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Spring 2002 Education Reform Extra

PERSPECTIVE

Every child not yet a winner

Education reform has set high standards, but schools have only begun to meet them

By *S. Paul Reville*

Nine years ago, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts launched an historic initiative to improve the state's system of public education. The set of strategies embodied in the Education Reform Act of 1993 represented the most dramatic set of state school reforms attempted in the last half century. The proposed investment was enormous, but no greater than the accompanying set of changes to policy and practice.

Now that we have spent more than \$8 billion in new state and local dollars as a result of this initiative, it is appropriate to ask how successful our reform efforts have been. What have we achieved? What have we learned? And where does education reform go from here?

The Massachusetts reform movement arose in the late 1980s and was driven initially by the business community. The Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education's 1991 policy report, *Every Child A Winner!*, became the cornerstone of the education-reform law. As in other states, leaders from both business and higher education in the Commonwealth were disappointed with the level of skills and knowledge of the state's high-school graduates. Since business and higher education were the ultimate destinations for the overwhelming majority of public-school students, the views of these leaders mattered.

Reform advocates argued that schools, even though successful by many existing standards, were not meeting the challenges posed by a changing economy that increasingly relied on knowledge and skills. In a high-technology, internationally competitive economy, education mattered more than ever for both individuals and society. Whereas 20 years before a high-school dropout could find a safe haven in a well-paid manufacturing job, by the early '90s those jobs were steadily disappearing. The income gap between the well-educated and the poorly educated was growing. For an individual to enjoy the fruits of the modern economy and participate fully in democracy, he or she would need an education of unprecedented quality. Likewise Massachusetts, a state low in natural resources and high in cost of living, would need a high-powered educational system to grow a knowledge-based economy. State governors, the federal government, and various national associations, galvanized by alarming reports like *A Nation at Risk*, were promoting

systemic school reform for the same reasons.

Massachusetts educators, too, were eager for change. During the 1980s, public education suffered from the multiple perils of Proposition 2 1/2, the local tax-capping measure implemented early in the decade; a deep recession at the end; and declining enrollment. Professional associations like the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents were eager to see changes in the state's school finance system, while advocacy groups like the Council for Fair School Finance were pressing ahead with legal action to challenge widespread disparities in school spending.

With Bay State business leaders, higher education, and the educational field pressing for various reforms, the climate was ripe for change when a new governor, William Weld, arrived on the scene in 1991. In a rare convergence of interests, leaders on Beacon Hill embraced reform as a priority. The political push for major change began.

The theory behind the Massachusetts reforms was homegrown but informed by legislative initiatives in other states. It embraced a commonsense strategy called "standards-based reform": The state would set clear, high standards for schools and students to attain, then track progress toward those standards, giving educators data to guide improvement efforts and, ultimately, introducing true accountability for performance.

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Standards-based reform could succeed only if all students were provided an adequate opportunity to learn, an opportunity consisting of high-quality teaching, a curriculum aligned with the standards, regular assessment of performance, and the time and attention needed to attain the standards. Providing such an opportunity to learn would require a major effort to build the capacity of districts, schools, and educators to meet the challenges of educating all students to these high standards. And that effort would be doomed without funding adequate to this challenging new educational agenda. Importantly, standards-based reform was and is a "civil rights" strategy for educational improvement. It expects the same learning from all students and insists that schools provide opportunities for all students to meet those expectations.

This theory was put into practice in the Education Reform Act, signed by Gov. Weld in June 1993. The law, which ran to more than 100 pages and included dozens of provisions, contained mandates that fell into three broad categories:

- **Standards, assessments, and accountability:** These were the basic provisions for a system of standards-based school reform;
- **Structural reforms:** Even though standards-based reform is results-oriented, the new law altered the structure of public education by changing many aspects of the educational delivery system: revising tenure laws; altering the balance of responsibility between superintendents and school committees for day-to-day operations of school districts; requiring recertification for teachers; and allowing for publicly funded charter schools, to name just a few;
- **Finance Reforms:** The law created a new system of school finance that combined local spending with new state support in order to achieve adequacy of financial resources in every district, greater equity for

students and taxpayers, and stability after the fiscal ravages of the 1980s.

Now, nearly nine years later, we can begin to assess the accomplishments of the Education Reform Act, and to identify the continuing challenges of education reform.

If nothing else, the reform process begun by the new law in 1993 has stimulated the most vital, serious, and urgent conversation about public education in decades--a conversation that, rightly, has not yet exhausted itself. In faculty lounges, at Saturday morning soccer games, and in the headlines of local newspapers, education is the number one topic. People are engaged in pervasive, if sometimes contentious, public discourse about how our schools should serve our society. This is a very healthy development for public education and for civic life in Massachusetts.

