

**Worcester
Education
Collaborative**

A Primer on
Education
Reform in the
Commonwealth:
Federal and State
Policy

Preface

For nearly twenty years, state and federal policy has played an increasingly important role in education at the local level as we work to prepare all students for the opportunities and challenges of life in a rapidly changing world. As interested citizens concerned about what works in the education of our children, it is important for us to have an understanding of the policies, laws, assumptions, and ideals that inform our current circumstances. The purpose of this document is to serve as primer, a brief introduction to the topic of education reform both at the federal level and in Massachusetts. This brief does not strive to be an exhaustive look at reform efforts, nor does it probe deeply into the nuances of policy decisions or their effects. It is a compilation of information culled from secondary sources, public presentations, and individual interviews. It is the first in a series of documents that seek to serve as a point for thoughtful, civil, and critical discussion around educating our children and to bringing each and every student to a level of proficiency for the security of their individual futures and our community life.

As an independent advocacy organization, the Worcester Education Collaborative works to ensure that students in the Worcester Public Schools are given the opportunity to succeed and to acquire the skills and knowledge to master the challenges of the 21st

century. Community education and capacity building represents some of our most important work. Central to that effort is providing the leadership and expertise to align community and district efforts and to focus community support and activities in support of our students and schools. As a non-profit education organization, the Collaborative's independent voice speaks for the children and for the community as it supports a system of effective schools in which every child is prepared for success in college, career, and life.

The work of the Collaborative flows from the belief that excellence results from a meaningful partnership among schools, families, and the community. We advance our mission by serving as:

- A **partner** to the public schools
- An **advocate** for and champion of schools, teachers, and students
- A **disseminator** of information and of best and promising practices in education for all children
- A **supportive critic** of our schools and our community in the work to educate children
- A **link** connecting people, resources, and information
- An **incubator** of leaders

We look forward to your thoughts and comments.

A Primer on Education Reform

Executive Summary

A Nation at Risk

In 1981, the National Commission on Excellence in Education, convened by Secretary of Education Terrel Bell issued a report. Titled *A Nation at Risk* the report highlighted a decline in academic achievement among American students and made grave observations about the state of education in our nation's schools. The report recommended dramatic changes in school curricula with an increased emphasis on English, mathematics, science, social studies, computer science, and foreign language study. The report was unflinching in its criticism of schools and served as a catalyst for subsequent reform efforts at the national, state, and local levels.

In his state of the Union Address in 1989, President George H. W. Bush outlined an ambitious set of goals to be achieved by the year 2000:

- All children in America will start school ready to learn.
- The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
- American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.
- U.S. students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.

- Every adult American will be literate and possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
- Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a safe, disciplined environment conducive to learning.

Concurrent with this work, was a growing national consensus that for meaningful reform to be sustainable, that it must be *systemic* and align curriculum, standards, assessments, teacher training, and resources. This approach emphasized the role of states as opposed to individual districts and schools alone in driving universal reform.

At the national level, reform efforts continued under President Bill Clinton. His Goals 2000 initiative supported systemic reform and created a grant program to support states in their development of standards and assessments. In addition, the re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act for the first time required that educational standards and expectations for low income (those receiving Title I services) be the same as those for more affluent students. It also supported reforms aimed at helping low income students meet new state standards. This shift, based on the assumption that all children can learn at high levels represented a sea change in federal and state approaches to education.

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993

In Massachusetts in 1988, a group of business activists joined together to form the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education to “help bring about systemic improvement of Massachusetts’ elementary and secondary education system.”

Propelled by a need to reform a system that they believed was failing to provide students with the skills and knowledge for an increasingly knowledge-based, technological economy the Alliance produced a report *Every Child a Winner*. The report, in the form of a proposal for legislative action focused on three key areas:

- Setting the course toward higher expectations for student achievement (which included tying the education system to the norms held internationally, as well as placing greater importance on educational outcomes and accountability);
- Improving the operational characteristics of the system itself (which included ensuring a high-quality teacher workforce as well as giving greater power of oversight to the schools themselves);
- and changing the educational finance system (to assure greater funding equity and to acknowledge that special attention needed to be paid to those districts serving economically disadvantaged youth).

Adding to the urgency of the conversation was looming court case *McDuffy vs. Robertson* that challenged the states school financing system. Originally filed in 1978 and amended in 1990, the complaint was brought on behalf of students in certain “property

poor” communities in our state who asserted that the school finance system violated the education clause of the Massachusetts Constitution. The case assured that school finance would be a central component of any Massachusetts reform effort.

