



District Financial Planning for Chelmsford Public Schools

Prepared by District Management Group

September 18th, 2026

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	3
1a. Executive Summary	3
1b. Methodology	5
2. Historical Analysis of Outcomes, Budgeting Practices, and Evolution of Student Needs	7
2a. Chelmsford delivers academic outcomes in the top 15% of Massachusetts districts while spending in the lowest 15% of districts	7
2b. CPS has a strategic, systematic approach to budgeting and resource management, which has enabled the district to weather fierce economic conditions	12
2c. CPS is meeting the evolving needs of students and families	22
2d. District Investments	29
3.	38
3a. Strengths	35
3b. Opportunities	35
3c. Weaknesses	36
3d. Threats	36
4. Recommendations for Chelmsford Public Schools	36
Recommendation 1	37
Recommendation 2	37
Recommendation 3	37
Recommendation 4	37
5. Conclusion	38
6. Appendices	39
6a. Appendix A – CPS Financial Planning Data Request	39
6b. Appendix B – Massachusetts Department of Education (DESE) Cost Categories	40
6c. Appendix C – Academic Return-on-Investment Materials	42

1. Introduction

In the Summer of 2026, Chelmsford Public Schools (CPS) partnered with District Management Group (DMG) to conduct a comprehensive review of its historical annual appropriated budget. Given that CPS is committed to maintaining high educational standards while being fiscally responsible, the review included an evaluation of the effectiveness of past budgets as well as recommendations for the district to continue to align spending and operations for a successful, sustainable future.

This work included assessing the impact of historical budgets, engaging select district leaders and stakeholders, finalizing a report, and presenting findings to school committee members.

This report outlines the findings from DMG's review of the financial landscape of Chelmsford Public Schools. The findings are broken down into three major sections:

- Historical Analysis of Outcomes, Budgeting Practices, and Evolution of Student Needs
- Chelmsford Public Schools SWOT Analysis for Resource Management
- Recommendations for Chelmsford Public Schools

Overall, this report aims to provide the district with specific recommendations to continue to optimize community resources while maximizing educational outcomes for students.

1a. Executive Summary

This report presents a comprehensive financial analysis of the Chelmsford Public Schools (CPS), conducted by District Management Group (DMG) to assess the impact of historical budgets and position the district for continued success and long-term sustainability.

The historical analysis reveals that CPS has consistently delivered strong academic outcomes, performing in the top 15% of Massachusetts school districts, while spending in the bottom 15% of districts. CPS students outperform their statewide peers in MCAS scores across grades 3-8 and 10, and students also demonstrate strong college matriculation and graduation rates. This success has been achieved while CPS spends 13% less per pupil than other Merrimack Valley districts and 20% less per pupil than the Massachusetts state average.

The district is strategic and efficient in its budgeting and spending, leveraging cost effective approaches to staffing without sacrificing quality for students. Through its strategic approach to budgeting, the district has also been able to invest in key programs such as in-district special education services and pathways for secondary students that support the evolving needs of students. These investments have already yielded strong results for the district while limiting growth in expenditures.

Despite this cost-effectiveness, education costs have been increasing dramatically, and CPS facilities are aging. The district must consider balancing being frugal and investing in its public education system to shore up the district for the next 10 years and beyond.

To address the identified risks and ensure continued excellence, this report offers four strategic recommendations that build on current strengths and address opportunities:

- **Continue proactively budgeting and strategically investing resources:** Continue to evaluate staffing levels, invest strategically to avoid large future costs, and maintain discipline around vendor negotiation and centralized purchasing.
- **Monitor high-growth cost areas:** Monitor high-growth cost areas and develop or refine plans to mitigate cost increases while simultaneously improving offerings for students.
- **Invest in maintaining or replacing aging facilities:** Continue to fund proactive capital maintenance using end-of-year surpluses and confirm a district facilities strategy.
- **Continue to assess outcomes relative to investments:** Continue to evaluate programs against outcome data, track progress on persistent achievement gaps, and adjust programming based on assessment insights.

Chelmsford Public Schools has a strong track record of delivering excellent academic results with efficient resource management. However, to maintain this success in the face of evolving funding landscapes and increasing student needs, the district should strategically address risks and consider the recommendations outlined in this report. This work will require a continued partnership between district leadership, town leadership, and the Chelmsford community to ensure long-term stability and excellence of CPS.

1b. Methodology

Over the past four months, DMG collected and analyzed extensive data and research from multiple sources to assess the impact of historical budgets and help position the district for continued success and long-term sustainability.

Quantitative Data Analysis

DMG collected and analyzed financial data over the last 10 years from the district. Sources included:

- Financial / budgetary data including line-item annual budgets, grant funds, demographic/enrollment projections, and labor contracts
- Strategic documents including the district strategic plan, district budget policy documents, and capital expenditure projects
- Staffing data by position, including salary, benefits, and funding source
- Student enrollment data by school name, grade level, demographics, and special populations (e.g., ELL)

DMG also reviewed publicly available student outcome and achievement data as well as other relevant documents. A full summary of data sources can be found in Appendix A.

Benchmarking Analysis

DMG conducted a benchmarking analysis using sixteen (16) other districts in the Merrimack Valley region (excluding Lawrence and Lowell given their relative size and distinct urban characteristics).

Comparison districts include:

- | | | |
|--------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| • Amesbury | • Georgetown | • Tewksbury |
| • Andover | • Haverhill | • Tyngsborough |
| • Billerica | • Methuen | • Westford |
| • Boxford | • Newburyport | • Wilmington |
| • Dracut | • North Andover | |
| • Groton-Dunstable | • Pentucket | |

DMG also corroborated findings from the benchmarking analysis with prevailing regional and national trends in educational services and finance. Public education in the United States is experiencing turbulence due to a variety of factors (e.g., post-COVID realities, innovations in technology, economic pressures, political forces, etc.), and while the results of this benchmarking analysis are useful to guide CPS planning efforts, it will be essential that CPS district and community leadership remain flexible when adapting to the evolving needs of students and the community.

Engagement of Select Leaders and Stakeholders

Throughout this process, DMG engaged select leaders and stakeholders to better understand Chelmsford's spending and to gather insights into district priorities. DMG conducted focus groups with school building and central office administrators as well as individual interviews with central office leadership and CPS School Committee members. Additionally, DMG collaborated closely with the district's Superintendent and Director of Business & Finance to ensure district specific context was incorporated into findings.

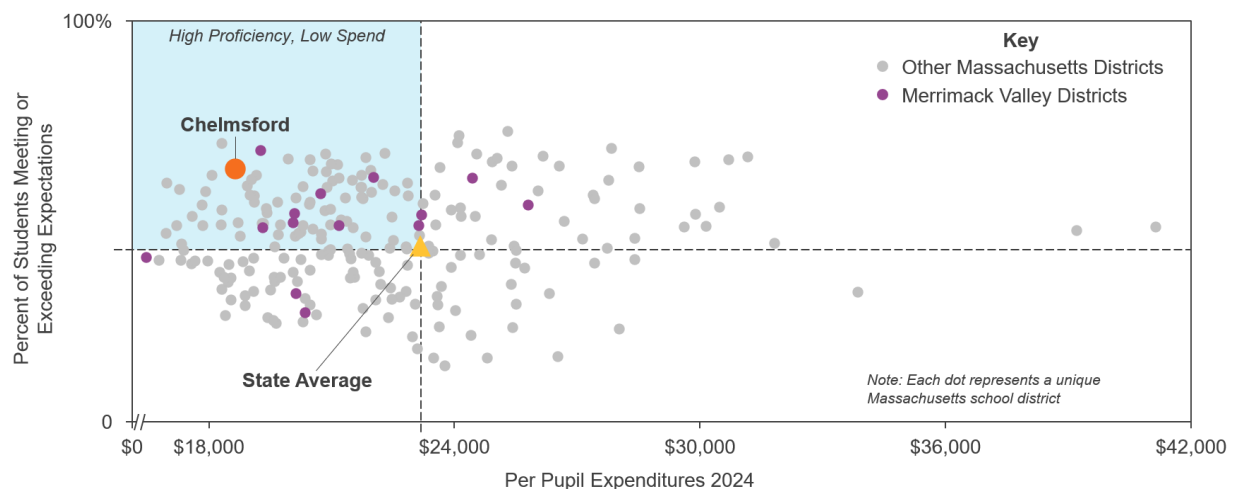
This report is the result of a comprehensive quantitative analysis of financial and strategic documentation, combined with stakeholder engagement and additional research.

2. Historical Analysis of Outcomes, Budgeting Practices, and Evolution of Student Needs

Chelmsford Public Schools has delivered strong academic outcomes for its students, performing in the top 15% of school districts in Massachusetts, while spending in the bottom 15% of districts. By strategically budgeting and investing, Chelmsford's leaders and educators have positioned themselves as strong stewards of town resources.

Despite having a much lower per pupil expenditure than the state average (\$18,641 per pupil in Chelmsford vs. \$23,159 per pupil across the state) and the vast majority of Massachusetts districts, 10th-grade English Language Arts (ELA) MCAS results indicate that Chelmsford academically outperforms not only the state but the majority of all state districts (Figure 1) with 82% of 10th graders meeting or exceeding expectations vs. 57% on average in the state.

Figure 1. 2024 10th Grade ELA MCAS Results compared with 2024 Per Pupil Expenditures (2023 – 2024)



Source: Data pulled from Massachusetts DESE; Chart generated by DMG

2a. Chelmsford delivers academic outcomes in the top 15% of Massachusetts districts while spending in the lowest 15% of districts

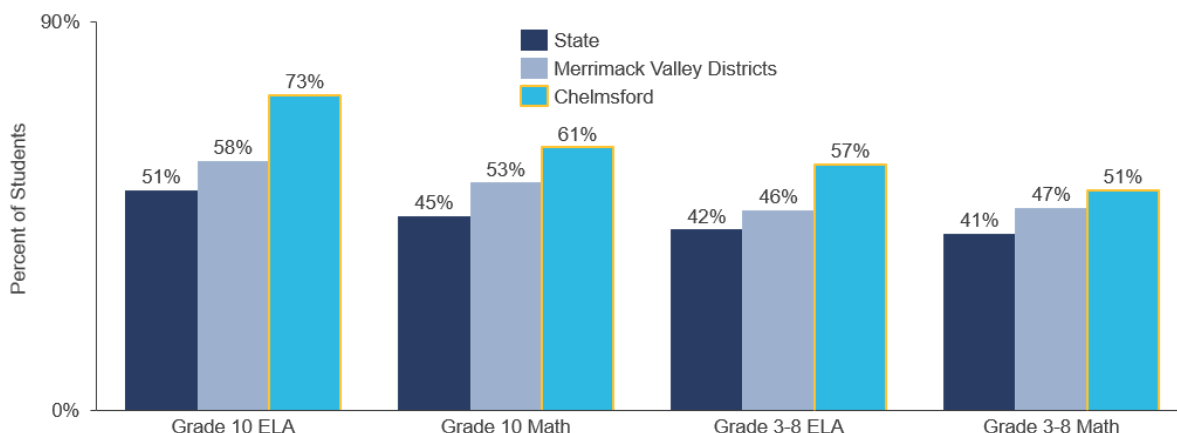
Chelmsford Public Schools consistently outperforms the state average and other Merrimack Valley districts across a wide range of academic indicators, even as the needs of its student population have grown more complex.

Strong MCAS Performance

Using the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) as one measure of success, CPS students in grade 10 outperform statewide peers by 16 and 22 percentage points, in ELA and Math, respectively, and outperform Merrimack Valley

districts by 8 and 16 percentage points, in ELA and Math, respectively. Students in grades 3-8 in CPS outperform their statewide peers by 10 percentage points in Math and 15 percentage points in ELA and outperform students in Merrimack Valley districts at a slightly lower margin (4-10 percentage points) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. MCAS Results for CPS Students who are Meeting or Exceeding Expectations compared to the State and Merrimack Valley Districts (SY2023 – 2024)



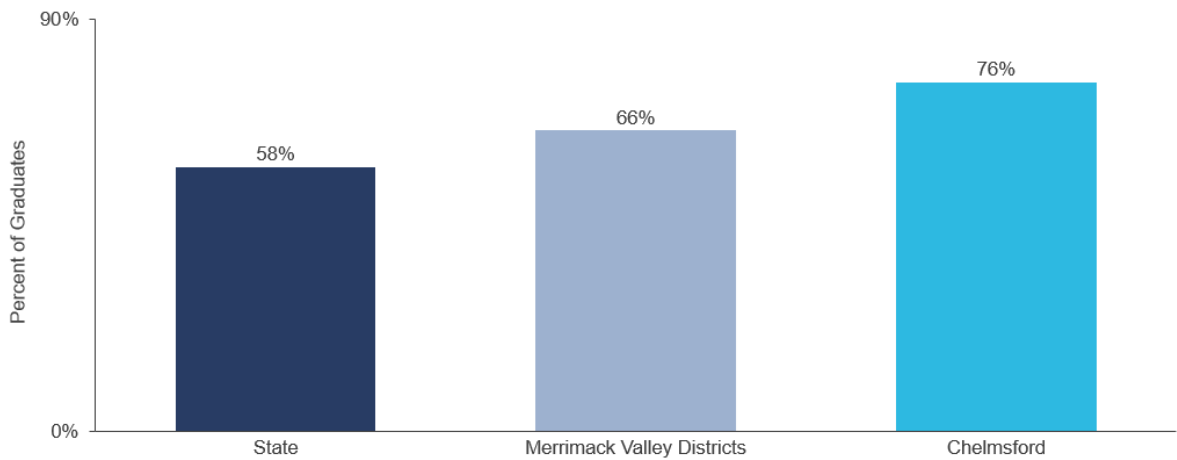
Source: Massachusetts DESE

CPS's Student Growth Percentile (SGP) in grades 3-8 is 54 in ELA and 48 in Math, on par with the state median, meaning students are achieving at higher levels while growing at comparable rates. SGP measures a student's academic progress by comparing their current test scores to those of "academic peers" (students statewide who started with the exact same test score history). Scores range from 1 to 99, where a score of 50 indicates median growth in the state. Districts report median SGP scores. Similarly, in grade 10, the district's SGP is 54 and 53 in ELA and Math, respectively.

