



## Scaling Up Educational Innovation

By **Jamie Gass, Director,**  
**Center for School Reform**

### Introduction

In recent years, a vast majority of schools in Boston, Worcester, and Springfield, not to mention Fall River, New Bedford, Lowell, Lawrence, Holyoke, and Brockton were placed on the federal 'In Need of Improvement' list, as mandated under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. Today, in these urban districts in the Bay State, nearly 70 percent of the students score in the 'Needs Improvement' and 'Warning/Failing' categories on the MCAS test.

Considering this record of low student achievement and the deep pockets of chronic under-performance, the Patrick Administration's Readiness Project and Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) are right to call for a long, hard look at the state's achievement gaps, education accountability, targeted assistance, and policymaking.

Fifteen years after the passage of the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) and after distributing \$40 billion in state aid to local districts, which was matched by another \$40 billion locally, the state needs a new and more resolute way forward. While education reform has worked for many suburban schools, its promise is still unfulfilled for the nearly 100,000 students trapped in the Commonwealth's lowest-performing school districts.

Will the Governor's education proposals benefit struggling urban school districts, or will the achievement gap persist for another generation? The initial indications from the Governor's first year and a half in office, in which he eliminated the state's only independent school district accountability office, rejected a state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education-

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Jamie Gass is Director of Pioneer Institute's Center for School Reform. He has over a decade of experience in public administration and education reform on both the state and municipal levels. Between 2002 and 2005, Jamie worked at the Massachusetts Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA). As Senior Policy Analyst-Technical Writer with EQA, he oversaw the writing and editing of 80 school district review reports. From 1991 to 1996, he worked for the Dean of the Boston University School of Education/Boston University Management Team in its partnership with the Chelsea Public Schools. Jamie earned a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from Boston University. Jamie's op-eds have appeared in the Boston Globe, Boston Business Journal, Worcester Telegram & Gazette, and Providence Journal.

sanctioned proposal for a charter school in Brockton, and has offered few plans for turning around the lowest performing districts, are not altogether promising.

Undoing accountability and innovation will jeopardize the achievements of the past 15 years, which were secured through enormous legislative leadership and hard-won bipartisan compromise. When Governor William Weld, Representative Mark Roosevelt, and Senator Thomas Birmingham crafted MERA, they sought to address funding inequities and establish a foundation budget for all school districts, in concert with clear educational performance standards and innovative approaches to school reform.

To the extent that this agenda has been fully implemented, it has been historically successful. The achievement level of many Massachusetts schools has increased significantly since 1993, and the state has received national recognition for its performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the SAT, which should encourage us to aim higher. Our less-successful districts do not suffer from too much accountability or innovation; instead, they require far greater leadership at the state and local levels to fulfill the promise of education reform.

To bring equality of educational opportunity to the students of our lowest-performing school districts, the Governor, Legislature, and BESE should scale up innovation by moving away from state command and control or top-down prescriptions for failing schools. Instead, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) should present a wide portfolio of credible, clearly defined School Innovation options from which districts would select those most appropriate to their needs. This process recognizes that community and school needs differ, that community buy-in is essential to the success of a reform strategy, and that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's strengths

in compliance work make it a suitable venue for the development and evaluation of the School Innovation portfolio.

The state should assemble, develop, and evaluate a portfolio of School Innovation options from which struggling districts and municipalities must choose. This portfolio should offer private, parochial, charter public, pilot, vocational-technical, private management, and scholarship voucher options for students, parents, and local officials to select from. Understanding that the needs of each community and school will differ, the state should avoid prescribing top-down solutions and instead encourage innovation at the local level.

***Recommendation:*** *The Commonwealth should assemble, develop, and evaluate a high-quality portfolio of School Innovation options, for schools and school districts, from which the districts and municipalities choose the option appropriate to them. The state would in turn ensure and reward improved performance. This comprehensive portfolio would include:*

- *University partnerships*
- *Private management*
- *Horace Mann charter public schools*
- *Commonwealth charter public schools*
- *Statewide Pilot Schools*
- *Vocational-technical schools*
- *Scholarships to independent and parochial schools*
- *Interdistrict choice (e.g., METCO, Inc.)*
- *Contract schools (school-based management)*

### **University Partnerships**

Considering the number and quality of institutions of higher education in Massachusetts, partnerships between cities and education schools could

drive real change in our urban districts. More of these partnerships would put our universities' educational resources to work where they are needed most.

The Boston University/Chelsea Partnership is charged with the reform and revitalization of the public schools in Chelsea. It is also intended to serve as a replicable model for urban school reform. The Partnership was established in 1989, when, with the approval of the governor and state legislature, the Chelsea School Committee contracted with Boston University to manage the city's public schools. Three basic principles guide the Partnership's efforts: 1) children should be ready to learn; 2) teachers should be prepared and equipped to teach; and 3) important subject matter must be taught and learned through a coherent plan of instruction. Now in its eighteenth year, the Boston University/Chelsea Partnership remains a model of a public school district managed by a private university.

