



Partners in Progress:

**A Framework for Raising Student Achievement
in Under-Performing School Districts**

**Report and Recommendations of the
Governor's Task Force on State Intervention
in Under-Performing Districts**

Paul S. Grogan, Chair

February 25, 2004

Introduction

In October 2003, the Governor created a Task Force on State Intervention in Under-Performing Districts. The specific charge of the task force is as follows:

Based on findings from research and practice, the task force will develop recommendations on state intervention in under-performing school districts. The work of the task force will focus on designing a framework for state-local partnerships, based on organizational and educational strategies that hold the greatest promise for strengthening schools and significantly raising student achievement. The goal of such collaborations is to enhance each district's internal capacity to effectively implement reforms and ensure continuous improvement. The task force will identify the essential elements of a district turnaround strategy, along with common barriers to successful implementation. The task force will also recommend where and how the state might add the most value to these new partnerships, and will consider any statutory or regulatory changes that may be required.

The Governor selected 15 members to serve on the task force:

Paul Grogan, Chair; President, The Boston Foundation

Robert Antonioni, Senator, Co-chair of the Joint Committee on Education, Arts, and the Humanities*

Robert Antonucci, President, Fitchburg State College

Kim Marshall, New Leaders for New Schools

Joan Murphy, lead math teacher, Rogers Middle School, Lowell**

Buzz Nembirkow, Superintendent, Chicopee Public Schools

Thomas Payzant, Superintendent, Boston Public Schools

James Peyser, Chairman of the Board of Education

Janis Pryor, former assistant professor, Wheelock College

Donna Rodrigues, Jobs for the Future

Mark Roosevelt, Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education

Robert Schwartz, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Harry Spence, Commissioner, Department of Social Services

Marie St. Fleur, Representative, 5th Suffolk District

Linda Whitlock, CEO, Boys and Girls Clubs of Boston

The task force met five times between November 2003 and January 2004. Following is a summary of the findings and recommendations on state intervention in under-performing school districts.

* reserving judgment on the recommendations of this report.

** abstained from voting on approval of this report.

Background

It has been over ten years since the Education Reform Act was signed into law on June 18, 1993. Since that time, the landscape of public education has changed dramatically. In addition to more equitable school funding and a massive state investment in education, Massachusetts has state curriculum frameworks in the core content areas and a performance measurement system based on student achievement, known as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).

The linchpin of education reform is accountability for results. Prior attempts at systemic change have foundered due to the absence of measurable performance objectives and meaningful consequences for success or failure. Over the past several years, the Department of Education and the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability have been designing and refining evaluation procedures for schools and districts. The next phase in the accountability process is to intervene in the schools and districts that are designated under-performing.

State intervention in districts is relatively new across the nation. There is much to be learned from states' intervention in individual schools, including Massachusetts. However, many researchers agree that intervention and support at the district level represents a different set of challenges and is more likely to lead to sustainable, long-term improvements in student achievement.

The primary goal of any state intervention in a district is to enhance—not supplant—the district's own internal capacity to implement reforms effectively and ensure continuous improvement. In other words, the goal of the state intervention is not takeover; it is to strengthen the district to make takeover unnecessary.

With that in mind, the task force examined ways in which the state could add the most value to the enterprise of turning around an under-performing district. Broadly stated, the state and district must work together to do the following:

- ◆ Clearly diagnose the major problems, and come to a common understanding of their root causes.
- ◆ Evaluate the capacity and the motivation of the current leadership to participate effectively in a partnership with the state and to implement a turnaround strategy.
- ◆ Engage an institutional change partner, who can work with district leadership on a daily basis.
- ◆ Initiate a community-wide dialogue to create a culture of high expectations and collective responsibility.
- ◆ Work with the district to develop a customized, targeted improvement plan, with specific milestones and timelines.
- ◆ Ensure that the district has the tools that it needs to implement the improvement plan.
- ◆ Monitor implementation and improvement on a regular basis.

The recommendations that follow are presented in the spirit of collaboration, recognizing that turning around an under-performing district is very hard work that will require the combined efforts of many. At the same time, they reflect a sense of urgency. Education reform is now in its second decade. While much progress has been made, too many students continue to be left behind. We cannot wait another ten years to see if reform will ultimately reach these young people. This is their only chance to build a promising future. The time to act on their behalf is now.

Characteristics of High-Performing School Districts

Given the dearth of research on effective state interventions in school districts, the task force began its work by delineating the characteristics of high-performing school districts. Based on research, experience, and common sense, the following ten characteristics were deemed to be essential in effective districts.

