

# Hands Off Voc-Techs' Success

## Lottery-based admissions proposal is a mistake

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Foreword by Kevin McCaskill and Warley Williams



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## Foreword

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Entrepreneurs looking to start a new business or corporations seeking to expand their operations, have long lists of considerations when deciding where to plant their flag. Are the business taxes competitive? Is there a transportation network to ship their goods? Is the local government business-friendly? But more importantly they look at the local workforce. Is there a well-educated, fundamentally-trained pool of people who can do the job?

Career vocational-technical education high schools in Massachusetts see to it that regions around the Commonwealth are stocked with such people. Our mission is to provide students with the latest skills to thrive in the 21st Century economy. Thrive by understanding the basics of construction or the engineering of robotics or the science of biotech.

Vocational-technical high schools are partners with the business community. Employers want motivated, skilled individuals. They count on us to provide them and we have delivered. Our graduates are better prepared to enter the workforce than students from comprehensive high schools. Our curriculum is unique, alternating vocational and academic education on a weekly basis. The programs we offer include skills like workplace readiness, teamwork and problem solving.

Because of the job we've done in raising MCAS scores to the level of comprehensive high schools, lifting graduation rates and reducing student drop-outs, we have more young people than ever before applying for a seat in our schools. And that means potentially a greater number of students trained and ready to step into a job upon graduation.

But there's a lid on the number of students we can educate. Not a "glass ceiling" but a "class room ceiling." Thousands of students are on waiting lists for vocational-technical schools, because there simply are not enough seats for them. So who gets in and why them?

Through our admissions policies we ensure that the students who enter our doors are a match for our mission. We train them on sophisticated, potentially dangerous equipment. We need them to be present in class to learn how to use that equipment and mature enough to be around it. Therefore we take their behavioral and attendance records in lower grades very seriously.

Today there are policy makers urging that we switch from our longstanding admissions process to a lottery. Voc-tech schools are public schools and everyone should have a chance to get in, they argue. Too many of our graduates are going on to college, taking seats from kids more suited for middle-class jobs. They say that students in protected groups such as low-income, minority and students with disabilities, are not sufficiently represented in vocational-technical school populations.

As experienced vocational-technical school leaders, we can say confidently that a lottery will not solve the problem. It won't create more seats, expand an existing school or build a new one. The mix of students who are accepted into a vocational-technical school would be altered, but the number of students on waiting lists would not change.

Vocational-technical schools already reflect the demographic characteristics of the state. We educate a higher percentage of low-income students than traditional high schools and we have a larger percentage of special needs students in our schools than comprehensive schools.

As for where our graduates go when they leave, we believe there's reason to celebrate when one of our students, perhaps a youngster of color or one who has overcome a disability, earns a high school degree, learns a trade AND is accepted into a four-year college

The obvious answer to our problem is to create more vocational-technical capacity in our schools. Rethink comprehensive high schools to include-technical programs. Expand existing regional vocational-technical high schools where the waiting lists are longest. Invest in a new building

where there is great demand. What if, for example, an additional regional vocational-technical high school was built in an area of the state where demand is high and capacity is insufficient? Is there any reason to believe it would not be filled?

As two career, minority voc-tech leaders, it's frustrating for us to know that any student from a low-income family or perhaps a young English language learner from an immigrant family, is not able to access the opportunities vocational-technical schools offer. Very often these students are expected to eventually contribute to their family's household income. We know such families.

By making Massachusetts' vocational-technical school system the gold standard for voc-tech education in the U.S., our policy makers have shown a commitment to ensuring that minority, low-income, English language learners and students with disabilities can have a future in middle class careers or more.

## Executive Summary

In February of 2023, a group of community activists filed a federal civil rights complaint against the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). The complaint alleged that career vocational-technical education (CVTE) schools in Massachusetts were allowed to use admissions criteria that “unjustifiably excludes” students of color, English language learners and students with disabilities.<sup>1</sup>

The group, known as the Vocational Education Justice Coalition (VEJC), favors an open lottery system. They note that vocational-technical schools are public schools, funded by taxpayer dollars, and should not be allowed to act like private schools that rank students and then choose preferred applicants.