In 1993, the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) passed with the following provisions:

- **State Frameworks** - statewide curriculum frameworks and learning standards for all students in all core academic subjects.
- **Statewide Student Testing** - Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) was created with the intention of reflecting the academic standards in the curriculum frameworks and identifying individuals and schools in need of attention in particular areas.
- **Graduation Standards** - the Act mandated that all students pass the MCAS tenth-grade test, in addition to meeting local requirements, to receive a diploma.
- **Foundation Budget** - was established to bring all schools to a core level of spending.
- **Charter Schools** - publically funded schools open to all and that operate independent of the local district
- **Time and Learning** - Districts were required to submit plans to schedule students for at least 900 hours in elementary schools and 990 hours in secondary schools in the study of core academic subjects.
- **Teacher Testing** - The Act required that, beginning in 1998, all new teachers pass two tests, one in knowledge of subject content, and one in communication and literacy skills.

- **District Performance** - The Act allowed the Board and Commissioner to formulate criteria to determine school and district performance. Under the Education Reform Act, if a district is found to be "under-performing," it can be subject to increased state oversight including receivership.

No Child Left Behind

While reform efforts proceeded in Massachusetts and in other states, they also continued at the federal level. In 2001, President George W. Bush signed into law, No Child Left Behind (*NCLB*). This new law dramatically expanded the federal role in education, altered the relationship between the federal, state, and local education agencies, and affected what happens in individual schools and classrooms. The Act addressed the following:

Teacher Quality: By June 2006 required that all teachers in core academic subjects be "highly qualified."

Core Academic Subjects: were defined as English, reading, or language arts; civics and government; mathematics, economics, science, foreign language, history, geography, arts, social studies, and speech communications.

Para-professional Quality: aides serving in Title I schools or programs were required to hold a high school diploma (or equivalent) and either have an associate's degree or demonstrated competence through a state test or observation.

Persistently Dangerous Schools and Victims' Rights: Schools with excessive problems with violence or weapons could be declared "persistently dangerous" allowing students to request a transfer to designated schools within the district.

Victims of violent crime were given the right to transfer to designated schools.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): was defined as the minimum level of achievement that school districts must attain based on the annual assessments.

Parent Notification and Parent Involvement: Parents must be notified of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and school designation (Level 1-5),

Annual Assessments: Students in grades 3-10 were mandated to take annual assessments as required by the state. The tenth grade test became the High School Graduation Qualifying Test.

Annual Measurable Objective (AMO): AMO is the percentage of students who must be proficient on the above exams as required by the state.

Consequences of Not Meeting Adequate Yearly Progress: The Act provided progressive requirements for schools failing to meet AYP and labeled schools level 1-5 based on AYP.

An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap: Ed Reform II

On going reform work in Massachusetts led to the passage in 2010 of An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap. Passed in response to persistent gaps in student achievement along racial, ethnic, and socio-economic lines, and in response to availability of federal funds, the Act represented the first substantive revision to education reform in since 1993. The goal of the Act is to close gaps in achievement, to help all students reach proficiency, to provide innovative choices for students and families by

aggressively turning around underperforming schools and lifting the cap on charter schools in low-performing districts. The Act has three major components:

- It provides local superintendents and the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education with the tools to intervene decisively to turn around schools and districts designated as underperforming or chronically underperforming, while providing the supports necessary for change and success.
- It creates a new locally-controlled option for in-district change called “Innovation Schools.”
- and it strategically lifts the cap on charter schools in the lowest performing districts to provide high-quality educational opportunities for students most in need.

Two of Worcester’s schools have been designated as underperforming: Union Hill and Chandler Elementary. Ed Reform II authorizes new approaches to improve schools designated as underperforming or Level 4. The intervention process laid out by the law is collaborative and involves teachers, the community, administrators, school committee members, parents, and local teachers’ unions.

Also relevant to Worcester is *The Act’s* provision for innovation. The new law can be used to expand choice for families and stimulate change by enabling districts to create “Innovation Schools” through an inclusive, locally controlled process. Such schools may be created as new schools or as conversions of existing schools. Unlike charter schools, innovation schools are *district* schools, operate under an innovation plan and are authorized by the School Committee.

And So What for Massachusetts? So What for Worcester?

The 1993 MERA took a systemic approach to reform and focused largely on curriculum alignment, funding equity and student and teacher accountability. Ed Reform II pushes further a systemic approach to change and acknowledges, according to Paul Reville, Secretary of Education, “the undeniable correlation between poverty and educational attainment.” He further noted that the new law responds to the question “how do we create a system that gets all students to proficiency?”

