

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

TWENTY YEARS AFTER EDUCATION REFORM

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The formula for providing state education aid to the Commonwealth’s K-12 school districts is outdated and inadequate: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 10th grade MCAS English test

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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.

- 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.¹
- Massachusetts ranks 31st of 49 states for the gap between Black and White student graduation rates (with 1st meaning that the gap is the smallest) and 39th 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 2009.² 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 2007³ 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.

¹ 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.

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 Unpublished Manuscript.

³ 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.⁴
- 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.⁵

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:

⁴ 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>

⁵ 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.

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.⁶
- 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 begin⁷:

- 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>.

⁶ 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.

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

INTRODUCTION

June 2013 - Massachusetts marks the 20th anniversary of the passage of the Education Reform Act of 1993 this month. In early 2006, Citizens for Public Schools released a report entitled “The Campaign for the Education of the Whole Child,” which laid out our vision of educational excellence and equity. In it, we said that, to educate the whole child, “schools must ensure every child has access to a rich array of subjects, including social studies, world languages, science, art, music, physical education, and recess, as well as reading and math.” We said a whole child education means “children’s basic emotional and physical needs must be addressed so they are able to succeed in school and beyond.”⁸

Twenty years after the law’s passage, and seven years after our first report, we set out to answer the question: Are we closer to the goal of equitable access to a high-quality “whole child” education for every student? The conventional wisdom is that our schools have undergone a dramatic transformation from mediocrity to excellence as a result of the standards and testing that came with the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act. Politicians and pundits tell us on a regular basis that Massachusetts is ranked first in the nation because of investments, standards, testing, accountability and choice in the form of a growing charter school movement.

We share a pride in the hard work of our teachers and students, many of whom are learning and demonstrating their achievement and growth on the tests that have been given such great weight. Still, two decades after the Education Reform law’s passage, we wanted to know what is the reality, or rather, what are the *different realities* for children in different areas of the state, or different neighborhoods within the same city or town?

To see what schools, teachers and students have been up against, we need to acknowledge the world outside of our schools. That world, after all, is what affects the condition of children when they arrive at the school door for the first time and every day throughout their career as a student. Thanks in large part to the worst economic calamity since the Great Depression, the context for public schools in low-income, urban communities is one of economic crisis, increased unemployment, homelessness and child poverty. Many of our communities are characterized by racial segregation and isolation, among the most extreme in the nation,⁹ and many of our traditional district schools face the pressures of charters and privatization.

⁸ Guisbond, Lisa et al. “The Campaign for the Education of the Whole Child,” 2006.

⁹ U.S. Census data ranks Boston among the nation’s most segregated cities. See maps of the nation’s most segregated cities here <http://www.businessinsider.com/most-segregated-cities-census-maps-2013-4?op=1>.

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Inside our schools, while children of highly educated parents in our more affluent communities maintain high scores on state tests, many children in poor urban districts continue to struggle. The MCAS graduation requirement remains a high, if not insurmountable, barrier for some students with disabilities and English language learners.

Though they are not well documented by the media, we are well aware of the challenges and frustrations of those who work in our classrooms every day: the pressures of high-stakes testing, budget cuts, children with emotional and behavioral problems, scapegoating by politicians and the media. We also hear the pleas of parents, particularly those in low-income communities, who desire but have not found reliable access to educational quality or responsiveness from school and political leaders. And we have heard from students who see that what is offered them in facilities, materials, course options and extracurricular activities is often much less than what students in affluent communities take for granted. They have stories to tell, and we believe they deserve a hearing and a response from those with the power to make change.

We wanted to look beyond average test results to a range of quantitative and qualitative data to get a multifaceted picture of the progress made and challenges that remain. This is what we have found.

Funding Equity Unrealized

The Education Reform Act of 1993 dramatically overhauled state education aid to local school districts in large part by requiring all school districts, for the first time, to spend a state-mandated minimum amount per pupil (the foundation budget). This amount was supposed to reflect the cost of educating students with differing learning needs — a critical first step in addressing the education needs of the whole child and funding inequities. However, twenty years later, the foundation budget has not been comprehensively reexamined.

The Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center's recent paper, *Cutting Class: Underfunding the Foundation Budget's Core Education Program*, identifies gaps between what the foundation budget says districts need and what districts are spending. MassBudget gathered data for each of the state's 328 operating districts and analyzed trends for different types of districts. It found:

- Districts with greater wealth spend above the foundation budget minimum.
- The foundation budget understates by about \$1.0 billion the true cost of staffing in-district special education programs and paying tuitions for specialized out-of-district placements.
- Failure to adjust for higher than anticipated health insurance cost growth has left the foundation about \$1.0 billion below actual health insurance costs.
- Districts have not implemented the low-income student program envisioned in the original foundation budget.

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- Most districts hire fewer regular education teachers than the foundation budget sets as an adequate baseline.
- Teacher spending below foundation levels has likely been manifest in the form of fewer total teachers than foundation calls for, resulting in larger class sizes, less planning and meeting time for teachers during the school day, and the hiring of fewer specialist teachers, such as literacy specialists, language teachers, art teachers, etc. If we are serious about educating the whole child, attention to these opportunities for children to learn is a necessity.

Assessing Student Progress

Massachusetts ranks first in the country on fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Similarly, Massachusetts' students score near the top on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) fourth- and eighth-grade math and science tests. While having the second highest student participation rate in taking the SAT tests, SAT scores are among the highest of the 50 states. Massachusetts has the 12th highest four-year cohort graduation rate (83 percent) in the nation.¹⁰

This data is good news and cause for celebration. However, this paper shares data from NAEP, MCAS, and other indicators that demonstrates that while Massachusetts' overall achievement is impressive, the state's progress in closing the opportunity and achievement gap ranks among the lowest in the nation.

- **Massachusetts has done well before and since education reform.** In 1992, our state was 3rd in fourth-grade reading and 5th in eighth-grade reading on the federal NAEP tests, with no other state significantly ahead in either grade. Massachusetts was in the top quarter of states in math – 9th in the fourth grade with only two states significantly ahead, and 12th in the eighth grade. Massachusetts *should* be doing better than most of the nation. The state has one of the wealthiest and best educated adult populations in the country. While the quality of teachers and principals rank as the number one and two *school-based* factors in student test scores, family education and income remain the two strongest overall influences on higher student test scores.¹¹

¹⁰ Downloaded from <http://eddataexpress.ed.gov/data-element-explorer.cfm/tab/data/deid/127/sort/idown/>, 2010-2011 data

¹¹ Marzano, R., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. (2005). *School leadership that works*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision & Curriculum Development.

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- **The Hidden Crisis: Persistent Gaps in Student Outcomes.** Despite the praise bestowed upon the state's education system, Massachusetts has significant progress to make before claiming that all students in our public education system are being well prepared for college, meaningful careers, and participation in civic life. The aggregate high test scores and ranking for Massachusetts students mask the dramatic variation in performance by subgroups across race, income, and language, reflecting the sobering conclusion that demography remains a significant factor in determining educational outcomes for the state's students.
- **Additional Outcome and Engagement Measures.** The disparities by race, income, and language are not limited to academic testing results. Suspension rates are one indicator of a student's engagement in school and are a predictor of dropping out of high school. In Massachusetts, Black and Hispanic students are suspended close to three times the rate of White students. With Black and Hispanic students scoring at significantly lower rates of proficiency while being suspended at substantially higher rates than White students, it is no surprise that the state's graduation rates for these subgroups are disproportionately low as well.

Twenty years into the Education Reform era, while Massachusetts leads in excellence, the state still lags in the bottom half of states in equitable outcomes by race, income, and language. Many low-income, Black, Hispanic, English language learners, and students with special needs are still not receiving the education they deserve. These results are exacerbated by the state's continued inequitable spending across high and low-income districts, placing it in the bottom quarter of states on measures of finance and equity, making the complex task of bringing educational equity to all students even more difficult.

Beyond the Scores: Narrowing Curriculum and Loss of Critical Thinking

The 1993 Education Reform Law called for a comprehensive system of measuring school quality and student outcomes using "a variety of assessment instruments...assessing whether students are meeting the academic standards." Twenty years later, it is clear that the "Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System" is comprehensive in name only. What drives many of our classrooms is a set of high-stakes standardized tests in math, English language arts and science, now known simply by the acronym MCAS. According to research done nationally and in Massachusetts, the result has been a loss of attention to non-tested subjects and extracurricular activities and an increase in test preparation and teaching to the test. Massachusetts teachers surveyed about the impact of high-stakes testing on their practice

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reported that it “led them to teach in ways that contradict their ideas of sound instructional practices.”¹²

Beyond evidence that high-stakes testing narrows the curriculum, there are serious concerns among K-12 and postsecondary educators about the impact of test-driven classroom environments on the development of critical thinking skills. Professor Trudy Knowles of Westfield State University has been teaching college for more than 20 years. She also served on Gov. Patrick’s Readiness Project Subcommittee on Assessments. She notes that the State Board of Higher Education found one-third of students enrolled in state colleges and universities are not ready for college and need remedial coursework. “This [is] despite the fact that the MCAS said they were ready to graduate.”¹³ She connects these deficits to high school curricula structured around test preparation instead of the development of critical thinking.

Knowles is one of 165 Massachusetts professors and researchers who have signed a Massachusetts Statement Against High-Stakes Testing¹⁴, in part because of these concerns. Among other things, the statement cites pressure to teach to the test as making it “difficult for teachers to create a learning environment that promotes creativity, critical thinking, risk-taking, experimentation and a love of learning.”

Over time, the use of test scores to measure school quality has become increasingly complex, but not necessarily more fair, and some of our most outstanding schools are being labeled as underperforming, putting them at risk of drastic measures.

There are better ways to approach assessment and accountability, both here and abroad. Rather than persist in the same models of measuring and turning around so-called failing schools, we should examine these successful models and incorporate their practices in our struggling schools.

The Impact of Commonwealth Charter Schools

The Education Reform Act of 1993 authorized the creation of charter schools in Massachusetts, and in September 1995, the first 15 charter schools opened. Legislators said their intent was to “stimulate the development of innovative programs within public education” and “to provide opportunities for innovative learning and assessments.” By the 2012-13 school year, there were

¹² Joseph J. Pedulla et al., Perceived Effects of State Mandated Testing Programs on Teaching and Learning: Findings from a National Survey of Teachers, 4. <http://www.bc.edu/research/nbetpp/statements/nbr2.pdf>

¹³ Email communication. Jan. 10, 2013.

¹⁴ The current list of signers and the statement can be found here:
<http://matestingstatement.wordpress.com/about/>

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76 charter schools statewide, with an enrollment of 31,830 students. Despite the amount of press coverage, public debate, private foundation support and time devoted by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to discussing charter schools, as of 2012, they still enroll just over 3 percent of the total public school population, mostly in urban districts.

Twenty years later, it remains a point of increasingly contentious debate across the Commonwealth whether charter schools have served to improve quality and stimulate innovation or have diverted scarce public school resources while screening, counseling or pushing out students with the most challenging learning needs. There is scant evidence that they have served the role of piloting effective, innovative practices that are then shared with and adopted by traditional public schools.

Some highly touted charter schools boast MCAS results rivaling those in affluent suburban districts. Many of these same charters, however, show dramatic attrition rates, with some of the highest-scoring charters losing as much as 75 percent of their enrollment before graduation. Charters have vigorously defended themselves against the charge that high MCAS scores and graduation rates are pumped up by high student attrition, saying their “mobility” rates are comparable or better than district schools. One thing seems clear, while students often leave charters and return to traditional district schools midyear, charter schools rarely fill their vacant seats with students from their “waiting lists.” Charter schools also have, on average, higher suspension rates, fewer students who have language barriers, fewer students in special education, and higher teacher turnover. This pattern does not extend to all charter schools. But it does describe most of the schools whose high test scores are held up as proof that district schools are just not trying hard enough.

CHAPTER 1

Understanding the Funding - and Underfunding - of Our Schools

The most important objective of the financial provisions of the 1993 Education Reform Act was to ensure that all school districts have the resources to provide an adequate education to every public school student.¹⁵ The new law required that, after a seven-year phase-in, every local school district spend at least a state-mandated, minimum amount per pupil (unique for each district). This was the first such requirement in state history, and the law also provided much of the funding to meet the new mandate. This minimum spending amount, the “foundation budget,” is intended to accurately reflect the costs of adequately educating different grade levels and categories of students with differing learning needs (regular, limited English proficient, special education, low income, etc.), a critical first step in addressing the education needs of the whole child.

After twenty years, as a direct result of the 1993 law, state aid in support of the foundation budget — “Chapter 70 aid” — has increased by 75 percent, when adjusted for inflation, from \$2.4 billion to \$4.2 billion.^{16,17} Most of the increase occurred in the 1990s, as below-foundation districts were brought up to foundation spending levels, with more recent funding either falling due to lowered state taxes and state fiscal crises, or increasing just enough to keep all districts at their foundation budgets, which typically rise over time (Figure 1).¹⁸

More significantly, in fiscal year 1993, three-quarters of school districts, with two-thirds of the state’s student population, were spending below their foundation budgets. In FY13, all districts

¹⁵ “Adequate” in this context means, at a minimum, an education that provides each student with the opportunity to meet state standards.

¹⁶ In addition to Chapter 70 aid, which accounts for 85 percent to 90 percent of state spending on elementary and secondary education, the state also provides a number of grants and reimbursements to school districts.

¹⁷ In spite of the increase in Chapter 70 aid, most of the funding in support of the foundation budget still comes from the “local contribution” made by cities and towns, primarily from the local property tax. In fiscal year 2012, the last year for which information was available, local funding accounted for 63 percent of spending, down from 70 percent in fiscal year 1993. The flip side is that, since the onset of education reform, Chapter 70 aid as a share of spending has risen from 30 percent to 37 percent. In addition to Chapter 70 funding, most local school districts also receive funding from non-education local aid, which goes to cities and towns to help fund municipal services but is also available for education. In some communities, as much as 50 percent of non-education aid goes to help fund local schools.

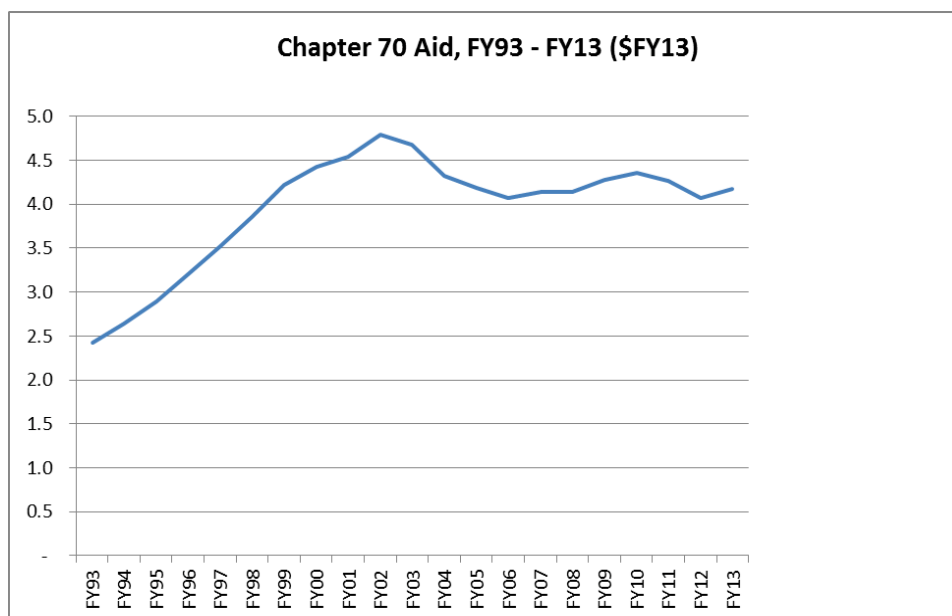
¹⁸ Since its inflation-adjusted high point in fiscal year 2002, Chapter 70 aid has declined by over \$620 million (almost 13 percent).

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are spending at or above their foundation budgets. Statewide, spending is almost 20 percent over foundation.

With all districts spending at or above foundation levels, the central question is whether the foundation budget — the state-determined standard of funding adequacy — is itself adequate to the task of providing all students with the opportunity, at a minimum, to meet state education standards. As will be argued below, the answer is “no.”

Figure 1: Trends in Chapter 70 Funding Levels



Source: Computed from Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education Data. FY09 – FY11 include American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds. FY11 includes funds from the Education Jobs and Medicaid Assistance Act.

How It Works: State and Local Funding for Schools

It is important to understand the basic components of the Chapter 70 education aid formula in order to understand how it needs to be fixed:

- As mentioned above, based on the formula set out in the law, which is intended to provide sufficient resources to provide an adequate education to each student, a foundation budget is calculated for each school district, which varies among districts on

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a per-pupil basis according to the distribution of the students among grade levels and programs and the share of low-income students in each district.¹⁹ “Poor” districts have a higher per-pupil foundation budget than “rich” districts, due primarily to their higher shares of low-income students. As indicated previously, the foundation budget is adjusted every year for enrollment changes and inflation.

- A calculation is then made to determine how much each city and town is required to contribute toward meeting the foundation budget spending level (the “required local contribution”), based on the city or town’s income, property wealth, and revenue growth.²⁰
- Chapter 70 education aid then fills the gap between the required local contribution and the district’s foundation budget. The cost of filling this gap in 1994, the first year of implementation of education reform, was about \$1.7 billion. As the state was not prepared to pay this much in one fiscal year, the law set out a Chapter 70 aid phase-in that took seven years for below-foundation districts to attain foundation spending levels.
- Although all school districts were brought to their foundation budget levels by FY2000, as noted previously, districts continue to receive state funding to keep them at foundation spending levels, which tend to rise each year. Typically, additional aid is also provided to ensure that each operating district receives a minimum per-pupil increase over the prior year.²¹

In sum, due in large part to the now over \$4 billion in state aid that has resulted from the education reform law, all districts since FY2000 have been spending at or above their foundation budgets. However, the foundation budget itself, in place for two decades now, was developed prior to the development of state standards and has never been comprehensively reexamined to determine whether it is adequate to enable all students to meet those standards.

¹⁹ The foundation budget is also higher.

²⁰ As MassBudget notes: “The required local contribution is only a minimum amount that cities and towns must contribute to their school districts, and many wealthier communities opt to contribute significantly more. For this reason, the Chapter 70 formula provides a baseline school budget, but it does not ensure equitable total funding across the state.” For more information, see Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, “Demystifying the Chapter 70 Formula: How the Massachusetts Education Funding System Works,” October 22, 2010.