Their position is opposed by the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators, (MAVA), an organization that represents 63 schools in the commonwealth. MAVA officials agree that any student who “wants access to a vocational technical education should have it.”<sup>2</sup> But they say the problem is the lack of space for the thousands of students seeking to enroll, not the admissions policies. During the 2015–2016 school year, there were about 3,200 students on waiting lists for vocational-technical schools.<sup>3</sup> Today there are more than 6,000 and possibly as many as 11,000, according to DESE. A lottery would not change that total, MAVA argues, just merely rearrange which students are left out.

There is no disputing that a seat in a Massachusetts vocational-technical school has become a prized possession. More than 54,300 high school students were enrolled in Chapter 74 programs<sup>4</sup> during the 2022–2023 school year,<sup>5</sup> about 9,500 more kids than 10 years earlier.

In 2021 the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved new regulations aimed at creating more fairness in admissions to vocational-technical schools. MAVA officials say 97 percent of vocational-technical and agricultural high schools made changes to their admissions policies in response to the revised regulations. Student grades, while still emphasized, are not as dominant a factor. Minor disciplinary issues no longer impact student records. Attendance scoring has been revised. More assistance in language translation is being provided and interviewers are being trained to eliminate bias in their evaluation of applicants.

The Vocational Education Justice Coalition contends the revised regulations made only “minimal changes” and that DESE “continues to grant CVTE schools substantial discretion over their admission procedures.”<sup>6</sup> In its civil rights complaint, the VEJC asks the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights to suspend any further federal funding “until DESE prohibits CVTE schools from utilizing discriminatory admissions criteria, and instead creates a more equitable admission process for all students across the board.”<sup>7</sup>

In February 2024, a bill that would require vocational-technical schools or comprehensive high schools that offer vocational-technical programs to hold a lottery if there are more eligible

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applicants from a sending community than seats available, advanced to the Senate Ways and Means Committee. The measure, Senate Bill 257, would also allow schools to consider attendance and disciplinary histories “for entry to the lottery.”

This paper looks at a unique situation in Massachusetts education: the outsized demand for access to public career vocational-technical education by those who could most use it, against the use of screening at a time of limited capacity. It draws on interviews with educators, civil rights advocates and elected officials, as well as data generated by state, federal and independent sources on vocational education, enrollment and demographics.

References to “voc-ed” as high schools reserved for underachieving kids and trouble makers have become tired tropes. These days the programs are filled with students designing robots, studying artificial intelligence or engaged in traditional CVTE courses such as culinary arts or auto repair. Meanwhile more students are trying to get through the doors. In Massachusetts and elsewhere in the U.S., the challenge of educators and policy makers is to meet that demand.

## Background

Massachusetts’ career vocational-technical education system has long been cited as one of the nation’s best. The 28 regional voc-tech high schools, four agricultural schools and the Chapter 74 vocational programs that operate within comprehensive high schools in 41 districts in the commonwealth fill a much-needed economic development role: producing graduates with employable skills to meet the area’s labor needs.

Still, the reputation of voc-tech schools once was that they were for students who weren’t suited for higher education. In fact, many weren’t. But that was often because they were attracted to the trades or were from low-income or immigrant families who needed them to contribute to the family income by stepping straight from high school into a middle-class career.

That reputation has changed considerably. In 1993 the state legislature approved the Massachusetts Education Reform Act, which established the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). The first tests were given in 1998 and passage became a graduation requirement for the class of 2003. At the time, many vocational-technical educators argued that the requirement was unfair to voc-tech students. Unlike their peers in comprehensive high schools, voc-tech kids spend the first half of their freshman year exploring the majors offered at their school. After selecting one, they switch to an alternating schedule beginning in the second half of their freshman year. One full week is spent in shop, focusing on their chosen vocation, the next week in traditional academic classes. Voc-tech superintendents argued that their schedule made it harder for them to pass the MCAS exams, but state officials refused to exempt them from the mandate.

But the schools rose to the occasion, with MCAS scores that exceeded those of comprehensive high schools. On the 2008 exams, for example, 96 percent of voc-tech students passed the math and English tests, compared to a statewide average of 94 percent. During the same year, the average graduation rate at voc-tech schools was 90.5 percent compared to a statewide average of 80.9 percent.<sup>8</sup> The reputations of voc-tech schools improved. For students who were unsure about whether to join the workforce or further their education after graduation, enrolling in college became a realistic option. Families took notice and applications climbed.

