

THE MASSACHUSETTS EDUCATION REFORM ACT OF 1993
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION MAPPING PROJECT

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) of 1993 is a comprehensive piece of legislation intended to substantially improve the quality of K-12 education in the Commonwealth. It calls for sweeping changes in many areas including curriculum and instruction, educational finance, assessment and testing, teacher preparation, and governance and decision-making. The many components of the legislation appear to have been intended to work synergistically to bring about substantial changes in educational practices and outcomes. Hundreds of millions in extra state dollars have been appropriated by the state legislature and the Governor in support of the financial provisions guaranteeing a foundation budget for each district designed to promote equity. Six years after passage of the legislation and with the period of full implementation of the special funding provisions nearly completed, it is time to ask if the law is having its intended effects--if the quality of education is actually improving. It is time for evaluation.

This document outlines a process for thinking about evaluating MERA. It provides a schematic chart or "map" of MERA that makes it possible to keep the whole and the various parts in continuous perspective. For all of the major policy initiatives and mandates of MERA, this report suggests implementation and evaluation questions and provides notes on data collection and methodology. It also poses evaluation questions for MERA as a comprehensive legislative initiative. Finally, this document suggests a five-year plan for keeping track of MERA implementation and evaluation. We hope that this work will serve as a tool for the Education Reform Review Commission that is both conceptually helpful for thinking about evaluation of MERA and practically useful by sorting implementation and evaluation questions; connecting the questions to specific policies within MERA; providing suggestions for data collection and analysis; and proposing a five year research and evaluation plan.

It is also important to note what this document does not do. It does not report the results of specific evaluation studies, nor does it contain fully elaborated research designs. The study team believes that evaluation(s) of MERA are very much needed by policymakers and educational practitioners in the Commonwealth at the present time. No single piece of legislation as comprehensive or complex as MERA should be expected to "get-it-right" in every detail the first time around, and there are bound to be fine tuning and even more sizable modifications needed to ensure that education reform continues to suit the needs of the Commonwealth. Conducting evaluations and even planning the details of specific studies, however, were beyond the scope of this project. We tried to keep our focus on the big picture and construct a map to guide evaluation decisions for the whole of MERA.

The study team has prepared this report for the use of the Education Reform Review Commission. We tried to keep the Commission's mandate "to monitor progress toward education reform"¹ and its specific charge with respect to MERA foremost in our thinking. We interpret the legislation to give the Review Commission two important responsibilities, the first is to monitor the implementation of the various policy provisions in the legislation to ensure that legislative intent has been followed by the education establishment, the second is to engage in policy analysis, recommending modifications for MERA or new legislation where policies fall short of their objectives. We hope that the effort to create a conceptual map for MERA that focuses on educational policy and includes implementation and evaluation questions will help the Review Commission as it works on behalf of educational reform for the Commonwealth.

¹ Section 70 of Chapter 71 of the Acts of 1993 as amended by section 510 of Chapter 151 of the Acts of 1996.