



Public schools need test of competition

By Lovett C. Peters

December 16, 2002

Most of us are fundamentally opposed to double standards. They are just contrary to what we learned in civics class growing up. But the latest round of MCAS results shows that double standards are alive and well.

Last spring the Board of Education correctly declined to renew the charter of the Lynn Community Charter School because it wasn't doing as well as it had promised in its original charter agreement. Parents whose children attended the school protested vehemently, fearing that the schools to which the students would have to return were even worse.

The most recent MCAS scores confirm those fears. Seven Lynn elementary schools had scores below the Lynn Community Charter School's 224, the worst being Harrington School's 216. Don't forget that each pupil gets 200 just for taking the test. Take away the 200 and 24 looks like a lot better score than 16.

Across Massachusetts, there were 135 elementary schools that had lower MCAS scores this year than the Lynn Community Charter: 57 in Boston, 14 in Springfield, eight each in Lawrence and New Bedford, seven in Brockton, Fall River, and Lynn, six each in Holyoke and Lowell, four in Worcester, and 11 spread across nine other cities.

Do we have the courage to get rid of the double standard and close down these schools? District schools should face the same accountability standard that was applied to the Lynn Community Charter School.

The worst performing elementary schools in Massachusetts this year include some perennial Boston laggards: Pauline Agassiz Shaw, Nathan Hale, Quincy Dickerman and Sarah Greenwood, along with Mt. Pleasant Street School in New Bedford. Here's where the double standard comes in. The Lynn Community Charter School gets closed down, but these poorer scoring district schools continue producing horrible results year after year.

The Shaw School's 300 students and the 380 pupils in New Bedford's Mt. Pleasant School aren't dumb; they're just not getting the education all of our children deserve.

Two years ago, the Save A School Foundation offered to take over these schools, convert them to Commonwealth charter schools, promised that within five years MCAS scores at the Shaw and Mt. Pleasant MCAS scores would be above the average for elementary schools in Boston and New Bedford, respectively, and offered to give each city \$1 million if it failed. The offers were dead on arrival. But it proved that one group, relying on competitive forces, thought it could do a much better job for children and was prepared to put its money where its mouth was.

The double standard says let's keep throwing more money at the problem of low-performing schools. But perhaps the time has come to try competition. Declare the schools bankrupt, put each out for proposals and seek operators who promise to do much better by the children.

Children can't afford to wait for improvement. Those who leave fourth grade with poor reading and math skills will have a very hard time ever making it to college. We need information technology specialists, nurses, teachers, and electricians, and the students in these failing schools have little chance of filling those positions. Being in a school like Pauline Agassiz Shaw or Mt. Pleasant is the 21st century equivalent of involuntary servitude. For some children, it is the only option, because schools too

often put the needs of the education bureaucracy and teachers unions ahead of students.

Government schools are a monopoly. In too many cases, they have grown soft and fat. We know competition provides superior goods and services in the private market. Why not let it work for poor children. Not next year, after we throw more money down the same failed system, but now. Shame on us if we sentence one more inner-city child to involuntary servitude.

Lovett C. Peters is the founding chairman of Pioneer Institute, a Massachusetts public policy think tank.