



## **Jamie Gass: Bay State still lags on school reform**

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By Jamie Gass

BOSTON--"THE EDUCATION REFORM Act can be reduced, in essence, to two propositions. We will make a massive infusion of state dollars into our public schools, and in return we will demand high standards ... and accountability from all." So said former Senate President Thomas Birmingham, one of the architects of the landmark Massachusetts legislation.

The commonwealth has defied the odds and spent \$40 billion in state aid on education since 1993, but two new Pioneer Institute studies find that many school districts have not upheld their end of the bargain.

Reform has brought impressive progress. In the 1980s, Massachusetts' students were below the national average in SAT verbal scores. As late as 1992, the Bay State was below the national average in math. In 2005, Massachusetts' fourth and eighth graders were number one in the nation in both English and math, the first time a state has achieved that distinction.

But there is still a long way to go. Most now agree that American students lag academically behind many of their counterparts, and future competitors, in other industrialized countries, and low-performing schools and districts have too often failed to achieve marked improvement.

The two recent Pioneer studies "Education Reform in Massachusetts" go a long way toward pinpointing the problems that the commonwealth still faces. They find that many school districts fall short in two important areas: aligning curricula with state frameworks and using MCAS test data to improve student performance.

Data for the studies are drawn from 76 district audits conducted by the Massachusetts Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA). The data cover many of the commonwealth's largest districts. The districts receive the bulk of state education aid and some are among the lowest-performing districts.

In terms of both curriculum alignment and 'student assessment and evaluation' (use of data to improve student performance), 58 percent of the EQA districts received a "Below Satisfactory" performance rating.

New Bedford and Fall River were among the districts examined. New Bedford was rated "Satisfactory" for curriculum alignment and "Below Satisfactory" for student assessment and evaluation. Fall River earned a "Poor" rating for curriculum alignment and "Below Satisfactory" for student assessment and evaluation.

In fiscal 2005, just under 40 percent of the commonwealth's public-school students were enrolled in the EQA districts, and they received 61 percent of state education aid. From fiscal years 1993 to 2005, annual state aid to the sample districts rose 151 percent, from \$770 million to \$1.94 billion. Total state aid to the EQA districts was \$19 billion between 1993 and 2005.

To ensure that curricula are aligned with state frameworks, districts in which 60 percent or more of students have not scored "Proficient" or higher on MCAS tests should be required to submit to a Massachusetts Department of Education curriculum audit. Audited districts should also be required to choose a team of teachers and administrators to collaborate with private providers in a professional-development program.

Regarding use of MCAS test data to improve student performance, schools and districts should include a description of the process they plan for analyzing data in their school improvement plans. Districts should also earmark part of their state aid for hiring a district-wide data specialist and implementation of data-driven school-reform models.

Since 1993, public schools in Massachusetts have come a long way under education reform. But to maximize student performance, local school districts need to better uphold their end of the money-for-standards-and-accountability bargain. That means using the vast resource of MCAS test data and aligning locally developed curricula with the high-quality academic content found in the state frameworks.

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