

# Taking Stock: A Decade of Education Reform in Massachusetts



The golden age of school renewal that was envisioned in Massachusetts in the mid-1990s has, sadly, never materialized. Mr. Myatt and Ms. Kemp contend that the state's emphasis on testing as a substitute for authentic dialogue about schooling

has been the main reason that the Massachusetts Education Reform Act has failed to fulfill its great promise.

**BY LARRY MYATT AND PEGGY KEMP**

**F**LASHBACK TO 1994. Under the leadership of Gov. William Weld and Secretary of Education Piedad Robertson, Massachusetts joins a host of states around the nation in launching a public dialogue on education intended to prepare the Commonwealth's schools and programs for the new millennium. The effort, known as Education Reform, seeks to reengage and empower parents, business representatives, and other collaborators to envision a good 21st-century education and determine what achieving it will require. Massachusetts convenes an all-star Common Core of Learning Commission charged with modeling the conversation that will take place in each community.

The commission's goals, and those of subsequent committees, are lofty and the work is detailed: sort through the Information Age glut of facts and data to determine the skills critical for graduating students; establish a lean and suggestive set of curriculum content to be learned and assessed through a variety of means and modal-

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ities; and, above all, align the daily business of schools, students, and teachers with the abundant research from the last quarter century on human intelligence and organizational theory. Scores of recent studies have clearly demonstrated that many school practices and their underlying theories are based on incorrect assumptions about learning and human behavior — many tied to Industrial Age science and economics — and are often counterproductive. As regional education forums are convened across our state, there is a growing consensus that improving the schools we have will not suffice to achieve our goals. It may be that the “end of school as we know it,” a phrase often heard around the nation, is at hand in Massachusetts. The opportunity to move the education establishment from the pony express and stagecoaches to superhighways and jet aircraft has arrived.

So, a decade later, how have we in Massachusetts fared? Have we organized our schools in the most effective ways to promote learning and professional community? Are our teaching and assessment methods consistent with cognitive research? Have we invited and engaged the citizenry to become partners in improving our schools? Have we changed our schools as significantly as we had believed necessary? Unfortunately, the answer is no on most counts. Instead, most of the dialogue and many of the structures and resources intended to support a golden age of school renewal have been co-opted, have been neutralized, or have vanished.

Rather than offering an accountability system based on public engagement, the policy makers offer only the accountability of high-stakes testing. Complacency has returned to our most affluent communities, the struggles continue in our poorest urban districts, and, if any-

thing, the nature of instruction and other school business remains largely unchanged. And the hefty cousin of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which has ushered in an unprecedented level of federal intervention into the workings of local schools, mandates a high-stakes testing regimen that, wittingly or unwittingly, has locked in outdated educational practice.

To be fair, there have been some positive developments associated with our Education Reform efforts. Some changes called for by the Education Reform Act — increased instructional time, greater accountability for school principals, charter schools, mandates supporting broader participation in governance at the school level — are no doubt helpful and largely in place. However, without more significant changes in classroom practice, assessment platforms, school organization, and community participation in the assessment of school quality, the impact on public education has been far less than anticipated.

The most significant and controversial component of Education Reform to date, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), is not a “system” at all. It is, instead, a series of paper-and-pencil tests intended to shift the locus of accountability closer to the school and classroom level. Unfortunately, the resulting rush and roar for districts to show improvement on MCAS has dwarfed all other conversations about deeper school reform. Notwithstanding recent testimonies that “change is everywhere” in Massachusetts and that scores on paper-and-pencil testing instruments are creeping upward, our public schools feel disturbingly similar to the way they felt a decade ago.

It is important to note that both NCLB and the Massachusetts Education Reform Act offer compelling advocacy for our children and both contain rhetoric that posits high standards for learning. In urban districts, MCAS has raised concerns about the educational plight of poor students and their families. It has forced some complacent schools and districts to convene long-overdue conversations about what should be taught and how. These twin factors — a sense of urgency for our most vulnerable students and dialogue about good teaching and what it takes to support it — could, under different circumstances, have resulted in “the end of school as we know it” and have served as the engines for unprecedented school renewal.