Vocational-technical schools became magnets, of a sort. But the doors, as a practical matter, weren’t open to everyone. The schools have attendance requirements because employers want graduates who will show up for work. They have discipline rules because students who goof around with blow torches or swing a wrench if they become angry are dangers in a shop lab. They need to be attentive in classrooms where the course content relates directly to the skills they learn in shop. The schools, as partners with the businesses that help support them, saw value in the admissions policies they devised.

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The practice of accepting some students and rejecting others isn't new. Admissions policies at Massachusetts voc-tech schools date back to 1910 at the Worcester Boys Trade School, according to vocational education historian Wilfrid Savoie. Boys admitted to the trade school "must be fourteen years of age, completed a Worcester grammar school and promoted to high school, exhibit mechanical aptitude and be physically fit to safely perform the work. Boys who did not graduate from grammar school may apply to the trade school and were given an examination to determine their fitness for admission."<sup>9</sup>

As strong academic performance burnished the reputations of voc-tech schools, demand took off. Upgrades and expansions were undertaken to make room for the rising enrollment. Those shiny classrooms and high-tech trade shops made the schools even more attractive. Eventually every vocational-technical school had a waiting list, and that's where civil rights advocates have a problem.

## Public, not private

"These are public schools and there's no other public schools allowed to be selective by criteria within the commonwealth, except for a handful of Boston schools," says Andrea Sheppard Lomba, executive director of United Interfaith Action, a social action group that is part of the Vocational Education Justice Coalition. "There should be equal access for the students."<sup>10</sup>

The selective admissions process includes five categories in which applicants are judged and awarded points, then ranked against other applicants. They are:

- Grades
- Attendance
- School discipline
- Guidance counselor's recommendation
- Personal interview with school official

Points given for each category often vary within and among schools. Shawsheen Valley Technical High School awards a maximum of 15 points for scholastic achievement, for example, and 20 points for school discipline. Greater Lowell Technical High School awards up to 40 points for grades, but only 15 for school discipline. Applicants can earn up to 30 points for their middle school attendance history and 30 points for grades at Northern Berkshire Vocational Regional High School. Minuteman Regional Vocational Technical School awards a maximum of 20 points for grades and 20 points for attendance.

In 2021 DESE removed the requirement that grades, attendance, discipline records and counselor recommendations be used as admissions criteria and instead permitted each school to develop its own policy and submit it for state review. Those policies needed to follow state and federal laws and should not use "criteria that have the effect of disproportionately excluding persons in protected classes unless they can demonstrate that the criteria have been validated as essential to participation."<sup>11</sup> The policies did not require using a lottery.

MAVA supported the revisions because of the autonomy schools were given to respond to community needs. According to MAVA Executive Director Steven Sharek, 97 percent of vocational-technical and agricultural high schools made changes to their admissions policies, personnel and training following the 2021 DESE admission order.<sup>12</sup>

Prior to the DESE recommendations, a typical school scoring system for academic achievement might require a student to earn an average grade between 90 and 100 to get full credit in its rating system. Following DESE's recommendation most schools relaxed their academic scoring. Students with averages below 90 might receive full credit. A "C" average could be treated the same as an "A" average.

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Changes in discipline meant that minor acts of disobedience or misconduct would not be harshly penalized, but suspensions or expulsions from middle schools still weigh heavily against a student. Violations of Massachusetts laws prohibiting bringing a dangerous weapon such as a gun or a knife to the school or a school event could disqualify an applicant (M.G.L. c.71 §37H or §37H1/2 or c.71 §37H3/4). If a student is convicted of a felony, the principal or superintendent of the school would review the student's record. Would his or her presence be detrimental to the school? Enrolled students committing similar offenses could be expelled.

Following DESE's recommendations, the schools also changed policies regarding attendance. Excused absences could no longer be used in admission rankings, the logic being that many low-income or minority students often have family obligations that can cause them to miss part or all of a school day.

## Hybrids

Three schools—Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational Technical High School, Assabet Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School and Worcester Technical High School—introduced admissions policies that includes a modified lottery.

