For more than 50 years, the United States has claimed to provide equal public education to all students, regardless of background or identity. But in fact, as income and wealth inequality have become more brutal and entrenched, low-income students, students of color, and students with disabilities have systematically and continuously been deprived of the resources that more privileged students take for granted. This fact sheet describes some of the sources of the underfunding of public schools, and policies that could finally achieve equity for our schools.

Federal Underfunding of Public Schools Title I – a war on poverty

In 1965, the federal government passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which sought to address the need for additional resources for schools in economically deprived communities. The legislation recommended that the federal government provide additional funding for low-income students, at a level up to 40% on top of average per-pupil state spending. That commitment, known as Title 1, has been underfunded every year.

If the federal Title 1 commitment had been met, Massachusetts would have had an additional $574 million to spend on low-income children in 2017. Over the past 13 years — since this year’s high school graduates entered kindergarten — Massachusetts schools have been shortchanged $5.9 billion in federal Title 1 funds.1

In 1975, Congress passed the law now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, which requires schools to provide students with disabilities with the supports they need in school. IDEA assumes that on average, the cost of educating a child with disabilities is twice the cost of educating a non-disabled student, and Congress pledged that the federal government would pay up to 40 percent of this cost. That commitment was also never been met.

If the federal IDEA commitment had been met, in 2017, Massachusetts would have had an additional $461 million to spend on students with disabilities. Over the past 13 years — since this year’s high school graduates entered kindergarten — Massachusetts schools have been shortchanged $5.3 billion in federal IDEA funds.2

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1 US Department of Education Budget Service and US Census Bureau, and National Education Association.
2 Ibid.