²¹ Since FY07, additional aid has been provided to phase in equity adjustments made to the Chapter 70 funding formula that year.

Underfunding Our Core Educational Needs

The Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center's recent paper, *Cutting Class: Underfunding the Foundation Budget's Core Education Program*, contributes to the growing statewide conversation about the foundation budget's present adequacy.²² MassBudget gathered data for each of the state's 328 operating districts and then analyzed trends for different types of districts, especially for districts of varying wealth. The report identifies major gaps between what the foundation budget calculates districts need for certain cost categories in Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 and what districts are actually spending.

Key findings of *Cutting Class* include:

Districts with greater wealth spend above the foundation budget minimum

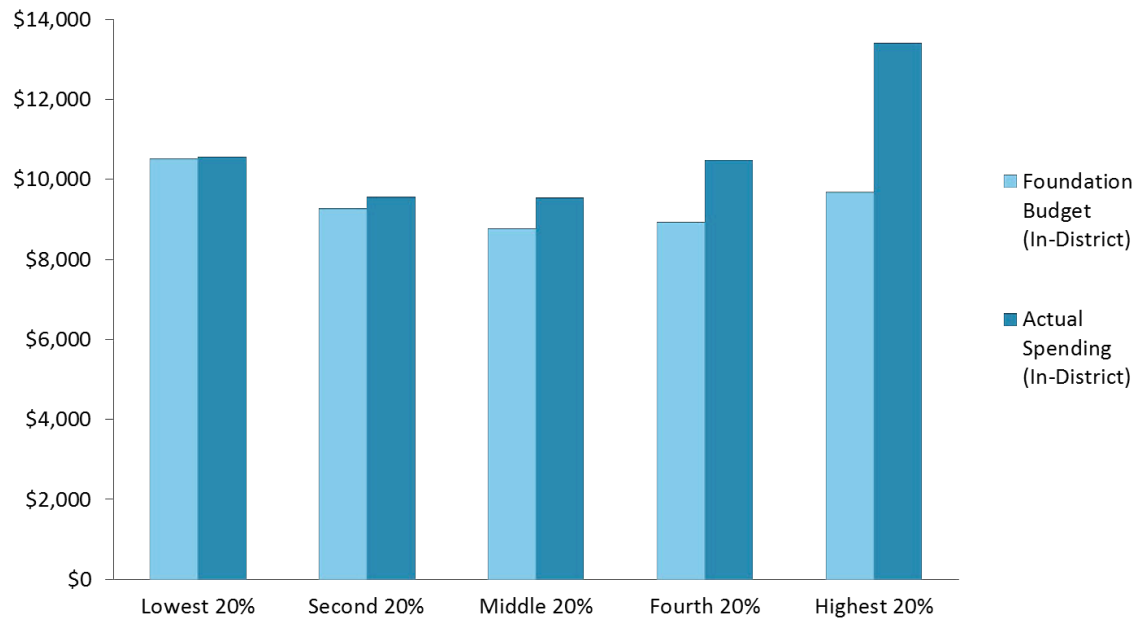
Increased levels of local wealth are associated with spending above a district's foundation budget. The least wealthy 20 percent of districts spend right at their average foundation budget, whereas the wealthiest 20 percent of districts spend 39 percent above foundation. Communities with greater property values have more money to spend on education and also tend to make it a priority to raise additional local revenue to fund education at levels significantly above baseline foundation amounts. Because the poorest schools have larger numbers of harder to educate categories of students, their foundation budgets are higher. The poorest communities spend at the state mandated minimum, an amount that comes primarily from state funds.

²² All substantive data and its explication in this section have been excerpted from the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center report "Cutting Class: Underfunding the Foundation Budget's Core Education Program." The entire report may be found at: www.massbudget.org

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Districts With Greater Wealth Spend Above Foundation

Districts clustered by Combined Effort Yield (community property wealth and incomes) per pupil
Total in-district spending per pupil, FY 2010



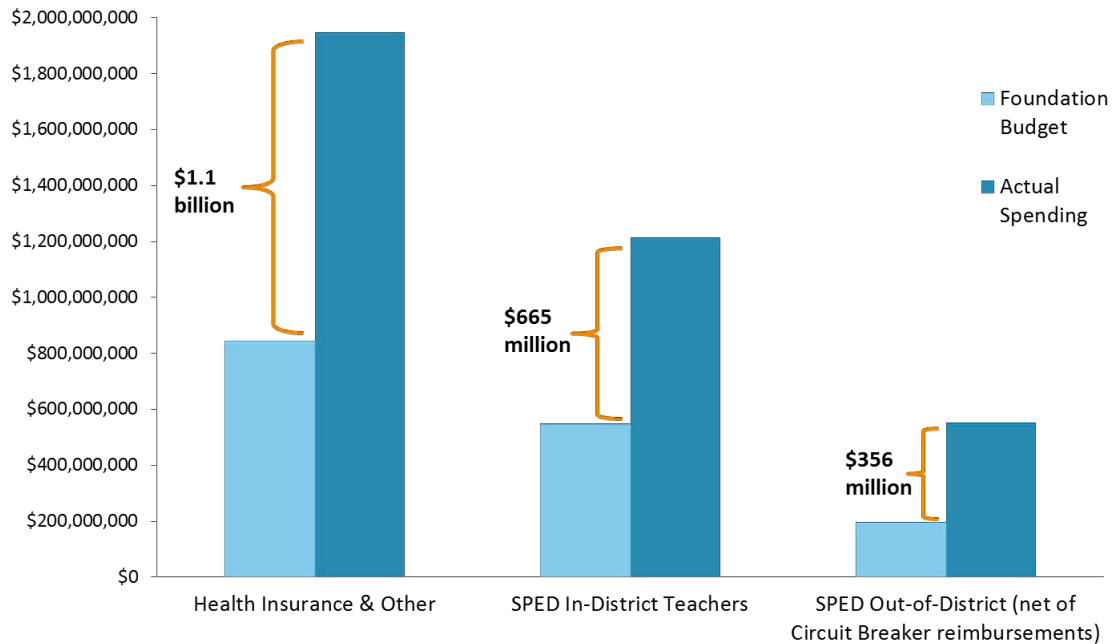
Statewide, the foundation budget understates core special education costs by about \$1.0 billion and health insurance costs by about \$1.1 billion

Due to a range of factors, notably an increasing proportion of high-needs special education students, the foundation budget understates by about \$1.0 billion the true cost of staffing in-district special education programs and paying tuitions for specialized out-of-district placements. School districts have a legal mandate to meet the needs of these students, and the value of the foundation budget has lagged over time as the formula's underlying assumptions have not been adjusted to account for this growing population.

Similarly, the original design of the foundation budget did not foresee the dramatic increase in health insurance costs nationwide, and the general inflation factor identified for adjustments to the foundation budget has lagged well behind true cost growth. Failure to adjust for this higher than anticipated health insurance cost growth has left the foundation budget about \$1.0 billion below actual health insurance costs.

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Foundation Understates SPED & Health Ins. Spending by \$2.1 Bil, FY10



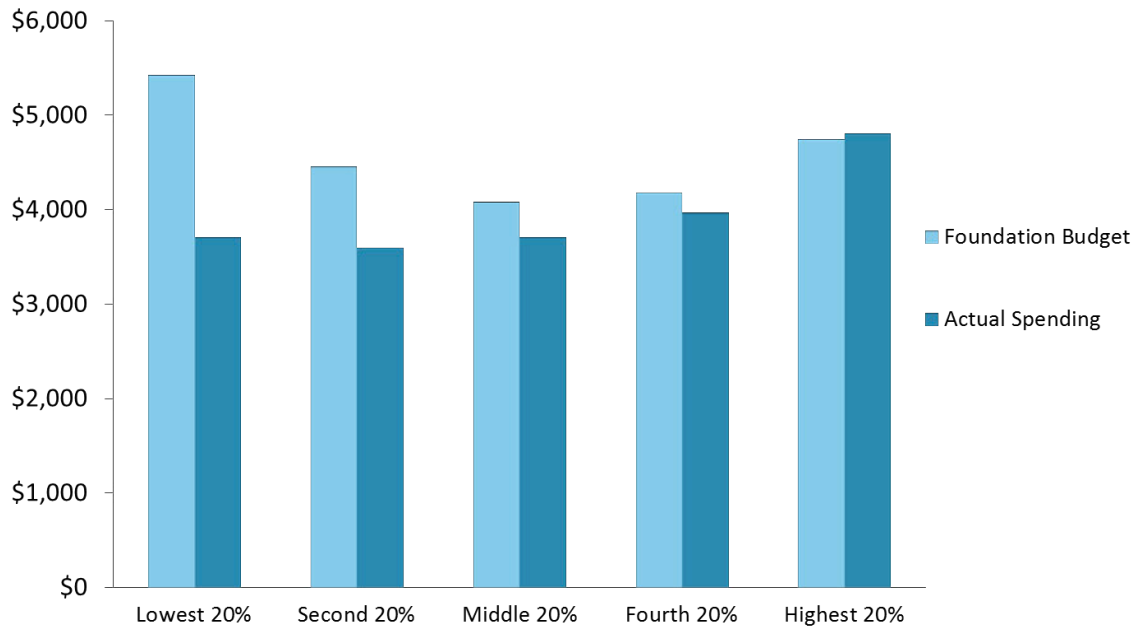
Districts have not implemented the low-income student program envisioned in the original foundation budget

The original foundation budget included additional resources to address the greater needs of low-income students in two very direct ways: 1) providing funding for three extra teachers for every 100 low-income students; and 2) allocating \$380 (in FY 1993 dollars) per low-income student in expanded program allotment money to help schools expand instructional time for these targeted students. While this incremental money still exists in the low-income student enrollment category of the foundation budget, there is no mandate for how the funds are actually spent. Evidence suggests that significant cost shifting is taking money away from these targeted purposes, rendering students in many low and moderate income districts without this additional instructional support. Spending on *Regular Education Teachers* is well below foundation for the lowest-wealth districts, and total spending on *Regular Education Teachers* is significantly greater for the highest-wealth districts, a level of spending that may represent the actual level of spending needed. The additional low-income funding is below that envisioned by the formula, and is certainly below the level needed to support the needs of children in these high poverty rate districts.

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Only Highest-Wealth Districts Spend at Foundation on Regular Ed. Teachers

Districts clustered by Combined Effort Yield (measuring community property wealth and incomes) per pupil
Per pupil spending on Regular Education Teachers, FY 2010



Most districts hire fewer regular education teachers than the foundation budget sets as an adequate baseline.

Due in large part to increased health insurance and special education spending needs, most districts, not just the lowest-wealth districts, spend below foundation on *Regular Education Teachers*. Only the highest-wealth districts spend at foundation in this category. This distinction between under-spending on Regular Education Teachers and over-spending on Special Education Teachers is masked in analyses that combine these two types of teacher spending together.

Furthermore, teacher salaries, adjusted for inflation, have remained remarkably level with the foundation budget's original salary assumption. This means that teacher spending below foundation levels has likely been manifest in the form of fewer total teachers than the foundation calls for, resulting in larger class sizes, less planning and meeting time for teachers during the school day, and the hiring of fewer specialist teachers, such as literacy specialists, language teachers, art teachers, etc. If we are serious about educating the whole child, attention to these opportunities for children to learn is a necessity.

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Conclusion

Examples of many other areas of the foundation budget that need updating abound. The inadequacy of the foundation budget, twenty years after it was designed to reflect the actual cost of educating our students, is illustrated by looking at (1) current spending of those who can afford to spend more, and (2) by the spending on teachers sufficient to meet the needs of different students. There is no magic bullet for meeting the needs of each child who walks through the door of our public schools. Their futures, and ours, are linked to their ability to be educated for their roles in the civic and economic life of the Commonwealth. Good public policy requires the Commonwealth to reexamine the foundation budget so that adequately funding schools is even possible — it is cheaper than paying for social and criminal rehabilitation, and it holds the promise of fully contributing adults — just what our democracy needs.

Sidebar 1: A Teacher's Perspective on Educational Equity

by Rebecca Cusick

In 2010, educators in Massachusetts were putting bumper stickers on their cars that read “Massachusetts Students are #1, Thank a Public School Educator” to recognize the state’s high scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Despite being a proud teacher myself, I just couldn’t bring myself to put one on my car. Teaching in a poor, urban school, I witnessed a glaring opportunity and economic gap facing my kids. Celebrating test scores seemed hypocritical, since the tests were the reason my students were missing out on a well-rounded education.



Rebecca Cusick

Curriculum has become more scripted and less engaging, leading to frustrated students and teachers. Data reigns supreme, usurping our autonomy, our time, and our humanity. Consideration for teacher input is minimal, and a balanced approach to education no longer exists. In recent years, I have been forced to put science and social studies on the back burner to make more time for tested subjects. When I pushed back on this directive, I was told that our non-fiction reading stories adequately cover content. But reading about a barometer is not as effective, or as motivating, as making and using one.

Our kids are also subjected to endless test prep. We give test upon test to get ready for *the test*, and we collect an endless amount of data we have little time to use. The instructional time lost is a crime. But even worse, our kids are becoming disengaged, bored and frustrated. They must

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sit in silence as they work, and when they are finished they must wait silently for everyone else to finish. Sometimes these benchmark tests take days for my special education students to complete. When I reach for the can of sharpened number 2 pencils, my class moans in protest. Recently, I told my class we were taking another district test, and one student slapped his hand on the desk and yelled, “Again! I’m sick of tests.” He brought me his bubble sheet after five measly minutes of work, and I can’t say I blame him. Yet this data will be analyzed to determine his progress. We should not be surprised that behavior problems are a constant challenge in schools like these.

Poor schools are filled with children whose basic needs are not met, and they struggle academically and emotionally. These children, the ones most in need of creative and relevant instruction, lose out in order to focus on the school’s *real* goal. You see, the dirty little secret in education is that the goal in these schools is different than the goal in higher scoring schools. *The goal of education in these buildings is to pass a test.* It weighs heavily on the minds of every educator in the building, and it drives every decision made. Creativity, deep thinking, and a passion for learning are secondary.

But not all schools suffer this harm, even within a poor city. Students in higher scoring schools take more field trips and participate in richer educational experiences. And as concerned parents seek the best and safest learning environment for their children, our schools are becoming more unequal. Certain buildings have more English language learners, special education students, and students living in poverty. These children often carry the burdens of homelessness, abuse, neglect, violence, hunger, transience and other social-emotional problems that keep academics from being their priority. It’s no great surprise that their scores are often lower. This results in more negative labeling, more bad press, and ultimately, more concerned parents fleeing the school.

Instead of recognizing
our students’ resiliency,
and reforming our
instruction to maximize
their abilities, we rate
and rank them.

My students are the forgotten and the ignored. Angry people resent them as a burden on society, as if their station in life was their *choice*. They are angry, they are sad, and quite often they are alone. They are, however, as brilliant as children anywhere. The race we put them in is unfair because in order to reach the finish line, they must jump over the hurdles life has placed in front of them. But instead of recognizing their resiliency, and reforming our instruction to maximize their abilities, we rate and rank them.

There are those who say poverty is not a barrier to educational success. Failure to acknowledge and address the very real obstacles facing my kids hurts them the most. Ironically, policies by reformers, which lead to segregation, testing and punishment, accompany claims of genuine concern. Make no mistake, *there is nothing innovative about education in these struggling schools.*

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What needs to happen is complicated and difficult work. It will not be solved by simple answers or by testing. We need to listen to our educators, our parents and our kids. We need to create school communities that nurture and care for the whole child and provide high-quality learning experiences.

A colleague recently shared a story about one of her ELL students, newly arrived to the U.S., seeing snow for the first time. She sounded as excited as he was. Imagine a school environment where she could seize this opportunity to connect with him both emotionally and academically. She could take him outside to grab a handful of the mysterious white stuff and ask him to describe it to her and to his peers. More than a great lesson in adjectives, it's a chance to engage him in fun and relevant learning. It's also a chance to show that she cares.

We can make this possible. And we have the responsibility to advocate for our students. In doing so, we teach them to advocate for themselves, to question the conditions around them, and to make the world a better place.

Rebecca Cusick teaches in Fall River.

CHAPTER 2

Assessing Student Progress: Are We Moving Toward Equity?

Massachusetts is widely touted as being at the top of the nation in K-12 public education. The state ranks first in the country on fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Data show that NAEP scores in Massachusetts have for the most part been consistently higher than the national average based on gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status (as defined in terms of national school lunch eligibility). Similarly, Massachusetts' students score near the top on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) fourth- and eighth-grade math and science tests. While having the second highest student participation rate in taking the SAT tests, our scores are among the highest of the 50 states. Massachusetts has the 12th highest four-year cohort graduation rate (83 percent) in the nation.²³

This data is good news and cause for celebration.

Massachusetts Has Done Well Before and Since Education Reform

The Education Reform Act of 1993 and in particular the state's Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests are touted as the reason for the state's educational success, but Massachusetts was faring quite well on most education measures prior to 1993. In 1992, our state was 3rd in fourth-grade reading and 5th in eighth-grade reading on the federal NAEP tests, with no other state significantly ahead in either grade. Massachusetts was in the top quarter of states in math — 9th in the fourth grade with only two states significantly ahead, and 12th in the eighth grade. These scores and rankings were achieved without any semblance of state curriculum standards or high-stakes tests.

That same year, Massachusetts was rated as having one of the most inequitable state education funding systems in the nation due to our overreliance on property taxes, which varied widely between rich and poor communities. The single biggest factor in bringing about the Education Reform Act of 1993 was a lawsuit filed by poor urban and rural districts. After 13 years, the suit had finally reached the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. The court, like most other state courts when faced with similar lawsuits, found the state had “an enforceable duty to provide education in the public schools for the children there enrolled whether they be rich or poor and

²³ Downloaded from <http://eddataexpress.ed.gov/data-element-explorer.cfm/tab/data/deid/127/sort/idown/>, 2010-2011 data

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without regard for the fiscal capacity of the community or district in which children live.”²⁴ Because the duty was enforceable, the Court expected the legislature and governor to raise the level of education to meet the standard. This decision by the court prompted the governor to sign, on June 18th, the Massachusetts Education Reform Act, comprehensive legislation intended to address the educational finance and opportunity inequities the court identified. Since the advent of Education Reform, a massive infusion of state funding into public education and the creation of the state curriculum frameworks that promote greater equity of opportunity to a quality education have contributed to improved student achievement, moving Massachusetts’ NAEP rankings from near the top to the top.