### Greater New Bedford

For the 2022–23 school year, Greater New Bedford implemented a revised policy that combines a qualified lottery with selective criteria. The school enrolls 565 freshmen each September and the admission process begins with the qualified lottery for the first 285 seats in the class.

All completed applications submitted by a set deadline become eligible for the lottery.

Additionally, a student must have a 70 or better average in ELA, math, science and social studies from the sending middle school and be promoted. They must also have a record of being absent no more than 10 percent of school days; and they need to demonstrate that the student was not suspended or expelled for violations such as bringing a weapon to school or assaulting a teacher. Minor behavior infractions are not considered in the admissions process. Once all eligible students have been identified, the lottery is held in April.

Once the lottery is held, remaining seats for the incoming class are filled using selective criteria approved by the GNBVTHS district school committee. Like other voc-tech schools, those criteria include a point system for academic achievement, attendance and school behavior.

Michael Watson, superintendent of the school, says that adjusting the attendance requirements was momentous. His staff listens to what business leaders say about the importance of having employees who show up for work.

“A few years ago, if you had one absence you lost points,” Watson says. “Attendance was 30 points and every absence counted against you. We’ve made a pretty significant change to our attendance policy to address that. Whether or not that’s created the results we’re looking for, time will tell. We’ve only had this qualified lottery system in place for one year.”<sup>13</sup>

Though his school has instituted a qualified lottery, Watson says he doesn't know enough about broader open lotteries to say they would work. “It doesn't address the root cause of the problem, which is that in some communities the issue is not just who is in the seats, but that there aren't enough seats to accommodate all those people who want one. That's the root issue.”

### Assabet Valley

When Assabet Valley receives more applications than it has available seats, the school applies a “minimum requirement” lottery to determine which students will be admitted. To be considered for the lottery, applicants must complete three required steps: fill out an application; attend an informational interview; and submit a letter of recommendation from a counselor, teacher, advisor, coach or community member. Applicants then are assigned a lottery number.

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The school's admissions committee conducts a lottery until all seats are filled. All completed applications are considered for fall admission and included in the lottery draw, which takes place in April.

Accepted students with disciplinary infractions for conduct within the previous school year for which suspension or expulsion was imposed pursuant to state laws will have their admission rescinded.

While Assabet uses a lottery, the number of students accepted every year from each of the school's seven member communities is determined by the three-year average of the previous year's October 1 enrollment numbers. If the town of Hudson had a three-year average of 50 students enrolled at the school, then 50 seats would be available to Hudson for the next school year.

"Part of the success of vocational schools is that we know our students and we personalize the education for those students," says Ernest Houle, superintendent at Assabet Valley. "That process starts during the application and admissions process."<sup>14</sup>

### Worcester

Like Greater New Bedford and Assabet Valley, students applying to Worcester Tech need to fill out an application. Seats at the school are allocated proportionately to each feeder school in the city, based upon their share of the overall 8th grade fall enrollment within Worcester Public Schools (WPS).

For both Worcester Tech and comprehensive Worcester high schools that offer a Chapter 74 program, WPS runs a tiered lottery. All applicants are assigned to one of three tiers based on attendance and discipline/safety criteria. The actual lotteries are conducted separately for Worcester Tech and each program at a comprehensive high school.

To be in Tier 1, for example, a student cannot have more than 10 total unexcused absences in the 7th and 8th grades combined, and no more than one long-term suspension for violating state law relating to dangerous weapons on school grounds or a felony conviction during the same two years.

A public lottery is held for applicants from each tier and feeder school, beginning with Tier 1. Next, names from Tier 2 and then Tier 3 are drawn from each feeder school.

### Open lotteries vs more seats

In February 2023 the VEJC was back arguing that the schools' approaches remained harmful to four protected groups: students of color, English learners, students with disabilities and low-income students.

In their civil rights complaint, the VEJC claimed that 5,067 out of 9,181 students of color, or 55 percent, were offered admission for the 2022–2023 school year, compared to 7,815 out of 11,402 white students, or 69 percent. The gap was larger for English learners. Only 44 percent of that group was accepted, compared with 64 percent of non-English learners. Among students with disabilities, 54 percent received offers compared with 65 percent of those without disabilities. Low-income students were admitted at a 54 percent rate, nearly 20 percentage points behind non-economically disadvantaged students (72 percent).<sup>15</sup> To the coalition the problem was clear. Schools were still using a score card to rank students and not an open lottery.

