

# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Massachusetts is in the midst of an educational revolution that is changing educational practices throughout the state. Learning standards for all children are higher than ever before. Expectations of teachers, administrators, parents, the state, and the Legislature have risen to new heights. Schools are on a more equal footing than in the past, and the stakes for everyone are high.

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA), passed in 1993, is a far-reaching statute designed to provide equity in the educational opportunities afforded to all K-12 students in the Commonwealth and to improve student achievement by dealing systemically with all of education's complexities. Rather than the piecemeal approaches of prior reform efforts, this is a major attempt to change all aspects of K-12 education, from what happens in the classroom to how schools are financed – all with a keen focus on student learning as the bottom line.

## **II. THE MASSACHUSETTS EDUCATION REFORM REVIEW COMMISSION**

The Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission (MERRC, or “the Commission”) was established by the Legislature in 1993 to oversee implementation of the Education Reform Act. Its members are committed to provide objective, policy-relevant research and analysis to legislators, policymakers, school leaders, and practitioners.

## **III. CHARGE TO THE RESEARCH TEAM**

This first Annual Report of the Commission provides an overview of the implementation of MERA, and its impact to date on reforming Massachusetts schools and improving student achievement. A research team was commissioned by MERRC and charged with assisting in the conceptualization, design, and production of an annual report on the state's education reform activities by addressing four main objectives:

1. Identifying the key components of education reform and establishing a set of success indicators for tracking them.
2. Auditing implementation of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993.
3. Identifying relevant research and research needs.
4. Highlighting significant policy and practice challenges related to MERA.

## **IV. METHODOLOGY**

MERRC and the research team identified a series of indicators in the areas of standards and assessment, accountability, district capacity, teacher capacity, and finance. The team collected data on these indicators to determine progress in each of the five categories. Thirty schools were selected to visit. Because a key intention of MERA was to equalize educational opportunities for all students, and low achievement has historically been highly correlated with high poverty, the team chose mostly schools from those whose poverty rates were 20% or above, and made predictions of performance based on poverty rates. A few schools not fitting this profile were included to ensure that all perspectives were represented in this report. The team then selected two groups of schools to visit, one performing above prediction and one performing below prediction.

Members of the research team visited these schools to try to understand what factors were associated with school success and with low school performance. Team members interviewed superintendents, principals, teachers, and parents on site. Other stakeholders including members of professional associations, DOE, and legislators were interviewed either in person or by phone. Research was conducted through a review of articles, position papers, reform initiatives in other states, and studies from journals, universities, government agencies, and non-profit organizations. More than 200 teachers, 90 superintendents, 100 principals, and 100 parents, many of them school council or PTO leaders, were interviewed.

## **V. MAJOR FINDINGS**

### **What's Working**

MERA has performed a quiet revolution in Massachusetts schools. For the first time, in this state known for local control, there is agreement on the part of the Governor, legislators, school administrators, teachers, parents, business and community members that there be educational standards statewide which all students, regardless of background or wealth, are expected to meet. Learning standards for Massachusetts students, among the most rigorous in the country, have been adopted, announced, and translated into curriculum frameworks. Furthermore, schools are being held accountable for what students know and are able to do at the end of each grade and when they graduate from high school. Accountability for student learning has shifted the focus in schools away from what teachers are teaching to what students are learning.

Many schools have added instructional time to the school day and many have added opportunities for teachers to meet, plan, and develop more effective learning strategies with other staff. Many low-achieving students now have access to an extended day and/or year of tutoring, enrichment, and extra practice on basic skills.

Principals have been removed from the collective bargaining process and the law allows them a much stronger role in hiring and evaluating teaching faculty and other staff, with the school committee role shifted to policy and resource concerns.

There is a clear message that schools are expected to reach all children; and this goal has been facilitated by changes in the school funding formula that have provided greater equity between rich and poor communities. State funds for local schools have been increased by more than one billion dollars a year, targeted to raise spending in cities and towns with low property wealth and a high percentage of students in poverty. Large increases in state education spending have also allowed all cities and towns to fund their schools at least at foundation level – a remarkable achievement.

Eight years into educational reform, we have many models of schools across the socioeconomic spectrum that have changed their practices sufficiently to have a strong impact on student achievement. These examples of success can be shared and replicated throughout the state

### **What's Not Working**

While there has been progress in the implementation of MERA, there is still much work to be done. Student learning is not close to where it should be, nor is there an adequate accountability system. There are still major shortages in certain teaching areas, and a great number of teachers have not received the training or support they need to accomplish the task of educating all students to a higher level of achievement. There is no system in place for holding school districts or individual schools to performance standards, and effective teaching and administration standards are in flux. There are controversies between the Board of Education and DOE, on the one hand, and the educational community on the other, regarding the use of MCAS as the state's sole determinant of student achievement or district improvement, especially when graduation is at stake.

While the original intent of MERA was to create mechanisms to support and assess improvement in student learning and district capacity, there has developed instead a distrustful climate where educators feel unsupported and harshly judged. Educators feel they are not treated as partners in the reform process as they once were and, as a result, morale is down. Teachers as a whole have been publicly criticized and their competency questioned. The Board of Education and DOE have often been accused of not listening to the concerns of the field, and not being attuned to the realities of public education.

