

Policy Dialogue

No. 57 • May 2005

Rescuing Students in Chronically Underperforming Schools

As a follow-on to *Peters Paper #2* titled “Rescuing 16,101 Drowning Students,” Pioneer Institute brought Harvard education scholar Paul E. Peterson to a standing-room-only Pioneer Forum on March 30, 2005, to outline his ideas of what might be done to rescue the 16,101 students in 25 Massachusetts schools that have failed to make “adequate yearly progress” in any of the last six years.

Professor Peterson, one of the nation’s foremost authorities on school choice, directs the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance. At the Pioneer Forum, he offered three recommendations to boost academic performance:

- **Pay good teachers more.** With the market demand for trained scientists and mathematicians high in so many areas in Massachusetts, we are downgrading the quality of teachers because of the union requirement that all teachers be paid the same for the number of degrees and years of service. Such was not the case in 1963 when highly qualified teachers were paid more than what less qualified teachers received. Professor Peterson argued that we will not be able to compete with industry for the best teachers unless we are willing to pay market rates. There is too much demand in the Massachusetts market from biotech, medical, and financial services areas in particular for highly qualified science and math graduates. Why, he asked, should we expect quality graduates to go into teaching and work for less than they can earn in other fields?

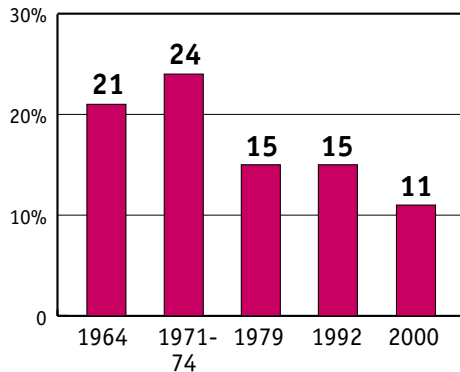


Read *Peters Paper #2* at www.pioneerinstitute.org/research/opeds/PP3_05.cfm.

www.pioneerinstitute.org

85 Devonshire St., 8th floor
Boston, MA 02109
617-723-2277 | Tel
617-723-1880 | Fax

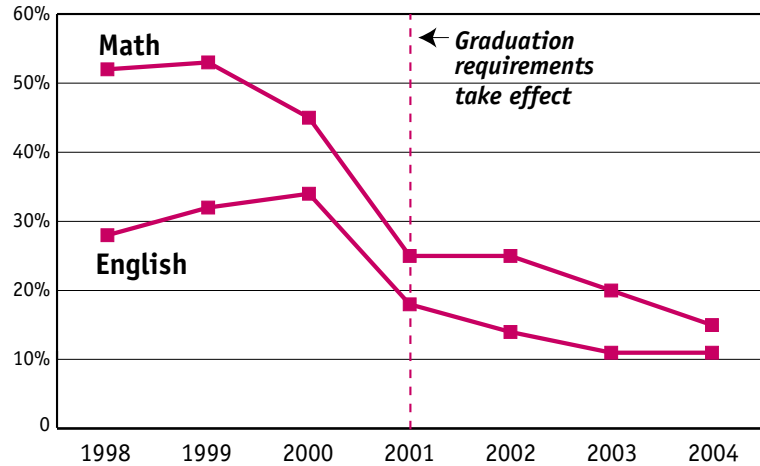
Figure 1. New teachers scoring in the top decile of achievement tests



Comment: Fewer high-aptitude individuals are entering the teaching profession.

Source: S. Corcoran, W. Evans, and R. Schwab, "Changing Labor Market Opportunities for Women and the Quality of Teachers 1957-1992," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 9180, 2002.

Figure 2. Failure rate on students' first take of 10th grade MCAS, 1998-2004



Comment: Student performance has improved through imposition of tougher accountability standards.

—Graphs from Paul Peterson slideshow, Pioneer Institute Forum, March 30, 2005

- **Hold students accountable.** Professor Peterson pointed out that students themselves are ultimately responsible for the effort and energy necessary to earn a good education. They need to be supported and encouraged, but in the end, held to high standards at all levels of the K-12 process.

- **Use tax credits to give poor parents greater school choice.** This will take legislation in Massachusetts, but tax credits are beginning to catch on in Florida, Pennsylvania, Arizona and elsewhere. Competition will improve the educational process and force districts losing students to provide what parents want in the way of quality.

