

Acton Public and Acton Boxborough Regional Schools
Joint Committee for Education
Education Reform Listening Tour

As representatives of the Town of Acton, the Acton Public and Acton-Boxborough Regional School Districts, we would like to ask the Joint Committee for Education to modify the formula for chapter 70 aid so that there is a minimum of \$2000 per student in chapter 70 aid for each and every student in Massachusetts no matter where they live. \$2000 would be the baseline, a “floor” or “circuit breaker”, but it would not preclude communities with greater needs from receiving more than the baseline. To bring all communities up to a baseline of \$2000 per student would cost an additional \$266 million dollars above current funding levels, without harming any communities.

The current formula which determines how much chapter 70 aid each city and town receives is unfair and inequitable. Attachment A shows the current chapter 70 aid each community is receiving per student, sorted from highest to lowest. If you scan this list, you can see that cities and towns of comparable wealth receive very different amounts of aid. Chapter 70 aid ranges from \$576 per student in some towns to almost \$10,000 per student in others. While the state average is \$3441 per student in chapter 70 aid, Acton is currently receiving \$1142 per student, a full 1/3 of the state average (figure 1). There are some communities that receive more in aid than we spend per student. We believe there is too much disparity, and the baseline per student is too low.

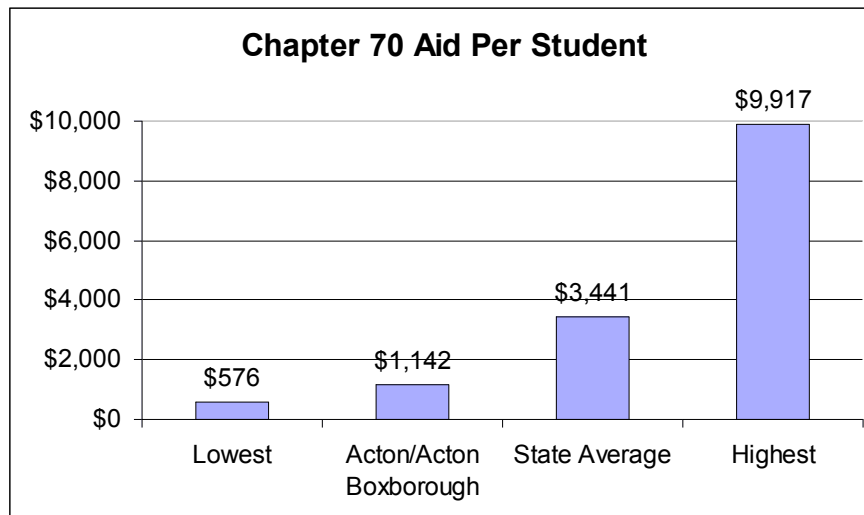
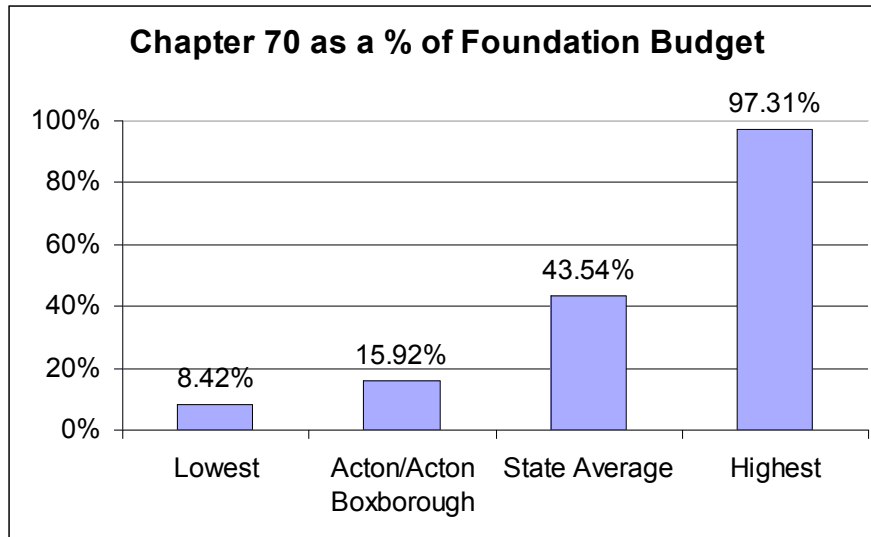


figure 1

Another way to look at chapter 70 aid is as a percentage of a school district’s foundation budget. Current chapter 70 aid ranges from 8.42% of foundation budget in communities receiving the lowest amount of state aid to 97.31% of foundation budget in the communities that are receiving the most. While the state average is 43.54% of foundation budget, Acton and Acton Boxborough are currently receiving 16% of our foundation budget (figure 2).



