



# The Research Bureau

## Change & Challenge

The Research Bureau's April 10th forum was organized to discuss the challenges facing the next superintendent of the Worcester Public Schools. While the quality of our public education is vital to the well-being of Worcester's youth, it also affects the entire community in numerous ways: the quality of our workforce and our cultural and civic life, real estate values, and the City's economic development potential. Expenditures for the Worcester Public Schools constitute approximately 55% of all municipal spending. All of this means that the job of the superintendent is as important as that of the City Manager. Therefore, citizens need to be aware of the issues and challenges facing the next superintendent and monitor the selection process so as to help ensure that every effort is made to find the most competent candidate.

What are some of those challenges?

The Worcester Public Schools enroll more than 23,000 students in 44 schools serving grades pre-K through 12. As in other urban districts, these students are demographically diverse: about 42% white, one-third Hispanic, almost 13% African-American, and 8% Asian. About 38% speak a first language other than English, and 17% of all students cannot perform ordinary classroom work in English. Nearly two-thirds are from low-income families, and 19% have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) qualifying them for special education services.

While enrollment decreased by 8%, or more than 2,000 students, between FY03 and FY07, per-pupil spending rose by more than 8% (to over \$10,000). Even while total staff declined by 12% (359 fewer), salaries and benefits increased by 11% (to \$200 million annually). Health-insurance costs for school personnel skyrocketed by 72% (to \$43 million), and now constitute about 18% of the total Worcester Public Schools budget, up from 12% just four years earlier.

Regarding academic performance as judged by MCAS scores, Worcester's scores have been improving slowly, but 33 schools (75%), enrolling more than 80% of the district's students in 2007, were identified as needing improvement, corrective action, or restructuring in mathematics, English language arts, or both, either in the aggregate or for particular subgroups. Fourteen schools, including all four middle schools, are implementing restructuring plans. In comparison with the Commonwealth's other 21

urban districts, Worcester public school students are either at or slightly below the average proficiency rate.

Yet there are some schools in the district, such as University Park Campus School, Worcester Arts Magnet, Jacob Hiatt Magnet, Thorndyke Road and Clark Street, where academic performance exceeds what the demographics would indicate. And some graduates of the Worcester public schools are admitted to the most competitive colleges in the nation. In the WPS survey, 85% of 2007 graduates indicated that they plan to enroll in 2- or 4-year colleges or other post-secondary education immediately after graduation.<sup>1</sup>

The charge given to the forum's panelists was to suggest ways of addressing these challenges.

P.J. McDonald, Headmaster of the Eagle Hill School, a residential school for special needs students, discussed the problem of retaining teachers, especially in urban districts where 50% of new teachers leave the profession within three years. Research indicates that teachers do not reach full effectiveness until their 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> year of teaching. One study revealed that years of teaching experience accounted for 90% of the variation in student achievement scores. When teachers nationwide are surveyed about their reasons for leaving, they most often cite a lack of adequate preparation and adequate support from administrators. Dr. McDonald maintains that the one-week summer program of teacher induction training offered at the Eagle Hill School reduces early career teacher attrition by as much as half. It increases professional contact with peers and increases participation in non-instructional professional activities. The program, now in its third year with Worcester's new teachers is bearing fruit, and at no cost to the district.

Linda Nathan, the co-headmaster of Boston Arts Academy, a "pilot" or in-district charter school, argued that in order for schools with Worcester's or Boston's demographic composition to succeed, they need "mission, vision, and autonomy." The last includes authority over curriculum and assessment decisions and budget and staffing, including the authority to hire and fire teachers.

Both she and Michael Contompasis, the former head of Boston Latin School and recent interim superintendent of the Boston Public Schools, emphasized the need for various approaches to fit particular circumstances and populations. Mr. Contompasis recommended that one option that the WPS should add is an exam school (on the order of Boston Latin) for the most academically-talented students. Mr. Contompasis also seconded Ms. Nathan's message that every school should have its own distinct mission and culture established by a collaborative process involving teachers and administrators. Having the autonomy and the authority to implement those plans is essential.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Research Bureau reports – *Benchmarking Public Education in Worcester: 2008*, <http://www.wrrb.org/documents/CCPM08-01.pdf> and *Improving Student Performance Under Education Reform: Practices in Urban Schools* <http://www.wrrb.org/documents/WRRB07-01.pdf>. For rebroadcast of forum, check Government Chanel 12 listings for schedule.

The challenge for the Worcester community is to find the best leader to institute such changes as the panelists described, in the face of the issues listed here.

**Roberta R. Schaefer, Ph.D.**  
**President & CEO**  
**The Research Bureau**