



State education reform is moving forward with ‘turnaround’ schools

Telegram & Gazette — May 8, 2006

By Jamie Gass

Massachusetts is 13 years and \$40 billion into its landmark education reform effort. The focus of this work was to improve the academic results of students in the poorest and lowest-performing school districts. After a whole K-12 cycle, underperformance is still rampant in urban districts and the rate of improvement is unacceptably slow.

The numbers speak for themselves. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 63 schools in Boston, 23 in Worcester and 29 in Springfield are on the federal “in need of improvement” list. All told, there are about 100 low-performing schools, more than 80 percent of which are in eight districts. Determining how to turn around these schools is crucial to the state’s economic competitiveness. More important, for the 61,000 children stuck in these schools, it is a civil rights issue.

As lawmakers weigh their options for our lowest-performing schools, it would be wise to return to core principles. At its heart, education reform has been about equitable state spending, but perhaps more fundamentally, it is about greater accountability and innovation. Much work has already been done to scope out the state’s school turnaround plans, and lawmakers should consider specific strengths from those who have already contributed to the debate.

Mass Insight Education, a Boston-based think tank, along with Sen. Steven Baddour, Rep. Stephen LeDuc and the Boston Foundation’s Paul Grogan, has proposed to establish the Commonwealth Turnaround Collaborative. Under Mass Insight’s plan, the designation of a “Turnaround School” would be based on objective MCAS test results. Such schools would remain in the collaborative for five years. Fifty schools would enter this process in the fall of 2006, with the next 50 added in the fall of 2007. The cost to the state for the collaborative would be \$35 million.

Last fall, the Board of Education, growing impatient with the glacial pace of the state’s school intervention process, rejected three turnaround plans for failing schools in New Bedford and Springfield. At that time, chairman James Peyser called for sweeping changes in the state’s approach to school interventions. Shortly thereafter, Gov. Mitt Romney filed his own version of turnaround school legislation. The governor’s plan worked from the Commonwealth Turnaround Collaborative template, but would designate turnaround status based upon whether schools failed to achieve federal adequate yearly progress for the aggregate of their students for three consecutive years. Furthermore, it would give superintendents and principals in these schools greater authority to remove administrators, reassign staff and dismiss teachers or raise their salaries and proposed to spend \$35 million in just the first two years of this effort. To exit turnaround status, schools would have to make adequate yearly progress in English and math for two consecutive years.

Since 2003, the Massachusetts Teachers Association has been working through its priority schools initiative with 10 underperforming schools. Success has been limited, but as the unions consider turnaround alternatives, they are right to be concerned about a top-down state government approach that would likely exacerbate the expanding gulf between state policy and local educational practice.

Each of these plans has potential. Turnaround school designations should be driven by objective data, such as MCAS test benchmarks, as well as state accountability reports. All turnaround school plans need to consider the interests of students, parents, teachers and local officials, ahead of state control over the process. Schools should discontinue turnaround status only when performance improves. Finally, policy-makers should build upon the state Department of Education's skill at compliance by encouraging the development of a rigorous, varied, and credible Turnaround Schools menu from which local officials can choose.

This menu should comprise greater opportunities for public charter schools; university/school partnerships; vocational-technical schools; private management companies such as Edison Schools and SABIS International; expanded METCO choices; pilot schools; and, yes, even scholarship vouchers.

Informed by student performance data and armed with robust turnaround options, the mayors, school committees, teachers and parents — not state officials — should pick the school turnaround options best suited for their particular communities. Now is clearly the time for thoughtful and bold legislative action on turnaround schools.

Massachusetts' lawmakers need to carefully select the best components of the various plans and act immediately to reverse the misfortunes of schoolchildren trapped in our state's failing schools.

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