Massachusetts *should* be doing better than most of the nation. It has one of the wealthiest and best-educated adult populations in the country. On the latest *Education Week* Quality Counts 2013 report, Massachusetts ranks first among states in the percent of adults with postsecondary degrees, third in the percent of children with at least one parent with a postsecondary degree, fourth in the percent of adults with income at or above the national median, and second in the percent of children in families with incomes at least 200 percent of poverty level. While the quality of teachers and principals rank as the number one and two *school-based* factors in student achievement, family education and income remain the two strongest overall influences on higher student achievement. Massachusetts ranks number one in the country on these two key factors, family education and income (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: State Rankings on Education Levels and Family Income – Top Ten States

Top 10 Ranked States (avg. of rank in 4 ratings)	State	Education Level of Adults				Family Income			
		Percent of Adults with Postsecondary degree		Percent of children with at least one parent with a postsecondary degree		Percent of adults with income at or above national median		Percent of children in families with incomes at least 200% of poverty level	
		Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank
1	MA	50.9	1	60.7	3	61.5	4	69.8	2

²⁴ Supreme Judicial Court in *McDuffy v. Secretary of Education*, June 15, 1993.

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2	NH	46.1	6	62.5	1	60.3	6	73.2	1
3	CT	46.5	5	57.4	6	62.0	3	69.4	4
4	MD	45.8	7	53.2	12	63.3	1	69.5	3
5	VT	47.9	2	62.1	2	54.4	14	66.6	7
6	MN	46.9	4	58.4	5	57.0	10	66.6	7
7	NJ	45.2	9	54.9	8	61.0	5	68.8	5
8	ND	45.7	8	60.6	4	52.8	18	67.4	6
9	VA	45.2	11	54.2	11	58.4	8	66.5	9
10	CO	47.1	3	52.7	13	55.6	12	60.0	19

Source: Education Week, Quality Counts 2013

Massachusetts schools should be expected to do well. It is a testament to the state and our educators that we have lived up to these expectations.

The Hidden Crisis: Equity and Opportunity

Despite the praise bestowed upon the state's education system, Massachusetts has a ways to go before we can truly claim victory for equity in public education. The aggregate high test scores and ranking for Massachusetts students masks the dramatic variation in performance by subgroups of students across a range of indicators. This reflects the sobering conclusion that, despite all the focus on standards, testing and closing test score gaps, race and income remain significant factors in determining educational outcomes in this state.

Student Test Scores - MCAS²⁵

Significant inequities in student performance by race and income remain relatively unchanged during the years of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests and education reform. How much money a family earns, the color of one's skin, the language spoken, and learning disabilities are still far too powerful determinants of a student's educational attainment for a society that aspires to democratic ideals.

Table 2: Comparison of Percent of Advanced/Proficient, Warning, and Gaps for All Grades in 2008 and 2012 English Language Arts MCAS

	2008 Percent A/P	2012 Percent A/P	2008 Percent Gap A/P	2012 Percent Gap A/P	2008 Percent Warning	2012 Percent Warning	2008 Percent Gap W	2012 Percent Gap W
SPED	27	31	37	38	31	32	22	23
ELL	27	34	37	35	30	26	21	17
LI	41	40	23	29	18	16	9	7
Black	43	50	29	26	17	17	12	12
Asian	71	77			6	6		
Hispanic	38	45	34	31	21	20	16	15
White	72	76			5	5		
ALL	64	69			9	9		

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE, 2013)²⁶

As Table 2 exhibits, there has been little movement since 2008 (the earliest year with comparable data on the DESE website) in the gaps in the percentage of students scoring advanced or proficient on English language arts between special education, English language learner (ELL), low-income students and all students, as well as between Black, Hispanic, and White Students. The gap for low-income students increased significantly, while the gap

²⁵ In light of the strong relationship between test scores and demographics, we cannot draw firm conclusions about the reasons for changes in scores. Students deemed low-income have a wide range of incomes, and that range may have changed in the last 20 years. Changes in test score gaps should lead to a closer look at the reality on the ground, but should not be assumed to prove either the success or lack of success of education policies.

²⁶ A/P = Advanced/Proficient; W = Warning; SPED = Special Education; ELL = English language learner; LI = Low Income as defined by free and reduced school lunch; Special Education, English language learner, and Low-Income rates are compared with All Students, while Black and Hispanic rates are compared with White Students.

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increased slightly for students with disabilities. The gap for ELL, Black, and Hispanic students declined slightly. The gap for students scoring in the Warning category increased slightly for special education students, remained static for Black students, and declined slightly to moderately for ELL, low-income, and Hispanic students. In all cases, the gaps remained large, particularly at the advanced/proficient levels.

Table 3: Comparison of Percent of Advanced/Proficient, Warning, and Gaps for All Grades in 2008 and 2012 Mathematics MCAS

	2008 Percent A/P	2012 Percent A/P	2008 Percent Gap A/P	2012 Percent Gap A/P	2008 Percent Warning	2012 Percent Warning	2008 Percent Gap W	2012 Percent Gap W
SPED	19	21	36	38	49	46	32	31
ELL	29	32	26	27	40	34	23	19
LI	33	38	22	21	33	27	16	12
Black	30	35	31	31	34	30	22	20
Asian	73	77			9	7		
Hispanic	29	34	32	32	37	31	25	21
White	61	66			12	10		
ALL	55	59			17	15		

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE, 2013)

Table 3 exhibits even less movement in the size of mathematics gaps from 2008 to 2012 than in English language arts. The gap in percent advanced/proficient increased slightly for special education students and English language learners, remained the same for Black and Hispanic students, and decreased slightly for low-income students. Encouragingly, the percent of students scoring in the Warning category decreased for each subgroup.

Last, MCAS data continue to demonstrate the clear link between high achievement on MCAS and income levels. The child poverty rate of the top ten ranked districts on the 2012 10th grade MCAS English test ranges from two to nine percent, while the ten bottom ranked districts on the same test had child poverty rates ranging from 58 to 87 percent. The results are similar for the 2012 10th grade MCAS test.

Table 4: Community Income and MCAS Results²⁷

Top-Ranked Communities on 2012 MCAS Tests			
10th Grade ELA	% Low Income	10th Grade Math	% Low Income
1. Winchester	6%	1. Winchester	6%
2. Northboro-Southboro	6%	2. Masconomet	NA
3. Harvard	2%	3. Harvard	2%
4. Dover-Sherborn	3.5%	4. Dover-Sherborn	3.5%
5. Westwood	5%	5. Cohasset	3%
6. Weston	4%	6. Duxbury	4%
7. Westford	4%	7. Westwood	5%
8. Wayland	6%	8. Westford	4%
9. Tyngsborough	9%	9. Wellesley	5%
10. Mount Greylock	NA	10. Northboro-Southboro	6%
Lowest-Ranked Communities on 2012 MCAS Tests			
10th Grade ELA	% Low Income	10th Grade Math	% Low Income
1. Lawrence	87%	1. Lawrence	87%
2. Holyoke	83%	2. New Bedford	64%
3. New Bedford	64%	3. Athol-Royalston	53%
4. Chelsea	78%	4. Springfield	86%
5. Springfield	86%	5. Holyoke	83%
6. Fitchburg	73%	6. Southbridge	68%
7. Fall River	78%	7. Ayer-Shirley	32%
8. Boston	70%	8. Chelsea	78%

²⁷ Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education website, 2013. For child poverty data, the source is Kids Count Data Center, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011-12.

<http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/bystate/Map.aspx?state=MA&loct=11&ind=7418&dtm=2&tf=1021>

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9. Randolph	54%	9. Fitchburg	73%
10. Somerville	69%	10. Wareham	50%

It is concerning that the significant gaps in performance between Black, Hispanic, and White students, and between Special Education, English language learner, low-income and all students have remained large and relatively consistent over time. These MCAS results clearly suggest that education reform has not yet made a significant difference in the quality of education that a student receives based on her or his ZIP code, language, or disability and call into question the use of the high-stakes MCAS as an effective tool for addressing these gaps.

Student Test Scores - NAEP

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), operated by the U.S. Department of Education, “is the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America’s students know and can do in various subject areas.”²⁸ NAEP tests are administered in representative sample districts and schools in each state, and results are widely recognized as a valid and common measure of student performance within each state and across the nation.

Examination of the gaps in achievement of Massachusetts students by subgroup on the NAEP reading and math tests over time raises even more questions than did MCAS scores. As seen in Tables five through eight below, the gap between the average scores of White and Hispanic students from 1992 to 2011 narrowed moderately to significantly in 4th and 8th grade mathematics and 4th grade Reading, and widened slightly in 8th grade Reading. However, Massachusetts’ progress in narrowing gaps has been outpaced by most other states in the nation, leaving Massachusetts with some of the widest White/Hispanic gaps in the nation.²⁹

Massachusetts now ranks near the bottom of all states in terms of our White/Hispanic gap, ranging from 38th to 47th (of 47 states) in terms of our progress toward closing achievement gaps in math and reading at the 4th and 8th grades.

In terms of the White/Black achievement gap, there has been a moderate to significant narrowing in 4th and 8th grade mathematics. The ranking of 23rd in the White/Black gap in 4th grade mathematics and 19th in 8th grade mathematics leaves Massachusetts in the middle of the pack of states in closing the test score gap. In reading, the gap increased slightly or remained the same, leaving Massachusetts with a ranking of 35th in the nation in reducing the reading test score gap between Black and White students at both the 4th and 8th grades.

²⁸ Downloaded from NAEP website, 3/3/13.

²⁹ While the overall national reduction in test score gaps by race and income have been small in comparison to the challenge that remains, they outpaced those of Massachusetts.

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Last, the NAEP test score gap between free/reduced lunch and full-paying students in Massachusetts remained static across both grades and disciplines, while other states have made progress in reducing this gap. As a result of this pattern, Massachusetts' ranking has fallen over years so that the state is now ranked from 27th to 45th in closing the test score gap by income.

Table 5: Massachusetts Ranking on NAEP by Score Gap among Subgroups in 4th Grade Mathematics (average scale scores)

Year	White/Black Gap		White/Hispanic Gap		Free/Reduced Lunch Gap	
	Rank	Gap in #	Rank	Gap in #	Rank	Gap in #
1992	27	36	19 of 21	34	N/A	N/A
1996	9	26	16	27	13	21
2000	16	27	22	36	39 of 41	30
2007	26	25	43	26	35	22
2011	23	24	38	22	27	22

Source: NAEP website, 2013

Table 6: Massachusetts Ranking on NAEP by Score Gap among Subgroups in 8th Grade Mathematics (average scale scores)

Year	White/Black Gap		White/Hispanic Gap		Free/Reduced Lunch Gap	
	Rank	Gap in #	Rank	Gap in #	Rank	Gap in #
1992	15	34	13 of 16	38	N/A	N/A
1996	13	33	17 of 17	44	34 of 41	27
2000	3	26	18 of 21	37	26	29
2007	38	40	42 of 43	35	49	31
2011	19	29	43 of 48	31	40	28

Source: NAEP website, 2013

Table 7: Massachusetts Ranking on NAEP by Score Gap among Subgroups in 4th Grade Reading (average scale scores)

Year	White/Black Gap		White/Hispanic Gap		Free/Reduced Lunch Gap	
	Rank	Gap in #	Rank	Gap in #	Rank	Gap in #
1992	11	26	14	34	N/A	N/A
1998	12	28	20	36	23 of 40	28
2002	19	27	30	32	35 of 44	26
2007	36	31	41	32	46	29
2011	35	27	40	27	35	27

Source: NAEP website, 2013

Table 8: Massachusetts Ranking on NAEP by Score Gap among Subgroups in 8th Grade Reading (average scale scores)

Year	White/Black Gap		White/Hispanic Gap		Free/Reduced Lunch Gap	
	Rank	Gap in #	Rank	Gap in #	Rank	Gap in #
1998	18	27	21 of 22	32	35	29
2002	31	31	24 of 26	31	37	25
2007	18	25	36 of 42	27	38	24
2011	35	27	47 of 47	34	45	27

Source: NAEP website, 2013

Massachusetts ranks in the bottom tier of states in closing the test score gap for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students. One significant reason for the state's low ranking is that the state is losing ground as compared to the progress being made nationally in closing gaps for Black and low-income students. Tables nine through twelve compare the progress of Massachusetts in addressing the test score gaps for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students over time with that made by the nation in 4th and 8th grade mathematics and reading. In examining all three subgroups, the nation's Black and low-income students, on average, are making more gains in closing the test score gap than are Massachusetts students (in three of four comparisons for both subgroups). Massachusetts has had greater gains than the nation in closing the score gap for

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Hispanic students (in three of four comparisons). However, the state still has larger Hispanic-White gaps than the nation in all four testing areas.

Table 9: Comparison of Massachusetts and United States Changes in Score Gap among Subgroups in 4th Grade Mathematics (average scale scores)

	White/Black Gap in Points		White/Hispanic Gap in Points		Free/Reduced Lunch Gap in Points	
	MA	US	MA	US	MA	US
1992/96*	36	35	34	26	21	24
2011	24	25	22	20	22	23
Change	12	10	12	6	(1)	1

Source: NAEP website, 2013. * 1996 for free/reduced lunch.

Table 10: Comparison of Massachusetts and United States Changes in Score Gap among Subgroups in 8th Grade Mathematics (average scale scores)

	White/Black Gap		White/Hispanic Gap		Free/Reduced Lunch Gap	
	MA	US	MA	US	MA	US
1992/96	34	40	38	29	27	27
2011	29	31	31	23	28	26
Change	5	9	7	6	(1)	1

Source: NAEP website, 2013

Table 11: Comparison of Massachusetts and United States Changes in Score Gap among Subgroups in 4th Grade Reading (average scale scores)

	White/Black Gap		White/Hispanic Gap		Free/Reduced Lunch Gap	
	MA	US	MA	US	MA	US
1996/98*	26	32	34	28	28	30
2011	27	25	27	24	27	23
Change	(1)	7	7	4	1	7

Source: NAEP website, 2013. * 1998 for Free/Reduced Lunch Gap

Table 12: Comparison of Massachusetts and United States Changes in Score Gap among Subgroups in 8th Grade Reading (average scale scores)

	White/Black Gap		White/Hispanic Gap		Free/Reduced Lunch Gap	
	MA	US	MA	US	MA	US
1996/98	27	26	32	27	29	23
2011	27	25	34	21	27	23
Change	0	1	(2)	6	2	0

Source: NAEP website, 2013

Massachusetts English language learners also do not fare well on NAEP math and reading tests. According to the national Quality Counts 2009 report, the gap between Massachusetts' English language learners who are proficient in NAEP math and reading tests and all students proficient in math and reading is significantly greater than the national average in both the 4th and 8th grades.

Additional Outcome and Engagement Measures

The disparities by race, income, and language are not limited to academic test results. Suspension rates are one indicator of a student's engagement in school and are a strong predictor of dropping out of high school. In Massachusetts, Black and Hispanic students are suspended close to three times the rate of White students. The Hispanic suspension rate of 12.3 percent is the second highest suspension rate for Hispanic students in the nation. This disproportionality places Massachusetts as having the second highest gap between White and Hispanic student suspensions out of 47 states measured.

Table 13: MA Suspension Rates and National Ranking by Subgroups (2009-2010)

MA	Suspension Rates in MA			Ratio (of suspensions compared to White students)	
Subgroup	Black	Hispanic	White	B/W	L/W
Suspension Rate	11.5	12.3	4.3	2.7	2.9
Rank	15 th of 47	46 th of 47	16 th of 47	15 th of 49	46 th of 47

Source: Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012

With Black and Hispanic students scoring at significantly lower rates of proficiency while being suspended at substantially higher rates than White students, it should not be a surprise to see large gaps between their graduation rates and those of their White peers. White students graduate from high school at a rate that is 23 percentage points higher than Black students and 30 percentage points higher than Hispanic students. The state's Hispanic graduation rate ranks 39th out of 47 states, and is lower than the national average. This places Massachusetts 31st of 49 states for the gap between Black and White student graduation rates (with 1st meaning that the gap is the smallest) and 39th of 47 states for the size of the gap between Hispanic and White student graduation rates.

Table 14: MA Graduation Rates and National Ranking by Subgroups (2009-2010)

MA	Graduation Rates in MA			Gap	
Subgroup	Black	Hispanic	White	B/W	L/W
Grad Rate	60%	53%	83%	23%	30%
Rank	16 th of 49	39 th of 47	11 th of 49	31 st of 49	44 th of 47

Source: Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012

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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 2009.³⁰ A significant reason for this low figure is the impact the MCAS graduation requirement has had on this subgroup. As noted by Kruger and McIvor (2013), "In 2002-03, high school seniors in special education were five times more likely to fail the MCAS requirements than their classmates in general education. In 2011-12, high school seniors in special education were 15 times more likely to fail the MCAS requirements than their classmates in general education. The MCAS graduation requirement has become an unintentional mechanism for preventing many students in special education from obtaining a high school diploma. Whereas students in special education comprised only 16 percent of all high school seniors in 2012, they nonetheless were 75 percent of the high school seniors not passing the state-mandated, MCAS-related graduation requirements."³¹ (Please see graph on next page.)

