



Moving forward with Turnaround Schools

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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 and the rate of improvement is unacceptably slow.

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.

Mass Insight Education, a Boston-based think tank, along with a few bold state legislators and the Boston Foundation, have proposed to establish the Commonwealth Turnaround Collaborative (CTC). 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 Turnaround 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 CTC would be \$35 million.

Last fall, the Board of Education (BOE) rejected several turnaround plans for failing schools. At that time, the BOE's chairman called for sweeping changes in the state's approach to school interventions. Gov. Mitt Romney filed his own version of Turnaround School legislation. The governor's plan worked from Mass Insight's template, but it would give superintendents and principals in Turnaround Schools greater authority to remove administrators, dismiss teachers or raise their salaries.

Since 2003, the Massachusetts Teachers Association has been working through its Priority Schools Initiative with 10 underperforming schools. Their success has been limited. Teachers unions are rightfully concerned about another top-down reform from state government that would likely exacerbate the expanding gulf between state policy and local educational practice.

Each of these plans has potential. Policymakers should build upon the Massachusetts 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, expanded METCO choices, pilot schools and, yes, even scholarship vouchers.

Lawmakers need to 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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