

# Twenty Years After Education Reform



*Choosing a Path Forward  
to Equity and Excellence for All*

**CITIZENS  
for PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS**

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**TWENTY YEARS AFTER EDUCATION REFORM:**  
*Choosing a Path Forward to Equity and Excellence for All*

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*Choosing a Path Forward to Equity and Excellence for All*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## *Twenty Years After Education Reform: Choosing a Path Forward to Equity and Excellence for All*

**June 2013** – This month, Massachusetts marks the 20th anniversary of the passage of the 1993 Education Reform Act. Twenty years later, Citizens for Public Schools set out to answer the question: Are we closer to our goal of equitable access to a high-quality education for every student?

The evidence we have gathered strongly suggests that two of the three major “reforms” launched in the wake of the 1993 law — high-stakes testing and Commonwealth charter schools — have failed to deliver on their promises.

On the other hand, the third major component of the law, providing an influx of more than \$2 billion in state funding for our schools, had a powerfully positive impact on our classrooms. But we will show that, after two decades, the formula designed to augment and equalize education funding is no longer up to the task.

Here is a summary of our findings:

### **The formula for providing state education aid to the Commonwealth’s K-12 school districts is outdated and inadequate:**

- The foundation budget, after twenty years, no longer accurately reflects the cost to provide a quality education that can enable all students to succeed. For example, some studies show that the formula understates special education costs by \$1.0 billion and has failed to adjust for health insurance cost growth. Others point out that the foundation budget never included certain costs required by the Education Reform Act. As a result, among other things, districts have not had the resources to hire adequate numbers of regular education teachers, resulting in larger class sizes and less planning and meeting time for teachers during the school day. Meanwhile, many low-income students are not getting the instructional support they need because of the redirection of funds intended for their support.

### **Large gaps in educational equity, opportunity and outcomes persist:**

- On the MCAS, significant gaps remain among student groups based on race, poverty, ethnicity, language and special needs, with some gaps stagnant and some increasing. The school districts with the highest scores on the 2012 10<sup>th</sup> grade MCAS English test had low-income student populations ranging from two to nine percent, while the ten lowest scoring districts had percentages ranging from 50 to 87 percent.

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- On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, though our average results place us at the top of all states, Massachusetts ranks in the bottom tier of states in progress toward closing the achievement gap for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students. Massachusetts has some of the widest gaps in the nation between White and Hispanic students, a sign that the English immersion policy created by the Unz initiative has failed.<sup>1</sup>
- Massachusetts ranks 31<sup>st</sup> of 49 states for the gap between Black and White student graduation rates (with 1<sup>st</sup> meaning that the gap is the smallest) and 39<sup>th</sup> of 47 states for the size of the gap between Hispanic and White student graduation rates. For students with disabilities, Massachusetts' four-year graduation rate is only 64.9 percent, which ranks the state at 28th out of the 45 states with available data in 2009.<sup>2</sup> A significant reason for this low figure is the impact of the MCAS graduation requirement on this subgroup.

#### **The high-stakes use of the MCAS has narrowed learning and stifled critical thinking skills, leaving too many students unprepared for college:**

- National research and surveys of Massachusetts teachers found the focus on preparing students for high-stakes MCAS tests has contributed to a narrowing of school curricula, most severely in districts serving low-income students. Nationally, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) reported in 2007<sup>3</sup> that time spent on subjects other than math and reading had been cut by nearly a third since 2002, because, as CEP President and CEO Jack Jennings put it, “What gets tested gets taught.”
- There is also widespread concern among K-12 and postsecondary educators about the impact of test-driven classroom environments on the development of critical thinking skills and creativity.

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<sup>1</sup> While the overall national reduction in achievement gaps by race and income have been small in comparison to the challenge that remains, they outpaced those of Massachusetts.

<sup>2</sup> Kruger, L. & McIvor, T. MCAS (2013). *Graduation Requirement Disproportionately Harms Students in Special Education*. Unpublished Manuscript.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer McMurrer, Choices, Changes, and Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era, <http://www.cep-dc.org/publications/index.cfm?selectedYear=2007>.