A significant number of school administrators do not have the help they need to create the systemic change required to move their schools and districts to higher levels of student achievement. The jobs of superintendents and principals are more complex than ever. Their role as instructional leaders is greatly enlarged, while their management responsibilities have not decreased at all. In addition, they are expected to be change agents, which is a new role for many. The state does not have a strategy to work with them

These factors are threatening the very fabric of education reform.

## **VI. SITE OBSERVATIONS/INTERVIEWS IN THIRTY SCHOOLS**

### **Schools Performing above Expectations**

Why do certain schools with a high proportion of lower income children do better than predicted?

Features characteristic of schools performing above expectations included:

- Strong leadership, especially from the principal but in some cases from others who exert instructional leadership
- High expectations of all students
- Common planning time for teachers
- A total system approach
- Longer blocks of time dedicated to specific instructional objectives
- Use of assessment data to guide curriculum decisions
- District teachers participate in aligning the curriculum to state standards based on student achievement data
- Use of high-quality, research-based curriculum materials
- New state and foundation dollars for specialists and smaller class size
- Professional development undertaken simultaneously by many teachers in the school or in the system that is based on a vision of how to achieve school or system change.
- School contracts that allow for professional development as described above and a stronger evaluation system
- Parents informed about standards and the work of the school
- A longer day for those students who need it

### **Schools Performing below Expectation**

Why do some schools with high enrollment of low income students perform below expectation? What impact has MERA or specifically the publication of MCAS scores had on low-achieving schools, their leaders and faculties and parents?

Schools in which students did more poorly than predicted shared many of the following characteristics:

- No strong vision for change from superintendent/principal or lead teachers
- A delay in implementation of education reform, stemming from a “this, too, will pass” attitude
- Teachers don’t believe their children can learn and do not set high expectations for them
- Few efforts to enable teachers of the same grade or same subject to take the same professional development courses, to meet to discuss needed curriculum revisions, or to share effective lesson plans
- Uninformed school councils
- Lack of cohesion among staff members
- Lack of cooperation from the local union
- Control exerted by the superintendent over hiring and firing
- Cumbersome legal procedures protecting low performing and uncooperative teachers

- High level of student turnover within a school year
- Difficulty getting high school students in for after school tutoring
- Difficulty getting parents involved in the schools for teacher conferences

## **VII. RECOMMENDATIONS**

With large numbers of students at risk of not graduating, and controversy around MCAS as an appropriate and sole measure of success, there is a serious risk of losing sight of the improvements MERA has brought to student achievement. There is also a risk of losing support for MCAS.

DOE and the Board of Education need to work with educators in the field and the public to build a credible and effective system of accountability for MA students. The following recommendations are designed to move schools from practices that are resulting in unacceptable levels of achievement to practices that have shown promise and results and to ameliorate the obstacles to success found in even the most successful schools.

### **Standards and Assessment**

- The curriculum frameworks should not be changed again for five years, once the history/social studies revisions are made. The DOE, with feedback from the field, must determine if the frameworks, in their entirety, are manageable for students and teachers.
- The achievement gap between Hispanic and African-American students and white students is of major concern. DOE and districts must focus reform efforts on reducing it. Research on effective approaches and practices must also be conducted.
- Allow multiple indicators of student proficiency, not one single snapshot such as the MCAS exam. SAT IIs, Advanced Placement tests, and locally developed portfolios and performance assessments approved by the DOE are possible indicators to include.
- A reasonable compromise regarding the debate over whether or not it is too soon for high stakes testing would be to withhold any decisions until the spring of 2002. 2001 MCAS scores will have been published, and high school students who did not pass will have had an opportunity for remediation and will have taken a retest. Results of this retake will be available. If these scores continue to be poor it will be time to give serious consideration to a variety of approaches while preserving the principles, the standards, and the test. It will also still be early enough to make decisions regarding the first group of students for whom high stakes apply.
- The impact of MCAS on drop-outs needs to be closely monitored by the DOE.
- Develop a 2-tiered diploma system. Students should not be admitted to publicly-funded 4-year colleges and universities unless they pass MCAS. This will keep attention focused on improved student results. Students who fail the MCAS but otherwise meet local standards for graduation should be awarded local diplomas,

which will qualify them for community colleges and give them the opportunity to seek Pell grant funding. Failure to do this risks withholding federal financial help to students who may successfully use community colleges as pathways to successful futures. The Legislature should support a program, similar to the dual enrollment program, for students who have failed MCAS twice.

### **Accountability**

- Make the following changes to the school improvement rating system:
  - Determine district improvement using multiple factors. Measures including SAT, AP exams, and other nationally normed standardized test scores, college acceptance, employment, attendance, drop-out rates, and course offerings are possible criteria to include. Process indicators that are believed to lead to improved student achievement such as high quality professional development opportunities for teachers, certified teachers, teacher attrition and class size might also be factored in.
  - The state should adopt a test data tracking system that compares the same cohort of students in a school from year to year. As proposed in the education bills now going through Congress, DOE should track individual students and judge schools on the annual academic growth of those who stay in the school.
  - Only use MCAS scores of students who have been in the district for at least two years. Schools should be allowed to report scores on newcomers separately. Schools who have experienced a boundary change should display a large asterisk.
  - Provide comparisons of district and school performance within categories that differentiate between different types of communities to provide schools and districts with useful data, and more readily identify models to which systems can relate.
- Appropriate funds for state reviews of district implementation of MERA, and implement the district accountability system developed by the DOE as soon as possible.

