

Kids Close to Home Plan

Plan ahead. Spend responsibly. Give districts better options.

Massachusetts can do more to help cities and towns manage rising special education costs without compromising the services students need. The goal is straightforward: when a district identifies a group of students with similar needs and can create a high-quality local or regional program to serve them, the state should help make that possible.

Pembroke Public Schools' Hobomock therapeutic classroom proposal illustrates the planning this policy would support: specialized instruction, behavior-analytic support, a registered behavior technician, and social-work services for elementary students with significant social-emotional and behavioral needs, with proposed annual staffing costs reported at approximately \$208,000. ([South Shore News, January 2025 proposal coverage](#))

The FY2026 budget approval included funding for the Hobomock behavioral social-emotional program and related staffing. ([South Shore News, May 8, 2025](#)) This plan treats Pembroke as a planning and capacity-building example, not a verified fully implemented success story. Full staffing, current operating status, student outcomes, and realized savings remain to be confirmed; the staffing estimate is not a verified all-in program cost.

The Challenge

Out-of-district placements remain an essential part of special education. This plan preserves those services and the requirement that each student's placement be based on individual needs through the IEP process, not a district savings target. ([603 CMR 28.05–28.06](#))

But districts should not be left with only one expensive option when they can responsibly build another.

Transportation adds to the cost of providing appropriate services: the Inspector General's study reported an average special education transportation cost of \$13,825 per student in FY2024, as summarized by Streetsblog Massachusetts. ([Streetsblog Massachusetts, April 8, 2026](#)) That statewide average is not a forecast of what a particular district would save. Each proposal should compare actual appropriate alternatives and route costs rather than assume every local seat eliminates a full tuition payment and bus route.

Under M.G.L. c. 71B, §5A, Circuit Breaker generally reimburses eligible high-cost services after districts incur the expense, with tuition and instruction reimbursed before transportation and payments subject to annual appropriation. ([DESE Circuit Breaker FAQ](#)) Eligible in-district instructional costs can already qualify when a student's costs exceed the threshold; this is not solely an out-of-district tuition program. ([DESE Circuit Breaker FAQ](#)) The proposed grants would address a different problem: financing planning, recruitment, training, and the early years of new capacity before a program is established.

The result is a system that often asks towns to pay first, wait later, and plan around uncertainty.

Massachusetts Case Studies

The examples below offer different kinds of evidence. Agawam documents an earlier state-funded launch and district-reported results; the other districts illustrate program design, staffing, and inclusion, not independently demonstrated savings. Published descriptions establish what districts

described at the time, not current vacancies, seat availability, or suitability for a particular child. Research reviewed September 26, 2026.

Agawam: A State Start-Up Grant for Local Therapeutic Capacity

Agawam received a \$110,800 Community Innovation Challenge grant in February 2013 and opened an in-district therapeutic program in September 2013, working with the Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative and its member districts. ([Agawam final report, June 1, 2014](#)) The Early Elementary Intervention and Transition Team model served pre-K through grade 2 through classroom support, coordinated clinical services, staff training, and individualized reintegration into general education. ([Agawam report](#))

The district reported no new out-of-district referrals for early elementary students with emotional disorders as of June 1, 2014, compared with five referrals in the preceding school year. ([Agawam report, Outcomes](#)) Its financial figures require qualification: the narrative projected more than \$200,000 in cost avoidance, while the performance table estimated approximately \$180,871 in total cost avoidance, including a \$151,047.94 subtotal. ([Agawam report, Outcomes and performance table](#)) These are historical district estimates with inconsistent totals, not an independent audit or a current-dollar savings promise.

Lesson for this plan: Fund planning time, qualified staff, clinical partnerships, and training, then require a consistent accounting of actual results. Agawam also reported that some neighboring districts preferred to develop their own programs rather than purchase seats, a warning against budgeting on uncommitted regional tuition revenue. ([Agawam report, Executive Summary](#))

Scituate: Elementary Support with a Middle-School Continuum

Scituate describes Jenkins Educating Motivated Students (JEMS) at Jenkins School for K–5 students with emotional and/or behavioral difficulties, with services ranging from full inclusion to substantially separate programming according to the level of support needed. ([Scituate Public Schools, Special Education](#)) The district also lists a Therapeutic Learning Program at Gates for grades 6–8. ([Scituate program descriptions](#))

Lesson for this plan: A nearby South Shore model supports planning for both elementary services and later transitions, rather than funding an isolated classroom with no next step. The district description does not provide program-specific savings or comparative student-outcome data; it is a design example, not proof of financial return. ([Scituate program descriptions](#))

