



The Research Bureau

Testimony at Listening/Learning Session May 4, 2010 Flagg Street School

Dr. Boone, Dr. Mulqueen, members of the School Committee, and fellow parents and residents.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer my observations and suggestions for changes in the Worcester Public Schools. I do so on the basis of 25 years of accumulated knowledge and research in my capacity as head of The Research Bureau, 11 years as a member of the Massachusetts Board of Education during the formative stages of implementing the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, 3 years as a researcher at the US Department of Education, and perhaps most important, 33 years as a parent who considered the education of her children her most important responsibility. My goals for them were to become good citizens, capable of participating in a self-governing democratic nation, and to become responsible and caring adults, capable of engaging in productive work that would enable them to be self-sufficient and happy. I suspect that these goals are shared by most parents; how to achieve them is the question.

I do not profess to have a panacea for what ails urban education. And I am no ideologue. I'm a pragmatist who agrees with President Obama's view that "we need to do what works." But as urban educators, dealing with a very heterogeneous population, you know that what works for one group, does not necessarily work for another. In other words, the first principle to recognize is that "one size does not fit all." While it would be impossible to have a teacher for every child, nor necessarily desirable for the sake of having shared experiences that bring us together as a community and as a people, we should strive to offer sufficient options to accommodate the wide diversity of backgrounds and interests of urban dwellers. While providing a common curriculum and setting the same standards for all students, some children will require a longer school day and school year, extra tutoring, and summer programs to master the material. Others will do better in single sex schools, especially beginning at the middle school level; yet others need to be challenged academically way beyond the current requirements if they are to stay engaged and fulfill their true potential. I would focus on offering a variety of different structural arrangements more than themes for schools. What I am suggesting will not be easy, but I think we know it is necessary to accommodate the wide range of our student population,

and to make the Worcester Public Schools, as Dr. Boone has stated so often, “schools of choice.”

Over the past few years, The Research Bureau has prepared several reports that outline the elements of successful urban schools that we have studied and I offer those to you again. They include principal authority over selecting and assigning staff; principal control over the school’s budget and schedule, including longer school day and year and summer school programs, and partnerships with universities and businesses for tutoring, mentoring, and curriculum development. The reports provide information about particular schools we visited and studies we referenced. But structure alone is not sufficient for urban education success. It is the people, the school leadership and the teachers, given the right structure and authority, that are decisive to the success of schools, and, in fact, to all organizations.

In that regard, I would encourage you to look at the Boston Teacher Residency program, a joint venture between the Boston Plan for Excellence and the Boston Public Schools, that combines a one-year classroom apprenticeship in the Boston Public Schools with master’s level course work and on-going support. The program was cited by President Obama as an effective, alternate pathway to teaching for talented young people. The program is fully described on the Boston Teacher Residency website, www.bostonteacherresidency.org

One final point: Many educators we interviewed said “the right school culture” may be second only to school leadership in improving student performance, that is, a set of core beliefs and expectations that are internalized to the point that they guide the actions and reactions of both staff and students alike. The school culture is a known sense of “how we operate” and “what we stand for.” School culture can create a positive group affiliation that helps both students and staff to accept and embrace specific attitudes, goals, and behaviors that support student success. This can be particularly helpful to those students coming from backgrounds where academic success may not be expected or its importance not clearly communicated. A school culture generally includes setting high standards for all students, enforcing a strict code of conduct, holding students accountable for their performance and behavior, and a dress code or uniform.

Thank you again and best wishes for success. The Research Bureau would be pleased to help you in your endeavors.

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President & CEO
The Research Bureau