



The Research Bureau

EDUCATION REFORM: A DECADE LATER

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share with you my observations on education reform which is approaching its 11th anniversary. Besides spending billions of dollars and generating lots of controversy over MCAS, what have we accomplished? To paraphrase former President Reagan, are our students better off now than they were a decade ago? The short answer is a resounding YES. The full answer would take me a couple of hours to give the subject its due. In light of the time constraints we're all under, I will give you the abbreviated version.

The Education Reform Act of 1993 is built on two pillars: to establish a fair system of school finance to bring all schools to an adequate level of per-pupil spending, regardless of the wealth of their local communities. The Act committed the state legislature to increase funding for seven consecutive years to bring all districts to what is called foundation-level funding. The Act also established a required local contribution level for each district.

The second pillar of the Act is that in exchange for this large infusion of funds, each district would be held accountable by the State for raising the level of student achievement in all academic areas.

Human nature being what it is, everyone embraced the money part, and secretly hoped that the second part would be like the old soldier, who, to quote General MacArthur, just fades away.

What has happened? The State legislature and successive governors kept their promise. Between FY93 and FY04, State spending on education went from \$1.2 billion to \$3.1 billion a year, a 141% increase. The cumulative total of new aid since FY93 is more than \$13 billion. All districts are now at or above foundation level funding. For the Worcester Public Schools, this infusion of funds has increased the budget from \$106 million in FY93 to almost \$229 million in FY04, an increase of 115%. Even in the last two years, during very difficult fiscal times, State aid to education has not decreased. Based on the Governor's proposed budget, for FY05, the Worcester public Schools will get an additional \$6.5 million in State aid.

What has happened on the accountability side of the equation? There has been a radical transformation in the system in many respects. I will review only some of the highlights. Please bear in mind that all the components of education reform are interconnected. You cannot change the standards and the curriculum without giving teachers the proper

preparation to teach them as well as on-going opportunities for professional development. So not one piece of the system has been left untouched.

First, Curriculum Frameworks – The Education Reform Act authorized curriculum frameworks in the core subjects (specified as mathematics, science and technology, history and social sciences, English, foreign languages, and the arts). The Frameworks have become the linchpin of education reform implementation, providing a common foundation for such previously separate areas as local curriculum, student assessments, and teacher preparation program approval. Framework committees, including classroom teachers, developed frameworks in seven areas by 1997. All have been revised since.

Second, Student Assessment System –the Act requires the Board to adopt a student assessment system “designed both to measure outcomes and results regarding student performance, and to improve the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction.” The law also requires “comprehensive diagnostic assessment of individual students” to be conducted “at least in the fourth, eighth, and tenth grades.” The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System or MCAS, has been developed and administered, with four performance levels (advanced, proficient, needs improvement and warning/failing), in four Framework areas (English, math, science and history). MCAS uses a variety of types of questions including multiple-choice questions, short-answer questions, open-response questions, and longer essays.

Third, Competency Determination – The Act establishes a minimum performance level on core academic subjects to be required for graduation from high school. The competency determination (state graduation requirement) was originally envisioned to require a “proficient” score in four core content areas. The Board of Education reduced this to a “needs improvement” level in two content areas, English language arts and mathematics, in 1999. This level of performance became a graduation requirement with the Class of 2003.

Fourth, Certificate of Advanced Mastery –The Act establishes a certificate of advanced mastery (CAM) to recognize academic achievement comparable to advanced students in other countries. Criteria for the CAM awards were approved by the board in 2000. The CAM is given to students for outstanding performance on assessment tests in addition to success in competitions and student publications. 885 students received CAMs in 2003. Recipients who enroll in a Massachusetts public college or university receive a merit-based four-year tuition waiver from the Board of Education.

Fifth, Certificate of Occupational Proficiency –The Act establishes a certificate of occupational proficiency (COP) to recognize comprehensive education and training in a particular trade or professional area comparable to advanced students in other countries. Standards have been developed by committees of educators, practitioners and representative of business and industry, in eight occupational areas. The Department of Education now has used these to develop occupational assessments for the COP.

Sixth, School and District Accountability – the Act, which gives the Board of Education the authority to declare a school or district chronically under-performing, requires that accountability determinations be based on the state student assessment, and allows the state to intervene in schools or districts found to be chronically under-performing. The Department has developed School Performance Rating system based on MCAS. A rating is issued to all public schools, every two years. It is used to flag schools with low performance. School Panel Reviews are conducted annually at schools selected for very low performance and little or no improvement on MCAS.

Diagnostic Fact-Finding Reviews are conducted only at those schools declared to be under-performing by the Commissioner following completion of the Panel Review Process.

The diagnostic review culminates in a detailed fact-finding report that points out areas of strength and weakness. The report also helps guide the development of the school improvement plan, which must be prepared and presented for the approval of the Board of Education. It is developed in collaboration with the district and with the Targeted Assistance staff from the Department of Education. Thus far, 17 schools have been declared underperforming, 2 districts (Holyoke and Winchendon) and 2 more pending (Webster and Fitchburg).