"We're trying to work so that the students of color, English language learners, special needs kids and low-income kids have equal chance to get into vocational schools with those students who are not in those groupings," says Lewis Finfer of the VEJC. "If you go (to a partial lottery), like at Assabet, that's better than it is now. That's a positive, but it needs to go to a full lottery. There are still kids being eliminated by some of the criteria they've kept."<sup>16</sup>

Lotteries can be problematic for schools that draw students from multiple towns. In regional districts, the annual assessment of each community's share of school expenses is based upon the

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Finfer says adjustments would need to be made. Districts that apportion seats might need to do individual lotteries.

“If I was in Assabet Vocational School in Marlborough and Stowe is a sending district that has six seats and 10 people apply from Stowe, they’d do a lottery for those 10 students,” Finfer says. “So it would be individual lotteries for each school and some would need to do further lotteries by geography, depending on the legal arrangements that sending towns have with the schools they are sending to.”

The bigger problem with requiring schools to use lotteries, according to school superintendents, is that they don’t address the shortage of seats for students. The composition of students who are accepted would change somewhat, but it would not reduce the waiting lists. Finfer agrees that creating more seats would be a long-term solution. But before then lotteries will allow more students from protected groups to be selected.

“They’re getting in less under the current system than the other kids,” Finfer says of the students in the protected groups. “If they had an equal chance then more of them would get in. Yes, it could also mean that kids who are not in those four groups who don’t do well in those measures will have more of a chance. But it’s going to give more of a chance to those people in those protected classes.”

Lottery backers also point to the percentage of students who go on to college after graduation rather than into the workforce as another flaw of the selective criteria process. According to DESE, 50 percent of Chapter 74 graduates of the class of 2018 continued on to additional education, while 33 percent were employed in a field related to their education and 12 percent were employed in an unrelated field. That suggests to them that not enough kids who would get the most use out of a vocational education are attending voc-tech schools.

“The fact that these schools are sending 50 percent of their graduates into higher education and four-year schools is really troubling,” says Sen. John Cronin, (D-Worcester/Middlesex), a critic of the selective admissions model and sponsor of S.257, the bill advancing in the Massachusetts Senate that would require schools that offer a Chapter 74 program to hold a lottery. “I’m not saying that college bound students don’t belong in vocational schools. I’m saying, that kid does not deserve more access than the kid who is growing up in poverty and a C-average student, who could use a Chapter 74 program to change the trajectory of their life and their family’s life.”<sup>17</sup>

Sharek, the executive director of MAVA, doesn’t agree that opening the doors wide will mean more kids from a protected group would enroll. They could see their numbers depressed in a larger pool of applicants.

“We have schools like Minuteman (Regional Vocational Technical High School in Lexington) that has probably 40 percent of its students who have disabilities,” says Sharek. “If the populations of its sending schools include about 16 percent of kids with disabilities and you go to a blind lottery, pure chance, what are the odds that 40 percent of the kids will be kids with IEPs?”<sup>18</sup>

Sharek says voc-tech schools can’t deliberately exclude kids in protected groups through their admission procedure, because there are restrictions on what voc-tech schools can ask about students on their applications. He said the schools are unaware of ethnicity or disability until they enroll.

In the letter MAVA sent to Governor Healey in January of 2024, he used the same series of data the VEJC used from DESE to claim that the students who enrolled in voc-tech programs in the 2022–2023 school year closely reflected the demographics of the sending communities.

Of the pool of students eligible for voc-tech programs for the 2022–2023 school year, 43.9 percent were students of color. Of the students who actually enrolled in voc-tech schools the same year, 42.3 percent were students of color. Of the total group of students eligible for voc-tech schools, 7.5 percent were English Language Learners. About 6.6 percent of students who ultimately enrolled

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were ELL. Students with disabilities made up 18.8 percent of the pool of eligible students, while the percentage of students who enrolled who had disabilities was 19.3 percent. Finally, 44 percent of the pool of students eligible for voc-tech programs were considered low-income, and 46.4 percent of students who enrolled were in the low-income group.<sup>19</sup>

Sharek agrees with the goal of having enrollment levels for each protected class reflect the percentage of individuals in their communities. That intention hasn't always been "on our radar screen," he says. But he believes that the selective admissions process was a "non-issue statewide" among other parties, such as comprehensive high school officials, until there was a surge in demand for voc-tech education.