Weymouth: Therapeutic Support Across Grade Levels

Weymouth's published description, updated August 2022, places its Therapeutic Learning Center at Pingree Elementary for K–5, Chapman Middle School for grades 6–8, and Weymouth High School for grades 9–12, serving students with a primary educational disability of emotional impairment. ([Weymouth district program descriptions](#)) The program is not limited to a substantially separate setting: general education participation is determined by the IEP Team, and the description distinguishes sustained therapeutic support from short-term crisis stabilization. ([Weymouth program descriptions](#))

Lesson for this plan: Require applicants to define the students they can serve, the clinical support they can deliver, and the situations requiring another setting. The published

description establishes a service model but does not establish net savings or measured improvements attributable to the program. ([Weymouth program descriptions](#))

Newton: A Multidisciplinary Team and Flexible Inclusion

Newton's November 2022 special education overview describes the K–5 Bridge program at Peirce, supported by special educators, a psychologist, a BCBA, a social worker, behavior therapists, and related-service providers. ([Newton Public Schools, Special Education Overview](#)) Students are connected to a general education classroom and can move between therapeutic support and general education opportunities based on individual needs; Bridge is also described at Day Middle School for grades 6–8. ([Newton overview, Bridge descriptions](#))

Lesson for this plan: A therapeutic classroom should be funded as a coordinated service model, not merely a room and a teaching position. Newton's overview provides staffing and inclusion detail, but not program-level costs or evidence of net savings; smaller districts would need to adapt the model to their workforce and resources. ([Newton overview](#))

Brookline: A Districtwide Program within a Public School

Brookline identifies a K–8 Therapeutic Learning Center at Florida Ruffin Ridley School for students needing intensive social and emotional support. ([Florida Ruffin Ridley School, School Vision](#)) Its services include separate-setting instruction, general education support, environmental adaptations, positive behavior intervention plans, and counseling according to each student's IEP. ([Brookline PK–Grade 8 program descriptions](#))

Lesson for this plan: A district can concentrate expertise at one school rather than duplicate every service in every building. That can be an in-district option without being a child's neighborhood school; the reviewed descriptions do not quantify program savings or demonstrate comparative student outcomes. ([Brookline program descriptions](#))

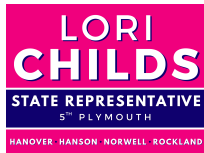
How This Differs from Special Education Collaboratives

Massachusetts already has educational collaboratives: public entities formed through approved agreements among two or more school committees and/or charter school boards under M.G.L. c. 40, §4E, with a board representing member systems. ([M.G.L. c. 40, §4E](#)) Their role is to supplement and strengthen district services, not solely to operate separate special education schools. ([DESE, Education Collaboratives](#))

District-run capacity: The proposed grants would help a school district create or expand a program it operates, with specialized services and appropriate access to the wider school community. A district could purchase clinical consultation or training from a collaborative without transferring operation of its classroom to that collaborative.

Collaborative-run services: An educational collaborative has its own statutory governance and can employ staff and operate shared programs for participating districts. ([M.G.L. c. 40, §4E](#)) Its services can also support students in their existing schools: SEEM's Bridge program offers district capacity-building, consultation, school-based assessment and direct services, home services, and intensive case management. ([SEEM, Assessment and Intervention Center / Bridge](#))

Regional does not automatically mean collaborative-run: Agawam led its grant project while partnering with an existing collaborative, and other districts could refer students on a tuition basis. ([Agawam report, Participating Entities](#)) This plan would support district-led partnerships and



collaborative-led projects, with the operator, employer, oversight, funding responsibilities, and each sending district's duties made explicit.

Location, operator, and restrictiveness are different questions: A program in a neighboring district is not an in-district placement for the sending student merely because it is nearby; likewise, a classroom within a local school is not automatically inclusive. State regulations require an individualized least-restrictive-environment determination and recognize collaborative-operated public special education programs. ([603 CMR 28.02 and 28.06](#)) Grant applications should therefore describe all three dimensions and actual travel time, rather than use "local," "regional," or "collaborative" as a proxy for educational quality.

What this proposal adds: Dedicated start-up and early implementation funding, recruitment support, transparent comparisons of existing options, and evaluation of new local capacity. It does not create a replacement collaborative system. Existing collaboratives should be eligible partners and applicants when their projects address documented gaps, and districts should compare available collaborative capacity before duplicating a program.

The Plan

Help districts build appropriate, sustainable programs

Lori will support legislation creating a Local Special Education Capacity Grant Program at DESE. The grants would help school districts, voluntary district partnerships, and existing educational collaboratives cover planning, start-up, and early implementation costs for new or expanded local capacity. Eligible costs would include recruitment, qualified staffing, training, clinical consultation, appropriate space and therapeutic materials, transition planning, and program evaluation. Smaller and lower-resource districts should receive planning assistance and should not be excluded because they cannot finance the start-up period themselves.