While students will continue to need have a strong command of the skills of reading, writing, and numeracy, they will also need to be fluent in 21st Century skills including technology, information management and assessment skills; the ability to collaborate and communicate, and the ability to think critically and to solve problems. If we are to move forward together and if as a community, we are to thrive, then we must assure that each one of our students is prepared to with both the knowledge and essential skills to contribute in a meaningful way in the economic and civic domains.

A Primer on Education Reform in the Commonwealth: Federal and State Policy

Compiled by the Worcester Education Collaborative

Where We've Been

A National Call to Action: The Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education

In 1981 President Reagan's Secretary of Education, Dr. Terrel H. Bell, appointed a National Commission on Excellence in Education charged with creating a "report on the quality of education in America"¹. The Commission was created as a result of the growing perception that something was seriously amiss in our educational system. It focused its work on five areas to assess the quality of teaching and learning in our nation's public and private schools, colleges, and universities. Soliciting the "support of all who care about our future," the Secretary noted that he was establishing the Commission based on his "responsibility to provide leadership, constructive criticism, and effective assistance to schools and universities."

The Commission's work

- compared American schools and colleges with those of other advanced nations;
- studied the relationship between college admissions requirements and student achievement in high school;
- identified educational programs resulting in notable student success in college;
- assessed the degree to which major social and educational changes affected student achievement; and
- defined problems to be faced and overcome to pursue the course of excellence in education.

The Commission's transmittal letter covering the report to the Secretary, noted:

"Our purpose has been to help define the problems afflicting American education and to provide solutions, not search for scapegoats. We addressed the main issues as we saw them...We were forthright in our discussions and have been candid in our report regarding both the strengths and weaknesses of American

¹ National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A NATION AT RISK: The Imperative For Educational Reform*. EducationNews.org. Web. <<http://www.ednews.org/articles/a-nation-at-risk-the-imperative-for-educational-reform-.html>>.

education." With that statement, and its bold title, *A Nation at Risk*, it was clear that the report would take the form of a dramatic call to action.

Crafted as an open letter to the American people, the report *highlighted* the decline of academic achievement over the twelve year period prior to its release. It made grave observations about the state of education in the United States, and within its first few pages asserted, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."

The report made several specific recommendations which, since it was published nearly 27 years ago, have served as the foundation for state and national reform efforts. The report stated the following:

We recommend that State and local high school graduation requirements be strengthened and that, at a minimum, all students seeking a diploma be required to lay the foundations [in the New Basics]... by taking the following curriculum during their 4 years of high school: (a) 4 years of English; (b) 3 years of mathematics; (c) 3 years of science; (d) 3 years of social studies; and (e) one-half year of computer science. For the college-bound, 2 years of foreign language in high school are strongly recommended...

We recommend that schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student conduct, and that 4-year colleges and universities raise their requirements for admission. ...

We recommend that significantly more time be devoted to learning... This will require more effective use of the existing school day, a longer school day, or a lengthened school year.

We recommend that citizens across the nation hold educators and elected officials responsible for providing the leadership necessary to achieve these reforms, and that citizens provide the fiscal support and stability required to bring about the reforms we propose.

With its unflinching indictment of American schools the report focused national attention on the issue of educational quality. It noted that over the decade plus preceding its publication that "Secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose...Students have migrated from vocational and college track preparatory programs to 'general track' courses in large numbers...from 12 percent in 1964 to 42 percent in 1979." Over the next several years other critical reports including work by the Education Commission of the States and National Governors Association raised further alarm bells.

In 1989, at a summit in Charlottesville, Virginia President George H. W. Bush convened the first meeting of the states' governors and the president devoted to education since the Depression. The summit furthered the commitment to a set of "national

performance goals" that focused leaders on a set of benchmarks to be achieved by the year 2000. In his State of the Union Address, President Bush outlined six goals to be achieved by the year 2000:

- All children in America will start school ready to learn.
- The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
- American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.
- U.S. students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.
- Every adult American will be literate and possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
- Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a safe, disciplined environment conducive to learning.

Emerging at the same time was a growing consensus that the achievement of meaningful reform would require "*systemic reform*"—the alignment of curriculum, standards, assessments, teacher training, and resources. Proposed by education researcher Marshall S. Smith and Jennifer O'Day and endorsed by the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and other organizations, this approach would "set the conditions for change to take place not just in a small handful of schools or for a few children, but in the great majority [of schools]." The approach emphasized the role of the states as opposed to individual districts and schools in driving meaningful, sustainable, and universal reform.