Of course, the education-reform law has resulted in more tangible results as well. These include:

- **More funding and greater equity:** To the surprise of many, both the Legislature and the executive branch have honored their long-term commitment to fulfilling the substantial financial obligations under the Education Reform Act. Adequacy, greater equity, and stability in school funding have all been achieved. The Commonwealth has more than doubled its annual spending on local schools, from \$1.3 billion in fiscal 1993 to \$3.2 billion in 2002, moving Massachusetts from the bottom of the list in terms of state share of education spending to the middle of the pack. The concept of a foundation budget--a baseline spending level necessary to provide an adequate education for every student--and a standard of local contribution have become well-established. And the additional state funding has brought schools in even the state's poorest communities up to foundation-budget spending levels.

Not only has the new finance formula been highly progressive, delivering a huge infusion of resources to the state's most impoverished districts, but remedial funding--\$50 million in the current budget--has beefed up resources devoted to closing the educational achievement gap between rich and poor. The Education Reform Act has focused the Commonwealth as never before on meeting the educational needs of those least well-served historically by the public schools. The result has been the allocation of massive new resources and much new attention to those in the greatest educational need.

- **Educational expectations that are high and clear:** Over the past eight years, Massachusetts has struggled long and hard to articulate in clear language what students should know and be able to do at various stages of their education. Our standards for student performance have been recognized as some of the most rigorous in the country. The state has sent a clear message to students, families, and educators about what skills and subject matter students are expected to master. This is a major cultural change in a field where the expectations have traditionally been so many and so vague that performance was impossible to judge. Now, learning matters and results count.

- **An assessment system that applies to all:** Assessment is a tool, an instrument for measuring progress. Though highly controversial, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System is a good start toward the truly comprehensive system of assessment envisioned by the education-reform law. Rated by various national organizations as among the most rigorous and progressive of standardized tests, MCAS is a sufficiently rich and complex test aligned well enough with the state's standards to provide not only valuable information for the improvement of teaching but some evidence for accountability purposes. It is already

providing valuable diagnostic information to teachers, students, families, and educational leaders.

- **New curricula and more professional development:** New learning standards and statewide assessments have spawned an outpouring of new curriculum materials designed to guide teachers in helping students. The drive to reach these standards has also led to an increased commitment to professional development for teachers, yielding vast new opportunities for educators to upgrade their skills and knowledge. So far, there may be more quantity than quality in both areas, but the renaissance in curriculum development and teacher education is welcome.
- **New opportunities for participation:** School Councils, mandated by the Education Reform Act, have become a vehicle for increased parent, teacher, community, and student participation in school planning and policy development in every school in the state.
- **Charter Schools:** There are now 43 charter schools, enrolling 14,000 students. Parental and student satisfaction with charter schools is high, and waiting lists at many of the charters indicate they are becoming welcome options for many families. Whether these schools are true vehicles of educational innovation or superior educational performance is not yet clear, but their existence has placed competitive pressure on mainstream public schools that is constructive. This pressure has led to the creation of less restrictive schools within districts, such as the pilot schools in Boston, and has pushed the mainstream system to adapt more readily to the other reforms.

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Most importantly, all these changes in standards and school structure are beginning to yield results in educational achievement. Critics, however well intentioned, had raised doubts that many children, particularly low-income children, could meet the standards challenge and achieve minimum competency on MCAS. But on last spring's MCAS, roughly two-thirds of the state's sophomores passed this demanding test on the first try. The others will have four more chances. These results demonstrate that minimum competency is within the reach of virtually any kind of student, with the exception of those students with severe special needs or significant language challenges. Students of all ethnic backgrounds and all social classes proved, in substantial numbers, that the new, high standard is realistic and attainable. Many schools proved that if students show up and meet the minimum attendance requirement they can achieve the learning standards. The challenge now becomes boosting the remaining students to that level of success.

While Massachusetts has made substantial progress in realizing the reform vision embodied in the Education Reform Act, we still have a long way to go. Many pieces of reform work are yet undone or need reworking. Here are some of the major challenges ahead:

CLOSING THE LEARNING GAP. The ultimate challenge of education reform is to realize an incredibly ambitious goal: all children learning at or above a high minimum standard. Particularly in our urban school systems, we have very large numbers of students who have not yet attained the rigorous but reasonable standard for graduation set by the state Board of Education. Some are quite close to achieving it and will

require modest assistance and another try (or two) at the exam. Others have far to go. These students will require extraordinary assistance.