Effective school districts:

1. **Own responsibility for student achievement.** Effective districts own the responsibility for their successes and failures with all learners—they do not excuse or blame. Student achievement is the shared responsibility of both the central office and the individual schools. Effective districts take responsibility for prompt intervention when student achievement or improvement is lagging, whether at the school or classroom level—all the way down to individual students.
2. **Are clear about their mission and goals, and highly focused on achieving their goals.** The district identifies a limited set of priorities on which to focus its efforts.
3. **Are led by effective leaders at all levels.** Continuity of high quality leadership is important, both at the governance and the executive levels. Effective districts ensure that a high quality instructional leader guides each of its schools.
4. **Are standards-based.** In Massachusetts, students, classrooms, schools, and districts are measured by their performance on MCAS, which is grounded in the state’s curriculum frameworks. In accordance with both state and federal standards, the performance objective is “proficiency,” which indicates a student has met grade-level expectations and is ready to move on with a high degree of success. Effective districts concentrate their programs and resources on ensuring that all students achieve measurable proficiency.
5. **Take alignment seriously.** Alignment with state standards encompasses curricula, assessments, evaluations, professional development, and student support services and programs.
6. **Are data-driven.** All important decisions in the district—from the classroom to the district office—are based on data, especially data about student achievement. Educators are trained in how to interpret data and how to make decisions based on an analysis of the data. Data-driven decision-making may involve such things as targeted assistance for individual students, modifications to school curriculum, design of professional development, and evaluation of district-wide programs. In Massachusetts, a data-driven district does not rely solely on MCAS data; it also uses periodic assessments, aligned to MCAS and administered at frequent intervals (at least quarterly).

7. **Make human resource functions a top priority of the district’s leadership.** The recruitment, selection, assignment, development, evaluation, and recognition of quality staff are critical. Equally critical is creating a culture of respectfulness, complemented by incentives for good work.
8. **Communicate effectively with staff, students, families and the community.** An effective district has a strategy for family and community involvement that is aligned with its core mission and goals, and communicates a “culture of excellence.” Effective districts take seriously the need to communicate their core mission, both internally and externally. They put into place clear channels for receiving information, as well.
9. **Treat schools differentially, based on needs.** Effective districts prioritize schools with the greatest needs and invest their intervention resources in those schools. They also assign their strongest educators to their neediest schools.
10. **Collaborate.** Effective districts ensure that all projects with external partners are aligned with the core mission and goals of the district. Districts work to build relationships with organizations, both inside and outside the school system—including the teachers union—in order to mobilize resources that can help them to achieve their objectives. A major focus of these collaborations should include partnerships with those organizations that serve students beyond the regular school day.

Focus on Children

In 1996, the Boston Public Schools adopted Focus on Children, a five-year education reform plan developed through broad-based community discussions about the needs of Boston students and families. The plan was designed to serve as a blueprint for improvement throughout the district, from the central offices to each classroom. Focus on Children II, which is the 2001-2006 plan, adopts the unifying priority for every school and the district as a whole to “accelerate the continuous improvement of teaching and learning to enable all students to meet high standards.” The plan outlines six essentials for whole school improvement: 1) focus on literacy and mathematics; 2) use student work and data to identify student needs, improve instruction and assess progress; 3) focus professional development to offer teachers and principals the skills they need to improve instruction; 4) identify and replicate best practices for instruction; 5) align all resources with the instructional focus; and 6) engage families, communities, and partners to support whole school improvement. For more information, see <http://boston.k12.ma.us/teach/foc.asp>

Major Barriers to Success

The task force discussed the common barriers that can impede a district's success. While these barriers are common to virtually all districts, they can be especially acute in smaller districts that may lack a critical mass of human and financial resources. These barriers can be categorized into five major areas, as follows:

- 1. Lack of focus on or commitment to excellence.** The culture and expectations of a school district and the broader community have a tremendous impact on the district's success. Some districts perpetuate a culture of excuse, and district and school staff do not behave as if they truly believe that all students can attain proficiency. Other districts are committed to excellence, but fragment their resources, rather than concentrate them on a limited number of achievable, high-leverage priorities. Frequently, the broader community does not have a good understanding of what standards-based education is, and ways in which local organizations and programs can best support their students and the district's priorities. Finally, too often districts and communities lack a sense of urgency about improving student achievement, without which any improvement effort has little chance of success.
- 2. Excessive constraints on leadership.** The ability of school district leaders to make changes in a district can be affected greatly by: school committee challenges, including the unclear or inappropriate division of responsibilities, and inadequate preparation and training; restrictive budgets; inflexible contracts and adverse labor-management relations that do not serve the best interests of students; and prescriptive state mandates.
- 3. Inadequate management systems.** Weak management systems can impede success, particularly if there is: a lack of an infrastructure to collect and analyze qualitative and quantitative data that are germane to effective teaching and learning; ineffective organization of the central office (which should be service-focused); and a budget that does not reflect the core priorities of the district.
- 4. Inability to attract and retain talented professionals.** School districts can be severely constrained by: a limited pool of experienced school and district leaders, especially when the district is unable to recruit effectively from the broader labor market; a limited management focus on human resources; and a limited understanding of what constitutes high quality teaching and how to recruit and support such teachers.
- 5. Inadequate professional development.** Coordinated, sustained, and focused professional development is essential for teachers, administrators (particularly regarding how to support new teachers and how to evaluate all teachers effectively) and school committee members.

