

Has Fall River's School Leadership Jumped Ship?

By Jaime Gass

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FALL RIVER - "You cannot save a ship by working out a problem in the cabin; the deck is the field of action," wrote Herman Melville in his seafaring novel *White-Jacket*. Today, Melville's wisdom applies as much to the Fall River Public Schools as to the naval frigates and maritime vessels docked in its wharves.

The Bay State's south coast is in dire need of ongoing educational reform. Since 1993, Massachusetts has spent almost \$40 billion to drive improvement in the state's lowest performing schools. But even after receiving \$763 million in state aid between 1996 and 2005, examples of educational excellence in Fall River are scarce. The city's leadership, however, has not yet fully accepted the situation. In the winter of 2004, eight years after becoming Fall River's mayor, Edward Lambert used the political and rhetorical skills he developed as a former state legislator to persuade the state educational council not to find the Fall River Public Schools 'under-performing.' A year later, when discussing schools in another annual address, Lambert postured, "Mediocrity won't cut it. Just doing enough to get by is unacceptable."

Fall River's recently released 2005 MCAS test scores tell a far less compelling tale. The district's average English language arts score was a respectable 73.8, but in math, an abysmal 53.4. Fall River's math score was well below even those of Boston, Worcester, and New Bedford. For three years running in Fall River, both the district in the aggregate and its educational, racial, and socio-economic subgroups have not made Adequate Yearly Progress. In 2005, a full third of Fall River's schools were placed on the federal No Child Left Behind 'Watch' list for low performance.

One of Fall River's most beleaguered schools is the Kuss Middle School, which has had eight different principals within a decade, low MCAS test scores, and an out-of-school suspension rate over five times the state average. In the fall of 2004, the Kuss was the first school in Massachusetts to be declared 'chronically under-performing.' Nevertheless, last February, Mayor Lambert said, "Labels don't help. Constantly referring to our public schools as failing is harmful and not backed up by the statistics." The parents of the 604 students at the Kuss School might think otherwise.

More worrisome than the failings of one or two schools is the fact that the entire school system and its leadership team lack direction. According to a 2004 state educational audit report, 11 years into state education reform, the district and Fall River's high school lacked state-mandated district- and school-wide improvement plan. The Fall River Public Schools have not made an effort to use student assessment data when crafting budgets, revising curricula, developing instructional programs, planning professional development, or evaluating students in educational or racial subgroups. The 2003-04 school year was also the first time that all the school principals in Fall River were even evaluated.

Under the recently retired superintendent, a 35-year plus veteran of the system, Fall River was among the lowest performing districts in Massachusetts. In recent years, the district's low student attendance and high student suspension, retention, and dropout rates have exceeded state averages. Between 2001 and 2004, the school department did not have formal, written, or transparent policies or procedures for hiring new faculty and staff members. Historically in Fall River, the internal candidates often get the jobs.

School districts like Fall River's often function as an employment system that benefits the people who run it rather than the students and families it is meant to serve. The chronic under-performance within the Fall River Public Schools leads many to conclude that its educational officials are merely looking out for their pensions. We hope the new superintendent, Nicholas Fischer, will right the ship's course. This may mean hard choices and bold actions including expanding public charter school options, improving district-wide accountability, and providing merit pay for teachers.

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