

CommonWealth

POLITICS, IDEAS & CIVIC LIFE IN MASSACHUSETTS

THE EDUCATION ISSUE
15 years after ed reform

A test for Massachusetts

1 What's wrong with ed reform?

- A. Too many schools failing
- B. College skills not up to snuff
- C. Dropout crisis overlooked
- D. Phys ed pushed aside

☒ E. All of the above



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Back to schools

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE of *CommonWealth* catalogues all of the unfinished business of the state's 15-year-old education reform effort: the achievement gap between rich and poor, the high number of failing urban schools, the shaky ladder to college, and the huge demands being placed on teachers. It even adds a few items to the state's to-do list, such as dealing with the troubling high school dropout rate and the lack of physical exercise in our schools.

Our coverage, spearheaded by executive editor Michael Jonas, not only documents what's wrong with the state's educational system but also offers prescriptions for what can be done to improve it.

There is no one answer, but it's becoming abundantly clear that much bolder steps must be taken if underperforming schools—and students—are going to make the grade in the K-12 system and succeed in college. In "Held Back," Jonas reports that we increasingly understand what it will take to elevate underperforming schools. Whether we'll commit the political will and resources to do it is another matter.

Laura Pappano says many high school graduates in Massachusetts are unprepared for college. Some don't take the courses that will give them the skills to do college-level work, but many urban students do not even have a concept of how important a degree is in today's world. "For many low-income students, college is still an inchoate idea, something they hear about but don't really get," Pappano writes.

Paul Reville, the state's incoming secretary of education and one of the architects of the state's 1993 education reform law, is understandably proud of the reform effort's accomplishments, but he says a lot of work remains if the state is ever going to reach its goal of a near 100 percent graduation rate. His essay suggests that education policy must morph into urban policy, and that what's going on outside the classroom is as important for many students as what's going on inside.

"We must, institutionally, do for poor children what middle-class families are able to routinely do for their own," Reville writes.

Teachers, particularly urban teachers, need much stronger support. Jessie Gerson-Nieder, an English and social studies

teacher at Prospect Hill Academy, a charter school in Somerville, says urban teachers are being asked to not just teach a year's worth of skills, but to elevate students to the educational achievement levels of their peers in wealthy suburbs. It's a herculean and often thankless task.

"I work more than 65 hours a week, but I cannot imagine being able to buy a house given my salary," she says.

Demographic forecasts give a sense of urgency to the state's education debate. Over the next 15 years, analysts say, a declining birth rate and an outmigration of residents will shrink the state's pool of high school graduates by as much as 15 percent. It's a brain drain that state officials can do little about, so they have to focus on reducing the leakage from the high school pipeline by cutting the number of dropouts and sending more students on to obtain a college degree. Otherwise, the state's economy may suffer.

Gov. Deval Patrick has an army of activists working on his Readiness Project, which is developing a blueprint for education action. Expectations are high—maybe too high, given the state's finances and the troubled national economy.

Reville, despite my prodding, refused to discuss in his essay where funding for the next stage of education reform will come from.

Mark Roosevelt, co-author of the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act and currently the superintendent of Pittsburgh public schools, suggests in his conversation with Jonas that the state may be a victim of its own success as it grapples with its next move. More students in Massachusetts are passing MCAS and scores are up. SAT scores are also on the rise, along with steady increases in participation rates among racial minority groups. Best of all, Massachusetts students lead the nation on several education fronts. Fourth- and eighth-graders, for example, have ranked first or tied for first on all four examinations of the National Assessment of Educational Progress since 2005.

"The problem, when you're first in the nation in so many categories, is how do you create the climate to put more resources into something that it looks like you're doing very well on?" Roosevelt asks.



BRUCE MOHL

inquiries

Fewer high school grads in jobs pipeline

► BY BRUCE MOHL

MASSACHUSETTS IS FACING a serious brain drain. Over the next 15 years, forecasters expect the state's school-age population to shrink and the number of high school graduates to plunge by as much as 15 percent.

The demographic data represents sobering news for a high-cost state with few natural resources aside from the brain power of its residents. The shrinking pool of graduates also lends even greater urgency to the state's ongoing debate over dropouts, college preparedness, and the achievement gap. It means Massachusetts school districts, colleges, and businesses will have to learn to do more with less home-grown talent.

"Our core competitive advantage is contained between the ears of our residents. To the extent these people are dying or moving away and not being replaced, that edge vanishes," says Michael Goodman, director of economic and public policy research at the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute.

Suzanne Bump, the Patrick administration's secretary of labor and workforce development, sees the decline in high school graduates as part of a larger economic problem facing the state. "We currently lack a sufficient, vibrant workforce," she says. "The fact that there are going to be even fewer kids coming up just adds to the problem."

A report released in March by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education indicated the number of high school graduates in Massachusetts will hit a peak this year of nearly 74,000. But the combination of a declining birth rate (down 20 percent since 1990) and an outmigration of residents to the West and South is expected to shrink the state's class of graduating

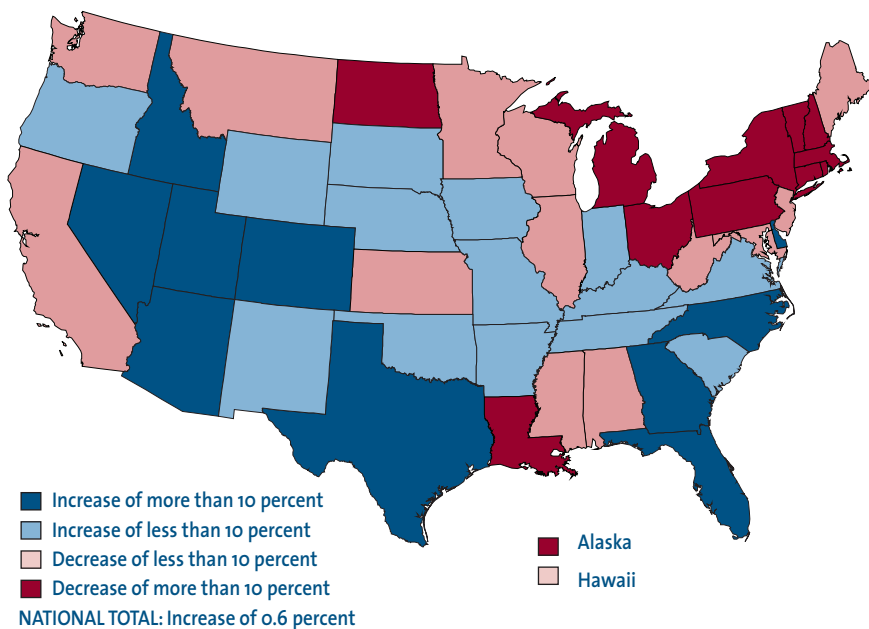
seniors over the next 15 years. By the commission's estimate, the number of high school graduates is expected to drop to just under 63,000 by 2022. (See map below.)

The forecast is based on actual births through 2004 and assumes existing immigration and migration trends continue indefinitely into the future. To the extent those trends or the state's birth rate changes, so would the projections.

Internal projections of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education also predict a downward trend in students and graduates. The agency is currently forecasting that the total K-12 population in Massachusetts will shrink 8.2 percent by 2017.

Nationally, the Western Interstate Commission study indicates the output of graduates will decline moderately through 2013 before growth resumes, fueled primarily by population growth in the West and the South. By contrast, the Midwest and particularly the Northeast regions are ex-

PROJECTED CHANGE IN THE NUMBER OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES, 2008-2022



Source: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (www.wiche.edu).

pected to see substantial, prolonged reductions in graduates.

The shrinking class of graduates will be accompanied by a dramatic makeover in their racial makeup, which could also have implications for the number of students graduating from high school. Between 2004 and 2015, the commission report says, there will be a 54 percent increase in the number of Hispanic graduates and an 11 percent decline in the number of white graduates.

In Massachusetts, the racial shift is expected to be less dramatic. Currently, whites represent 78 percent of all public school graduates, with Hispanics at 9.6 percent, blacks at 7.6 percent, and the balance coming from various other ethnic groups. Over the next 13 years, Hispanics are expected to grow to 17 percent of the graduate population, compared with 68 percent for whites and 7 percent for blacks.

If current dropout rates among minority groups don't improve, the shift in racial makeup could make it even more difficult to boost the number of graduates. A report released recently by state education officials calculated that 11,436 students, or 3.8 percent of total enrollment, dropped out of high school during the 2006-2007 school year. The data showed that 9 percent of all Hispanic students enrolled in grades nine through 12 had dropped out, compared with 6.4 percent of African-Americans, 2.7 percent of whites, and 2.6 percent of Asian-Americans.

While Massachusetts as a whole is churning out plenty of graduates right now, some school districts are already experiencing slowing or declining enrollment. The Mohawk Trail Regional School District in western Massachusetts, for example, has seen its overall enrollment drop from 1,600 to 1,100 over the last five years.

School officials there are operating four elementary schools, three of which are barely half full. They want to close two or three of the schools, but doing so would trigger a violation of the legal agreements covering the bonds used to build the schools. The state currently makes payments on the bonds, but would stop if the schools were no longer being used for educational purposes.

Bob Aeschback, chairman of the Mohawk school committee, said local towns would go bankrupt if they were forced to make the payments. So the towns are pushing legislation that would allow them to close the schools and have the state continue making payments on the bonds. But state lawmakers have indicated they are unlikely to help out, in part because they don't know how many other communities will soon be asking for similar help.

"Mohawk may be the first community facing this, but I would consider it the canary in the coal mine," says Rep. Denis Guyer of Dalton, who filed the legislation on behalf of Mohawk.

Records of the Massachusetts School Building Assistance Authority indicate that many school districts are facing en-

rollment declines. Since 2003, Cambridge enrollment has fallen 14.3 percent, Barnstable is down 24.1 percent, Somerville is off 10.8 percent, and Boston has declined 6.8 percent. Other communities are growing, with Shrewsbury and Norwell both up 10 percent.

Area colleges are looking at the school population numbers with more trepidation than anyone. Their customer base is shrinking and some in the industry say a college or two may be forced to close. "Everybody in admissions who occasionally puts their head above the trench knows this is coming down the rails," said Kevin Kelly, director of admissions at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Kelly said 75 percent of this year's freshman class came from Massachusetts, down from about 80 percent in previous years. The university is now recruiting outside of Massachusetts more aggressively, particularly in the rest of New England but also in New York, New Jersey, Florida, and even California. "We're trying to get the message out about UMass-Amherst to a wider audience," Kelly said.

At Regis College in Weston, which draws nearly 85 percent of its students from Massachusetts, officials are also trying to expand their recruiting reach to south Florida, Puerto Rico, Maryland, and Virginia. The college recently went coed

and is marketing its programs in the hot fields of nursing and health care.

THE CUSTOMER BASE FOR COLLEGES IS ALSO SHRINKING.

Joe Bellavance, vice president of enrollment and marketing at Regis, said schools have to go where the students are. "You can't just make more 18 years old. You had to make those 18 years ago," he says.

Paul Clemente, chief financial officer at Bentley College in Waltham, says he worries the pool of available students is shrinking at a time when college costs continue to rise. He says colleges are trying to increase financial aid, but it won't be easy. "How are people going to write the checks to pay for tuition for a regular middle class kid?" he asks.

Bump, who deals with business concerns about the supply of trained workers on a daily basis, says the downturn in graduates is not yet on industry's radar screen. "They're more focused on how they're going to fill their jobs in two years than they are in 12," she says.

Goodman says the state needs to reduce its dropout rate, convince more graduates to go on to college, and make sure those who graduate from college are trained in the fields that businesses need. The Legislature took a stab at addressing these issues in 2007 when it approved \$3.75 million for the Commonwealth Covenant Fund, which is offering up to \$5,000 per year to graduates of state universities who earn a degree in science, engineering, or math and commit to

work or teach in the state for at least a year.

Brian Prescott, senior research analyst at the Western Interstate Commission, said states need to recognize that the brain drain isn't just a school problem. "Too often we lay this at the foot of educators, but this goes beyond the classroom," he said. "This is a state public policy issue."

Laptops rule among students in middle school

► BY GABRIELLE GURLEY

EXCEPT FOR THE tapping on keyboards and the whispers here and there, the eighth-grade humanities class at Boston's Lilla G. Frederick Pilot Middle School was pretty quiet.

Deep into their "Unsung Heroes" reports, students worked on monologues about historical figures they'd chosen that would be recorded as iMovies and posted to the school intranet. Tyrone Williams and Leroy Hamilton were drawn to the writings of members of the Black Panther Party, a 1960s African-American activist group. Kymaunii Godfrey liked what labor leader César Chávez had to say: "You are never

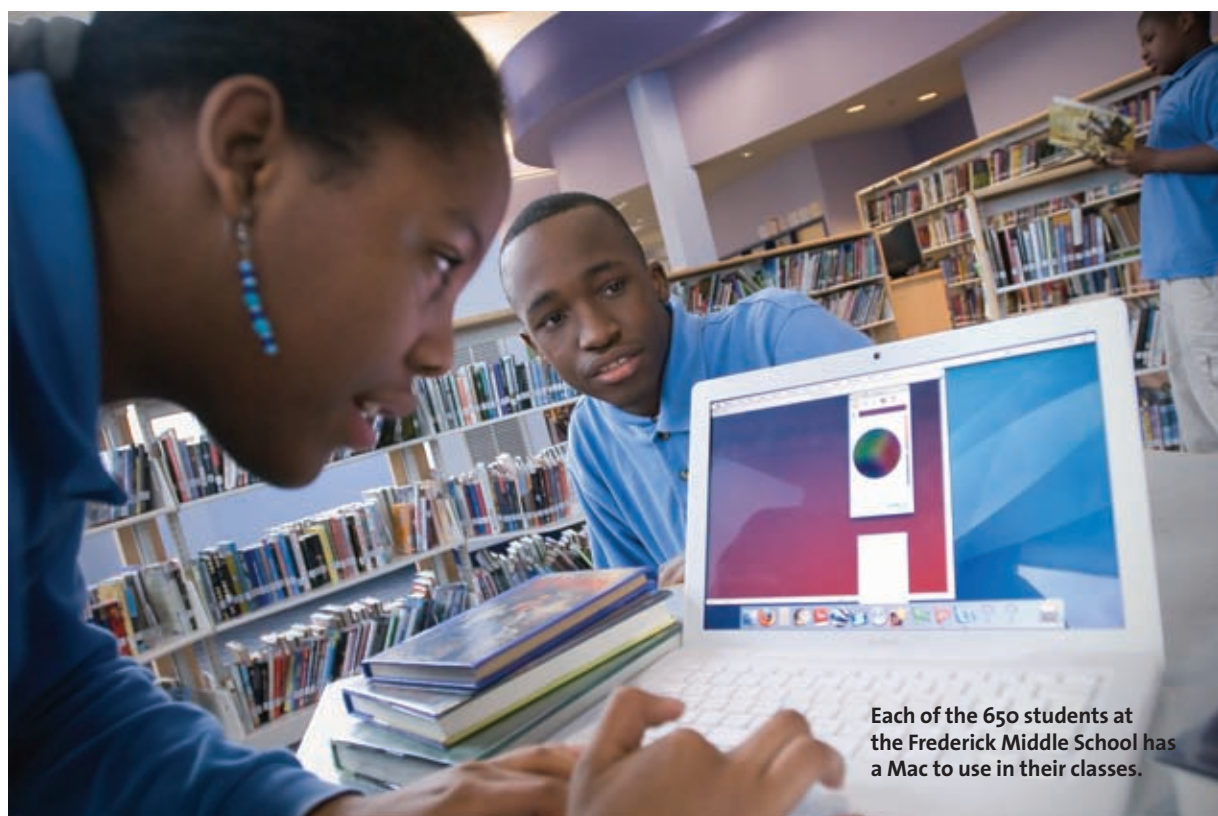
strong enough that you don't need help."

What's unusual about the class is that the students don't have to compete for a few workstations or wait until they get home or to a library to do Web research or writing. Right after the school day starts at 9:15 a.m., each of the 650 sixth-through eighth-grade students receives his or her own Apple MacBook to use in their classes. It's part of a four-year, \$1.25 million wireless learning initiative funded by the state and bolstered by both public and private dollars.

Trailblazing is also going on at the other end of the turnpike. The Berkshire Wireless Learning Initiative has put laptops into the hands of more than 2,300 students and teachers at the Herberg and Reid Middle Schools and the St. Mark School in Pittsfield, plus the Conte Middle School in North Adams.

The aim of these programs is to not only provide students with 21st-century technology skills, but also to improve teachers' instruction and to help students become better writers, thinkers, and problem solvers. "I really do think this is the most potentially transformational intervention in education I have seen in my 27 years as an educator," says Frederick principal Debra Socia.

Are one-to-one computer initiatives really a worthwhile undertaking for struggling students? Students at the Frederick School, located on Columbia Road in Dorchester, face tremendous academic challenges. On the 2007 MCAS, only



Each of the 650 students at the Frederick Middle School has a Mac to use in their classes.

20 percent of sixth-graders, 30 percent of seventh-graders, and 31 percent of eighth-graders reached the proficient level in English. In math, most students fell into the warning or failing categories. Socia doesn't flinch about the scores. "They're terrible," she admits.

The further you drill down, the more issues you find. At Frederick, 87.5 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch, the highest of any Boston middle school. One-third of the children are special education students, and another 20 percent are learning English. In reading, Socia faces the task of getting some students caught up with the peers in the seventh grade—from a third-grade level.

But laptop programs alone won't turn around underperformers, explains Andrew Zucker, author of *Transforming Schools with Technology*. What works for at-risk students is a focused program that zeros in on the standards and engages students while training teachers. "If the school is really good at doing those things, then the laptops can help," he says.

Feedback about one-to-one computer programs is largely positive, but the research on this new phenomenon is limited, according to Damian Bebell, an assistant research professor at Boston College's Technology and Assessment Study Collaborative, who is evaluating the Boston and Berkshire programs. It's too early to gauge the impact on the Frederick's MCAS scores. On the other hand, the Berkshire schools have reported that their scores have generally improved. Bebell wants to find out why they went up, and if technology played a role.

However, for Socia, improving MCAS scores is just one piece of the initiative. "It's not the entire puzzle, because if you can't get engagement, it doesn't matter," she says. "I can't help but imagine it's going to have a big impact."

There's little doubt that laptops have struck the right chord at the Frederick, producing the sorts of changes that lead to academic improvement. Discipline referrals have dropped 30 percent. Attendance has increased. The penalties for lateness now include forfeiting a laptop for a period or the entire day, which motivates habitually tardy students to arrive on time. (Even with concerns like visits to unauthorized websites, the computers are less of a distraction problem than cell phones are, according to the principal.)

Lead technician Pierre Alexandre has been impressed by the students' movies and PowerPoint presentations. In one civics project, students also helped bridge the digital divide in their neighborhood by using their MacBooks to test the strength of wireless signals in the city's fledgling public Wi-Fi network. "I enjoy seeing kids take ownership of the machines," Alexandre says.

Teachers have been as quick to embrace the technology as their students. Laptops facilitate individualized lessons for

English language learners and special education students. Testing and assessment is easier. Professional development opportunities, both structured and informal, are multiplying. For example, Frederick teachers can take part in "Bagels and Laptops," a weekly conversation over breakfast on such topics as blogging and electronic drop boxes.

The buy-in from teachers is significant. Education reforms often get a warm initial reception and then go into the closet after six months or a year, Bebell says. But with computers so prevalent in schools, to use or not to use them is no longer the question. The debate now revolves around how to use the devices, how many to have, and how much to spend. (The Frederick's MacBooks cost less than \$1,000 each.)

Although the cost of laptops is falling, money has still been the biggest drawback to making these programs more widely available. Three years ago, as part of his education reform plan, Gov. Mitt Romney proposed giving inexpensive laptops to every Bay State student. The \$54 million plan ended up in a study committee, the death knell for any piece of legislation.

While the Bay State takes one-to-one learning baby steps, Maine has jumped way out in front. The Pine Tree State is the only one in the country with a universal middle school laptop program. In 2002, plenty of Mainers mocked Gov. Angus King's plan to distribute laptops to some 40,000 seventh- and eighth-graders, but laptop supporters have had the last laugh.

When Jeff Mao, the educational technology coordinator

ATTENDANCE HAS GONE UP SINCE THE INTRODUCTION OF LAPTOPS.

for the Maine Learning Technology Initiative, traveled around the state four years later to find out whether to fight for the program's reauthorization, teachers told him, "If you take these laptops away, I'm

leaving teaching." In 2006, the Maine Legislature decided to keep the program going, investing \$40 million for another four years. Early test results are encouraging. Last year, University of Southern Maine researchers found that an average student scored better on the state writing test in 2005 than about two-thirds of all students in 2000. Moreover, the writing scores of Maine eighth-graders on the 2007 National Assessment of Education Progress, known as the Nation's Report Card, continue to show steady gains.

Yet Frederick Middle School students don't have long before they have to think seriously about life after laptops. What comes next for students who have been turned on to academics through technology? That's always a worry, Socia says. Only three high schools in the city—TechBoston Academy, Parkway Academy of Technology and Health,

and the Urban Science Academy—currently offer a one-to-one computer environment.

Craven gets a grip on the rising costs of school construction

► BY GABRIELLE GURLEY

KATHERINE CRAVEN IS all about the numbers. On a yellow legal pad page, the head of the Massachusetts School Building Authority jots down “1983–2003” and, beside that, “\$20 billion,” for the amount cities and towns spent on building schools over two decades. She circles “\$11 billion” for the debt the agency inherited from the old Department of Education building program for more than 1,000 projects. “My one talent in life is a memory,” she says, smiling.

As Craven diagrams the MSBA’s fiscal pressures, it’s clear that she brings both passion and a dazzling grasp of facts and figures to a herculean task, riding herd on school building assistance in the Bay State. But as an agent of change, she has her work cut out for her.

In school building BC—Before Craven—the mindset in cities and towns was simple. Get on the state education department’s waiting list for funding, build the school, (municipalities borrowed 100 percent of the construction costs), then wait, up to 15 years in some cases, until the state could pay for its share of the grant reimbursements. Payments were generous, as much as 90 percent for projects related to desegregation plans. There was one catch, though. The state did not have a pot of money for the school construction that it committed to fund each year. Allocations for those projects were based on the annual increases to the education department’s budget.

In short, the state paid its share of reimbursable costs exclusively through general operating funds. But the education department neither tracked the added costs of wait-listed projects nor audited the projects it reimbursed. To make matters worse, as communities sought additional state aid to build schools after Proposition 2½ slashed their ability to fund projects, the state’s tab for school construction exploded. Massachusetts would have eventually defaulted on its liabilities to cities and towns, Craven believes, if state leaders hadn’t agreed by 2000 to corral the budget buster.

“It was crazy,” says Thomas Finneran, the WRKO radio talk show host who served as House speaker and the chamber’s top budget official. “There was no incentive for any

kind of budgetary discipline at the local level.”

In 1994, Finneran hired Craven, fresh out of Harvard, to work for him at the House Ways and Means Committee as a budget analyst. Finneran says the job generally becomes too much for people somewhere between their second and fourth annual budgets, but Craven didn’t burn out. She soldiered on, becoming, in her words, “the go-to gal” for the nitty-gritty details about the problem children of state government: Medicaid, the MBTA, and the school building assistance program.

Working her way up the legislative food chain to director of policy for the speaker, Craven helped draft the state’s new policies covering school construction. In 2004, she started carrying out those new policies as the first executive director of the school building authority.

She faced two challenges. The first was to replace a demand-driven funding program with a competitive process for limited dollars. The second was to reshape the municipalities’ sense of entitlement about school facilities by forcing them to think differently about construction priorities and costs.

Austerity is now the name of the game. A four-year moratorium on new projects allowed the authority to begin to pay down existing debt and adjust to life on a fiscal diet pegged at a fifth of the revenue from the state sales tax. Right now the agency is guaranteed \$702 million a year, but a year from now the guarantee will disappear and the authority will receive its share of whatever revenue the sales tax actually generates.

To adjust to this new spending reality, Craven is capping how much money her agency makes available annually for future school construction projects. The current cap is \$500 million.

With a limited amount of money available, Craven is working with communities to start prioritizing their spending needs. It’s a big adjustment for municipalities. No longer will Massachusetts rebuild an otherwise functional school because it is no longer aesthetically pleasing. Nor will state officials give into a community’s “school envy,” wanting a new building because another neighborhood or nearby town has one.



School Building Authority head Katherine Craven

To move into the agency's new capital pipeline, a district must now demonstrate that a project addresses a specific problem, such as health and safety issues or severe overcrowding. For example, Quincy's Central Middle School, an 1894 facility labeled "medieval" by architects, recently advanced to the next phase of the multi-step process.

With school enrollments expected to decline across the state, Craven's agency is developing a model for forecasting school-age populations by town. Her staff is also reviewing the physical condition of schools. In a recent survey, nearly 2,000 schools received rankings ranging from 1 (good) to 4 (poor). Nearly 80 percent ranked in the top category, with less than 3 percent, or 62 schools, in dire straits.

The agency's survey found no correlation between town wealth and school condition, the most surprising finding for Craven. Buildings that need major work include the Bedford, Wellesley, and Concord-Carlisle high schools. Applications for state assistance from those well-off communities are treated the same as those from less affluent New Bedford, which has more than a dozen buildings in poor shape. "Right now, the question is who is the neediest in terms of their physical buildings, not who is the neediest in terms of dollars," Craven says. (Poorer districts do receive higher reimbursements than wealthier ones.)

The application process for funds is much more rigorous, a change that cities and towns are only beginning to appreciate. When the authority lifted its building moratorium last year, it was inundated with more than 400 funding requests. At press time, however, only 86 of those had moved forward. "That's a huge culture change," Craven says. "I'm not sure that every community realizes this."

To get communities to focus like a laser, the agency is insisting on one project per district. On a rainy Friday morning in March, Pittsfield found out the hard way that the state has no intention of backing down from that posture. During their meeting with Craven's agency in downtown Boston, city officials put on the table a \$65,000 "visioning study" of options to replace its two aging high schools, but the only project scheduled for review was the Crosby Elementary School. Pittsfield officials were told they would have to re-apply for the high schools: The city couldn't swap out the elementary school for the high schools.

That "black and white" regulatory reality did not sit well with Mayor James Ruberto, who had called the high schools a top priority. Speaking at the March meeting, he said state officials ought to see the shades of gray when they look at communities' needs. "We're walking away with the wind knocked out of us," echoed outgoing Pittsfield Superintendent Katherine Darlington.

Although Craven may amend her stance, she suggests that most communities can only manage one project at a

time. For Exhibit A, take Newton. When the four-year moratorium ended, Newton submitted 17 new funding requests for its middle and elementary schools. However, as far as the MSBA is concerned, other Newton projects will have to take a number until the city deals with its most ambitious (some would say infamous) project.

What started out as a \$39 million renovation of Newton North High School has ballooned into a \$198 million project. There's been plenty of back and forth between city and state officials about the project, one that got the go-ahead under the old school building program, and state officials are willing to help the city find ways to manage costs. But with nearly \$47 million already committed, Craven won't be forking over any more money. If the school were coming into the program now, the MSBA would be wrestling with every detail on the design, she says.

What Craven brings to the program is discipline and stability, says Finneran. He says communities need to understand that they don't have a blank check, and he thinks school designs should be standardized to reduce costs. "There should be an operable set of blueprints that are as functional in, let's say, Boston, as they would in Pittsfield, and as functional in Pittsfield as they might be in Provincetown," he says. "You don't need 351 dreamers, designers, architects, and engineers

trying to build their own version of the Taj Mahal."

THE AGENCY IS INSISTING ON ONE PROJECT PER DISTRICT.

Mandated by the Legislature to investigate "prototypical" designs, the authority does provide space guidelines based on standard school

models that it has developed with assistance from superintendents and others. But an "off the shelf" design hasn't yet been developed, according to Craven, although that could be an option down the road if labor, material, and other variable costs become unaffordable.

What fuels the Boston native's passion? A strong work ethic often begins at home. In her public service family tree are her late grandmother (and namesake), a Boston city councilor from 1963 to 1967, and her father, John Craven, a retired Boston Juvenile Court judge. While many of her peers went into consulting, investment banking and the like, Craven, who also manages the state's cash flow as a deputy treasurer, saw an opportunity to make an immediate difference in people's lives at a young age.

