

Testimony of S. Paul Reville

Massachusetts K-12 Education Reorganization

June 3, 2002
Boston, MA



TESTIMONY OF S. PAUL REVILLE

TESTIMONY ON K-12 EDUCATION REORGANIZATION

June 3, 2003
Boston, MA

I am the executive director of the Center for Education Research and Policy at MassINC, a member of the faculty at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, chairman of the Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission and a former member of the Massachusetts state Board of Education, having served from 1991-96.

I begin with the principle, pioneered here in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, home of the nation's first public education system that education should be fairly independent; it should be somewhat, but by no means completely, removed from the vagaries of the political process.

The founding fathers of the education system sought, through this limited independence, to ensure some continuity in education, as education is for children a long-term process that is ill served by the gyrations of political change.

If educational policy and operations, which are largely governed at the state level, were to change every two years when the Legislature is elected or every four years on the election of a full term Governor, then the system, its children and teachers could be subject to wide and disruptive sways, operational fits and starts, protracted policy wrangling, and other zigs and zags of ideology that could prove profoundly upsetting and educationally costly.

So, Horace Mann and generations of subsequent leaders in the State House saw fit, for well over a century, to insulate educational policy from the ebb and flow of politics. This was accomplished by putting some distance between the chief policy making entity, the Board of Education, its executive, the Commissioner of Education, and the Executive and Legislative branches. They deliberately did not totally insulate education from the popular will as they recognized that schools should reflect the popular conception of the role of education in society, but they did take the following protective steps:

- They created a large Board of Education, as many as fifteen members, the overwhelming majority of whom were appointed by the Governor to five year, once renewable terms. They staggered the terms and provided that members could only be removed for cause.
- Five year terms ensured that every member had a term that exceeded the term of a one term Governor, thus providing continuity.
- Staggered terms ensured that on any given Board of Education, there would likely be appointees who had been appointed by more than one Governor, thus providing balance. Staggered terms also guaranteed that the Board could not be "packed", because there would never be wholesale turnover of the entire Board.
- They provided that the Board, as is the case in the majority of states at present, would appoint the Commissioner, a senior professional, charged with leading and managing the Department of Education and enacting the policies of the Board of Education.
- The Commissioner would serve at the pleasure of the Board of Education, but he would interact regularly and closely with the Executive and Legislative branches on whom he would depend for his budget.
- In addition, they determined that the Board could not include most state or school district appointees, so as to avoid conflicts of interest and ensure genuine "lay" leadership for education. At the same time, they guaranteed representation from labor, higher education and students, ensuring that those who had a direct stake in the system had a policy voice at the table.

This system of reasonable political insulation served as a model for the nation and steered the Commonwealth to wide recognition as one of the country's leading school systems. It served us well.

For the first time ever, in 1996, the Legislature, at the recommendation of the Governor, saw fit to reduce the political insulation of the Board by reducing the size of the Board and, in a dangerous precedent, firing the sitting Board and replacing all members simultaneously, thus seemingly ensuring ideological consistency.

It was apparently thought that these moves would enhance the Board's efficiency and effectiveness. In fact, the opposite proved to be true. The Board, under chairman John Silber, became an ideological battleground where members publicly assailed one another and the field. Education reform progress slowed to a snail's pace and eventually the situation degenerated to such a point that the chairman had to be removed because the Board had completely deadlocked over the selection of a new Commissioner.

Since that crisis, Board operations have definitely improved, although there are still significant tensions between the Board and the field charged with implementing education reform. It is fair to say that the Board is often viewed by practitioners as ideologically homogenous and sometimes extreme in its approach.

Now, the new Administration's reorganization plans for the Board threaten to repeat recent history and run all the attendant risks. They propose to fire the entire sitting Board and create an all new Board again this summer. They propose two-year Board terms. These would be the shortest terms in the nation. A two-year term is not long enough for a lay person to even learn the job of being an effective Board member. Even though the terms can be renewed, the interval is so short as to constitute the equivalent of an ideological/political short leash.

The proposal continues the Board at the current reduced size, rather than expanding it as I, and many others, have suggested. The Board is already viewed as narrowly composed. By eliminating the guaranteed seats for labor and higher education, the Board may be further narrowed. Again, a small, narrow Board has the potential to develop a very sharp political edge.

The reorganization removes the authority of the Board to hire the Commissioner. This has historically been the Board's most important responsibility and a key feature of the quasi-independence of the education system. The Commissioner would now be a direct appointee of the Governor, placing the Department under the immediate control of the Executive Branch.

Further, the proposal creates the post of Secretary of Education. The Commonwealth has tried an education secretariat twice in recent decades and in both cases, the experience has been so negative that the Legislature has chosen to abolish the position. Notwithstanding the outstanding qualifications of the Administration's proposed nominee for this post, why go down this road again?

No matter how well constituted, an education secretariat creates a competing center of power that vies with and against the state's Chief State School Officer, the Commissioner of Education, and the State Education Agency, the Department of Education. In fact, the past conflicts and confusion spawned by the creation of a secretariat have created such difficulty in the field that policymakers had to eliminate the office.

Among other problems, the new structure seems to create three masters for the Commissioner, the Governor, the Secretary of Education and the Board of Education including its chair. If you were Commissioner under these circumstances to whom would you report?

I know that the proposed changes are well intentioned, an attempt, I suspect, to bring coherency and responsiveness to the education system. I share these goals, but I do not believe that the proposed changes are the way to achieve them. Indeed the Governor, through appointment of the Board and its chair, the bully pulpit, proposed legislation and especially the budget can exercise enormous influence and control over education in the Commonwealth. Legislative leaders can do much the same.

I submit that the arm's length relationship between education and politics has served the Commonwealth and its children well over the years. I would urge you to maintain that relationship, avoid the failures of the past and concentrate on bringing real reforms to our schools and classrooms.

Center for Education Research & Policy

The Center's mission is to develop a public agenda that informs and promotes significant improvement of public education in Massachusetts. Our work is motivated by a vision of an education system that creates the opportunity to educate every child to be successful in life, citizenship, employment and life-long learning. Applying nonpartisan, independent research, journalism and civic engagement, the Center is creating a civil space to foster thoughtful public discourse to inform and shape effective policy.



About Paul Reville

Executive Director, Center for Education Research & Policy

Paul is a lecturer at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education and currently serves as the executive director of the Center for Education Research & Policy at MassINC, an independent, evidence-based think tank dedicated to the improvement of K-12 public education in Massachusetts.

Paul is the former executive director of the Pew Forum on Standards-Based Reform, a national education think tank. For the past six years, he has served as the chairman of the Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission, which oversees the State's implementation of the historic Education Reform Act of 1993.

He previously served a term on the Massachusetts State Board of Education and chaired the Massachusetts Commission on Time and Learning. Paul was the founding executive director of the Alliance for Education, a foundation dedicated to improving public schools in Worcester and Central Massachusetts, and the founding executive director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE), an organization that provided key conceptual and political leadership for the development and passage of the Education Reform Act.

Paul is a former teacher and principal, who holds a master's degree from Stanford University and a bachelor's degree from Colorado College. He is a member of numerous boards and commissions.