

October 15, 2019

Testimony before the Joint Committee on State Administration and Regulatory Oversight on H.2681, "An Act Ensuring Equitable Representation in the Commonwealth"

Chairs Pacheco and Gregoire, and members of the committee, my name is Colin Jones. I am a Senior Policy Analyst at the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, known as MassBudget. We are an independent nonprofit that produces nonpartisan research and analysis focused on policy solutions that improve the lives of low- and middle-income people in Massachusetts. Thank you for the opportunity to address you on this important topic.

At MassBudget we use data to help policymakers and the public better understand the landscape in Massachusetts so we can design policies that are equitable. In an equitable society, no aspect of a person's identity — like race or ethnicity — should predict how well they do.

To start, I'd like to clarify the distinction between equity and equality. Unlike equality, which refers to equal treatment of all people, equity refers to treatment based on peoples' different needs.

Say, for instance, you have a hospital that only provides aspirin to all its patients regardless of their ailments. Whether they have a fever, a broken arm, or a chronic disease, they all leave with aspirin. They have been treated equally, but the treatment is not appropriate for all of them. Equitable treatment would account for the patients' different needs.

Similarly, good policy — where possible — accounts for the different circumstances of those it impacts.

But, without precise data, it's difficult to get a clear picture of the situation. Without a clear picture, it's difficult to create good policy.

I see this through my research on K-12 education policy. Serving the needs of all our diverse students is difficult if you don't know who exactly is in your classrooms. State data currently tracks broad racial categories, like Black or Latinx. But an American-born Black student and a student who recently arrived from Cape Verde likely have different needs. State data currently does not capture these nuances, making it a challenge for policymakers, school administrators, and teachers to ensure our K-12 system provides a great education for all our children.

While U. S. Census data already tracks racial and ethnic subgroups, the samples often are too small to be reliable. State data is preferable and it could be even better if it allowed people to identify their racial and ethnic subgroups.

Better data can help us better understand our state, which can help us create better policy. H.2681 is one way we can obtain better data that captures the nuances of our state's population.

Thank you for considering my testimony.

Colin Jones
Senior Policy Analyst
Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center
1 State St, Suite 1250
Boston, MA 02109
cjones@massbudget.org