Now 35, Craven doesn't intend to repeat past mistakes. "If we can't rebuild every school in the state, maybe we can rebuild every science lab in the state in a way that's creative, that no one has thought of before because everyone's been focused on getting to the top of the list," she says. "That's the culture that I'm trying to walk away from." **CW**

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Pay scale BY ROBERT DAVID SULLIVAN

TEACHING JOBS IN Massachusetts public schools may not pay as well as such private-sector occupations as nursing and technical writing, but in most communities teachers are doing relatively well, financially. The chart to the right shows average salaries for selected occupations during 2006, and both elementary and high school teachers make more, on average, than police officers, firefighters, and toll-takers (but a bit less than state legislators).

Salaries vary across the state, of course, ranging from an average \$34,748 for the 12 teachers in Berkshire County's little town of Florida to \$71,123 for the nearly 5,000 teachers in Boston, according to the state


Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Different costs of living are one factor, and a greater demand for skilled professionals may be driving up

Teachers in Boston lead the state.

teacher salaries in places like Dover, Malden, Natick, Weston, and the Concord-Carlisle district (to cite the only places other than the Hub to top \$70,000 per year). In the Boston public school district, the average teacher's salary in 2006-07, spread out across the entire year, was \$1,368 per week. That's a bit less than the average weekly wage of \$1,386 for all people working in Boston during 2006, according to the state's Office of Labor and Workforce Development. Similarly, public school teachers made almost exactly the average wage as for all workers in Cambridge and Framingham.

But in cities and towns with a weaker employment base, particularly those outside of Route 128, public school teachers were among the higher paid professionals. In Brockton, the average teaching salary came out to \$1,206 a week, or almost 60 percent more than the average paycheck of \$757 earned by all workers in the community. And in New Bedford, the teaching wage was \$1,124, well above the \$718 averaged by all people working in the city. **CW**

AVERAGE ANNUAL INCOME IN MASSACHUSETTS IN 2006, BY OCCUPATION



Physicians and surgeons:	\$134,400
Lawyers:	\$122,000
Computer software engineers:	\$93,080
Physics teachers (college):	\$89,640
Registered nurses:	\$70,910
Technical writers:	\$69,310
Probation officers:	\$61,320
State legislators:	\$58,237*
Elementary school teachers:	\$55,910
High school teachers:	\$54,780
Toll takers (Mass. Turnpike):	\$52,773**
Police officers:	\$48,830
Biological technicians:	\$48,750
Firefighters:	\$46,100
Construction laborers:	\$41,600
Court, municipal, and license clerks:	\$39,360
Mental health counselors:	\$35,610
Preschool teachers:	\$28,780

Source (except as noted): May 2006 State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates for Massachusetts, Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor (www.bls.gov)

*Base salary as of March 2007

**Current salary as reported by the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority

Raising the bar BY ROBERT DAVID SULLIVAN

BY MOST MEASURES, K-12 public education in Massachusetts is in better shape than in other states. We can boast higher scores on standardized tests, more spending per student, and fewer students per teacher. Bay State schools also stand out as having low “overhead,” meaning the share of education spending devoted to administration rather than actual teaching.

But not all students or school districts in Massachusetts have been able to keep up with this pace. The “poverty gap” in standardized test scores—that is, the difference between high- and low-income students—is one of the highest in the nation. And while we have the second-highest percentage of

children who get an early start in pre-kindergarten programs (most of them privately run), we’re not much better than the national average in the share of ninth-graders who graduate within four years from public high school.

Such differences make it clear that education reform has not met all its goals, but it’s unclear whether there will be popular support for doing more. We have an unusually high percentage of students who attend private schools and thus have no investment in the public system. And we can’t look for much help from Washington: Partly because of the state’s relative affluence, Massachusetts gets little in federal aid for education. **CW**

SPENDING PER STUDENT, 2005*

1. NEW JERSEY	\$12,252
2. NEW YORK	\$12,218
3. VERMONT	\$12,105
12. MASSACHUSETTS	\$9,930
48. IDAHO	\$6,867
49. ARIZONA	\$6,232
50. UTAH	\$5,463
US AVERAGE	\$8,973

*Adjusted for regional cost differences

Source: Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, *Education Week* (www.edweek.org/irc)

PERCENTAGE OF PUBLIC SCHOOL EXPENDITURES DEVOTED TO INSTRUCTION*

1. NEW YORK	72.0%
2. MASSACHUSETTS	69.9%
TENNESSEE	69.9%
48. MICHIGAN	61.6%
49. NEW MEXICO	60.9%
50. OKLAHOMA	60.7%

*Other categories are “student support services,” “administration,” and “operations.”

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education (<http://nces.ed.gov>)

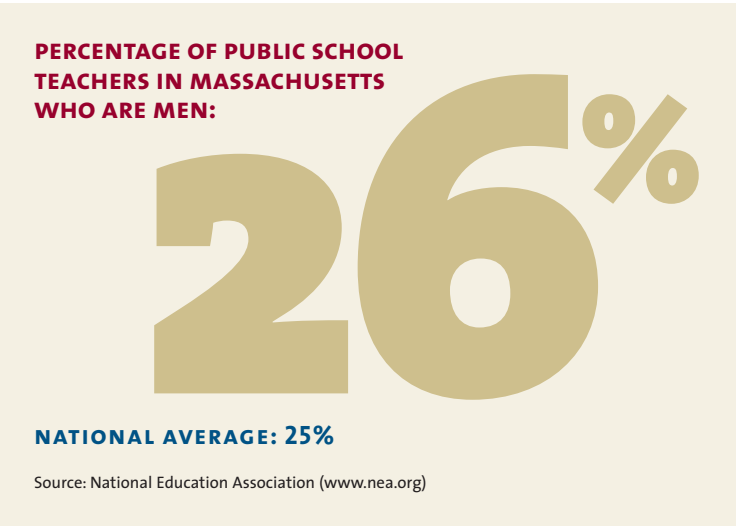
MATH PROFICIENCY AND THE “POVERTY GAP”

PERCENTAGE OF EIGHT-GRADERS PROFICIENT IN MATH, 2007*		NAEP SCORE “POVERTY GAP,” 2007**	
1. MASSACHUSETTS	50.7%	1. NORTH DAKOTA	15.4
2. MINNESOTA	43.1%	2. WYOMING	16.1
3. VERMONT	41.4%	3. MAINE	17.2
48. ALABAMA	18.2%	48. NEW JERSEY	31.3
49. NEW MEXICO	17.4%	49. MASSACHUSETTS	31.4
50. MISSISSIPPI	13.6%	50. CONNECTICUT	36.1
US AVERAGE	31.0%	US AVERAGE	26.0

*Based on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores

**Difference in 8th-grade NAEP scores between students eligible and not eligible for the National School Lunch Program; a higher rank means a smaller gap.

Source: Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, *Education Week*



FEDERAL AID AS PERCENTAGE OF ALL EDUCATION FUNDING, FY 2006

1. MISSISSIPPI	20.7%
2. LOUISIANA	18.5%
3. ALASKA	17.0%
47. MASSACHUSETTS	5.6%
48. NEW HAMPSHIRE	5.5%
49. CONNECTICUT	4.8%
50. NEW JERSEY	4.4%
US TOTAL	9.1%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education

STUDENTS ENROLLED PER TEACHER IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS, 2005

1. VERMONT	10.5
2. RHODE ISLAND	11.1
3. NEW YORK	12.3
8. MASSACHUSETTS	13.2
48. CALIFORNIA	21.0
49. UTAH	21.3
50. ARIZONA	21.8
US MEDIAN	14.9

Source: National Education Association

AVERAGE ENROLLMENT PER PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT

1. VERMONT	330
2. MONTANA	337
3. NORTH DAKOTA	491
22. MASSACHUSETTS	2,492
48. MARYLAND	35,834
49. FLORIDA	39,767
50. HAWAII*	182,767
US TOTAL	3,161

* Hawaii has a single statewide district.

Source: National Education Association.

PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES FROM PRIVATE AND PAROCHIAL SCHOOLS:

16%

NATIONAL AVERAGE: 10%

Source: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (www.wiche.edu)

EARLY LEARNERS VS. HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

PERCENTAGE OF 3- AND 4-YEAR-OLDS ENROLLED IN PRE-SCHOOL, 2006

1. NEW JERSEY	63.7%
2. MASSACHUSETTS	60.5%
3. CONNECTICUT	57.1%
48. IDAHO	31.7%
49. NORTH DAKOTA	29.2%
50. NEVADA	29.1%
US AVERAGE	46.1%

Source: Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, *Education Week*

FOUR-YEAR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE, CLASS OF 2004

1. NEBRASKA	87.6%
2. NORTH DAKOTA	86.1%
3. IOWA	85.8%
17. MASSACHUSETTS	79.3%
46. GEORGIA	61.2%
47. SOUTH CAROLINA	60.6%
48. NEVADA	57.4%
US AVERAGE	75.0%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education. Data not available for New York and Wisconsin.

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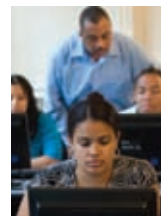
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Prep schools

BY ROBERT DAVID SULLIVAN

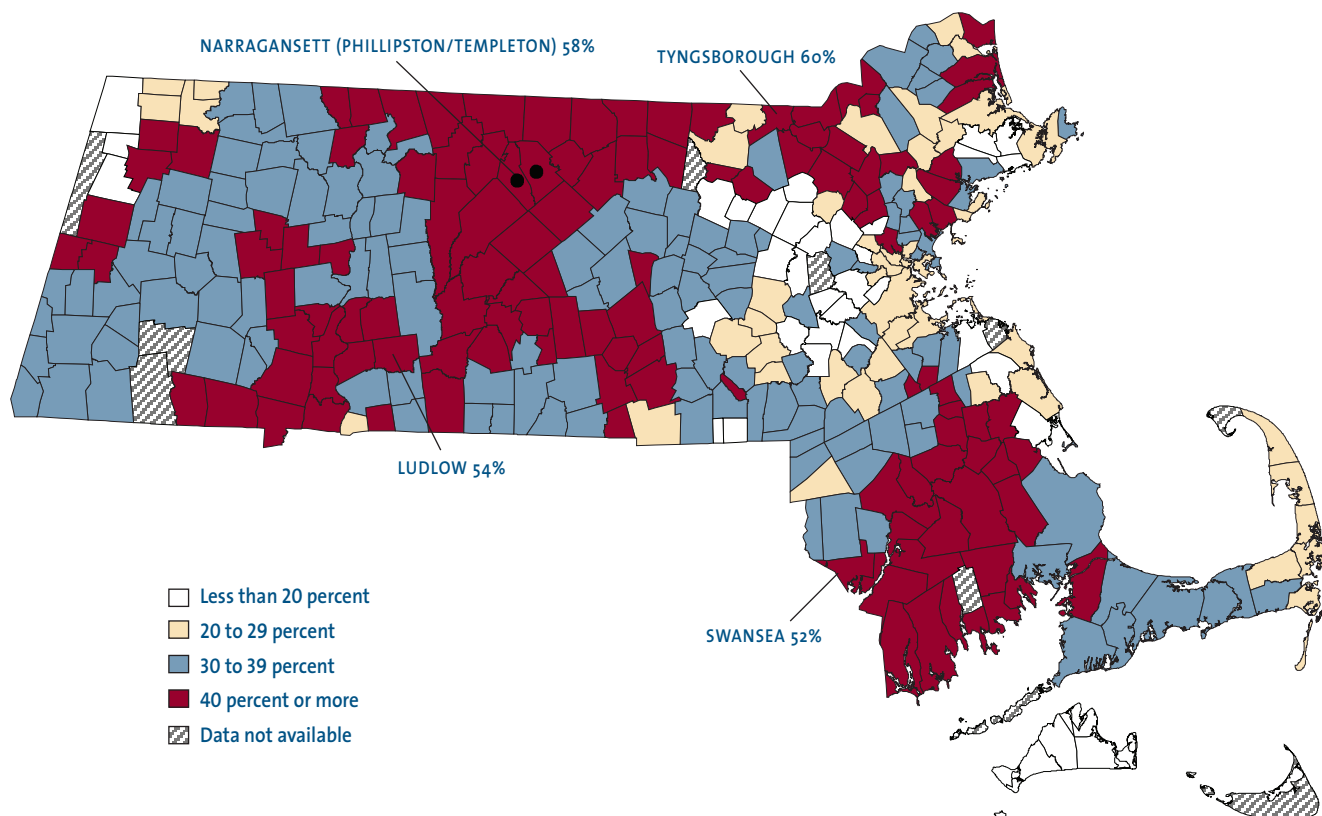
THE BAY STATE'S public colleges and universities attract a sizeable number of students from Boston, but they seem to be more valued as a higher-ed option in other parts of the state—Worcester County, the Springfield area, the Merrimack Valley, and the South Coast. The map below shows how likely students in each school district are to enroll in public institutions after graduation, according to the *Massachusetts School-to-College Report*, released by the state in April. (Vocational, agricultural, and charter schools are included in the data but not on our map.) High schools in Hingham and Wellesley were the only ones where less than 10 percent of graduates enrolled in the public system, presumably because so many went to private or out-of-state schools.

Lowell High School sent 347 students—or 44 percent of its 2005 graduating class—to the public higher-ed system, the largest such number in the state. And there were 19 high school districts in which over half of all graduates went on to

public colleges and universities in Massachusetts. But how prepared were they for college? Most of the freshmen from four of those 19 schools—Lawrence High, the Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School, the Mahar Regional School in Orange, and the Sabis International Charter School in Springfield—enrolled in remedial classes during their first semester, as did 49 percent of the Lowell High contingent. Suburban schools generally fared a little better: Sixty percent of Tyngsborough High graduates enrolled in public institutions, and 36 percent of them took remedial classes.

Among high schools that sent more than 40 percent of their graduates to the state's higher-ed system, Boston Latin Academy had the best college readiness record: Only 8 percent of its former students needed remedial courses. At the other extreme, 70 percent of the graduates from Springfield's High School of Commerce enrolled in remedial courses. **CW**

PERCENT OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES WHO ENROLLED IN MASS. PUBLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES, 2005



Source: *Massachusetts School-to-College Report*, Department of Higher Education and Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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One last thing, Mr. President

Ted Kennedy counts on lame duck Bush to give No Child Left Behind a new lease on life **BY SHAWN ZELLER**

LIKE ANY GOOD Democrat, Sen. Ted Kennedy is hoping that his party gets a big win in November—big enough to secure the congressional majorities gained in 2006 and also to take over the White House. That outcome would do wonders for the Democratic agenda on Capitol Hill, which this year has faced a constant roadblock at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

So why is Kennedy, despite the reluctance of many in his party's caucus, still insisting that this is the year to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind education law? Because his best hope of preserving the law he wrote seven years ago may rest in the hands of the man with whom he forged the original compromise, President George W. Bush.

It's not hard to see why Kennedy may feel that way. Both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama made it clear during the Democratic primaries that they are no fans of the 2001 law. Earlier this year, campaigning for his wife, former President Bill Clinton even criticized Kennedy—who'd recently endorsed Obama—by name. "This was a train wreck that was not intended," he said of the law. "No Child Left Behind was supported by George Bush and Senator Ted Kennedy and everybody in between. Why? Because they didn't talk to enough teachers before they did that."

Obama basked in Kennedy's endorsement in January, but he hasn't been much kinder to the law. He's said he wants a "fundamental" revamp "so that we're not just teaching to a test."

"The problem is political as much as substantive," says Paul Reville, the incoming state secretary of education. "The reality is that the passage of No Child Left Behind may have been a special event in political history that is now difficult to re-create."

Kennedy has spent considerable time this year

trying to overcome that difficulty, meeting with education-minded constituencies and policy experts to fashion a reauthorization bill. He says he hopes to convince his colleagues in Congress and President Bush to sign off on a revamped No Child Left Behind before Congress recesses for the year, sometime this fall. (Kennedy declined to comment for this story.)

To be sure, Kennedy—like many Democrats—has condemned the implementation of No Child Left Behind, particularly the funding levels sought by the Bush administration. Kennedy says the law needs an additional \$70 billion to work as intended. But unlike many Democrats, Kennedy still believes that the law's strictures, including its rigorous testing and school accountability standards, are more or less sound.

To preserve those standards and to win more federal funding to help states meet them, Kennedy's best hope would seem to be a reauthorization compromise with Bush this year, followed by a big Democratic victory in November. Then, next year, Kennedy could pursue the funding levels he says have been needed from the beginning.

That plan figures to be a tough sell. Many Capitol Hill Democrats are wary of moving a Kennedy-led reauthorization, given the criticism of the law's accountability standards from one of the party's key constituencies, teachers' unions. Last year, a House-driven reauthorization push by Democratic Rep. George Miller of California came unglued over union concerns about Miller's plan to allow school districts to give raises to teachers based on student test scores. The Bush administration, meanwhile, opposed Miller's bill because he also wanted to replace the current requirement that schools improve test scores with a system that relies on "multiple indicators" of progress—com-

binning, for example, test scores with graduation rates.

But if Kennedy can bridge the divide and, in particular, get his fellow Democrats on record in support of his reauthorization bill, it'll likely hold up at least until the next scheduled reauthorization, five years hence.

That would do a lot for Kennedy's legacy. After all, the liberal lion is now 76 years old. He's been a senator for nearly 46 years. When No Child Left Behind passed in 2001, it was touted as his crowning achievement as a legislator, an example of how Kennedy could cross the aisle and work with a conservative president to pass a landmark law.

If a Democratic president were to dismantle No Child Left Behind, by contrast, Kennedy's legacy takes a hit. And Kennedy would probably not be any better off if Arizona Sen. John McCain were to become president. The presumed GOP presidential nominee has barely mentioned No Child Left Behind on the campaign trail, only saying that he sees it as a "good beginning" and that he would look to increase its emphasis on science and math.

Also, a President McCain would come under pressure from congressional Republicans who have grown disenchanted with the law in recent years and more aggressive in critiquing it as a federal intrusion into a policy area better handled by the states. More than 60 House Republi-

cans have signed onto a bill by Michigan Rep. Pete Hoekstra that would allow states to opt out of the law's requirements entirely and still collect federal education funding.

Kennedy has addressed such concerns, saying that any reauthorization bill should give states more flexibility to help their worst-performing schools and provide more leeway to states in evaluating student progress. But he is determined to maintain the law's tough standards.

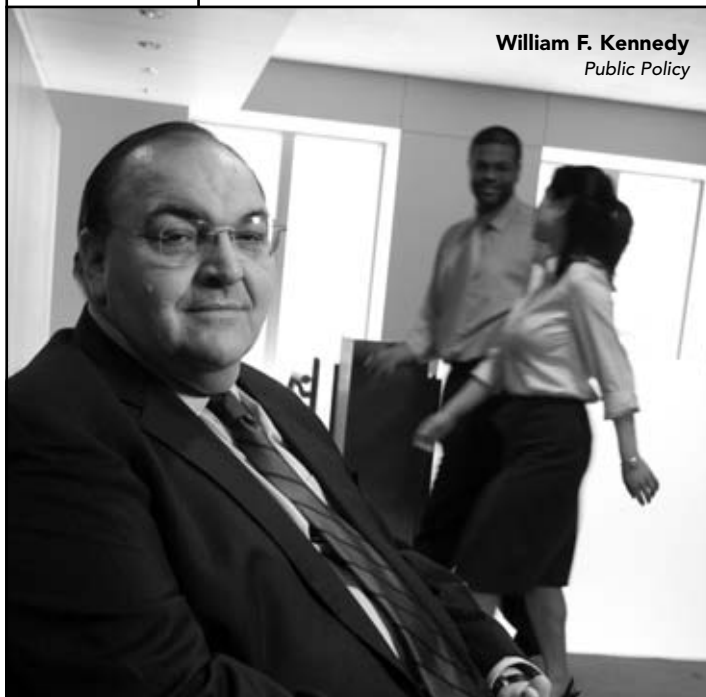
"We can't abandon the law's focus on helping every one of our students compete and win in the global economy," Kennedy said in January as the law reached its six-year anniversary.

FOR MASSACHUSETTS STUDENTS, a Kennedy-led reauthorization—rather than one spearheaded by Clinton or Obama—would help maintain support for what is widely acknowledged to be one of the toughest, and most successful, student achievement programs in the country.

That doesn't mean that Massachusetts has fared so well when it comes to meeting No Child Left Behind's standards for schools, or that No Child Left Behind enjoys any greater popularity in the Bay State than it does elsewhere. Indeed, under one of the most criticized por-



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tions of the law, states are allowed to set their own student achievement standards for their schools. States that set a high bar, as Massachusetts did, face a more difficult burden getting their students up to grade level.

That doesn't sit well with many Massachusetts teachers, who point out that last September they learned that Bay State students had outscored peers in every other state on a national assessment conducted by the federal Department of Education. That same month they learned that the percentage of Massachusetts schools determined under No Child Left Behind rules to not be meeting yearly progress goals actually rose to 39 percent.

"There's no way you can be No. 1 on the national assessment and have high rates going to college and look at No Child Left Behind and we're doing poorly. It just doesn't make sense," says Anne Wass, president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association.

But the fact that Wass trusts Kennedy to repair the law so as to prevent such an outcome—by providing more leeway to states not only to set standards but also to measure progress—indicates that he may still have enough good will among union leaders to reach a reauthorization deal.

"I know a lot of people in other states are upset with Sen. Kennedy," Wass says. "We don't believe the law was implemented in an effective way. But I totally believe his commitment to low income and minority kids. We want to work with him to fix this."

And in Bush, Kennedy may have a willing partner once again. The president, like the senator, is thinking about his legacy. He's eager to prove that his most impressive domestic policy achievement can stand the test of time.

Indeed, fearful that his successor will dismantle No Child Left Behind, Bush's Education Department has released a string of regulatory changes this year aimed at fine-tuning the law without having to get Congress's sign-off.

Kennedy has praised some of these changes, but he and Bush still have wide policy differences. Bush likes the idea of merit pay and also wants to give states the power to bypass labor agreements in order to reassign teachers and to dedicate more funds to private tutoring programs. Democrats like Kennedy instead favor more experimentation with methods of evaluating schools' progress, shifting away from standardized tests that evaluate students against their predecessors in favor of growth models that evaluate one group of students as it moves from grade to grade.

In the end, says the Board of Education's Reville, the impending elections may thwart legislative compromise. But as was the case in 2002, sometimes unexpected alliances produce big results.

"One way or another No Child Left Behind is going to come back," he says. "The question is how much fidelity it will have to the principles and mechanisms of the original law." **CW**

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Shock to the system

Voters pony up taxes after the state flunks Randolph's schools

BY ROBERT PREER

RANDOLPH During the 27 years after Proposition 2½ became law in Massachusetts, the town of Randolph never passed an override of the state property tax cap. Between 2003 and 2007, voters rejected overrides three times. So when this year's election was held on April 1 and the votes were tallied that night at Town Hall, override supporters reacted to the results with celebration and amazement.

Randolph voters passed one of the largest overrides in Massachusetts history: \$5.5 million for the schools, \$411,000 for the police, and \$200,000 for the fire department. When property tax bills are mailed in July, homeowners will absorb a 16 percent annual increase, or about \$500 for a typical home—a big hike in any community during a recession, but especially difficult in a middle-income town like Randolph.

The new revenue will allow the town to hire 50 teachers, six police officers, and four firefighters. Schools will be able to expand their curricula and restore programs that had been cut over the past five years. “It allows us to restore some critical educational infrastructure needs that have been lost,” says Randolph School Superintendent Richard Silverman.

The election appeared to pull Randolph from the brink of civic collapse, but the town's recent history could be a cautionary tale for other suburbs in Massachusetts. In the months leading up to this spring's override vote, the town had fallen into a dangerous downward spiral, and the state was preparing to take over what it labeled an “underperforming” school system.

Randolph may be less affluent and more racially diverse than other towns in the Boston area, but its troubles reveal that the divide between suburb and city is not as great as many people think.

Randolph's experience also shows what can happen when a town appears to turn its back on its schools.

RANDOLPH, A FORMER shoe-manufacturing town that is now mostly a bedroom community for Boston, first began to feel budgetary pressures in 2001. That's when the state economy went into a tailspin, state spending was curtailed, and local tax revenues began to drop. Randolph, of course, was not alone in this predicament, but it was hit particularly hard.

And to say that 2007 was a tough year for Randolph understates the perilous turn the town's fortunes had taken. “It was like you were in a boat and you were taking on water, and you couldn't bail yourself out quick enough,” says Selectman James Burgess. “Pretty soon the boat was going to sink.”

The first bad news came at the start of the year, when the state Board of Library Commissioners revoked the accreditation of the town's library. The action, triggered by cutbacks in library hours below state minimums, deprived the town of \$30,000 in state library aid and also prompted neighboring towns to yank borrowing privileges for Randolph residents.

In March, voters shot down a \$4.16 million tax override, \$3 million of which would have gone to the troubled schools. In the weeks after the vote, the School Committee voted to lay off teachers, eliminate all bus transportation, close an elementary school, and end all freshman and junior varsity sports at Randolph High.

In May, two boys were killed in their home on Union Street in a fire, which authorities suspect was caused by arson. When the fire chief said publicly that budget cuts were a factor in the deaths, the

selectmen suspended him for three weeks. He later responded with a federal lawsuit.

Summer brought new pressure on the police, especially with the shooting death of a 17-year-old in front of a gas station on North Main Street, or Route 28, the heavily traveled main road into town. Authorities attributed the killing to gangs, which also were suspected of playing a role in a nonfatal stabbing a week earlier.

In mid-August, the selectmen shifted their top administrator, Executive Secretary Michael Carroll, to the job of finance director and cut his pay. They attempted to make the elected town clerk, Brian Howard, interim executive secretary, but ran into protests and a lawsuit from a group of residents. Carroll resigned and took a town job in Seekonk, and the selectmen left the executive secretary post vacant.

Such turmoil seemed to spread throughout local government. The recreation director was fired after 33 years on the job. Attempts to hire a town planner—Randolph is one of the largest towns in the state not to have a professional planner—foundered when none of the finalists would take the position, apparently because the \$75,000 salary was below their other options.

Then in October, Maureen Kenney, who

PERHAPS THE WORST news came in November, when the state Board of Education cited Randolph as an “underperforming” school district, based on declining test scores and inadequate funding. (Gill-Montague, Holyoke, and Southbridge share that designation.) It gave the district six months to develop a turnaround plan or face state receivership. Since the state education reform law was adopted in 1993, no school district has gone into receivership.

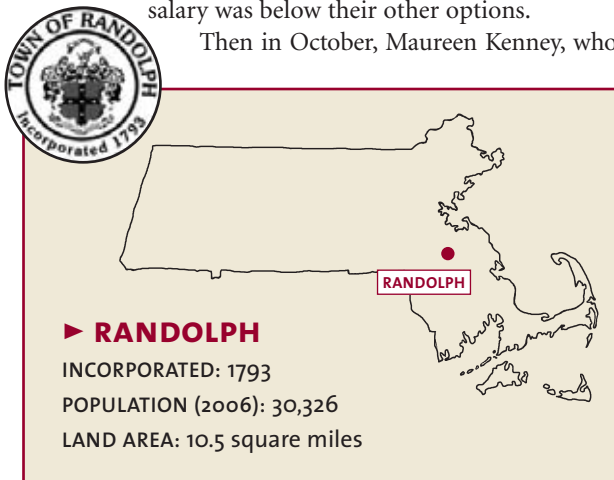
The town’s school spending grew by only 6.6 percent between fiscal years 2002 and 2006, well below the statewide average of 27.7 percent, and Randolph has been hit hard by fluctuations in state aid. Because it has high numbers of low-income, minority, and non-English-speaking students, the town has been eligible for more state aid than most suburban districts get. (State aid makes up close to 40 percent of Randolph’s school budget, compared with 13 percent in the neighboring town of Canton.) But funding from Beacon Hill fell by about \$1 million between the 2003 and 2004 fiscal years, and it has remained flat ever since.

It hasn’t helped that, according to data compiled by the Randolph schools, local parents and students began deserting the public schools around 2003. Since then, enrollment has fallen 20 percent. According to the department, 30 percent of school age children in Randolph do not attend the public schools, up significantly from 21 percent five years ago. Among high school age children, approximately 40 percent, or 600 students, don’t go to Randolph High.

This may be a simple case of white flight. Partly because of relatively relaxed zoning laws, Randolph is known for small, affordable homes, and beginning in the 1970s it has become increasingly diverse, with an influx of African-Americans, Asians, Haitians, and other ethnic and racial minorities. As these ethnic groups took seats in the public schools, white parents in growing numbers pulled their children out, sending them to private, parochial, and charter schools.