Outstanding College Matriculation

CPS also outperforms the state and Merrimack Valley districts on graduation rates and college matriculation, which are key indicators of post-secondary success for students. 96% of CPS students graduate in 4 and 5 years in 2025 compared to 89% at the state level (Figure 3). 76% of CPS graduates enroll in college or university (2- and 4-year programs), compared to 58% statewide. An additional 9% of students plan to attend college and 10% of students start work, trade school, apprenticeships, or join the military.

Figure 3. College Matriculation Rates for CPS Students compared to the State and Merrimack Valley Districts (SY2024 – 2025)



Source: Massachusetts DESE

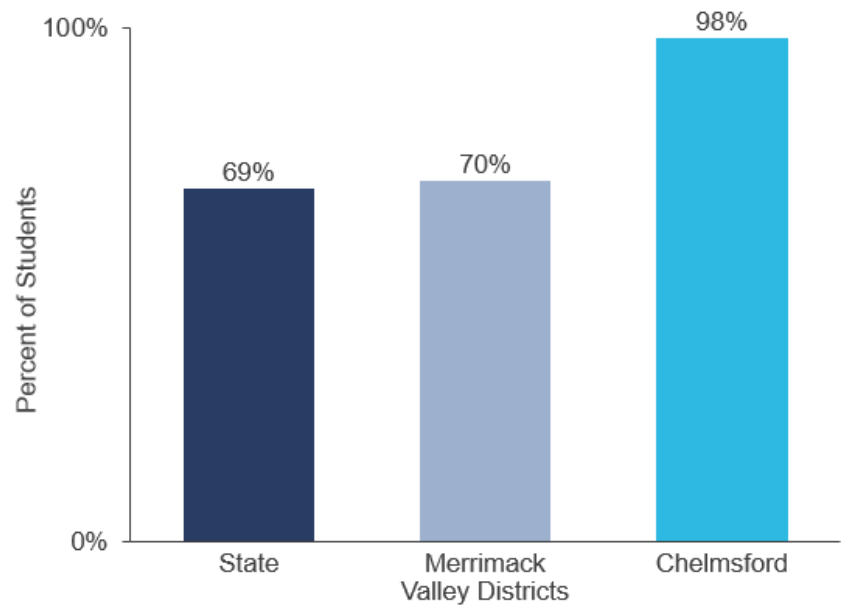
Availability of Advanced Coursework

Chelmsford provides students with the options and support to pursue rigorous coursework that interests them. Almost all CPS 11th and 12th grade students (98%) complete advanced coursework (Figure 4). DESE specifies a variety of academic opportunities as rigorous coursework, including but not limited to AP courses, honors courses, concurrent enrollment courses, and courses deemed sufficiently advanced such as some advanced math and science classes. 87% of AP tests taken at CPS score passing grades (3 to 5 out of 5) on Advanced Placement (AP) exams (Figure 5). Chelmsford outperforms other Merrimack Valley districts and the state average, where only 69%-70% of students complete advanced coursework and 76%-80% of AP exams are passed.

Students can enroll at Middlesex Community College or attend Nashoba Valley Technical High School, which provides expanded academic and vocational opportunities that prepare students for college and careers. In school year 2025-2026, 152 students took concurrent enrollment courses at Middlesex Community College, of which, 105 students took more than one course. 216 Chelmsford students were enrolled at Nashoba Valley Technical High School in the 2025-2026 school year, making up ~28% of the school's enrollment. Concurrent enrollment is associated with positive outcomes for students including higher college enrollment rates, attendance, and college degree attainment¹.

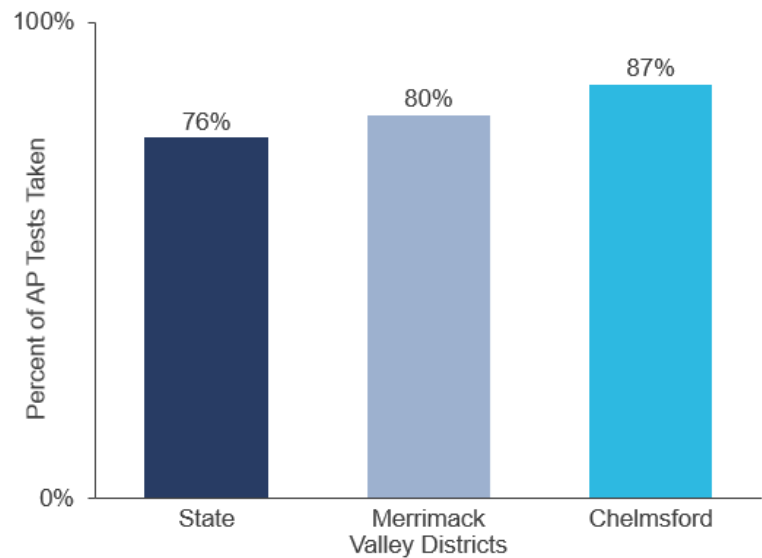
¹ Schaller, T. K., Routon, P. W., & Berry, R. (2025). A systematic review and meta-analysis of dual enrollment research. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 27(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251231170331>

Figure 4. CPS Students Completing Advanced Coursework compared to the State and Merrimack Valley Districts (SY2024 – 2025)



Source: Massachusetts DESE

Figure 5. CPS Students Scoring 3-5 on Advanced Placement Exams compared to the State and Merrimack Valley Districts (SY2024-2025)



Source: Massachusetts DESE

Henneberger, A. K., Witzen, H., & Preston, A. M. (2018). *Dual enrollment in Maryland: What are the causal effects on college and workforce outcomes and do effects differ by student subgroup?* Baltimore, MD: Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center.

Breadth of Extracurriculars

MCAS scores, college matriculation, and advanced coursework completion are just a few indicators of student success. Beyond traditional academics, CPS offers a wide range of extracurricular activities to encourage students to be well rounded.

The district's highly competitive music program includes a comprehensive offering of vocal and instrumental opportunities across grade levels, engaging students in classroom music, performance ensembles, composition and music technology. In 2026, CPS earned NAMM Foundation's recognition as one of the top 1,000 national Best Communities for Music Education (BCME) for the 14th consecutive year.

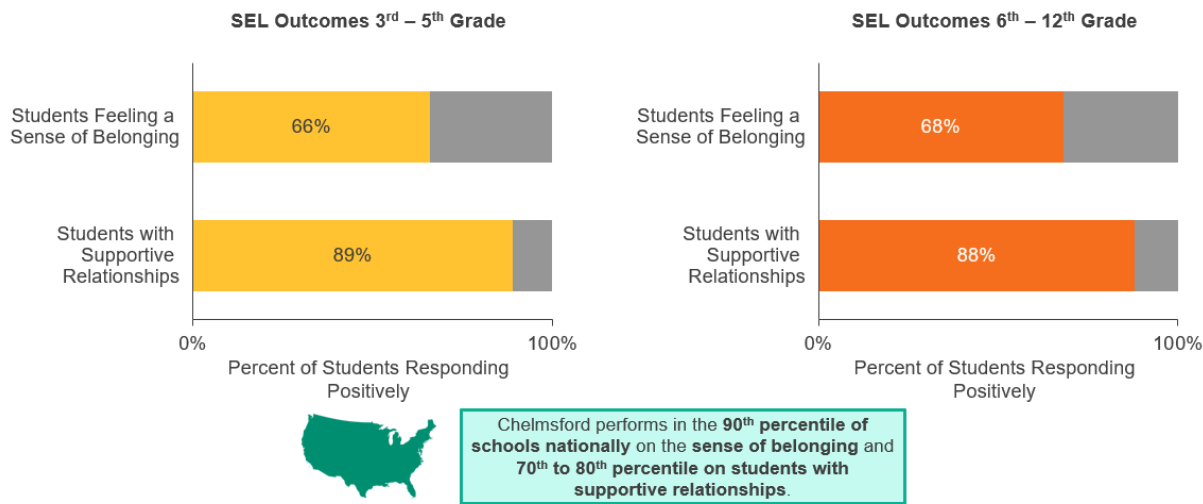
Chelmsford High School's prestigious theater guild frequently wins TAMY awards from the Mount Wachusett Community College's Theatre at the Mount, which recognizes exceptional accomplishments in the production and performance of musical theatre in area high schools.

Students also have opportunities to engage in visual arts, clubs, and 32 different varsity sports. Chelmsford consistently has strong sports teams and recently won the Massachusetts Division 1 Baseball State Championship in 2025. Over 1 in 3 students at Chelmsford High School participate in performing arts, or another extracurricular and over 1 in 2 participate in sports.

Social Emotional Wellbeing

CPS has also made it a priority to foster a positive and inclusive climate in its schools. The vast majority of CPS students (88-89%) report having positive relationships with staff. Over two-thirds of students (66-68%) report feeling a sense of belonging, a figure that has grown significantly among 6th-12th grade students, rising from 53% in 2023 to 68% in 2026. According to Panorama, Chelmsford performs in the 90th percentile of schools nationally on the sense of belonging and 70th and 80th percentile on students with supportive relationships in grades 6-12 and 3-5, respectively. Across Massachusetts and the United States, social emotional wellbeing for students continues to be an area of concern. The outcomes in CPS reflect the district's investment in SEL staff and resources and align with research showing that belonging and supportive relationships are key drivers of student engagement and achievement.

Figure 6. CPS Students Feeling a Sense of Belonging and Supportive Relationships (2026)



Source: Chelmsford Public Schools

This history of strong holistic performance for CPS students, from MCAS scores to course rigor to extracurriculars, suggests a consistent and intentional effort on the part of the district to ensure that students have access to rigorous instruction, high-quality educators and support staff, and the resources (materials, technology, and additional supports) required to continuously perform at the highest levels.

2b. CPS has a strategic, systematic approach to budgeting and resource management, which has enabled the district to weather fierce economic conditions

Statewide Budget Struggles Compared to CPS Discipline

Across Massachusetts, nearly 1 in 3 municipalities have faced school or general operating budget override votes in the last 10 years, reflecting widespread district-level financial strain.

Over the past two years, many districts around Massachusetts have faced major public budget cuts including the following communities:

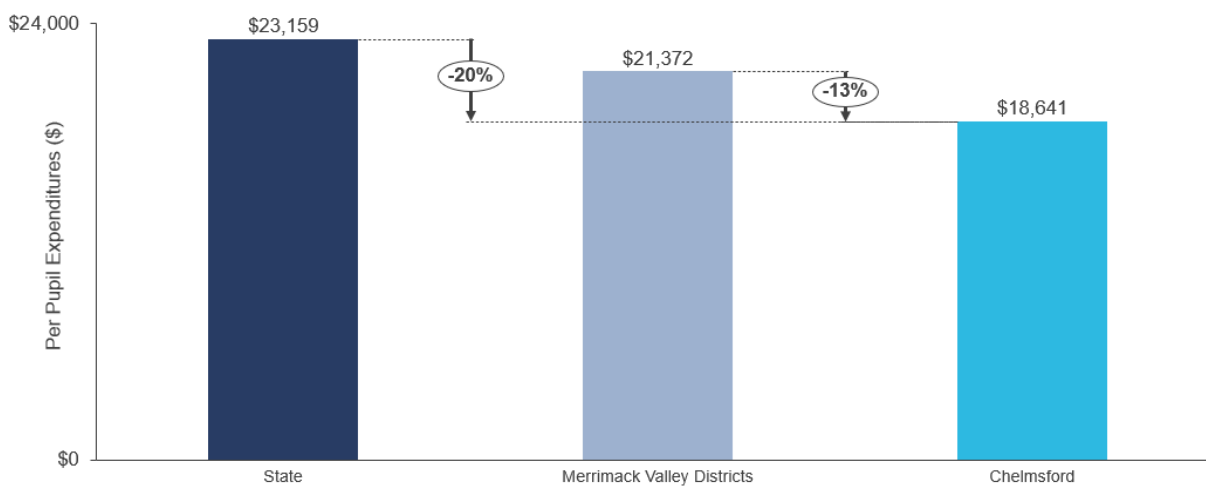
- **Boston Public Schools:** planning 300-400 staff cuts for FY2026; had already eliminated ~400 FTE positions in FY2025
- **Braintree:** \$4M shortfall, ~40 staff laid off (5% of workforce) for FY2025, partially mitigated by a successful \$8M override
- **Chelsea:** ~70 positions proposed for elimination
- **Georgetown:** cut 26 positions after a \$3M override failed in 2024
- **Hanover:** eliminated 36 positions (10% of workforce) after a \$6M override failed in 2024
- **Lexington:** facing major cuts and layoffs of 65 teachers, classroom aides, and other staff positions to plug a \$4.7 million shortfall in next year's proposed budget
- **Melrose:** laid off 13 full-time employees and cut 26 vacant positions in 2024
- **Salem:** ~50 staff members let go for FY2025
- **Worcester:** cut ~200 positions (~3% of its workforce) heading into FY2025

In contrast, CPS has contained its budget growth to ~3.7% p.a. (per annum, yearly rate) over the past 10 years, ranging from 1.1% to 5.4% increases, without an override, supporting healthy staffing levels, new education initiatives, and facility upkeep. CPS's growth in spending has been driven by increases in funding due to student need, town population growth, and tax increases in line with Proposition 2 ½. CPS has been able to achieve its controlled budget growth through disciplined budgeting, efficient spending, and strategic investments.

