



School can learn from Edmonton' s teamwork

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By Jamie Gass

Most of us in Massachusetts identify the city of Edmonton, Alberta, with hockey star Wayne Gretzky. His individual successes were impressive, as was the spirit of teamwork that garnered five Stanley Cup championships for his team, the Edmonton Oilers. Equally remarkable is the teamwork and accomplishment in Edmonton's 203 public schools, which enroll 80,000 students (20,000 more than Boston). Unlike the Bay State's union-dominated landscape, in Edmonton the collaborative efforts of former Superintendent Angus McBeath and the local teachers union have resulted in an educational revolution.

Under the leadership of McBeath and his predecessors, the Edmonton schools carried out a radical education reform program that has gained the support of teachers and parents alike. This partnership required principals to become academic leaders, focused teachers on professional development and involved parents more deeply. This stands in contrast to Massachusetts, where entrenched education special interest groups have scuttled decentralization and necessary reforms.

UCLA management professor William Ouchi has studied 223 schools in the major cities of North America. According to Ouchi, the central elements of the Edmonton public school revolution are "(e)ntrepreneurial principals, school-controlled budgets, accountability, decentralization, a strong focus on student achievement, school choice and a community approach, meaning there is a consistent belief among school staff about how to meet students' needs and use available resources."

McBeath granted schools the autonomy to get the job done without red tape. The superintendent's office devolved authority over 92 cents of every dollar spent on education to the school level. According to Ouchi, Edmonton spends a higher percentage of educational dollars in classrooms than any other big city school district in North America.

To assure ultimate accountability to parents and children, funding follows the child, meaning that if a school cannot attract enough students, it is closed down. Sadly, the Massachusetts Teachers Association is stridently opposed to allowing such market forces into their realm.

Here in Massachusetts, much has been accomplished during the education reform efforts of the past 12 years: public charter schools, state curriculum frameworks, the MCAS test, school district accountability and nearly \$40 billion in state aid. Nonetheless, when listening to Angus McBeath, one is struck by how much more reform work lies ahead for us. The Bay State's labor-relations-hardened district administrators and teachers union officials need to follow the example set in Edmonton. By doing so, they will better serve the academic needs of our children.

Jamie Gass is director of education research and programs at the Pioneer Institute.