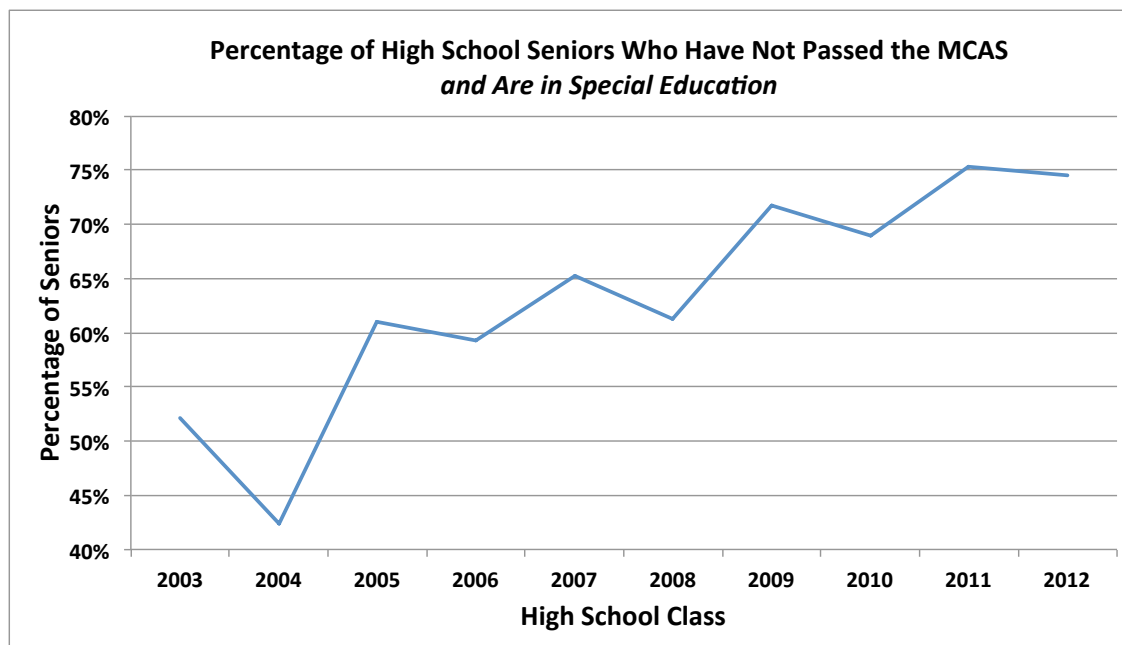
The MCAS graduation requirement has become an unintentional mechanism for preventing many students in special education from obtaining a high school diploma.

³⁰ Kruger, L. & McIvor, T. MCAS (2013). *Graduation Requirement Disproportionately Harms Students in Special Education*. Unpublished Manuscript.

³¹ Two factors help explain these trends. First, a higher percentage of students in general education are now passing these high stakes tests. Second, the number of students in special education has increased since 2003. Although the pass rate for high school seniors in special education increased from 73.0% in 2003 to 80.7% in 2004, the pass rate for this group has decreased slightly to 80.2% during the nine years since 2004.

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Source: Kruger, L. & McIvor, T. MCAS (2013). *Graduation Requirement Disproportionately Harms Students in Special Education*. Unpublished Manuscript.

The Opportunity Gap

These test score, graduation, and suspension gaps reflect in part an opportunity gap in our state. While decisions about personnel, curriculum, and instruction are critical, equity in resources continues to play a pivotal role in determining the quality of education that a student receives. In Massachusetts, despite the infusion of new state dollars through the Education Reform Act of 1993, educational opportunity is still far too influenced by the community in which one resides. Massachusetts ranks 43rd of 50 states in actual spending as a percent of the amount needed to bring all students to a median level of equity in spending. As a result, the state ranks 42nd in the difference in per-pupil spending levels of districts at the 95th and 5th percentiles, and 39th in the amount of disparity in spending across districts. One contributing factor to these rankings is the fact that, despite the state's wealth, Massachusetts ranks a mediocre 23rd of 50 states in the percent of total taxable resources devoted to education.

Table 15: Massachusetts Rankings on Key Equity in Funding Indicators

Equity Indicator	MA State Rank
Relationship between district funding and local property wealth (with 1 st indicating the highest funding for poorer districts)	21

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Actual spending as percent of amount needed to bring all students to median level of equity in spending	43
Amount of disparity in spending across districts (low-numbered ranking indicates greater equity)	39
Difference in per-pupil spending levels at the 95 th and 5 th percentiles	42
Percent of total taxable resources spent on education	23 (at 3.8%)

Source: Education Week, Quality Counts 2013

According to a recent Reuters report, over the past twenty years Massachusetts has “experienced the country’s second biggest increase in income inequality,” resulting in being the “seventh-most unequal of the 50 states....” As the Reuters report notes, “as the gap between rich and poor widens in the world’s richest nation, America’s best-educated state is among those leading the way.”³²

This income disparity affects students beyond their K-12 education experience, particularly in access to college and meaningful careers beyond high school graduation. For example, the same Reuters report found that, “In the state’s five wealthiest school districts, students had average scores ranging from 594 to 621 on the 800-point college-admissions test in 2009-2010. In the five poorest districts for which data are available, the SAT scores averaged from 403 to 469.”³³ SAT scores are one important measure for college admissions to many colleges and universities.

It Is Time to Focus on Equity and Excellence

The Education Reform Act of 1993 played a role in improving the quality of education across the state. Massachusetts’ ranking moved from near the top to the top of the nation in student achievement on multiple measures. The state’s education performance has been praised nationwide, including by President Obama.

However, as the data reveals, hidden underneath this headline is another story of tremendous disparity in opportunity and outcomes by race, income, and language. Twenty years into the Education Reform era, the state still lags in the bottom half of states in equitable outcomes by

³² Rohde, D.; Cooke, K.; Ojha, H. (December 2012) *The Decline of the “Great Equalizer.”* The Unequal State of America: A Reuters Series.

³³ Ibid.

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race, income, and language. Many low-income, Black, Hispanic, English language learners, and special needs students are still not receiving the education they deserve. These results are exacerbated by the state's continued inequitable spending, placing it in the bottom quarter of states on measures of finance and equity.

Two decades later, we have more than ample evidence to suggest that we need to make mid-course corrections. Massachusetts has a responsibility to provide every student with equitable educational opportunities. Now is the time to consider new financial and educational approaches, and make a serious commitment to address educational equity through actions not words. As a state, we need to celebrate the work we have accomplished, while recognizing that there is much work to do before we can proudly claim that our public education system truly reflects the democratic and equitable ideals of our nation. It's time to get to work on this new agenda.

CHAPTER 3

How Has MCAS Testing Affected Teaching and Learning and What Are the Alternatives?

The 1993 Education Reform Law called for a comprehensive system of measuring school quality and student outcomes using “a variety of assessment instruments...assessing whether students are meeting the academic standards.”³⁴ The law specified that, “...as much as is practicable, such instruments shall include consideration of work samples, projects and portfolios, and shall facilitate direct and authentic gauges of student performance.” Such a system would have conformed to the standards and principles of the testing profession, avoiding the well-known pitfalls of high-stakes testing, including narrowed curricula, teaching to the test and various forms of corruption, including cheating.

Twenty years later, it is clear that the “Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System” is comprehensive in name only. What drives many of our classrooms is a set of high-stakes standardized tests in math, English language arts and science, now known simply by the acronym MCAS. The groundwork for this translation of the Education Reform Act legislative language was laid with former Governor William Weld’s decision to appoint Boston University President John Silber — his opponent in the 1990 governor’s race — to head the Board of Education in 1996. Simultaneously, Weld filed legislation to eliminate the then 16-member state Board of Education and give the governor power to appoint a new downsized nine-member board. The legislation was pushed through without any opposition by the Democratic legislature in a late-night session. In addition to Silber, Weld appointed three members affiliated with the Pioneer Institute (James Peyser, Abigail Thernstrom, and Ed Delattre) and another ideological supporter of privatizing public schools (Roberta Schaefer). This newly constituted and carefully constructed board, with five of nine members affiliated with conservative organizations and causes, determined that the state would adopt a narrow set of tests rather than the system of varied assessments called for in the 1993 Education Reform Act.

Initially, the state required MCAS testing in math and English language arts (ELA) in three grades — 4th, 8th and 10th. However, the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind law dramatically increased MCAS testing, mandating math and reading testing every year from 3rd to 8th grade and once in high school, plus science testing once in each of three grade spans. This decision cemented the central role of the MCAS, especially in schools struggling to meet the federal law’s test score targets and avoid stigma or sanctions for poor test scores.

³⁴ M.G.L. Chapter 69, 11, “An Act Establishing the Education Reform Act of 1993,” 177.

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Massachusetts and most other states are now transitioning to a new set of standards, the national Common Core State Standards, the adoption of which was a criterion in the competition for federal Race to the Top grants. By 2014-2015, there will be available a new, more rigorous set of tests to measure the new standards. On this anniversary of the 1993 law, as we prepare to make these transitions, it makes sense to evaluate the impact of the high-stakes MCAS on our schools. Before we remake our schools to comply with new standards and new high-stakes tests, we should learn from past mistakes to avoid repeating them.

Narrowing the Curriculum

Adults who succeed in life after struggling in school often say that their lives began to turn around when they found an extra-curricular activity or “special” subject, like art or music, which gave them the confidence and motivation to overcome personal obstacles. Yet the impact of high-stakes testing in Massachusetts on the non-tested subjects and extra-curricular activities has received little attention in the media or the research community.

Nationally, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) reported in 2007³⁵ that time spent on subjects other than math and reading had been cut by nearly a third since the No Child Left Behind law took effect in 2002. “What gets tested gets taught,”³⁶ said Jack Jennings, CEP’s president and CEO. The CEP study was based on a survey of 350 school districts across the country. The biggest cuts were found to be in elementary school, possibly because NCLB focuses most of its tests at that level.

In 2003, Boston College researchers published a national survey of teachers, conducted for the National Board on Testing and Public Policy, on the impact of high-stakes testing in their classrooms. Like the CEP study, the National Board survey found that teachers said they added instructional time in subjects that were tested and reduced it for subjects that were not. The researchers also reported, “About three-quarters of all teachers ... found that the benefits of the testing program were not worth the time and money involved.”³⁷ In addition, “9 in 10 teachers did not regard the state test as an accurate measure of what ESL students know and can do, and 4 in 10 teachers reported that teachers in their school could raise test scores without improving learning.”

³⁵ Jennifer McMurrer, Choices, Changes, and Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era, <http://www.cep-dc.org/publications/index.cfm?selectedYear=2007>.

³⁶ Press release, Center on Education Policy, July 25, 2007. <http://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=312>

³⁷ Joseph J. Pedulla et al., Perceived Effects of State Mandated Testing Programs on Teaching and Learning: Findings from a National Survey of Teachers, 4. <http://www.bc.edu/research/nbetpp/statements/nbr2.pdf>

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Teachers said they had changed their teaching techniques to fit the goal of producing higher test scores. “A substantial majority of teachers at each grade level indicated that state testing programs have led them to teach in ways that contradict their ideas of sound instructional practices,” the researchers said. “This view was particularly pronounced among elementary teachers.... This finding is a particularly distressing one and highlights the fact that state testing programs can have unintended negative effects.”

Also in 2003, a Boston College team conducted an in-depth study based on teacher interviews in three states including Massachusetts. This study, also for the National Board on Testing and Public Policy, was carried out by a group of researchers that overlapped with the national survey team.³⁸ It produced results that echoed the findings of the first, including concerns about pressures to teach to the test and spend time on test preparation instead of using sound educational practices.

According to Norman Shacochis, president of the Massachusetts Council for the Social Studies (MCSS), the impact of MCAS on history instruction went through several phases as plans for a history MCAS test came and went. At first, schools revamped their social studies curriculum to align better with the state Frameworks in preparation for a state test. The emphasis was on learning world history facts to the detriment of creative lessons, he said, because that was the expected focus of the test. Then state plans shifted to US history, and districts revamped their curricula again. When Massachusetts put off its plans for a history MCAS, Shacochis reported, creative teaching returned to social studies but the subject is getting much less time, especially in grades K-8. At most elementary grade levels, according to Shacochis, social studies instruction is an afterthought, and in many middle schools, it is taught by teachers certified in other fields.

The narrowing caused by high-stakes testing is particularly severe in the schools where scores are lowest – precisely those where students need the most opportunities for motivating learning experiences.

In his film *Teach*³⁹, former Boston teacher Robert Lamothe detailed the rich curriculum available to students at Newton North High School, including 44 courses in the visual, performing, and applied arts. In the high school where he taught, Snowden International School in Boston, Lamothe reported there was no music, photography, or TV studio, and art had just been eliminated. Thus, the gap in richness of the curriculum offered to students in the inner city

³⁸ Lisa M. Abrams, Views from the Classroom: Teachers’ Opinions of Statewide Testing Programs, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/s15430421tip4201_4

³⁹ For more about the film *TEACH*, see <http://www.teachdocumentary.com/film/aboutteachfilmmakers.cfm>

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and those in a relatively affluent suburb may be growing, in part because inner city schools are under more test pressure.

Critical Thinking and the ‘MCAS Generation’

On top of evidence that the high-stakes MCAS has narrowed the curriculum, there are serious concerns among K-12 and postsecondary educators about the impact of test-driven classroom environments on the development of critical thinking skills.

There is some agreement that the new Common Core standards (adopted in part to make Massachusetts eligible for federal Race to the Top funds) place great emphasis on higher order thinking skills. However, it will be some time before we know if the “new and improved” assessments being developed to measure the Common Core standards will drive teaching and learning that will help our high school graduates think flexibly and creatively about the ever changing challenges they will face in college and life. Dr. Yong Zhao, author and Associate Dean for Global Education in the College of Education, University of Oregon, sees reason for concern.⁴⁰ “The Common Core, however dressed, shares the fundamental spirit with NCLB: standardization of curriculum enforced with high-stakes testing. In fact, the Common Core comes with more force on a larger scale. The side effects will be even more significant,” Zhao said.

In the meantime, there is a rising chorus of Massachusetts voices noting a decline in critical thinking skills among our high school graduates and linking it to high-stakes testing. Professor Trudy Knowles of Westfield State University has been teaching at the college level for more than 20 years. She served on Governor Patrick’s Readiness Project Subcommittee on Assessments. Knowles notes that the State Board of Higher Education found that more than one-third of students enrolled in state colleges and universities are not ready for college and need remedial coursework.⁴¹ “This [is] despite the fact that the MCAS said they were ready to graduate.” She connects these deficits to high school curricula structured around test preparation instead of the development of critical thinking.

“I now have what I call the MCAS generation in my classes. I see great potential in all my students. What I also see compared to even five years ago are students who think less, take less risks, don’t engage in class conversations, and seem to have a dull glaze in their eyes when I ask a question,” Knowles said. “When I asked my students what was happening, one said to me, ‘In

⁴⁰ Yong Zhao, “Common Sense vs. Common Core: How to Minimize the Damages of the Common Core,” 17 June 2012. <http://zhaolearning.com/2012/06/17/common-sense-vs-common-core-how-to-minimize-the-damages-of-the-common-core/>

⁴¹ “PARCC: NEXT GENERATION ASSESSMENT: What does this mean for higher education in Massachusetts?” PowerPoint Presentation, Slide 5. <http://www.mass.edu/currentinit/parccresources.asp>

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high school we didn't have to think. All we had to do was give the right answer. And if we didn't know the answer we kept quiet for fear they would send us into test prep classes.”⁴²

Boston public school teacher Jon Shore agrees. “After years of MCAS testing and teaching, we are graduating seniors, adults really, who have been indoctrinated by MCAS testing into subordination,” Shore said. “I taught before this MCAS frenzy, and I remember teaching critical thinking, and I remember graduating students who could think through problems and confidently explain their decision making process. They didn't look to me to decide what is ‘right.’”⁴³

James McDermott of Clark University, a Massachusetts Teacher of the Year and former member of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, also sees a link between preparing students for the high-stakes MCAS and a lack of preparation for real academic writing. “In a test there is no time to create what writer Ann Lamotte calls [sloppy] first drafts where the beginning of the writing process helps writers discover thoughts and ideas they may not have thought they had until they began writing. Instead, they must have a thesis before they write. But academic writing is about making a thesis, not about having one. And writers make a thesis through the use of evidence. Too many college writers have learned to write their opinion and defend a ready-made thesis rather than to create a thesis using the evidence they accumulate.”⁴⁴

In a commentary titled “MCAS now an end in itself,” McDermott wrote that he had initially been an MCAS booster but now believes that his reform ideas have been hijacked. “The thinking is that a new-age test will transform classrooms. I thought that way once, too. The evidence, though, overwhelmingly challenges us to rethink our policies. Our children deserve better. Testing policies, such as MCAS, do not drive good instruction. Indeed, they do just the opposite, lowering expectations for all of us.”⁴⁵

Knowles and McDermott are among 165 Massachusetts professors and researchers who have signed a Massachusetts Statement Against High-Stakes Testing,⁴⁶ in part because of these concerns. Among other things, the statement cites pressure to teach to the test as making it

⁴² Email communication. Jan. 10, 2013.

⁴³ Online comment submitted to “Flunking the Test,” Boston Globe, April 11, 2013.

⁴⁴ Email communication, Jan. 10, 2013.

⁴⁵ James E. McDermott, “MCAS now an end in itself,” Worcester Telegram and Gazette, April 4, 2013.

⁴⁶ The current list of signers and the statement can be found here:
<http://matestingstatement.wordpress.com/about/>

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“difficult for teachers to create a learning environment that promotes creativity, critical thinking, risk-taking, experimentation and a love of learning. Moreover, as with other negative consequences, there is a disparate impact: teaching to the test, curricular narrowing and damaging school climates more frequently affect low income and minority students.” The professors cite a variety of research, including a 2011 report from the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, which found that “test-based incentives” have had little or no positive effect on academic achievement and have caused some harm.⁴⁷

Across the country, including here in Massachusetts, there is a tragic new genre of public resignations by teachers who cite the narrow focus on test preparation as a key reason they are leaving the profession they loved. A growing list of teachers are recording their resignations and posting them on YouTube and Facebook, where they are going viral.⁴⁸ Here in Massachusetts, former Boston Public School teacher Jill Conroy testified before the Massachusetts Legislature’s Education Committee about why she felt she had to quit teaching. Among other things, she said, “Teaching is no longer about the students; it’s about the scores and scores alone. Nothing else matters.”⁴⁹

The Mismeasure of Our Schools

In the past twenty years, the ways in which the state uses MCAS results to measure students and schools have multiplied and become increasingly complex. In 2010, the state legislature passed the “Achievement Gap Act,”⁵⁰ which, among other things, required districts to intervene aggressively in schools with the lowest MCAS scores. Beginning in the 2012-2013 school year, as a result of a waiver from some NCLB requirements, Massachusetts implemented a new system of measuring school performance. In part, the new system was meant to be fairer than NCLB’s Adequate Yearly Progress mechanism, which by 2011 had resulted in 82 percent of Massachusetts schools and 91 percent of districts failing to reach the required benchmarks toward 100 percent proficiency on the MCAS. In place of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), based on math and ELA MCAS scores alone, there is now a Progress and Performance Index (PPI), which incorporates “student growth” and other indicators, including science scores and dropout rates.

⁴⁷ Michael Hout and Stuart W. Elliott, Editors. *Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Education*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2011, 4-5.

⁴⁸ See, for example, this powerful resignation letter read by Ellie Rubenstein, <http://youtu.be/uH9vxq1iJVM>.