Reform efforts were well under way in several states, most notably California, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New York. California had embarked on a major effort to create new curriculum frameworks, develop aligned texts, provide statewide content-based professional development, and require new assessments. This initiative, together with the experience in other states, began to demonstrate the features of a fully aligned vertically through elementary, middle, and secondary schools, and horizontally across each grade.

With his election to the presidency in 1992, Bill Clinton continued the education reform efforts that he had been involved with as Governor of Arkansas. His *Goals 2000* supported systemic reform and created a grant program to support state development of standards and assessments along with school district

implementation of standards-based reform. It recognized and supported the systemic reform efforts that many states already had under way.

Along with *Goals 2000*, Clinton advanced proposals for reauthorization and modification of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), called *Improving America's Schools Act* or *IASA*.

Prior to the Clinton reforms, the Title I program of ESEA permitted states to use achievement standards for economically disadvantaged students that were different from, and less challenging than, those for other students. *IASA*, in contrast, required that the standards for Title I and non-Title I students be the same. This dramatic and fundamental change in student expectations was based on the premise that all students could achieve at high levels. It supported reforms aimed at helping children in poverty meet new state standards. The *IASA* law received widespread bi-partisan support as well as the support of the education and business communities.

The Massachusetts Experience

In 1988, a group of involved business activists came together to form the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE). The continuing purpose of MBAE as stated in its 1991 report *Every Child a Winner!* is to “help bring about systemic improvement of Massachusetts’ elementary and secondary education system.” The group was propelled by what they considered the urgent need to reform a system failing to “provide its students with the knowledge and skills necessary for them to be productive and informed citizens in the coming decades.” Also informing their work was a clear understanding borne out by Department of Labor statistics that not only was the workforce changing, but the skills demanded of workers in an increasingly technological and knowledge based economy were changing. The business activists were convinced that “the foundations of the future economic strength of the Commonwealth would be undermined, and the very fabric of the democratic society of informed citizens would be seriously weakened” if the Commonwealth did not act.

In 1991, after over a year and a half of collaborative research, MBAE issued its report. *Every Child a Winner!* was designed as a proposal for legislative action and focused on three key areas:

- Setting the course toward higher expectations for student achievement (which included tying the education system to the norms held internationally, as well as placing greater importance on educational outcomes and accountability);
- Improving the operational characteristics of the system itself (which included ensuring a high-quality teacher workforce as well as giving greater power of oversight to the schools themselves);

- and changing the educational finance system (to assure greater funding equity and to acknowledge that special attention needed to be paid to those districts serving economically disadvantaged youth).²

The MBAE report was an ambitious work that served as a catalyst for discussion of the future of education in our state. Also adding urgency to the conversation was the looming court case, *McDuffy v. Robertson* (the Secretary of the Executive Office of Education). Originally filed in 1978 and amended in 1990, the complaint was brought on behalf of students in certain “property poor” communities in our state who asserted that the school finance system violated the education clause of the Massachusetts Constitution. *McDuffy* was one of a series of similar lawsuits filed across the country. Since 1989, plaintiffs had prevailed in eighteen of the twenty-nine major state financial equalization cases. The specter of *McDuffy* would assure that school funding reforms would be a key pillar of legislation in Massachusetts.

The proposals under consideration would mean dramatic changes in the work of education in our state. Some likened the work to make the changes needed to accomplish true reform to changing the direction of a barge. In addition to that, O’Sullivan, in a panel hosted by the Worcester Education Collaborative, pointed out that accountability and standards were unpopular words. In fact, much of what was proposed required was controversial. The proposed legislation would shift accountability for education outcomes to the districts from the state level. Principals would be removed from teachers’ unions. A set of universal curriculum standards would be introduced. The Legislative proposals would also clarify the chain of hiring, and create a more streamlined approach for school districts to hire teachers, administrators, and staff. Proposals also reinforced the Superintendent as executive authority in the school district.

The legislature worked assiduously to develop a comprehensive reform package and in June of 1993, Governor William Weld signed the *Massachusetts Education Reform Act* into law. *MERA* significantly increased the state role both in funding public education and in guiding the local educational process. With *MERA*, the state was now charged with developing curriculum frameworks and holding districts accountable for student performance. *MERA* was designed, consistent with the work advanced earlier by Smith and O’Day and the ideas articulated by MBAE to be a *systemic* reform of education, aligning multiple state activities policies into a coherent whole based on state educational standards with the goal of enhancing student achievement.