The first step in closing the learning gap is to give all students a genuine opportunity to learn, and the place to start is teaching. If we keep teaching the way we've been teaching, we'll keep getting the unacceptable results we've been getting. We need to upgrade the quality of teaching in order to accomplish what no teachers have ever been asked to do before: educate all students, without exception, to a high standard. Let us recognize that this is a bold new challenge for teachers, who will require much support to meet it.

Making such a quantum leap in the quality of teaching will take more than professional development in the usual sense. It will take reinvention of the teaching profession. Indeed, we need to make teaching a true profession, giving it the compensation, status, and prerogatives to compete for the most talented, best educated people in our society. This means recruitment strategies, pre-service training, induction, mentoring, career ladders, and flexible scheduling. It means higher pay. It also means differential pay that rewards skill, responsibility, and performance and recognizes scarcity in certain specialties, such as math and science. It means a new kind of professional development that is school-based, teacher-led, focused on student work, driven by data, and dedicated to improving teaching strategies. All of this means more time for professional development and joint planning. It also means computers, telephones, offices, and all the other accouterments we associate with professional work. Only with this sort of stem-to-stern rebuilding of the profession will Massachusetts be able to attract and hold teachers of the caliber needed to achieve our goals for student learning.

Reformers initially assumed that the quality of instruction, the ways and means of meeting the new standards, should be left entirely to local control and professional discretion. This reform assumption has proven faulty. It is now apparent that districts and schools, particularly those whose students have the biggest learning deficits, need help in figuring out how to assist all students to meet the new, high standards. Schools and districts across Massachusetts are looking to the state to provide support and direction, but the state Department of Education is severely limited in its own capacity. DOE is now operating with a fraction of the staffing level it enjoyed in the years prior to the Education Reform Act, while its responsibilities have arguably doubled. The Commonwealth must invest in expertise that can be brought to bear on school districts from Cape Cod to the Berkshires.

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But educating all students to high standards is not just a matter of know-how. It's also a matter of time. Today, our schools are set up in a "one size fits all" way that holds time constant--same school day, same school year for every child in every district--and lets the amount of learning vary. We need a new paradigm in which the educational standard becomes the constant and instructional time varies with student needs. Since students have different levels of attainment coming into school and learn at different rates and in different ways, it stands to reason that they will require different amounts of instructional time. Extended school days and longer school years must become options for students who need them. Such a client-centered model of education would look very different from our standardized time allotment today. It would also be very disruptive for

adults, at least in the short run, which is why such changes haven't taken place already. But we must not let adult convenience stand in the way of education for all.

No matter how much more effective we make our K-12 public schools, we will never close the learning gap until we increase our commitment to early childhood education. Current research shows that a lack of stimulation in the early years can lead to the permanent underdevelopment of the human brain. The moral and social implications of this research are profound. We need to deliver more early childhood education at earlier ages to many more of our children, particularly those from low-income families.

Likewise, the Commonwealth needs a more comprehensive set of supports for children who live in poverty. Some have theorized that school reform, even if fully and effectively implemented, will be insufficient to overcome the educational disadvantages of poverty. But schooling won't even have a chance if it is not more closely linked to the social services that will enable all children to come to school ready to learn. Our fragmented support system for the needy results in isolated, underserved families. We need to beef up these social services and connect them directly to our primary youth-serving agency, the schools.

Finally, the best teaching in the world--indeed, all the reforms in the world--will not work if students are unmotivated to learn. We ignore issues of motivation at our peril. Until we attend to the challenge of making learning a meaningful, hopeful, personal experience for each student, we will continue to have significant numbers of students unwilling to reach for, let alone attain, the new, higher standards.

GETTING ACCOUNTABILITY RIGHT: The theory of standards-based school reform stipulates that adults be held accountable for providing children with the opportunity to learn before children are held accountable for learning. Here in Massachusetts, we have it backward. Students are being held accountable, with high-school diplomas in the balance, prior to adults being held accountable at all. This is understandable, given that education is an industry with little history of performance accountability, and adults are much better organized than children to resist accountability measures. As a result, however, the Commonwealth has fiddled and diddled with strategies for holding districts, schools, and educators responsible for their side of the learning equation for years, never coming to terms with the cost and capacity issues associated with systematically measuring district and school performance. At present, the state is able to intervene in only the most egregiously underperforming schools. If we are to attain high standards for all students in the foreseeable future, then all schools and all adults associated with them must feel some pressure to be accountable for providing students with the opportunity to learn.