⁴⁹ Testimony to Education Committee, April 9, 2013.

⁵⁰ The text of the Act is available here: <http://www.malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2010/Chapter12>

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Massachusetts uses the PPI scores to divide schools into five levels. Eighty percent of schools are classified in the top two levels. The remaining 20 percent are classified as Level 3, 4, or 5. Those schools considered the lowest achieving, with the least improvement, based on their PPI scores, are in Levels 4 and 5. These are the schools that are eligible for “turnaround” interventions, the most severe (Level 5) being state receivership. While no individual schools have been designated as Level 5, the district of Lawrence was placed into receivership under this system in November 2012.

Instead of being more fair and transparent, however, the new system is more difficult to understand and appears to be labeling some of our most innovative and high-performing schools as failures. One striking example of this is Boston Arts Academy, a Pilot school that has drawn international praise for its arts-based curriculum and successful student outcomes. It sends 93 percent of its graduates to college or conservatories.

According to Linda Nathan, BAA’s founding headmaster and now executive director of the Center for Arts in Education, “Our graduates include two members of Alvin Ailey Dance Company and countless other alums who have taken their place in the world of art, education, culture and service. In a recent study, 63 percent of our grads had either finished or were still in college.”⁵¹

In 2013, BAA exceeded all of its test score targets, including those for its high-needs students (a category that includes students with disabilities, English language learners and low income students). Its 2012 graduation rate was 86 percent. Yet, according to the state’s Cumulative Progress and Performance Index, it is in the lowest performing 20 percent of the state’s schools.

“Even though we are well above statewide averages on the test with regards to the percentage of students scoring at proficient or advanced in both ELA and math, someone has to be near the bottom. And because this new way of calculating levels is normed, someone will always be at the bottom,” Nathan said. “If your head hurts trying to understand all this, join the club. But really: How is the average parent supposed to understand all this?”

Better Assessment Models Exist, at Home and Abroad

There are many models of successful school systems that we might look to for inspiration. Much has been written about the Finnish school system, which underwent dramatic reforms beginning in the 1970s, and in recent years has consistently come out at or near the top on international comparisons.

⁵¹ Speech in Washington, D.C. April 5, 2013. <http://lindanathan.com/2013/04/10/whats-been-lost-in-the-bubbles-comments-from-occupy-doe-april-5-2013/>

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Finland's reforms couldn't be any more different than those adopted in Massachusetts and across America. There are no high-stakes standardized tests, just one test for college admissions. Teachers assess their students with tests they create themselves and give individualized report cards to students and families. The Ministry of Education keeps track of national achievement by testing small, representative sample groups across the country. Teachers are well-trained, decently paid (but not significantly higher than the average U.S. teacher), have high prestige and tremendous autonomy in their classrooms.⁵²

But there are also successful models closer to home. New York State's Performance Standards Consortium consists of 28 small schools, including 26 in New York City.⁵³ After a determined campaign, these schools won permission from state authorities to substitute their own final performance assessments for the New York State Regents exam except in language arts.

Students are required to complete four performance tasks including an analytic essay, a social studies research paper, a science experiment, and an applied mathematics problem. These tasks are the polar opposite of memory-dependent, multiple-choice test items. They involve analysis and application of knowledge to new problems.

A sample literature "performance task" used by the New York State Performance Standards Consortium:

Who is an American? Does the American dream change depending upon the identity of the dreamer? What qualifies as a triumph or a failure? Who emerges heroic and who allows the pursuit of the dream to turn him villainous? Use two of the novels we've read this semester to explore these questions.

To assure comparability across schools and to maintain high standards, some of the student work is rescored by outside examiners.

Consortium schools offer students not just a more interesting final exam, but a school career built around higher-order thinking. That may help explain why these students have much higher persistence in college than either New York State or national averages.

⁵² For a description of the Finnish school system, see Anu Partanen, "What Americans Keep Ignoring about Finland's Success," *The Atlantic*, 29 December 2011.

⁵³ "Educating for the 21st Century: Data Report on the New York Performance Standards Consortium," 2012. http://performanceassessment.org/articles/DataReport_NY_PSC.pdf

Table 16: Persistence in College, 2nd Year: Consortium, National and NYS Rates

	Consortium Rate*	National Rate**	NYS Rate**
4-year colleges	93%	74.7%	80.8%
2-year colleges	83.9%	53.5%	59.1%

Source: * National Student Clearinghouse, Jan. 2012 **Data obtained from <http://www.higheredinfo.org>.

Like charter schools, Consortium schools are schools of choice. So we must ask whether the college success of Consortium graduates is due to the sorts of students who enter and stay in these schools. No demographic information can fully answer this question because within any demographic category, there are always some students better equipped to succeed in school and others who are less well equipped. But it is relevant that the Consortium schools' demographics closely approximate the city averages. Where they diverge, they have more students from groups that traditionally do less well.

Table 17: New York Performance Standards Consortium Compared with New York District High Schools

	Consortium	NYC High Schools
% Black & Hispanic	72.0	71.9
% ELLs	12.7	12.3
% Students w/ special needs	14.3	13.0
% Students qualified for free or reduced lunch	64.2	63.6
Average 8 th grade proficiency (out of 4.50)	2.71	2.76
4-Year Graduation Rate (based on 2 or more years of enrollment)	68.6	59.0
Black Graduation Rate	60.8	53.9
Hispanic Graduation Rate	64.9	51.8
Asian Graduation Rate	87.6	76.8
White Graduation Rate	77.9	73.9
ELL Graduation Rate	69.5	39.7

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Students With Special Needs Graduation Rate	50.0	24.7
Suspension Rate	5	11.0

Source: Educating for 21st Century: Data Report on the New York Performance Standards Consortium, http://performanceassessment.org/articles/DataReport_NY_PSC.pdf

Yet Consortium students have higher graduation rates than other New York schools, especially among their special education students, English language learners, Blacks, and Hispanics (see Table 17). What's more, Consortium schools have less than half the suspension rates of other district schools or charter schools. Their teacher turnover rates are much lower as well.

These impressive results suggest that Massachusetts should give more schools the flexibility to use a pedagogical and assessment approach similar to the Consortium schools, replacing MCAS with performance tasks or granting waivers from mandated tests, as the Board of Regents did in New York for the Consortium schools.

Performance assessments are, in fact, being used successfully in Boston at the Mission Hill School. A series of videos called “A Year at Mission Hill”⁵⁴ portrays the K-8 Pilot school's use of performance assessments and the profound, positive impact they have on student learning. However, in the final segment, Mission Hill Principal Ayla Gavins explains that, in order to protect their assessment process, the school will be resisting a new mandate tied to the federal Race to the Top program (for “predictive tests” that will be linked to teacher evaluations). For this, she says in the film, the school could be written up, putting her own job at risk.

Time to Reform the New Status Quo

In 2004, Larry Myatt, the founder of Fenway High School, and Peggy Kemp, his successor at Fenway, wrote “Taking Stock: A Decade of Education Reform in Massachusetts.” In it, they described the toll taken by high-stakes testing on Massachusetts schools. “Some educators argue,” they wrote, “that the vast expenditures on high-stakes testing have, ironically, lowered the bar, drumming into students a dull set of test-taking strategies and depleting resources

⁵⁴ See “A Year at Mission Hill – Chapter 10: The Freedom to Teach,”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VduHn6GmVt4&feature=player_embedded#!

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available for more challenging research and advanced coursework that are generally associated with the junior and senior years of high school.”⁵⁵

They pointed to the impact on education’s “consumers,” our students, who find school “boring, stressful and unrelated to more important issues in their lives and to what they will need in the future.” More recently, in 2012 a Gallup student survey found student engagement declines steadily, year by year, from fifth grade to high school, when just 44 percent of students say they find school engaging. Calling this drop in student engagement “our monumental, collective national failure,” Brandon Busteed, Executive Director of Gallup Education, cites as a key factor, “an overzealous focus on standardized testing.”⁵⁶

Nearly ten years ago, Myatt and Kemp took stock of Education Reform in Massachusetts and called for a reevaluation of the policies “that have distracted us from building the schools that we began to envision a decade ago.” Twenty years out, we are overdue to reform what has become a test-driven status quo that does not serve our students well.

⁵⁵ Larry Myatt and Peggy Kemp, “Taking Stock: A Decade of Education Reform in Massachusetts,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2004, 139-144.

⁵⁶ The School Cliff: Student Engagement Drops with Each School Year, <http://thegallupblog.gallup.com/2013/01/the-school-cliff-student-engagement.html#.UQNNcdXxaRw.twitter>



Members of Lynn Parents Organizing for a Better Education

Sidebar 2: The View from Lynn Parents

by Lissy Romanow

In fall of 2012, the newly formed Lynn Parents Organizing for a Better Education (LPOBE) conducted a citywide survey of parents. More than 80 parents from nearly all of Lynn's 26 public schools were asked how their child's school was succeeding and how it needed to improve.⁵⁷ What we found was that parents were particularly happy with the quality of teachers, but that building conditions, class size, communication with parents, lack of after-school programming, and parental involvement needed to improve across the city.

We ultimately shared these findings at a community forum in November of 2012, when parents speaking many of Lynn's languages (English, Spanish, Khmer, Arabic) came together with local elected officials to brainstorm solutions to the issues identified through the survey. In response to the forum, the group forged a new alliance with elected officials to demand truly adequate funding so that Lynn schools can provide an education on par with neighboring, higher-income districts like Swampscott and Marblehead. In the coming months, LPOBE parents will be providing workshops to other parents across the state on the Chapter 70 funding formula and how changing it is necessary to close the opportunity gap in Massachusetts.

⁵⁷ Survey results relate to those collected from the end of September through November 26, 2012.

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Below are the findings of our survey.

Questions Included

- Are you happy with your child's school? (Yes or No)
- What are you happy with?
- What are you unhappy with?
- How could this school be improved?
- What do you think we as parents can do to make changes?

What Parents are Happy with...

- Nearly half of respondents mentioned teachers in some way, calling them accessible, attentive, caring, involved, and responsive to parental concerns.
- A number of Brickett Elementary parents commented on the high level of parental involvement and the school's strong parent teacher organization.
- A Lynn Woods parent was happy with the "positive environment" at the school.
- An Ingalls parent called the school "well organized and clean."

What Parents are Unhappy with...

Class Size

- Getting in the way of being able to give students individual attention.
- Schools feeling cramped.
- One parent said that large class sizes affected the pace at which teachers were able to cover material.
- Affecting the teacher's ability to customize the curriculum to their students' needs.
- This issue appeared on approximately 20 percent of the surveys collected.

Communication

- Short notice for open houses or other important school events/meetings.
- Not having phone calls to the schools returned (example: a Sisson parent who called the school six times with no response).
- Not having a way to contact teachers outside of school hours (via email or phone).
- Not having a clear understanding of specific policies such as the discipline policy or dress code.
- Two parents mentioned issues surrounding their child's 504 or IEP plans.
- No clear understanding of what is in the curriculum and difficulty in getting this information from the teacher.

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- For Spanish-speaking parents: lack of Spanish-speaking personnel in the Lynn Public School system (teachers or translators) being a barrier to effective communication with the school and teachers.

Lack of after-school program options and extracurricular activities at both the elementary and middle school levels

- Good parent programs are offered, but they only occur on a few days for a short amount of time.

Items on a few surveys:

- Lack of parental involvement at some schools.
- Too short of a school day (ending at 1:45 p.m.).
- Too much emphasis on a few MCAS-related subjects (English, math, spelling) and not enough science or social studies.
- Outdated facilities with a lack of grassy play space (Brickett, Cobbett).
- No libraries at some schools (Sisson, Cobbett).
- The academic quality of the middle schools (Marshall).

Parent-Centered Changes

‘What do you think we as parents can do to make changes?’

Parents had a number of ideas including:

- Communicating with the teachers more regularly.
- Working with the principal.
- Joining PTOs.
- Attending school committee meetings.
- Creating volunteer groups for parent outreach at the beginning of the school year.
- Parents working together.
- Helping with fundraising for needed items.
- Increasing learning opportunities at home, going to the library or Aquarium, encouraging reading at home.
- Increasing parental accountability and involvement with the schools.
- Most of the comments regarding improving the schools focused on parents increasing their active presence in the schools.

Lissy Romanow is a community organizer for Neighbor to Neighbor.

CHAPTER 4

The Impact of Charter Schools

Overview

The Education Reform Act of 1993 authorized the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to establish charter schools in Massachusetts and, in September 1995, the first 15 schools opened. Legislators said their intent was to “stimulate the development of innovative programs within public education” and “provide opportunities for innovative learning and assessments.” By the 2012-13 school year, there were 76 charter schools operating statewide with an enrollment of 31,830 students, 3.3 percent of the state public school enrollment, but 11 percent in Boston and a significant percentage in other urban centers as well.

There are two types of charter schools in Massachusetts, but most are Commonwealth charter schools, which will be the focus of this report. Commonwealth charter schools are considered separate school districts, are run by independent boards, and do not require the approval of the local school committee. All other types of charter or alternative schools must be approved by the local school committee. While in-district charter or other alternative schools have positive features that may provide good models for public education, such an analysis is beyond the scope of this report. For simplicity, for the remainder of this report, the term “charter schools” shall generally mean Commonwealth charter schools.

In Massachusetts and across the country, charter schools are at the center of efforts to create a marketplace of schools that are free of local government control. Twenty years after the law that created charter schools, it remains a point of increasingly contentious debate across the state whether charter schools have served to improve quality and stimulate innovation, or have diverted scarce public school resources while screening, counseling or pushing out students with the most challenging learning needs.

Meanwhile, the goal of guaranteeing equal access to high-quality, desegregated and equitably funded schools seems to have taken a back seat to the creation of a multi-tiered system that remains deeply segregated.

In theory, charter schools are given autonomy in return for accountability. Those that fail to improve student learning are to be shut down. To date, that fate has been visited on seven Massachusetts charter schools.⁵⁸ Students at the controversial and troubled Gloucester

⁵⁸ According to the DESE, since 1994, 102 charters have been granted and 18 charter schools have closed, 11 by pre- or post-opening surrender and seven by revocation or nonrenewal.
<http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/factsheet.pdf>. The 2010 Achievement Gap legislation created another category

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Community Arts Charter School experienced this harsh form of accountability when their school closed abruptly in the middle of a Wednesday this January. The story of the Gloucester charter's birth and demise exemplified the bitter politics and controversy that can envelop a community when a charter comes to town, pitting parents and teachers against one another in a struggle for resources and control. (See Page 82 for more on the Gloucester school.)

The original Education Reform law had a cap of 25 schools statewide and a limit of three-quarters of a percent of state public school enrollment. These caps were raised over the years, and an additional cap was added, limiting the amount of net school spending that could go to charter school tuition from the sending districts. In 2010, the legislature passed a bill eliminating the cap on the percent of charter enrollment statewide. The law essentially eliminated the cap on the number of schools allowed statewide because charters granted in certain low-performing districts could be outside the cap. While keeping the net school spending limit at 9 percent for most districts, the cap was raised to 18 percent for low-performing districts, which includes Boston. In Boston, with its 20 Commonwealth charter schools, that has meant a loss to traditional district schools of \$69 million, after deducting limited state reimbursements (Boston is now at 11 percent of its net school spending).

Now, charter school proponents are pushing for legislation to lift this last cap on charter schools in Boston and other "low-performing" districts, as defined by MCAS results.

Marc Kenen, executive director of the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association, claims the need to lift the cap is self-evident due to the high demand for charter school seats. This is based on claims of a cumulative waiting list of 45,000 for all of the state's charter schools. But that number likely includes double, triple and quadruple counting since parents can put their children on multiple waiting lists. Also, the *Boston Globe* recently reported that some schools put families on their waiting lists if they ask for information about the school, even if they do not apply.⁵⁹

The legislature in 2010 directed the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to come up with an accurate count,⁶⁰ but DESE has yet to do so.

What's more, charter schools are not required to backfill seats that open up when students leave after February 15; if the vacancy is in grades 10, 11, or 12; or if the vacancy is in the last half of the grades offered by the charter school. As a result, there are actually already many empty seats in existing charter schools.

of in-district schools, similar to Horace Mann Charters, called Innovation Schools. Also, Boston has created its own in-district schools, known as Pilot schools.

⁵⁹ James Vaznis, "Waiting lists for charter schools overstate demand, review finds," *Boston Globe*, April 7, 2013.

⁶⁰ See <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2010/Chapter12>.

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The proposal to raise the charter school cap is before the legislature now in a bill sponsored by Senator Barry Finegold and Representative Russell Holmes. It could be on the 2014 ballot as an initiative question. The Walton Family Foundation, endowed by the owners of Walmart, gave the charter school association a total of \$550,000 in 2011 and 2012. The Walton Foundation and other charter school proponents say charter schools are the ticket out of poverty for students who would otherwise be trapped in dysfunctional urban schools. But studies of student test scores, even those funded by charter school advocates, make much more circumscribed claims.

Funding Charter Schools - Still a Problem

Charter schools are funded by the state by reducing the state education aid of the “sending” school district (where the charter school student lives) by the per-pupil charter tuition (set by the state, based on the sending school’s expenditures) and paying this amount directly to the charter school. The tuition formula for charter schools has been adjusted to more accurately reflect the cost of educating different types of students, such as students with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency. However, the resulting loss of education aid can still be devastating to a small or already poorly funded school district, since it is not always possible to reduce school costs even when there are fewer students.

State law provides some reimbursement to the sending district for the first few years to enable districts to adjust to the loss of funding, but in recent years, the state has not fully funded that reimbursement account.⁶¹ Meanwhile, charters get their full funding from the Chapter 70 education aid account and an additional amount per pupil for capital costs.

Perhaps most troubling for the sending school districts is the fact that they are responsible for fully funding the tuition for students to go to a school that the local district — and therefore the local community and its elected officials — have no say in, no oversight of, and usually, no contact with. Nor do districts have any part in determining the amount of tuition that they send to the charter, regardless of the district’s financial situation. In addition to paying the charter school tuition, the district must provide transportation to charter students on the same basis that it provides transportation to district students. Also, the obligation to pay for private day or residential services for special education students remains with the local district, not with the charter school. Finally, the district is required to take back all of the students who leave the charter school, whether voluntarily or because they have been pushed out by the charter because they did not meet the charter school’s “standards.” In a strange twist of the “free market,” the district is responsible for paying the tuition and other costs for schools with which they are competing.

