

## **Massachusetts must unleash innovation in public schools**

**By Stephen Adams**

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One of the most powerful attributes of our free market system is its ability to foster innovation. In the drive for a competitive edge, companies seek innovative ways to produce their products or create entirely new products to provide for the needs and wants of consumers. But this urge to innovate can be stymied in a company that gets large, bureaucratic and set in its ways. For these firms the results are always painful and sometimes fatal.

Digital Equipment Company (DEC), once second only to IBM in the North American computer market, has faded into oblivion. Some blamed DEC's bureaucratic, consensus-driven management style for failing to make important changes in time, including the move to personal computers. A single-minded strategy to support existing technology prevented innovators from within the company from advancing new technologies. Motorola, once a leader in wireless communications struggles to recover from its loyalty to the analog technology it pioneered. As a former executive of failed retailer Montgomery Ward told the Chicago Tribune, "Companies with strong cultures are resistant to change and get trapped in their own strategies."

Massachusetts' K-12 public education system is trapped in timeworn strategies. A decade-long plan of sharply increasing school spending has yet to pay off for children from low- and moderate-income families. After nearly doubling the annual state education appropriation to more than \$3 billion, our public education system continues to fail the very children education reform was intended to help.

Deficiencies in our K-12 system are systemic and geographically widespread, but concentrated in schools where many students are from families with limited incomes and more limited choices. MCAS tests results from 2003 demonstrate the scale of the problem:

- 43 percent of all of the Commonwealth's 4<sup>th</sup> graders scored below proficient in English Language Arts; 60 percent scored below proficient in mathematics.
- 69 percent of African American 4<sup>th</sup> graders remain in "needs improvement" or "warning/failing" categories in English, 85 percent in math.
- 75 percent of Hispanic 4<sup>th</sup> graders were in the "needs improvement" or "warning/failing" categories in English and 86 percent in math.
- In 75 out of the Commonwealth's 210 school districts (including every major city in Massachusetts), more than half of the students scored in the "needs improvement" or "warning/failing" categories.

After a decade of tinkering around the edges, it is time for wholesale innovation in the delivery of K-12 education. The means of producing quality education is not a mystery. The list of ingredients is well-trod ground. It includes getting parents more involved, providing teachers with incentives for quality teaching, giving principals the authority to reward top performers and get rid of poor performers. Our school system is full of educators who know what it takes to educate children from all

circumstances. We have many principals and administrators who know how to motivate their employees, achieve good performance and sustain positive results. But public school innovators have been stifled by the rules, restrictions and procedures handed down by school boards and teachers unions.

A growing number of states and cities—Ohio, Colorado, Florida, and Washington, DC—are trying voucher and scholarship strategies to address failing schools. They are hoping that competition for public funds with private schools will give reform-minded teachers and administrators the leverage to achieve broad reform. It is time for Massachusetts to consider whether school vouchers improve educational opportunities for families of modest means.

Vouchers raise many questions—questions about costs, about the ability of private schools to accommodate public school students, about holding private schools accountable for using public funds, about how public schools will respond to decreasing revenues. That is why Pioneer Institute has launched an in-depth assessment of the pros and cons of school vouchers in Massachusetts. We need to determine if vouchers can empower innovators in our public schools. Most importantly, we need to give all our children a chance at a decent education. When companies like Motorola or DEC failed to innovate they were harshly disciplined by the market. The victims of such failures by our public schools system are the children who are left unprepared to compete in a 21<sup>st</sup> century economy. If school vouchers can drive innovation in our failing schools, we owe it to the Commonwealth's children to consider them.

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