CPS Spends Less Than Other Merrimack Valley Districts

While delivering stronger results for students, CPS has demonstrated that its spending is far more efficient than its peers in the Merrimack Valley. CPS spends \$18,641 per pupil, compared to \$21,529 among Merrimack Valley districts and \$23,159 on average in Massachusetts, putting the district in the bottom 15% of spenders in the state (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Total Per Pupil Expenditures in CPS Compared to the State and Merrimack Valley Districts (FY2024)

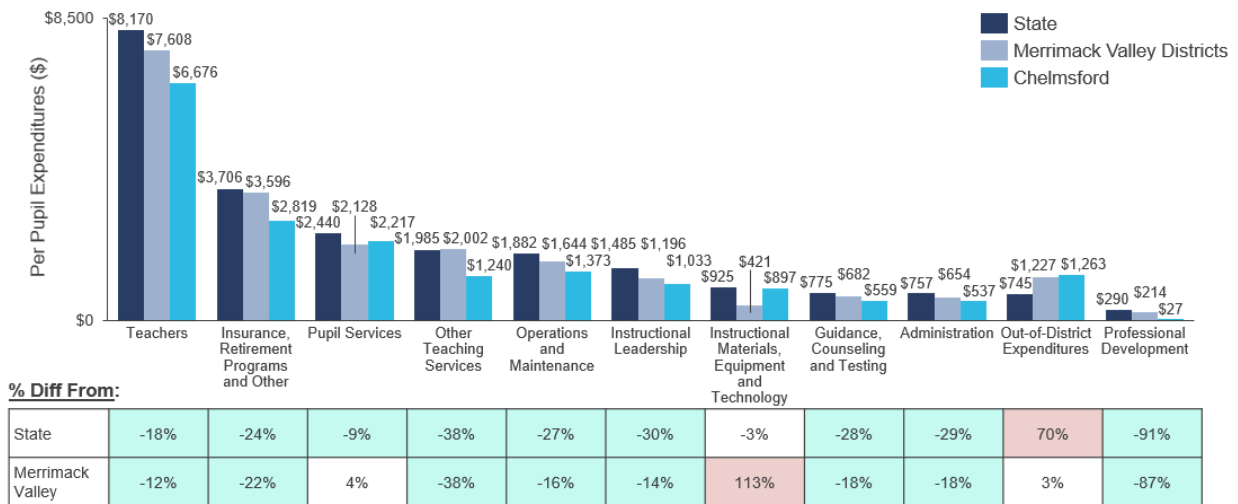


Source: Massachusetts DESE Resource Allocation and District Action Reports (RADAR)

Note: DESE creates consistency in its expenditure comparisons across the state by ensuring that reporting of in-district expenditures does not solely include local town spending, but is inclusive of all funding sources, including student fees, competitive grants, and fundraising. This approach allows for a reliable comparison of resourcing between communities.

Figure 8 details the portion of per pupil expenditure, a proxy for the school district budget, that goes towards each expenditure category. For example, of the \$18,641 that CPS spends per student, \$6,676 of that amount (~36%) goes towards teacher salaries.

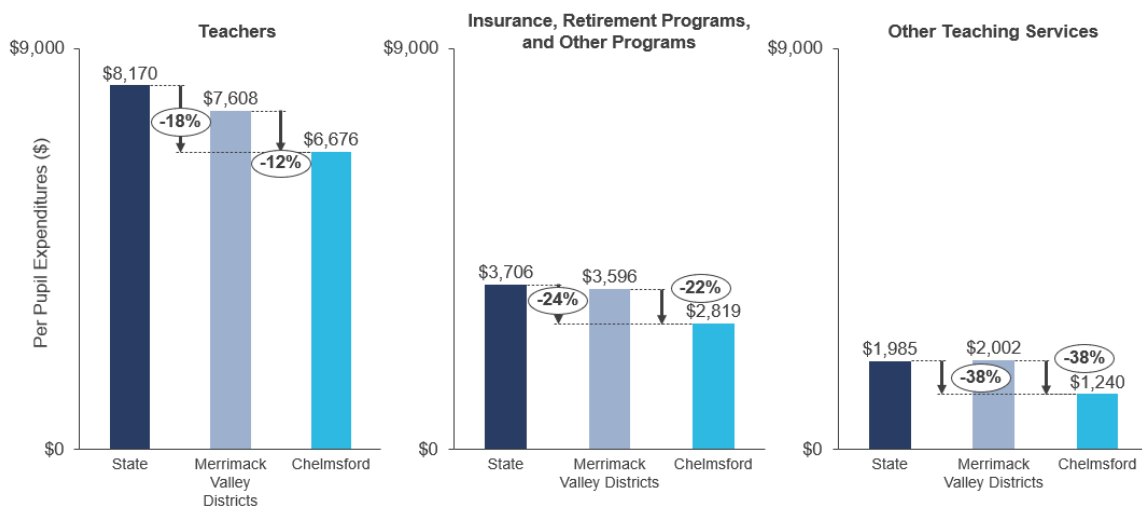
Figure 8. Per Pupil Expenditures by Cost Category in CPS Compared to the State and Merrimack Valley Districts (FY2024)



Source: Massachusetts DESE RADAR

The district's cost-efficiency is reflected across a variety of budget categories and is most notable in three connected areas: Teachers, Insurance, Retirement, & Other Programs, and Other Teaching Services (e.g., paraprofessionals, substitute teachers, nurses, librarians, and on-line coursework). Between these three cost categories, the district spends anywhere from 12% to 38% less than its peers and the state (Figure 9). The data in this analysis is from FY2024 (the most recent publicly available data for benchmarking), and it is important to note that expenditures change from year to year and one-time expenditures in CPS may be accounting for some differences compared to similar districts and the state.

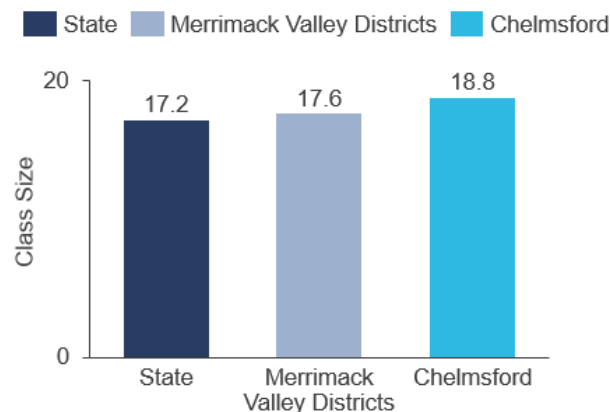
Figure 9. Per Pupil Comparative Expenditures by Top Cost Categories (FY2024)



Source: Massachusetts DESE RADAR

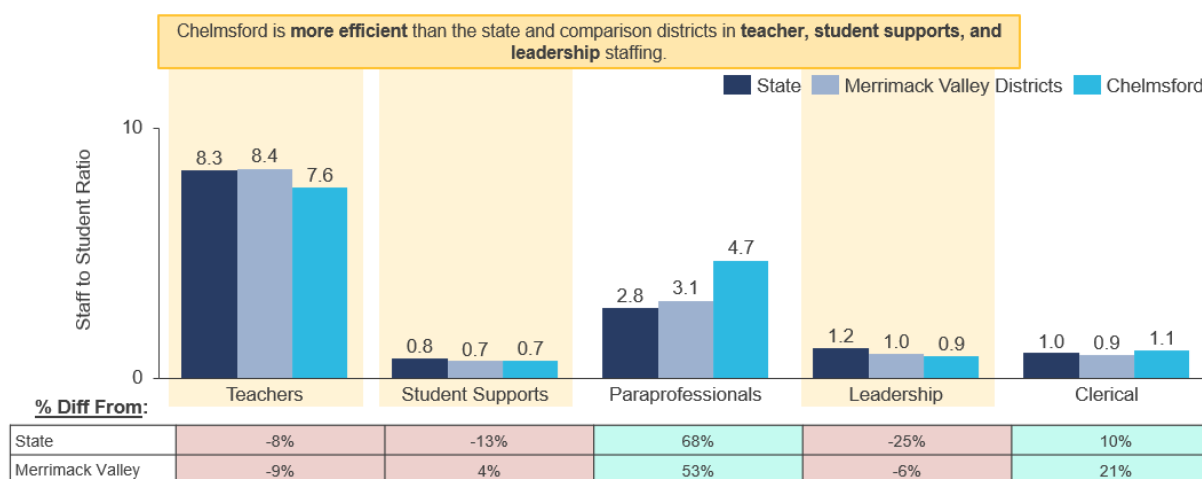
Chelmsford's lower spending on staff is primarily driven by slightly larger class sizes, 9% higher than the state average and 7% higher than Merrimack Valley districts (Figure 10), and more efficient staff use, rather than lower salaries. A benchmarking analysis reveals CPS's teacher to student ratios are 8% lower, or more efficient, than the state average and 9% lower than Merrimack Valley districts (Figure 11). CPS also finds efficiencies in student supports and leadership vs. the state and Merrimack Valley districts. In the face of lower staffing levels for teachers and administrators, CPS has more paraprofessional and clerical staff per student than the state average. An opportunity could exist for CPS to look at shifting paraprofessional positions as they become open to licensed teaching positions to provide higher quality instruction, lower class sizes, and better teacher-to-student ratios.

Figure 10. Average Class Size in CPS Compared to the State and Merrimack Valley Districts (2025)



Source: Massachusetts DESE

Figure 11. Staff to 100 Student Ratios vs. the State and Merrimack Valley Districts (2025-2026)

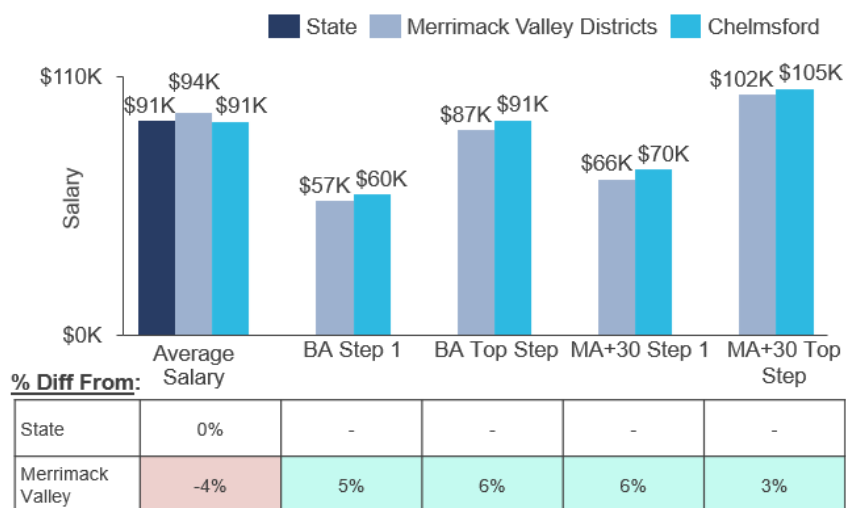


Source: Massachusetts DESE

Note: Student supports includes social workers, psychologists, nurses, and counselors

Chelmsford's starting salaries are, on average, 5-6% higher than other Merrimack Valley districts, supporting strong recruitment of early-career talent (Figure 12). CPS is more competitive vs. Merrimack Valley districts for more tenured teachers, with 3%+ higher salaries at the highest steps (Figure 12). The district has built a collegial and supportive culture for staff with its competitive salaries, thoughtful staffing levels, feedback pathways for teachers to be heard by administrators, generous material budgets, and mentoring programs, resulting in strong staff retention. When filling open positions, CPS generally seeks early-career educators who have the potential to build long-term careers in the district rather than recruiting more experienced educators from other districts. This approach has the added benefit of mitigating spend on teacher salaries, resulting in slightly lower average step than the state average, driving savings for the district on average salary (4% below Merrimack Valley districts) while maintaining competitive pay at each level (Figure 12). Lower spend on staffing also translates to lower spend on staff benefits (Figure 9).