⁶¹ The projected reimbursement for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 2013 is 69 percent, even less than the prior year’s 83 percent.

Do Charter Schools Raise Student Test Scores?

The question most people would like to answer is whether charter schools do a better job of educating children. But it is important to recognize that almost all of the research on charter school quality attempts to answer a much narrower question: Do they raise standardized test scores?

This question has been investigated extensively, but important questions remain:

- To what extent are the higher scores found in some studies due to characteristics of the students?
- High-scoring charter schools screen out – intentionally or not – many students in difficult circumstances. Can they open themselves to all students and still maintain high scores?
- And do the high scores indicate better preparation for college?

We will review the main studies and developments in Massachusetts in chronological order, culminating with two studies released this year.

The most comprehensive national study to date, released in 2009 by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, found that they do not.⁶² This finding was particularly surprising since CREDO is a research project of the conservative Hoover Institution,⁶³ which supports charter school expansion. CREDO examined schools in 15 states and the District of Columbia, representing 70 percent of U.S. charter schools. CREDO's measure of success was score increases on state reading and math tests. CREDO used a complex methodology, pairing charter school students with statistical composites of non-charter students from feeder schools who matched demographically and in several other ways.⁶⁴

Nationwide, 17 percent of charter schools showed better results than the traditional public schools in their immediate area, 37 percent showed worse results, and the rest were equivalent.

A 2009 study limited to Boston and using a different methodology put charter school students much farther ahead. This study was funded by the Boston Foundation and conducted by a group

⁶² http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf

⁶³ <http://www.hoover.org/research/projects-and-programs>

⁶⁴ For a relatively clear explanation of this methodology, see the most recent CREDO Massachusetts study, <http://credo.stanford.edu/documents/MAReportFinal.pdf>, p. 8 -11.

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from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). On one test (middle school math), the scores of charter students were .54 standard deviations ahead of the non-charter control group. The report notes that .5 standard deviations is equivalent to the difference between the 50th and 69th percentile, roughly half the Black-White achievement gap. The differences on most other tests were below .2 standard deviations.

The Boston Foundation researchers used two approaches. One was to compare students who applied to charter schools that had more applicants than seats and used a lottery to decide whom to admit. The researchers compared the subsequent test scores of students who got in through the lottery with the scores of those who did not.

As the researchers noted, this meant that only the most popular charter schools – those with more applicants than seats – would be compared with all district schools. Only 26 percent of the charter sample was included. The others did not have more applicants than seats and/or did not have student records for applicants that were complete enough to allow the researchers to follow both lottery winners and losers. The small sample of the charters with high test score performance was reported by the media as if the positive results reflected all charters, when in fact several charters left out of the sample were subsequently closed due to low scores.

The second approach covered more charter schools but raised questions about validity. The researchers compared charter students with district school students who were matched on demographics and prior test scores. As the report pointed out, this second approach might miss crucial differences among students that do not correspond to demographics or prior test scores—for example, differences in student motivation and family involvement. With these limitations noted, Boston district’s Pilot high schools (schools with greater autonomy than traditional schools) performed comparably well to charter schools.

The study noted, but did not emphasize, that charter schools had fewer limited English proficient (LEP) and students with disabilities than district schools.

MTA Study: Do Segregation and Attrition Boost Charter School Scores?

The Massachusetts Teachers Association followed the Boston Foundation study with its own analysis of Boston charter schools.⁶⁵ The MTA, using some of the same numbers for LEP and students with disabilities that were reported but downplayed by the Foundation study, said charter schools were “segregating students based on language proficiency, special education status and poverty.” Charter schools enrolled smaller percentages of students with disabilities

⁶⁵ <http://massteacher.org/news/archive/2009/~media/Files/PDFs/CEPP/charterschools0909.ashx>

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than Boston district schools, and almost all of those they did enroll were students with mild disabilities – almost none had moderate or severe disabilities. And while Boston’s charter schools had many students with family incomes low enough to qualify for reduced-price meals, they had significantly lower percentages of the poorest students, those receiving free lunches.

The MTA also pointed out that only about 40 percent of charter high school freshmen make it to the senior year, compared with about 80 percent of Boston district school freshmen. The report noted that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan had called schools where two out of five freshmen didn’t make it to their senior year “drop-out factories.” By that criterion, the report said, every single charter high school in Boston is a drop-out factory.

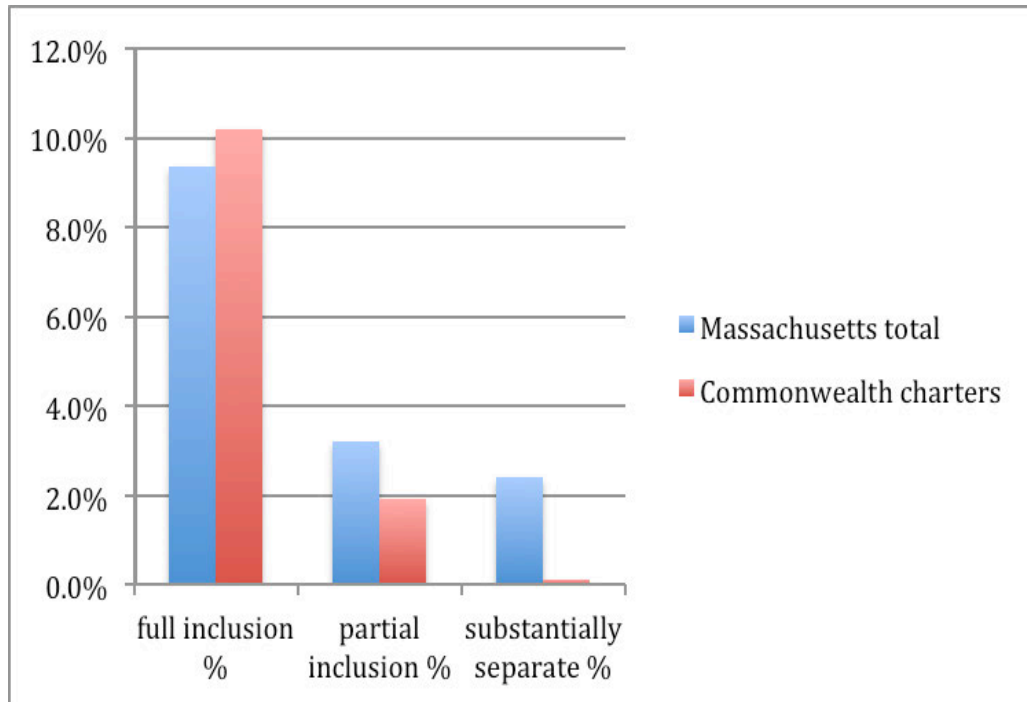
The Act Relative to the Achievement Gap of 2010 responded in part to these criticisms. While it doubled the charter school funding cap in districts with the lowest test scores, it required those applying under the higher cap to have track records showing they have succeeded, not just with some students, but with students who generally score low.

The Act also required charter schools to make an effort to recruit high-needs students rather than enrolling only the most motivated students. But as the conservative, pro-charter Pioneer Institute has pointed out, the law only required charter schools to document their effort, not actually to enroll and keep these students.⁶⁶

In charter schools today, the pattern of excluding low-scoring students continues. Figure 1 compares Massachusetts district schools with Commonwealth charter schools in the percentage of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that call for total inclusion with regular education students, partial inclusion, and substantially separate programs. Generally speaking, students in substantially separate programs have the most significant or severe disabilities.

⁶⁶ <http://pioneerinstitute.org/download/charter-school-caps-and-strings-attached/>

Figure 1: Massachusetts District Schools and Charter Schools by Percentage of Students in Full Inclusion, Partial Inclusion and Separate Placements.

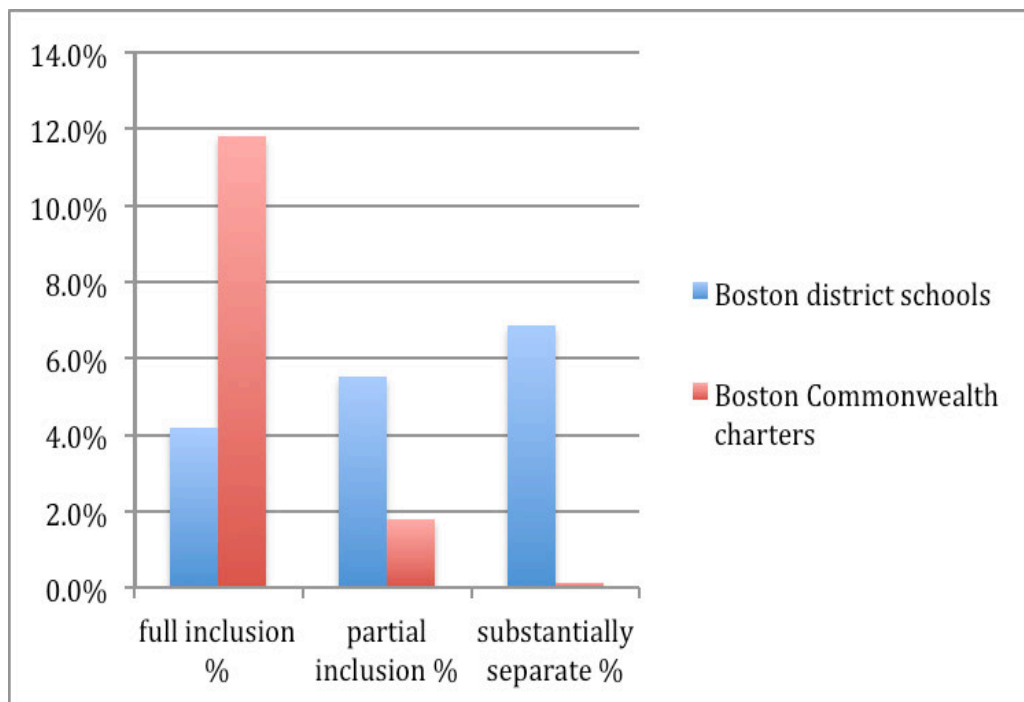


Source: DESE, 2012.⁶⁷

Charter schools enroll a lower percent of students with moderate to severe special needs even though these schools are disproportionately located in low-income, urban districts where there are more students with disabilities. Figure 2 compares Boston district schools with charter schools located in Boston.

⁶⁷ Data comes from the file titled “Special Education Counts and Rates for Educational Environment.” <http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/enroll/default.html?yr=sped1112>, last updated Dec. 14, 2012.

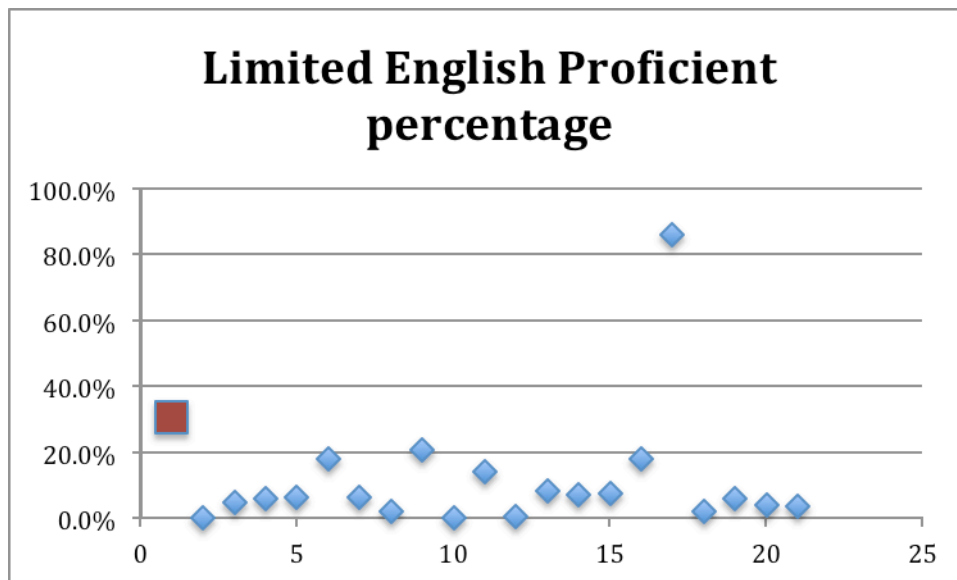
Figure 2: Boston District Schools and Boston Charter Schools by Percentage of Students in Full Inclusion, Partial Inclusion and Separate Placements.



Source: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/enroll/default.html?yr=sped1112>, last updated Dec. 14, 2012. Data comes from the file titled “Special Education Counts and Rates for Educational Environment.”

Figure 3 is a scatterplot showing the percentage of Limited English Proficient students in Boston district schools vs. Boston's Commonwealth charter schools. The Boston district is the first dot, at 31 percent.

Figure 3: Limited English Proficient Students in Boston District Schools (first dot, at 31%) and Boston's Commonwealth Charter Schools.



Source: 2012-2013 data from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/selectedpopulations.aspx.

Most charter schools have a much smaller percentage of LEP students than the district schools. The stand-out exception is Match Community Day Charter School, established specifically to educate English language learners. Since it opened last year with grades pre-K and 2 (projected to expand gradually to pre-K-12), this school has yet to administer any MCAS exams. The original founding MATCH school in Boston has 2.1 percent Limited English Proficient students.

Student mobility is another challenge for urban school systems that most charter schools do not have to confront. According to state data, 18.4 percent of students in Boston district school classes in 2010-11 entered after the year begins and had to get used to their new situation and classmates while their teacher worked to bring them up to speed. In charter schools, it was only 5.1 percent.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/mobilityrates.aspx [I NEED TO CHECK WITH LOU ON THE CHARTER SCHOOL NUMBERS.]

What It All Means

One way to understand the blizzard of numbers is to consider the average Boston district classroom. According to DESE statistics, it has 18 students. Three or four enter after the school year begins, while others leave. Five or six do not speak English fluently. Three have disabilities, possibly severe. And that doesn't count the students whose families face economic and other crises. Well over half of members of this class should receive extra attention from the teacher, but budget constraints make it hard for the district to reduce class size or provide the help that's needed.

Meanwhile, in the charter school down the block, the typical class has 21 students, but very few have come in after the year began or don't speak English. And those who have disabilities compose only a small fraction of the class.

If the district school is shut down because of low test scores, and the charter school gets permission to expand, will that typical charter school take in the students who need the most help? The statistical record suggests it will not. Whether the charter school discourages these students from applying, or their parents can't find their way through the intake procedure, or they're just not present on the critical days when applications are accepted, the result for the students is the same: They will go to other district schools, making it even more difficult for the teachers there to give every child what he or she needs to become a well-educated and productive member of a democratic society.

Because of the dramatically different student populations in the charter and non-charter classrooms in Boston, one should be very skeptical of evaluation reports that suggest charter schools are outperforming other Boston schools on measures of achievement.

Massachusetts Charters: Some Flowers, Some Dandelions, No Excuses?

In 2011, the group that wrote the 2009 Boston Foundation report applied their approach to charter schools in the rest of the state in a report titled “Student Achievement in Massachusetts Charter Schools.” They came up with surprising results: While charter schools in urban areas seemed to raise test scores, charter schools outside urban areas generally did not, and in some cases had lower scores.

One of the study’s lead authors, MIT Economics Professor Joshua Angrist, said, “The charter schools’ idea is ‘Let a thousand flowers bloom.’ Well, many of those flowers are dandelions ... Charter schools are very heterogeneous.”⁶⁹ The researchers noted that urban and nonurban charter schools were different in an important way: Most urban schools subscribed to the “no-excuses” philosophy, but not a single nonurban charter did so. The schools touted by charter school proponents almost always represent the “no-excuses” mold.

The charter school movement began as a way to encourage wide-ranging innovation. In urban districts, however, charter schools seem to be converging on this one approach, which involves long hours, highly precise rules for behavior, and severe discipline for breaking even minor rules, on the theory that any leeway granted to students may breed chaos.

The long hours have received the most publicity. The tight control over behavior has received less. The leading KIPP charter school chain enforces a set of classroom rules they summarize as SLANT: “Sit up straight. Look and Listen. Ask and Answer questions. Nod your head. Track the speaker with your eyes.” A positive view of this slogan is that it helps students pay attention. A negative view is that it stresses compliance above all else.

The primary school (grades K – 2) of the Edward Brooke Charter School in Roslindale has a 79-page online handbook. It details the many violations of the school’s dress code for which students must be sent to the dean’s office to call their parents, violations such as wearing sneakers that are not 100 percent white or black, wearing the wrong color socks, or wearing a polo shirt that does not have the school emblem.⁷⁰

As Paul Tough, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, and many others have reported, such extreme control of student behavior is defended as necessary to teach middle class or “professional”

⁶⁹ Peter Dizikes, Jan. 2, 2013. “The Natural Experimenter,” Technology Review, <http://www.technologyreview.com/article/508381/the-natural-experimenter/>

⁷⁰ Page 48 of the Edward Brooke handbook. <http://www.ebrooke.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/K-2-student-handbook-2011-2012.pdf>

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habits and values to lower-class children.⁷¹ However, as Tough notes, schools for middle class and affluent students often try to create an atmosphere that cultivates free-wheeling creativity, exploration, teamwork, and critical thinking, very different from the “no excuses” approach. Tough quotes a guidance counselor at an elite New York City school explaining that, although her school does value self-discipline, “If you’re showing self-control at KIPP, for example, you sit up straight and you track the teachers. Here, you can sit in a ball in your chair and no one cares. We don’t care if you lie on the floor.”⁷²

To maintain total compliance with the “no-excuses” code of conduct, school officials may need to be able to threaten students with expulsion. The Thernstroms, for example, quote a school leader in his opening remarks to students on their first day of school: “Am I forcing you to be here? ... If you cannot live by our rules, if you cannot adapt to this place, I can show you the back door.”⁷³

Consequences go beyond oral threats. “No-excuses” schools frequently resort to out-of-school suspension. The Brooke Charter School, grades K-8, has a 25 percent out-of-school suspension rate, according to state data.⁷⁴ The online data do not reveal how many of the suspended children were in the primary grades. Nor does it show the total number of suspensions. The data give the percentage of students suspended at least once, but some students may be suspended repeatedly.

Table 18 shows the schools with the highest percentage of out-of-school suspensions, after eliminating schools that were set up to handle students with behavioral problems. Charter schools make up half of the top 10, even though they are less than 5 percent of Massachusetts schools.

⁷¹ Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed*, 2012; Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom, *No Excuses*, 2003.