Seventh, Educator Certification Standards – Under ed regorm, lifetime certification of teachers was replaced by two stages of certification – initial and professional – and by required renewal of the highest stage every five years based on completing professional development. In addition to holding a bachelor’s degree in arts or sciences, completing a state-approved program, and being of “sound moral character,” candidates now must also pass the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure – a general communications and literacy skills test plus the appropriate subject matter test for each license sought.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MOST NOTABLE ACCOMPLISHMENTS?

External evaluations of Massachusetts’ standards and assessments. Achieve, Inc., and independent, bipartisan, standards-research organization has evaluated the state’s K-12 standards and 10th grade MCAS tests in English language arts and mathematics. Findings included the following (quoted from the 2001 report):

- Overall, Massachusetts’ standards and high school tests are of high quality and are aligned, providing a solid foundation on which to build state education policy... This sets Massachusetts apart from the other nine state standards and assessment programs that Achieve has reviewed. It is the **only** state that has both strong standards and strong assessments.
- The grade 10 tests are rigorous yet reasonable – and are, in fact, the most challenging of the exit-level tests Achieve has reviewed.
- Achieve believes (the English language arts standards) are among the best standards in the nation and uses them as ‘exemplary standards’ against which other states’

standards are compared. The mathematics standards generally are well organized, jargon-free, clear and precise.

MCAS Results MCAS assesses students' learning against common standards that are specified in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Students in the 10th grade who do not pass the MCAS have five opportunities to re-take it. Students who fail the MCAS in the spring are able to take a "focused retest" version in the fall. The focused retest maintains the same 220-level achievement standard as the original test, but it strips out the higher level questions required for proficient and advanced standing and replaces them with additional competency-level questions.

MCAS

- As of October 2003, 95 percent of all students in the state enrolled in the class of 2003 had met the MCAS graduation requirement. In all, 96 percent passed the English Language Arts exam, and 95 percent passed the mathematics exam. For Worcester, 96% passed in the class of 2003.
- On the 2003 exam, a record 89 percent of 10th graders passed the English exam and 80 percent passed the math exam. In all, 75 percent of the nearly 70,000 students in the class of 2005 passed both exams and earned their competency determination on their **first** try.
- Improvement over time is clear among ethnic group results. In 2003, 80 percent of Asians in the class of 2005 passed both exams, up from 68 percent in 2001; 52

percent of African-Americans passed both exams, up from 37 percent in 2001; and 44 percent of Hispanics passed both exams, up from 29 percent in 2001.

Many have argued that the MCAS has narrowed students' education and that teachers just teach to the test. The evidence suggests otherwise. NAEP is the only test given nationwide which allows us to compare ourselves nationally. It is not based on the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks.

- On the 2002 NAEP reading exam, Massachusetts' fourth graders ranked **first** in the nation, while eighth graders **tied for first place** with several other states.
- On the 2002 NAEP writing exam, the state's fourth graders ranked **second** in the nation, with 44 percent of students scoring at or above the Proficient level.
- In science, Massachusetts' fourth graders **topped** the nation in 2000, and eighth graders tied **for second place** with several other states.

What are the major issues we're still facing? While the MCAS scores show improvement among all groups, the continuing test score gap between Caucasians and other groups primarily Hispanics and blacks, must be addressed. My friend and colleague on the Board of Education, Abigail Thernstrom, has just written a book on this subject that I encourage you to read titled *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*. She and her husband Stephen, with whom she co-authored the book, argue that the gap is THE civil rights issue of our time. It is no longer just a question of more money for the schools or poverty among minorities. Even the children of middle class black families, of

whom the 2000 census shows at least a 25% increase during the 1990's, score well below their white counterparts. According to the Thernstroms, and they are by no means the only ones to suggest this, there are cultural and familial issues that go far deeper than income. Black children have half as many books in their homes; almost half of black 4th graders spend 5 hours a day watching TV while less than 20% of white children spend that much time. In the 12th grade, 1/3 of all blacks were still watching 5 hours a day, 5 times the proportion among whites.

Education reform has no magic bullet to address this larger cultural issue.

The second major issue has to do with the accountability system, and this is a problem that has to be addressed by individual districts. The Reform Act took principals out of the union in order to hold them accountable for what happens in their schools. In order to hold them accountable, however, they need to have final say over who is teaching in their schools. The Act gave them that authority subject to collective bargaining processes. While many districts have modified strict seniority and transfer procedures to give principals that authority, Worcester, for example, has not. So it is virtually impossible to put together a team that is all pulling together. When Deputy Superintendent Steven Mills talked about the union eating its young, he was referring to this problem. With layoffs pending, the newest teachers will be laid off even if they have more talent and interest in pressing ahead with education reform than those who are senior, resistant to change, and close to retirement. For a more detailed explanation of this issue and others, I refer you to the excellent report prepared by Research Bureau staff last fall titled

“Education Reform and Collective Bargaining: C for Compatibility.” It is also on our website www.wrrb.org.

I apologize for going on so long, but, as I said earlier it is a subject about which I feel passionately. Today I have just touched the highlights of this massive undertaking. We have accomplished a great deal but much remains to be done.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share the highlights with you.

Questions?