The 2000 federal census found the town’s population to be 63 percent white, 21 percent black, 10 percent Asian, and 3 percent Hispanic. By contrast, the racial makeup of the Randolph public schools during the 2006-2007 school year was 50 percent African-American, 26 percent white, 15 percent Asian, and 7 percent Hispanic.

The Randolph schools also have seen a big jump in students from low income families and families where English is not the language spoken in the home. According to the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, English is not the primary language of 38 percent of the students (the statewide average is 15 percent) and 41 percent of the students are classified as low-income (the statewide average is 29 percent).



served on both the school committee and board of selectmen, confronted School Superintendent Silverman about his request for five days paid leave after the death of a relative. He quoted her as saying of his request, “It’s not the standard in industry. Besides, don’t you Jews plant them within 24 hours?”

The remarks set off a furor that spread beyond the town, drawing unwelcome publicity to the community. Kenney apologized and resigned her school committee post, but a recall campaign to remove her from the board of selectmen failed to garner enough signatures.

Burgess, the selectman, says 2007 was a devastating year for Randolph. “I’ve been in government half of my life,” he says. “I’ve never seen the animosity or chaos that this year brought.”

It was the school district's poor performance on standardized tests that caught the attention of state education officials. Examining student achievement measures from 2003 to 2006, state education analysts determined Randolph to be a low performing district.

In the 2006 MCAS tests, only 46 percent of Randolph students were proficient in English and 29 percent were proficient in math. Furthermore, the trends were pointing downward. The percentage of students scoring as advanced or proficient on MCAS tests decreased by 8 points between 2003 and 2006, while those in the warning/failing category increased by 4 points. And Randolph

Poor test scores and inadequate funding led to the 'underperforming' label.

seemed to be having a harder time with those who were making up an increasing proportion of the student population—African-Americans, Hispanics, children with disabilities, and children from low income and non-English speaking families. Less than a third of the students in these groups were proficient in MCAS testing. These poor scores, along with the troubled town management, made the Board of Education's "underperforming" label seem almost inevitable.

RANDOLPH IS STILL governed by a 240-member representative Town Meeting, which meets a couple of times a year, a volunteer board of selectmen, and several autonomous boards and committees. The chief administrator in town is the selectmen's executive secretary, who has no real authority over some of the boards. This lack of centralized authority has hurt the town's finances and allowed conflicts to occasionally spin out of control, according to some officials.

"We are a \$75 million business being run in essence by volunteers," says Town Clerk Howard.

A former selectman, Howard remembers when Gov. Mitt Romney cut state aid in the middle of the fiscal year early in his administration, and most communities pulled back on spending immediately. In Randolph, officials had to wait for Town Meeting to convene six months later, Howard says. An attempt to shift to a city-style mayor-council form of government lost at the polls in 2005, though proponents hope to put government reform to the voters again.

Still, there were signs this spring that the town's troubled politics are calming. The selectmen finally hired an executive secretary, David Murphy, who had been opera-

tions manager for Quincy's former mayor William Phelan. A fresh face in town, Murphy promised to focus on efficiency and cost savings, which won him early plaudits from elected officials. And the school committee decided after some hesitation to renew Silverman's contract as superintendent for three years, providing stability to the schools.

The selectmen and school committee, which had squabbled for years over matters large and small, decided to seek better relations. In April, members of the two boards met at Town Hall for a luncheon with a facilitator on hand. The officials agreed to make the luncheons a regular occasion.

"We came out of there with a consensus that we need to work together," says school committee member Marybeth Nearen.

Sen. Brian Joyce of Milton, whose district includes Randolph, launched a series of initiatives aimed at helping the town. In the middle of last year, the town found money to keep the library open more hours but needed the state to waive a two-year waiting period for recertification. Joyce shepherded through the Legislature a bill to allow quicker recertification.

Joyce also persuaded the state Office of Public Safety to open a regional police training facility in a closed Randolph school, which will bring revenue to the town from the lease and also have dozens of police cars rolling in and out of town every day and perhaps deterring wrongdoers. Joyce also helped to arrange a Department of Revenue review of town finances, as well as a \$1.8 million grant to spruce up the downtown.

"I simply felt an obligation to step in and get more involved even in areas that traditionally a state senator does not get involved in," says Joyce. "Randolph is a community at the crossroads."

The state Board of Education still has receivership for Randolph on its agenda for June. Randolph officials say they are confident with the new money voted by the town and plans in place to reinstate programs and hire new staff that they can convince the board not to take this drastic action.

J.C. Considine, state Education Department spokesman, said the board will review Randolph's plans carefully. Of the override vote, he says, "It's obviously encouraging. I know a lot of hard work and effort went into approving the override."

Silverman says the override vote "is simply the beginning." As programs are added and teachers hired, he believes the Randolph schools will again be a draw for parents and students. "We hope as we begin to rebuild, the children will come back," he says. **CW**



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The bottom line

Michael Bloomberg shakes up public schools in New York City

BY LISA PREVOST

SET AMID THE row houses and apartment buildings of the poor, mostly Hispanic community of Bushwick, the New York Harbor School seems a long way from the open water. The school dropped anchor on the top floor of the former Bushwick High School about five years ago, when that old institution was shut down for chronically low performance. Three other small schools occupy the lower floors, each with its own theme, like social justice and urban planning, each striving for relevance on this inner-city block.

Harbor School students routinely venture out to the waterways, but most of their learning takes place up four flights of stairs on dry ground. The maritime theme serves as a hook to draw kids in to academics, as well as a lens through which they might view new career or life paths, says the school's founder, Murray Fisher, an environmentalist who previously worked with Bobby Kennedy Jr.'s Waterkeeper Alliance. "We keep anticipating naysayers—'You want to teach these kids what? Boat building?'—but there's been almost none," Fisher says.

In one classroom on a recent afternoon, a half-dozen juniors were learning just that as they huddled around a board contemplating the cuts necessary to form a skeg (the finlike protrusion on the keel of a ship). Down the hall, in a marine robotics class, students worked in teams to build computerized models of the underwater robots they'd fashioned from Legos. Their challenge, as explained by student Daniel Jusino, was to design a robot that could surface on its own from a resting state. "You've got to have a good eye for where the pieces are," Jusino said, maneuvering his mouse to rotate a three-dimensional model on the screen.

Several floors below, in the building's shared swimming pool, Shaun Strobel's scuba class was finishing up. As kids stacked equipment, Strobel, a fisherman-turned-teacher, recalled how he and Fisher managed to raise enough money from private donors last year to take 12 students on a seven-day diving trip to the Bahamas. "I wanted to show them how nice it could be outside the pool," Strobel said, adding that the passport fee alone was more than

some of his students' families could manage.

The Harbor School is neither charter nor magnet. Rather, it's a public high school reimagined as more of a start-up business, one in which the bottom line is measured by academic achievement. Seeded with \$500,000 in foundation grants distributed over four years, the school continues to underwrite its hands-on activities by raising private funds (some \$500,000 this year out of its \$4 million budget). Much of that fund-raising is done through outside partners, like the South Street Seaport Museum, which also supplies the school with its own schooner.

In essence, the Harbor School is built on Fisher's entrepreneurial fervor, the staff's pioneering spirit, and the commitment of outside "investors." It is one of more than 200 such downsized innovations that have sprung up under Mayor Michael Bloomberg's small schools initiative, part of a reform process inspired and guided by the rules of the marketplace.

Since taking over the nation's largest school system in 2002, New York's billionaire businessman has taken a bold, businesslike approach to reform. The legislation establishing mayoral control allowed Bloomberg greater authority than his counterparts in other major cities—including Boston, where Mayor Tom Menino has overseen the schools for 15 years. Bloomberg has made full use of his authority to give New York's school system what Stanford University education professor Michael Kirst calls a much-needed "jolt."

In 1995, Menino tapped the expertise of a respected education veteran (Thomas Payzant) to focus Boston's reform efforts around improved instruction, but Bloomberg has employed more of a scattershot approach. His handpicked chancellor, Joel Klein, is a former antitrust lawyer for the Justice Department. Together, the two men have set about the business of reform with the impatience of corporate bean-counters, enacting new policies by edict, firing principals who aren't performing, and sloughing off dissenters as self-interested defenders of the status quo.

Just about everyone agrees that Bloomberg freed

the school system from what was a stagnant and ineffective bureaucracy. His reforms have been hailed as a model for mayoral control, with *The Economist* praising Bloomberg for “pointing the way” on school reform much as his predecessor, Rudy Giuliani, did on fighting crime. More notably, last year the city won the Broad Prize for Urban Education (awarded to Boston public schools in 2006), which comes with \$500,000 in college scholarships from the Los Angeles–based Broad Foundation.

But strong mayoral control may not survive Bloomberg’s second term in office. (He is prohibited from running for a third term.) Parents, teachers, and community advocates complain that they have been cut out of the governing process (a not-unfamiliar complaint in Boston). Others raise questions about how the Department of Education (DOE), now a branch of city government, compiles data, and whether the public is getting accurate information about the impact of reforms.

Additionally, some see Chancellor Klein’s repeated reorganizations of the bureaucracy—going from intensely centralized control to regional districts to decentralization—as glaring evidence of the administration’s lack of educational experience. “I don’t think anyone who’s been paying attention could possibly believe they know what they’re doing,” says Leonie Haimson, executive director of Class Size Matters, a city advocacy group.

Stanford’s Kirst counters that total control was essential to shake up such a staggeringly large system, with 1.1 million students, 1,456 schools, and some 80,000 teachers. Performance was so uneven before Bloomberg took over that, in some of the poorer areas of the city, barely 30 percent of students read at grade level, and graduation rates weren’t much higher. “They shook up such a mammoth bureaucracy,” Kirst says. “I mean, they closed down 110 Livingston Street,” the old Board of Education headquarters in Brooklyn. “That was the epitome of bloated bureaucracy.”

Post-jolt, however, the context for mayoral control in New York City may have changed. Next year, mayoral control expires, leaving it to the Legislature to decide whether to reauthorize it, and if so, in what form. “The issue before New Yorkers now,” Kirst says, “is, do they want more democratic control, or unfettered executive leadership?”

A WALL STREET MENTALITY

Klein has publicly addressed that question, telling an audience at the Manhattan Institute recently that mayoral control is the only way to keep “special interests” from mucking up the reform process. (Klein declined to be interviewed for this story.) One of his deputy chancellors, Christopher Cerf, suggests that current criticisms reflect the resistance of

those interests, whom he vaguely defines as stakeholders afraid of change or better off with the status quo. “There are of course lots and lots of complainants,” says Cerf, who formerly presided over Edison Schools, a commercial manager of public schools, “and they’re very effective at managing the press because the press likes conflict.”

Certainly Bloomberg and Klein have attacked the status quo on all fronts. In addition to the small-schools initiative, which has attracted more than \$125 million in grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, their record includes the creation of 45 charter schools, an academy that has trained about 200 new principals, a 70 percent increase in city funding for education, and a 40 percent hike in teacher salaries.

Applying a Wall Street mentality to school performance, they have refocused the system around accountability, aided by an \$80 million data management system known as ARIS (for Achievement Reporting and Innovation System). Schools are graded on an A-to-F scale on annual progress reports. Those that meet performance goals can earn bonuses for their teachers. Kids who reach testing goals, earn good grades, and attend school regularly can earn cash payments or prepaid minutes on free cell phones, depending on the particular incentives being tried at their schools.

Klein’s management approach has been a bit herky-jerky. While his first years were marked by a tightly controlled, top-down management style, more recently he did an about-face toward decentralization that he prefers to characterize as a natural evolution. The upshot is that principals are now “empowered” to run their schools like independent franchises. They have much more discretion over how to use their resources, thanks in part to a new union

Teachers can earn bonuses, kids can earn cell phones.

contract that eliminated job “bumping” rights for more-senior teachers. In return, their schools must meet performance targets.

Klein’s rapid-fire reforms are a sharp turnaround from the bad old days, when political divisions paralyzed the Board of Education and scandals periodically plagued the 32 elected community school boards. The 2002 legislation establishing mayoral control replaced those governing bodies with a 13-member Panel for Educational Policy as well as Community District Education Councils, neither of which has any real authority. The PEP generally rubber-stamps Klein’s policy proposals—not surprising, since eight of its members are appointed by the mayor, and the other five by borough presidents over whom the mayor has considerable influence.

In March, for example, the panel voted on a proposal to



Mayor Michael Bloomberg with students from Columbus High School in the Bronx, while campaigning for reelection in 2005.

require eighth-graders to achieve basic levels on standardized English and math exams before being promoted to the ninth grade. (Similar retention policies are already in place for third-, fifth-, and seventh-graders.) The panel approved the policy 11-1 in the face of a roomful of noisy protestors, most of them parents, who wanted to know what the Department of Education was going to do to improve the city's middle schools. "The votes are almost always like that," says David Bloomfield, a parent member of the advisory Citywide Council on High Schools and an education professor at Brooklyn College. "It would have made huge headlines if they'd voted against the mayor."

Mayoral control traded away democratic representation for focused school reform. The question being pondered in the face of reauthorization is whether the tradeoff was worth it, and the debate is heated. Klein points to rising test scores and higher graduation rates as evidence that students are better off, but some critics say those claims are inflated. The mayor's office also controls the information coming out of the DOE—and that is "a big, big deal," Bloomfield says. "Democracy runs on information. Accountability runs on information. Without accurate data, there can be no accountability."

A WHIRL OF CONFLICTING DATA

One of the fiercest dissenters is Diane Ravitch, an education historian and research professor of education at New York University. Although Ravitch initially supported mayoral

control, she has since become so disenchanted that, in February, she resigned from the editorial board of *Education Next*, a journal of opinion published by the Hoover Institution, in a huff over a story about Bloomberg's reforms. She later derided the article as "a thinly veiled puff piece." One of her many points of contention is Klein's claim to double-digit gains in math and reading scores on state exams since 2002. The actual gains are more modest, Ravitch has repeatedly argued, because Klein is wrongly laying claim to progress made between 2001 and 2003, well before his reforms were under way.

Deputy Chancellor Cerf dismisses Ravitch's criticism as "a cheap rhetorical point." Bloomberg had an impact on the system beginning in his first year, "an earth-shaking moment in the history of the DOE," Cerf said.

The release last November of federal test scores dealt a more serious blow to the chancellor's claims. New York City's results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed no significant change in eighth-grade reading and math between 2005 and 2007. Fourth-grade reading progress was similarly flat. The only bright spot was fourth-grade math, with 6 percent fewer students scoring below the basic level.

Further muddying the picture were the administration's new school progress reports, also released in November. The rating system relies heavily on the measure of individual student progress from one year to the next, with a lesser focus on overall student achievement. The approach is meant to more accurately identify areas of success (or failure). As ap-

plied in the DOE's complex calculation, however, it branded some schools considered high-performing by other measures with a C or worse, while some schools with lower overall performance won the highest letter grade. A *New York Times* editorial called the rating system a "commendable" aim which, as executed, resulted in "misleading and distorted results." (The DOE is now considering assigning separate grades in separate categories, among other changes.)

The city's public advocate, Betsy Gotbaum, an elected ombudsman who watchdogs city agencies, says the perpetual whirl of conflicting data was the motivation for her recent appointment of a commission to look into whether mayoral control needs refining. "We have too many testing systems here, so nobody really knows what's going on," says Gotbaum, who is often mentioned as a potential candidate for mayor herself. "I'm not saying that DOE isn't telling the truth, but that there's so many different measurements. That's what has a lot of people concerned."

SMALL ADVANTAGES

Back at the Harbor School, the pressure to boost test scores demands a daily focus on keeping kids engaged and on track. With about 400 students, the school is small and contained enough that, on her way up the cement staircase with a bag of sandwiches one recent afternoon, the assistant principal, Jennifer Ostrow, immediately recognized the young man on his way down as a senior now in his fifth year at the school. Planning to skip out on the rest of the day's classes, the teen was instead escorted back upstairs by Ostrow for a serious chat.

These staff-to-student connections help prevent kids from falling through the cracks. Last year, the Harbor School graduated its first class, 59 percent of the kids who started out as freshmen. That may not sound all that impressive until you consider that the old Bushwick high school's four-year graduation rate was a far more dismal 23 percent. "Those kids who graduated last year?" says Dudley, the principal. "Those are my babies. And they will be for the rest of their lives."

A study last year of 75 small schools started under the Bloomberg administration found similarly promising results. The study, by Policy Studies Associates, in Washington, DC, concluded that the four-year graduation rates at small schools averaged about 18 percent higher than those of larger city high schools with comparable student populations.

The administration's trumpeting of small schools' success has also been challenged, however. Schools that started with one grade and then added a grade each year (like the Harbor School) have a "particularly well nurtured and in-

cubated sample size," says Bloomfield. "To compare that with a normal school lacks credibility." Additionally, new small schools are allowed to exclude high-need special-education students and English language learners (ELLs) requiring separate classroom instruction during their first two years in operation. (Brooklyn College's Bloomfield has filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights concerning that policy.)

Some are also troubled that higher graduation rates at the small schools don't necessarily translate into college readiness. The Policy Studies report noted that small schools'

Bloomberg's changes have lukewarm voter support.

graduates were far more likely to earn a "local diploma"—representing the minimum standard for graduation and a rank below the higher-standard Regents and Advanced Regents diplomas—than were students at larger city schools. Advocates for immigrant families voice concerns that English language learners are at a particular disadvantage at small schools because many don't seem to be getting the appropriate instructional services. "They're closing bilingual programs at these large high schools, and they're not replicating them at these small schools," says Arlen Benjamin-Gomez, a staff attorney for Advocates for Children, which advocates for equality in education.

Overall, public support for Bloomberg's reforms seems lukewarm at best. In a Quinnipiac University poll released in March 2007, 58 percent of voters said an independent board of education should run the public schools, not the mayor. Last November, 47 percent of voters in another Quinnipiac poll called the mayor's takeover a success. Yet for all the complaints, few are those who long for a return to the old Livingston Street era. The demands are mostly for more transparency. Gotsbaum is thinking the city might need an independent entity that will "give real data" on school performance. Others have suggested giving more of an oversight role to the City Council.

A rethinking of authority could be the system's next natural evolution. "The mayor's role may evolve as the context changes over time," says Kirst. "After the jolt's over, then you might want to strike a different balance." The trick will be finding a point on the scale that doesn't act as a drag on what is still very much a work in progress. Small schools like the Harbor School, for example, are still getting up to speed. Murray Fisher has yet to realize his original vision for a place that would prepare kids to understand, manage, and take care of marine resources. But he's nearly there. By the time the debate over mayoral control is resolved, the school will be planning its move to a brand new facility on Governors Island, smack in the middle of New York Harbor. **CW**

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Middle William S. Greene **FALSBURG** Academy Middle
GLoucester-Montague Sea Falls Middle **GLOUCESTER** Milton
L. Fullers **GREENFIELD** Newton **HOLBROOK** Holbrook
Jr. (Sr.) **HULL** Dr. William R. Peck Middle E.N. White
Elementary Holyoke Alternative Program John J. Lynch
Middle Kelly Elementary Lawrence Elementary Lt. Elmer J.
McMahon Elementary Morgan Elementary **LAWRENCE** Arlington
Middle Emily G. Wetherbee Gerard A. Guilmette Guilmette
Middle John K. Tarbox Lawrence Family Development Charter
S. Lawrence East Elementary S. Lawrence East Middle
LOWELL Bartlett Community Partnership Charles W. Morey
Charlotte M. Murkland Elementary James Sullivan Middle
John J. Shaughnessy Pawtucketville Memorial **NEW BEDFORD**
Abraham Lincoln Charles S. Ashley George N. Dunbar Keith
Middle Normandin Middle Thomas R. Rodman **NORTH ADAMS**
Silvio O. Conte Middle **PITTSFIELD** John T. Reid Middle
RANDOLPH Randolph Community Middle **REVERE** Seacoast
SOUTHBRIDGE Mary E. Wells Jr. High West Street
SPRINGFIELD Brightwood Chestnut Street Middle Daniel
B. Brunton Elias Brookings Gerena Homer Street John F.
Kennedy Middle John J. Duggan Middle Lincoln Elementary
M. Marcus Kiley Middle New Leadership Charter Putnam
Vocational Tech Samuel Bowles Springfield Academy for
Excellence (SAFE) Van Sickle Middle White Street **WAREHAM**
Wareham Middle **WESTFIELD** South Middle **WORCESTER**
Burncoat Middle Burncoat Street Canterbury Chandler
Elementary Community Chandler Magnet Claremont Academy
Forest Grove Middle Goddard School/Science Tech Lincoln
Street Roosevelt Sullivan Middle Woodland Academy
Worcester East Middle



Held BACK

We increasingly know what it would take to turn around failing schools. Are we willing to do it?

Nearly 75 percent of the students in the Holyoke public schools come from low-income families. At the city's Lynch Middle School, that figure is 84 percent, giving it one of the highest concentrations of poverty of any school in the state. Paul Hyry, the school's principal, easily ticks off more figures that fill out the school's profile. Like the fact that roughly one-third of its 300 students are classified as "English language learners." Or that nearly 30 percent of Lynch students are deemed "learning disabled" and receive some form of special education services. Or that, as a result of redrawn school boundaries, the Lynch district now includes the lion's share of the 174 homeless family shelter units in Holyoke, meaning that new students from the most unstable families in the Commonwealth appear at the school's door throughout the school year, some of them having been in no classroom for months.

"None of this is an excuse," says Hyry, a 40-year-old marathon runner who comes off as both patient and determined, an indispensable mix in a job that puts a high premium on perseverance. On one wall of his cramped office are two posters for the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, a national organization that provides college tuition assistance. The slogan on the posters targets a powerful message to students at Lynch, 85 percent of

BY MICHAEL JONAS

PHOTOS BY MARK MORELLI

whom are Puerto Rican. DEFY EXPECTATIONS, it reads. The truth is, however, that most of them do not.

On the eighth-grade MCAS exam for English last year, just 29 percent of Lynch students scored “proficient” or “advanced,” the two top categories, while 44 percent fell into the “needs improvement” category and 26 percent failed the test. For eighth-grade math, just 19 percent were in the top two categories, with 21 percent deemed in need of improvement and 60 percent failing outright.

Students at the Lynch School, like many in the state’s poorer communities, are stuck at the bottom of the achievement ladder. When the Massachusetts Education Reform Act was passed 15 years ago, it ushered in a new era in which high standards were set for all students, with an expectation that the huge infusion of new state funding to poorer districts, combined with strict accountability measurements, would lift achievement there to the levels seen in more affluent districts. Call it naive—or a bold aspiration.

We aimed to “eradicate the correlation between socioeconomic status and educational attainment,” says Paul Reville, the incoming state secretary of education and one of the architects of the 1993 law. “Fifteen years into education reform, we’d have to say we’ve failed on that.”

The Lynch School is one of 114 schools on the state education department’s list of “underperforming schools.” These are schools that have failed to make enough progress for four straight years in either math or English scores to satisfy benchmarks developed as part of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which aims to bring all students to proficiency in the two subjects by 2014. Late last year, the Lynch School was one of six schools statewide that the state education department recommended be further downgraded by a vote of the Board of Education into the category of “chronically underperforming” schools, a label reserved for schools that have not made progress after at least two years in the underperforming category. The designation carries with it a presumption that the school principal will be replaced, and it is supposed to give the school district broader powers to hire and dismiss teachers at that school, though this provision has never been tested.

Holyoke school leaders outlined to the state Board of Education all the steps they were taking to improve student outcomes, many of them the very strategies recommended for underperforming schools. They had worked hard to align the school’s curriculum with state standards. Teachers were receiving more professional development



Principal Paul Hyry is determined not to let Holyoke's Lynch Middle School fall victim to low expectations.

training. They also explained that the school’s population of English language learners and special needs students had increased by approximately 50 percent over the previous three years.

In December, when it came time for the board to vote to move the six schools into the worst-performing category, it balked. “There was dead silence,” says Hyry, who is in his third year at the helm at Lynch School. “No one would make a motion.” Board members said they were increasingly concerned that the state was stigmatizing low-performing schools with labels, while doing too little to help them improve.

Fifteen years after education reform established a new era of accountability for schools, no one seems prepared to answer the question of what to now do with schools that are still failing to educate kids to an acceptable level. For a state rightly heralded as a leader of the standards-based education reform movement, and one at the top of several national rankings of overall student achievement, it has become the elephant in the room.

“If we have an accountability system, it implies that we know what to do and that we’re willing to help,” says Reville. “To have an accountability system that publicly calls out underperformance but does nothing to remedy that situation is irresponsible.”

LIGHT TOUCH?

The knock on the state accountability system is that it is much better at diagnosing those schools and districts where

achievement is lagging than it is at curing what ails them.

Assistance has largely consisted of education department officials and outside consulting groups working with schools and districts on strategies to boost student achievement. A school designated as underperforming must develop a school-improvement plan laying out steps it will take to address curriculum shortcomings, teacher training deficits, or other things that may be impeding achievement.

As part of a set of new regulations passed by the Board of Education in 2006, the state also identified a list of what it termed “10 essential conditions” that underperforming schools should meet. They include regular meetings among faculty to discuss individual student progress and after-school tutoring programs. The most far-reaching of the 10 conditions calls for the school principal to have “authority to select and assign staff to positions in the school without regard to seniority.”

Education department officials have taken to calling this list “the 10 Commandments.” But the districts are merely instructed to make an effort to follow them. Principal autonomy over staffing decisions, regarded by many as a linchpin of meaningful school reform, must be negotiated with teachers’ unions, which has effectively prevented imple-

Critics say there’s a ‘go-slow’ approach to an education crisis.

mentation of this measure in the state’s 114 underperforming schools. Other conditions, such as the requirement to have after-school tutoring available (also a mandate of the federal No Child Left Behind Law), are also routinely ignored, says Jim Peyser, the board of education chairman who helped craft the new regulations in 2006. “It is a reflection of a lack of urgency and a tendency to put the adults first and the students second,” says Peyser.

The “10 Commandments” for low-achieving schools could more appropriately be called the “10 Suggestions.” And that distinction underlines what critics say is a go-slow approach to what ought to be viewed as a public education crisis.

“Because the more intrusive and disruptive makeovers are politically and bureaucratically unpalatable, every state and district has nearly always picked the least intrusive option,” says Chester Finn, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a national education policy organization. “You shouldn’t be surprised that the schools aren’t much better; the interventions aren’t very strong.”

Holyoke is one of four entire school districts in Massachusetts that have been declared underperforming, a designation that was first applied in 2004. At that time, the

state funded a national consulting firm, America’s Choice, to work with the district. The firm has had a full-time consultant based in Holyoke since 2005, working with school officials on everything from curriculum planning to teacher and principal coaching.

Achievement scores in Holyoke have not shown improvement, but Rochelle Herring, the consultant based there, says it takes time to get at the root causes of underperformance. “We’re seeing progress in the student’s day-to-day work,” she says. Still, she expressed uncertainty about a timeline for clear improvement, citing the constant churn of students entering and leaving the Holyoke schools.

A growing chorus of education experts is questioning whether such school improvement efforts are aggressive enough to turn around troubled schools. Outside help like that provided by America’s Choice is “necessary and important, but it’s not sufficient to turn around failing schools,” says Andrew Calkins, senior vice president at Mass Insight, a Boston-based research and policy organization.

Unless such partners have shared authority on hiring decisions and are themselves held strictly accountable for student achievement “the chances of success beyond minimal improvement are minimal,” said Mass Insight president William Guenther at a mid-March panel discussion in Washington on strategies to turn around the country’s worst schools. In the biggest study to date involving low-performing schools, conducted in 1999 by the American Institutes for Research, 21 of 24 different comprehensive school reform initiatives failed to show clear evidence of a benefit in raising student achievement. “That sort of stuff might work with schools in the middle of the achievement spectrum, but it’s not working for these schools,” said Calkins.

WHAT WORKS

“Most of what’s been taking place over this 15-year period is identifying a problem and hoping that when you identify a problem, people fix it,” says Thomas Scott, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents. “If people knew how to fix it, they would have done it already.” A big hole in the standards-based reform effort has been the belief that underperforming schools would be able to boost achievement levels once the right set of accountability measures were put in place.

Not knowing what to do to help low-performing schools would be cause enough for alarm. The reality today, however, is both better and worse. “The thing that should be keeping us all awake at night is that now, for the very first time, we have enough achievement data with enough specificity over a number of years to show us that in fact it can be done,” Calkins said at the Washington conference.