⁷² Tough, 2012, p. 90.

⁷³ Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, 2003, p. 49.

⁷⁴ http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/indicators.aspx?mode=district&orderBy=, data downloaded April 11, 2013.

Table 18: Top 10 Massachusetts Schools in Out-of-School Suspensions

School	Out of school suspension %
Roxbury Preparatory Charter	56.1
Grove Hall Preparatory Charter School	50
City On A Hill Charter Public	43.6
Holyoke - Holyoke High	38.4
UP Academy Charter School of Boston	38
Lynn - Lynn English High	37.6
Springfield - Forest Park Middle	37.2
Springfield - South End Middle School	37.2
New Leadership Charter	36.6
Boston Preparatory Charter Public	35.1

Source: Mass. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education data for 2011-12 school year, at http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/indicators.aspx.

Twelve of the top 40 schools with the highest out-of-school suspension rates are Commonwealth charters. Out-of-school suspension sends a message that the school feels the child should not be there.

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In the latest state data, charter schools continue to show much higher attrition rates than their district school neighbors. Table 19 shows the 2009-10 ninth grade enrollment for Boston and the Commonwealth charter schools that had ninth grades that year, 2012-13 senior enrollment, and the percentage drop.

Table 19: High School Enrollment Drop-off

District	Grade 9 (2009-10)	Grade 12 (2012-13)	% Drop
Boston	4862	3869	20%
MATCH	72	45	38%
Boston Collegiate	50	35	30%
Codman Academy	53	24	55%
Academy of the Pacific Rim	49	26	47%
Boston Preparatory	56	39	30%
City on a Hill	130	47	64%
Charter Total	410	216	47%

Source: http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/enrollmentbygrade.aspx

These charter schools' average attrition rate was more than twice that of the district schools.

Charter school representatives have responded to criticism of their high attrition rates by pointing out that high student mobility is a feature of many urban schools, not just theirs. The critical difference, however, is that district high schools accept new students transferring in. Charter high schools do not. The Achievement Gap Act of 2010 requires charter middle schools to fill vacant seats if they have applicants, but the law did not extend this requirement to charter high schools.

A new CREDO study of Massachusetts schools, released in 2013, is being used as an argument for lifting the caps on charter schools, but a closer look shows the study came to mixed conclusions. The Walton Family Foundation, which supports charter schools, funded the study.

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Using the same matching procedure as previous CREDO studies, the researchers found that, overall, charter school students' scores rose slightly faster than the scores of matched students in district schools. But the small average gains concealed more interesting findings:

- Charter school students in Boston did much better on test scores than their matched district school students.
- Outside Boston, the difference between charter and district school students was very small.
- Charter students in elementary schools scored lower than district students, while those in middle schools scored higher. High school scores were mixed (lower in reading, higher in math).
- The few English language learners in charter schools did worse than their district school peers.
- Students with special needs in charter schools did slightly better on MCAS tests than those in district schools but the researchers warned that “of all the facets of the current study, this one deserves the greatest degree of skepticism” because the small number of students compelled them to compare all students with special needs in charter schools with all students with special needs in the matched district schools, without distinguishing among categories. As we have seen, district schools educate many more students with serious disabilities.
- Charter school students in their first year scored no better than district school students (lower in reading, higher in math). But students who stayed at charter schools for two or more years scored higher.

The finding that charter school students score higher only after their first year could be explained by low scorers leaving. As CREDO researcher Edward Cremata notes, “[T]he measured impact of charters by years of enrollment should be viewed as a “best case scenario” for the charter sector, in that the cohort of students that remain continuously enrolled in charters for three or four years may not be the same as those that enroll in charters for shorter periods of time. In other words, the ‘4 years in charter’ effect is likely capturing both the value add from the charter school as well as inherent student characteristics that make them more likely to persist in charters.”⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Email communication, April 2, 2013.

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The CREDO finding that only charter middle schools in urban areas show better scores than their district counterparts is consistent with the earlier Harvard/MIT study.

Looking at all the studies, most funded by charter school advocates, we see evidence that the “no excuses” type of charter school raises MCAS scores in middle schools. It remains unclear to what extent this is due to low-scoring students leaving.

We see no evidence that other types of charter middle schools raise scores. Some of these schools may offer other benefits to students, but they do not seem to raise scores.

It is unclear whether any type of charter school raises scores for elementary and high school students. At these two levels, charter schools as a group do not show better test score performance than district schools. However, higher scores in no-excuses elementary and high schools could be masked by lower scores in other charters.

Parents thinking of enrolling children in no-excuses schools should be aware that:

- They resort quickly to out-of-school suspension for behavior code infractions.
- A large proportion of students do not complete the program.
- They enroll very few students who are not already fluent in English and there is no evidence that the few they do enroll score higher.
- They enroll very few students with serious disabilities.

High MCAS Scores, Mediocre SAT Scores?

Recently the Boston Teachers Union *Bulletin* raised a new question about the significance of high charter school MCAS scores. The BTU looked at SAT scores and noted that Boston charter schools with top MCAS scores often show mediocre performance or worse on the SAT, which is specifically geared to predict first-year college grades.

District schools that score high on MCAS tend to do well on the SAT as well. This suggests that urban charter schools’ high MCAS scores may be the result of intense focus on that particular test rather than real academic skills that could transfer to other situations.

Among the 17 Commonwealth charter schools that have as many or more low-income students than the state average, only two made it into the top half of SAT reading comprehension scores and a different two were in the top half on the SAT math test. None were close to the top. In

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short, the charter schools did about as well as one would have expected based on income, even ignoring their low percentages of English language learners and students with disabilities.

Yet six of the 17 joined a handful of the state's wealthiest towns in having 100 percent of their students score "proficient" or "advanced" on the English Language Arts MCAS, and four had 100 percent "proficient" or "advanced" on the math MCAS.

The most striking discrepancies were at the MATCH charter school in Boston and the Community Charter School of Cambridge, where top ranked scores on the MCAS came with scores very near the bottom on the SAT, as Table 20 shows.

Table 20: Contrasting Test Scores

District	MCAS ELA rank	SAT reading comprehension rank	MCAS math rank	SAT math rank
MATCH	1*	275	1*	228
Community Charter School of Cambridge	1*	268	1*	248

*** Sixteen districts scored 100 percent proficient or advanced in ELA; four districts did as well in math. The state website lists results for 287 districts.**

Source: SAT scores: http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/sat_perf.aspx; MCAS: http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/mcas.aspx

In May 2013, the Boston Foundation issued another report in support of its campaign to eliminate the charter school cap in Boston and other urban areas. This report compared students using a complex methodology involving students who applied to charter schools that were over-subscribed and therefore were admitted by lottery. The approach was similar to the method used in the earlier Boston Foundation study (some of the same researchers were involved).

This time, the researchers said they included six charter high schools in Boston but eliminated two others that were closed for poor performance. This leaves them open to criticism, as with the earlier Boston Foundation report, that the sample was biased toward charter schools with high scores.

The researchers' description of their methodology raises the question of whether the validity of their findings depends on the assumption that students who win the admissions lottery and go

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on to enroll have the same characteristics as lottery winners who do not enroll. They offer no evidence to support this assumption. That would not matter if almost all students who were offered admission accepted the invitation. However, the researchers' data show that many students admitted to charter schools do not actually enroll.⁷⁶

The key findings of this study were that students who go to charter schools in Boston have higher MCAS and also higher SAT scores than students who applied to charter schools but did not get in. Their methodology does not show the dramatic differences between MCAS and SAT performance that is evident in the state data. The SAT performance of charter school students deserves further study. The researchers also found that charter school students are more likely to take Advanced Placement tests and do better on those tests than their district school counterparts.

They noted that students applying to charter schools have better scores before they apply than other students, and that they include very few English language learners.

They presented preliminary data about college careers but said their numbers were too small for firm conclusions. They promised more in the future.

Do Charter School Students Fare Better in College?

The May 2013 Boston Foundation study is part of a new effort in charter school research to go beyond high school test scores and look toward college.

We have seen evidence that many charter schools filter out students either before or after admission if they are not sufficiently motivated, academically capable, and willing to comply with strict behavior codes. But what of the students who do complete the program? How do they fare in college?

The KIPP charter school network has sought to track its graduates and find out. In 2011, KIPP reported⁷⁷ that 33 percent of the graduates of its programs in Houston and New York had obtained four-year college degrees 10 years after leaving a KIPP middle school, which allowed four years to finish high school and six for college. KIPP said 95 percent had graduated from high school, and 89 percent had enrolled in college, but getting through college turned out to be a much bigger problem.

⁷⁶ <http://www.tbf.org/~media/TBFOrg/Files/Reports/Charters%20and%20College%20Readiness%202013.pdf>.

⁷⁷ <http://www.kipp.org/results/college-completion-report>

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Deborah Meier, pioneer educator and founder of Boston's Mission Hill Pilot School, has reported on a conference in which a KIPP teacher told about discovering that "many [KIPP grads] fell apart later on without the tight structure and scaffolding that KIPP provided. They had learned to do things the KIPP way but had not built in ways to handle more open settings." Meier favors a radically different school model in which students learn to take part in a democratic community at the same time that they master academics.

Confirmation comes from conservatives as well. Robert Pondiscio, writing in the spring, 2013 issue of the Hoover Institution's *Education Next* quarterly journal, says the discovery that "no-excuses" charter graduates don't do so well in college is leading some charter leaders like Donald Kamantz, director of college initiatives at Houston's YES Prep charter chain, to reconsider their strategy:

"What we've found with the 'whatever it takes' or 'no excuses' mentality is that it was very teacher-driven and less student-driven," says Kametz, acknowledging this is a controversial line of thought in his own halls. ... [This is] the largest gaping hole with our kids in college," he says. "They will constantly say, 'You structured my life so much that I had to do very little thinking and structuring myself.'"

"Academic preparation is absolutely foundational," says Jeremy Chiappetta, executive director of Blackstone Valley Prep in Cumberland, Rhode Island. "But what education looks like, to be truly prepared for college, probably is not the routinized learning that makes many of these schools, including us, really successful on standardized tests. I don't think that's the academic rigor that any of us want for college prep. I think it's much deeper, much bigger," he says.

Teaching in Charter Schools

In the face of disagreement about almost everything else, educators across the board agree that the quality of teaching is a critical factor in education. Economic and racial inequality are more important, but teachers still make a difference – in test scores and in the broader although less easily quantified elements of a good education.

Looking back on their schooling, adults rarely focus on buildings or books, but everyone remembers teachers.

When policymakers, politicians and charter school advocates talk about the advantages of Commonwealth charter schools, which operate independently of union contracts and district rules, a key factor is the flexibility charter schools have to make decisions about hiring, firing and work rules. They argue that this unfettered control over teaching staff allows the schools to choose the best, most committed and hard-working teachers and dismiss any who are not

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performing at a high level. It also allows them to provide students with longer school days and expect teachers to be on call after school to provide support and answer questions from students and families. This is touted as one of the main reasons why some of these schools achieve better test results than their traditional district counterparts.

What is it like to teach in this environment? Teachers who have worked in some of Boston's high-scoring charters describe grueling work days and pressure to perform that makes it difficult to persist. Nancy Bloom worked at one of Boston's largest charter schools for five years. After quitting, she wrote a column⁷⁸ in which she describes the environment at her former school: "The teachers at my charter work 10 and 12 hours a day and often on the weekend to keep up with the incredible demands placed on them by the administration. Every year dozens of them quit or get fired. Very few of us last long enough to become expert veteran teachers. Teachers are afraid and paranoid. No one feels safe. Just like Walmart workers, they need the security that unions provide."⁷⁹

While there has been a focus on the need for better teacher evaluation processes as a way to improve teacher performance and more easily remove underperforming teachers, the turnover rate of our urban teacher workforce may be a more pressing issue. Annual turnover rates are high in general for urban teachers, ranging from 13 to 15 percent in Boston, but the rates for urban charter schools are extremely high.

Researchers at Vanderbilt University found, nationally, charter schools had a 25 percent teacher turnover rate compared to 14 percent at public schools, with 14 percent of the charter school teachers leaving the profession and 11 percent moving to a different school. On the public side, 7 percent left the profession and 7 percent changed schools. Overall, they said the statistical rate of turnover for charters was 132 percent greater for leaving and 76 percent greater for moving. "We found the turnover in charter schools is voluntary and dysfunctional compared to public schools," observed David Stuit and Thomas Smith.⁸⁰

In Massachusetts, average one-year teacher turnover rates range from 13.2 percent for low-poverty schools to 21.5 percent for high-poverty schools.⁸¹

⁷⁸ <http://edushyster.com/a-charter-school-teacher-takes-on-the-boston-globe/>

⁷⁹ Similar observations were depicted in a darkly humorous performance by former charter school teacher Norah Dooley in "Charter School is English for gulag."
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=aAYAnWJk1tA

⁸⁰ David Stuit and Thomas Smith, 2010. *Teacher Turnover in Charter Schools*. National Center on School Choice, Vanderbilt University, p. 1.

⁸¹ MA DESE, "Status of the Massachusetts Educator Workforce," December 2011, Page 37.

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The average Massachusetts charter school loses one-third to one-half of its teaching staff each year. In 2012, these were the teacher turnover rates in charter schools:

2012 Teacher Turnover⁸²

Roxbury Preparatory Charter: 50 percent (up from 16.7% in 2011)

Edward Brooke Charter: 49% (up from 36.1% in 2011)

Spirit of Knowledge Charter: 47%

New Leadership Charter: 47% (25.5%)

Boston Preparatory Charter: 35% (31.3%)

KIPP Academy Charter Lynn: 35% (39.3%)

Boston Renaissance: 35% (34.4%)

Pioneer Charter School of Science: 35% (26.1%)

City on a Hill: 33% (37%)

Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School of Excellence: 33% (18.2%)

Smith Leadership Charter: 32% (down from 58% in 2011)

Conservatory Lab Charter: 30% (down from 56% in 2011)

MATCH: 25% (30.8%)

Charter leaders such as Mike Goldstein, chief design officer for MATCH education, view this churn not as a problem but an opportunity. It's the *Catch-22* approach to hiring teachers, i.e., if you are so untalented that you want to make a career out of teaching, we don't want you:

Many of the people we attract simply do not want to be lifetime teachers. This is true of many talented folks from many sectors: they do not want any one career. Instead, we welcome talented people who basically say, "I'll give the kids everything I have for perhaps 5 years. Then I'm gone. It's not burnout. It's that I simply don't want to teach 9th grade algebra my

⁸² Data obtained using the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Data Analysis and Reporting Tool.

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*whole life. Is that of interest to your school?” No Excuses schools say yes (in a million different ways). Traditional schools say “Whatever.”*⁸³

It’s worth questioning the wisdom of placing urban children, many of them from low-income households, in a learning environment characterized by such instability.

Education organizations from left to right agree that teachers improve at least for their first five years.⁸⁴ The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) study *Who Will Teach? Experience Matters*, funded by the Gates Foundation, decries what it called “an emerging conventional wisdom that ‘experience doesn’t matter.’”

“This is a belief that may add comfort to those who staff their schools year after year with inexperienced beginners,” the study authors said, but research proves it is wrong. Their review of the literature includes a study from University of Virginia scientists that showed student test score gains reach a peak when the teacher has 20 years of experience.⁸⁵ NCTAF criticized the “churn of attrition and teacher turnover” in schools serving low-income students and said the nation must find ways to stop it.

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website does not show years of teaching experience but does show the age distribution of teachers in every district. Charter schools are counted as districts. In Massachusetts as a whole, five percent of all public school teachers are under age twenty-six. Twenty districts have 30 percent or more teachers under 26 — all of them charter schools, with MATCH at 77 percent.⁸⁶

Table 21: Top 20 Massachusetts Districts in Percentage of Teachers Aged Under 26.

Excel Academy Charter School - Boston II	100%
Community Day Charter Public School - R. Kingman Webster	69%

⁸³ Blog post by Mike Goldstein quoted in EduShyster blog, <http://edushyster.com/?p=1812>

⁸⁴ See for instance the factsheet of The New Teacher Project founded by Michelle Rhee, http://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP_FactSheet_TeacherExperience_2012.pdf, and the position paper of Parents Across America at <http://parentsacrossamerica.org/how-teaching-experience-makes-a-difference/>.

⁸⁵ <http://nctaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/NCTAF-Who-Will-Teach-Experience-Matters-2010-Report.pdf>.

⁸⁶ Derived from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/agestaffing.aspx, as of March 26, 2013

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MATCH Community Day Charter Public School	57%
Boston Preparatory Charter Public	49%
Edward W. Brooke Charter School 3	48%
MATCH Charter Public School	46%
Alma del Mar Charter School	45%
KIPP Academy Lynn Charter	45%
Excel Academy Charter School - Chelsea	42%
Bridge Boston Charter School	41%
Roxbury Preparatory Charter	41%
Veritas Preparatory Charter School	40%
Phoenix Charter Academy	40%
Community Day Charter Public School - Gateway	40%
Edward W. Brooke Charter School 2	38%
Seven Hills Charter Public	37%
Pioneer Charter School of Science	36%

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Community Charter School of Cambridge	34%
Rising Tide Charter Public	32%
Hampden Charter School of Science	31%

Source: http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/agestaffing.aspx, as of June 6, 2013

Charter schools also have a smaller percentage of teachers who are licensed in the subject they are teaching. The 52 districts with the smallest percentage are all charter schools. Table 22 shows the bottom 20. The statewide average is 97.5 percent.

Table 22: Bottom 20 Massachusetts Districts in Percentage of Teachers Licensed for Their Teaching Assignment.

DISTRICT	Percent of Teachers Licensed in Teaching Assignment
KIPP Academy Boston Charter School	12.2
Smith Leadership Academy Charter Public	34.6
Sturgis Charter Public	36.6
Excel Academy Charter	36.9
Excel Academy Charter School - Boston II	37.8
Roxbury Preparatory Charter	38
Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter	39.3

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MATCH Community Day Charter Public School	40
Alma del Mar Charter School	43.5
Edward W. Brooke Charter School 3	45.2
Codman Academy Charter Public	46.5
Edward W. Brooke Charter School 2	47.4
MATCH Charter Public School	47.4
Excel Academy Charter School - Chelsea	48
Berkshire Arts and Technology Charter Public	48.5
Community Day Charter Public School - Gateway	49.4
Community Day Charter Public School - R. Kingman Webster	53
Boston Collegiate Charter	53.1
Dorchester Collegiate Academy Charter	53.8
Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public	55.9

Source: http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/teacherdata.aspx

Expanding charter schools in low-income areas means more unqualified novices will be teaching students who have the greatest need for highly-skilled, professional educators.