University Park Campus School, Worcester (UPCS) was developed by Clark University and the Worcester Public Schools (WPS) to be a public school of choice that would admit neighborhood students regardless of their academic standing. Applicants are admitted by lottery, but before they apply, they must accompany their parents to an informational meeting in which they are told about the academic rigor of the school and the minimum of two hours of homework each night. University Park opened the doors to its first class of seventh-graders in 1997.

Seventy-eight percent of UPCS students speak English as a second language. This percentage is much higher than that of the WPS (36 percent) or of the state (14 percent). Seventy-three percent of UPCS students qualify for free or reduced-price meals (compared to 30 percent in the state). UPCS has added one grade each year for five years, and now has 220 students. One hundred percent of the teachers are licensed in the subjects they teach, and 93 percent of the core academic teachers are

identified as "highly qualified."

This strong commitment to academics works. In 2003, 100 percent of UPCS tenth grade Hispanic students met or exceeded the state standards in English Language Arts (ELA), and in math, 93 percent of tenth grade Hispanic students met or exceeded state standards on the MCAS test. In 2004, all UPCS tenth grade students passed the ELA portion of the MCAS test, with 85 percent scoring 'Proficient' or 'Advanced', and no one failing. On the math MCAS test, 88 percent of tenth graders scored in the 'Proficient' or 'Advanced' categories, with no one failing. Students' scores in both subject areas of the MCAS test have consistently placed the school among the top 10 percent in the state, and the school was recently named the top-performing urban high school in Massachusetts.

### **Private Management**

Edison Schools, Inc., founded in 1992, partners with schools and districts in 25 states, Washington, D.C., and the United Kingdom to raise student achievement through a research-based school design, aligned assessment systems, interactive professional development, and integrated use of technology. Edison students achieve annual academic gains well above national norms. Edison Schools estimates that in the 2005-06 school year it will serve more than 330,000 public school students in 25 states, Washington, D.C., and the United Kingdom through its whole-school management partnerships with districts and charter schools; summer and after-school programs; and achievement management solutions for school systems.

SABIS® is an international Pre-K through 12 college-preparatory education system with roots in the 19th century and goals for the 21st century. The SABIS® system currently serves 28,000 students in 31 schools in 11 countries around the world. SABIS® offers educational management products and services to a membership network

of private and public schools. Currently, there are several SABIS® schools in Massachusetts, including a highly successful public charter school in Springfield.

### **Charter Public Schools**

Charter public schools were established by the Legislature as delineated by the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 (M.G.L. Chapter 71 Section 89). A charter school is managed by a board of trustees under a five-year charter granted by the Massachusetts Board of Education. The first charter schools were established in 1995 to encourage innovative educational practices, to provide parents and students greater choice in public education, and to serve as models for replication by other public schools. Currently, over 20,000 students are enrolled in charter public schools statewide, with 16,000 more on waiting lists to attend charter schools.

Charter schools have the freedom to organize around a core mission, curriculum, theme, and/or teaching method; to control their own budgets; and to hire (and remove) teachers and staff. In return for this freedom, a charter school must attract students and produce positive results within five years or its charter will not be renewed. Two main types of charter schools exist in Massachusetts:

Commonwealth charter schools are public schools that operate independent of any traditional school committee or school district. For each student, a Commonwealth charter school receives tuition from the state that represents what would have been spent on that student if s/he were educated in the school district in which s/he resides (detailed information on this tuition formula can be found at [http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/charter/rates\\_explain.xls](http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/charter/rates_explain.xls)). The state then deducts the same amount from the sending district's state aid. School districts receive additional funds that fully or partially reimburse them for funds provided to Commonwealth charter schools.

Horace Mann charter schools are public schools whose charters must earn approval from the local school committee and the local teachers' union in addition to the state Board of Education. To the extent provided by their charters, Horace Mann charter schools may be exempt from certain provisions in local collective bargaining agreements. Employees of a Horace Mann charter school remain members of the local collective bargaining unit; continue to accrue seniority; and receive, at a minimum, the salary and benefits established by the local collective bargaining agreement. Horace Mann charter schools are funded directly from the school district in which the school is located.

### **Statewide Pilot Schools**

The Boston Pilot Schools were developed collaboratively by the Boston Public Schools and the Boston Teachers Union. Pilot Schools experiment with innovative ideas in quality instruction, and demonstrate replicable practices so that all schools can benefit from their experiences. Recognizing the promise of Pilot Schools, the Boston Foundation has provided planning grants to Boston Public Schools interested in becoming BPS Pilot Schools.

After the Pilot School concept was agreed to in 1994, a request for proposals yielded more than thirty responses. In 1995, the first year of the initiative, six proposals were approved. The following year two more school proposals were approved, and in the third year, three other proposals were accepted. To date, a total of seventeen Pilot Schools have been approved, which educated 5,342 K-12 students in FY05. Four existing BPS schools converted to pilot schools in FY04. Hopefully, seven more Boston Pilot Schools will be added for the 2008-09 school year. In November 2006, the Massachusetts Board of Education authorized four chronically low-performing schools in Boston, Springfield, and Fitchburg to be designated Commonwealth Pilot Schools.