Some among the reformers at the time cited an unusual national phenomenon — the convergence of business/economic interests and civil rights/equity interests

over the desire to build a high-performance education system. Regrettably, we have squandered much of the potential of that moment by taking the paths of least resistance when it came to making tough decisions about curriculum, creating incentives for change, developing the ability of teachers and administrators to examine and adjust their practices and programming, assessing student work and school performance, and engaging the public to truly address issues of school accountability. In particular, the decision to go the fast, cheap, and uniform route by using testing as the driving force for accountability has resulted in an antiquated curriculum and reinforced those same values and pedagogical approaches that we had identified as problematic. That unfortunate decision, made by those who early on took power over the Education Reform effort, has stalled many significant initiatives to fundamentally change the business of schooling.

Anachronisms abound in our schools, each of them contradicting clear findings in developmental psychology: same-age grouping, bell-curve grading and its hollow incentives, passing students on to new teachers every semester, a pedagogy of delivering facts, multiple-choice assessment, 50-minute teaching blocks, memorization as the dominant strategy for student learning, and curriculum that separates literature and art from history, math from science. At the same time, promising new math and science curricula developed cooperatively by college faculty, industry professionals, and classroom teachers; sophisticated project-based learning modules pioneered by the likes of Harvard's Project Zero; and deeper redesign efforts such as those led by the Coalition of Essential Schools now wither, having been marginalized in urban districts and lower-performing edge-city schools. With luck — and conscious, professional decision making — efforts like these survive and flourish in a few affluent schools in which students' high test scores allow teachers to minimize test prep and pursue higher levels of critical thinking and rigorous hands-on learning.

For many urban educators, the attempt to replace the complicated and extended conversations with parents about what makes for good classroom instruction with a simple MCAS performance report (pass/fail) or a quick look at the district's performance matrices has been a deep disappointment. Many of the parents and caregivers who have the least familiarity with educational issues and are the most in need of it for the sake of their children have been offered a poor substitute for the intense examination of the school experience

required in urban communities. Other school leaders lament, often too quietly, that MCAS-as-silver-bullet thinking has allowed schools, in the name of "alignment," to pursue uniform instructional practices that too often focus on lower-level critical thinking skills and offer little preparation for more challenging post-secondary instruction, which has encouraged some teachers to not reflect deeply on their practice.

### **The struggles continue in our poorest urban districts, and, if anything, the nature of instruction and other school business remains largely unchanged.**

As for the impact of these policies on education's consumers, ask high school students in America today, Massachusetts included, what they think about school or about their classroom lessons or about the ways in which they are asked to display their knowledge. The responses are strikingly uniform — boring, stressful, and unrelated to more important issues in their lives and to what they will need in the future. Both Denise Pope's study presented in her book *Doing School* and the study by Lawrence Baines and Gregory Stanley of Ohio adolescents' attitudes toward school offer striking testimony from students, although the feelings they express are hardly new and certainly not different from the Massachusetts experience.<sup>1</sup> Baines and Stanley find a level of student dissatisfaction that is often strongest at what we perceive as the poles of student performance — the "gifted" students and those we deem "at-risk." College-bound students, although skilled at the game of school and anxious to be successful, join their less-motivated peers in describing much of their school experience as a waste of time. High performers report having little or no significant input into the curriculum or instructional delivery. Great books are taught in ways that minimize creativity and expansive thinking. Compliance with instructions is the dominant dynamic. At the other end of the achievement continuum, students who struggle in school report that the subject matter has little relevance to their futures and that they often receive a heavier test-prep diet than do their peers. "The test," whether an AP exam or a state achievement measure, exerts an extreme influence on what and how teachers teach.

In response to the degree to which testing has been emphasized, many of the high schools in Massachusetts' poorer districts have chosen to put the bulk of

their resources into the early high school grades, hoping to get as many students as possible to pass the tests. In the late 1990s, when money was more available to support schools with low scores, some students found themselves in MCAS test-prep classes for as much as 60% of their daily instruction. Schools that frontload resources in grades 9 and 10 (the test is taken in grade 10) must then struggle with depleted budgets to offer significant language, art, and technology courses in the upper grades. Some educators argue that the vast expenditures on high-stakes testing have, ironically, lowered the bar, drumming into students a dull set of test-taking strategies and depleting resources available for the more challenging research and advanced coursework that are generally associated with the junior and senior years of high school.