We believe that a new chapter 70 formula should include the following:

1. Foundation needs to be redefined to reflect the actual cost to educate a student today in a way that meets all seven curriculum frameworks needs to be determined, as is spelled out in the Bill S299.
2. A baseline or “floor” should be established that is a minimum amount of state aid that all communities receive for each student. We are proposing that in today’s dollars the baseline be \$2500.
3. An inflationary factor, such as 5%, needs to be created for annual increases to chapter 70 that reflects that actual costs that budgets need to increase annually to meet average wage, pension and health insurance increases.
4. The formula should not penalize towns if they pass an override.

Acton is a community that values education, and our students historically perform at the top of the state, while our per pupil spending is below the state average (figure 3). Our citizens have stepped up to the plate and voted to increase their own property taxes by 25% in the last 3 years by passing two major general overrides: a \$3 million dollar override in March of 2003, and a \$3.9 million dollar override in March of 2005. Yet, a 25% decrease in chapter 70 aid to the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District in 2002 (figures 4 and 5), the elimination of regional aid, decreases in transportation aid, combined with dramatic enrollment increases and skyrocketing healthcare costs have lead us to make deep cuts in all aspects of our operation. We have cut 25 full time equivalent staff in the last three years, and expect to have to cut more this year. We have the second largest class sizes of all school districts in Massachusetts according to the student/teacher ratio chart on the DOE website (figure 6). Our high school has grown from 1500 students in 2001 to 1800 students in 2005 without adding a single teacher! The school committee voted to re-enact the school choice program this year, adding 50 more students to our high school from neighboring towns, which provided a revenue source to hire five teachers. We have high school classes with as

many as 50 students in them, with many classes over 40. It is not uncommon for even a freshman to have more than 30 students in each of their classes. AB high school teachers teach 5 classes, and have a teaching load of 120 to 150 students each. In recent years we have lost highly qualified teaching candidates to school districts with much smaller teaching loads. From Kindergarten through 12th grade, Acton and AB classes are 25%-30% larger than the Massachusetts average. Our five elementary schools do not have some of the most basic educational supports, including no certified librarians, technology instructors, and only one curriculum specialist shared among the five schools. It's hard to imagine meeting all of the curriculum frameworks without libraries, curriculum support, technology instructors or any funding for computers. This will be the fourth consecutive year that the School Committee debates whether it is better to cut art, music and p.e., or if it is better to 5th and 6th grade students in classes of 35.

Acton is unusual in that 80% of its revenues come from property taxes. We have much lower than average commercial tax base and state aid. This puts an undue burden on our senior citizens. Of the money that we spend, 70% of it goes to school services. The 30% that goes to municipal services is down from 40% ten years ago as municipal budgets have made room due to 33% growth in school enrollment. Severe understaffing in all town and school services has increased our risks in areas of public safety and infrastructure maintenance.

We know that from a distance Acton looks like a high performing school district that can survive with very few resources. We need you to understand that this situation is not sustainable. While our performance might not degrade this year or the next, if we continue with this pattern make no mistake that the Acton and AB school districts will be a very different place five years from now. We cannot let this happen. That is why we are here today.