### **District Capacity**

- DOE must work more in partnership with the field, offering support and resources while limiting its requirements of school districts so as not to overwhelm and alienate them. Districts whose students are performing well or making good progress should be able to work relatively independently of DOE if they prefer. DOE should then concentrate its attention on districts (and schools) that are having trouble raising student performance, and should develop a strong group of outside experts (primarily retired but well-respected superintendents, principals, and teachers) to work with needy districts. The DOE's effort to create such a capability was lost in the controversy over where accountability would be done.

- Arbitrators are failing to respond to the new dismissal criteria in MERA and instead continue to decide cases on the “just cause” standard. The Legislature should strengthen the legal language to ensure that arbitrators make decisions for dismissal based on the criteria of the best interest of students and on state and district teacher performance standards. If necessary, DOE should challenge key findings in court to uphold the clear intention of MERA to allow districts to dismiss teachers for poor teaching performance.
- Districts must provide the principal with adequate assistance, including both assistants who can take over building management functions and support personnel who can help with paperwork. This will enable principals to supervise and evaluate teachers, oversee curriculum work and school-based professional development, respond to DOE mandates, and perform all their usual functions.
- Undertake an evaluation of the effectiveness of professional development. The research should focus on determining conditions under which professional development is most effective in raising student achievement and the identification of ways to evaluate professional development programs.
- The Legislature should mandate and fund a longer school year (200 days) for students.
- Teachers should be expected to work a significantly longer school day than students, and/or a longer school year, to provide critically needed additional teacher time for professional development, collaborative planning, and other demands of standards-based teaching.

### **Teacher Capacity**

- The state should pay a supplemental salary amount in disciplines like math, science, and special education where teachers are hard to find, as recommended by the Governor. This would allow districts themselves to continue to pay equal salaries while allowing total compensation to respond to the pressures of supply and demand. School districts must be actively encouraged to create career ladders for teachers.
- Teaching competency should be assessed using multiple sources of data including observations, student work, teacher conferences, etc. A diagnostic teacher test should only be used when an administrator has reason to question subject knowledge.
- School districts must be actively encouraged to create career ladders for teachers. These teachers could receive 11 month contracts to train teachers and develop curriculum and training materials for the district. Salaries could be differentiated on the basis of skills and performance.
- All potential teachers, regardless of their route to certification, should have their teaching effectiveness assessed. Although the Commonwealth currently has plans to do this through college and University training programs, the state should consider using a nationally-validated instrument that not only tests knowledge and academic

skills, but also gauges a potential teachers subject mastery, pedagogical skills (including curriculum planning, instructional design, and assessing student learning) and classroom performance.

## **Finance**

- The foundation budget should be raised by 5 to 7% over the next 4 years as an interim increase. At that time, a future foundation budget review commission should consider whether further increases are required. This review commission should look at spending (in relation to foundation) by the more frugal districts that show reasonably high test results. Massachusetts should base its funding for wealthier districts who do not receive foundation aid on a formula that sets aid to any given town as a percentage of its foundation budget. High-poverty cities and towns that would receive more money under the current foundation budget formulation would continue to receive foundation aid. Cities and towns that already receive more aid than can be justified under either approach should be held harmless on a per-pupil basis.
- The primary purpose of state aid should be to make up the difference between the foundation budget and some reasonable local tax effort. Keep the required local tax rate lower than some ceiling (e.g., twice the state average tax rate) and higher than some reasonable floor (e.g., 80% of the state average tax rate), as proposed by the Governor and the House.
- Place a cap on the required tax effort to help towns struggling with large debt payments for school construction. This cap should apply to the sum of excess debt and required contribution. A town with large debt payments would then have its operating contribution reduced by the excess debt amount, with state aid filling in the gap.
- Eliminate overburden aid to Athol, Lawrence, and Holyoke and require the minimum tax effort required of all other cities. Use these funds to increase spending levels in high poverty districts.
- Efforts to eliminate overburden aid have been opposed because some of this aid goes to cities and towns with relatively high tax burdens. One way to deal with this problem is to put in place a floor on the local tax effort, similar to the ceiling proposed by Governor Cellucci. Any city or town with a required local tax effort less than, e.g., 60% of the state average (the average is \$8; 60% of this would be a tax effort of \$5) would be required to add to the increase normally required an additional local contribution toward school equal to 1% of its equalized or adjusted valuation. This extra amount would not be subject to the normal Proposition 2 ½ levy limit. The increases would continue until the city or town reached the tax floor. Proposition 2½ was meant to keep local officials from imposing large tax increases without public approval; it was not intended to place the burden of paying the total cost of any local school on all other citizens in Massachusetts.