The other aspect of accountability that needs continuing attention is the MCAS. Our state examination, while laudable, should be just the beginning of a comprehensive system for measuring student performance. The Commonwealth needs to continue to work on developing other valid, reliable, and feasible measures for gauging student learning. Also, educational leaders need to refine policy on the high-stakes aspect of the test as it affects special needs students, limited English proficiency students, and other individuals who chronically fail the MCAS. A more robust remediation program must be developed on top of the generous allotment that has already been made in this area.

In addition, transitional strategies may need to be devised to smooth out the 2003 change to high stakes for all. There are a number of open questions that need to be addressed as soon as possible. What will

happen to students who are still failing after the fifth MCAS test? Will they stay in their respective high schools or go on to community colleges? How will the performance of special education students be treated at the time of graduation? Will local districts be allowed to issue certificates to students who have met local graduation requirements but failed to pass MCAS? If high failure rates persist, will the state allow more time before imposing high stakes? Or will the state allow local districts to issue their own diplomas for a few years until system performance meets a higher standard? Finally, how will the state align its testing program with the considerable assessment demands of the recently approved federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act?

REFINING THE FINANCE SYSTEM: The Education Reform Act established the "foundation budget," a minimum amount of spending per pupil necessary to deliver an adequate education. The original foundation budget, proposed by the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, was calculated in the early 1990s by asking a diverse group of superintendents what they would need to provide an adequate education to every child in their district. These calculations, now more than a decade old, were made in the absence of any state educational goals because none existed at the time. Now, however, we have a highly articulated set of educational goals (standards). Our finance system needs to be realigned so as to provide educators the means to achieve these educational goals. If we are serious about bringing all students to the high standards, then we need to ask our educators, particularly our urban educators, that question again: "What will it take to get the job done?" Then we need to calculate the costs of the necessary educational provisions--e.g. more instructional time--and develop a formula that will deliver the resources required to move each student to the standard.

FILLING THE LEADERSHIP GAP: In Massachusetts and around the United States, we are facing a leadership crisis in education. Standards-based reform has imposed increased responsibility, accountability, vulnerability, and time demands on our superintendents and principals. The applicant pool for these positions is shrinking at a time when education leadership is more important than ever. Without effective leaders, education reform will fail. The crisis is particularly acute for school principals. Research increasingly shows the crucial importance of instructional leadership from principals. Effective schools typically have school leaders who are relentlessly committed to improved teaching. However, principals are typically so overwhelmed by details of management, control, and conflict resolution that they have little time for instructional leadership or even reflective practice. There is an urgent need to redefine the role of the principal, to more broadly distribute leadership functions and then to aggressively recruit the next generation of school leaders with a set of new incentives and prerogatives.

ASSESSING EDUCATION REFORM: There is a huge research deficit on the progress of education reform in Massachusetts. We have spent billions trying to improve our schools, but almost nothing on finding out whether those expenditures have been effective. If we do not learn from experience in a rigorous and systematic way, policy makers will forever craft new policies based on anecdotes, lobbying efforts, hunches, and political exigencies. Our policies and practices need to be informed by data. The Commonwealth must substantially increase its commitment, as other states have done, to conducting research on the effectiveness of reform. To do anything less would be not only fiscally irresponsible, but educationally negligent.

Finally, there is the matter of attitude and spirit. For the past five years, many educators have felt that reform has been a top down, state-directed enterprise administered with a mix of distrust and contempt for the educators who have to carry out the reforms. This perception needs to

change. The state's executive and legislative leaders, in addition to the Board of Education and Department of Education, must make restoring a spirit of collaboration a top priority. The history of education is littered with the corpses of reforms killed off by the arrogance of those who imposed them. A climate characterized by listening, responsiveness, respect, and collaboration would dramatically improve our chances of success.

Education reform is a work very much in progress. It is the most important work of our time, the most vital work for the future of the Commonwealth. Our massive investment in reform has yielded some promising results, yet there is much still to be done. The process is painfully slow, especially for parents and students caught in underperforming systems. Nonetheless, progress will be incremental, the ultimate victory generational. If we are to succeed in closing the achievement gap and thereby fulfilling our obligation to the next generation, we must be relentlessly persistent, firm on our principles, and flexible in our strategies.

We will not achieve a perfect system of education in our lifetimes, but the perfect should not be the enemy of the good. The strategies embodied in the Education Reform Act of 1993, enriched by nine years of experience, hold greater promise of achieving greater good for a greater number of children than any other reform strategy currently available. Our initial successes are not cause for euphoria, but they should be enough to inspire growing confidence and renewed commitment to the ideal of making every child in Massachusetts a winner.

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