Last November, Mass Insight released a blueprint for

improving the nation's worst schools, which it calls "the crucible of education reform." It dismisses the "light touch" strategies employed by most districts and states. Instead, the report says the model should be the small number of existing schools that have met the challenge posed on the wall of Paul Hyry's office in Holyoke: They have defied the expectations of their demographic profile.

These so-called "high-performing, high-poverty" schools almost invariably combine three elements, says the report, no one of which can be left out of the equation. The first is termed "readiness to learn," which means students are in a safe and inspired environment and have close relationships with teachers and other adult mentors. "Readiness to teach" means there is a "missionary zeal" among staff to boost student achievement and to work on their own professional development. Finally, the report says, these schools have a "readiness to act," with school leaders having wide latitude to make "mission-driven" decisions on hiring, budget, and curriculum.

"Having a few such schools means it's possible to have such schools," says Finn, the Fordham Institute president. "The actual proves the possible."

The University Park Campus School, a Worcester public school, is showing that it's possible. The 7-12 grade school, located in one of the poorest sections of Worcester, offers an honors-level curriculum to all students. The school also has a close partnership with nearby Clark University, and upper-grade students take classes there as part of the school's college preparation strategy. Every member of the school's nine graduating classes has gone on to seek a higher education degree.

It doesn't come without intense focus from the school's staff—or its 230 students. There is a tough love dimension to the school culture, says June Eressy, the school's principal. "We need to stop making excuses for these kids," she says. "You need to hold them to same standards you would hold your own children to."

A similar culture of high expectations pervades the classrooms and hallways of the Match Charter Public High School in Boston. Housed in a former auto parts dealership on Commonwealth Avenue near Boston University, the school has a relentless focus on academics and preparation for success in college. Serving a high-poverty population—more than 70 percent are eligible for free- or reduced-price lunches—many of whom would be the first in their family to attend college, the school's leaders realized that high achievement would not come easily. "A lot of our kids come in not being able to add a quarter and a half," says Match staff member Ken Wang. To make up for lost ground and then get students learning ahead of the curve, the school day runs from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., four days a week, with a shorter day on Fridays. All entering ninth-graders attend a five-week summer orientation

academy. And just sliding by doesn't cut it, as a grade of 70 or higher is required to pass any course.

On last year's MCAS test, Match ranked first out of all 341 Massachusetts high schools in the percentage of 10th-graders scoring proficient or advanced in math, and for the third straight year, every 10th-grader passed the MCAS English and math tests, the high-stakes graduation requirement for all Massachusetts high school students.

Match student Luis Sanchez says he was "in and out" of two different Boston middle schools and missed six weeks of school in eighth grade. "I got D's; they passed me," says the 18-year-old senior.

Four years later, Sanchez, who sports twin earrings, a shiny necklace, and a confident air, is getting ready to graduate and head to Boston College this fall. "It's a pretty tough school. It's a rigorous schedule. But if you stick with it you'll make it through," he says.

It's the combination of students who "stick with it" and a school that sticks with them that make for success at Match. Four years ago, the school ramped up its existing tutoring program by launching Match Corps, a program in which 45 recent college grads spend a year providing intensive tutoring to Match students.

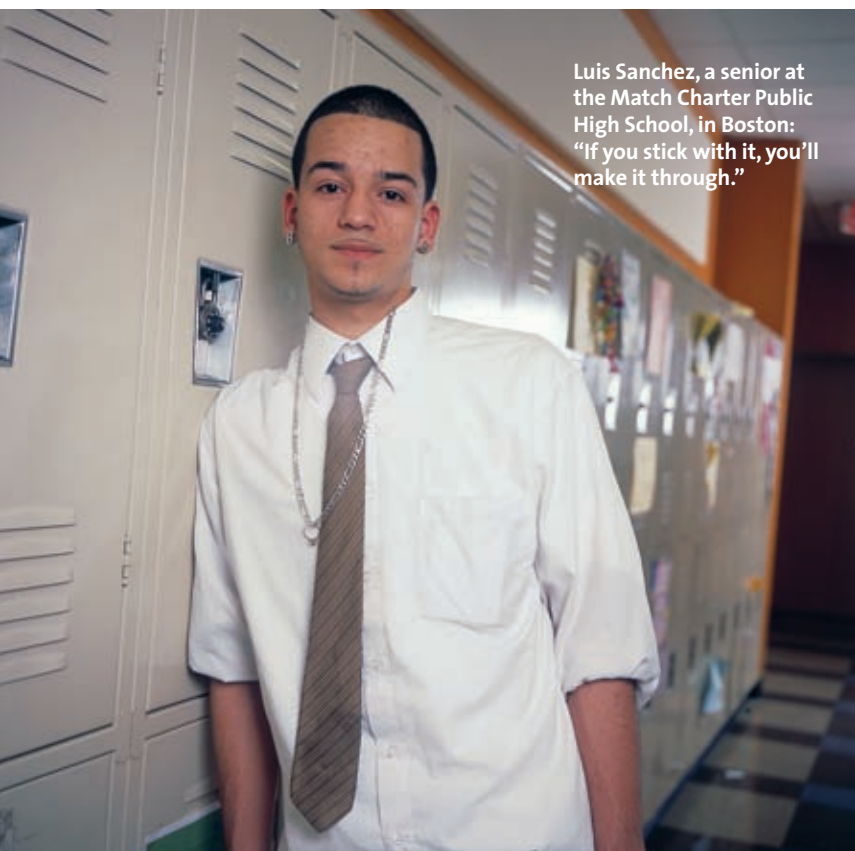
"We've flooded the zone with tutors," says school founder Michael Goldstein. Each Match student spends two of the eight periods of the school day with a tutor. "Think about the hundreds of hours a high-literacy parent would spend reading to their kid," says Goldstein. "We are trying to make up for that, one-on-one."

"If a kid arrives behind grade level, whatever the complicated causes that lie behind it, the only plausible way for that kid to get caught up is to exert a ton more effort," says Goldstein. The close bonds teachers and tutors form with students are part of the strategy for motivating stu-

Students need to see a 'missionary zeal' among their teachers.

dents to work hard. "Most people think of the job as delivering instruction," says Goldstein. "Successful schools think, 'How do you generate enormous student effort?', and from that effort the kids will learn a lot."

Reville, the incoming secretary of education, who has served as board of education chairman since last August, says the school reform movement underestimated the hurdles to high achievement faced by children from low-income families. "What you see at University Park or at a Match School is what it will take to get students there," says Reville.



Luis Sanchez, a senior at the Match Charter Public High School, in Boston: "If you stick with it, you'll make it through."

But what will it take to have the outside-the-box thinking and practice of those schools become the rule, not the exception, in low-performing schools? Or, as Calkins, the Mass Insight vice president, put it at the Washington conference on failing schools: "How do we take the DNA that is present in those high-performing, high-poverty schools, and understand it and dissect it, and then embed it in the systems that serve all the other schools?"

DNA TINKERING

Massachusetts has made no wholesale moves to reconstitute the basic genetic makeup of underperforming schools. But it has begun taking pieces of the DNA found in high-achieving, high-poverty schools and inserted them into a handful of other schools. One hallmark of nearly all these high-achieving schools is a longer school day. So, in the 2006-2007 school year, the state approved funding for 10 schools to extend the standard six-hour school day by about 90 minutes, making Massachusetts the first state to pilot a longer school day. This year, the state roughly doubled its initial appropriation, earmarking \$13 million for the plan, which allowed nine more schools to join the initiative.

Our nine-month school year and six-hour school day are relics of an agrarian economy that relied on all hands in the field during harvest season, and which set a low achievement bar for most students. That schedule, say many education leaders today, is entirely inadequate to pre-

pare students for success in a 21st-century global economy, especially those not from middle-class homes fortified with reading, music lessons, or other kinds of enrichment.

"We have to reinvent education dramatically to succeed," says Chris Gabrieli, chairman of Massachusetts 2020, the nonprofit advocacy group that has driven the extended school-day effort.

The idea is to provide added time for English and math, while also making room for arts, music, and other subjects that often get crowded out by the emphasis on core academic subjects in the standards-and-accountability era. The initiative is open to all Massachusetts schools, but the bulk of those now on board are in urban districts and serve large numbers of black, Hispanic, and lower-income students—the groups at short end of the achievement gap in US schools. In the initial cohort of 10 schools, 75 percent of all students are from low-income families, compared with 29 percent of public school students for the state as a whole.

In the first year, extended-learning time schools narrowed by more than one-third the gap between the percentage of their students reaching proficiency in English and the statewide average, which is driven heavily by scores from higher-income suburban districts. "It's not good enough, but it's a start," says Gabrieli. "If on the second year the gains accumulate, we're on the road to something big."

At the Edwards Middle School in Boston, which is completing its second year in the extended-day initiative, principal Jeff Riley says the focus should shift from the achievement gap to "the opportunity gap." The longer day has allowed the school to expand the time and rigor of core academic studies, while also providing drama, music, and sports programming. "It compares to a suburban experience," says Riley. "And when they get the same kind of access, they perform as well as anybody else. The test scores are rising, and we believe they'll continue to rise."

In 2006, the state also began an experiment that gave a handful of the state's most troubled schools the sort of management autonomy that often accompanies high-performing high-poverty schools. With four underperforming schools facing designation by the board of education as *chronically* underperforming, then-chairman Chris Anderson proposed as an alternative that they be allowed to become "Commonwealth pilot schools." Pilot schools, which are part of regular district school systems but share many of the attributes of charter schools, including leadership discretion in hiring and budgeting, have been popular in Boston. But this marked the first time the

model was proposed as a strategy for underperforming schools as part of the state's accountability system.

The Academy Middle School in Fitchburg, a struggling 5-8 grade school, had already applied for a grant to join the extended school day initiative when it faced the day of reckoning over its flagging achievement scores. With its back to the wall, Academy, like the other three schools facing designation as "chronically underperforming" that year, opted instead to pursue the new Commonwealth pilot school model.

Opening last fall as both a pilot school and an extended learning time school, Academy is getting a strong dose of school-turnaround medicine.

Using the scheduling autonomy granted by the pilot model and the longer school day funded by the state, Academy expanded by more than a third the amount of weekly instructional time devoted to core academics. Teams of teachers from each grade spend three hours each week in meetings to discuss issues involving individual students as well as curriculum planning. During that "common planning time," outside community partners lead classes in everything from poetry to weight-room conditioning and woodworking.

Sue Quick, the school's principal, says the common planning time sessions are not yet as productive as she would like them to be. And the enrichment classes that the longer school day has allowed for have been a discipline nightmare, as the well-meaning community partners often lack the classroom management skills that are particularly crucial in urban schools. "We've remedied it for next year," she says of plans to integrate school staff into the enrichment periods. "But we've still got a whole quarter to go."

"It's been a challenging year," agrees Andre Ravenelle, the Fitchburg superintendent of schools. "It's like *Extreme Makeover: School Edition*," he says of Academy's conversion to a pilot school and the move to an extended day all in the same year.

"It hasn't come to fruition like we wanted, but there's real potential for it to," says Sarah Priestley, an eighth-grade English teacher. "It was very discouraging for a long time," she says of the mood at Academy. "We needed to do something drastic."

One big question hanging over the pilot experiment is whether troubled schools can innovate their way out of an achievement hole on their own. The pilot model is based



Sue Quick, principal of the Academy Middle School, in Fitchburg, says a longer school day brings opportunities but also new challenges.

on schools that are often already doing well academically, where staff and parent interest in school-based autonomy drives the effort to seek pilot-school status. "There's some caution to have when you are essentially imposing a model of freedom and autonomy on a school," says Dan French, executive director of the Center for Collaborative Education, an education nonprofit that has helped drive Boston's pilot school movement and which is providing consulting help to the four Commonwealth pilot schools. "There's a little irony there."

WHAT IT WILL TAKE

As promising as the early findings are from the extended learning time project, and despite hopes that the pilot school model might help the four schools now employing it to climb out of the achievement cellar, what's needed is a coherent plan of action to deal with all of the state's lowest performing schools.

At the Lynch School in Holyoke, Paul Hyry says there's a limit to what his school can accomplish in a six-hour school day. "We have absolutely maximized instructional time on language arts and math," says Hyry, voicing support for a longer school day.

As for the state accountability system, he says the "chronically underperforming" designation that the school

dodged last December might actually have been worth swallowing if it yielded significantly more funding and conferred the sort of school management autonomy that many reform advocates say is needed. "If the label brought substantially increased resources and it brought the kind of principal superpowers that are suggested, then you could start to think, 'Yeah, go ahead and give us the label,'" says Hyry. But the added leeway granted by the education reform law to remove teachers from chronically underperforming schools has never been tested. When Hyry and Holyoke school leaders asked state education officials about that provision, he says, "The clear message was: 'It's not going to be that easy.'"

Education leaders recoil at the "underperforming" label, not so much because it isn't true, but because they say it puts an undesirable stamp on their school, making it hard to recruit and retain teachers but not bringing meaningful help. That equation needs to be turned on its head, says Guenther, the Mass Insight president. "The state needs to figure out a way to make these groups of schools into clubs that the schools actually want to belong to," he says.

The report that his group issued last year calls for just those kinds of clubs. It advocates the formation of school turnaround zones, in which underperforming schools would make heavy use of outside partner organizations, but would also have charter-school-like freedom over hiring and budgeting.

Paul Grogan, president of The Boston Foundation, says bold moves like that are needed if the state is serious about living up to education reform's promise to close the achievement gap between students from wealthier and poorer communities. "We know a great deal about what it will take," says Grogan. "There's just been tremendous timidity. To let these districts drift along in a kind of limbo, or with these kind of light improvement plans, not only guarantees they won't improve, but it sends a message that the whole accountability plan isn't serious."

Mass Insight proposed a version of a statewide turnaround plan three years ago, with the backing of a group of urban superintendents and business leaders. The plan called for creation of a special zone for 100 of the state's lowest performing schools, with \$25 million in funding to support longer school days, curriculum assistance to schools, and a zone administrator who, working with district superintendents, would have broad authority to reassign staff and revamp curricula. Facing funding concerns and union objections, the plan never got off the ground.

The concept could find fresh support from the state's new education commissioner, Mitchell Chester, who took office in May. Chester's first major task will be to provide direction for the state's floundering accountability system, and he seems receptive to the Mass Insight concept of turnaround zones. If the Commonwealth pilot school

approach seems to bear fruit, says Chester, he'll aggressively promote it. If it doesn't, he says, "I think we need to carve out space and opportunity for folks who are willing to try new approaches."

Meanwhile, Reville is a leading proponent of longer school days, especially for low-performing schools. He also recently voiced support for higher teacher pay for those who work in lower-performing schools and for those in schools that record significant achievement gains. The Massachusetts Teachers Association supports the idea of higher pay in tougher schools, but opposes any system that ties salary increases to student performance.

Even the best ideas, however, must compete for limited resources. Gov. Deval Patrick has sounded strong support for extending the school day. Building out the extended school day initiative to serve a quarter of Massachusetts students, however, would cost \$300 million a year, according to the nonprofit Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center. Patrick's budget plan for the coming year proposed a doubling of current spending on extended school days from \$13 million to \$26 million. However, the House version of the budget proposes a much more modest increase to \$17.5 million. (The Senate budget had not been released at the time *CommonWealth* went to press.)

Meanwhile, funding for accountability efforts and technical assistance to troubled schools, which was \$9.1 million this year, was cut by \$100,000 for the coming year in the House budget, despite the inevitable growth in the list of underperforming schools that will occur based on the No Child Left Behind Act standards.

Fifteen years into the state's education reform era, Reville worries that there may be little appetite for bold change or big increases in targeted spending for the large swath of children who are still being left behind. "The challenge is, we don't necessarily have the public will to make radical changes in our education system, neither do we have the resources to launch a robust set of interventions designed to bring poor kids up to standards," he says.

It will be up to him and Chester, the state's two top education officials, together with the governor and other leaders from the public and private sector, to try to change that. Otherwise, when it comes to the state's most troubled schools and students, we seem destined to continue to muddle along, even as evidence accumulates on the kinds of schools that work. Without renewed resolve, including a willingness to fight for funding and the kind of school makeover that's needed, education researcher Robert Gaudet says our vow to educate all children to a high standard is as flawed as the 2004 Rumsfeld declaration about making do with the military we have in Iraq. "We essentially are going through education reform with the schools we have," says Gaudet, "not the schools we need." **CW**



Salvador Pimentel, a senior at Brighton High School, says his jobs have shown him there's not much to look forward to without a college degree.

What about college?

*Too many students
leave high school
unprepared for the next step.*

BY LAURA PAPPANO | PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN DOOHER

The colorful murals that ring the walls of Brighton High School's College and Career Center (for 65 years it was the school library) seem out of sync. Not that there's anything wrong with paintings of pharaohs, monks, cavemen, and lumberjacks—or with nearly two walls depicting the manufacture of paper and the operation of old-style lead type presses. It's just that images of contented manual laborers conflict with the wake-up call that guidance counselors want kids to grasp: The future demands college.

Guidance director John Travers has been ordering college banners on the Internet and hanging them around the room. Bright felt flags represent the Ivy League, local schools like Boston College and Boston University, and historically black colleges like Spelman and Howard.



Marlon Thompson, a Boston College sophomore (seen in front of BC's Burns Library), says a lot of his friends didn't graduate from high school and ended up in jail or having kids. "They just didn't see the path to college."

"We've been talking all year about increasing visibility among students about post-secondary options," says Travers. A new bulletin board amplifies his point. Big letters read: WHAT'S A GPA? To help kids judge their performance, Travers color-codes student grade point averages (using ID numbers, not names) with green (3.67 and above), blue (2.67 to 3.66), yellow (1.67 to 2.66), orange (0.67 to 1.66), and red (0.66 and below).

It's troubling enough that about half of students are orange and red. Even more worrisome to Travers is that many don't see the relationship between grades and college admission, and how both affect their future. A girl this year with a 1.6 GPA, he says in disbelief, didn't see why she shouldn't visit Harvard.

"They don't understand that kids who go to BU or BC, that 90 percent of them are near the top of their class," he

says. “Our students don’t typically have the college-educated parents. It is a huge educational issue for them to understand how all this comes together.”

Fifteen years after the Massachusetts legislature passed a sweeping school reform act that foreshadowed the federal No Child Left Behind law, a troubling gap persists between students in wealthy suburban districts and in poor urban districts—precisely what education reform sought to address. Only today, the issue is not about what drew attention in 1993 (inadequate funding, leading to crowded classrooms and a dearth of textbooks) but about the more critical and complex matter of who goes onto college and who is able to succeed there. The state’s obsessive focus on MCAS passing rates missed something: What happens to kids *after they graduate*?

SOCIOECONOMIC FAULT LINES

In Massachusetts, for every 10 urban students in the ninth grade, six will graduate from high school, four will enroll in college, and only two will earn a degree, according to figures presented in January at the Massachusetts College and Career Readiness Summit by Jeffrey Nellhaus, acting commissioner of the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Also, a new K-16 database lets state education officials follow public high school graduates who enroll at the state’s

It can be difficult for students in city schools to focus because ‘they are around so many kids who just don’t care.’

public colleges. Data for the class of 2005, released in April, reveals that the state’s urban and suburban high schools do send a majority of their graduates on to some form of higher education, but many of those students must play catch-up, taking remedial courses that cost money and time but don’t earn them credit.

While a worrisome number of students at suburban and exurban districts have to play catch-up, the problem is more widespread in some urban districts, where well over half the students who go on to state colleges need remedial work when they get there. And that may be understating the problem, since no database tracks whether high school graduates enrolling in private or out-of-state colleges require remedial courses. Perhaps most disheartening is that large percentages of high school graduates who enroll at the state’s public colleges fail to return for a second year,

making it unlikely they’ll earn a degree.

So while Massachusetts often looks good on national education indicators, Andrew Sum, professor of economics at Northeastern University and director of the Center for Labor Market Studies, says a profound disparity lurks below the surface.

“You look at the subsets and you find we are worlds apart. We have some schools I would call Third World countries in Massachusetts and others where kids feel entitled to go to a four-year college and they go and are successful,” says Sum, who is working on a report due this summer on private and public college attendance for the Boston Public School classes of 1998 through 2005. “We present a false face to the outside world.”

One problem is that not enough students take the courses that will get them skills they need to do college-level work. Plus, there’s a giant cultural gulf between rich and poor schools. For many low-income students, college is still an inchoate idea, something they hear about but don’t really get.

One student who does “get” it (albeit belatedly) is Salvador Pimentel, a ponytailed senior at Brighton High who wants to attend Northeastern and one day design car engines. He knows his 1.8 GPA—dragged down by little effort and poor grades his first two years (he now earns As and Bs)—means he’ll start in community college. He also knows from his valet parking job that without a college degree, there’s not much to look forward to.

“When you get a part-time job where you only get minimum wage, you see what the real world is like. It’s a pain,” says Pimentel, the youngest of nine. “I pay bills that are in my name and it is a headache and it is stress and you are making chump money.”

Pimentel’s experience reveals the obvious socioeconomic fault lines. He may be bright and able, but he’s had to figure out for himself that taking advantage of his free public education is critical to his future. That’s not information suburban kids miss. To the contrary, they are piling up Advanced Placement courses, dual-enrollment credits, internships, and leadership chits that are tools to get them to and through college.

If education reform sought equity and opportunity, many low-income and urban kids are being left out because the educational culture hasn’t evolved. Tonya David, a mother of five from Roxbury, saw this play out for her daughter, who graduated last June from Madison Park Vocational Technical High in Boston. “Kids are making careless choices,” she says. “There are a lot of kids who are focused, but it is hard for them to focus in city schools because they are around so many kids who just don’t care.”

This lament is not about kids like Brighton High senior Ruo Chen, who tackled AP biology, chemistry, and calculus and is headed to Harvard in the fall. Chen and kids like

him will always succeed. More urgent is connecting poor city kids who are good or average students with a college-bound agenda, and with the academic and social support to see it through.

College was never the focus of education reform, acknowledges Neil Sullivan, executive director of the Boston Private Industry Council. “It set out to raise academic standards and expectations, and academic achievement for a broad swath of the population. It was ambitious in its breadth,” he says. “Even so, it did not target a 50 percent reduction in the dropout rate over a discreet period of time. It did not look at the college diploma as a measure of success. Why not do those things now?”

Paul Reville, who played a key role in the passage of education reform and is about to become the state’s secretary of education, insists that preparing high school graduates for higher education without remediation was part of the original agenda.

“It was definitely part of the thinking,” says Reville. “It just wasn’t the language we were using.” Still, Reville concedes a gap between state graduation requirements and college readiness, noting that “those discrepancies have become more vivid over time.”

THE NON-COLLEGE CULTURE

Whether or not education reform addressed graduation rates and college readiness, those giant issues make the rest of the reform effort seem shortsighted or, at best, a mere prelude. And now there is a divide between public educators who feel excited about the strides they’ve made and charter school leaders who don’t get why college wasn’t more blatantly the point from the start.

“Raising the academic bar for a large part of the population is an important goal, but it’s not enough. Parents in suburban districts and wealthy parents who send their kids to private schools would never allow that to be a sufficient measure of progress,” says Evan Rudall, co-founder of Roxbury Preparatory Charter School and now chief operating officer of UnCommon Schools, a nonprofit charter school management organization based in New York City.

His point is that making “adequate yearly progress”—a measure of school improvement under No Child Left Behind—matters only if kids graduate and leave prepared for higher education. That precise goal, though, remains a reach for many low-income city kids because, unlike many charter and pilot schools created around strong and defined school cultures, your average comprehensive urban high school has been allowed to drift. Some, like Brighton High, have created ways to reach students with more individualized attention, or have partnered with organizations to give students access to experiences and support they

wouldn’t otherwise get. Other schools, though, look only marginally different after 15 years of reform.

Aimee Bronhard, a 1998 graduate of B.M.C. Durfee High School in Fall River and its newly appointed guidance head, is blunt about her alma mater: “I feel we’ve been a dormant high school for a long time.” Principal Ralph Olsen, formerly principal at Framingham High, has a strong track record in urban schools, but he’s the third principal in five years to give it a try. The school schedule has changed three times as well, leaving seniors with transcripts that are a mish-mash of credit schemes.

Bronhard believes students are capable of more, but just 27 percent of last year’s graduates went on to a four-year college and another 41 percent pursued a two-year education. At Wellesley High, by contrast, 94 percent enrolled at a four-year-college. Bronhard wants to make college a focus (and, as we spoke, scribbled a Post-It reminder to hold an SAT registration drive), but she spends time every day trying to keep kids from dropping out. The most prominent visual in the guidance lobby is a royal blue felt banner with glued-on white letters urging, STAY IN SCHOOL. Could you imagine that at Wellesley High?

It’s tough to talk college when only about half of those arriving at Durfee in grade nine graduate in four years. On a late March morning, a student in a white hoodie stood before the guidance secretary and in a tone no different than asking for a hall pass, wondered, “Where do I get papers to drop out?” The girl and secretary chatted about how this is not a good idea, but the secretary ambled back to get the forms.

Part of Durfee’s challenge is geographical. Bronhard

Boston’s high-powered business community offers support to public schools, but other cities lack such resources.

says Fall River is isolated in a poor pocket of the state. “The opportunities in Fall River are not what they are in Boston,” she says. “We have the business community support, but it’s like comparing apples and avocados. Around here you are talking about your mom-and-pop bagel shops and grocers.”

Boston’s high-powered business community offers more for schools to lean on. At Brighton High, Travers is trying to turn on the light bulb around planning for college and a future that many kids miss because of family circumstances, zip code, or simply not being able to figure how to get from where they are to where they could be. That’s why



Tonya David, a mother of five from Roxbury, laments the “careless choices” made by today’s teens.

Joyce Campbell, small learning community leader at Brighton High, says business investment and involvement through the Private Industry Council (PIC) has been one of the most important outgrowths of education reform.

Rashell Wilson, senior class vice president, says her job at the Boston law firm of Burns and Levinson (arranged through the Boston PIC) makes college an obvious goal. (She will attend Salem State College this fall.) “I’m around all these people who have these fancy degrees and what I consider a better life, and I wanted what they had,” she says. “I knew settling for a regular job or something that didn’t require post-secondary education wasn’t going to cut it for me.”

In too many city schools, there is a randomness to the way kids get connected and receive mentoring and guidance that helps them see how the world works outside

their enclave. Until speaking with Bronhard, Heather Reis, an 18-year-old senior, says, “I wasn’t even sure I wanted to go to college.” A reluctant student who rarely does homework and took five tries to pass the 10th-grade MCAS in math, Reis works three jobs—bookkeeping for her father’s masonry business, bookkeeping for another business, and caring for an 8-year-old girl with Down Syndrome—and earns \$210 a week to cover car insurance, cell phone, clothes, food, gym membership, and indulgences like the French manicure she shows off. On the cusp of graduation, she’s thinking about the future.

“I realize obviously that you do need education to get a decent job,” she says, adding that she may attend community college even though her father wants her to work for him. “After high school it’s scary because what’s going to happen to me? What’s going to happen to me for the

rest of my life? I'm not ready."

The question of what it means to be "ready" is a point of serious confusion. While Reis is not sure she can do the work (and doesn't want to waste money if she'll fail), other students are falsely confident. Education reform mandated that students pass the 10th grade MCAS in English and math to earn a diploma. But many believe, as Bronhard relates, that "I'm all set. I've passed MCAS." According to a report by the Boston Higher Education Partnership, *From College Access to College Success*, "students operate under the false assumption that their ability to pass MCAS with minimum proficiency is a measure of college-readiness."

READY FOR REMEDIATION

It's one thing to enter college, but quite another to earn a degree. Nationally, concern about students dropping out during or after freshman year has driven campuses to create support programs for first-year students. The other half of the problem, though, falls back on high schools: How prepared are students for college academics?

"The MCAS never aligned with college readiness," says Ann Coles, senior advisor for college access programs at TERI, a nonprofit providing student loans. She says MCAS

Only 45 percent of students who took two or more remedial courses earned a degree by the time they were 30.

tests 10th-grade skills when students must master 12th-grade skills to do college work.

Coles insists such preparation "should have been a goal at the beginning," but she says over the past 15 years the need for post-high school degrees has become more obvious. "The state policy people weren't there yet. They were still thinking about, 'Some people go to college,' and 'Some people go to work,'" she says. "The thinking is much more now that all students need to finish high school college-ready."

And ready to do college work without remediation. Unfortunately, the education department's *School-to-College Report* shows that 37 percent of the statewide public high school class of 2005 who went on to the state's public college system enrolled in one or more remedial or "developmental" courses for which they pay tuition but don't earn credit.