**Interdistrict Choice (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity, Inc)**

The METCO program is a grant program funded by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It is a voluntary program, intended to expand educational opportunities and reduce racial imbalance, by permitting students in certain cities to attend public schools in other communities that have agreed to participate. The program has been in existence since 1966 and was originally funded through a grant by the Carnegie Foundation and the United States Office of Education. In that year, the first METCO legislation was filed, the service provider METCO, Inc. was established, and seven school districts accepted the first two hundred METCO students. Currently, there are about 3,300 students participating in 34 school districts in metropolitan Boston and at four school districts outside Springfield. In Springfield and Boston, there is a five-year, 15,000-student waiting list for the METCO program.

**Vocational-Technical Schools**

Vocational-technical education (VTE) schools and programs offer a dual mission of occupational and academic education, as set forth in Chapter 74 of the Massachusetts General Laws. They are approved by the Department of Education pursuant to Chapter 74 and the Vocational Technical Education Regulations. VTE students are subject to MCAS testing; in fact, they achieved a 41.6 percent increase in combined MCAS test performance between 2001 and 2005. Currently, there are approximately 30 regional vocational-technical schools in Massachusetts.

**Private and Parochial Schools**

Scholarship vouchers are not currently available to school children in Massachusetts due to two archaic Know-Nothing Party and Blaine Amendment constitutional barriers. Approximately 12 percent of the students in Massachusetts are enrolled in private and parochial schools. This figure in Massachusetts is higher than the national average, but has

remained relatively constant over the last several decades. According to a research survey conducted by Pioneer Institute:

- One hundred thirty-eight schools, 72 percent of the private and parochial schools that answered the survey, reported that they would consider participating in a publicly-funded scholarship voucher program if it were offered in Massachusetts.
- Most interested private schools would be willing to educate a scholarship voucher-bearing student for less than what the state’s public schools now spend on average per child.
- Respondent schools that would consider accepting scholarship vouchers reported more than 5,400 vacant seats, about 85 percent of those in grades K-8, and a willingness to add about 2,000 more seats in response to a scholarship voucher program.

**Contract Schools (school-based management)**

Reform efforts undertaken here in Massachusetts, across the country and abroad demonstrate that a key element in successful school reform is decentralized school management. The former superintendent of the Edmonton, Alberta public schools, Angus McBeath, took a school system 30 percent larger than Boston’s and used school choice and school-level management to generate impressive system-wide improvement. Comprehensive and sustained administrative reforms that have been achieved under Barnstable Public Schools interim superintendent Tom McDonald (recently retired) and Town Manager John Klimm prove that this can also be done in Massachusetts.

When he was the principal of a K-5 school that served the entire Barnstable district, McDonald confronted a stifling bureaucracy by applying for a Horace Mann charter. Unlike Commonwealth charter schools, the Horace Mann model requires applicants to obtain approval from both the

school committee and the teachers' union. But like a Commonwealth charter, it shifts decision making from school districts' central office to the principals and teachers. While the model offers increased autonomy, outcomes are closely monitored. McDonald was granted a charter in 1999; Barnstable later received an additional charter.

After being hired as interim superintendent in 2004, McDonald converted additional district schools into Horace Mann charter schools. He also transformed the district's back office functions to enable all principals to act more independently, and consolidated the school department's finance and human resources offices into the municipal offices. These reforms reduced redundancy and freed up money for innovation and improvement. McDonald devolved authority to principals and gave the 10 non-charter schools powers and responsibilities similar to those in the Horace Mann charter schools, but without the burdensome layer of state oversight. Ultimately, 80 cents on every dollar was managed and budgeted at the school level, rather than the superintendent level, which meant that school-level savings on energy and other costs could be directed toward teacher hiring and other school needs.

McDonald demonstrated that school autonomy and accountability can free superintendents, principals, and teachers to focus on improvements, and benefit from them directly. These lessons are especially applicable in underperforming districts.

Now is the time to ensure that Massachusetts, like other states in the union, has a rigorous, full menu of School Innovation options available for our educators, policymakers, parents, and schoolchildren.

### **Conclusion**

Massachusetts cannot address underperforming urban schools at any scale without the buy-

in and energetic support of local districts. The recommendations laid out above address those points.

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 combined a long-term commitment to state investment in exchange for accountability and innovation. MERA has helped build successful schools, especially in suburban districts, through this combination of funding and accountability. In our urban centers, there is more work to be done. Many of the toughest challenges facing urban schools, to be sure, are non-educational, but those cities that have made progress have done so by implementing some of the innovations described above. The most improved urban school districts in Massachusetts, such as the Boston and Chelsea Public Schools, have benefited greatly from university partnerships, Commonwealth and Horace Mann charters, pilot schools, vocational-technical schools, and participation in the METCO, Inc. program.

Looking back on the incomplete successes of education reform, we have learned two vital lessons: (1) We need to work together—state and local government, superintendents, school boards, principals and teachers—if we ever hope to provide a level of improvement that will fulfill the promise not just of education reform but of the children in our urban districts. And, (2) allowing local community and school leaders to manage themselves, with greater control and greater flexibility over their money and rules, in exchange for accountability for results, works.