new Small and Rural Schools Committee](#)

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As rural schools and their challenges continue to become a more prominent topic at the state level, two local champions of Franklin County's schools have been tapped to serve as co-chairs of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees' (MASC) new Small and Rural Schools Committee.

Martha Thurber, chair of the Mohawk Trail Regional School District School Committee, and Sunderland Elementary School Committee Chair Jessica Corwin will head the new board, which will examine the challenges rural schools are facing and help guide the MASC's legislative priorities. The nascent committee will hold its first meeting on May 2, which will allow its members to draft a mission statement and prepare for MASC's annual Day on the Hill advocacy event at the State House on May 6.

The 24-member board, with representatives hailing from the Berkshires to Cape Cod, convenes as the MASC's official legislative priorities now include pushing for \$60 million in funding for rural school districts and full funding of regional transportation, which were two of the key points in 2022's "A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools" report from the state's Special Commission on Rural School Districts.

"We may have issues in western Mass. that I think are shared across western Mass., but it may be that in central Mass. and the Cape they have similar or, in some cases, differently defined or presented issues," Thurber said during a Zoom interview. "It's good to get rural schools in all parts of the state, and bring everybody together and focus everybody on the goals, which are the recommendations from the [Special Commission on Rural School Districts]." Thurber said the MASC has started taking a deeper look at rural school districts and has endorsed bills filed by state Rep. Natalie Blais, D-Deerfield, and Sen. Jo Comerford, D-Northampton, that would have codified a \$60 million line item for rural school aid and reimbursed transportation costs, among other recommendations laid out in the special commission's report.

After being sent to the Joint Committee on Education and merging into H.4425, the bill would no longer fund the \$60 million in rural school aid, but it retained provisions related to health insurance review and special education funding.

The creation of the Small and Rural Schools Committee is the first new committee created by the MASC in about a decade, according to Corwin. "Just the existence of that committee is a statement," said Corwin, who is also an adaptive music education instructor in Springfield. "I think establishing this new committee is a direct response to what happened with the Joint Committee on Education."

"We've been lobbying the Legislature as western Mass. on rural aid for a while. Until last year, it never really was an expressed priority for MASC," Thurber added. "[MASC] came out strongly in

support of the bill. ... In my mind, that was a huge step because they represent school districts across the commonwealth.”

Corwin added that 18 of the highest residential property tax rates in the state belong to towns receiving rural school aid, which was budgeted at \$15 million this year, and action is sorely needed, as towns often must choose between funding schools or their public safety departments and infrastructure.

“Rural towns have already compromised in every possible direction,” Corwin said. “There’s nowhere else to go.”

Once the committee is on its feet and the MASC holds its Day on the Hill event, Thurber and Corwin said the top priority is advocating for the codification of a rural school line item in the budget, because it is currently an annual appropriation and districts never know how much money could be allocated each year.

“That’s agenda item and priority No. 1,” Thurber said. “As we’re budgeting, we usually don’t budget at all for rural aid. ... Just bringing some uniformity and consistency to that would be helpful.”

As Corwin and Thurber continue their work, they are also collaborating with local stakeholders to advance the discussion around the county and the state. In conjunction with Deerfield Selectboard Chair Carolyn Shores Ness and Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont regional school districts Superintendent Sheryl Stanton, the group has launched [ruralschoolsma.org](http://ruralschoolsma.org), where they provide news on rural schools advocacy and legislative updates.

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