To receive a grant, a district would need to show:

- A documented group of students with compatible service needs, with individualized evaluations and no assumption that a shared diagnosis means an identical program or placement.
- An educationally appropriate model with qualified staff, clinical supervision, meaningful inclusion opportunities, and a readiness check before opening. Recruitment delays must not interrupt services or require students to wait for an appropriate placement.
- A three- to five-year comparison of appropriate options, including available collaborative programs. Count salaries and benefits, substitutes, space, related services, extended-school-year needs, transportation, administration, and start-up expenses; test low-enrollment and staff-vacancy scenarios and identify funding after the grant ends.
- A plan for family and special education parent advisory council participation, student progress, and ongoing quality review, including transitions between grade levels and between settings when appropriate.
- Compliance with every student's IEP and placement rights.

Why this works: It does not reward districts for keeping students in district at all costs. It supports careful planning for an appropriate and sustainable option, without requiring guaranteed savings. Grants would be awarded for capacity and quality, not paid as a bounty for each avoided out-of-district placement.

Recipients would report annually on IEP-goal progress, attendance, meaningful general education participation, family experience, travel time, staffing stability, and safety indicators, with privacy protections for small groups. Financial reports would distinguish projected cost avoidance from actual spending changes, identify changes in Circuit Breaker aid and tuition revenue, and separate municipal effects from total state-and-local costs. A shorter trip or a stronger educational option may be valuable even when immediate net savings are modest or absent.

Make transportation aid predictable

Lori will support an amendment to the Circuit Breaker law that moves special education transportation support toward same-year aid rather than relying almost entirely on reimbursement after districts have already paid the bills.

Under this proposed approach, DESE would use prior-year claims and current IEP-related transportation needs to provide an estimated payment during the school year, reconciled after final eligible costs are reported. The legislation would specify appropriation needs, prevent double payment during the transition, and protect individual high-cost eligibility rather than replace it with a fixed districtwide enrollment assumption.

Why this works: It would improve cash-flow predictability without changing transportation or placement rights. The Inspector General identified the reimbursement model as a financial and administrative burden, particularly for districts with fewer resources to carry costs. ([OIG, February 24, 2026](#))

A State Representative can pursue this through legislation amending M.G.L. c. 71B, §5A and through annual budget amendments that fund the revised formula.

Make transportation pricing transparent

Lori will support legislation requiring standardized, itemized cost information from special education transportation vendors. Districts should be able to see what they are paying for: drivers, fuel, insurance, vehicle costs, route structure, and other major expenses.

The legislation would also direct DESE, working with the Office of the Inspector General and municipal procurement experts, to establish common bid documents, contract standards, and a searchable repository of transportation bids and contracts. Public information would exclude student-identifying details and sensitive route information.

Why this works: Towns need better information and stronger negotiating tools. The Inspector General found that vendors were not required to provide detailed invoices and that there was no central repository of school transportation bids and contracts. ([OIG findings and recommendations](#))

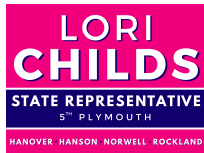
This is not about forcing a one-size-fits-all transportation contract. It is about making sure every community has the data needed to protect taxpayers and secure reliable service for students.

Make it easier for towns to work together

Lori will support state grants and technical assistance for voluntary partnerships among school districts and existing educational collaboratives. Applicants would map nearby services and consult potential partners before proposing new capacity, while retaining flexibility when an existing program cannot meet the identified need.

These partnerships could help communities share:

- Specialized teachers, clinicians, and behavior-support staff.
- Therapeutic classroom programs where enough students need similar services.



- Transportation purchasing and route coordination.
- Program oversight, training, and administrative costs.

Why this works: A small town should not have to choose between building every specialized program alone and sending every student far away. Voluntary regional programs can give districts access to deeper expertise and shared costs while still preserving local oversight and individualized IEP decisions.

The grant legislation should require written agreements identifying the lead operator, staffing and supervision, transportation responsibilities, tuition and cost-sharing, student monitoring, and continuity if a partner withdraws. Use existing collaborative structures where appropriate rather than require a new entity. Regional tuition should be budgeted conservatively, not assumed from uncommitted seats.

Protecting Students and Families

This plan is about better choices, not fewer choices.

Federal and Massachusetts special education protections require appropriate services and individualized placement in the least restrictive environment, with parent participation and consent protections. ([603 CMR 28.05–28.07](#)) This plan would preserve those protections, including dispute-resolution and stay-put rights, and would not force a child to fail in a new local program before receiving an appropriate out-of-district placement.