The final ruling in the *McDuffy* case was handed down soon after the Massachusetts legislature passed *MERA*. Paul Reville, Massachusetts Secretary of

² Ibid.

Education noted "...I know that not only did the *McDuffy* case help to stimulate this sweeping reform, but various lawyers played crucial roles in writing the law so as to bring equity aspirations to life."³ In Massachusetts, the pressure of court action, the national *zeitgeist* for reform, and the focused activism of the business community aligned to produce an education reform law broad and deep in scope and effect. The law addressed eight areas as follows:

- **State Frameworks**

MERA put in place statewide curriculum frameworks and learning standards for all students in all core academic subjects. These guidelines were designed for teachers to use in preparing daily lesson plans and for districts to use in planning school district curriculum.

- **Statewide Student Testing**

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) was created with the intention of reflecting the academic standards in the curriculum frameworks and identifying individuals and schools in need of attention in particular areas.

- **Graduation Standards**

The Act mandated that all students pass the MCAS tenth-grade test, in addition to meeting local requirements, to receive a diploma. The Act also included provisions that allowed students in vocational programs passing the test to receive additional certificates, specifically a Certificate of Occupational Proficiency or a Certificate of Mastery.

- **Foundation Budget**

The "foundation budget" was established to bring all schools to a core level of spending. The level differs between communities depending on local demographic and economic factors. The Act intended that by the Year 2000, all districts in the state would be at foundation level.

- **Charter Schools**

MERA allowed for the development of Charter Schools--publically funded schools open to all and that operate independent of the local district under a five-year charter granted by the Board of Education.

- **Time and Learning**

MERA required increased "time on learning" in schools. Districts were required to submit plans to schedule students for at least 900 hours in elementary schools and 990 hours in secondary schools in the study of core academic subjects.

- **Teacher Testing**

The Act increased expectations for all educators, both those new to teaching as well as veterans. It required that, beginning in 1998, all new teachers pass two tests, one in knowledge of subject content, and one in communication and literacy skills.

- **District Performance**

The Act allowed the Board and Commissioner to formulate criteria to determine

³ Reville, Paul. "Commencement Address to Southern New England School of Law." Address. Commencement 2010. North Dartmouth, MA. 29 May 2010.

school and district performance. Under the Education Reform Act, if a district is found to be "under-performing," it can be subject to increased state oversight including receivership.

The 1993 Education Reform Act sought to eliminate excuses in the field of public education. As Dr. Robert Antonucci, then Commissioner of Education recently stated, "No matter who the student, they deserve equal education."⁴ Central to MERA was the creation of "foundation funding" for school districts for the first time in Massachusetts. It addressed the issues raised by McDuffy and acknowledged the increased efforts needed educate children living with poverty. Foundation funding sought to level the playing field across the Commonwealth, ensuring that a child from property-poor districts would receive an education comparable to that of a child living in a property-rich district.

The Act also sought to increase accountability. As Kevin O'Sullivan, observed, "as with any business model, greater funding should require increased responsibility and a greater need for accountability."⁵ Part of that accountability was for rigorous, measurable student outcomes. As part of the MERA legislation, the state developed *The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System*, a standards-based assessment given to students at specific grade levels beginning in third grade. Passing the MCAS exam in grade ten became a requirement of graduation from high school. This requirement was built upon the belief that all students can and should achieve proficiency, despite entering school with differing levels of prior achievement.

MERA made strides in advancing a rigorous curriculum for students across the Commonwealth. Prior to its enactment, the only statewide educational requirements were in history and physical education. Drawing on her experience as Superintendent of the Lowell Public Schools, current Deputy Commissioner of Education Karla Brooks Baehr noted MERA "had a profound impact on the standards in Lowell...if there hadn't been writing [standards], there wouldn't have been writing in the curriculum."

A New Federal Mandate: No Child Left Behind

In 2001, President George W. Bush signed into law the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB). The law dramatically expanded the federal role in education, altered the relationship between the federal, state, and local education agencies, and affected what happens in individual schools and classrooms.