In Boston, transcripts from 465 graduates of the classes of 2003, 2004, and 2005 attending public and private col-

leges were analyzed by the Boston Higher Education Partnership and revealed that 59 percent of non-exam-school graduates enrolled in remedial math their first semester. But the real zinger is that more than one-quarter failed the remedial course and 11 percent withdrew, presumably to avoid failing. The study found 37 percent of non-exam school grads took remedial English, earning an average 2.41 grade point.

Most distressing about remedial courses is what they mean to a student's chance of earning a degree. According to a key 1999 study done by Clifford Adelman for the US Department of Education, only 45 percent of students who took two or more remedial courses earned a two- or four-year degree by age 30. The study tracking the Boston Public School graduates showed just 67 percent still enrolled at the end of two semesters of college. On average, they earned just 9.6 credits toward graduation—or about three courses worth.

Sticking it out in college when it takes years to earn enough credits to graduate makes the end point elusive. And yet, high schools that merely send students to college look like winners. At Brighton High School, Travers says one reason they send so many grads to Salem State College is that "Salem State has remedial programs that are a good fit for us." Of 39 seniors who applied this year, he says, only four were admitted without needing remediation (10 were rejected, 17 were admitted with remediation and eight are on hold for missing documentation).

Students end up in remedial courses—especially in math—partly because many high schools don't have very demanding course requirements for graduation. At Durfee, students are only required to take three years of math. "How do you get kids motivated to realize they are better off senior year in math than in basketweaving?" asks Bronhard, who says students may choose courses not based on an academic plan but on the buzz they get from friends.

HOW TO 'DO SCHOOL'

In high school, "buzz" matters. Getting kids oriented to a worthwhile goal was something many Boston charter schools got from the start. For Roxbury Prep, the Match School, Codman Academy Charter School, Boston Collegiate Charter School, and the Academy of the Pacific Rim (among others), college was always the point.

On day one at Codman, Marlon Thompson of Roxbury, now 20 and a sophomore at Boston College, says founder Meg Campbell asked him where he wanted to go to college. "I said, 'Princeton.' I just liked the name of it," he recalled, as he sat on a Sunday afternoon in Corcoran Commons fiddling with a bottle of lemonade and an iPhone. Thompson, an operations management major, never actually applied to Princeton but says that goal

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made him focus. Attending Citizens Schools' 8th Grade Academy and Codman gave him the college message.

"The school should throw it in your face that if you don't do this you won't get anywhere. If you don't stay focused and do what you need to do in high school, there is a slim chance you will make it to the next level—and these days you have to make it to the next level," he says. "I know a lot of my friends, they didn't graduate from high school; a couple are in jail, some have kids. They just didn't see the path to college."

Getting to college takes serious work, which is why poor preparation in the early grades puts extraordinary pressure on high schools to help students catch up. The Match and Codman schools do it with boot-camp-like academic rigor, strict discipline, and long hours. Match School students take four years of math, at least two AP courses, and two courses at Boston University, which is located next door. The school day runs 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. with two hours of one-on-one tutoring.

The good news is that the dual dose of more hours and more rigorous academics is starting to catch on. At Brighton High, Campbell says students identified as struggling will next year likely have to stay after school for a longer day. And in 11 high schools across the state, Mort Orlov, president of the Massachusetts Math and Science Initiative, is piloting an effort to enroll more students (and not just top performers) in Advanced Placement courses as a way of exposing more kids to college level work and building a college-bound culture. "Why wait until freshman year to find out that you are ill prepared?" he says.

There is no learning shortcut. Kathleen Sullivan, executive director of the Boston Collegiate Charter School, which enrolls students in grades 5 through 12, says that two years after the school started in 1998, they stopped accepting kids into high school because it was too tough to make up so much lost academic time in four years. Starting college preparation in middle school, she says, "means it needs to be less of a miracle."

The belief that the road to college starts in middle school is gospel at Roxbury Prep, which comprises grades 6, 7, and 8. Some kids are shocked at first by the heavy homework, uniforms, discipline, expectations, long hours, and double math and English periods, but co-director Joshua Phillips says it's the only sensible approach given that one-third of students arrive two or more grade levels behind in reading and math.

"What we are trying to do is really, really difficult," he says. The school requires parents who want to get their child into the lottery that determines charter school admission to meet school leaders first. The leaders want parent buy-in. In return, the school offers help with college selection and applications.

"We are here to teach them how to do school," says Teresa Rodriguez, director of high school and summer placement. That means teaching kids how to use a syllabus and organize their time, and relaying vocabulary that typically sinks urban kids on standardized tests. Learning to navigate the system is essential, which is why, although students leave after eighth grade, the school continues its help. Phillips says 86 of the 100 who graduated in the first class, in 2002, are now college sophomores.

We can thank education reform for many things, most noticeably that it has gotten educators to hang up the hunches and crunch the numbers. But the numbers show that the big picture stuff—that more kids are graduating, but lots are dropping out, and that too many who get to college can't do the work and aren't staying—still breaks too predictably around the same rich-poor district divide that existed in 1993.

The good news is that it's easier to spot which urban

Poor preparation in the early grades puts extraordinary pressure on high schools to help students catch up.

schools are performing and which aren't. That's useful information for parents like Tonya David, who watched her daughter battle through Madison Park High, where 28 percent of graduates go to a four-year college, 74 percent need remediation when they enroll in state public higher education, and only 56 percent of those at state institutions return for year two.

For her son Kani, a poised young man who sings and likes to study foreign language, David chose the Roxbury Prep charter school, which emphasizes preparation for college. This fall, Kani will attend Roxbury Latin, an elite private school with a national reputation for getting kids into top colleges.

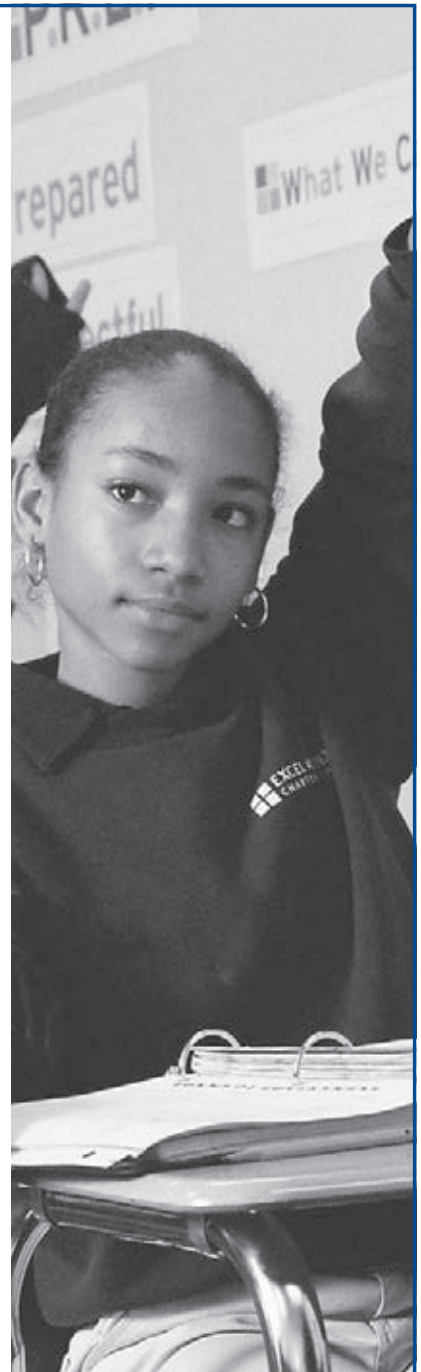
"A lot of children, especially in the inner city, are faced with some tough things. Their peers are dying around them daily, they are walking around in mourning, and they don't think education is important because they don't think they will live to see the future," says David, a mother of five whose youngest daughter, Kai Leigh Harriott, was paralyzed in 2003 after being hit by a stray bullet. "I tell my children all the time that we need to keep pressing forward. I was just two seconds ago telling my daughter that if you want to build a skyscraper, you need to be around engineers. It is important to be around positive people who will get you to the next level." **CW**

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Sparkling *the* brain

Research suggests that ‘go-go’ exercise improves fitness and academic performance

BY CHARLES EUCHNER | PHOTOS BY MICHAEL MANNING

Music from a homemade CD blares from a crackling sound system at the Millis Middle School in the town of the same name. Twenty eighth-graders stream into the gym and pick up heart monitors lying in a straight line on a desk. The students wrap the long black plastic bands around their chests, slip on wristbands that record the heart signals sent from the bands, and start to move.

Some stretch their legs. Some shoot baskets. Some run laps. After a while they start playing “ultimate ball,” a fast-paced game where teams of three kids run up and down the gym floor throwing the ball to each other. Players get the ball, run, and throw. They constantly change direction and sometimes bump into each other. With such urgency to get rid of the

ball, no one kid dominates the floor, and no one gets left out of the action.

The one constant in all this activity is nonstop motion. For a visual image, think of the hyper Jim Carrey in the movie *Mask*, multiplied by 20. The goal is to keep students in “the zone”—with their hearts beating at peak rates of at least 175 beats a minute—for 20 or 30 minutes. At the end of the class, students check the data from their heart monitors. In this March class, all but two of the students played in the zone for at least 20 minutes.

Fitness experts have long celebrated the effects of aerobic activity on the body, such as weight loss, increased oxygen supply, lower cholesterol levels, better efficiency in the nervous system, and better lung



Danielle Pellegrine races downfield in a game of "ultimate ball." Chasing her, on right, is fellow Millis Middle School student Alex Golash.



Physical education instructor Scott Kendrick, center, created his own fitness program for Millis Middle School.

and heart capacity. Now Harvard Medical School psychiatrist John Ratey says another benefit can be added to this list: dramatic gains in learning capacity.

Ratey has been traveling around the country promoting a new model of physical education with born-again zeal. In February, he published a provocative new book, *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the*

Brain, that details the growing evidence that exercise gives the brain greater capacity to learn.

“The brain is really no different than any other part of the body, like muscles,” says the 60-year-old Ratey, a lifelong athlete who was a high school tennis star growing up in Beaver, Pennsylvania, and began running marathons when he moved to Boston in the 1970s. “We used to think

that once the brain developed, it was set. But that's not true. It's a very dynamic thing. You can shape the brain, make it better. And exercise is one way to do it."

From the pre-teen years to early adulthood, Ratey says, we develop twice as many branches in our brain cells than at any other time, a process that scientists call "exuberance." This cranial festival makes the brain more "plastic," or capable of change, than at any other time after infancy. Not only does the brain's gray matter bloom, but a process called myelination fosters connections between the right and left hemispheres.

Exercise offers an ideal way to excite the brain, Ratey says. During periods of high-intensity exercise, chemical messengers move more freely among the brain's 100 billion neurons. With exercise, the neurons' dendrites (the antennae that send and receive signals) and synapses (the molecule-rich points of connection between neurons) become more vital, improving their capacity to give and receive messages.

Studies show that learning is greatest in the two or three hours after strenuous exercise, when the physical activity makes the brain more "plastic." Ratey says some kids can keep their learning edge for a whole day, but he suggests two-a-day workouts, once before school and once to fight early-afternoon blahs. The exercise primes the brain for learning; after physical activity it takes in more ideas and retains them longer.

"It's incredible to see all the kids able to do this," Ratey says as he watches the Millis students jump rope. Some of the students whip the rope around in a crisscross like Rocky training for his fight with Apollo Creed. "This is hard work. It's good for the cerebellum. You really give the brain a workout."

A FALLOFF IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

The spectacle of kids exercising with such frenzy and joy (every kid on the floor in Millis wore a smile) is a rarity in public schools these days. Statewide, and across the nation, fitness programs have suffered deep losses since the 1990s. Like art and music, fitness is considered a frill—nice to have, but not essential for kids getting ready to compete in a global economy.

Massachusetts mandates physical education for all grades, but it does not have any specific requirements for the number or kinds of classes. Theoretically, a school can provide one day of physical education a week and comply with state standards.

As late as 1996, the state required all children to get at least 90 minutes of exercise every week, and 80 percent of all Massachusetts kids took a physical education class at least once a week. Now the state has no minimum exercise requirement, and only 58 percent of Massachusetts kids

take a physical education class at least once a week. Anecdotal evidence suggests that gym classes have been hit hardest in poor school districts, which often lack adequate facilities and have cut back on faculty.

The Massachusetts chapter of the American Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance recommends at least 150 minutes a week of physical education for elementary school children and 225 minutes a week for upper-school children.

Nationally, the share of students participating in daily physical education classes declined from 42 percent to 28 percent between 1991 and 2003, according to *The Shape of the Nation*, a 2006 report from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. American Association of

**Learning potential may
be at its peak a few
hours after strenuous
exercise, when the
brain is more 'plastic.'**

Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance. At the time of the report, only two states, New York and Illinois, mandated specific time for physical education. Only 5 percent of schools required PE classes in the 12th grade, compared with 50 percent in grades one through five and 25 percent in grade eight. Only 8 percent of elementary schools and 6 percent of high schools provided daily PE for all grades.

The falloff in physical education requirements has coincided with a bulge in childhood obesity and sedentary lifestyles. *The Shape of the Nation* reported that the percentage of young people who were overweight had tripled since 1980. Sixteen percent of children aged 6 to 19 were overweight, and 60 percent of children aged 6 to 10 faced some risk of cardiovascular disease, such as high blood pressure or excessive levels of cholesterol. One-quarter of the children in this age group had two or more risk factors.

LIKE 'MIRACLE GRO' FOR THE BRAIN

Naperville, a Chicago suburb, is ground zero for the revolution in fitness-based learning. Physical education classes in Naperville once focused on skills and strength, which frustrated the vast majority of students who simply needed to get fit. The district's innovators wanted to change the dynamic of physical education, so they invented high-speed games and tried to make socializing an important value. A square-dancing class, for example, not



John Ratey, Harvard Medical School psychiatrist and author of *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*

only gets kids moving but also gets them talking. Heathers have to chat up nerds; jocks chat up brains.

Students gather at school for “Zero Hour PE” every morning at 7:10. After strapping on heart monitors, they run a mile around the outdoor track, hitting a red button that gives them times for every lap. The instant feedback gives the kids a time to beat next time around the track. The fitness routines take place before school starts so that kids are ready to learn.

The effort has paid off. In the district of 16,000 students, only 3 percent are overweight, while nationwide 30 percent of school-age children are overweight and another 30 percent are “on the cusp.” Craig Broeder, a researcher at nearby Benedictine University, dismisses claims that Naperville students are more fit because their parents are generally affluent and well-educated. “The numbers are too high for it to just be that,” he says. “Let me put it this way. You can’t say for sure that the PE program does it, but their fitness is so far off the scale that it can’t be just because it’s *Naperville*.”

The Chicago suburb of Naperville transformed phys ed by focusing on speed and fitness rather than strength.

A fitness-learning link may also be emerging, according to research conducted by Ratey. Students at Naperville Central High School (where annual per-pupil spending was \$8,939 in 2005) outperformed the students of New Trier High School in Evanston (with per-pupil spending of \$15,403) on the state’s mandatory tests. On the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, a rigorous test that matches selected American schools with its toughest global competitors, Naperville’s eighth-graders finished first in the world in science and sixth in the world on math, according to Ratey. “Obviously there are a lot of factors,” he says. “But exercise is definitely one of them.”

Dozens of studies have found that when subjects are placed in physically demanding environments, they develop their brains more quickly. A landmark 1995 study by Carl Cotman found that exercise strengthens not only the cerebellum and other motion-oriented parts of the brain, but also the hippocampus, which is essential for learning. A 2005 study of nearly 900,000 students in California found strong correlation between fitness standards and scores on the SAT and other standardized tests, and a 2007 German study indicated that people learn vocabulary

words 20 percent faster after exercise. Another 2007 study found that one 30-minute session on a treadmill increases information processing and cognitive flexibility.

Research suggests that people today burn 62 percent less energy, per unit of body mass, than our Paleolithic ancestors. So how much exercise should we be getting? Ratey suggests a simple formula: Multiply body weight by eight for the total number of calories to burn in a week. A 150-pound boy, for example, would need to burn 1,200 calories a week—say, by exercising six times weekly and burning 200 calories with each workout.

High-impact exercise, Ratey says, fertilizes the brain “like Miracle Gro.” The lush the brain’s landscape, the greater the opportunity to reshape the brain every day. Exercise, he says, strengthens virtually every section of the brain, including those devoted to memory and problem-solving.

(Ratey also says he has weaned patients of all ages off medication by putting them on high-intensity exercise regimens. Prescriptions for Prozac, Ritalin, and Zoloft, he acknowledges, can help patients with depression or attention deficit disorder, but he says they do not work on the whole brain or the whole person. Exercise reshapes the brain’s whole landscape, Ratey says, without debilitating side effects.)

He practices what he preaches. Watching TV at night, he runs outside to jump rope during commercials. He says he likes what it *feels like* to play. “Play is something worthwhile in itself,” he says. “But it’s also social skills training, it’s trying things out and learning how to get along.”

Since reports of Naperville’s success have circulated, other districts have gotten into the act. Titusville, a declining industrial town in western Pennsylvania with a median income of \$25,000 and 75 percent of its kindergarteners on the school-lunch program, started a new fitness program in 2000. Since then, scores on standardized tests have risen from below the state average to 17 percent above on reading and 18 percent above in math. Titusville officials also claim that the junior high school has not had a single fistfight since 2000.

Ratey has been working with schools in San Diego, Charleston, and Chicago, and at a recent wellness conference in Boston, he pushed for the Boston public schools to be next. Meanwhile, a Kansas City–based organization called PE4Life has taken up the challenge of training teachers, collecting information on best practices, and helping districts develop new programs. (PE4Life provided materials for the fitness programs in Millis and Natick.) And now parents and school administrators are calling Ratey to ask permission to start “spark clubs” so kids can play high-speed games to keep in shape. He claims no control of the word “spark,” despite his book’s title.

“I say, ‘Go ahead,’” Ratey laughs. “Why not have as

many of these clubs form as possible? That's how change is going to happen."

FORGING BETTER CONNECTIONS

Scott Kendrick discovered the body-brain connection while taking distance courses with Ratey as a master's student at Bridgewater State College. The former National Guardsman has read *Spark* and carries a binder full of academic journal articles on the body-brain connection. When he took the Millis job in the summer of 2006, he had only weeks to prepare for the fall, but he visited the schools in Naperville and came away impressed.

A three-year \$150,000 grant from the Metro West Community Health Care Foundation allowed Kendrick to create his own fitness program. The school's principal carved out one period a day for seventh and eighth graders, and Kendrick gets the kids every day for one semester. (During the other semester, the time is used for MCAS

The irregular movements of 'ultimate ball'—like those in ballet, skating, and karate—engage many parts of the brain.

prep classes.) "I wish I had them for 180 days, not just 90," Kendrick says.

During one of Kendrick's classes, the students play "ultimate ball." Because the game moves so fast, the kids have to be alert at all times. Their eyes are wide open, like Little Orphan Annie, and they move with sudden stops and starts. The irregular movements—like those in dancing, ballet, gymnastics, figure skating, Pilates, and karate—engage many parts of the brain and force them to work harder, says Ratey. That leads to better connections among the brain's 100 billion neurons, he adds.

When the kids aren't playing go-go games, they learn about nutrition and other health issues. Students calculate the fat content of fast food. They watch as their teacher spoons out globs of fat from a can of Crisco, just to show how disgusting fat buildup can be. To show what's in a can of Coke, the teacher pours tablespoon after tablespoon of granulated sugar into a glass.

The 29-year-old Kendrick stresses fun. He tries to get kids to be in the zone for as much as possible of their 30-minute games. He cheers when students tell him that their heart rates have reached 175, 180, or even 190 beats a minute. "Good going," he tells a student who reports a heart rate of 190 and peak rates for 23 of the game's 32

minutes.

"The heart-rate data and the weight issue [are] secondary," Kendrick says. "I would never ever, ever, ever mention their weight or even heart rate unless they asked about it. I could be really brutal with an exercise routine. But when the kids have a great time, they're more likely over the long time to be healthy. The weight issue is so sensitive. They're so self-conscious. Once you focus on things like that, it makes them obsess. If they're having fun and feel great about themselves, they'll do it and keep doing it."

The emphasis on fun helped seventh-grade student Vanessa Pourier thrive during the roughest period in her young life. Vanessa's parents worried that family tensions—the breakup of their marriage, her mother's struggle to get back on the job market, her older brother's battle with depression, and Vanessa's ongoing problems with being overweight—would sabotage Vanessa's school work and social life.

But despite the family problems, her grades and spirit actually improved after she started participating in the Millis exercise program. She also lost weight and started feeling better about herself. When she came home from school, she sought out her mother to chat about fitness and nutrition. "We never talked about any classes like this before," Janine says. "Something was happening. It was an emotional relief and gave her hope that maybe [by] getting in shape, with the right tools, she could achieve her goals."

Another Millis mother, Shefali Desai, also noticed changes in her child's health and learning after taking the fitness class. Karishma, also a seventh grader, lost more than 10 pounds and became more energetic and alert throughout the day. "She manages her time much better, and she's less distracted," says her mother. "She is more enthusiastic about all subjects. If she sees an A-minus now, she wants better. She's paying more attention."

Other parents and teachers tell similar stories—of kids losing weight, embracing exercise for the first time, improving their scores on tests, arriving in class ready to learn. But with the Metro West grant expiring after the 2008-09 school year, who knows whether the program will become a permanent part of the school's offerings? The program is easy to set up—all the district needs is a teacher who cares about go-go exercise and a time slot for students to meet—but the traditional gym class is the only program guaranteed to continue.

Kendrick, who hopes to stay and earn tenure after the 2008-09 school year, is philosophical. "It's all pretty simple, you know?" says Kendrick. "You just have to do it." **CW**

Charles Euchner, a New Haven writer, was the executive director of the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston at Harvard University from 2000 to 2004.

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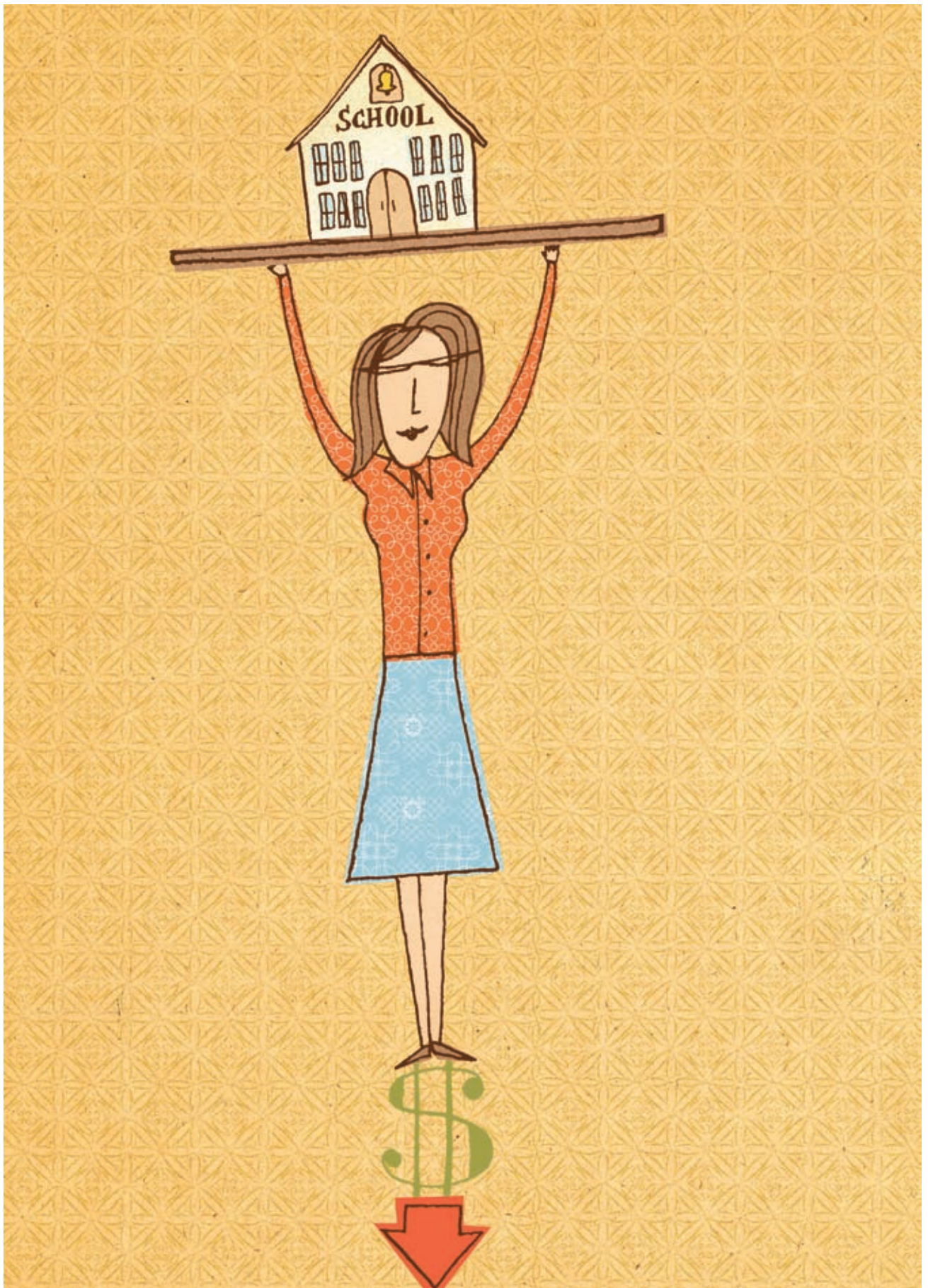
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Reports from the front line

Teachers from Somerville, Boston, and Longmeadow talk about being asked to do too much with too little.

Charter schools show what we can accomplish

► BY JESSIE GERSON-NIEDER

I AM A seventh-grade English and social studies teacher at Prospect Hill Academy, an urban charter school in Somerville. Prospect Hill is a highly successful school. The majority of our students are the children of first-generation immigrants, and many speak a language other than English at home and live at or below poverty level. Yet 98 percent of our seniors were accepted by four-year colleges last year, many with scholarships, and our 10th-grade math MCAS scores were among the highest in the state. Prospect Hill offers an instructive point of entry into some of the issues facing urban educators.

The work and commitment of the Prospect Hill teaching staff is at the root of our students' success. That said, the school also holds up a mirror to the struggles of attracting and retaining quality teachers who represent a range of backgrounds and experience levels. Although many of our students are children of color, and research indicates that students benefit from being taught by adults who share their cultural and racial experiences, our school's staff is predominantly white. While, in general, teachers do not reach their full potential until their fifth year in the classroom, most of our teachers are in their mid-20s to early 30s and average two to four years of teaching experience. Furthermore, as a result of the workload and pay, staff turnover is high.

These problems are common within the charter school movement. The issue, then, is how to attract a diverse and talented teaching force into urban



education and then retain them over an extended period of time.

Discussions of urban education usually use the language of a deficit model: “How will we convince teachers to go to these schools?” The conversation needs to be reframed as: “How can we support talented teachers who *want* to teach in urban schools and ensure their success?” Contrary to public perception, there is no shortage of such teachers. We need, however, to acknowledge and accommodate the unique demands of urban education.

Our schools all too often represent the racial and economic divisions that are present in our country. Urban schools largely serve the children of color and families living below the poverty line—the children who are most affected by the achievement gap. Unless schools deliberately set out to close this gap, they risk doing little more than reinforcing existing race and class inequities.

Therefore, successful urban teaching differs from teaching in more socioeconomically privileged settings. Urban teachers are not being asked to simply teach a year’s worth

of teachers, compensate them accordingly, and then are disappointed in the results they produce. Instead, we need to increase teachers’ pay to a level commensurate with other respected professionals while simultaneously increasing rigor in teacher selection and training and in the expectation of best practice in the classroom.

Unless class size, planning time, and pay are addressed, we will continue to see the least experienced teachers funneled into the highest-needs schools and then, after a few years, depart for better paid and easier work—even those teachers who under different circumstances would have happily stayed in an urban setting.

AT PROSPECT HILL, the MCAS is taken seriously and used as a data point in our analysis of what we are and are not teaching well. The focus is not on teaching to the test but on teaching core academic skills in such a way that students will be successful on the test by default. That said, MCAS testing is a stressful time for faculty and students alike. We know that our success on this test will be used as a barometer of our success as a school.

Although controversial, I believe that standards, assessments, and accountability are necessary. The MCAS provides valuable data and allows me to track student progress. However, accountability needs to take a value-added approach, measuring how far each student progresses over the course of the year. To do otherwise penalizes schools with large numbers of special education or “at risk” students.