Nothing in this plan would:

- Set quotas or caps on out-of-district placements.
- Allow a district to choose a placement based only on cost.
- Limit a parent's participation in the IEP process.
- Prevent a student from receiving an out-of-district placement when that is the appropriate setting.

Instead, the plan gives districts more tools to create a quality local option when it can appropriately serve students, while preserving the full continuum of services. “Close to home” is an opportunity to expand, not a placement mandate or a substitute for the right education.

Glossary

Definitions below are plain-language summaries, not substitutes for an IEP or legal requirements. Placement protections and collaborative governance are described in [603 CMR 28.00](#) and [M.G.L. c. 40, §4E](#).

Cost avoidance versus realized savings: Cost avoidance estimates spending that would otherwise have occurred. Realized savings require evidence that actual spending fell, after accounting for new program costs and changes in aid; these terms should not be used interchangeably.

Term	What it means	Why it matters here
Circuit Breaker	Massachusetts’ high-cost special education reimbursement program	Districts can receive partial state reimbursement for eligible costs above an annual threshold, but they typically pay costs

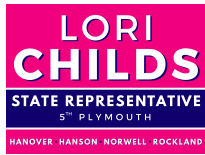
		first. The Legislature controls program rules and appropriations
DESE	Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education	The state education agency that administers Circuit Breaker reimbursement, oversees special education compliance, and could administer a new capacity-grant program
FAPE	Free Appropriate Public Education	A core right under federal law requiring eligible students to receive the special education and related services they need at no cost to their family
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act	The federal law that establishes special education rights, including parent participation, IEPs, and access to appropriate services and placement
IEP	Individualized Education Program	The legally binding plan documenting a student's goals, services, and supports; the Team determines placement based on the IEP
IEP Team	The group that creates and reviews an IEP; it includes the parent or caregiver and school professionals	The Team determines the individual student's services and placement. A local program cannot override this process simply because it costs less
In-district program	A special education program operated by a student's public school district	The plan supports state help for districts that can demonstrate a need and build a properly staffed local option
LABA	Licensed Applied Behavior Analyst	Massachusetts' state license for certain professionals who provide behavior-analytic services; a BCBA may also be a LABA
Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)	The IDEA principle that students with disabilities should learn with peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate	It does not require one setting for every student. It requires decisions based on what is appropriate for the individual child
M.G.L. c. 71B, §5A	The Massachusetts law that establishes the Special Education Circuit Breaker reimbursement program	A State Representative can introduce legislation to amend this law, including how and when districts receive reimbursement

Out-of-district placement	A placement outside the student's district program, which may be in another district, a collaborative-operated program, or an approved private school; not the same as simply receiving a collaborative service	These placements remain necessary when the district cannot appropriately provide the services identified in the student's IEP
Educational collaborative	A public entity formed through an approved agreement under M.G.L. c. 40, §4E, with its own governing board; distinct from an informal district partnership	Can operate programs or provide expertise and services within district schools. The plan complements existing collaboratives rather than replaces them
Related services	Services a student needs to benefit from special education, such as counseling, speech therapy, occupational therapy, nursing, or specialized transportation	Transportation and therapeutic support may be required IEP services; they are not optional if a student needs them to access education
Residential placement	A placement in which the student lives at an approved school or program because their educational needs require 24-hour support	It is among the most intensive and expensive special education settings and should remain available when appropriate
Special education transport	Transportation required for a student to access the education and services in their IEP	It is often expensive because routes may be long, specialized, and individualized; the plan seeks to make state support and pricing more predictable
Substantially separate program	A specialized classroom where students receive most of their instruction with special education staff and peers with similar needs	Pembroke's proposed therapeutic classroom is this type of program; it can be appropriate when a student needs more intensive support than a general classroom can provide
Therapeutic classroom	A small, highly structured school program combining specialized academics with behavioral, social-emotional, and counseling supports	The proposed Hobomock model aims to provide this level of support closer to home for students who can benefit from it

The Bottom Line

Pembroke offers a common-sense example of the kind of planning Massachusetts should encourage: see a recurring need, develop a qualified program, compare long-term costs honestly, and invest early when doing so serves students and taxpayers.

Lori Childs will work at the State House to make that approach easier for communities across Massachusetts. She will support practical legislation that improves cost transparency, provides more predictable state funding, and helps districts build or share services when there is a clear educational need and a sound financial case.



That is responsible government: protect every child's rights, respect every family's voice, and give municipalities the tools to make smart decisions before costs spiral out of control.