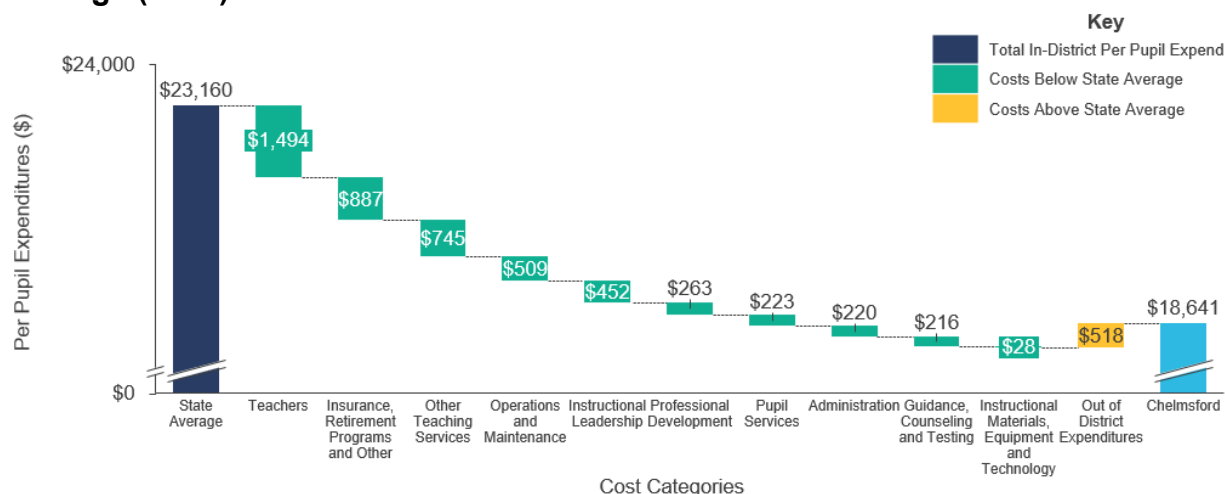
Figure 12. Average Teacher Salaries vs. Step-Specific Salaries (2025)



Source: Massachusetts DESE, District Websites

Chelmsford spends less per pupil than the state average across all cost categories except for out-of-district expenditures due to CPS's larger share of students with disabilities placed out-of-district and higher out-of-district transportation costs (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Differences in Total Per Pupil Expenditures between CPS and the State Average (2024)

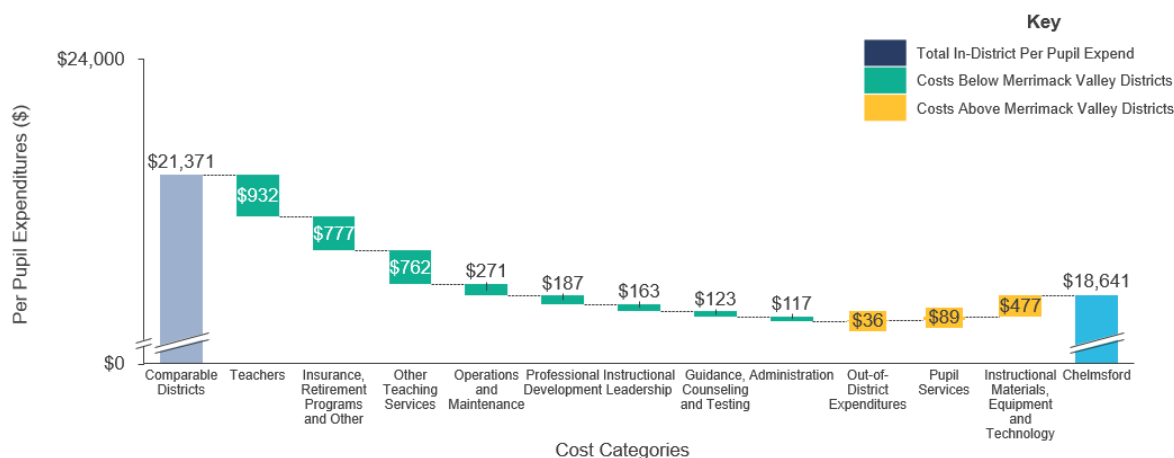


Source: Massachusetts DESE RADAR

Note: Definitions of the cost categories can be found in the appendices (Appendix B).

Chelmsford spends less per pupil than Merrimack Valley districts across most cost categories but has invested significantly more in instructional materials than other Merrimack Valley districts, who are spending significantly below the state average (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Differences in Total Per Pupil Expenditures between CPS and Merrimack Valley Districts (2024)



Source: Massachusetts DESE RADAR

Note: Definitions of the cost categories can be found in the appendices (Appendix B).

Chelmsford is able to spend less on operations and maintenance through consistent preventative investments and planned projects.

CPS spends less on professional development than Merrimack Valley districts and the state average (spending 11-17% of what others spend based on how DESE categorizes spend). CPS's professional development spend as categorized by DESE may be underreported for a variety of reasons. The district relies on content-specific district coordinators to provide professional development, which keeps costs down. Coordinators and teachers also create in-house district courses and offer them throughout the year to provide content-specific professional development and re-licensure offerings that are revised yearly to address educators' current needs. The district also invests in self-paced professional development that is associated with its technology platforms, such as Panorama and i-Ready, which provide training modules on various topics for educators to gain additional content and pedagogy skills. Also, many of the curriculum products used in the district have embedded professional development courses that are part of the licensing costs and are not reflected in the professional development spend since they are embedded in the curriculum product. Providing professional development using these models is not reflected in the professional development figures reported. Chelmsford also utilizes its entitlement grants from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to provide professional development in the district.

The district ensures professional development is aligned with long-term strategic goals and does not fall into fads. The district's use of operating budget and grant awards is in direct alignment with these goals, rather than providing one-off professional development

based on individual or small group requests. There is an opportunity, however, for the district to evaluate how it addresses evolving student needs, particularly as the EL, low-income, and special education populations continue to grow.

CPS has leaner staffing in instructional leadership, administration, and guidance than the state and other Merrimack Valley districts, leading to more efficient spend.

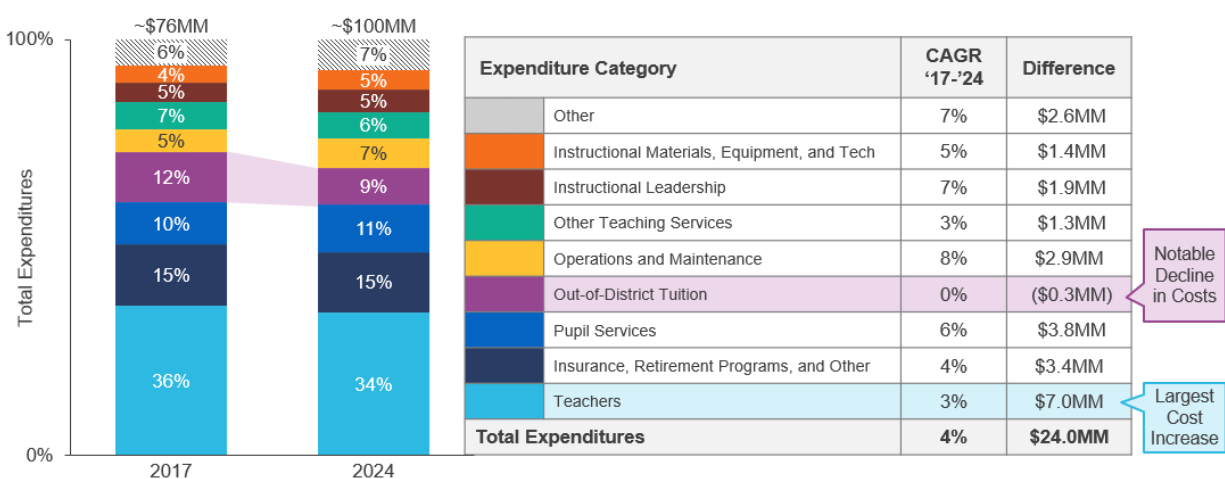
CPS's savings in pupil services vs. the state average are primarily driven by savings in food services, medical / health services, and transportation services. The district's expenditures are similar to peer districts in the Merrimack Valley.

CPS has been able to invest more in instructional materials, equipment, and technology than surrounding districts, and more in line with state averages, due to its methodical process of logging savings and reinvesting them. While districts across the country used ESSER COVID relief funds for staff, CPS used these temporary funds for one-time expenditures, allowing the district to invest more in materials and technology and avoid cutting positions when funds expired.

Chelmsford and other Merrimack Valley districts spend more on out-of-district expenditures than the state average due to the higher percent of students with disabilities being placed out-of-district vs. the state average and higher out-of-district transportation costs per student. Chelmsford's out-of-district transportation spend per student is similar to other Merrimack Valley districts due to similarly small groups of students per placement, similar vendors, and similar distances traveled. Chelmsford's out-of-district tuition expense has remained stable since 2017, despite outsized growth in students with IEPs and nationwide cost increases, due to the district's effort to build out in-district programs. Out-of-district tuition has decreased as a portion of total expenditures by 25% (Figure 15). In the same period, the district's circuit breaker reimbursement from the state has increased from ~\$2.8MM in 2018 to ~\$4.5MM in 2026 as out-of-district placements have included students with more severe needs, triggering additional funds from the state.

CPS pays more per out-of-district student for transportation than the state average given the more severe needs profile among Chelmsford out-of-district students. The district has made meaningful progress controlling out-of-district costs over the past several years. Costs are expected to continue to converge with state norms as the district continues to grow the share of students with disabilities kept in-district.

Figure 15. Chelmsford Public Schools Expenditures by Cost Category (2017-2026)

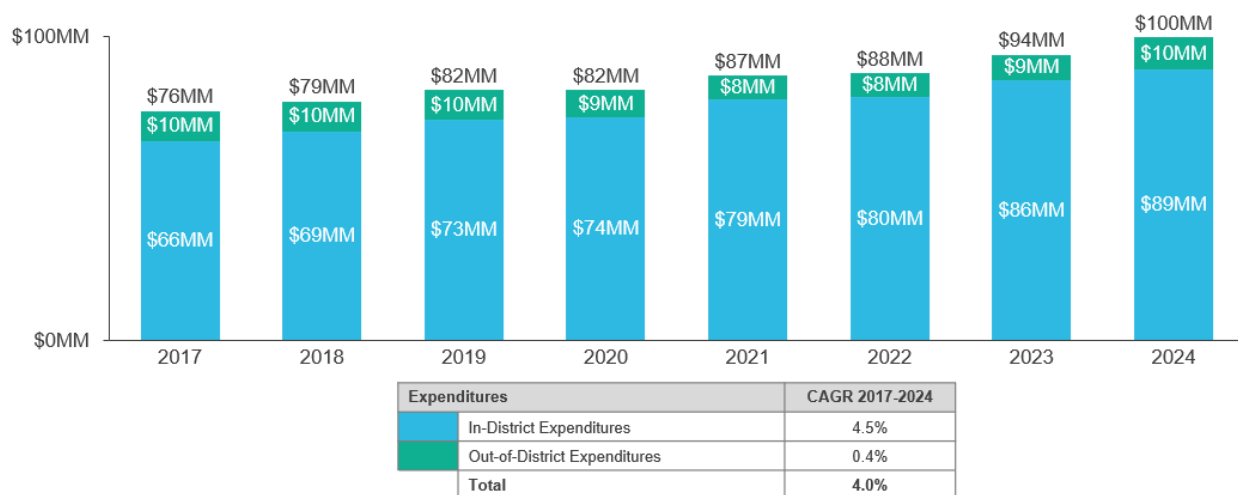


*Other includes guidance, counseling, and testing; administration; out-of-district transportation; and professional development

Source: Massachusetts DESE RADAR

CPS has contained its expenditure growth to 4% p.a. over the past 10 years, ranging from 1.0% to 7.8% in different years, which has equated to moderate real per pupil expenditures when considering inflation levels per category and enrollment growth (Figure 16). CPS's per-pupil expenditure has grown almost 2 percentage points lower than state average budgets in the same period (3.7% p.a. vs. 5.5% p.a.).

Figure 16. Chelmsford Public Schools Expenditures (2017-2026)



Source: Massachusetts DESE

Teacher expenditures, though growing modestly and at a lower rate than other Merrimack Valley districts, have been the largest contributor to budget growth over the past 10 years (~\$7MM additional spend in 2024 vs. 2017) (Figure 15). CPS's general education teacher expenditure has grown ~3% p.a. and special education teacher expenditure has grown

6% p.a. over the past 10 years. Chelmsford has a lower student to special education teacher ratio than the state average, which has allowed the district to support more in-district programming. General education teacher counts have remained largely the same, while special education teachers have increased by 26 FTEs or 3% p.a. over the past 10 years to support an increase in students with IEPs, students' growing needs, and CPS's expansion of in-district special education programs. CPS's Chapter 70 funding has grown 4% p.a. over the past 10 years, accelerating from 2023 to 2026 when the population of students with disabilities grew significantly, to support special education teacher staffing.

Other teaching services expenditures (e.g., paraprofessionals, substitute teachers, nurses, librarians, online coursework) have grown in line with teachers. This spend increase has been supported by IDEA 240 grant funding. Chelmsford has slightly higher paraprofessional to student ratios than other Merrimack Valley districts. The district has kept paraprofessional staffing levels relatively consistent over the past 10 years, while student needs have grown significantly, given Chelmsford had a high staff to student ratio 10 years ago.

Staff benefits costs have grown in line with state and national trends.

Instructional leadership and administration costs have grown above state averages as the district has added back 3 curriculum coordinators who were cut previously and a special education chair.

