PIONEER INSTITUTE
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH

TRANSCRIPT

Has Education Reform Stalled in Massachusetts?

by Thomas F. Birmingham

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Let me begin with saying my proper thank yous. First of all, thank you, Chris [Anderson, President of the Massachusetts High Technology Council], for that extraordinarily generous, maybe even extravagant introduction. My only question is, why didn't you ever say such nice things about me when I actually was in office?

To Pioneer Institute, let me say thanks for hosting what really is a very timely event. Let's cut right to the chase. The bloom is off the rose of education reform. If by hosting events such as this, you can re-invigorate and re-inject the enthusiasm that heretofore had characterized our efforts to improve our public schools, you will be performing a great public service. So, Pioneer Institute, thank you very much for getting us to focus on this issue.

And thanks to all of you who care enough about education to be here today. This is a day when, as we sometimes say in Chelsea, "I shoulda stood in bed." This is a day when it would have been easy to say, "Ah, I'm going to pass that one up." But you've filled the room, and that's a tribute to the spirit of people in Massachusetts who deeply care about who we are as a society and how our important institutions, particularly educational institutions, are faring. So to each and every one of you, thank you for taking the time to be here today.

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Center for School Reform

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I'm slightly surprised that I was chosen by Pioneer Institute to be the keynote speaker today. So perplexed was I that I looked up the dictionary definition to make sure I had my role right. I learned that a keynote speech is an address designed to present the issues of primary interest to an audience, and to arouse unity. Given the provocative formulation of the issue this symposium will address—has education reform stalled in Massachusetts? —I think it is unlikely in the extreme that we're going to reach consensus on that question.

More generally, I would think a keynote address would be pretty uninteresting if it didn't arouse any disagreement, dissent, or diversity of opinions. So right at the outset, I want to disclaim any goal of creating unity on this inherently controversial issue of education reform, and about where we go with education reform.

Before I give my views on where we are headed, I think it would be helpful to provide some perspective, by taking a quick look back to where we were before education reform passed. Because in 1992 —due to what, in my mind, was our over-reliance on the local property tax—we witnessed gross disparities in spending on our public schools. In some communities, we were spending three thousand dollars per child per year. In other communities, we were spending ten thousand dollars per child per year.

In those circumstances, to pretend we were affording our kids anything remotely approaching equal educational opportunity was nothing short of fraudulent. In 1992, those spending disparities resulted in vast discrepancies in what constituted a public education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

To cite just a couple of examples: in 1992, we were experiencing a true digital divide where poor kids didn't have access to computers, but wealthier kids did. It would be like in my generation, if poor communities didn't have libraries, and wealthy communities did. It is inherently and fundamentally unfair. Overcrowding was endemic in poorer communities, where a class size of 40 was not unusual. Many think of these conditions as characteristic of urban minority-dominated school districts, but that is only partly true.

In 1992, in the small, all-white town of Wales, in central Massachusetts on the Connecticut border, they had 63 kids in a single classroom in 1992— not 1892. That wasn't worthy of the name of public education. That was simply child custody. Tolerating such conditions was particularly dangerous for Massachusetts, for reasons that Chris Anderson alluded to. We are a state that prospers, but not because we have a vast abundance of natural resources. We prosper by our wits. We are a state that is peculiarly reliant on an educated workforce to compete.

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Tolerance of such conditions in the public schools of our Commonwealth was a shameful departure from our noble legacy, dating back to the earliest days of the Republic, of national leadership in education. It was John Adams—a Senate President, by the way—who authored our State Constitution, which accorded primacy to the duty to support our public schools. Adams' language was the basis of the Supreme Judicial Court's McDuffy decision two centuries later.

In the 19th Century, another Senate President, Horace Mann, made Massachusetts the first state in the nation to provide public education to all of our children. As an aside, it seems to me that we produce a Senate President who is a great champion of education only once every century. I've identified the ones for the 18th and 19th Centuries. Anybody care to nominate someone for the 20th?

The unconscionable conditions that I've described were deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Judicial Court. And the legislature, acting just about simultaneously, addressed the problem by passing

the Education Reform Act of 1993. The goal of the new law could not have been more ambitious. For the first time, the state guaranteed that every child in a public school would receive an adequately financed education, and the state demanded that all our students attain high standards. I remember the stifling day when we all gathered at the un-air conditioned Holmes School in Malden in 1993 for the ceremonial signing of the Education Reform Act. We met amidst a spirit of bipartisanship, more than a little self-celebration, and truth be told, a lot of political hot air.

Bill Weld was there. Mark Roosevelt was there, too. And together, we vowed to make the accident of place and station of birth cease to be the most dispositive factors in determining the potential for the educational success of a child. Maybe we were guilty of hubris.

