

25th Anniversary Event for the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993

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Thank you for those kind words of introduction and thank you to those of you in state government who are hosting this event.

As I look around this room I see so many familiar faces of people who contributed so much, who worked so hard to make education reform a reality in Massachusetts in 1993. So as I look around at all these friendly faces from way back when I think I have a premonition of what it will feel like on Resurrection Day. But seriously I am very happy to be here and to celebrate the accomplishments of the last 25 years in K-12 education in Massachusetts.

I remember that stifling hot day when Governor Weld signed the Education Reform Act into law at the un-air conditioned Holmes School in Malden. If you had told me then that more than 90 percent of our students would pass MCAS and that we would have 13 consecutive years of improvement on SAT scores, or that our students would rank first in the nation in every category and in every grade tested on NAEP between 2005 and 2013, and that they would place at or near the top on gold-standard international math and science tests like the TIMSS, I would have thought you were unrealistically optimistic. We all had ambitious hopes for education reform on that day 25 years ago, but I doubt any of us would have dared to predict the historic successes we have actually enjoyed under the Act.

Before 1993, we witnessed the grossest disparities in spending on our public schools. In some districts we were spending more than \$10,000 per child per annum and in others we were spending \$3,000. In those circumstances to pretend that we were affording our children anything remotely approaching equal educational opportunity was nothing short of fraudulent.

And the academic quality of education was materially different in virtually every school district across the Commonwealth. Partly as a result of those disparities in spending, the state did precious little to insist on uniform standards. Pre-1993 there were but two state-imposed requirements to get a high school diploma: one year of American history and four years of



gym. Clearly a testament more to the lobbying prowess of gym teachers than to any coherent pedagogical vision.

But the Education Reform Act strove to change all this; to change the state funding mechanism and the academic expectations for all our students. I believe we have largely succeeded. It's often thought that the really problematic school districts were urban and minority-majority districts, but that was only partly true. In 1993, for instance, we had 65 kids in a single classroom in the small central Massachusetts town of Wales on the Connecticut border. The Education Reform Act sought to address such unconscionable and ultimately unconstitutional conditions. Doing that required a fairly complex and complicated piece of legislation, with many innovative elements.

Under education reform we imposed an academic subject matter test for prospective teachers. We removed school committees from the hiring process with the exception of the hiring of the superintendent, and we created charter public schools, which have become the best public schools in America at closing achievement gaps. Given charter schools' extraordinary successes, I believe they should be allowed to grow modestly without legislative or regulatory obstruction.

The Act was not complex just because it had a multiplicity of initiatives. The funding and distribution formulas themselves were also exceedingly complicated. On this point I want to heap some praise on Governor Weld. Mark Roosevelt and I as the co-chairs of the Education Committee negotiated what would become the Education Reform Act with Bill Weld. I was very impressed by what a quick study Governor Weld was. He understood not only the terms and conditions of the act, but also the secondary and tertiary implications of changing one provision or another. When it came to the very progressive funding formula that gave much more money to poor communities than to wealthy ones, Governor Weld proudly declared himself to be a communist. His word. Bill Weld, self-described communist. But whether as a communist, a Republican, or a Libertarian, he had a grasp on this very complex piece of legislation and he was a major factor in Massachusetts having among the most progressive K-12 funding formulas in the nation.

For all its complexity, the Education Reform Act can essentially be reduced to two core principles: We're going to make a massive infusion of state dollars into our public schools and in return we expect standards and accountability from all education stakeholders. That was the grand bargain of ed reform. Resources and standards — if you removed one we couldn't move forward, but with both we could. And as a matter of policy and a matter of politics, that's what was required.

Our faithfulness to the core principles — adequate funding and

academic standards with testing — explains so much about our educational success that I'm a bit discomforted by what I see these days. The Commonwealth, if not abandoning the primacy of K-12 education reform, seems to be veering away from those two core principles of 1993.

With regard to funding, when adjusted for inflation our current education appropriation is about the same as it was in 2002. This contrasts with the generous expansion of the '90s and the first couple of years of this century. As a result of relatively flat funding over a decade the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center has concluded that almost all low-income school districts simply do not have the resources needed to provide the caliber of education envisioned in the foundation budget.

Indeed, the *Boston Globe* recently reported that we're heading back towards pre-'93 spending disparities — with Brockton spending \$14,000 per student, while Weston spends \$24,000. Brockton class size averages in the 30s whereas in Weston the student-to-teacher ratio is 12 to 1. Brockton and Weston are not isolated examples. Indeed, both communities are representative of the differing educational conditions in poor school districts and wealthier ones. While Brockton, Fall River, New Bedford, and Lynn all spend under \$15,000 per student, Weston, Lincoln-Sudbury, Concord-Carlisle, and Dover-Sherborn all spend more than \$20,000.

With regard to standards and tests, we have jettisoned our tried and true reliance on higher-quality academic standards and MCAS and replaced them with inferior Common Core standards and PARCC testing. It's worth noting that the PARCC consortia has now lost over two-thirds of its member states; hardly a ringing endorsement. I fear the implementation of Common Core and MCAS 2.0, which is a rebranded version of PARCC, has contributed to Massachusetts being a negative growth state on NAEP reading and math between 2011 and 2015.

Why Massachusetts would settle for having the same English, math, or science standards and rebranded PARCC tests as do Arkansas or Louisiana, whose students could not possibly meet Massachusetts performance levels, is puzzling to me. The Common Core and its PARCC-style testing regime represent one of those rare instances where what may be good for the nation as a whole is bad for Massachusetts.

So after 25 years I think there's a great deal to be proud of about education reform, but unless we return to the core principles that have been responsible for so much of our success, I'm afraid we could squander our hard-won gains. I sincerely hope that doesn't happen. Thank you very much.