Over the past 10 years, CPS has invested in growing out its SEL supports, which is reflected in growth in the district's expenditures on guidance, counseling, and testing.

CPS transportation costs (in-district transportation falling in "pupil services" and out-of-district transportation) have grown 6% per year from 2017 to 2024, in line with state and Merrimack Valley district averages, accounting for approximately 8% of the total budget increase over that period or \$1.8MM more in spend. Chelmsford's out-of-district transportation costs have grown ~7% p.a. over the past 10 years, growing at the same rate as the state and Merrimack Valley district averages. The transportation revolving fund has helped offset in-district general education transportation costs. The district has prioritized keeping the bus fee charged to families the same over the past 10 years.

Chelmsford's out-of-district tuition spend has decreased as the district has maintained more students with disabilities in-district, going from 83 students with IEPs out of district in 2017 to 67 in 2026, despite seeing an increase of 231 students with disabilities in the same period. Comparatively, state and Merrimack Valley district average growth in the category has been ~5-6%.

Chelmsford has been able to invest money in operations and maintenance over the years at higher rates than other Merrimack Valley districts. CPS is diligent about preventative maintenance on its older buildings, which have more maintenance needs over time. Growth in spend on instructional materials, equipment, and technology is driven by

increased cost of supplies, hardware, and textbooks. Through smart investments, CPS has been able to manage costs below state and Merrimack Valley district averages.

Chelmsford has maintained low growth in professional development expenditures, below state and Merrimack Valley district averages. CPS engages its internal leaders and staff to provide professional development within its schools.

Methodical and Structured Budgeting Practices Drive Lower Spend

Chelmsford is proactive and methodical in its approach to financial management, which has stabilized the district's financial situation and maximized the reach and impact of community resources. It has done this work by thoughtfully managing costs and proactively investing its resources.

Cost Reduction:

- **Aggressive Procurement and Vendor Negotiation:** District leaders actively negotiate with vendors and refuse to accept initial quotes, often achieving better pricing than neighboring districts for the same materials and services.
- **Willingness to Adjust Less Effective Programs:** Leadership constantly evaluates the academic return on investment using data. They focus on projects that work and are cost-effective. They are unafraid to adjust programs or subscriptions that do not deliver expected results. For example, the district regularly halts payments for ed-tech subscriptions if usage data indicates teachers and students aren't using them. For their career readiness platform, they switched from Naviance to Scoir and realized a savings of \$10K per year.

Proactive Resource Review:

- **Careful Review of Staffing:** CPS closely manages staffing by examining enrollment fluctuations, retirements, and needs. When there are openings, the district prefers to hire at lower salary steps to be prudent with salary expenditures, while keeping competitive salaries per step. Additionally, the district uses temporary "bubble classes" that follow larger student cohorts, rather than permanently expanding district-wide headcount.
- **Proactive Intervention:** The district invests in intervention programs for students, which resolve learning needs and prevent issues from developing later, thereby giving students academic confidence earlier and not incurring costs for reactive measures.
- **In-District Placement:** The district has a robust continuum of in-district special education programs that support strong outcomes for those students and manage out-of-district tuition and transportation costs, which have increased at a significantly higher rate than district budgets across the country.

Investing Effectively:

- **Investment Alignment with Strategic Plan Priorities:** Careful creation of strategic plan priorities and strict adherence to those priorities in evaluating new initiatives keeps Chelmsford disciplined. Chelmsford was able to hire additional interventionists in math, for example, given its strategic plan focus on improving math.
- **Strategic Use of End-of-Year Surpluses:** The district uses temporary grants and operational savings accrued throughout the year to fund one-time expenditures. The district does not use those funds for recurring positions to avoid overspending in subsequent years. Coordinators and teachers feel there is a transparent and fair process to approve new initiatives.
- **Staff Retention:** The district invests in teachers' classroom materials and initiatives to promote staff retention and gain long-term benefits of consistent and strong teachers.
- **Investment in managing building upkeep:** CPS has transformed building management protocols over the past 10 years to ensure a systematic budget for executing on routine and large maintenance projects and to secure high MSBA and APPA building ratings. Over the past 10 years, CPS has prioritized investing in school buildings to avoid costly deferred maintenance expenditures. From roof replacements and kitchen renovations to elevator upgrades, boiler replacements, and HVAC systems, this investment reflects a community commitment to maintaining safe, code-compliant, and functional learning environments.
- **Opportunities:** The district has opportunities to invest in more energy efficient facilities going forward to save long-term costs.

CPS has prioritized using community resources and allocated state and federal resources efficiently instead of looking for creative ways to grow revenue beyond the local tax base. Notably, CPS applied one-time COVID ESSER funds toward materials rather than personnel, avoiding the structural budget pressures many districts faced as those funds expired. In some ways, this approach is prudent because it prevents the district from relying on unstable dollars. On the flip side, CPS could be leaving important dollars on the table for supplementary programming and materials. Chelmsford could pursue other creative revenue sources (e.g., renting facilities, athletic sponsorships, philanthropy, competitive grants) to grow revenue streams in the future if district leadership felt the opportunities were worthwhile.

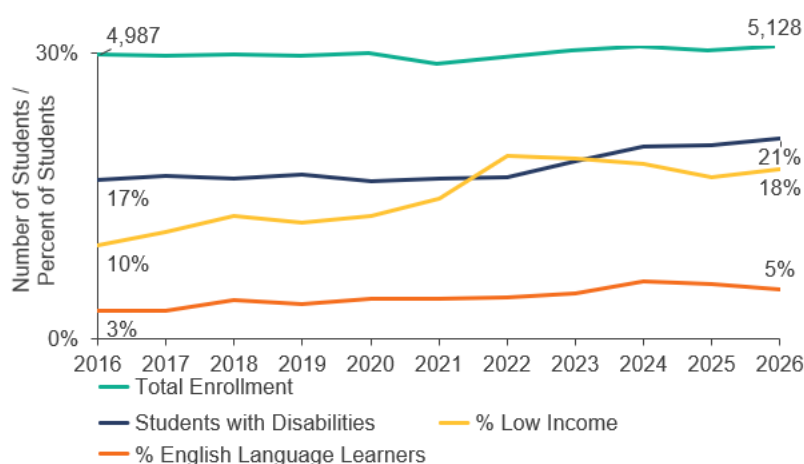
2c. CPS is meeting the evolving needs of students and families

Demographic Changes

In the last ten years, the composition of students and the needs of students in CPS have slowly shifted, requiring changing and evolving programming to meet their needs. These needs include students with needs that require additional support such as students with disabilities, English language learners, students who are immigrants, and low-income students as well as *all* students who now need to be equipped with 21st-century skills in order to participate in a rapidly changing and global society. Many of the changes that CPS is facing are on par with state and national trends, though nonetheless require creative and innovative solutions.

As seen in Figure 17, overall student enrollment has grown steadily while the share of the population that is identified as English Language Learners, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities has increased. The population of English Language Learners has almost doubled, from 3% to 5% in 10 years, representing 122 more students.

Figure 17. Change in District Student Demographics – *Number of Students in District and Percentage of Total Student Population (Students with Disabilities, English Language Learners, and Low Income, 2016-2026)*



Source: Massachusetts DESE

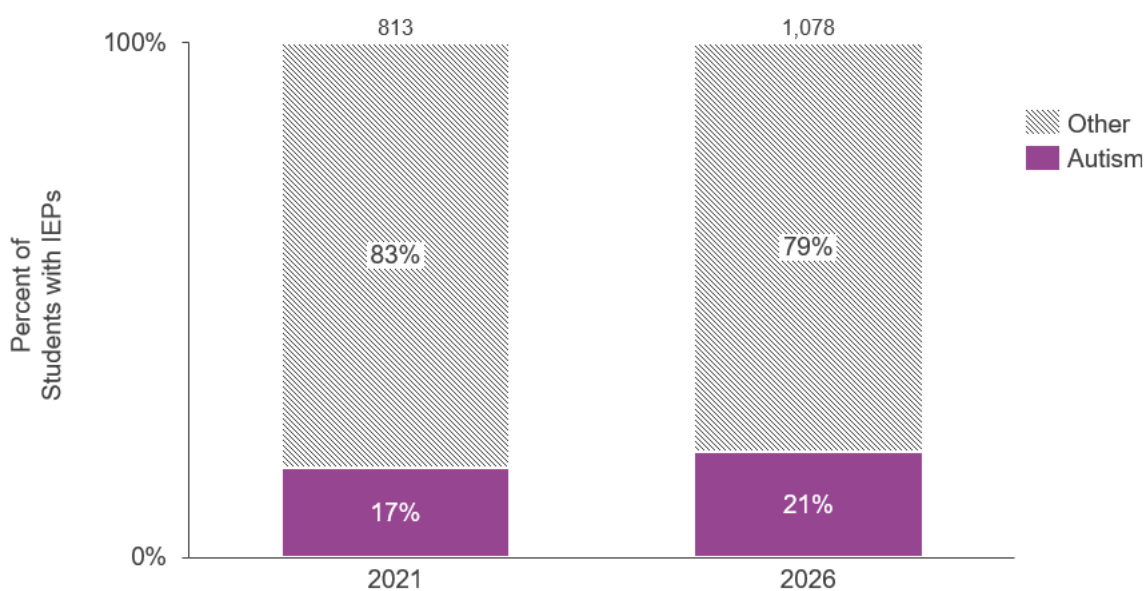
Over the last ten years, CPS enrollment has grown by 0.3% (Figure 17). In the same period, Massachusetts public school enrollment has declined over 1% p.a. and Merrimack Valley peer districts have similarly declined 1%.

While Chelmsford's ELL and low-income populations are still at a lower percentage than the state, the district has seen more growth in these subgroups in the past 10 years than the state, forcing the district to catch up quickly to support students' needs. Chelmsford

has historically had lower rates of students with disabilities than the state and districts but is now on par.

The district not only has more students with disabilities than 10 years ago but also has students with more complex needs. Chelmsford has 50% more, or 80 more students with autism now than in 2021, making up 17% of students with disabilities in 2021 to 21% in 2026 (Figure 18). This trend is aligned with state and national trends, notably a post-pandemic increase in the number of students with autism. In 2021 in Massachusetts, just over 14% of students with disabilities were classified as having autism, as compared to just over 19% of students in 2026.

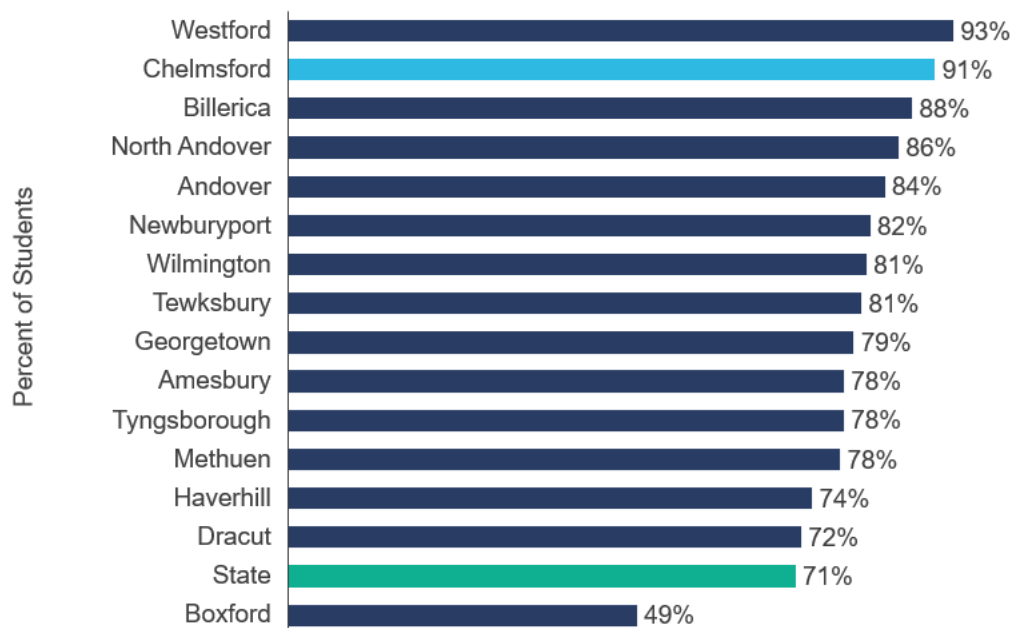
Figure 18. Students with IEPs by Disability Type (2021-2026)



Source: Massachusetts DESE

With 97% of children living in Chelmsford attending public schools, the district is ranked #18 / 351 districts in the state for public school attendance rate. 92% of kids in MA go to public schools. Chelmsford ranks even higher, 15, when looking at just *local* public schools (excluding academic regional schools, vocational technical regional schools, collaboratives, charter schools, and out-of-district public schools). 91% of kids in Chelmsford go to local public schools vs. 71% in Massachusetts overall, underscoring the district's commitment to serving all students (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Students in-District (Chelmsford vs. Merrimack Valley Districts) – Percent of Students in Local Public Schools, 2025



Source: Massachusetts DESE

Chelmsford is committed to serving students with evolving needs in-district. Chelmsford is supporting students with disabilities and ELL students by investing in in-district resources. As more students living in poverty are enrolling in the district, admin has prioritized reducing fees to ensure programming is accessible for all students and families.