The Impact on Students who Attend District Schools

There has been little systematic research about the effect of opening charter schools on district schools. We identify three types of impact:

Student Body Composition: Charter schools have fewer students with significant disabilities and limited English proficient students, student subgroups that are often much more costly to educate. Also, because families and students must apply to each charter school separately from the district's enrollment process, many families with fewer resources do not even know about charter school options or cannot find the time to apply. This dynamic creates a sorting out of students who may not have as much social and academic capital as families and students who do apply. When charters sort students out, intentionally or not, the result is a concentration of students with less family support and more learning challenges in district schools.

Enrollment numbers: Some charter school students, if they were not in charter schools, would be in private schools or be home schooled. But many would be in district schools. The growth of charter schools therefore contributes to falling enrollment in some urban areas, which can lead to school closures.

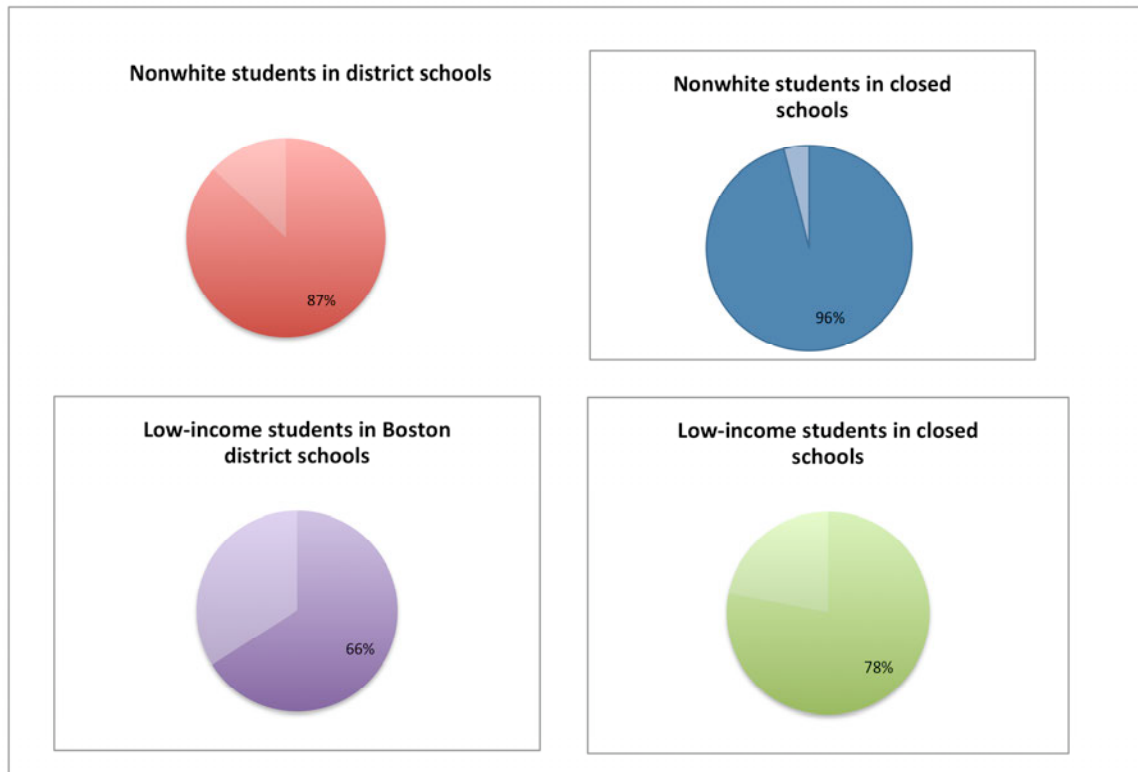
Financial cost: DESE preliminary fiscal year 2013 figures show districts paying charter schools \$353 million and being reimbursed \$70 million from state funds, for a net local expenditure of \$283 million.⁸⁷ Boston alone had a net expenditure of \$69 million. When new charter schools open, the state cushions the financial blow to districts with 100 percent reimbursement the first year and 25 percent reimbursement for the next five years. Eventually, however, the cost is born solely by the district. Mostly because of the rapid expansion of charter schools in Boston, the state projects Boston's net charter school outlay will grow to \$85 million in just one year.

That money and the hundreds of millions of dollars that Boston has paid charter schools over the years would have been available to prevent disruptive school closings. These closures disproportionately impact neighborhoods with low income and minority group families.

Figure 4 shows the demographic makeup of schools closed in Boston between 2003 and 2012.

⁸⁷ <http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/finance/>

Figure 4: Demographics of Boston District versus Closed Schools



Source: http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/enrollmentbyracegender.aspx

According to data on the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website, the students enrolled in the closed schools⁸⁸ were 96 percent nonwhite, compared with 87 percent nonwhite for all Boston district schools. DESE began reporting the numbers and percentages of students eligible for free school meals — 130 percent of the federal poverty line — in 2006-7.

⁸⁸ Deciding whether or not a school closed can be complicated. Some schools merge or are reorganized and may or may not serve the same students. We have listed only schools that clearly closed and did not reopen with mostly the same students: Dorchester High School, 9 Peacevale Road, Dorchester; M. Fuller Elementary, 25 Glen Road, Jamaica Plain; Phyllis Wheatley Middle School, 120 Kearsage Ave., Roxbury; Wm. Endicott Elementary, 2 McLellan St., Dorchester; Frank Thompson Middle, 100 Maxwell St., Dorchester; Hyde Park HS, 655 Metropolitan Ave., Hyde Park; Cleveland Middle School, 11 Charles St., Dorchester; Pauline Shaw Elementary, 429 Norfolk St., Mattapan; W. Wilson Middle School, 18 Croftland Ave., Dorchester; Alex. Hamilton Elementary, 198 Strathmore Road, Brighton; Lucy Stone, 22 Regina Road, Dorchester; Quincy Dickerman, 206 Magnolia St., Dorchester; Solomon Lewenberg Middle School, 20 Outlook Road, Mattapan; James Garfield Elementary, 95 Beechcroft, Brighton; Agassiz Elementary, 20 Child St., Jamaica Plain; Dante Alighieri Elementary, 20 Gove St., East Boston; Emily Fifiield Elementary, 25 Dunbar Ave., Dorchester; Farragut Elementary, 10 Fenwood Road, Mission Hill, Roxbury; Ralph W. Emerson Elementary, 6 Shirley St., Roxbury.

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Since then, 78 percent of students in closed schools have been eligible for free meals, compared with 66 percent of students in the Boston district.⁸⁹

Closing district schools adds to the turmoil in the already difficult lives of low-income students and harms their chances of getting a good education. School closures probably also increase the demand for charter schools as parents seek stability for their children.

Charter schools, with their highly touted flexibility and autonomy, were supposed to motivate struggling district schools to achieve a higher level of quality. Instead, what has happened is district schools face increasing concentrations of challenging students and fewer resources to meet their needs.

Sidebar 3. Lessons of the Gloucester Charter Collapse

By Peter Dolan

The collapse of the Gloucester Community Arts Charter School warns us that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is not adequately supervising Commonwealth Charter Schools. The school's failure in the middle of its third year shows that it is time for a moratorium on the granting of new Commonwealth Charters, *not* the time to lift the charter cap, and *not* the time to allocate an additional million dollars a year to the DESE to support the creation of more charter schools.

Many of the problems at the Gloucester charter school might have remained out of sight if concerned local residents had not called attention to them. It should not have fallen on private citizens to ensure that this public school was adhering to the same standards and following the same rules that apply to any public school. That it did is a clear sign that granting more Commonwealth Charters does not make sense in light of the alternatives offered by locally supervised Horace Mann Charters and Innovation Schools.

The school's chaotic mid-week closing in early January of its third year, abruptly sending over 100 students in search of new schools, capped a history of political meddling when the charter was granted, failure to hold the school accountable for what was promised in the school's



The Gloucester Community Arts Charter School closed in January. (Photo by Jason Grow)

⁸⁹ http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/enrollmentbyracegender.aspx

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charter application, massive turnover of staff and students, failure to meet enrollment targets, and failure to deliver special education services.

Right after accepting an offer from the DESE — surrender their charter in return for accelerated funding — that on its face was intended to allow the school to stay open until the end of the school year, the school abruptly closed its doors. The agreement between the school and the DESE did spare the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) from having to vote on Commissioner Mitchell Chester’s recommendation that the school’s charter be revoked. However, the school’s implosion three weeks after the agreement was reached leaves us wondering how carefully the DESE looked at the school’s desperate financial situation before it proposed the “deal.”

The Commissioner recommended that the school’s charter be revoked after the release of a scathing report on conditions at the school, along with the discovery of embarrassing lapses in supervision by the DESE. Despite the school’s high profile (the granting of its charter remains the subject of ongoing litigation), midway through its third year of operation the school did not have an Accountability Plan approved by the DESE. That plan is supposed to be finalized by the end of a charter school’s first year. For the school’s final site visit evaluation, the DESE engaged only two “outside” evaluators, both charter school employees. One of the evaluators, Diana Lam, had an undisclosed financial relationship with the school. (An investigation of the school by the State Auditor’s Office is also ongoing.)

A year before the school opened, public records requests revealed that DESE evaluators had determined that the proposed school failed to satisfy minimum legal chartering criteria. This was concealed from the BESE when it voted to grant the school’s charter. After it opened, the school was cited for failing to provide special education services as well as for violating public bidding and open meeting laws. There was a cyclone of staff and trustee turnover: When it closed, only two teachers remained from last year, none remained from the prior year, the principal was the third in as many years, and only one founder remained on a board that had struggled to maintain the legal minimum number of members. Yet the school was allowed to continue lurching along despite mounting evidence that it was not delivering on its promises, culminating in a stunning list of failures in its final evaluation.

For three years in a row the school’s “pre-enrollment” figures grossly overstated actual enrollment. For example, the school cited a pre-enrollment of 212 for the current school year in its August 2012 annual report to the Department, but reported actual enrollment of 124 when it opened in September. While state payments to the school eventually reflected actual enrollment, these pre-enrollment claims were used to determine the year’s first payment from the Commonwealth to the school. This provided the school with an interest-free loan and distorted municipal budgets as officials had to address the diversion of hundreds of thousands of dollars of state aid to the charter school for what turned out to be nonexistent students.

The recent revelations about the Gloucester charter school form a constellation of flashing red stop lights, warning us that it is time to pause, stop approving new Commonwealth Charters, and not rush forward to raise the charter cap.

Peter Dolan is the lead plaintiff in a parents’ lawsuit contending that the state broke the law when it granted a charter for the Gloucester Community Arts Charter School.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion and Recommendations

The 20-year effort to improve education for all Massachusetts children has fallen short and gone astray. Faced with our state's rapidly rising income inequality and the failure of our education investments to keep pace with growing needs, our efforts to achieve equal educational opportunity and better outcomes for all students are stalling.

A narrow focus on accountability through standardized testing is doing serious harm, especially to our districts and students with the greatest needs. Nor have Commonwealth charter schools been the panacea that many hoped; instead, the over-expansion of these experimental schools has hurt our struggling urban districts and families by reducing school resources and pushing out students who don't make the grade, leading to a discriminatory, "two-tier" education system.

As a recently released study⁹⁰ of similar policies in Chicago, New York and Washington, D.C., has found, these reforms "deliver few benefits and in some cases harm the students they purport to help, while drawing attention and resources away from policies with real promise to address poverty-related barriers to school success."

It is time for a new direction, one based on rigorous, independent research rather than the one-size-fits-all, ideological prescriptions that have little relation to the real-life needs of our students.

This new direction should be rooted in elevating the role of professionals in the field who are leading our schools and teaching our children, and providing them with increased voice in determining the state's educational priorities.

Our recommendations:

Increase School funding:

- **Update the Foundation Budget to ensure that it includes all of the costs to provide a quality education for every student.** While the Foundation Budget and the state and local funding it generated has been a national model for school funding, it is now time to reexamine our school funding formula. We support legislative efforts to revive the Foundation Budget Review Commission.

⁹⁰ 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.

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- **Provide adequate funding for quality public early education and public higher education.** Educators and policy makers agree that access to quality early education, including full-day kindergarten, is essential to allow all children to succeed; expanding early education in the public schools would guarantee access and equity. For most students, a high school education is no longer adequate to ensure a successful future; increased state funding to public higher education will help more students find their way.
- **Increase state revenues in a progressive way to fund our schools and other services for children and families.** While such legislation has not been successful recently, it is important to keep this issue on the table and to continue to broaden support.

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.** Massachusetts goes beyond federal rules in requiring students to pass a test in order to earn a high school diploma. As we have seen, there is little evidence that this requirement has improved education. As MCAS data reveals, English language learners and students with disabilities have already been disproportionately harmed by the MCAS graduation tests. One hundred sixty-five Massachusetts researchers and university experts have signed a statement asking the state to revoke the use of MCAS scores to punish students, teachers, and schools, and “*work with educators, parents and the public to craft a new assessment system that will more fully assess the many competencies our children need to succeed in the 21st century and that will avoid the current overreliance on standardized tests.*” We strongly support that position. As a first step, we urge the state to refrain from using the new, more rigorous Common Core tests as high school graduation requirements.
- **Support legislative action for a truly comprehensive assessment system with no high-stakes uses of state standardized testing.** Also, back legislation to expand and reform the MCAS appeals process.

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.** The legislative proposals we support include a moratorium, requiring local approval of Commonwealth charters and

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ensuring that students in charters are not pushed out for low performance or minor behavioral problems. We oppose lifting the caps on charter schools. The national and state evidence to date fails to support the belief that lifting charter school caps will result in greater benefits than costs for Massachusetts public school students overall. Given the mixed academic record of charter schools, the evidence that most charters do not serve students with the greatest needs, their high rates of student attrition and teacher turnover, and the way charter proposals have disrupted communities and pitted parents against one another, the cap should remain in place.

Educate the Whole Child and Close the Opportunity Gap:

We need to take steps now to eliminate inequities in the opportunities and outcomes of students who are non-white, come from low-income families, are not fluent in English, or have disabilities.

While Massachusetts' students are performing well in the aggregate, the state's progress in closing the gap in NAEP test scores ranks among the lowest in the nation. What's more, students who are Black, Hispanic, low-income, English language learners, and/or have disabilities continue to be suspended at higher rates and graduate from high school at much lower rates than their White, middle or upper class peers.

One major reason for this inequity in performance is inequality of opportunity in school. Massachusetts ranks 42nd in the nation in the disparity in per-pupil spending levels between the 95th and 5th percentiles. The state also ranks in the middle of the pack at 23rd in the total taxable resources spent on education. Together, these data point to the lack of educational resources provided to our students who should equitably receive more than their more privileged peers.

In addition to increasing school funding (see first recommendation, above), we suggest:

- **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, with an emphasis upon supporting students of color and English language learners to succeed.**
- **Address the social and emotional needs of children and use positive behavioral supports instead of zero tolerance discipline policies.**
- **Reform the English language learner law to allow bilingual education for students who need it.**

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Other suggestions include providing incentives to districts to recruit, hire, and retain faculty of color, and enforcing the elimination of the general track provision of the Education Reform Act of 1993 to ensure that all students enrolled in secondary grades are taking a program of studies that enables them to be college- or career-ready upon high school graduation.

With these research-based measures, inside and outside schools, Massachusetts could maintain its high overall position in the educational level of its population while shrinking the persistent achievement gaps among income, racial, and ethnic groups. The result would be a stronger state economy and better quality of life for all.

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.⁹¹**

We need to acknowledge the failure of top-down, market-oriented reforms and base interventions on the real needs of low-income communities and strategies that have been shown to work. Massachusetts political leaders and policymakers remain faithful to the menu of market-oriented reforms that have been imposed in cities like New York, Chicago and Philadelphia. These reforms, which have become the new status quo, include test-based teacher evaluations, school closures and increased charter school access.

The evidence is mounting that, despite massive hype, these reforms have not worked. A new report from the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education carefully examined the results of these reforms and concluded they “delivered few benefits and in some cases harmed the students they purport to help.” On the other hand, the “nuggets” of successful strategies they identified within these same cities mirror our own recommendations, including investment in quality early childhood education and closing overall opportunity gaps to address gaps in achievement.

- **Instead, our students need and deserve research-based reforms, including programs like quality early childhood education and efforts to close overall opportunity gaps to address gaps in achievement.**

Proponents of the current approach to improving schools have turned “data-driven” into a mantra, but many have resisted following their own advice. When leading researchers say

⁹¹ Ibid.

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policies have failed, they and their data should not be ignored. And programs that do work should not be forgotten because they don't fit the market ideology.

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.

National studies indicate from 60 to 80 percent of test score variance is the result of out of school factors such as income inequality and parent education. A top education priority therefore must be to reduce inequality outside of school.

The United States' vast achievement gap between wealthy and poor is due at least in part to the failure of our government to reduce economic inequality. We are first among developed nations in inequality and last in the extent to which taxation and other government programs shrink inequality.⁹²

As we noted earlier, Massachusetts has the dubious distinction of ranking second among all the states in growth of income inequality over the past two decades. This trend is a powerful drag on efforts to close achievement gaps in school.

Inequality has many causes that are beyond the control of state government, but the state can make a difference. Massachusetts' most notable achievement in this area has been to give almost every child medical insurance. Our state provided the model for the national health insurance system now being developed.

Massachusetts can also raise the minimum wage and index it to inflation, require employers to offer paid sick days, and do many other things to reduce the economic stress on low and moderate-income families. When the family is on the brink of economic disaster, the child has a hard time learning.

Here are some suggestions on how to begin⁹³:

- **Provide a real "safety net" for all families with children, including food programs, health care, day care and safe housing.**

⁹² See <http://delong.typepad.com/sdj/2012/02/oecd-no-the-us-government-is-not-a-powerful-engine-of-income-redistribution.html>.

⁹³ For more, see "The Rich and the Rest of Us" Smiley and West, SmileyBooks, New York, 2012.

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- **Invest in jobs and 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 pay for important public services.**
- **Stop privatizing public services, such as our hospitals and schools; once publicly staffed and funded, many are now operated under the control of profit-driven corporations and no longer serve the public interest.**

Twenty years after Education Reform, we need to choose a path forward to equity and excellence for all. Our children deserve better.

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