On that June day in 1993, there were, basically, two groups that were highly skeptical about education reform's prospect. One group expressed grave doubts that we would ever keep our seven-year increased funding commitment. The other group contended that all we were doing was throwing money at the problem. I believe we have confounded both sets of critics.

The Education Reform Act is a very complex and complicated piece of legislation containing many innovative pieces, including, for example, the creation of charter schools. But for all its complexity, the Education Reform Act can be reduced, in essence, to two propositions. We will make a massive infusion of state dollars into our public schools, and in return, we will demand high standards from all and accountability from all.

This is the grand bargain that is education reform, both as a matter of good policy and good politics. It was necessary to couple higher funding with higher standards. Politically, if we had simply increased the appropriation for our public schools, the bill would not have passed, nor should it have. If we had simply imposed standards and accountability, the proposal would not have commanded majority support, nor should it have.

I believe it is because we have remained faithful to those two core principles—money and accountability—that we have achieved as much success as we have. And that success—and I'm not a disinterested observer—has, to my mind, been impressive. We've got miles to go before we sleep, but we have made great strides.

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If you had told Weld or Roosevelt or me on that hot day in June 1993 that more than 90 percent of students would pass the MCAS test when it became a graduation requirement, we would have thought you wildly optimistic. Along with substantial success with what some might consider a modest MCAS standard, we've also seen increases in our SAT scores for 13 consecutive years, from 1993 forward, ultimately placing us number one in the country. It was not ever thus, according to one of the Pioneer reports. In the 1980s, we were below the national average in the verbal SAT scores. And as recently as 1992, we were below the national average for math scores.

In elementary and middle schools, we've also seen progress and success. Last year, both our fourth graders and our eighth graders scored first in the country on the NAEP test, the national standardized test, in both math and English. One state had never finished first in both subject matters in the history of the administration of the test.

I think, however, that with education, there is what may be a natural tendency to accentuate the negative and to emphasize our shortcomings. This is fine, insofar as it helps us guard against complacency. But I sometimes fear that the "glass-is-half-empty" orientation obscures the true good news stories that have occurred and continue to occur in Massachusetts public schools every day under education reform. Our successes did not come by accident or because we got lucky. They

came through fidelity to those two core principles, the two wheels of the ed reform bicycle. Our progress did not roll in on "wheels of inevitability."

It was a constant battle to maintain the promised funding. We had to rebuff efforts, year in and year out, to water down funding and standards. One year we got full funding because I delayed passage of the state budget for 6 months after the end of the fiscal year, until $100 million cut from Chapter 70 by the House was restored. Another time we had to override a veto, by Governor Cellucci, of $100 million to keep the commitment to bring all our schools up to adequate levels of funding. My only point in mentioning this is to suggest that keeping the funding promise was not the political equivalent of snapping one's fingers. These are issues that continue to challenge us today. We have to remain vigilant and resolve to remain faithful to those two core principles, of adequate financial support and accountability.

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For all of the good news stories that education reform has produced, I must say that I view the future of education reform with foreboding. If pressed, I would have to answer the question posed by the conference—has education reform stalled? —in the affirmative.

I have likened the two guiding principles of education reform, funding and standards, to two wheels of a bicycle. If you remove either one, you cannot go forward. On the funding issue, the legislature has shortchanged the Chapter 70 commitment a little bit. But far worse, it has eviscerated whole programs that complemented education reform in important ways.

You know, we used to offer a teacher signing bonus designed to attract the best and the brightest across the nation to come to Massachusetts. It worked. We lured scores of really bright people every year—lawyers, Ph.Ds in physics and chemistry, engineers— to come to teach in our public schools, especially in poor communities and especially in math and science.

The program was structured as an endowment. Therefore, it was what we call "off-budget." There was no need for an annual appropriation to support the teacher signing bonus plan. Nonetheless, the legislature—I think as an excuse—used the fiscal crisis to plunder the entire endowment and kill the program. Where once we had found a way to entice talented people to teach poor kids math and science, now we argue, without any resolution in sight, about merit pay for teachers in those subjects.

For years, we had appropriated tens of millions of dollars to a small-class-size initiative targeted at poor school districts. That program was a demonstrated winner educationally. That program was also zeroed out in 2004, and has not been restored. Guess what? In many low-income communities, class sizes are beginning to creep back to pre-education reform levels.

And finally—and I believe this is the most egregious example of ill-considered savings—there's been a cut to the MCAS remediation program, which has been reduced by 80 percent. Because of the cuts, we've developed a triage system for kids. All the remedial money goes to at-risk high schools whose students are in imminent danger of not passing MCAS, and therefore, not graduating. As a result, remedial help has been withdrawn from the lower grades, a time when a student's education problems can be nipped in the bud. In the past two years, the performance of elementary and middle schoolers has been stagnant. In some grades, it has actually dropped. I know that is true in the fourth grade, and I believe it's true in the seventh grade.

