



Legislature Approves Cultural Districts, Index to Measure Creativity in Schools

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Contact: [Gregory Liakos](#), Communications Director 617-727-3668 x343

(Boston, MA)—The Massachusetts House of Representatives joined the Senate on Wednesday in passing measures to establish state-sponsored cultural districts and explore ways to measure how schools foster student creativity. The provisions were part of broader legislation designed to advance economic development in Massachusetts and reorganize state government agencies.

Differences remain between the House and Senate versions of the bill that must be reconciled through a conference committee before it goes to the Governor for his approval. The legislative session ends July 31.

The House bill would establish a program to create state-sponsored cultural districts, distinctive areas of a community in which a high concentration of cultural facilities and programs serve as an anchor for activity and commerce. The Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC) would manage the program and set guidelines with input from the public and other state agencies.

The cultural districts provision was spearheaded by Rep. John Keenan of Salem, House Chair of the Joint Committee on Tourism, Arts, and Cultural Development, with support from Reps. Steve Walsh of Lynn, Ann-Margaret Ferrante of Gloucester, and Kay Khan and Ruth Balsler of Newton. It had the backing of House Economic Development Committee Chair Brian Dempsey of Haverhill and Speaker Robert DeLeo of Winthrop. A similar measure filed by Senator Stan Rosenberg of Amherst passed the Senate earlier this spring.

The House bill would also establish a commission to study how schools foster student creativity. Entitled the Creative Challenge Index, the measure would set up a commission to develop an index that would "rate every public school in the Commonwealth on teaching, encouraging, and fostering creativity in students." The MCC would have a seat on the commission along with representatives from organizations involved in education, business, advocacy, and public policy.

That provision was spearheaded by Rep. Martha Walz of Boston, House Chair of the Joint Committee on Education, and cosponsored by Reps. Keenan, Walsh, and Dan Bosley of North Adams. The Creative Challenge Index has been a central advocacy goal of the Mass. Advocates for Arts, Sciences, and Humanities (MAASH) and Arts|Learning.

"This is great news," said MCC Executive Director Anita Walker. "The strong support shown for these measures demonstrates that the Legislature truly views arts and culture as key to the state's economic recovery."

"Cultural districts will give cities and towns new tools to expand participation in cultural activities, revitalize commercial districts, and draw new visitors to arts venues. And the creative challenge index has the potential to reinforce the importance of arts education and creative learning in our schools."

About the Massachusetts Cultural Council

The Massachusetts Cultural Council is a state agency supporting the arts, humanities, and sciences to improve the quality of life in Massachusetts and its communities. The MCC pursues this mission through a combination of grants, services, and advocacy for cultural organizations, schools, communities, and artists. For more go to www.massculturalcouncil.org.