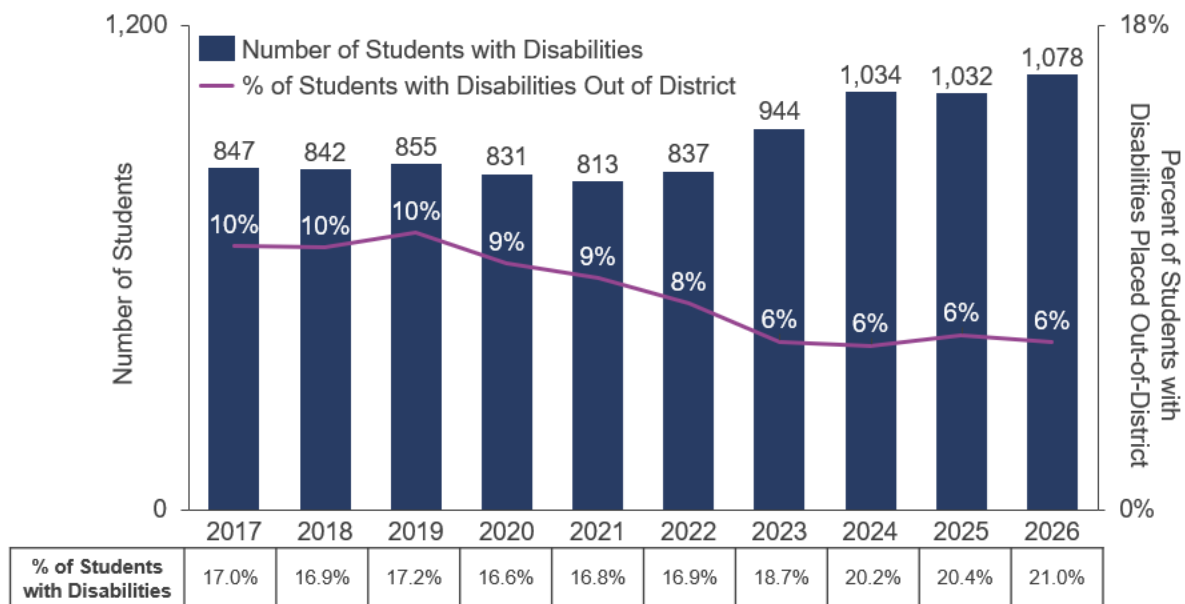
Students with Disabilities

The number of special education students in-district has grown 6% p.a., while the number of students out of district has declined 1% p.a. going from 9% of students in 2021 to 6% in 2026 (Figure 20). This shift can be credited to a highly intentional effort made by the district to invest in the following programs:

- **CHIPS:** Chelmsford Integrated Preschool Program offers inclusive and intensive preschool classes to children between the ages of three and five years old who require special education programming. The Inclusive classrooms include typically developing peers to ensure strong and appropriate peer modeling. The classes provide a rich, language-based curriculum with a multi-sensory, developmental approach to learning. The intensive classrooms offer substantially separate classes for students who have an identified disability that significantly impacts their ability to learn from the natural environment. These classes offer a smaller class size and higher adult to student ratio and are based on the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA).
- **SAIL** (Student Achieving Independent Learning): Is a substantially separate program supporting students K-12 with autism and is designed for students with highly intensive needs. It offers a small class size with a high adult to student ratio. Students are taught using the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) methodology to access the curriculum and make meaningful progress with academic, social, communication, and behavioral skills. The programming receives on-going consultation from a BCBA. Programming at all levels include related services (speech, OT, PT) primarily through a consult/co-teach model. CPS partners with the New England Center for Children (NECC) for the SAIL program at the high school level. This program has grown significantly as CPS has seen its population of students with autism increase over the past several years.
- **STRIVE:** The STRIVE program is a therapeutic program for students K-12 with an emotional disability and documented history of significant behavioral difficulties impacting their access to learning. The program provides a range of support and inclusion opportunities that are designed to meet the individual social-emotional and behavioral needs of students allowing them access to the curriculum. The programming includes ongoing consultation and support from a BCBA, psychologist and school counselor.
- **Language-Based Program:** Is for students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) in Basic Reading or a Language-Based disability with average to above average reasoning abilities. Students require intensive instruction in reading, writing, listening, speaking and organizational skills throughout their academic day. Instruction is presented in a highly structured manner that is explicit, systematic, cumulative, and multisensory, centering around the Orton-Gillingham methodology.
- **PAVE** (Providing Academic and Vocational Experiences) / **Life Skills Program:** Supports students with intellectual disabilities including autism, neurological,

complex physical and/or multiple disabilities K-12. It provides a replacement curriculum for students which develops foundational and functional academic, communication, activities of daily living, social, and vocational skills. The program includes opportunities for meaningful inclusion with peers when appropriate.

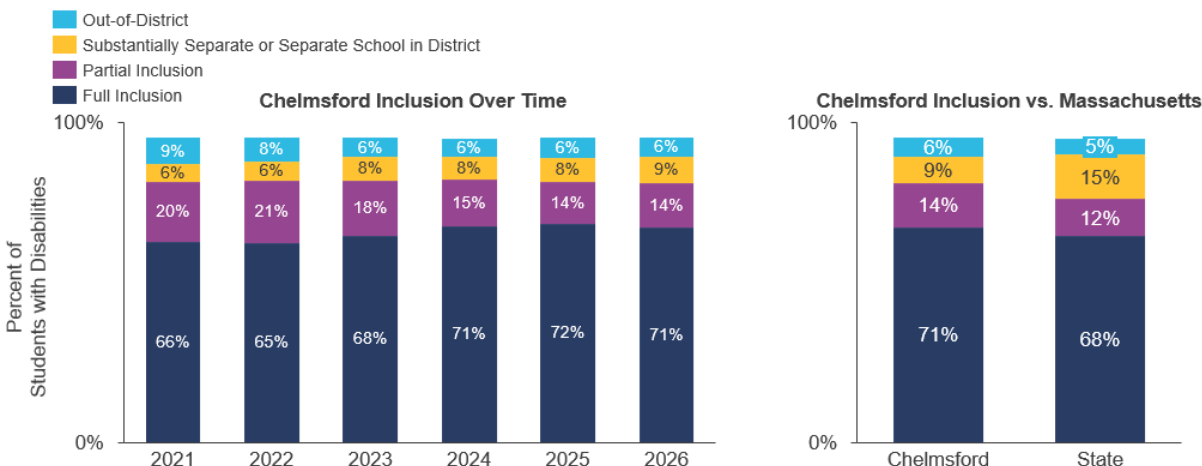
Figure 20. Trend in Students with Disabilities Out-of-District – *Number of Students with Disabilities and Percent of Students with Disabilities Placed Out-of-District (2017-2026)*



Source: Massachusetts DESE, Chelmsford Public Schools

Inclusion has also grown in the district, from 66% of students fully included in 2021 to 71% in 2026 (Figure 21). In-district, Chelmsford is more inclusive than the state average. The district still has a slightly higher share of students going out of district, but that share is expected to decrease over time as the district's investments in its special education continuum mature.

Figure 21. District Inclusion – Percent of Students with Disabilities by Education Environment Placement



Source: Massachusetts DESE

At the state level, students with disabilities are not achieving at the same rate as their peers without disabilities, as measured by MCAS scores. In Chelmsford, achievement gaps between students with and without disabilities have been significant and remained relatively stable over the past five years. Students with disabilities in Chelmsford consistently outperform state peers, but their Student Growth Percentiles are slightly below those of general education students, preventing gap closure over time. Chelmsford is working toward supporting students with disabilities in-district and closing those gaps.

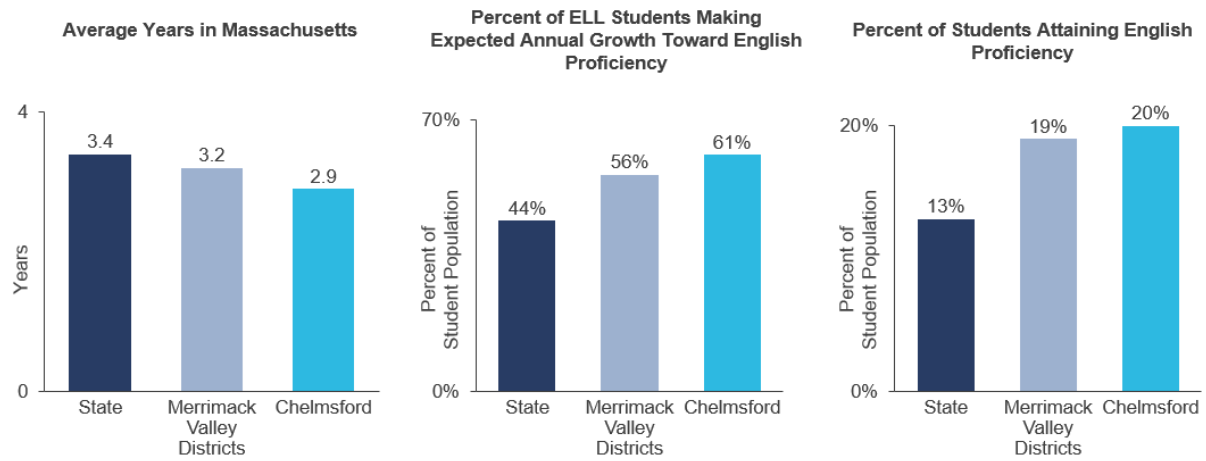
Staffing levels have remained largely stable (1% p.a. growth from ~150 to ~170 paras over the past 10 years) even as needs have increased. CPS has had higher paraprofessional to student ratios than the state over the past several years. CPS is actively working on defining staff roles to create thorough and efficient coverage across schools.

English Language Learners

CPS has expanded its staff from 6 ELL teachers in 2017 to 8 in 2025 including a district-wide elementary ELL teacher who travels across schools and provides screening and support at the CHIPS preschool program due to the district's growth in ELL students and corresponding increase in Chapter 70 funding to support that population. The newly expanded social worker department is also utilized to assist the families of ELL students, providing them with timely resources and stronger home-to-school connections. Tech and interpretation services investments have also helped the school communicate better with families.

Student outcomes have positively reflected the district's attention to supporting ELL students. For the past few years, Chelmsford ELL students have been more proficient than state averages and comparison districts despite being newer to the state (Figure 22).

Figure 22. English Language Learners Proficiency and Growth on WIDA ACCESS



Source: *Massachusetts DESE*

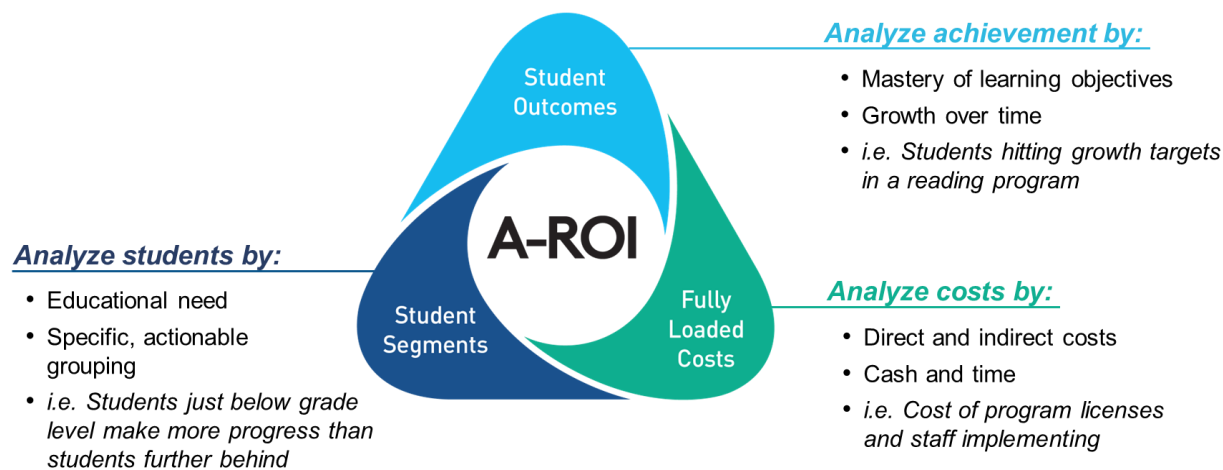
2d. District Investments

New programs and approaches are constantly being touted in education, and yet in most districts, initiatives get adopted without a way to track their efficacy. A combination of stakeholder interest and professional judgment ends up determining whether programs continue, are expanded, or are eliminated. To make informed decisions about programs and their related costs, having a deep understanding of a program's Academic Return on Investment (Academic-ROI) is critical.

CPS leaders have demonstrated that they are thoughtful stewards of community resources and carefully evaluate the relative impact of their investments on student outcomes. The DMG Academic-ROI approach can be a helpful framework to strengthen how CPS might continue to structure its initiatives to demonstrate their success or determine whether investments might be better served elsewhere.

An analysis of Academic-ROI provides a nuanced, cost-benefit analysis of a program by examining student outcomes, student segments, and fully loaded costs. Ultimately, an Academic-ROI analysis answers the following questions:

- *Is this initiative working?*
- *For which students?*
- *At what cost?*



Source: DMG Framework

In order to understand critical investments made by CPS, Academic-ROI reviews were conducted for investments in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and in an in-district special education continuum.