This is the first time since the passage of education reform that we have not witnessed steady annual improvement. Now, is this the result of our withdrawal of remedial help? I've got to believe

that there's a correlation. This year, for the first time since the passage of the Education Reform Act, we witnessed a decline in SAT scores. Does this represent the educational equivalent of the canary keeling over in the coal mine? I don't know, but it's certainly not encouraging.

Very recently, as Chris mentioned, the State Board of Education voted to raise the passing score on MCAS from 220 to 240, the level of proficiency. I want to say I'm fine with that, as long as we are prepared to provide kids with support commensurate with the demands that we are making on them. Having high standards simply cannot mean you throw kids into the deep end of a pool and if they swim, you say "fine," and if they sink, you say "tough."

If we are going to assume the awful responsibility of denying high school diplomas to kids as a matter of state law, we thereby assume what I think is a moral responsibility to give as much support as reasonably can be provided to get students to the high levels of achievement that we are demanding. If not, I fear that our experiment in standards-based education itself will be put in jeopardy. Here is where accountability and money come together again.

Just to give some perspective on this question, if the passing grade of 240 were in place today, two-thirds of African-American and Latino-American students would fail the test. Forget about our policy discussions. This is politically unacceptable and politically untenable. If we now have to fight to protect MCAS as a graduation requirement when more than 90 percent of our kids pass, what do you think the chances are of holding the line if only one-third of minorities pass? And by the way, only two-thirds of whites pass. I don't think the chances are very good.

If test scores continue to fall, there will be increasing pressure to lower the standards, or make failure to meet the standards inconsequential. In this regard, I'm a bit discomfited that one of the leading candidates for governor is, in my opinion, ambiguous on the question of even retaining MCAS as a graduation requirement.

And so, I'm pessimistic about state government's commitment to take education reform to the next level, either on the funding or the standards front. Among elected officials today, I wish someone would step forward and become the champion for education. I see [State Representative] Jay Kaufman is in the audience. I'm inviting him to step forward.

But instead, collectively—and I'm going to paraphrase Ross Perot—that whooshing sound you recently heard was the collective sigh of relief of almost 200 legislators upon learning of the SJC's decision in the Hancock case. The Hancock case was brought by the McDuffy plaintiffs, seeking to extend the reach of that landmark decision. The SJC declined the invitation to command Education Reform II, and dismissed the complaint. Legislators largely interpret Hancock as a stamp of approval, an imprimatur from the court to produce budgets and legislation without educational priorities. That is exactly what's happened.

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Just as the legislature has turned from education to other issues, so too, I think, have opinion leaders. The grand bargain of education reform was created by a grand coalition. Back in the early 1990s, the business community, for example, brought a real sense of urgency to the reform debate. It is my hope that through the leadership of the Pioneer Institute and other groups, we will rekindle that same sense of mission about making our public schools the very best they can be.

Moving forward, I'm not suggesting it will be easy to bring all kids up to the level of proficiency. To the contrary—this is a daunting task. Indeed, the easiest part of school improvement may well be behind us. In Paradise Regained, John Milton described the journey from purgatory to heaven, saying that the closer you got to paradise, the less

steep the climb became. I believe with regard to education reform and the march to universal proficiency, the opposite may well be true. The closer we get to the goal, the steeper the climb becomes. I do fear we will not get there at all if we're unfaithful to the twin goals of adequate funding and high standards. Certainly, we should spend our money better and smarter, as the Pioneer Institute is very good at reminding us.

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We should also remember that while we might not always get what we pay for in our public schools, we will never get what we do not pay for. The stakes could not be higher. While we have closed—and in many cases, reversed—the spending gap between well-off communities and poorer ones, we have not closed the achievement gap nearly as much.

We live in an era, as Chris mentioned, that is increasingly global and technological. Long gone are the days when a strong back and a strong work ethic would grant a worker entré to the lower levels of the middle class. These days what you earn will be based on what you learn. If a class of our population fails educationally, we run the risk of becoming a bifurcated society, two commonwealths.

The issue is not just about who we are as an economy—although it is about that—but more importantly, who we are as a society and who we are as a democracy. I'm certain no one in the audience has agreed with everything, or maybe anything I've said this morning. But I do hope that all people of good faith and good will, whatever their party affiliation or ideological stripe, can agree that the effort to make our economy, society, and democracy stronger is a noble one, and one well worth undertaking. Maybe we can achieve unity on this issue after all. Pioneer Institute, thank you for your attention. Thank you all very, very much.

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