True to our nation's long history of test-driven school improvement strategies, some principals, teachers, and district personnel work cooperatively to demystify the test — focusing instructional efforts on certain types of test questions and coaching students to concentrate on some questions or topics but not on others. On the one hand, the tests are kept ultra-secret, guarded in all phases of pre- and posttesting. Security waivers are signed and personnel are investigated when allegations of test tampering arise. Yet when old versions of the tests are made public, district personnel and department heads are often assigned to cut and paste chunks of the curriculum to ensure “coverage” prior to testing. Ninth- and 10th-graders might receive just enough exposure to topics from the senior-year curriculum to improve their test scores (and then quickly forget the material).

Test results in schools that employ such strategies often improve, but not for long and not for all students, since good test scores across the board would indicate “flaws” in the test and defy the psychometric design that requires some students to fail. Many of the urban schools and school leaders publicly recognized in the early MCAS years as having made significant instructional improvement have now vanished from the radar screen. No one mentions them. At their most fundamental and disappointing level, our classrooms remain entrenched in the business of absorbing and reiterating old knowledge, rather than focusing on the creation of the new, despite our recent golden age of cognitive research.

In March 2004, the state department of education quietly announced a growing dropout rate among high school students in the 2002-03 school year. A complicated redefinition of what qualifies as dropping out

notwithstanding, this was the first admission that our urban schools were losing the battle to retain their students. The majority of our dropouts are poor and of color, the very students officials promised would benefit from the high-stakes testing approach to school reform. State officials also described themselves as “perplexed” by growing numbers of senior dropouts who had already passed the MCAS exam. Also perplexing were examples of districts such as that of the city of Lowell, which, rather suddenly, reported zero dropouts after several years of routinely reporting dropout figures in the range of 400 per year.

In June, however, the department brushed aside its perplexity to announce that new data revealed a 96% MCAS passing rate, including numbers in the high 80% range for black and Hispanic (the term the state department uses) students. The commissioner announced that he was considering raising the passing score.

What the folks at the state department neglected to mention was that the 96% passing rate for the class of 2004 included only those students who were still in school, not accounting for all those from the original cohort who were no longer in school with their class. Using the department's own statistics and the methodology it used until just a few years ago that looks at the full cohorts, a less optimistic picture emerges when the data are broken down by race. The figures cited in the 11 June 2004 edition of the *Boston Phoenix* newspaper show that, when MCAS came into effect as a diploma requirement, the graduation rate for white students dipped but quickly returned to prior levels (nearly 80%). Full-cohort graduation rates for black and Hispanic students, however, have fallen from 69% for blacks and 50% for Hispanics in 1998 to 58% and 45% respectively in 2004.<sup>2</sup> Spokespersons for the department confirmed that there is little or no evidence explaining why these classes shrunk as they did. With millions of dollars spent annually on testing, little money remains to support, follow up on, and re-engage these students. We know little about what their issues were or where they have gone. By 1997, three years into the Massachusetts Education Reform Act, the state had eliminated dropout prevention from the budget, apparently counting on testing to address issues of motivation and performance.

One of the greatest ironies in Massachusetts' reforms relates to the prevailing perceptions of accountability that have foisted high-stakes testing on our schools. Far from the notion of community conversations about the learning experience that were once to be the cen-

terpiece of our discourse on reform, the locus of accountability has now become centralized and remote from our local classrooms. Despite national surveys that consistently report rates of public satisfaction with teachers, schools, and principals in the 70% to 80% range, test-makers, state departments of education, publishing houses, and psychometric consultants now produce the only “scientific” reports on who is or isn’t learning.


Sadly, many parents are content to view the annual parade of MCAS scores published in major newspapers and hometown journals as the authoritative source on how their kids and schools stack up. Well-to-do suburban schools battle one another for a place in the top 10. Blue-collar towns jockey to break into the top 50 in test scores. Real estate agents and businesspeople take school leaders to task if test scores in their communities slip while those of a neighboring town should happen to climb. Urban districts remain where they have always been, at or near the bottom. The difference is that now they are saddled with gargantuan state and federal reporting requirements and face potential penalties and interventions for poor performance. Yet these schools already bear the burden of serving the students and families who need the greatest assistance.

Despite a recent state superior court decision that calls into question the Massachusetts school finance system, the dollars once promised to help districts make and sustain improvement have been greatly reduced. To make matters worse, the hope that accountability could be shared by a highly engaged local citizenry — bankers, lawyers, clergy, accountants, software engineers — who could come together to assist schools in need of interventions has evaporated. We have, instead, divorced our community members from any significant input into the operations of their schools.