Professor Peterson said he had not studied the alternative suggested by Pioneer of closing down the worst schools and putting them out for bid by any entity which can offer better results.



Professor Paul Peterson at the March 30th Pioneer Forum.



Panelists (from left) Richard Stutman, President of the Boston Teachers Union; Michael Contompasis, Chief Operating Officer of the Boston Public Schools; and James Peyser, chair of the Massachusetts Board of Education.

Education reform overcoming obstacles

Becoming increasingly shrill and making things up out of thin air are sure signs that reform opponents' control over state education policy is slipping away. It's about time.

By **CHARLES D. CHIEPPO**

The Supreme Judicial Court's dismissal of the Hancock school finance case is the latest indication that real education reform is beginning to take hold in Massachusetts. And supporters of the status quo, who for so long succeeded at demanding more money in return for no accountability, are beside themselves.

A long road still lies ahead. The passing grade on the MCAS exam must be raised, school leaders need more management flexibility and the state should intervene more aggressively in underperforming schools. But it's clear that accountability and standards-based reform are gaining wider acceptance.

Chronically underperforming schools were the topic last week at a Pioneer Institute forum that became

a battleground in the fight between a tired status quo and real reform.

Harvard professor Paul Peterson described the importance of tying teacher pay to student performance, differential pay for teachers in hard-to-find subjects like science, holding schools accountable, and — most terrifying to the status quo — the success of Milwaukee's policy of giving vouchers to poor and working-class students that can be used at the public, private or parochial school of their choice.

Peterson made a compelling case for the corrosive impact that decades of treating everyone the same, regardless of performance, has had on public education.

Some 30 years ago, 24 percent of female public school teachers scored in the top 10th on achievement tests. By 2000, the number was down to 11 percent. That comes as no surprise when you learn that in 1963 women who entered teaching from a selective college were paid about twice as much as those from a bottom-tier college. Today each is paid the same.

Another panelist, Boston Teachers Union head Richard Stutman, must have felt

the education establishment's power slipping. How else to explain why he would resort to making things up.

First he made the absurd claim that half the charter public school students in Boston had transferred from private or parochial schools, meaning taxpayers were now footing the bill for students who were previously at private schools.

Aside from the fact that we have long bemoaned the loss of students to private schools, the Department of Education doesn't compile this data.

Next, he proudly noted that his daughter attends Boston's Washington Irving Middle School and disagreed with its status as "underperforming" school. He said 30 Washington Irving students had been accepted to Boston Latin School.

The percentage of Washington Irving students scoring in the advanced category on MCAS was less than a third of the state average and the percentage scoring proficient was less than half. The school is on the federal restructuring list.

Best of all was when he claimed Boston Collegiate Charter School had no spe-

cial ed students. As the only non-exam school in the city at which every student passed the 10th-grade MCAS exam each of the last two years, Boston Collegiate is particularly threatening to the education establishment.

In fact, 17 percent of Boston Collegiate students receive special ed services. About 12 percent have individualized education plans; another 5 percent are less severe, but still receive services.

Stutman is not alone in the hall of shame. Arlington School Committee chairman and past president of the Mass. Association of School Committees Paul Schlichtman unveiled a Web site devoted to charter school bashing. The address: gravysuckingpigs.org. His parents must be so proud.

These tactics are unfortunate, but every cloud has a silver lining. Becoming increasingly shrill and making things up out of thin air are sure signs that reform opponents' control over state education policy is slipping away. It's about time.

Talk back to Charlie Chieppo at charleschieppo@rcn.com.

—Opinion column by former Pioneer staffer Charles Chieppo on the March 30th Forum

Commenting on this presentation were three panelists on the "front lines" of education in Massachusetts.

- **James Peyser**, Chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education, who said that progress, though small and slow, was being made.
- **Michael Contomposis**, Chief Operating Officer of the Boston Public Schools, who echoed this sentiment.
- **Richard Stutman**, president of the Boston Teachers Union, who strongly defended the present situation and felt that paying all teachers more would be the practical solution.

A lively question and answer period followed with the main thrust being on how merit pay for teachers might be implemented.

Lovett C. Peters, Pioneer's Founding Chairman and author of the *Peters Paper* which sparked the Forum, closed the session by assuring the forum that Pioneer would press for better results for those students in the worst performing schools.