The Act addressed the following:

⁴ Worcester Educational Collaborative Panel Presentation, "Education Reform at Seventeen," held on June 29, 2010

⁵ Personal interview with Kevin O'Sullivan, June 15, 2010

- **Teacher Quality:** By June 2006 all teachers in core academic subjects were required to be “highly qualified” having demonstrated competence in their subject area by formal academic study, passing a state test or evaluation, or by earning advanced or national certification.
- **Core Academic Subjects:** were defined as English, reading, or language arts; civics and government; mathematics, economics, science, foreign language, history, geography, arts, social studies, and speech communications.
- **Para-professional Quality:** aides serving in Title I schools or programs were required to hold a high school diploma (or equivalent) and either have an associate’s degree or demonstrated competence through a state test or observation.
- **Persistently Dangerous Schools and Victims’ Rights:** Schools with excessive problems with violence or weapons could be declared “persistently dangerous” allowing students to request a transfer to designated schools within the district. Victims of violent crime were given the right to transfer to designated schools.
- **Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP):** was defined as the minimum level of achievement that school districts must attain based on the annual assessments. Adequate Yearly Progress is determined by participation rate in the annual examinations, *annual measureable objectives* in language arts and mathematics, and an additional academic indicator. For high schools the additional indicator is graduation rate, for elementary schools it is average daily attendance.
- **Parent Notification and Parent Involvement:** Parents must be notified of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and school designation (Level 1-5), with special notifications to parents in Title I schools; parents were encouraged to be a part of the school planning and goal setting processes.
- **Annual Assessments:** Students in grades 3-10 were mandated to take annual assessments as required by the state. The tenth grade test became the High School Graduation Qualifying Test (in Massachusetts it is MCAS).
- **Annual Measurable Objective (AMO):** AMO is the percentage of students who must be proficient on the above exams as required by the state. Not only must each school meet AMO, but each specified sub-group of students must meet AMO. These subgroups are Caucasian, African-

American, Asian, Native Alaskan, American Indian, Hispanic, Economically Disadvantaged, Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners.

- **Consequences of Not Meeting Adequate Yearly Progress:** NCLB provided progressive requirements for schools failing to meet AYP. For schools receiving Title I funding (money distributed to schools and districts with a high percentage of students from low-income families) the requirements are:
 - Level 1, Alert: The school must notify parents and prepare and implement a school plan; consult with the District and state department explaining reasons for not meeting AYP and must receive technical assistance
 - Level 2, School Improvement Status: School must notify parents; develop and issue a school improvement plan; submit that plan to district for approval; submit the plan to the State Department; provide supplemental services to eligible students.
 - Level 3, School Improvement Status: Same requirements as Level 2 but the district must provide public school choice
 - Level 4, Corrective Action: Requirements for Levels 2 and 3 the district plus at least one of the following actions: replacement of staff, implementation of a new curriculum, significantly decrease management authority at the school, appoint one or more experts to advise the school, extend the length of the school day or year, or restructure the internal organization or the school.
 - Level 5, Restructuring: Continue Level 4 activities plus one of the following alternative governance arrangements: reopen the school as a public charter school; replace staff, enter into a contract with a private management company, transfer operation of the school to the State Department; or another governance arrangement

Since its passage, *NCLB* has been plagued by controversy. States have chafed against the unfunded mandates imposed by the Act and the resulting financial burden that has been shifted to them and then downstream to districts and schools. Others have voiced concern that achievement and progress is measured only by student performance on standardized tests and that as a result teachers are pressured to “teach to the test” at the expense of creativity and flexibility. Still others note that the intense focus on mathematics and

reading proficiency dilutes attention and resources available for other important subjects.

Research has been mixed on the outcomes and consequences of NCLB. One of the most controversial areas has been the persistence of the achievement gap between low income and more affluent students and between students of color and their white counterparts. Perhaps most distressing is research indicating that the emphasis on testing and AYP has had the unintended consequence of pushing students out of school and into a pipeline of exclusion.

And Back to Massachusetts...

What effect has the 1993 Education Reform Act had on student achievement in our state? According to a 2009 report from MassInc, results have been mixed. With respect to student achievement, in 2007, Massachusetts ranked first among all states on three of the four national NAEP exams. In an international standardized test (TIMSS), Massachusetts students ranked at or near the top in science and math in 2007. And yet, as strong as the results were, they masked persistent disparities in achievement. For example, the achievement gap separating low income and African American students in fourth grade reading from their peers, was higher than the national average.

Reports also show that the majority of the new money available to schools and districts has been spent on classroom services. As was planned, spending per student equalized throughout the 1990s. Some of these gains have been lost however because of cuts in state aid following the 2001 and in response to the current recession. Although the extent of spending disparities is less than it was prior to education reform, the gap between the top quartile and the bottom three districts in spending has, in real terms, remained essentially unchanged.

