

COMMENTARY

Seize the Moment to Design Schools That Close Gaps

By Paul Reville

Recently, I stepped down from my position as secretary of education for the commonwealth of Massachusetts. Leading this new, integrated pre-K-through-higher-education cabinet office for Gov. Deval Patrick was one of the great honors of my career. I take great pride not only in what we accomplished during my tenure, but also what our state has achieved over the past two decades of education reform. During this time, we emerged as the nation's top state for student achievement and one of the world's leading jurisdictions for overall student performance.

However, doing well isn't good enough. While we in Massachusetts appreciate the outstanding performance achieved by our students and educators, we have been sharply focused on the sad story our outstanding averages conceal. We have deep, persistent achievement gaps, larger than in most other states. Even though we are gradually closing these gaps and have raised achievement levels so that our lowest performers now surpass low performers elsewhere, the progress is far too slow. Too many students in Massachusetts, in spite of our high averages, are unable to enjoy the advantages of a high-quality education. Caught in that achievement gap are low-income students, English-language learners, students with disabilities, and students of color.



—Jonathan Bouw

Twenty years ago, when standards-based reform was enacted in Massachusetts, we celebrated that victory by declaring we were on the way toward a genuine educational

meritocracy. We were going to eliminate the correlation between zip codes and educational achievement and attainment. I'm sorry to say that, two decades later, it is clear that we've failed to meet that challenge. There is still an iron-law correlation in the commonwealth between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. Despite our great successes, we've failed.

This state's experience has proven both the value of standards-based school reform and its limitations. We have seen that school reform is necessary and enormously potent in boosting student success, but that, on average, it is insufficient to the task of closing achievement gaps.

I believe that our experience demonstrates, as Richard Rothstein and others have argued, that schools alone, conceived in our current early-20th-century model, are too weak an intervention, if our goal is to get all students to high levels of achievement. Even when optimized with high expectations, strong curriculum, and expert instruction, today's schools have not proven powerful enough by themselves to compensate for the disadvantages associated with poverty. Of course, there are notable exceptions of individuals and schools defying the odds, but these schools are isolated examples at the margin. We have not been able to scale up their success. The exceptions have not proven a new rule, though some practices have shown promise. The gaps, on average, persist. After 20 years of school reform experience, the data don't lie.

The lesson I take from our reform experience in Massachusetts is that we can't do 21st-century work with a century-old (or older) school system. Our "modern" school system is a fortified version of an educational model designed to batch-process large numbers of immigrants and migrants with a rapid-turnaround model set to socialize and prepare them for useful roles in a burgeoning low-skill, low-knowledge, manufacturing economy.

A hundred years ago, a single-digit graduation rate and bell-curve distribution of achievement (with a low center) was desirable and useful to the economy. By the fourth quarter of the 20th century, we recognized that we had outgrown such a system, and that international competition and automation were forcing the disappearance of well-paid low-skill, low-knowledge jobs and replacing them with jobs that would require ever higher levels of skill and knowledge, levels previously attained only by the elite few in the old education system.

By the 1980's, leaders of government, business, and education were issuing reports like [***A Nation at Risk***](#)  or (in 1990) [***America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages***](#), which

made the case that the U.S. system of education was woefully inadequate. Their prescription: The nation needed a new, robust system to educate all students to the high levels necessary to match the demands of the economy and an increasingly sophisticated democracy and society.

In response to this challenge, state leaders across the nation have done their best to alter the existing system by introducing major modifications like standards, accountability, and competition. But the basic one-size-fits-all school model, which an overwhelming majority of American students attend, remains remarkably entrenched. The basic early-20th-century delivery system is unchanged: six or 6½ hours of school a day, roughly 180 days per year—only about 20 percent of a child's waking hours. Our reform efforts sought to optimize existing schools, but even at their best, with high standards, real accountability, and serious investment in building capacity and competition, these schools, by themselves, have, on average, proved incapable of closing the achievement gaps in spite of three decades of reform.

What's needed is a new model of child development and education—a learning system that makes sense for the 21st century. Let's stop trying to do the new work of this era, readying all (and by all, I mean *all*) for 21st-century success, with tools and systems designed for another century. We need a massive redesign to create a system that meets every child where he or she is, that provides education and support beginning in early childhood, and that includes postsecondary learning. We need a new model that allows every child to become a successful worker, citizen, head of family, and lifelong learner.

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This system should not be constrained by the boundaries of time and space that continue to narrow our curriculum and our aspirations for today's child. This system should not mass-produce education, but should tailor the education to the individual, much as a health-care system does.

This education system should interconnect easily and effectively with other systems of child and family support so that educators can immediately and efficiently address the problems that get in the way of young people's regular attendance at school and attentiveness when in class. This system should harness the power of technology to accelerate and individualize the process of learning while liberating teachers and students from the confines of the

school building, the daily school schedule, and the annual calendar. Finally, this system should find ways to compensate for the vast enrichment inequalities that attach to students' home lives and experiences.

Robert Putnam and others have shown that the large investments some families are able to make in out-of-school learning experiences, compared with the negligible investments other children experience, are a powerful contributor to test-score gaps. A 21st-century system must level the enrichment playing field, or we will never close the gaps.

The politics of education reform, inertia, and complacency, laced with conflicting adult interests, won't allow for massive, sudden changes. We are a conservative, status-quo-oriented society when it comes to how we educate our children. However, we urgently need to declare the obsolescence of our current approach.

We live in a time when there is a felicitous coincidence between our society's moral obligation to achieve educational equity and our economic self-interest in developing talent for 21st-century jobs. In addition, the advent of the Common Core State Standards and the accompanying assessments will, at least temporarily, exacerbate achievement gaps across the country and create a new sense of urgency about how to close these gaps, unless we take action now. The moment of opportunity and urgency is upon us. Reformers should seize it to drive a new reform agenda toward a transformative vision of a learning system geared to the 21st century.

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