**Commonwealth charter schools have not contributed to equity of educational quality and resources:**

- State statistics show charter schools continue to enroll a much smaller percentage of English language learners and students with significant disabilities than their sending districts.
- A widely quoted study that favors charter schools shows higher scores only for specific grades (middle school) and student subgroups, but not for elementary or high schools, ELLs, or students in their first year at charter schools.
- Though one of the goals of the charter school movement was to spark innovation, urban charters have gravitated toward a single approach known as “no excuses,” which translates to long hours in school, highly precise rules for behavior, and severe discipline for breaking even minor rules, such as wearing the wrong color socks.<sup>4</sup>
- Perhaps as a result, many urban charter schools report very high out-of-school suspension rates and continue to show much higher attrition rates than their district school neighbors.
- While some charter high schools with a large percentage of low-income students score high on MCAS, these schools rank much lower on the SATs. What’s more, research indicates many students from high-scoring charter schools do not fare well in college, as measured by six-year college completion rates.
- The average Massachusetts charter school loses one-third to one-half of its teaching staff each year, compared to the state average, which ranges from 13 to 22 percent, depending on school poverty level.<sup>5</sup>

The Massachusetts Education Reform law set admirable goals of equitable educational access, but the evidence after 20 years suggests our policies need fundamental revisions or our goals will grow even farther out of reach. Our recommendations to change course and get on track toward greater equity and quality include:

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<sup>4</sup> Page 46 of the Edward Brooke handbook describes the dress code. <http://www.ebrooke.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/K-2-student-handbook-2011-2012.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> MA DESE, “Status of the Massachusetts Educator Workforce,” December 2011, Page 37

**Increase School Funding:**

- Update the Foundation Budget to ensure that it includes all of the costs to provide a quality education for every student.
- Provide adequate funding for quality public early education and public higher education.
- Increase state revenues in a progressive way to fund our schools and other services for children and families.

**Stop High-Stakes Testing:**

- Adopt a moratorium on high-stakes uses of the new Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) tests.
- Support legislative action for a truly comprehensive assessment system with no high-stakes uses of state standardized testing.

**Reform Charter Schools:**

- Stop the approval or expansion of Commonwealth charters until funding is provided by the state, rather than the local school district, and until problems of student recruitment and retention are resolved.

**Educate the Whole Child and Close the Opportunity Gap:**

- Give all students in every grade access to an enriching and challenging curriculum in areas beyond tested subjects, including art, science, social studies, music, physical education and extracurricular activities.
- Provide professional development in cultural competency for educators that emphasizes supporting students of color and English language learners on their pathway to success.
- Address the social and emotional needs of children and use positive behavioral supports instead of zero tolerance discipline policies.
- Reform the law relating to English language learners to allow bilingual education for students who need it.

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#### **Reject Top-Down, Business-Oriented Reforms:**

- The record in cities around the country that have embraced business-oriented reforms like test-based teacher evaluations, school closures and charter expansion shows that, behind the hype, these reforms are hurting the students they purport to help.<sup>6</sup>
- Instead, our students need and deserve research-based reforms, including programs like quality early childhood education and closing overall opportunity gaps to address gaps in achievement.

#### **Tackle Poverty:**

There is no way to eliminate the opportunity gaps in our schools without addressing poverty and our state's increasing income inequality. Our nation's future is at risk if we do not address this very real and growing problem. Every other developed country is far ahead of us in meeting this challenge. Here are a few suggestions about where to begin<sup>7</sup>:

- Provide a real "safety net" for all families with children, including food programs, health care, day care and safe housing.
- Invest in jobs, job training and fairness for workers, including raising the minimum wage, requiring paid sick leave and family leave, and extending unemployment benefits.
- Support passage of equitable tax plans, requiring the wealthy and corporations to pay their fair share to help support important public services.
- Stop privatizing public services, such as our hospitals, schools and prisons; once publicly staffed and funded, many are now operated under the control of profit-driven corporations and no longer serve the public interest.

*Note: The full report is downloadable from the home page of the Citizens for Public Schools web site, at <http://www.citizensforpublicschools.org>.*

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<sup>6</sup> Elaine Weiss and Don Long, "Market-Oriented Education Reforms' Rhetoric Trumps Reality," Broader, Bolder Approach to Education. <http://www.epi.org/files/2013/bba-rhetoric-trumps-reality>. April 22, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> For more, see "The Rich and the Rest of Us" Smiley and West, SmileyBooks, New York, 2012.