Since *MERA* became law, the demographics of our state have changed in important ways. A MassInc report notes that there has been a dramatic growth in the share of low-income students – those eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch – in the districts that received the largest amount of state aid post-MERA. In 1992, nearly 40 percent of students in these districts were low-income. By 2006, that number had increased by 14% with over half (54%) of students low-income. The achievement gap between low-spending and high-spending districts in the Commonwealth has not closed, but it has narrowed. Statewide examination performance has (looking at 4th grade exams) improved over time indicating a cumulative effect on student performance long term. While an achievement gap persists and is unacceptable, without MERA it would be wider than it is today.

Ed Reform II: An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap

MERA passed with the understanding that reform efforts would evolve with the needs of the Commonwealth. A major step in the evolution of education reform in our state was the 2010 passage of an *Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*, commonly referred to as *Ed Reform II*. Passed in response to persistent gaps in student achievement along racial, ethnic, and socio-economic lines, and in response to availability of federal funds, the Act represented the first substantive revision to education reform in since 1993. The goal of the Act is to close gaps in achievement, to help all students reach proficiency, to provide innovative choices for students and families by aggressively turning around underperforming schools and lifting the cap on charter schools in low-performing districts.

According to Dr. Karla Brooks Baehr, MERA “underestimated the experiences outside of school that impact kids’ ability to learn.”⁶ She further noted, “Education Reform I was about requiring accountability of the children within the system, Education Reform II is about requiring accountability of the adults.” Ed Reform II has three main components:

- It provides local superintendents and the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education with the tools to intervene decisively to turn around schools and districts designated as underperforming or chronically underperforming, while providing the supports necessary for change and success.
- It creates a new locally-controlled option for in-district change called “Innovation Schools.”
- and it strategically lifts the cap on charter schools in the lowest performing districts to provide high-quality educational opportunities for students most in need.

State Secretary of Education Paul Reville pointed out at the WEC panel, “if teachers knew how to create miracles, they would.”⁷ The new Act acknowledges that there are a host of factors affecting educational achievement and adds a focus on administrative and systems accountability beyond individual student and teacher accountability.

Speaking of Ed Reform II, Tom Del Prete, Professor of Education and Director of the Hiatt Center for Urban Education at Clark, noted that reform “emphasiz[ing] community or achievement tend to fall short. You must address both.”⁸ In

⁶ Worcester Educational Collaborative Panel Presentation, “Education Reform at Seventeen,” held on June 29, 2010

⁷ Worcester Educational Collaborative Panel Presentation, “Education Reform at Seventeen,” held on June 29, 2010

⁸ Ibid.

looking at the history of education reform within Massachusetts, it is clear that with the passage of the new law attempts are being made to address both of these issues. Massachusetts has set a national standard for education reform and, in constantly reexamining the field and the needs within it, the Commonwealth has become known for its high standards of excellence.

Implications for Worcester

Two provisions of the *Act Relative to the Achievement Gap* are particularly relevant for our community: that relating to *underperforming schools* and that relating to *innovation schools*.

Ed Reform II authorizes new approaches to improve schools designated as underperforming or Level 4. The intervention process laid out by the law is collaborative and involves teachers, the community, administrators, school committee members, parents, and local teachers' unions.

Of Worcester's 44 District Schools, two, Union Hill and Chandler Elementary School have been designated Level 4 schools. At this writing, with the recommendations of a broadly representative stakeholder group, a turnaround is being developed that

- addresses the health and social service needs of students and families that effect students ability to arrive at school ready to learn
- improves or expands services to promote a safe secure learning environment
- enhances workforce development services to supply students and families with substantive skills opportunities
- identifies specific strategies to addresses achievement gaps for low-income students, English language learners and students with special needs
- provides language learning programs for students with limited proficiency in English

In developing the turnaround plan, the Superintendent may, among other things:

- change the curriculum
- reallocate funds within the school budget
- provide additional funds to the school from the district's budget
- provide funds to increase the salaries of teachers and administrators and attract teachers or administrators
- expand the school day or school year
- provide additional professional development and common planning time
- address transience in the student population

In support of this work, the District is also eligible for additional funding of up to 1.5 million dollars over three years for each school.

Also relevant to Worcester is *The Act's* provision for innovation. The new law can be used to expand choice for families and stimulate change by enabling districts to create "Innovation Schools" through an inclusive, locally controlled process. Such schools may be created as new schools or as conversions of existing schools. Unlike charter schools, innovation schools are *district* schools, operate under an innovation plan and are authorized by the School Committee.