"While we didn't pay close attention to those categories and the percentages, our schools should reflect the demographic composition of the member communities, as a general proposition," Sharek says. "That seems equitable, fair and reasonable. Why should we be all of one category and not of another?"

## Financing vocational education

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the merits of a lottery, the fact is that there currently isn't enough space in vocational-technical schools to accommodate the thousands of students on waiting lists. And the vocational education business requires deep pockets.

The average total per pupil expenditure for Massachusetts high schools, including charter schools but not including voc-tech schools, was \$20,767 in 2022. For voc-tech students that number was \$23,874, a per pupil difference of more than \$3,100.<sup>20</sup>

Voc-tech school buildings are also more expensive than most traditional high schools, because of the need to equip voc-tech schools with shop facilities for automotive technology, plumbing, carpentry and other trades. In recent years new comprehensive high schools have gone up in Somerville (\$256 million<sup>21</sup>) and Arlington (\$290 million<sup>22</sup>). The projected cost of a new traditional high school in East Longmeadow that is expected to open in 2026 is \$177 million.

Voc-tech schools cost more and, with taxpayers from multiple towns in regional compacts, there are taxpayer limitations. All plans had been approved until January when a proposal to build a new Whittier Regional Vocational Technical High School in Haverhill, at a cost of \$445 million, was rejected.

Yet new voc-tech construction is happening, and new seats are being added. A new Northeast Metropolitan Regional Vocational High School in Wakefield is expected to be completed in 2026 at a cost of \$318 million. The school will include state-of-the-art vocational shops, enhanced technological capabilities and room for an additional 300 students.<sup>23</sup> Bristol-Plymouth Regional Technical School in Taunton started construction on a new \$305 million school in October 2023.<sup>24</sup> The new facility will hold 1,434 students, about 100 more than enrolled in 2014, according to DESE records.

In 2023, companion bills were introduced in the Massachusetts House and Senate that proposed creating a \$3 billion fund for capital investments in Chapter 74 programs and schools, including replacement and renovation of school infrastructure. Though supportive of the idea, MAVA leadership concluded the dollar amount was unlikely to be approved by the Legislature.

Instead, in January MAVA proposed creating a \$300 million competitive grant fund to increase Chapter 74 seating capacity across the state in high demand, high wage fields. The terms on who would receive the grants and other limitations include:

1. Vocational technical schools, agricultural high schools, and comprehensive high schools offering no less than five Chapter 74 programs will be eligible for grants.
2. Eligible recipients must be located in regions of the commonwealth with wait lists for enrollment in Chapter 74 programs.

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3. Funds may support the duplication by a comprehensive high school of existing Chapter 74 programs within a regional vocational-technical school district, so long as there is demonstrated student and labor market demand for the program and the regional vocational-technical school district is unable to meet that demand.
4. Preference in awarding grants will be given to schools serving Gateway Cities, schools with existing Chapter 74 programs in high-demand, high-wage fields that have an excess of applications over seats, schools with demonstrated strong connections to regional employers, and schools which have received Chapter 74 program approval by the DESE and can promptly expand capacity to implement the program.
5. No individual grant award larger than \$25 million.
6. The initial term of the grant program will be three years.

MAVA has presented its proposal with legislators to identify which ones will serve as sponsors. The grant program would be run by the Executive Office of Education and the Workforce Skills Cabinet, and would be funded with money generated by the Fair Share Amendment passed by voters in November of 2022.

## Conclusion

Though favored by superintendents and school committees of the regional voc-tech schools, the selective admissions process has been under pressure for several years. In 2016 a report from Northeastern University described a “peculiar paradox” happening in Massachusetts vocational education. Students with “lackluster academic or disciplinary records... who have historically benefitted the most from career vocational education, and who now must compete for vocational school slots with better-prepared students — many of whom are college-bound.”<sup>25</sup>

Then in February of 2023, the Vocational Education Justice Coalition, filed a federal civil rights complaint against the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, alleging that career vocational-technical education schools in Massachusetts were allowed to use admissions criteria that “unjustifiably excludes” students of color, English language learners and students with disabilities.<sup>26</sup> The group urged DESE to adopt a policy requiring voc-tech schools to use an open lottery admissions system.