A wonderful former principal of mine used to say, “A pig doesn’t get any fatter by weighing it.” Testing is a valuable diagnostic tool, but we need to make sure that we are not confusing the diagnosis with the solution. We want to know how much the pig weighs but need to devote most of our time and effort to figuring out how to fatten it up.

The most distressing element of high-stakes testing is the hard truth that it reveals. These tests reflect the pervasive reality of the achievement gap. At the same time, schools and teachers need to be rewarded for making meaningful, measurable progress rather than be punished for not erasing societal inequities in one fell swoop.

THE CHARTER SCHOOL debate is often one of dichotomies—for example, whether charter schools are a panacea or are weakening public schools by taking away funds and spiriting away academically committed families. The issue is far more nuanced than that.

Prospect Hill is a model of what urban schools can accomplish. Our teachers are passionately committed to the work of education and to our students. We are free to

We need to increase teachers’ pay at the same time we become more rigorous in teacher selection and training.

of skills and content; they are being asked to attempt to elevate each student to the educational achievement level of their more privileged peers.

The work required to accomplish this can be monumental. I collaborate with colleagues to analyze data from student work and state assessments to identify what skills my students have and have not mastered, and we design targeted unit and lesson plans that are vertically and horizontally aligned with other educators in my building. I grade student work not just for completion and quality, but also for longitudinal tracking of skill mastery, and I create individual action plans for students who are struggling. All this while developing relationships with students and their families and cultivating a warm and disciplined classroom environment.

I have been responsible for more than 130 students in the past; I am now down to 100. I work more than 65 hours a week, but I cannot imagine being able to buy a house given my salary, or figure out how I would raise a family while working these hours.

Urban teachers need smaller classes, more planning time, and compensation that reflect the tasks that are being asked of them. Currently, we seem to have low expectations

design our curriculum with creativity, albeit with a close eye to state standards, and our students benefit from the results. But with lack of funding and institutional support, sustainability remains a major concern. I know that I cannot continue working at such a fevered pitch forever, and high teacher turnover is emotionally difficult for students and logistically difficult for departments.

When I imagine what Prospect Hill would do with more adequate funding and institutional support, it is breathtaking. Charter schools were intended to serve as laboratories for ideas that could be adopted by the broader public school system if they worked and abandoned if they did not. But today there is little connection, and sometimes overt hostility, between charter and traditional public schools. If we are committed to providing the best possible education to every child, we need to think hard about how to work with unions and districts to allow the most successful elements of charter schools to be replicated in all public schools.

Jessie Gerson-Nieder is a seventh-grade teacher at the Prospect Hill Academy, in Somerville.

Striking the balance: autonomy vs. accountability

► BY JALENE TAMERAT

I SPENT SOME time recently thinking about the ubiquitous word “change”—not as a political catch phrase or slogan, but as a word that, from my experience, seems to characterize the very nature of public education. As it happened, my thinking coincided with the first round of MCAS



examinations for the year, which always places students, parents, teachers, and administrators in the uncomfortable throes of test-induced anxiety.

It isn't hard to remember a time when we didn't have the looming presence of accountability measures to influence our practice, when

teachers were given free rein over what and how to teach, and we were all exempt from the dreaded MCAS. I graduated from Boston Public Schools in 1995, three years before the first MCAS examination was administered, so

I have ample experience with the old system and a personal lens through which I can assess the changes that have taken place over the past decade and a half, for better or worse.

Standards and assessments have an important place in schools. The 1993 Education Reform Act has rightly addressed our long-ignored need for accountability. However, I know that we are not yet at a point where we can use these measures of accountability as a viable means of gauging student performance in an equitable way. We are still working to strike a balance between autonomy and accountability, and we have yet to reach equilibrium.

Ninety-three percent of the students in my science classes are from racial minority groups, and are for the most part economically disadvantaged (two-thirds receive free or reduced lunch). When I consider the fact that the experiences of many of my students, whether at school, home, or elsewhere, contrast sharply with the experiences of students from different backgrounds in other parts of the state, I realize the problematic nature of universally applied forms of assessment.

Over the past few years, I've had to rethink everything I had come to understand about public education, the way I teach my students, and how schools are run. I teach at a Boston public school that many would argue is progressive both in terms of pedagogy and school leadership. Being a pilot school, we are free to creatively manipulate our curriculum as we see fit, so long as the outcome is that our students demonstrate proficiency in a given area. For our students, the *process* of learning does not have to be uniform, competitive, or uninspiring; we are able to create and deliver lessons that are student-centered and experiential. This happens in many of our classrooms, but it is a long and arduous process that often results in variations in student learning.

I taught sixth-grade mathematics during my first three years in the district and can remember spending hours upon hours planning my lessons for each week. I was daunted by the fact that in any given classroom of 25 students, at least a third lacked the basic skills to be able to understand and manipulate fractions, a major component of the sixth-grade MCAS. I was left to figure out a way to cover what perhaps should have been taught in the lower grades for those students who were behind, come up with work that would be challenging and relevant for the students who were ahead, and make sure that they were all up to speed by the time MCAS season rolled around in May. Despite my hard work, I never felt a real sense of accomplishment, because often my students' scores failed to reflect the personal gains that they had made as a result of what they learned.

I have listened to the gripes of other teachers who have felt overwhelmed by the increased demands placed on

them as a result of the many different ability levels of their students and the lack of support they receive for their special education and English Language Learner students. I have experienced aggravation with having to, in some instances, create a curriculum where none before had existed, without the proper time to plan. It makes me wonder how my students will ever be able to compete with schools in other parts of the state that are clearly better funded, sufficiently staffed, and well-organized.

Though I was just a student in the days prior to education reform, my perception is that my teachers back then did not have to face many of the same pressures that teachers face today. While they created their own curricula in the absence of guidelines and standards, they were also the sole judges of how well or how poorly their students had performed. Many schools that were failing went unnoticed in the absence of state-wide assessments.

The push toward accountability was warranted, though it seems as though we have gone too far. Under the pressure to perform, students, teachers, and administrators today have come to regard the MCAS period as one marked by angst and nervousness, and for good reason. Many educators are daunted by the idea that a year or more of learning could be summarized and measured by a single examination. We are cognizant of the fact that student learning experiences across the Commonwealth are still far from uniform, despite knowing that, in many classrooms, lessons have become driven by the inevitability of standardized exams. For us, there is a strong tension between uniformity and individualism. On the one hand, we race toward reaching MCAS proficiency through the rigorous drilling of facts and specific skill sets, and on the other, we take steps to employ creative strategies that will both attract and maintain student populations, and counteract student attrition to charter schools.

It is only fair that if we are compelled to individualize our instruction based on students' needs, we are given the autonomy to individualize our assessments as well. I have seen a few schools that use competency-based portfolios to demonstrate student learning over a period of time. This seems like a more equitable means of assessing students, given the fact that each child learns differently, comes to us with a unique history, and from year to year and school to school, has teachers with varying teaching styles. Schools should be granted the freedom to develop a new type of assessment that measures individual student competency and value-added gains. I, for one, would enjoy seeing a realistic and clear assessment of the amount of progress that I have been able to make with my students, and I know that my students would enjoy the process of creating a demonstration of their proficiencies.

Change takes time and careful orchestration. We need to change the way we think about assessment and remem-

ber the possible pitfalls of autonomy. We also need to embrace the idea that schools can and should be creative enterprises that can inspire students despite diverse backgrounds and learning styles. If we are indeed advocating for school autonomy and individualized learning, our assessments should reflect those values as well. We will never be able accomplish a balanced model as long as we believe that we can measure student learning through high-stakes testing. If we are to create an improved and equitable learning experience for all students in the Commonwealth, our creativity must go further than the classroom; it must extend to the realm of accountability as well.

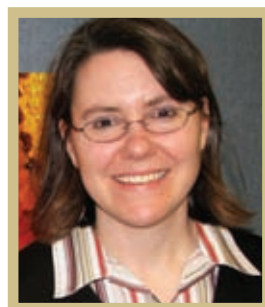
Jalene Tamerat is a seventh-grade teacher at the Josiah Quincy Upper School, in Boston.

Reform stirs a debate even in affluent suburb

► BY ANNA GELINAS

LONGMEADOW, WHERE I teach seventh- and eighth-grade Spanish, is an affluent suburb of Springfield. The median household income is \$92,000, and the graduation rate is 97 percent, well above the statewide average of 81 percent. Most parents in this residential community of 16,000 are highly educated and take a strong interest in their children's progress in school. The children themselves are highly motivated.

Yet, even here, the state's education reform efforts spark spirited discussions. Education reform has helped estab-



lish strong curriculum frameworks and standards and has provided much-needed resources for teacher training. But these positive developments are outweighed by increased demands on teachers' time and on the school budget. It remains a challenge to implement reforms mandated by state politicians, many

of whom do not have classroom experience.

The increased accountability within our school district also comes at a time of declining state and national resources and a shift in focus by many grant programs to target disadvantaged areas. Longmeadow has not been immune from this pressure. Over the years, our district has



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lost staffing positions and resources associated with curriculum coordination, remedial services, gifted programs, and some content areas such as science, health, physical education, foreign languages, and reading. As state and federal mandates increase, we find ourselves continually needing to do more with less.

Tests, a big part of education reform, are another area of concern. The state competency test in subject matter ensures that teachers are teaching within their certification areas, but the changes in certification requirements for new teachers have become hurdles placed in the way of our real goal, which is educating children.

The Massachusetts Test for Educator Licensure, required of all persons seeking new licensure in any field, is not a true measure of a person's ability to teach. It is an exercise in reading and writing and a measure of content knowledge, not pedagogical knowledge. It has become a stumbling block for some people who would be wonderful teachers because of their ability to connect with kids, but who have trouble passing the test. As veteran teachers con-

School districts may have trouble recruiting new teachers, in part because of state competency tests.

tinue to retire, all districts, including Longmeadow, will have trouble recruiting new teachers because there will be fewer people applying for the jobs.

The annual administration of the MCAS tests has not really changed the way many of us in Longmeadow teach. We have always followed a very rigorous curriculum, and our district has performed well on the tests since their inception. Most of our results are at or above 85 percent of the composite performance indicator.

The only issue we sometimes face is the timing of the tests. That is, the science tests are administered in May, but the teachers do not finish covering the curriculum until June. The tests also create a false sense of closure at the end of the year. Many students assume that once the MCAS is over, school is over, and it is hard to engage them in the remaining curriculum.

The amount of testing that occurs also has an impact on education in general. The tests are administered over three or four days in April and then again over a two-week period in May. It is difficult to give other assessments during this time, and it is difficult to teach a lot of new material because the kids are tired after testing all morning. This hurts some of the untested areas such as foreign

language, art, music, and physical education.

De-tracking, which groups students together regardless of intelligence or ability in a content area, has placed added burdens on teachers by creating the need for differentiated instruction within the groupings. The result is mixed-ability classes in which some students are struggling with the content and pacing while others are bored. In classes of 25 students each, individualizing instruction is nearly impossible.

In my Spanish classes, when I begin to explain subject-verb agreement, many students can identify a subject and a verb in a sentence. They can quickly transfer this information to the Spanish language and begin to create sentences. But some students struggle with parts of speech in English, so they often need to remain after school for help in identifying subjects and verbs in English before they can use them in Spanish.

This discrepancy in ability makes teaching more difficult. I have some students who are ready for the next lesson at the same time that I have others who need the lesson presented again. Previously, the students that struggled with reading and English grammar would have been placed in a reading class, while those students with higher language ability would have been placed in the foreign language class.

Then there is the increase in our special education population. Currently, 17 percent of the students in Longmeadow qualify for special education services. Students with severe needs require outside placements, and the district is required by law to locate and fund these placements. These mandated programs have limited state funding and reimbursement, which has caused financial strife in Longmeadow.

Depending on how it is reported, the special education budget in Longmeadow is between 22 percent and 30 percent of the total school budget, which inevitably creates a lack of funding for other areas. It has also created a tense relationship between parents and school officials at times. It is not uncommon for parents in Longmeadow to hire an advocate, or even a lawyer, to assist them at special education meetings and to ensure that the district is in compliance with their child's Individualized Education Plan.

Our mission in Longmeadow is "eyes on the child learning." Despite all the negative implications of education reform, we are striving to provide the young people of our town with the best public education possible, even with limited resources and increased demands on our time. **CW**

Anna Gelinas, Ph.D., teaches at the Williams Middle School, in Longmeadow. The opinions expressed in this article are hers and those of her eighth-grade colleagues.

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HIGH-STAKES TEST

Mark Roosevelt has gone from policymaker to practitioner. After preaching the mantra of accountability in education, the superintendent of Pittsburgh public schools is now the one on the hook.

Passage of the state's landmark 1993

Education Reform Act was a rare moment in politics when consensus was forged around a truly big idea that shook up the status quo. For Mark Roosevelt, the chairman of the House education committee and a co-author of the law, it capped months of hard work and was the crowning achievement of eight years in the Massachusetts Legislature. But it may be child's play compared with the challenge he now

faces. Trading on his years as a leader in education policy, in 2005 Roosevelt became superintendent of the Pittsburgh public schools.

If ever there were a big-city school district in need of a leader committed to bold reform, it would be the 30,000-student Pittsburgh system. An antiquated management structure, factionalism among members of its elected school board, middle-class flight, and a school department where decision making was driven by political agendas rather than educational mission were the defining characteristics of the city's schools, a toxic mix that festered while student achievement levels sank woefully low.

By 2002, the schools were in such shambles, and there was so little confidence in the willingness of school leaders to embrace needed reforms, that the city's three leading foundations announced that they were suspending all funding to the schools. Leaders of the Heinz Endowments, the Grable Foundation, and the Pittsburgh Foundation said any further investment in the city's schools would be "put at risk by the bickering, distrust, and chaotic decision making that now seem endemic to the top echelons of the Pittsburgh Public School System."

In response, then-mayor Tom Murphy formed a blue-ribbon commission, which issued a report in 2003 calling for major reform of the school system. That same year, Roosevelt attended a Broad Foundation training academy for aspiring urban school superintendents. With his non-traditional background outside the education system, Roosevelt was the type of leader the foundation was seeking. Two years later, Pittsburgh turned to Roosevelt as well, naming him its new school superintendent.

Roosevelt has been a man in motion ever since. In 2006, he set out a broad plan for improving Pittsburgh's schools, calling for rigorous alignment of curriculum with state

'A Nation at Risk came out in 1983, so we've been taking 25 years of steps, and where are we? Not much further along.'

standards; clearly defined roles for the board, superintendent, and schools; and intensive use of assessment results to inform teaching and learning. He negotiated a new contract that puts all principals on a performance-based system for raises. He closed one-quarter of the district's schools to help streamline financing in the face of a dwindling school population, and he has put a handful of schools on a longer school day and longer school year to test whether



that model can boost achievement.

"He's really trying to entirely change the culture of the district," says Carey Harris, the executive director of A+ Schools, a nonprofit that was established to monitor the pace of reform following the report from the mayoral commission.

That sounds like just the job for the reformer who pushed for bold moves in education as a member of the Massachusetts Legislature, as the Democratic nominee for governor in 1994, and in a later stint as director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, the business group that drove the education reform effort. But Roosevelt is also now facing all the realities on the ground that can reduce big ideas into small steps.

That tension emerges at one point when Roosevelt almost seems to be debating himself, as he recalls that it was 25 years ago that a seminal national report sounded a call to action on the state of public education in the United States. He says the handful of Pittsburgh schools now operating with longer school days represents an incremental move that is likely to bring only marginal improvements. "But I think it is the kind of incremental step you need to take," he says. In the next breath, however, he expresses impatience with such talk. "The problem, of course, is *A Nation at Risk* came out in 1983, so we've been taking 25 years of steps, and where are we?

Not much further along,” he says.

The city’s foundations have sounded a vote of confidence by resuming funding of initiatives in the city’s schools. And that support has been augmented by a pledge from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center of \$100 million over the next 10 years to help pay college costs of any graduate of the Pittsburgh schools.

Three years into the job, Roosevelt still sounds passionate about life in the ed reform trenches, even as he acknowledges some of the scars that come with it. With a new three-year contract under his belt, Roosevelt will now own, for better or for worse, what happens in Pittsburgh’s schools. It seems only fitting that the sort of performance-based accountability Roosevelt has fought for in public education for nearly two decades will now be how he is judged as well.

I spoke with Roosevelt by telephone in late March from his office in Pittsburgh. What follows is an edited transcript of our conversation.

— MICHAEL JONAS

COMMONWEALTH: You have a unique vantage point on educational reform efforts. You were a principal architect of the Massachusetts ed reform law passed 15 years ago, and now you’re running a large urban district. What has the transition from theory or policymaking to practice been like for you?

ROOSEVELT: Interesting question. It certainly provides you with a different lens to view the same problems. The challenges faced by any urban district in terms of overcoming the various deficits that poor urban children without significant family and community structural support face—it’s just far more daunting on the ground no matter how aware I think I was as a policymaker.

CW: There is no statewide, high-stakes graduation exam in Pennsylvania to set a bar indicating a basic level of proficiency. With Massachusetts 15 years into this, it sounds like Pennsylvania is, if not in the Dark Ages, at least in the 1980s.

ROOSEVELT: Yes. And I think that the managerial reforms of the ’93 law go a long way to explain why Massachusetts has made so much ground on Pennsylvania during the last 15 years. But I certainly couldn’t claim that Pittsburgh is bleeding or hemorrhaging, because we spend a significant number of dollars per pupil, somewhere north of \$18,000 [per year].

CW: But there’s certainly bleeding or hemorrhaging in the sense of how dire the situation is with regard to achieve-

ment and things like that.

ROOSEVELT: I think if one were to look at the achievement levels of urban kids, especially African-American and Latino kids across the country, you could say that all of us are bleeding. But in Massachusetts in ’92, it was very, very hard to refute the fact that districts with challenging kids to educate did not have the resources to do so. That claim cannot be made in Massachusetts now in the same way that it could then, nor can I make it in Pittsburgh. But since nobody is educating the majority of urban kids to a high standard we don’t know what it takes. We just know that we don’t do it.

CW: Earlier this week you spoke at a panel discussion here in Boston marking the 15th anniversary of the Education Reform Act. You cited all the attributes of the Pittsburgh schools that might be expected to lead to high student achievement, including the fact that your per-pupil spending is, as you say, somewhere above \$18,000 a year, which really is a phenomenal figure.

ROOSEVELT: It’s Cambridge-like.

CW: And that teachers are the fourth highest paid in the country of any urban district, and that you have among the smallest class sizes of any large urban district.

ROOSEVELT: And we have a significant and very well-run and well-established early childhood program.

CW: That was all a way of leading to your conclusion, which was, with achievement still badly lagging in Pittsburgh in spite of all these factors, it’s clear that these things alone don’t do it when it comes to improving schools. The question then is, what does do it?

ROOSEVELT: We know an awful lot of things that are arguably necessary to get urban kids to a high standard. One is an appropriately rigorous curriculum and properly trained teachers and principals who can deliver that curriculum. Two, decent management systems to put accountability in place for the professionals tagged with educating our kids. Now that needs a few years to run, but I think everybody believes, as I do, that this will improve our results, especially given the nice attributes of small class sizes, well-paid teachers, good early childhood, etc. I think that when you add aggressive management to that, you’ll get improvement. But I don’t have any belief myself, nor do I think the folks here do, that we’ll get the kind of performance we want. I think that we know what the missing area looks like: providing some systemic delivery of alternative scaffolding to kids who just lack the scaffolding

in their own lives, meaning family support and community support. I think that is going to be a large part of our work. We've been tremendously lucky in that we've gotten this huge gift to establish a guaranteed scholarship program [the Pittsburgh Promise, funded by the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center] so that every Pittsburgh public school graduate will be guaranteed money for college. It's huge.

CW: I've read about that.

ROOSEVELT: What we're going to try to do is create what we call pathways to the Promise. We're really making a huge effort to try to get all of our kids to be proficient in reading by the end of the third grade. Just as an educational delivery issue, [initially] you're learning to read, but after that you're reading to learn. So if you haven't got your literacy skills down by fourth grade, you're just on the wrong path. Secondly, and what is the newest of the pieces of work we would be imagining, is that we would want to do, in sixth grade, basically an individual wellness plan for each of our children—sort of asking whether they are on a trajectory to be what we're calling Promise-ready by the 12th grade. And if not, we're going to try to orchestrate resources, including mental health resources, mentoring resources, physical health resources around nutrition, and other things.

CW: It really sounds a lot like some of the qualities you see in what are often touted as the “high-performing high-poverty” schools, many of which are charter schools or other alternate models.

ROOSEVELT: We know of many small schools that deliver the goods. So we have lots of evidence it can be done. That evidence, I think, is what keeps all of us going. Most of these schools are partly based on what we call the heroic principal model, which is they have an unbelievable school leader. That is an incredibly important piece. And two, they are able to build their school from scratch. If you told me, for instance, that my [base] school spending in Pittsburgh is 12 grand per pupil, and then gave me an additional six grand to be creative on top of it, I could do a lot more than I'm doing now with my 18 grand per pupil because I'd be using that to build these personalized support systems. We know this about poor kids and poor kids without great family support systems: They need deep relationships with adults. They need teachers that care about them, and they have some sort of barometer that indicates to them whether people care or not. If that barometer isn't met, the content delivery can't follow.

CW: Right.

ROOSEVELT: And many schools like that will be able to cherry-pick teachers who want to work in the kind of environment where they know their colleagues will have that attitude, too. So how do you do that systemically? That's where the challenge comes in. All the research tells us that optimism is essential to get kids to work hard in school. Because if you don't understand that working hard is going to lead to something, there's a problem. And what we know about these kids is they don't have the middle-class ladder that you and I both grew up having in our DNA, which is you go to school, you work hard, you get into a good college, you get a good job, and you work your way up and you get a good life. I think we're beginning to realize that schools, whether we like it or not, are going to need to communicate and get buy-in on that middle-class ladder idea.

The sixth grade should include ‘an individual wellness plan’ for each child, making sure they’re on the right trajectory.

CW: At the panel discussion earlier this week, you said we need to stop bemoaning the range of social ills that schools are asked to deal with and just start figuring out what needs to be done. You said you think before long we'll have urban boarding schools. There are a couple of urban charter boarding schools already that come to mind, one in Washington, DC. It seems like that is the ultimate expression of some of these efforts now—say, for longer school days. They're all on the same continuum.

ROOSEVELT: That's exactly right.

CW: You have opened eight schools that you call “accelerated learning academies,” which have a slightly longer day and a 10-day-longer school year. But is that going to be only a “light touch” approach to what's really needed?

ROOSEVELT: I think it's an incremental step toward what's really needed, and I think it's going to yield incremental results. To claim more for it would be wrong. But it is the kind of incremental step that you need to take. The problem, of course, is that *A Nation at Risk* came out in 1983, so we've been taking 25 years of steps, and where are we? Not

much further along. How much longer can we afford to keep taking these small, incremental steps? Before standards-based reform, there was really not even the verbal rhetoric around educating poor kids, urban kids, kids of color to a high standard. Now we're saying that is a goal. Another thing we need to be talking about is that kids need to work a lot harder. In the suburban world now, the privileged world, the conversation is, "Well, the kids are doing too much homework. There's too much pressure on them, blah, blah." Well, that is such a different reality. A lot of my kids [in Pittsburgh] admit to me that they do hardly any, if any, homework. And if that is the case, ain't nothing going to work. A lot of people balk at even admitting that parents and students are part of the issue. But I believe they are, and I believe a lot of our younger parents, especially, had a very adversarial relationship with education themselves. So not only do they not understand and communicate to their children the middle-class ladder that we were talking about, they probably communicate to their children their own frustrations and animosity toward schooling.

CW: Which makes me wonder how you feel things are going with your reform effort. Carey Harris, the director of Pittsburgh's A+ Schools organization, told me the reforms so far have a great deal of support and buy-in from the civic leadership class in Pittsburgh, with the friction point being with the groups affected most directly— principals, teachers, and parents.

ROOSEVELT: What you were told is pretty accurate. Nevertheless, we've been very successful at putting in place some managerial reforms that will result in higher performance. We're changing our entire K-12 curriculum over time. Probably our biggest and, I think, most successful change is we've got all of our principals now on incentive pay contracts. No one will receive any kind of raise except for improved student achievement. Our old method was: We teach it and if they get it, they get it, and if they don't, they don't. But good, productive urban school reform means we teach it, we assess whether kids have gotten it, and we get help very quickly to kids who didn't. That sounds so simple using those words, but putting in place the systems to support that is what we've been all about for 2½ years. I would say we're halfway there. Half of our principals are really super at it, half to one degree or another are still struggling. Some of those principals are going to be demoted, and that's a new thing for Pittsburgh. This is the first year we've done aggressive principal evaluations. It's tough. We've got a huge grant from the federal government to do this and we have another grant from the Broad Foundation to start a principal training program, which we have seven people in this year.

CW: You got the buy-in from the city's board of education on these management reforms. You remarked at the forum in Boston that the superintendent previously needed board approval to give a secretary a raise, and when you arrived in Pittsburgh the board was basically making the hiring decisions about school principals.

ROOSEVELT: The board has changed.

CW: Was that wrenching or difficult?

ROOSEVELT: It's ongoing. It's constant.

CW: Do you bear some scars from that?

ROOSEVELT: It's tough. But remember, the first thing I had to do when I got here was close 22 schools. We will never have to do anything that horrible. I don't know of any school system that has ever closed a higher percentage of their schools than we did when I got here. We had 88 schools, so we closed 25 percent of all our schools in one year. It doesn't mean the scars aren't still there. They are. For a parent who's used to walking their kid to their elementary school, now they're putting them on a bus, and there was nothing fun about that. But I think what getting it done, and getting it done quickly and cleanly, won for us was the idea of, "OK, these folks deserve a chance to show what they can now deliver on." And that window— how long it stays open is the question. We're bringing so much change in such a short period of time. We really want to make the point that though we believe very strongly in these management reforms, it won't get us to where we need to go without working on the other pieces that are outside of what is traditionally seen as "school." That is a huge extra challenge because we only have so many people, so much staff, and so many resources. Luckily, we've had a ton of support from the foundation community and other communities in Pittsburgh, including this magnificent gift from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center of \$100 million for [college] scholarships.

CW: The money is going to be available regardless of financial need and income. Certainly in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and some other places that have similar programs, it was, in part, an effort to convince middle-class families to stay. Is that part of the goal here as well?

ROOSEVELT: Definitely, it is part of the goal.

CW: Why is that so important?

ROOSEVELT: Because we've been bleeding children for 25 years.

CW: Disproportionately middle-class families?

ROOSEVELT: Correct. If that trend continues, it makes things very difficult. So the Promise has two key goals, neither of which is more important than the other. One is to convince people to move to or stay in the city of Pittsburgh and have their kids in the public schools. Two is to raise the life trajectories of the kids we already serve. They're two very different things, but luckily a program such as this can have a very positive effect on both.

CW: Is there any part of the program that's paying attention to success in college? There's been increasing attention paid to this here in Massachusetts. We're now alarmed to find kids coming out of Massachusetts high schools, having passed the MCAS, who are not doing very well when they go on to higher education.

ROOSEVELT: I totally buy it. When we looked at Kalamazoo, which I laud as having been the forerunners of this, what we saw missing was what you're asking about. Now the Pittsburgh Promise is just up and running. This is the first year. But I am a member of the Promise board, and one of the things we will be charged with is developing the kind of networks and support services for kids once they're in college, because Pittsburgh actually has a very high rate of kids that attend college from our schools, but we do not have a great rate on kids who graduate from college. So you're totally right. The Promise will be a relatively unsuccessful program, in my view, if it doesn't also serve over time to dramatically increase the college graduation rate as well as college attendance rates.

CW: You set out pretty ambitious four-year goals for benchmarking improvements in student achievement. By the end of next school year, you said, you hope to see an almost doubling of third-grade reading proficiency, from 49 percent to 80 percent, an increase in the proportion of eighth-graders who are proficient in reading from 49 percent to 69 percent, similar improvements in math, increases in the number of students taking AP courses, and so forth. How are things looking?

ROOSEVELT: Well, when we announced those goals, which we are still committed to, we said, "Look, these are very, very ambitious goals, which would make us the fastest-moving district in the country." We expect to be judged on the extent to which we reach these goals. I think what's important in goal-setting is they have to be a mix of aspirations and realism. Will we reach 80 percent

[in third-grade reading proficiency]? Probably not. Will we get close? I hope so. And that's really where we are with those goals. Now we do have some very good early indicators of success from making the AP courses more diverse, getting more kids into them, etc. But will that result in a large series of passing grades on AP tests? That's probably the harder hurdle. But I'm not in any way shy about saying that we have very aggressive goals and that we will do everything in our power to attempt to reach them.

