

TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

October 12, 2005

Worcester public schools lag in the age of globalization

AS I SEE IT
By Jamie Gass

Referring to Thomas L. Friedman's book on the challenges of global competition, Worcester School Superintendent James A. Caradonio last spring declared to the state's educational audit council, "The world is now flat." To which an impatient council member retorted, "And so are Worcester's test scores."

The 2005 MCAS test results just released by the Massachusetts Department of Education are not any more encouraging for Worcester public schools than were the 2004 results. Worcester's aggregate 2005 MCAS scores were 70.3 in English language arts and 57.8 in mathematics. While the English language arts score is respectable for a larger urban district, the math score is disappointing. Worcester's average of these two 2005 scores is slightly lower than it was in 2003. Furthermore, since 2001 approximately 70 percent of Worcester's students have not attained proficiency on the MCAS test.

From 2001 to 2005, Worcester's MCAS test trend line shows only a few improvements in overall student achievement. It's little wonder that nearly half of Worcester's schools appeared on the federal No Child Left Behind "watch list," a register of low performance also released recently by the state. Given these troubling indicators, state officials should be wondering what value has been added by the approximately \$752 million in state Chapter 70 aid that the Worcester school system received between FY2001 and FY2005.

Unfortunately, none of this is breaking news. During the past 20 years, The Research Bureau has issued a number of reports chronicling and benchmarking these educational data and hosted numerous public events calling attention to Worcester's academic under-performance. The Research Bureau publications - and in recent years those of the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy with their carefully considered and rational findings - are invaluable tools for Worcester policy-makers and, indeed, anyone who is interested in educational improvement. Management recommendations for the Worcester Public Schools - such as transparency in the district's teacher hiring and transfer process, reducing the district's health care contribution and implementing merit pay for teachers - are as valid as ever.

The Worcester schools have resisted such reasonable suggestions. Instead, a spring 2005 state accountability report on the district stated, "Excuse-making for low student achievement was present throughout many of the interviews with district [officials] and principals groups." In truth, what this means for Worcester's families is that the city's educational leaders need to take much more seriously their obligation to prepare Worcester's students to compete in the global economy.

Worcester's low student performance and flat-line test scores would be disconcerting in any era, but particularly so in the age of globalization, which is accurately described by writers like Friedman, Ted Fishman and Clyde Prestowitz. These authors tell us that because of the 3 billion new capitalists in China, India and the former

Soviet Union, worldwide competition is growing exponentially. Fishman's "China Inc.," for instance, reports that China produces 325,000 engineers annually - five times as many as the United States. Accordingly, with its 10 percent annual economic growth, it is estimated that by 2050 China's economy will be 75 percent larger than that of the United States.

In light of these sobering projections, business, higher education and political leaders need to insist upon the commonwealth's and Worcester's schools improving their low math and science scores.

"Think globally, act locally" was the mantra for the decades ushering in the 21st century. The leadership of the Worcester public schools seems to understand the first part of this catch phrase, but the district's unchanged MCAS test scores and defensive management style simply don't reflect much progress on the latter front. This must change.

For years, combating the MCAS test, battling charter schools and resisting standards-based education have been the rallying cries for many educational officials in Worcester. Perhaps now, Worcester's school leadership, with its newfound understanding of global issues, will finally stop fighting state education reform measures and channel its energies into teaching its students the skills they need to compete in the world.

Jamie Gass is director of education research and programs at the Boston-based Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research.