Massachusetts’ career vocational-technical education system has evolved to become a vital part of the economy in many regions around the Commonwealth. State officials, realizing its importance, have invested in its growth. Since 2016 the Massachusetts Workforce Skills Capital Grant Program, for example, has invested more than \$153 million through nearly 500 grants.<sup>27</sup> That investment and the performance of vocational-technical schools in the state MCAS exams, plus improvements in dropout rates and graduation rates, have all contributed to a surge in interest by families in voc-tech education. Applications have risen annually.

With the rise in demand have come lengthening waiting lists. But vocational-technical school officials have argued that the problem was not their selection process, but the lack of space in their schools. Officials of the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators have developed a \$100 million funding proposal to finance a targeted expansion program. As of March, 2024 they were in discussions with state legislators about the plan.

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## Recommendations

### ***Address the underlying problem: Create more seats.***

*The competition for taxpayer dollars in Massachusetts is intense, with advocates of health care, transportation and housing, to name a few, lobbying for their projects. But expanding seating capacity at vocational-technical schools will ultimately create more skilled workers and strengthen the state's economy. In 2022 voters approved the "Fair Share" amendment, a four-percent surtax on income above \$1 million annually. The new revenue is intended for public education and infrastructure. Vocational-technical schools are worth the investment.*

### ***Allow more time to analyze changes made by Chapter 74 schools in response to new DESE policies.***

Superintendents at voc-tech schools, particularly Greater New Bedford, Assabet Valley and Worcester Tech, are closely watching the data from their new hybrid admission policies. Directors of schools where changes were less dramatic, are also looking at results to determine future changes.

In their letter to Governor Healey, MAVA officials said "we have limited data to gauge whether (changes at the schools) are making a real difference. Two years of data does not make a trend. . . Given the fact that these policies are still new, more time is needed to gauge their impact."

The data that will determine whether to continue with some form of selective admissions, modified lotteries or an open lottery will be available to all parties. Further analysis is prudent.

### ***Improve opportunities for contact between rising students and voc-tech schools.***

Are voc-tech superintendents reaching all of the students in the four protected groups that they can? Some say that officials from sending communities, particularly in Gateway Cities, block them from marketing to all middle school students. They aren't always invited to "high school nights," when representatives of schools attend with marketing material and answer questions from parents and students.

"It doesn't happen in every district but it does happen throughout the state," says Sharek of MAVA. "There are certain pockets where we have enormous difficulty spreading the word about vocational education. If you have no access, how are you supposed to increase the number of students of color or English Language Learners?"

Non-vocational superintendents and politicians accuse voc-tech schools of "cherry picking" the best students who apply, leaving lower achieving students at the public high schools. Vocational superintendents find the term highly offensive, quickly noting that many of their incoming students have math and reading levels that are several grades below what they should be.

### ***Carefully study the impact of lotteries before embracing them.***

Use a surgical approach rather than a blunt instrument when making changes. If a voc-tech regional district has guaranteed seats for each sending community, and the number of applicants exceeds that allotment, a community-specific lottery would be appropriate. But in districts where there are no guaranteed seats per town, an open lottery creates the possibility that on some year no students would be selected from a participating town. Even the idea that the numbers could float per town could create budgeting headaches. Predictability is valued when creating town budgets and estimating expenses.

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## Endnotes

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## Mission

Pioneer Institute develops and communicates dynamic ideas that advance prosperity and a vibrant civic life in Massachusetts and beyond.

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Success for Pioneer is when the citizens of our state and nation prosper and our society thrives because we enjoy world-class options in education, healthcare, transportation, and economic opportunity, and when our government is limited, accountable, and transparent.

## Values

Pioneer believes that America is at its best when our citizenry is well-educated, committed to liberty, personal responsibility, and free enterprise, and both willing and able to test their beliefs based on facts and the free exchange of ideas.