CW: I wonder how the whole experience has been for you on a more personal level. When I called the A+ Schools organization and said I was trying to see how things are going there with the schools under your leadership, the woman who answered the phone said, "The poor man," before quickly catching herself. What do you think she meant by that?

ROOSEVELT: Well, um [laughter].

CW: Is there a sense that you're in the crosshairs?

ROOSEVELT: There certainly is that. You look at a guy like [former Boston superintendent] Tom Payzant, who seemed to have been given some sort of almost unfair, Zen-like ability to never take anything personally, to rise above squabbling. I don't have that. I don't have Tom's quality of that, so I probably—

Pittsburgh has 'a very high rate of kids that attend college...but we do not have a great rate on kids who graduate from college.'

CW: You squabble?

ROOSEVELT: I squabble, and I get hurt by some things that are said. And in a context like this, one of the things that's tough is that the race card is played a lot. In our attempts to change things for better results for African-American children, some people characterize it as experimenting with African-American children. That hurts. I don't like that. It makes it even more important, obviously, that we deliver the goods. But there is a level of rhetorical toughness to urban schooling that I think is unfortunate. I hope I don't whine about it, but the work is inherently tough. I love the work. The part I do bridle a little bit at

is the vitriol that sometimes gets into the discourse, the lack of civility. I look back on events in my political career and I sometimes regret the partisanship that I showed. I wouldn't now, at 52, show that same partisanship that I did at 36. So I don't know, maybe that's because some of this is scarring, and what you learn from that is maybe people who are trying deserve the benefit of the doubt.



CW: You recently had your contract renewed for three years, through 2011. Are you settling in for the long haul, or at least the longer haul?

ROOSEVELT: What I have said here, and I really mean it, is that as long as I'm allowed to do the work I was hired to do, I would like to do it. If, at some point, I'm not allowed to do the work due to conflicts with my board or other things, that would be what would give me pause. I bought into the work. I embraced the work and I try to spread the gospel of the work, and so that's terrific.

CW: Are you surprised to hear people expressing concern that the Massachusetts ed reform effort has stalled or fallen off the public agenda? It seems that one overriding remaining challenge here, and it certainly dovetails with your work in Pittsburgh, is to improve achievement among poorest students and the poorer districts in the

state. That's something that will require a commitment of resources and will that might be lacking right now.

ROOSEVELT: The problem when you're first in the nation in so many categories is, how do you create the climate to put more resources into something that it looks like you're doing very well on? And that is a thoroughly political task. In 1993 the stars were aligned. One, you had an aggressive *Boston Globe* making this a huge issue. Two, you had a governor who was a Republican [William Weld], who I think understood that he needed to do something in this area for political reasons. You had a Senate president [William Bulger] who had a protégé, Tom Birmingham, whom he wanted to help and support, who was chair of education. You had a Speaker of the House, Charlie Flaherty, who was in some difficulty and wanted to leave his mark. And you had this court process hanging out there that may have ordered something if it didn't happen. You had the stars aligned as they so seldom are. When we look back at '93—wow, how often do all of those pieces get in place? So maybe the rhetoric this time and maybe the plan has to be more modest, more targeted.

CW: Are you struck by the fact that in the national campaign, education has not figured prominently?

ROOSEVELT: Despite this aggressively funded "Ed in '08," run by my friend Roy Romer [a national initiative to make education a central issue in the presidential campaign, directed by the former governor of Colorado]. I agree with you, it's hardly on the radar screen at all.

CW: Is that distressing?

ROOSEVELT: Very. And I think it's an indication of what I fear most, which is this nation's inability to really grapple with the serious problems we face in a serious way. We get distracted by a lot of phony issues, a lot of backbiting, a lot of personality stuff, a lot of issues—I don't mean to denigrate them—like gay marriage and things that take your eyes off the prize. And the eyes on the prize here is that we're getting our clock cleaned by our economic competitors. It's much worse now than it was 20 years ago or 15 years ago because there are far more nations who are doing better than us in education. **CW**



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Next steps

We have reason to be proud, but Massachusetts has still not achieved the school reform we need **BY PAUL REVILLE**

THE COMMONWEALTH OF Massachusetts is frequently, and with solid justification, considered to be the poster child of successful, systemic, standards-based school reform, but the ultimate goal of the 1993 Education Reform Act, proficiency for all, has not been met.

Our students top the nation on several indicators of educational achievement. Massachusetts fourth- and eighth-graders ranked first or tied for first on all four examinations of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and have held this unique position since 2005. Massachusetts students are the first to lead the nation in both reading and mathematics at both the fourth- and eighth-grade levels.

Student performance on our state assessment, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), has also risen dramatically since the test's introduction in 1998. More than half of all 10th-graders score within the "proficient" or "advanced" categories in both of its subjects, English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics. In addition, MCAS passing rates have considerably improved. Between 1998 and 2004, the failure rate of 10th-graders taking the test dropped 30 percentage points in math (from 45 percent to 15 percent) and 23 percentage points in ELA (from 34 percent to 11 percent).

While students are given several chances to pass the examination and earn their Competency Determination between 10th and 12th grades and beyond, the vast majority of students in the classes of 2007 and 2008 passed both the math and ELA examinations on the first try. The passing rates for the first administration of the examinations were 82 percent for the class of 2007 and 84 percent for the class of 2008, up from 68 percent in 2001 and 48 percent in 2000. Massachusetts's academic

standards have also been heralded as a model.

Finally, the Commonwealth also has one of the best records of performance on the SAT, despite slight declines over the past two years that are consistent with many other states' dips in performance. Fourteen straight years of improvement along with steady increases in participation rates, especially among racial and ethnic minority subgroups, are another indicator that we're on the right track.

We have much of which to be proud, yet the celebration, while deserved and necessary, should be short-lived. Policymakers and practitioners clearly recognize that Massachusetts has not fully achieved what school reform set out to achieve—an equitable and excellent system of education for all, one that provides every child with an opportunity to achieve a high level of performance and become prepared for a lifetime of learning.

Beneath all the glowing testimony to its success, Massachusetts, like literally every other state, still yields disturbing evidence of persistent achievement gaps that must be closed if the overriding promise of education reform—excellence and equity for all—is to be realized. For example, while 84 percent of the class of 2008 passed the MCAS examinations in mathematics and ELA on the first try, only 61 percent of Hispanic students and 68 percent of African-American students earned this distinction. In addition, while the statewide graduation rate for the class of 2006 cohort is 80 percent, this falls to 62 percent in urban areas.

It is still the case that in Massachusetts, as in virtually the entire country, educational attainment correlates closely with socioeconomic status. Education reform was supposed to make socioeconomic status irrelevant as a factor in educational achievement, but that has not happened anywhere, yet. Maybe the ideal was painfully naive, but I

believe we can do much better, even with the limited tools and resources at our disposal.

Before charting the course ahead, we need to look back at what we've done well and what we've not done well since passage of the Education Reform Act. First, what have we done well?

The Commonwealth, and especially the Board of Education, set high and nationally exemplary standards for student learning. We created some of the most admired and multifaceted assessments in the country. We not only set high standards, but we created high stakes for performance, and we "hung tough" whenever advocates of lowering standards sought to tear down the equity architecture of setting high standards and making them count.

Although it took too long, we eventually established an accountability system that held adults (administrators, teachers, districts, and schools) as well as children responsible for contributing to educational success. That accountability system began to provide modest doses of support and technical assistance to districts and schools needing assistance in "turning around" lagging performance trends.

Our leaders in the governor's office, the Legislature, and the private sector have maintained a strong, visible, consistent commitment to the key principles of education reform and have expressed their commitment in the form of substantial increases in education funding, at least in the first eight years of school reform. These leaders provided new financial resources through a highly progressive school finance formula, which supported the achievement of dramatically increased expectations. Finally, the state found ways to work with various partners in the private and nonprofit sectors to develop and sustain reform implementation.

What have we not done so well?

Our biggest error in the conception and early implementation of reform was to systematically underestimate how much the system's capacity would need to be built up to meet the dramatically increased expectations set by somewhat naive policymakers.

If teachers had known how to educate all students to proficiency, they would have done it without the prod of education reform. The notion of "all students at proficiency" represented a radical departure from the system that expected schools to provide the traditional bell curve distribution of educational attainment—a few students at proficiency, lots in the mediocre middle, and a handful or more (depending on your school system) failing. This kind of distribution of achievement served the industrializing, immigrant-socializing, early 20th century very well.

In the early 1900s, it generated a single-digit graduation rate that was acceptable at the time. But in the 21st century, we have very few low-knowledge, low-skill jobs, and we are striving for a 100 percent graduation rate.

School administrators and teachers need much more assistance if they are to educate 100 percent of students to proficiency. We policymakers failed to see how our radically increased expectations had fundamentally changed the job of teaching and required new skills and expertise. We grossly underestimated the need for the equivalent of a Marshall Plan to improve the quality of teaching in Massachusetts schools.

We underestimated the impact of poverty on student achievement and continue to be naive about its impact.

The 1993 act hugely expanded the role and responsibilities of the Department of Education (now called the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education), making it the prime driver of education reform, yet there was virtually no capacity building at the department. The current staffing level is roughly half of what it was in the mid-1980s, while the department has arguably tripled its organizational responsibility.

For example, the education department is now called upon to provide diagnostic and technical assistance service to a cascading number of schools and districts declared "underperforming" by our accountability system, but it is woefully understaffed to accomplish this task. As a result, we have an accountability system that "calls out" underperformance but is incapable of providing assistance to correct this condition.

We also failed to see how much more time would be required to get all students to world-class proficiency and give them a well-rounded education at the same time. As a result, our curriculum has narrowed as we have sought to guarantee each and every child "gateway" skills in English and math. We are trying to cram 21st-century expectations into a late 19th-century school structure and schedule. Not surprisingly, our contemporary expectations don't fit the old model.

And we didn't act on the clear implication of standards-based reform that the use of time should be differentiated according to student needs. We should give to each student the quantity and quality of instruction he or she needs to master the skills and knowledge needed to be successful.

Finally, we underestimated the impact of poverty on student achievement and continue to be naive about its

impact. We cannot get all students to a high standard if we pretend they all have the same learning needs that can be met in the same way. We must, for example, do a far better job of alleviating problems that impede poor children from coming to school ready and able to learn. We need to give poor children more preschool education, after-school and summer-learning opportunities, and a variety of interventions designed to level the playing field with middle-class children. We must, institutionally, do for poor children what middle-class families are able to routinely do for their own. This means deep and constant support. This means a system that differentiates between children's needs and responds differentially to address those needs—supplying whatever it takes, in quantity and quality, to get each child to proficiency and, ultimately, success.

As a consequence of these various oversights, coupled with the fact that the foundation budget was built prior to the existence of standards and clear performance targets, we made an educated guess at what it would cost to accomplish the goals of education reform and how much it would take to adequately finance the reforms. State government routinely dodged the obligation, outlined in the 1993 reform act, to review the foundation budget, and, consequently, it appears that what was once considered an adequate “foundation budget” for school reform in the early '90s is no longer adequate now.

The beauty of the standards, assessments, and accountability system is that it regularly generates data on performance, and that data (while serving many constructive purposes) regularly and sharply force us to come to grips with the yawning gap between our aspirations (proficiency for all) and the reality of our performance (substantial and persistent achievement gaps). Faced with this cold splash of reality, we can either walk away from the aspirations, declaring them naively ambitious, or we can recommit.

Clearly, we, as a Commonwealth, are committed, with renewed urgency, to redoubling our efforts to close the achievement gaps.

MOVING INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

We see the challenge ahead as meeting each child where he or she is and providing the support, services, and teaching necessary to take that student all the way up the ladder of achievement so that he or she may enjoy the fruits of success in our 21st-century economy and society.

In particular, we must simultaneously pursue two major strategies: an all-out effort to improve teaching and learning coupled with the building of a robust system of services and supports to guarantee that each child has an unimpeded opportunity to learn.

To improve the quality of teaching, we need to create

a genuine teaching profession, thereby drawing the most highly qualified candidates into the field. Once we have these teachers, we need to build their content knowledge and skills and provide high-quality mentoring, professional development, supervision, and evaluation. We need to recognize their outstanding skills, knowledge, and willingness to undertake special assignments, to compensate them fairly, to recognize their achievements, to provide them with career ladders, and to create for them and their colleagues genuine, adult learning communities.

At the same time, we will need a 21st-century curriculum that demands high standards of content mastery as well as an array of skills such as communication, collaboration, creativity, problem-solving, and the use of modern technology. Many of these skills are difficult to measure with our conventional assessment tools, but we must find new metrics to capture them. Parents and the public want children to receive a well-rounded education replete with the arts, civics, character building, physical education, and the joy of learning for its own sake. Finally, our nation's economic and political future depends on a citizenry with a global perspective and the capacity to be culturally competent in a variety of situations.

For children with specialized challenges, especially the challenges of poverty, we will need to build systems that replicate the common supports of middle-class life. As mentioned, time must be expanded to match the size of children's learning deficits. Pre-school from birth onward, after-school programs, and expanded and differentiated school time must all be utilized. Health and human services must be readily available at school sites.

Where we have school underperformance and high concentrations of poverty (a common correlation), we need to guarantee that nurses, counselors, and other support personnel are readily available to help students, their families, and their teachers.

How will we get there?

Gov. Patrick has proposed and secured from the Legislature a new governance structure to expedite an ambitious next chapter of school reform. This new structure is designed to foster interagency collaboration within the education sector in order to produce a seamless PreK-16 education system while at the same time integrating other government services like employment training and health and human services into the world of education.

The governor has commissioned the Readiness Project to do conceptual and design work to map out the steps needed to take us from where we are to where our children need to be. Legislative leaders are participating in this process and, in addition, have ideas and initiatives of their own, as do the several boards of education that govern education subsectors.

The Readiness Project's report aims to come up with

an ambitious vision and also to detail a set of specific action steps that can be taken in the near and long term to realize this vision for 21st-century Massachusetts schools. The report will articulate a strategic plan for an education future that will serve the children and the society far better than our current system. The plan will suggest cost savings as well as some new initiatives that have associated costs. Once the education vision is articulated, we can then begin the process of grappling with how to pay for this education future.

At the outset of the coming press for renewed reform, we will need to recognize several important principles for a transformed system:

Our approaches can no longer be “one size fits all.” We need differentiation and the recognition of individual needs on everything from the use of educational time to support services to the delivery of educational services to the hiring and promotion of educators.

We will need to be creative, to foster innovation, to demand continuous improvement, and to rely on hybrid educational delivery systems.

The new system will require unprecedented collaboration between the pre-school, K-12, and college and university sectors in addition to the participation of our

health and human services, employment and training, and other systems of support. We will need a fully integrated, fully aligned, coherent, and seamless system of education.

We must build a system that recognizes the realities and demands of the 21st century and prepares our children to succeed in this contemporary world. We are asking more than ever of our schools: world-class achievements in core subjects, 21st-century skills, a well-rounded education, and the development of character and civic virtues.

To do all this, to prepare all students for proficiency and success, will not only require a bold re-envisioning of our system but major new investments in bootstrapping this system from the early 20th century into the 21st century. We will need the courage to move beyond the status quo and substantial persistence to realize our audacious dream of making every child a winner. **CW**

Paul Reville, chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, is the secretary-designate of education and will assume that office on July 1. He is currently a faculty member at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and president of the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy. He was a key participant in the design, passage, and implementation of the Education Reform Act of 1993.



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Too many incompletes

The dropout crisis is a threat to students, society, the economy, and the taxpayer **BY NEIL SULLIVAN AND ANDREW SUM**

EDUCATION REFORM IN the Commonwealth focused our attention on those students who were passing through school without acquiring basic academic skills. We aimed for a particular target, and we hit it. We raised academic achievement across the board, and we redefined the high school diploma.

But education reform had no impact on the state's dropout rate. No surprise, since it's hard to hit a target—even a target as big and costly as this one—when you do not aim for it. But the time has come to make dropout rate reduction a major policy objective, just as we have done with K-12 education. The cost of inaction is simply too great in terms of squandered lives and taxpayer dollars. Over 70 percent of the inmates in state prisons are high school dropouts, and that is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the social and fiscal consequences of the dropout crisis.

A concerted effort to cut the dropout rate in half would yield substantial benefits for students, society, the economy, and the taxpayer. We need to ask what kind of commitment it will take—from educators, parents and the community, from business and workforce development, from human services and law enforcement.

Massachusetts is one of only seven states that measure on-time graduation rates. For the Class of 2007, our rate was just over 80 percent, the highest among the reporting states. However, on-time graduation rates vary substantially by community, from 41 percent in Lawrence to 99 percent in Weston. Statewide, approximately 85 percent of white and Asian students graduate on time, while black and Hispanic graduation rates run at only 65 percent and 59 percent, respectively. The situation is even worse for black and Hispanic boys. Only 58 percent of black males graduate on time, compared with 72 percent of their female counterparts. For Hispanic students, the rate is 53 percent for young men versus 64 percent for young women.

Another way to measure the size of the dropout problem is to count the actual number of students who leave each year. Approximately 11,000 students in Massachusetts drop out of high school annually, almost 2,000 per year in Boston alone.

The economic, social, and fiscal consequences of the dropout crisis are profound. Drawing on disparate data sources, the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University has quantified the impact of the dropout crisis on individuals and on society as a whole. The failure to graduate from high school leads to a wide range of personal and social ills, as well an enormous burden on the taxpayer.

Dropouts face an unforgiving labor market from the moment they leave high school. Fewer than 40 percent of teenage dropouts in Massachusetts are employed during an average month. During 2005, only 55 percent of working age adults without a high school diploma or GED were employed in any type of job (full-time or part-time), versus nearly 75 percent of high school graduates and 82 percent of bachelor's degree holders.

Due to their low employment rates and low hourly earnings, adult dropouts in Massachusetts have very limited earnings potential. During 2005, the mean annual earnings of 18- to 64-year-old dropouts were slightly under \$16,800, nearly \$9,200 less than those of high school graduates and \$34,000 less than those with bachelor's degrees. Over a lifetime, high school dropouts in Massachusetts earn an average of \$777,000. Add a high school diploma and average lifetime earnings rise to \$1,224,000. In other words, a high school diploma is worth an average of \$447,000.

It is tempting to say that this has always been the case, but that could not be further from the truth. The gap in lifetime earnings between those with diplomas and those without has widened considerably over the past few decades. The high school diploma may not be worth what it once was, but the high school dropout has lost almost twice as much in real earnings.

These large drops in lifetime income are associated with steep declines in marriage rates and thus family formation. Back in 1979, the marriage rate for male dropouts actually exceeded that of bachelor's degree holders by 6.5 percentage points. Since then, marriage rates for college graduates have remained the same, while the rate for male dropouts has plummeted by 25 percentage points, from 68 percent to 43 percent. Meanwhile, the out-of-wedlock

birth rate for female dropouts has risen to 77 percent, compared with just 6 percent for college-educated females.

Dropouts also contribute less in taxes, and they are more dependent on public assistance such as welfare (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and Supplemental Security Income, as well as food stamps, rental subsidies, and Medicaid health benefits. Their incarceration rates dwarf those of other educational groups, driving the explosion of prison costs.

High school dropouts are the only educational group that pays less in taxes to federal, state, and local governments than it receives in public assistance. On average, including the expense of institutionalization, dropouts cost taxpayers \$1,400 a year, while high school graduates contribute \$5,480. On average, over a lifetime, the public treasury loses \$322,000 when a young person leaves school without a diploma. Fiscal conservatives, take note. By any calculation, we cannot afford to ignore the steadily escalating impact of the dropout crisis.

DETECTING THE WARNING SIGNS

Boston and Massachusetts have begun to take the dropout crisis very seriously. In October 2004, with support from national foundations, Mayor Thomas Menino convened a Youth Transitions task force. This coalition of school, community, and state agency leaders has made the dropout issue visible through a steady drumbeat of meetings, forums, publications, and emerging networks of community organizations.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has implemented an individual student tracking system that allows us to reliably measure on-time high school graduation rates, as well as five- and six-year rates, starting with the classes of 2006 and 2007.

Secretary of Labor and Workforce Development Suzanne Bump is promoting employment programs for at-risk youth, including those transitioning out of residential programs run by the Department of Youth Services. The Commonwealth Corporation is supporting local coalitions that reconnect youth to education and the state workforce system through its "Pathways to Success by 21" (P-21) initiative. Sixteen local workforce boards, including the Private Industry Council in Boston, stand ready to partner with school districts, adding employment to the prevention and recovery mix, as well as school-to-career internships and connections to the workforce system.

These efforts are benefiting from a strong body of research that has taken shape over the past three years. We know what we need to know to identify those students most likely to drop out. Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins

University and the Boston-based Parthenon Group have done separate studies of Boston's student population that will allow Superintendent Carol Johnson to identify the individual students who are most likely to drop out of school. The Boston Plan for Excellence, the local education foundation, has developed a composite learning index that displays this information in a format that is accessible for teachers and administrators.

A strong early-indicator system sets up the need for effective early interventions. The Balfanz model identifies those middle-school students who need serious social services, as well as those who need less intensive attention. This lighter and less expensive intervention could be pro-

We need to identify who is most likely to drop out.

vided by community organizations and national service corps volunteers as early as fourth grade. The Parthenon study recommends new high school models that specialize in serving younger students who have fallen significantly behind and older students who need just a few more credits.

The essential complement to prevention is recovery. In Boston, the Private Industry Council has hired two outreach and referral specialists, both former dropouts themselves, to pursue recent dropouts and to reenroll them in school. We are in the process of learning why students leave, what brings them back, and what is necessary to keep them in school once they return.

All of these reforms are contained in legislation filed by state Sen. Edward Augustus of Worcester. The legislation calls for a 50 percent reduction in the statewide dropout rate within five years, while allowing a cabinet-level commission to adjust the goal and timetable as local action plans are developed. It mandates local action teams that link school districts, state agencies, and community organizations to a plan that includes early indicators and early interventions for students who are falling behind, as well as outreach, re-enrollment, and alternative pathways to graduation for those who have left.

Even with a strong foundation of research and innovation, Massachusetts is merely pointed in the right direction. Addressing the dropout crisis will require a major leadership commitment at all levels. With enough focus and effort, we can continuously reduce the number of students dropping out of high school. **CW**

Neil Sullivan is executive director of the Boston Private Industry Council, an organization focused on workforce development and school-to-career transitions. Andrew Sum is professor of economics and director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University.



Ed reform must move beyond MCAS

BY SCOTT W. LANG

AS MAYOR OF New Bedford, I rely upon the entire community to work together to move our city forward. So it alarms me to watch New Bedford's best resources, our promising young people, deprived of an opportunity to fully participate in our society. The young people to whom I refer stayed in school, passed their classes, sang in the choir, played sports, served on the student council, joined the junior ROTC, made up the social fabric of the classrooms, worked at the grocery store, and volunteered at the hospital. Yet they were denied a high school diploma because of their inability to pass a single standardized test.

In Massachusetts, the Legislature enacted education reform, and its subsequent implementation, with the noblest of intentions: to improve educational standards. However, one component of the Education Reform Act caused egregious unintended consequences in New Bedford and in other cities across the state. We created a system that denies a public high school diploma to students who achieve all local standards for public high school graduation but fail a standardized test.

Without a high school diploma, these students are denied the opportunity to fully participate in our society. These students are lumped in with high school dropouts, many of whom will be unable to find gainful employment or opportunity in their lifetimes. In New Bedford and in other cities, this means that the social costs posed by individuals without high school diplomas will grow every year, decreasing our tax base and creating an increased tax burden for our residents.

I am not even accounting for the number of children who drop out of high school because of their fear of not passing the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS, test. While there are no firm statistics on how the test

affects the dropout rate, I believe the MCAS is another hurdle that contributes to students leaving school. A report recently released by the Massachusetts Department of Education indicates that 50 percent of the state's high school juniors who dropped out had not earned their MCAS competency determination at the time that they left school. Of the students in their senior year who dropped out, 28 percent had not yet earned their MCAS competency determination.

While many believe that the MCAS is essential to ensure that Massachusetts students have reached an appropriate level of achievement to obtain a high school degree, the MCAS system does not apply to the 134,023 students in private or parochial schools in the state of Massachusetts. This disparity of standards is neither logical nor equitable. Further, universities and colleges do not consider MCAS scores when they evaluate candidates for admission, nor do they discriminate against applicants from other states who may or may not have had to pass a different standardized test in order to gain a high school diploma.

The dropout rate in the cities of Massachusetts is unacceptable. However, a comparison of dropout numbers throughout the country shows that the problem is truly a nationwide crisis, not unique to our state. Data indicate that the high school graduation rate in Massachusetts, which hovers around 72 percent annually, is on par with states from all parts of the country. With only 70 percent of students in the United States receiving a high school diploma, and 1.2 million students dropping out of high school annually, we are confronted with a problem that has tremendous implications for our society. In fact, a recent report released by America's Promise Alliance indicates that in 17 of the nation's largest cities, the dropout rate exceeds

the graduation rate. The report goes on to cite huge discrepancies in dropout rates for major cities in comparison with their suburbs. This is a catastrophe and a clear indicator that the American public school system is failing.

In Massachusetts, we have created a system that unintentionally exacerbates the number of students who leave public high school without a diploma. Unilaterally, education reform, with its public school MCAS graduation requirement, has effectively added, on average, 30 percent each year to the “dropout” numbers. In 2003, the first year of the MCAS requirement, the Massachusetts Department of Education reported that 9,389 students dropped out of high school. By June of that same year, 5 percent of the class of 2003, or 3,282 students statewide, had failed to receive an MCAS competency determination, depriving them of a high school diploma. This means that a combined total of 12,671 students statewide left high school without a diploma in 2003. This pattern has continued through the most recent year for which data is available: In 2007, 11,346 students dropped out of high school and 4,441 students did not receive an MCAS competency determination, for a combined total of 15,787 students statewide who left high school without receiving

a diploma.

It is clear that in each year since 2003, the MCAS exam has continued to contribute to the number of young residents in cities across the state who fail to graduate from high school, and who are lumped together with young people who drop out of high school. However, let us be clear: Students who meet all graduation requirements but do not pass the MCAS are not dropouts. They are students who have successfully completed kindergarten through the

As a diploma requirement, MCAS is unacceptable.

12th grade and are looking for an opportunity to succeed in our society. Using the MCAS as an assessment tool to measure student learning at a single point in time is a logical use of the standardized test. As a diploma requirement, however, it is unacceptable and is causing mounting problems in our communities.

While many speak of the need for our students to compete in a global economy, it is evident that in several ways that our local economies have a minimal overlap with the worldwide economy. Our skilled tradesmen, hospitality

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workers, service industry workers, and construction workers, to name only a few vocations, provide services that form the backbone of our communities and their local economies. These jobs, held by a majority of the residents of many communities, cannot be outsourced. Many of our students are hardly competing with students from afar. They are attempting to establish sustainable vocations in our cities and towns, perhaps not as college or community college graduates, but as skilled, dependable employees. Instead, without a high school diploma, they are forced to compete with the individuals who have dropped out of our school systems.

The effects on society of MCAS casualties—those students who have met local graduation requirements but not passed the exam—are measurable and real. These public school students, who receive “certificates of completion” rather than high school diplomas, are relegated to the same class of wage earners as those who have chosen to drop out of high school. Analysis of federal receipts and expenditures indicates that a household headed by a dropout costs society \$22,449 more per year in direct benefits and means-tested aid when compared to a household headed by a high school graduate.

The Department of Education has indicated that since the inception of the MCAS graduation requirement, each year 5 percent of enrolled public high school seniors statewide, on average, are not graduating from high school because they have not met one or both of the MCAS requirements. From 2003 through the graduating public high school class of 2007, 16,841 students have been given “dropout” status, leaving little opportunity for jobs paying a living wage, further education, or a sustainable career. These 16,841 students, multiplied by \$22,449 per year in societal support, represent a cost to society of over \$3.5 billion. This figure, representing the cost to Massachusetts alone, will be a tremendous and continually increasing drain on our local, state, and federal government and our community nonprofits.

Our society cannot afford this self-imposed silent tax to support public school students who have met all high school diploma requirements except the MCAS requirement and who desire the opportunity, and have the ability, to support themselves.