An "innovation plan" must include measurable, annual goal and clearly state the way in which it will use increased autonomy and flexibility in one or more areas including:

- curriculum
- budget
- schedule and calendar
- staffing policies and procedures
- district policies and procedures and
- professional development

According to Tom Del Prete, Professor of Education and Director of the Hiatt Center for Urban Education at Clark University, the autonomy available to innovation schools offers a chance to "apply best practices" to address student achievement and the ongoing professional development of teachers.

Where We're Going

The 1993 MERA took a systemic approach to reform and focused largely on curriculum alignment, funding equity and student and teacher accountability. Ed Reform II pushes further a systemic approach to change and acknowledges, according to Paul Reville, Secretary of Education, "the undeniable correlation between poverty and educational attainment." He further noted that the new law responds to the question "how do we create a system that gets all students to proficiency?"

The summer of 2010 brought with it debate around a growing movement toward national standards created to assure consistency nationally around grade level expectations for learning in critical subjects. Supported by the federal Department of Education and developed from work by the National Governor's Association and the National Association of State Education Chiefs, the Common Core State Standards seek to provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn. The standards are

designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers.

Massachusetts own standards are demanding and were created for similar reasons, to clarify what students need to know and when they need to know it so that teachers, with the support of parents can teach it. Given the efforts over the years that went into the development of our state standard, and the overall performance of Massachusetts students on national and other measures, there was considerable concern that acceptance of a national standard not dilute Massachusetts expectations for its students. A study group of educators and business people completed a side by side comparison and considered independent research before noting that there was not a substantial difference between the Common Core Standards and the State Curriculum Frameworks already in place and recommending that the Massachusetts State Board of Education accept the new standard. These new standards were adopted in August.

The challenges ahead for our community are significant as are the opportunities presented by both state and federal reform activity. Our city has schools ranging across the continuum—from Level 1 schools through Level 4. According to Superintendent Melinda Boone, the question at hand is “will we have the will and the courage to address what needs to happen... to use our energy to work with the policy makers so that it [reform strategies] makes sense at the child's level”.

Education reform legislation at the state level in form of the 1993 and 2010 Acts coupled with federal mandates hold states and districts accountable for the performance of *all* children. They also offer, for those committed to putting the needs of children at the forefront and navigating challenging politics, a set of tools and expectations to bring our understanding of best practices in education to schools and classrooms, and to meet the holistic needs of all children as learners and as our common-wealth.

Questions and Considerations as Education Reform Continues to Evolve

As is clear from its forty plus year history, education reform will never be complete, but rather will continue to evolve. The federal, state, and local roles will continue to shift according to need and performance, and expectations regarding curriculum and student achievement will change according to economic and other considerations. Also affecting the implementation of reform efforts are the very real, daily considerations surrounding school budgets and finance, the non-school factors affecting student performance, and the job and performance expectations of teachers and other professionals associated

with our schools. Some of the questions that will continue to wrestle with include the following:

- What is the appropriate balance between federal and state mandate and oversight and district autonomy?
- Does that balance shift when the educational rights and futures of our children are a part of the equation?
- Does it shift if individual schools and districts are not able to meet the needs of particular groups of children?
- In a period of shrinking financial resources, how do we maintain consistently high standards and expectations?
- What is the appropriate balance between the long term investment in our common future that education requires and the need to address immediate and pressing needs?
- How can education reform and community partnerships come together effectively? What “best practices involving families, community agencies, and institutions, businesses, and schools will help fulfill the central goal of education reform to ensure quality schooling, strategic support, and achievement leading to sound post-secondary options for every student?

And So What?

Worcester, as is the rest of the nation is in the midst of major shift to a knowledge *and* skills based economy. With ten colleges and universities, numerous technology and bio-tech companies and a thriving health care sector, Worcester is a center of this new 21st century economy. As Kevin O’Sullivan succinctly put it, “we’re no longer in the apple and cranberry business. We’re in the brain business.”⁹

While students will continue to need have a strong command of the skills of reading, writing, and numeracy, they will also need to be fluent in 21st Century skills including technology, information management and assessment skills; the ability to collaborate and communicate, and the ability to think critically and to solve problems. If we are to move forward together and if as a community, we are to thrive, then we must assure that each one of our students is prepared to with both the knowledge and essential skills to contribute in a meaningful way in the economic and civic domains.

⁹ Ibid.

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Federal Education Policy and the States, 1945-2009(for an extensive discussion of education reform)

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