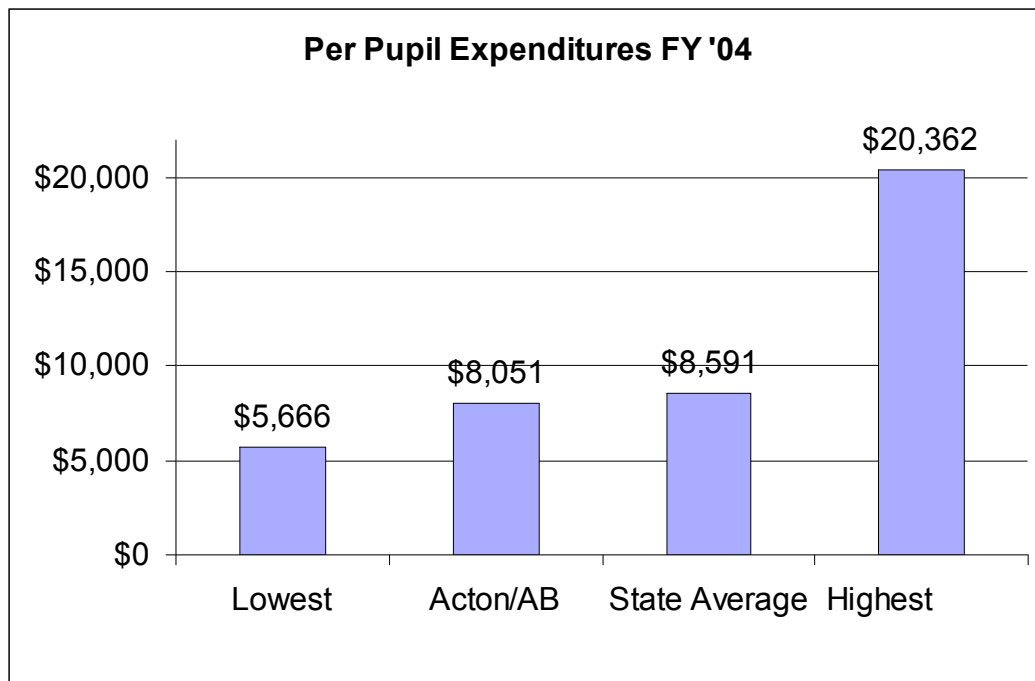


figure 3

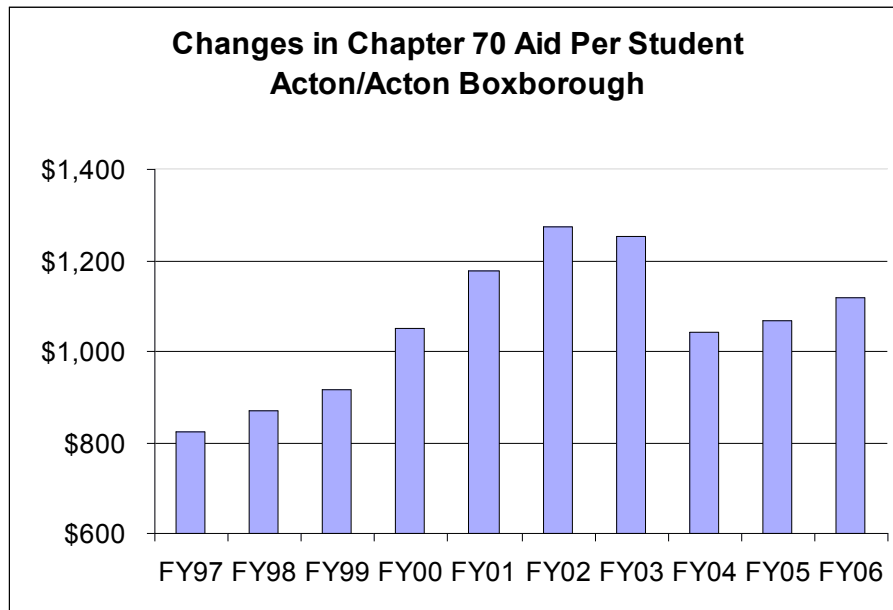


figure 4

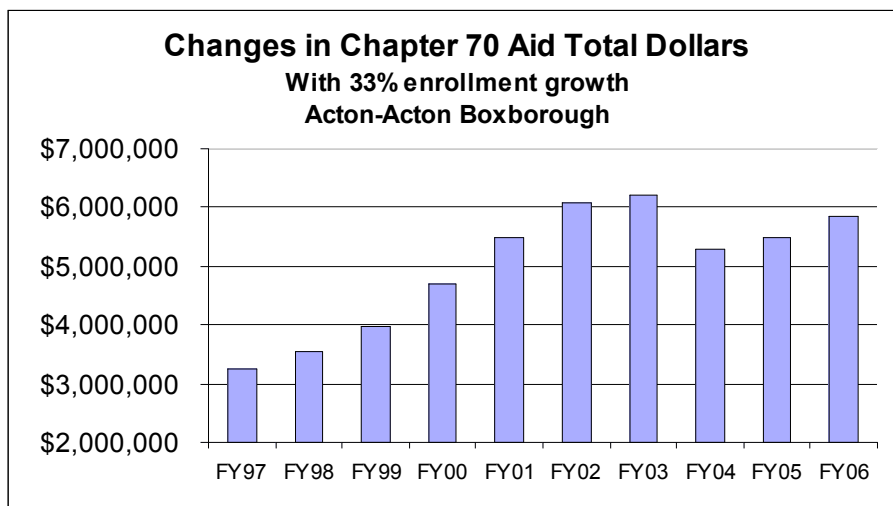


figure 5

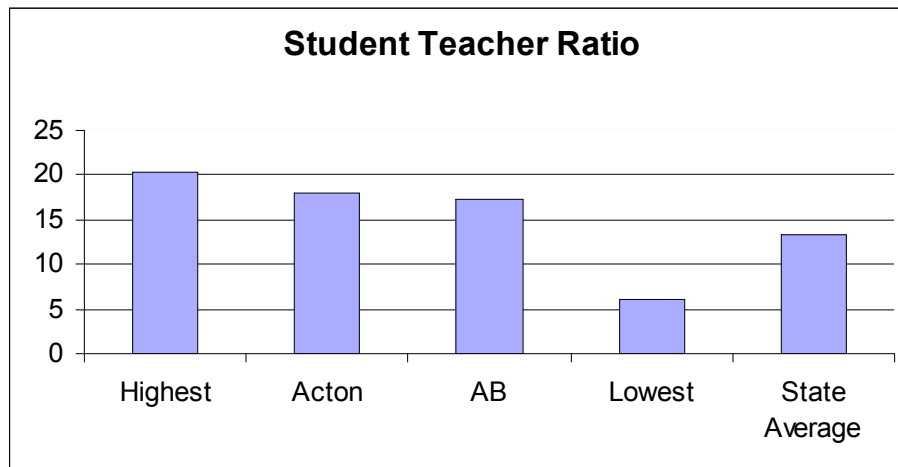


figure 6