In addition, these students who now are relegated to “dropout” status will never have an opportunity to earn a living that generates taxable income to address the needs and provide services for our communities. According to the most recent data available from the national Bureau of Labor Statistics, individuals who lack a high school diploma earn an average of only \$21,788 annually, or 30 percent less than the average annual income of an individual with a high school diploma (\$30,940). Based on this data, the difference in lifetime incomes between a

high school dropout and a high school graduate is \$384,384. Moreover, dropouts on average pay about half the taxes of high school graduates.

The opportunities afforded to students who cannot pass the MCAS are dismal. While little if any tracking of these students has been done by the Massachusetts Department of Education, we have the benefit of a large pool of data on the consequences of being a high school dropout in the United States. We know that those without a high school diploma are eight times more likely to serve time in jail or prison than high school graduates. Only 40 percent of our high school dropouts have jobs, compared with a 60 percent employment rate for high school graduates and an 80 percent employment rate for college graduates.

The fiscal burden imposed by the social costs and lost tax revenue of the “dropout” status problem continues to be compounded by the wasted resources expended by our school systems in an attempt to first teach, and then tutor, to the test. Our students, rather than being given the chance to participate in enrichment activities designed to foster a love of learning, spend countless hours reviewing the material that will be presented on the MCAS. The modern education reform curriculum emphasizes teaching to the test and teaching how to take the high-stakes test. Those who fail then receive costly remediation late in the game that consumes much of their time. At the end of the day, many students, unable to pass the test, finish their senior year of high school with a worthless certificate.

The MCAS failure rate hits cities of Massachusetts the hardest, and worse yet, both minority students and students who speak English as a second language fail at a rate significantly higher than their peers. Within the public high school class of 2007 in Massachusetts, 94 percent of all students passed the MCAS test and were eligible to receive a high school diploma. However, only 82 percent of black students, 83 percent of Hispanic students, and 60 percent of students with limited English proficiency passed the MCAS. The racial inequities created as a result of the MCAS graduation requirement damage the very economic and social fabric of our cities.

We work every day to keep in school students in danger of dropping out, and in New Bedford in 2006 we saw our dropout rate decrease by 3 percentage points from the previous year, one of the largest decreases among urban areas in the Commonwealth. In 2007, despite increased efforts, the dropout rate inched up again. State educational policy must enable us to strengthen and build our communities, not detract from them. The MCAS graduation requirement has harmed thousands of students across our state and poses a cost to the rest of us that numbers in the billions of dollars. This situation cannot be sustained.

We have had several years to watch as the unintended

consequences of this test have caused great harm in cities across the Commonwealth. We now need to work together to implement a bifurcated system of public high school diplomas: an MCAS high school diploma, certifying that a student has passed the MCAS exam, and an accredited high school diploma. This system will even the playing field for all of our high school students, whether they're enrolled in public, private, or parochial schools throughout the state.

Each of our young students is a unique individual who

can positively contribute to our communities and the world. With the MCAS graduation requirement, some of these young people will never have an opportunity to succeed. We should not be holding them back because of a graduation standard that has no relevance in terms of determining success over the course of their future careers and endeavors. Let these young men and women have the opportunity to excel.

Scott W. Lang is the mayor of New Bedford.

No need to leave MCAS behind

BY TOM BIRMINGHAM

EDUCATION REFORM IN Massachusetts was a grand bargain: a massive infusion of state dollars into our public schools in return for high academic standards and accountability from all. We still have a long way to go, but few would deny that reform has been tremendously successful, and the MCAS test is a cornerstone of that success.

Between 1993, when education reform was enacted, and 1998, Massachusetts pumped an additional \$1 billion into education aid. But during that period, state reading scores didn't improve and mathematics scores rose only marginally. After the state began MCAS testing in 1998, both skyrocketed.

By 2005, Massachusetts became the first state ever to finish first in all four categories of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as the nation's report card. When the test was next administered in 2007, the Commonwealth's students did it again. Massachusetts's SAT scores have also risen dramatically and, recently, *U.S. News and World Report* rated our public high schools as the very best in the nation.

New Bedford Mayor Scott Lang resurrects the old argument that MCAS testing requires teachers to "teach to the test." Instead of instilling a love of learning, he argues, it results in students mindlessly replicating material on which they've been drilled. It's a good story line, but the national data reveal the truth about the success of standards-based reforms in the Bay State.

MCAS tests students on the academic content of the Commonwealth's curriculum frameworks, and those frameworks got it right. The frameworks consist of knowledge and skills, such as literacy and numeracy, that are universally necessary. In a *Washington Post* op-ed this Feb-

ruary, noted educator E.D. Hirsch wrote, "Consider the eighth-grade NAEP results from Massachusetts, which are a stunning exception to the nationwide pattern of stagnation and decline... That is because Massachusetts decided ... students (and teachers) should learn explicit, substantive things about history, science, and literature, and that students should be tested on such knowledge."

MCAS doesn't require students to know when the Battle of Hastings happened, but it does make sure they can write. Far from crowding out important subjects, MCAS simply ensures the achievement of minimum academic standards in content areas like literature, poetry, history, and mathematics. Although Mayor Lang cavalierly dismisses MCAS as having "no relevance in determining success over future careers and endeavors," in fact a recent study by the Board of Higher Education established that there is a strong correlation between MCAS scores and success in college.

In making his case against the MCAS exam, the mayor falls prey to the low expectations that have hampered education reform for too long, especially in our cities. He argues that many urban public high school graduates simply go on to work in low-skill jobs that can't be outsourced, don't require high-level skills, and are therefore unaffected by global economic changes. By not giving a diploma to students who complete all their requirements except passing the MCAS test, he argues, we are dooming them to the life of a high school dropout, with employment prospects that are limited at best.

Thankfully, New Bedford's residents are more optimistic, choosing instead to pursue the higher aspirations that are within reach for so many more of our citizens over

the last 15 years, thanks to education reform. More than three-quarters of the class of 2007 at New Bedford High School advanced to higher education, while just 16 percent moved straight into the workforce. The majority made a smart and self-interested decision because by 2010 jobs requiring at least some post-secondary education will make up more than two-thirds of the new jobs created in the United States, according to a report put out by the Educational Testing Service in 2003.

The relatively few in New Bedford's Class of 2007 who did go directly to work found a world in which the service jobs that the mayor calls "the backbone of our communities and their local economies" are quickly disappearing. Even if some young people can find work that requires little in the way of credentials, those jobs will become harder and harder to get—and they rarely provide real opportunities for career advancement.

Contrary to Mayor Lang's assertions, even the jobs that have traditionally been available to those without a higher education have been affected by global economic changes. In order for a mechanic to be certified, he or she must be able to perform a computerized diagnostic test. Understanding the directions for the test requires post-secondary reading skills. I have represented building trades unions for decades and can personally attest to the high level of numeracy demanded in the apprenticeship programs of the operating engineers, the plumbers, and the carpenters, to name just three crafts.

The mayor seems to reify the meaning of a diploma so that the physical possession of the document is thought to confer value on its owner. A diploma signifies value, however, only if it authentically attests to an understood level of skill and learning. The mayor misses the critical connection between what you learn and what you earn. At the heart of his argument seems to be a belief that if we gave a diploma to students who fail MCAS, their futures would somehow be transmogrified. Diploma or not, a student who lacks the skills required to pass MCAS confronts dismal employment prospects in the 21st century.

Earning trends in general don't support the mayor's argument. The gap between high school and four-year college graduates is widening, while the earning profile of those with associate's degrees increasingly resembles that of high school graduates. More and more, the importance of a high school diploma is as a platform for post-secondary education, as Harvard economist Richard Murnane argues in his paper "Preparing Students to Thrive in the 21st-Century Economy."

MCAS opponents have long blamed high dropout rates on the higher standards the test embodies. But even Mayor Lang indicates that fully 72 percent of high school seniors who drop out have already passed MCAS. The most recent report from the state Department of Elementary

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CLOSING REMARKS:

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and Secondary Education says the percentage of students who graduate from high school in four years rose in 2007.

When it comes to education reform, there is still much work to be done, and the climb gets steeper as we get closer to the summit. Clearly, eliminating the achievement gap between white and minority students tops the list of challenges that remain. The mayor points to lower MCAS pass rates for minorities and non-English speakers as proof that the test exacerbates that gap. But testing didn't create these inequities, it simply exposed them. Without high-quality diagnostic data we can never truly close the achievement gap.

One way to help many of the students about whom the mayor writes is to restore funding for MCAS remediation, which has been cut dramatically in recent years. The

funding would allow us to provide not just a triage system for the kids imminently at risk of failure, but to focus on younger children at a time when their educational problems could be readily addressed.

Massachusetts lacks natural resources; our economic competitiveness is uniquely dependent on an educated workforce. But MCAS and high academic standards speak to something even more important: preparing students from all backgrounds to function as active citizens in a democracy. Our success or failure in that endeavor goes to the very heart of who we are as a society.

Tom Birmingham is the former Senate President and co-author of the Education Reform Act of 1993. He is currently senior counsel at Edwards Angell Palmer & Dodge, LLP.

MCAS can evolve for a new era

BY NICK DONOHUE

MASSACHUSETTS IS RICH in so many ways. It's vibrant and diverse, with world-famous institutions and a storied history of improving the way many of its citizens live. That history is exemplified by the education reform movement launched more than 15 years ago. Driven by a true partnership between business, educators, and Beacon Hill, it was a bold initiative to secure a standards-based approach to learning as a way of educating our citizens in an equitable manner.

Following this approach, Massachusetts has moved to the head of the class on certain nationally calibrated measures of school success, such as the National Assessment of Education Progress. We have also seen an increase in MCAS scores for those who graduate from high school. However, roughly 20 percent of Massachusetts high school students do not graduate, and too few who do are prepared for higher learning. We also see too many teachers leaving the profession and higher turnover than ever among school officials. In short, we have made some progress through the implementation of MCAS, but we have much further to go.

Realizing the limits of our progress to date has brought us to an interesting crossroad in the debate over MCAS. There are a number of possible paths forward, each with a committed following. There are those who say "stay the course" with current reform efforts, including MCAS. The problem is, the "course" does not lead to the level of skills

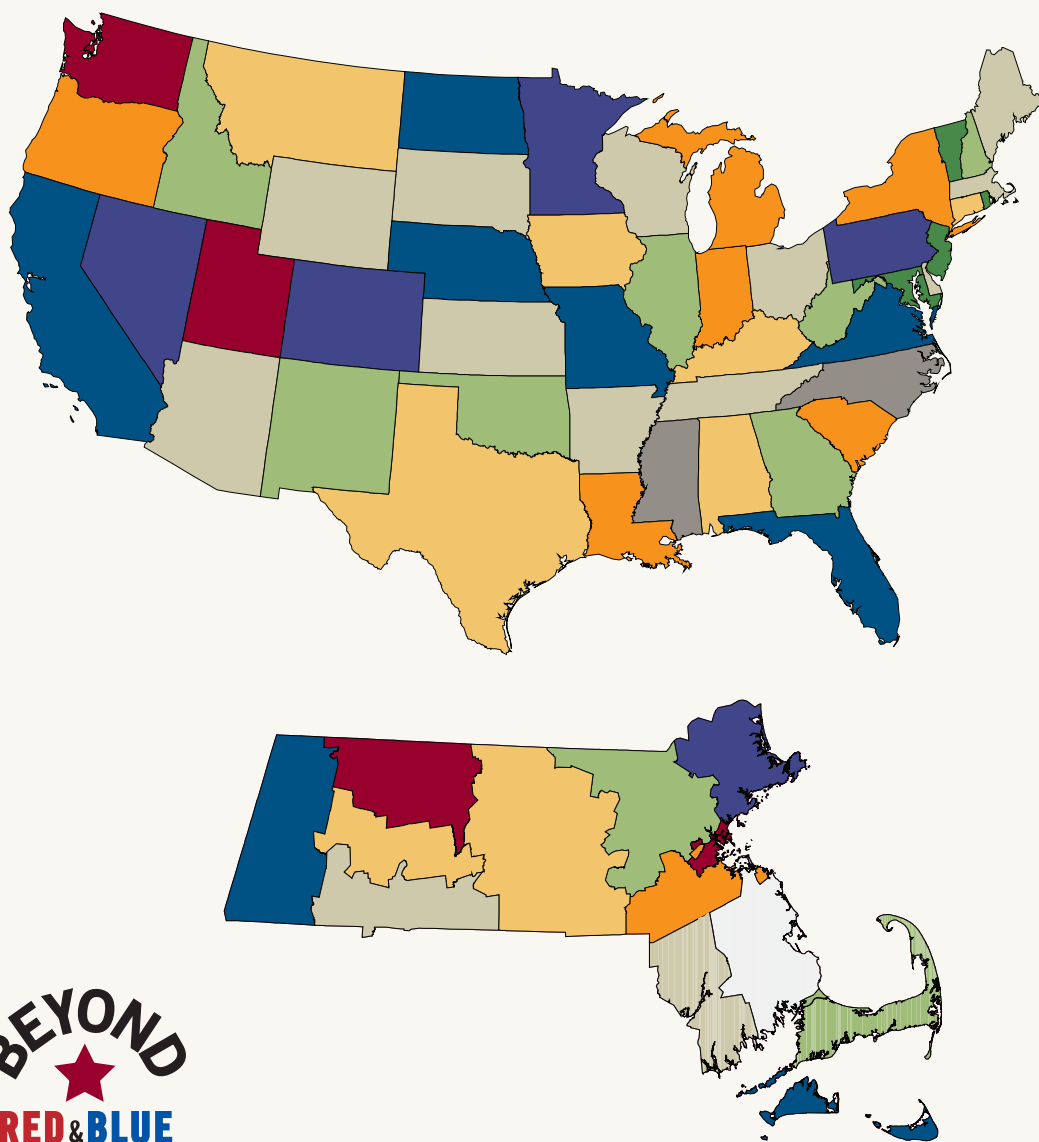
and knowledge that students will need to lead economically and civically engaged lives. Thanks to the progress of education reform, we have more people learning more, but without a sufficient number learning enough.

The achievement gap is narrowing slowly, but there is a "learning gap" that remains vast. This learning gap is the distance between achievement as defined by current standards and what is needed in order to succeed. This gap is real and is growing, and staying the course with MCAS will not close it. The standards that underpin MCAS and the current methods of assessing student learning were created to focus on bringing underperformers up to acceptable levels. Unfortunately, the floor has become the ceiling for the system in many respects.

There are those who would argue that we need to abandon MCAS, and what some see as narrow and restrictive standards, and put education "back in the hands of educators." While we should certainly provide better support to our hard-working teachers, abandoning clear, high standards is unwise. If we aspire to the varied system necessary to meet the needs of a broad range of learners, then clear expectations are essential.

Some suggest accommodations to the current system. Mayor Lang says the debate over MCAS can be solved with a dual diploma system that recognizes success other than that defined by scores on the high-stakes test. His stance is not without its logic. Any review of what is necessary

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for life in the 21st century reveals an array of skills and knowledge that is not sufficiently measured by MCAS. However, this dual approach could lead to “dueling” systems, and a broader gap in achievement between the haves and have-nots.

What we need is an evolution to the type of comprehensive, flexible system that will educate the largest number of learners possible at the highest levels. Such an evolution will require the wisdom to accept worthy aspects of the current system; the humility to renovate the system for a new era; the vision to articulate the standards and types of student engagement that truly provide educational opportunity for all; and dynamic leadership that will fight for profound changes.

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 actually can and should be the basis for this new system. The law is rooted in a commitment to standards, and defines an assessment system composed of a variety of instruments and methods that are sensitive to different learning styles and barriers to learning.

In *McDuffy v. Secretary of the Executive Office of Education*, a case significantly linked to the development and adoption of education reform, the court held that an educated Massachusetts child would possess (among other capabilities): “sufficient knowledge of economic, social, and political systems...sufficient grounding in the arts to enable each student to appreciate his or her cultural and historical heritage...[and] sufficient training or preparations for advance training in either academic or vocational fields so as to enable each child to choose and pursue life work intelligently.”

We need MCAS, but also a variety of measurements.

To date, this type of system has not been fully constructed and implemented. We need a robust “system of assessment” as intended by the Education Reform Act, a system that may include an on-demand testing component such as MCAS, but also a broad variety of measurement tools more closely aligned with the breadth of revised learning goals and consistent with MCAS’s original purposes.

The new system must honor learning that is acquired in different settings and demonstrated in a wider variety of ways. We must increase the number of internships and other “applied learning opportunities.” For example, learners could receive partial credit in English for work at a local newspaper; high-tech work sites are similarly rich in opportunities to learn math and other sciences.

High standards must guide these efforts. Experienced teachers should vet these experiences, and classroom

learning should complement and support these kinds of opportunities. If we want world-class thinkers and doers, we must have a system that asks learners to engage in and complete complex tasks that demonstrate competency in real-world contexts.

This will demand a change in how we regard accountability and delivery. Accountability should not be the sole burden of learners, but rather relate to outcomes that reflect a compact between learners, educators, and policymakers. These outcomes must be rooted in integrity of purpose and must receive sufficient support. If we acknowledge that outdated methods are destined to deliver modest results, we should honor our teachers by allowing them to apply their creativity. Holding educators responsible for teaching students how to fly but only allowing them to use vehicles that run on the ground is simply unfair.

Implementing this type of system would admittedly be a challenge, but one well worth it. High standards can be measured fairly and accurately using both a state-administered test and locally-controlled performance assessments. The on-demand test would need to be shorter and complemented by a rich, reliable, and valid way of measuring the complex features of student learning to which we aspire. A number of our neighbors in New England are wrestling with similar issues. Collaboration with other states on these issues will only help. We can and should work together.

We cannot mention this type of K-12 system without briefly discussing its implications for higher education. In order to make good on the promise provided by such a K-12 system, we must broaden the notion of postsecondary education to embrace a wider array of opportunities that still includes the gold ring of four-year degrees. We are capable of creating high quality, varied pathways—based on strong, varied standards—to guide learners to the bright futures they choose. Commitment to this type of alignment will allow Massachusetts to once again lead the world by redefining an accessible and high quality system of “higher learning.”

We have a responsibility to build on our creative and productive history, and take the lead in evolving education. A century ago we moved out of the one-room school house. The time has come to move beyond the well-intended, important foundation started with MCAS and toward a system that is aligned with both our current and future needs—one in which creativity, teachers, and students can all thrive. **CW**

Nick Donohue is president and chief executive of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and co-chair of the MCAS and Additional Assessment Subcommittee of Gov. Deval Patrick’s Readiness Project.



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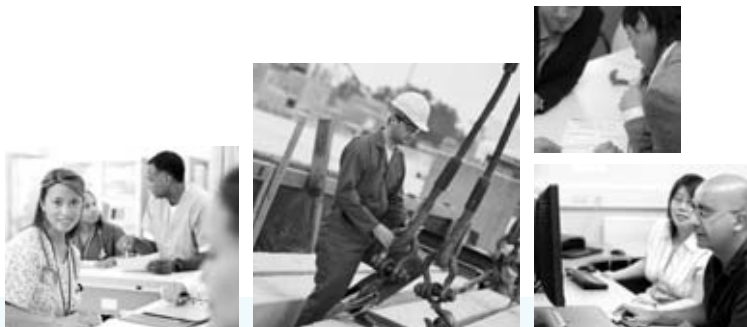
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Natural curiosity

A new book makes the case for letting students learn by exploration rather than by instruction **BY CHARLES EUCHNER**

IMAGINE A BASEBALL team run on the same organizational model as a typical school. Players would join not because they love the game, but because reformers in the 19th century decided that all children should play. Players would learn by attending classes all day. They would sit at desks arranged in rows, listening to teachers explain the history of baseball, pitching, hitting, fielding, strategy, statistical analysis, and the culture of baseball and sports.

Students would demonstrate their mastery of these subjects in tests. Only occasionally would students go to labs, where they could throw balls and swing bats. To win praise as a “high-achieving” team, coaches would drill their players before standardized tests. Parents would also spend thousands on test-prep programs. At the end of the year, players would advance to the next level if they showed a bare recognition of concepts like bunting, slugging percentage, and the Black Sox scandal. At the end of the year, everyone would collapse in exhaustion and frustration.

You get the idea. The experience would be miserable. But schools of all kinds—public and private, rich and poor, urban and suburban and rural—try to teach kids with that kind of arbitrary and inflexible system. Since the Industrial Revolution, the basic model of schools has changed little. Students gather in large buildings, separated by age and ability. Teachers stand in the front of the classroom, telling kids what they need to know. Kids shuffle from class to class, indifferent to most of what they are supposed to learn. Many thrive. Many don’t.

None of these complaints is new. Fundamental critiques of modern schooling include liberal voices like John Dewey, Paolo Friere, A.S. Neill, TheodoreSizer, and Jonathan Kozol and conservative voices like Milton Friedman, William Bennett, and E.D. Hirsch. Critics agree that schools have become bureaucratic and arbitrary, but they disagree about what to do. Liberals usually urge greater attention to the child, with lower teacher-student ratios and programs to meet “special

needs.” Conservatives urge a return to “standards” and “values” and allowing families to choose schools in a marketplace.

These two perspectives check each other so changes occur on the margins. Schools become ever more bureaucratic, rule-bound, test-oriented,

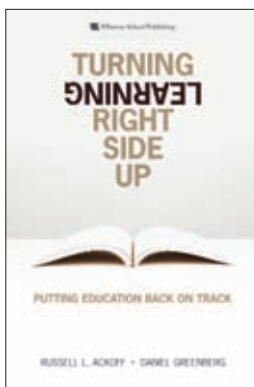
and alienating. Administrators and teachers (and their unions) often clash, but their battles lock in the status quo. State bureaucracies, testing companies, textbook publishers, education schools, and ideological activists all make inflexible demands, creating less and less room for change. Even sincere

reform efforts regiment schooling, reducing the freedom of everyone in the school.

Russell Ackoff and Daniel Greenberg—the former an emeritus management professor at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business, the latter a founder of the Sudbury Valley School in Framingham—have entered the debate with a brilliant but uneven manifesto for wholesale change of the way children (and adults) learn.

Turning Learning Right Side Up: Putting Education Back on Track (Wharton School Publishing, July 2008) began as a correspondence between the authors. Greenberg and Ackoff, one of the pioneers of “systems theory” in business, met at a conference and discovered that they shared ideas on learning. And so they started talking.

Ackoff and Greenberg’s dialogue provides a compelling philosophical case for letting kids learn by exploration rather than by instruction in a common curriculum, but it offers little hard evidence that this type of schooling works. Still, by focusing on the basic questions of how learning works, the authors speak some brutal truths about the current state of education—not just in



America, but across the world.

The basic problem, the authors say, is that schools are designed upside down. Rather than serving students' innate abilities as learners, schools are stuck in an input/output mentality. Schools use all kinds of programs and materials—textbooks, tests, interventions—to push students to produce outputs like high test scores and college acceptances.

Little of this activity has to do with real learning. Schools operate from the top down, and concerns from the bottom rarely filter up. “The schools are an almost perfect model of political autocracy,” the authors write. “There is a well-defined hierarchy, a clear chain of command. Each level has almost unlimited control over the next level below, the student being at the bottom of the heap.... One predictable result of this setup is that the system is permeated with resentment and hatred, and at every level enormous energies are spent breaking or subverting the rules.”

The ideal school would begin with a simple question: *How do people learn?* Research, as well as our own experience, tells us that learning happens through exploration. A toddler discovers the world through moving around, playing, and observing. At every age, people learn by exploring and building models of the world. The school's job—and the job of every social institution from the family to sports teams to choirs and theater troupes—is to create opportunities for people to discover and pursue their passions. The teacher's job is to give students resources and gentle nudges.

“Anyone who has observed infants cannot help noticing the intensity of their curiosity,” Ackoff and Greenberg write. “They are consumed by a passion to observe the world around them, to make sense out of it, to figure out how to operate within it, and to learn how to control as much of it as possible to their own benefit. This trait never departs from the human spirit.... Curiosity keeps the individual in motion, always seeking change and innovation. ... Plainly put, it is no more necessary to teach people ‘problem solving’ than it is to teach people breathing. Every human being develops his own approaches to solving problems, and does so naturally.”

In other words: Leave ‘em alone. But Ackoff and Greenberg acknowledge that curiosity alone does not “give direction to motion, nor does it contain within it the skills to maintain motion.” What does? “The key factor operating to produce tendencies in our behavior is our character,” the authors write, adding that schools can help develop character only if they bring students into a truly democratic community.

At the Sudbury Valley School, students play critical

roles in policymaking and discipline. School meetings are run with Robert's Rules of Order, and everyone in the school votes on every aspect of the school's governance.

Forget about a core curriculum. The authors scoff at the idea that students can master the basics in the full range of liberal arts subjects like math, science, literature, history, languages, and the arts. By insisting on course requirements, they say, education becomes a process of force-feeding. The more we demand, the more students resist; the more students resist, the more pressure we put on them; the greater the pressure, the more schooling becomes a passionless stalemate.

So what do kids do at these “free” or “democratic” schools? They explore whatever captures their interest. They play lots of games. They learn musical instruments and make furniture. They fix engines and work on computers. They read books and write stories. They play with animals, work in gardens, and cook meals. Frequently, students decide the way to dive into an academic subject like biology, math, mythology, physics, or philosophy.

‘Schools are an almost perfect model of political autocracy... The system is permeated with resentment and hatred.’

In a way, Ackoff and Greenberg want learners to be like the “connectors” of Malcolm Gladwell's famous essay “Six Degrees of Lois Weisberg.” Weisberg is a key political and social figure in Chicago, not because of high office but because of her ability to know and bring together people from all walks of life. Like Weisberg, every kid should be able to tap into a network that extends far and wide—a network that includes not just people, but also ideas and resources. If a student wants to learn about sea life, for example, he should be able to link up with everything having to do with sea life—biology, environmental issues, shipping, economics, community issues. As with Weisberg, the most compelling connections occur among apparently dissimilar topics—sea life could be connected to music or colonial history, for example. That's what education is all about.

What proof do Ackoff and Greenberg offer that free learning is superior to standard school programs? Not much—at least not the kind of proof that can be quantified in test scores. The authors say graduates of the 40-year-old Sudbury Valley School succeed because they know how to play, work, and learn. “They have become used to

working hard,” the authors write. “They are used to working independently. And they know who they are. They can describe their own strengths and weaknesses and their own methods of exploiting the strengths and overcoming the weaknesses. So they seem to be quite successful in their next pursuits.”

Studies published in the *Journal of American Education* and co-authored by a trustee of the Sudbury Valley School found that the school succeeds by encouraging students to help one another. The academic literature has long found peer tutoring to be among the most effective means of learning. And graduates of Sudbury Valley seem to do well after graduating. More than half have graduated from college, and the rest either took college courses or found ways to teach themselves or find apprenticeships. Graduates reported that they knew how to track down whatever they needed to pursue their goals. When they wanted to compete on standard academic tracks, they did that. When they wanted to get involved in music and the arts, they did that. When they wanted to start businesses, they found mentors and partners.

Is that enough evidence for parents and policymakers frustrated with the state of public education? Hardly. We live in an age of anxiety. We want assurances, if not guar-

antees, that learning strategies work. That’s the greatest attraction of top-ranked schools like Bracket Elementary School in Arlington, Carlisle Middle School, and the Boston Latin School. Surveys and test scores show these schools work.

Common sense would tell you that the free-schooling model works for some but not all students, but then no single model works best for everyone. My opinion is we need choice, and we need it before another generation grinds through yet another round of reform, with teachers and students locked into mutual suspicion, with mind-numbing textbooks and chaotic school board politics, and, of course, more tests and more metal detectors.

Ackoff and Greenberg could have produced a classic book on the virtues of free schooling in the postmodern age. They could have made a tighter argument, marshaled more evidence, and engaged opposing views. Too bad they didn’t. But they have started an important conversation, and maybe that’s enough.

Now, go play. **CW**

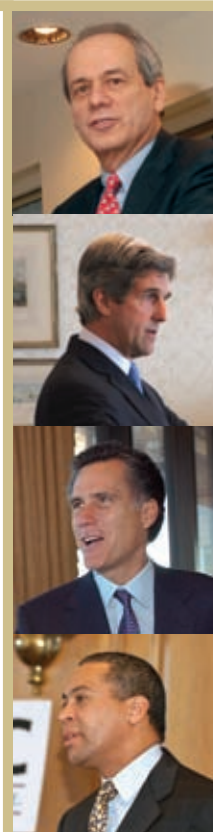
Charles Euchner, a New Haven writer, was the executive director of the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston at Harvard University from 2000 to 2004.

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