Social Emotional Learning Investments

What Works?

Research continues to consistently show the impact of students' social-emotional well-being on their ability to engage and learn in the classroom.² Many districts in the Commonwealth and throughout the country are grappling with increased social-emotional needs in the wake of the pandemic. In 2022, the U.S. Surgeon General called the increase in youth mental health needs “the defining public health crisis of our time.”³

Chelmsford Public Schools has made highly intentional, systemic investments in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and student mental health. While the district has managed to keep chronic absenteeism (below 10%) and exclusionary discipline rates low (below 2%) these intentional efforts require extensive resources and strategic staffing, most notably school social workers and counselors. Recognizing that a sense of belonging and safety are prerequisites for academic achievement, the district has built a comprehensive, wraparound support infrastructure that spans every school level. These efforts have been driven by district leadership and implemented through expanded staffing, external resources, and data-tracking tools.

Staff: The district added four social workers, which created a bridge between home and school, and placed psychologists in every building. The district also added an additional Guidance Counselor and four Assistant Principals in the elementary schools since 2017.

Programming: The district added the STEP Program to support students returning to school from hospitalizations, medical leave, or mental health leave.

Panorama Surveys: Utilized technology that allows teachers, clinicians, and leadership to evaluate students' wellbeing based on attendance, grades, behavior, and social emotional wellness.

External mental health and referral resources: CPS partners with Cartwheel and Care Solace, which reduce caseloads for internal staff and provide support for students who could not otherwise access services.

As a result of these investments and a district-wide focus on student mental health, students see the following benefits:

² Durlak, Joseph & Mahoney, Joseph & Boyle, Alaina. (2022). What We Know, and What We Need to Find Out About Universal, School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs for Children and Adolescents: A Review of Meta-Analyses and Directions for Future Research. *Psychological Bulletin*. 148. 765-782. 10.1037/bul0000383.

³ Peetz Stephens, C. (2023, April 25). Kids' declining mental health is the 'crisis of our time,' Surgeon General says. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/kids-declining-mental-health-is-the-crisis-of-our-time-surgeon-general-says/2023/04>

1. A vast majority of CPS students (88-89%) report having positive relationships with staff, and over two-thirds (66-68%) report feeling a sense of belonging; both metrics have grown over the past few years (Figure 6).
2. Students are less likely to be chronically absent, which directly contributes to stronger academic outcomes across the country.⁴
3. Students are regulating their emotions and behavior better than in previous years, improving their own and their peers' ability to learn.⁵

For Whom?

These investments in staff, technology, and external resources intend to serve all students, particularly those at the high school level, who have additional strain.

At What Cost?

CPS has invested meaningfully in SEL over the past 10 years and has built out room in its budget for staff, technology, and external resources to support student wellbeing each year. The total annual cost of these investments in FY2025 was ~\$1.4MM inclusive of the following:

- \$329,909 on salaries for 4 **Social Workers / Family Counselors** added over the past 10 years
- \$482,328 on salaries for 4 **Assistant Principals** added over the past 10 years at the Elementary Schools
- \$275,541⁶ on salaries for 3 incremental **Psychologists** (11, up from 8 FTEs in 2017)
- \$95,890 on salaries for a special education teacher and paraeducator in the **STEP program**
- \$89,573⁷ on salaries for 1 incremental **Guidance Counselor** (17, up from 16 FTEs in 2017)
- \$64,250 annual license for **Panorama Education**, a **survey tool** that gathers feedback on school climate, safety, and wellbeing from students, teachers, and

⁴ D'Orio, W. (2026, July 28). New report ties chronic absenteeism to sluggish academic outcomes. *The 74*. <https://www.the74million.org/article/new-report-ties-chronic-absenteeism-to-sluggish-academic-outcomes/>

⁵ Ha, C., McCarthy, M. F., Strambler, M. J., & Cipriano, C. (2025). Disentangling the effects of social and emotional learning programs on student academic achievement across grades 1-12: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543251367769>

⁶ Average psychologist salary

⁷ Average guidance counselor salary

parents then connects with student data, attendance, behavior and grades to create better support systems

- \$13,750 annual contract with **Cartwheel Care**, a mental health **telehealth provider** that partners with K-12 school districts to give students and their families rapid access to pediatric care, working alongside school counselors and social workers to bypass long community waitlists, offering virtual therapy, psychiatric evaluations, medication management, and parent guidance.
- \$17,696 annual contract with **Care Solace**, a **mental health care coordination service** that connects individuals, families, and staff to verified local mental health and substance use treatment providers

In-District Special Education Continuum

What Works?

Over the past several years, CPS has made a deliberate, multi-year investment in building an in-district continuum of specialized programs for students with disabilities, including the SAIL autism program, the STRIVE behavioral therapeutic support program, the Language-Based program for students with specialized reading needs, and the PAVE/Life Skills program for students with intellectual disabilities (K-12) (see description on pages 28 and 29).

Chelmsford has made meaningful investments into its in-district special education program that has reduced the number of students going out-of-district for special education despite the growing number of students with disabilities in the district (Figure 20). From 2017 to 2026, the number of Chelmsford students with disabilities educated out-of-district has declined from 83 students to 67. Over the same period, the number of students with disabilities in-district have increased from 847 to 1,078, supported by expansion of in-district programming.

This investment has produced meaningful benefits for the community:

1. More students are learning in their hometown of Chelmsford, in public school among their peers, which promotes community belonging and relationships and eases logistical challenges for families.
2. Students are receiving high quality instruction and services in the least restrictive environment appropriate to them with the support of more specialized autism services, reading interventions, and other services.⁸

⁸ Hunt, P., & Goetz, L. (1997). Research on inclusive educational programs, practices, and outcomes for students with severe disabilities. *Journal of Special Education*, 31(1), 3-29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002246699703100102>

3. The district is not incurring costly out-of-district tuition and transportation costs: \$4MM annual costs not incurred in 2025, a figure that grows each year as the program continues to evolve. Out-of-district tuition and transportation costs have been increasing across the state over the past several years, making it particularly important to reinforce in-district programming.

For Whom?

Chelmsford's investments into keeping students with disabilities in-district serve all students who would have previously been considered for out-of-district education under previous resource constraints 5-10+ years ago in the district. Despite having meaningful growth in students with disabilities and students with more severe needs in-district, CPS has maintained achievement levels for students with disabilities.

Students without disabilities are shown to develop greater empathy and principles of fairness while learning in classrooms with students with disabilities.⁹

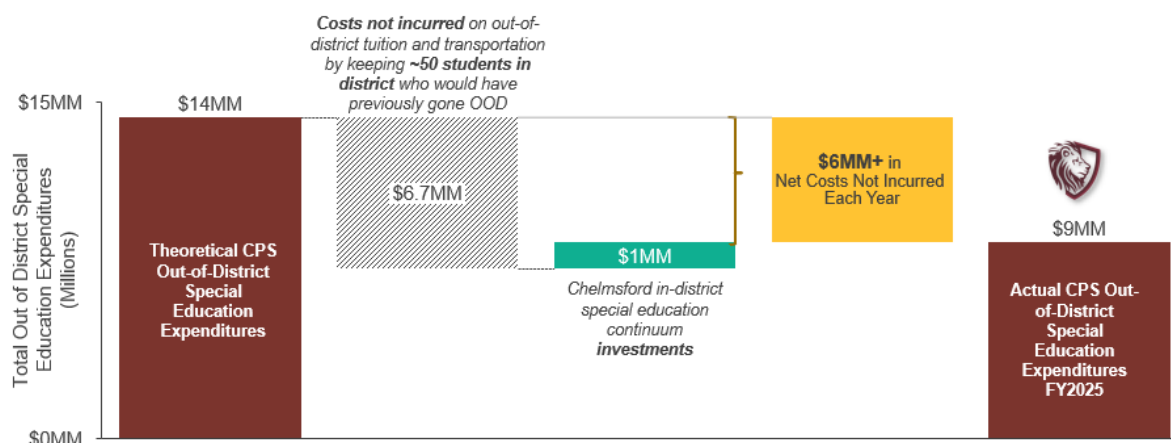
At What Cost?

Over the past 10 years, CPS has been able to lower the share of students with disabilities being educated out-of-district from ~10% of students to ~6% of students. In 2026, there are an incremental ~50 additional students in SAIL, PAVE, and STRIVE programming than just a few years prior. Without Chelmsford's investments in its in-district service continuum breadth and capacity, these students may have needed to go out of the district for their education.

Those ~50 students are now able to receive a better education in Chelmsford and avoid the logistical strain and high costs associated with leaving the district. Out-of-district tuition and transportation cost ~\$130K on average in Chelmsford, multiplied by 52 students equates to almost \$7MM in costs that the district did not incur. The incremental investment in special education teachers, paraeducators, and specialized programming to educate more students in district has been significantly lower, ~\$1MM, netting the district ~\$6MM in costs not incurred in 2025, a figure that will continue to grow as programs mature and a higher percent of students with disabilities are able to remain in-district (Figure 23).

⁹ Staub, D., & Peck, C. A. (1995). What are the outcomes for nondisabled students? *Educational Leadership*, 52(4), 36-40.

Figure 23. Illustrative Example – Annual Compounding Costs Not Incurred from Keeping Special Education Students In-District



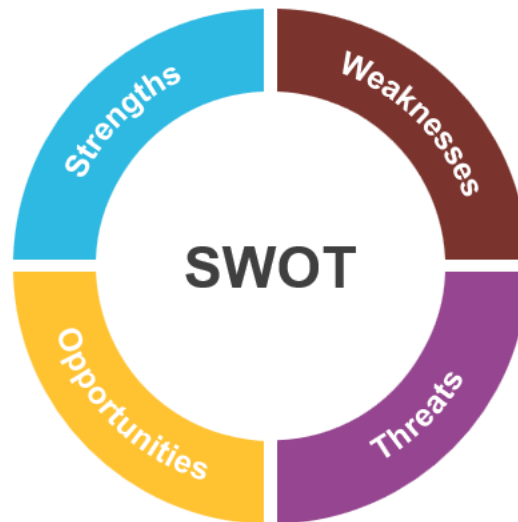
Source: Chelmsford Public Schools

The district plans to continue to support these programs and evolve them with student needs. CPS has taken considerable steps to improve in-district programming for students with disabilities, and the composition of the CPS student body has changed as a result. Therefore, despite building more in-district programs, achievement gaps between students with and without disabilities persist. The district is committed to continuing to improve outcomes for all students by refining its program offerings and services.

Conclusion

CPS is thoughtful and strategic in its approach to designing special education programming and building out SEL supports for all students, which creates a supportive environment across all CPS schools. CPS might consider adopting elements of the DMG Academic-ROI framework to add rigor to its approach of evaluating its educational programs and initiatives. This comprehensive approach, which analyzes student outcomes, student segments, and fully loaded costs, would provide CPS leaders with the critical data needed to make informed decisions about resource allocation and program effectiveness. The appendix of this document provides additional materials related to academic-ROI analyses.

3. Chelmsford Public Schools SWOT Analysis



Note: A SWOT Analysis is a structured planning method used to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of an organization. Strengths are internal traits / advantages that give the organization an edge over others. Weaknesses are areas the organization needs to improve to perform at optimal levels. Opportunities are changes that could give the organization an advantage. Threats are factors that could potentially harm an organization.

3a. Strengths

CPS delivers exceptional academic outcomes relative to its resources, ranking in the top 15% statewide in MCAS scores while spending in the bottom 15% per pupil. High school graduation rates, near-universal access to advanced coursework (98% vs. 69% statewide), and a college matriculation rate of 76%, compared to 58% statewide, reflect a district that consistently produces strong results. Community confidence mirrors this: 91% of Chelmsford children attend local public schools, ranking 15th of 351 statewide and well above the 71% Massachusetts average.

Underpinning these outcomes is disciplined, proactive financial management. The district has not needed to pass a budget override in over a decade, supported by a data-driven culture in which leadership actively evaluates the return-on-investment of programs and is willing to cut those programs that fail to deliver the needed outcomes. Competitive starting salaries support strong recruitment and retention of early-career talent, while disciplined hiring practices keep salary spending in check.

CPS also maintains notable programmatic strengths, including a strong in-district special education continuum and a comprehensive SEL infrastructure that supports the whole child.

3b. Opportunities

CPS's in-district special education continuum is a meaningful asset that can be further leveraged both to support strong student outcomes and not incur the high tuition and transportation costs associated with out-of-district placements. Similarly, the district has an opportunity to reduce out-of-district transportation costs through competitive vendor contracting and rebidding, with the caveat that the district does not have significant economies of scale for negotiation with its declining out-of-district placements.

As student needs grow more complex and the student body grows more diverse, strategic investment in professional development, particularly in EL instruction, differentiated learning, and special education, would build educator capacity to meet those needs. A related priority is closing the persistent achievement gap between students with and without disabilities, which represents both an equity imperative and an area where targeted investment could move the needle.

CPS has fewer teachers per student than comparative districts and more paraeducators per student. An opportunity could exist for CPS to shift more staffing towards licensed educators and administrators as staff members retire or leave the district. Determining the appropriate staffing model for CPS should be a collaborative conversation with district and school leadership, in alignment with the district's strategic plan.

3c. Weaknesses

Out-of-district transportation costs are notably high relative to other Merrimack Valley districts statewide. Disparate placements of students in out-of-district programs make coordinating transportation challenging or impossible.