In 2004, little of the energy and vision of the mid-1990s for “the end

of school as we know it” remains. Teachers and school communities are increasingly put upon by the growing demands of their jobs, while being relegated to old structures and systems with few opportunities to create something more powerful and enduring. Shrinking budgets in our sluggish economy spell despair for urban districts. In a vote of no confidence in the value of the test as an indicator of achievement, the statewide association of school committees has overwhelmingly rejected the use of MCAS in granting diplomas. Could there be a clearer indication that the intent of the Ed-

*The numbers are on your side.*



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ucation Reform Act has not been met?

**S**O WHERE can we go with Education Reform in 2004? From a principal's perspective, what would be some of the significant positive steps we could take to revive the effort?

To begin with, let's recognize that criticisms of Education Reform, MCAS, or NCLB do not represent disagreement with their goals. A critique of our schools and what they lack was, after all, at the heart of education reform efforts. Indeed, criticisms of NCLB have come increasingly from Republican as well as Democratic states and leaders. Now we should take a bipartisan second look at Massachusetts' Education Reform. We could invite our constituents to support, review, and comment on the work of school and business collaborations that coordinate efforts to generate exciting new learning models and real-world performance standards. We should honor and resuscitate the original intent of the Education Reform law by allowing schools and districts to create multiple measures of performance and accountability.

Rather than trying to duck accountability, educators have the chance to create more authentic and challenging alternatives, some of which a few schools and districts had begun to develop before being smothered by MCAS. We must curb our enthusiasm for using MCAS solely as a reliable instrument for making sweeping educational decisions such as student graduation, designating schools as high- or low-performing, and awarding scholarships to students or funds to schools. Let's stick with and improve the English language arts and math tests that we have and abandon the idea of adding more tests (science, social studies, world languages, etc.) to the menu. Our state department should support and encourage, not oppose, new approaches to curriculum and assessment that show promise in the most challenged schools and districts. Waivers from the current arcane approach to the content disciplines should be granted in exchange for increased transparency, documentation, and accountability for research and development work at the school level. We should support the creation and adoption of interdisciplinary curriculum frameworks that reflect today's complicated economic and political systems, and we should examine them all with the help of our community and higher education partners.


We as school leaders have seen and verified that public assessment, as Grant Wiggins once claimed, can be

the Trojan horse for improving schools. Therefore, we should again extend an invitation to community stakeholders to come into the schools and look at authentic student work in formal and informal settings. We should fund the districts that need the funding (we've known which ones they are for decades). We should give the high-performing districts the freedom to do more of what they already do well. Just as we must differentiate teaching in our classrooms, our educational leaders must differentiate the approaches schools and districts take to learning and accountability to meet their varied capabilities, resources, and developmental needs.

Furthermore, let's take the big-picture view. As successive headmasters of a New American High School that continues to receive many visitors, we have had the opportunity to speak with education policy leaders from Great Britain, Russia, Thailand, Korea, Finland, China, Japan, Australia, Germany, and other nations. Interestingly, as the standards-based efforts in the U.S. make our schools more centralized and uniform in what and how we study, these other nations are moving in the opposite direction. While their education systems have long been based on a standardized national curriculum, national exams, and predetermined routes to professional careers, we now hear that these countries are allowing their schools and districts to make local decisions about what and how to teach. Teachers are being given increased autonomy and encouraged to involve their students in discussions about other ways in which the subject matter might be approached. Foreign educators report as central to their new efforts an increasing emphasis on helping students develop important skills rather than having them memorize loads of content, on arranging for students to participate in more cooperative projects and research, and on infusing arts and technology into other core content.

As one state in a nation quick to respond to perceptions that we might not be keeping pace with other societies, let's tackle education reform for the right reasons this time. Let's reevaluate the policies that have distracted us from building the schools that we began to envision a decade ago.

1. Denise Clark Pope, *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001); and Lawrence Baines and Gregory Stanley, "Disengagement and Loathing in High School," *Educational Horizons*, Summer 2003, pp. 165-68.

2. David S. Bernstein, "Achievement Gap: This Is Improvement?" *Boston Phoenix*, 11 June 2004, p. 7. 

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