Despite recent district investments, achievement gaps are persistent for students with disabilities in CPS. Special education programming has long been an area of improvement for CPS, and the district has taken significant steps to expand in-district offerings and adjust staffing levels to provide robust services for students. While these important changes are taking place, the district is still working to improve outcomes for students within these programs. With refined programs in place, improvements to instruction and services have been a focus of the district over the last five years and likely should continue to be a focus as the district refines its special education programs to meet student needs. As the district looks towards its upcoming strategic plan, it has an opportunity to reevaluate its efforts and achievement metrics in a structured way.

3d. Threats

The district faces several converging pressures that could strain its ability to sustain current performance. Continued limits on hiring risk producing class sizes and course offerings that are no longer competitive with neighboring districts over time. CPS should continue to evaluate its capacity to build educator skills with professional development as student needs grow more complex and continue to prioritize effective professional development.

Cost pressures are also intensifying across multiple areas: curriculum subscriptions, transportation, and capital expenditures are all rising faster than normal budget growth allows. The district's school buildings average 62 years in age, and with \$2.8 million in capital projects planned for FY2026 alone, that figure will continue to grow, carrying risks for both code compliance and the technological and physical infrastructure needed to serve a growing student population.

4. Recommendations for Chelmsford Public Schools

Chelmsford Public Schools operates an efficient and effective organization that thoughtfully leverages precious community tax dollars to deliver strong outcomes for students and families. Given evolving needs of students and the shifting landscape of state and federal education funding, CPS might consider pursuing actions that reinforce its commitment to delivering strong academic outcomes in a cost-effective manner, while stabilizing its schools for the next generation of students and families.

The following four strategic recommendations are designed to position CPS to continue to deliver excellent outcomes for students and families.

Recommendation 1

Continue proactively budgeting and strategically investing community resources to produce strong outcomes for students.

CPS has firmly established itself as a strong steward of community resources, building proactive budgets that strategically invest community resources. This culture of strategic budgeting is not a product of happenstance, but of intentional efforts by district leaders to align all members of the organization to carefully invest community resources and build a strong school district. It is therefore important that the district does not lose its focus on strategic budgeting. In particular, the district should consider continuing to focus on three elements of its proactive approach to budgeting:

1. **Continuously evaluate staffing levels to meet the evolving needs of students:** Staffing represents the lion's share of a school district's budget. The most financially prudent districts carefully monitor the full composition of positions to ensure that all personnel are necessary and connected to the specific needs of students in the district. Leveraging benchmarking data from other Merrimack Valley districts and best practice research is helpful to ensure the district is appropriately staffed.
2. **Invest strategically to avoid large future costs:** School districts are in the business of improving outcomes for students, not cutting costs. However, as district leaders assess the evolving needs of their students, there may be opportunities to invest in new or refined program offerings that simultaneously support students' changing needs while avoiding large future costs. CPS has exemplified this approach by building or strengthening in-district specialized programs for students with more significant and complex learning needs. These programs first and foremost allow the district to provide high-quality instruction and support to students in their home district. As a secondary benefit, CPS limits its spending on costly out-of-district tuition and transportation. District and student needs will inevitably change, and CPS should consider how it can continue to adapt its offerings to align to those needs in a cost-effective manner.

3. **Maintain discipline around vendor negotiation and centralized purchasing:**
The strong culture of resource management in CPS has led to disciplined negotiations with vendors. Costs for materials and services have increased dramatically in recent years and do not show signs of slowing. Maintaining discipline with vendors and taking advantage of centralized purchasing for economies of scale will help CPS to continue to get favorable deals for important and necessary licenses, materials, and services.

Recommendation 2

Monitor high-growth cost areas.

In the last 10 years, costs in education have grown significantly, particularly in the areas of transportation, labor benefits, and instructional materials. These trends are not unique to Chelmsford, although the district has navigated increased costs effectively. Moving forward, the district should consider carefully monitoring high-growth cost areas to determine how best to invest its resources. Escalating costs in some areas might require the district to modify its approach, as there could be better, lower cost alternatives.

Two additional areas to continue monitoring are out-of-district tuition and transportation contracts. While both expenditures are necessary and provide critical support for students, opportunities may exist for the district to adjust its current approach to providing higher quality services for students while simultaneously managing costs. Continuing to build the in-district special education continuum of programs to reduce costly out-of-district tuition and transportation has been an important step for the district. Additionally, CPS should consider monitoring transportation contracts closely and exploring optimization opportunities as agreements come up for renewal.

Recommendation 3

Invest in maintaining or replacing aging facilities.

While CPS has aging facilities (the average age of a school building is ~62 years), the district has taken meaningful steps to invest in and sustain its existing buildings. Even in times of stretched funding, the district has used funds, carefully saved throughout the school year, to fund capital maintenance projects, thereby avoiding larger future costs in the short run. Despite thoughtful investments in and careful maintenance of its facilities, significant facility needs loom to ensure that the spaces in which students are educated align with modern needs.

In the short term, CPS should continue to fund proactive capital maintenance using year-end surpluses. In the long term, the district should consider confirming a district facilities strategy that balances prudent investments in new facilities with maintaining existing facilities. Facing potentially sizeable facility investments, the Chelmsford community should take comfort knowing that their district will care for any renovated or new facilities well to be able to serve students for generations to come.

Recommendation 4

Continue to assess outcomes relative to investments.

As previously mentioned, CPS has demonstrated that it is strategic and methodical in its approach to budgeting. District leaders carefully evaluate expenditures to ensure that initiatives and programs produce strong outcomes for students and the community. The district might consider adopting a more formal framework for evaluating programs through an Academic Return-on-Investment (AROI) lens. An AROI framework can help to systematize program evaluations, helping district leaders to align on definitions of success for their respective investments, setting them up to be able to determine how to take action based on a program's outcomes. In many districts, program outcomes are hazy because there is little agreement on what constitutes success. This lack of agreement prevents districts from redirecting their resources towards programs that truly deliver strong outcomes for intended groups of students.

CPS should consider building on its current approach, continuing to evaluate programs against outcome data and cut what is not working as well as tracking progress on persistent achievement gaps. With a strong framework for AROI, CPS will be able to take action on program outcomes to tailor programming and spending to what works for students, staff, and the community.

5. Conclusion

Chelmsford Public Schools operates an efficient and effective organization that consistently delivers top results for its students. Its leadership and team are thoughtful stewards of community resources and are a model for communities across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. However, as costs rise, facilities age, and student needs become more complex, even the best managed school district will face challenges with maintaining top results for students and families. CPS must strategically address risks and consider the recommendations outlined in this report. This work will require a continued partnership between district leadership, town leadership, and the Chelmsford community to ensure the long-term stability and excellence of CPS.

Chelmsford Community Member Next Steps

The Town of Chelmsford and Chelmsford Public Schools values community input and wants to empower community members to share their thoughts and priorities in the following ways:

- **School Committee Meetings:** Attend or watch biweekly meetings broadcast on Chelmsford Telemedia
- **Chelmsford Strategic Planning:** CPS is launching its next five-year strategic plan and wants to hear from parents and community members. The district will gather feedback via on-line survey and listen to feedback in community meetings.
- **Parent Teacher Organizations:** Parents can stay engaged and share school-level input by joining their school's PTO.
- **Annual Spring Town Meeting:** Each spring, elected town meeting representatives vote on the town and school budgets at the Annual Town Meeting, held at the Senior Center (75 Groton Road, North Chelmsford). Community members are encouraged to attend.

6. Appendices

6a. Appendix A – CPS Financial Planning Data Request

Below are the data points DMG requested from CPS. We received financial data going back 10+ years.

Financial / Budgetary Data Request

Document	Years	Description
Historical Budget	2017-2027	Annual budget by line item with account codes and location codes, as appropriate, inclusive of revenue source
Grant Budgets	2017-2027	Grant budgets for Title I, II, funding, etc.
Other Philanthropic Revenue Sources	2017-2027	Other sources of revenue, as relevant
Historical Capital Expenditure Projects	2017-2027	Expenditure and project details
District Budget Policy Documents	2025-2026	Municipal and district policy documents (i.e. Documents related to budget policy for the Town of Chelmsford)
CPS Building APPA Ratings	2017-2027	Building condition ratings used for strategic plan goal tracking
Maintenance Orders	2017-2027	Maintenance orders completed and open for district buildings

Human Resources Staffing and Student Enrollment Data Request

- Employee ID
- Employee Full Name
- School Site (Chelmsford High School, Parker Middle School, etc.)
- Role in District
- Position Type (i.e., Special Education, ELD, general education, etc.)
- FTE
- Tenure / Years in District
- Funding Source (i.e., general fund, Title fund, etc.)
- Annual Salary

- Annual Benefits
- Step (if applicable)
- Union Contract

Student Outcomes Data Request

- i-Ready Scores
- VOCAL Scores

6b. Appendix B – Massachusetts Department of Education (DESE) Cost Categories

Below is the full list of functional spending categories that DESE uses in its per pupil expenditures calculations. For more information, see the DESE website at <https://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/statistics/per-pupil-exp.html>

Function	Description
In-District Expenditures	
1110	School Committee
1210	Superintendent
1220	Assistant Superintendents
1230	Other District-Wide Administration
1410	Business and Finance
1420	Human Resources
1430	Legal Service for School Committee
1435	Legal Settlements
1450	Districtwide Administrative Technology +
ADMN	Administration (sub-total)
2110	Curriculum Directors and Department Heads (Supervisory)
2120	Curriculum Directors and Department Heads (Non-Supervisory)
2130	Instructional Technology Leadership +
2210	School Leadership
2220	<i>Curriculum Leaders and Department Heads (School Level) *</i>
2250	Administrative Technology (School Level)
2315	<i>Instructional Coordinators*</i>
LDRS	Instructional Leadership (sub-total)
2305	Teachers, Classroom
2310	<i>Teachers, Specialists*</i>
TCHR	Teachers (sub-total)
2320	Medical/Therapeutic Services
2324	Substitutes, Long-Term
2325	Substitutes, Short-Term
2330	Paraprofessionals
2340	Librarians/Media Center Directors

2345	Distance Learning/Online Coursework +
TSER	Other Teaching Services (sub-total)
2351	Professional Development Leaders
2352	Instructional Coaches
2353	<i>Professional Days*</i>
2354	Stipends for Teachers Providing Instructional Coaching
2355	<i>Substitutes for Professional Development*</i>
2356	Costs for Instructional Staff to Attend Professional Development
2357	<i>Professional Development Costs*</i>
2358	Outside Professional Development Providers for Instructional Staff
PDEV	Professional Development (sub-total)
2410	Textbooks +
2415	Instructional Materials (Libraries)
2420	Instructional Equipment
2430	General Classroom Supplies
2440	Other Instructional Services
2451	Instructional Hardware (Student and Staff Devices) +
2453	Instructional Hardware (All Other) +
2455	Instructional Software and Other Instructional Materials +
MATL	Instructional Materials, Equipment, and Technology (sub-total)
2710	Guidance/Adjustment Counselors
2720	Testing and Assessment
2800	Psychological Services
GUID	Guidance, Counseling, and Testing (sub-total)
3100	Attendance and Parent Liaisons
3200	Medical/Health Services
3300	Transportation Services
3400	Food Services
3510	Athletics
3520	Other Student Activities
3600	School Security
SERV	Pupil Services (sub-total)
4110	Custodial Services
4120	Heating of Buildings
4130	Utility Services
4210	Maintenance of Grounds
4220	Maintenance of Buildings
4225	Building Security System
4230	Maintenance of Equipment
4300	Extraordinary Maintenance
4400	Technology Maintenance/Support (Salaries) +
4450	Technology Maintenance/Support (All Other) +

OPMN	Operations and Maintenance (sub-total)
5100	Employer Retirement Contributions
5150	Employee Separation Costs
5200	Insurance for Active Employees
5250	Insurance for Retired Employees
5260	Other Non-Employee Insurance
5300	Rental Lease of Equipment
5350	Rental Lease of Buildings
5400	Short Term Interest RANs
5500	Other Fixed Charges
5550	School Crossing Guards
BENE	Benefits and Fixed Charges (sub-total)
III	Total In-District Expenditures
Out-of-District Expenditures	
9100	Tuition to Massachusetts Public Schools
9110	Tuition for School Choice
9120	Tuition to Commonwealth Charter Schools
9125	Tuition to Horace Mann Charter Schools
9130	Charter Transportation Tuition ^
9200	Tuition to Out-of-State Schools
9300	Tuition to Non-Public Schools
9400	Tuition to Collaboratives
ODTR	Transportation
OODD	Total Out-of-District Expenditures
Total Expenditures Per Pupil	
TTPP	Total Expenditures

6c. Appendix C – Academic Return-on-Investment Materials

Attached in a separate file.

District Management Group is committed to partnering with districts to bring about transformational, measurable, and sustainable improvements in public education. We are committed to helping schools and students thrive.



**District
Management
Group**

Helping Schools and
Students Thrive

If you have any comments or questions about the contents of this document, please contact District Management Group:

Tel: (877) 362-3500

Email: info@dmgroupK12.com

Fax: (617) 491-5266

Web: www.dmgroupK12.com

Mail: 133 Federal Street, Boston, MA 02110