Recommendations

To effectively address the challenges of educational under-performance, whether on a targeted or statewide basis, the capacity of the state to engage directly with districts must be substantially expanded. Sometimes this will mean an increase in the human and financial resources of the Department of Education. Other times it will mean the development of partnerships with the private sector and higher education. Massachusetts can take advantage of its rich array of high quality educational organizations, specialists, and consultants prepared to assist schools and districts. In either case, while it is important to be respectful of the critical role local communities must play in the education of their children, it is now time for the state to assume greater leadership in accelerating improvement in districts that are struggling to keep pace with rising expectations.

Our recommendations below are divided into two categories: the first is a list of statewide initiatives which, while benefiting all schools and districts, will have a disproportionately positive effect on low-performing systems; the second is a list of targeted initiatives specifically focused on under-performing districts. The following actions can be taken administratively, based on existing statutory authority, except where specifically noted:

Statewide Initiatives:

- 1. Establish grade-by-grade learning standards** (clear statements of what students need to know and be able to do by the end of each grade level) in core academic subjects, beginning in Kindergarten.
- 2. Evaluate and rate major textbook series**, with respect to their alignment with the state's curriculum frameworks.
- 3. Identify qualified vendors to provide classroom assessments** aligned to MCAS and systems for quickly collecting and analyzing the results.

America's Choice

The America's Choice School Design is a leading school improvement program sponsored by the non-profit, Washington, DC-based National Center on Education and the Economy. The America's Choice program aligns standards, instruction and assessments; introduces highly successful, research-based teaching strategies; and builds the capacity of school faculty to sustain school improvement long after the engagement with America's Choice is over. From its inception in 1998, America's Choice has worked closely with school district central office staff to help them improve the performance of their low performing schools, partnering with small rural school districts, suburban districts and some of America's largest school districts. One example is the Duval County (Jacksonville), Fla., school district, which introduced the America's Choice design in 60 of its 132 urban, suburban and rural schools in 1998. Other examples include Rochester, N.Y., where America's Choice is working in 56 percent of their schools, and Plainfield, N.J., where the America's Choice program is used by all 10 of its elementary and middle schools. Studies by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania have found that the America's Choice program raises student achievement significantly, that score gains compound over time, that the program closes achievement gaps, and that it is particularly effective with low-performing students. For more information, see www.ncee.org/acsd/program/index.jsp

4. **Identify and recruit qualified turnaround partners** to work with districts that are under-performing or are struggling to avoid under-performance.
5. **Consider broader policy action.** In addition to the targeted remedies to under-performance outlined below, broader *legislative reforms may also be necessary* to support school districts in their efforts to avoid under-performance and improve the achievement of all students, including the following:
 - a) Provide all superintendents with authority to reconstitute their lowest performing schools, including authority to establish pilot schools and charter schools. Among other things, reconstitution may empower principals to hire their own staff and remove teachers for “good cause,” regardless of certification status or years of service.
 - b) Remove administrators (e.g., assistant principals and district program directors) from collective bargaining.

Targeted Initiatives for Under-Performing Districts:

1. **Establish small, focused leadership evaluation teams.** These teams will be appointed by the Commissioner of Education within two weeks of a declaration of under-performance, and should include a Massachusetts teacher and administrator, a non-school private sector executive, an instructional expert and one or more community representatives. Within 30 days, the team will conduct in-depth interviews with the district leadership, including municipal leaders, school committee members, the superintendent, senior central office staff, school principals, local teachers union officers, and district PTO leaders. These interviews should be based on a transparent protocol approved by the Commissioner. Leadership evaluation teams should work in parallel with the Tier III programmatic evaluation (also called a fact-finding report), conducted jointly by the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability and the Department of Education. The Tier III fact-finding report should include a review of major district policies and contracts that may pose barriers to change and improvement.
2. **Determine capacity and will of district leadership.** Based on these interviews, and a review of any relevant documents, the team will report its findings to the Commissioner of Education on the capacity of current leadership (including municipal leaders, school committee members, the superintendent, senior central office staff, school principals, local teachers union officers, and district PTO leaders) to participate effectively in a partnership with the state and execute a turnaround strategy. Part of this evaluation will be an assessment of the willingness of the current leadership to act swiftly to address policy or contractual barriers to change. If the team finds that the district’s leadership lacks the requisite capacity or sense of urgency, it may either propose specific personnel changes or recommend that the Commissioner ask the Board of Education to declare the district to be “chronically under-performing,” which requires the Commissioner to appoint a receiver, as per existing law. Failure on the part of the district to act in a timely fashion on recommended personnel changes may also lead to a declaration of chronic under-performance.

The Stupski Foundation

The Stupski Foundation works with urban districts, by invitation only, to provide expert resources and financial investment in multi-year district partnerships. The Stupski Foundation's inaugural work includes eight partnerships with school districts in California (Elk Grove Unified School District, Gilroy Unified School District, Oak Grove School District, the Pasadena Unified School District, Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District, and West Contra Costa Unified School District) and Washington (Bellingham Public Schools and Yakima Public Schools.) In partnership with the Foundation, the districts have developed initiatives that target system-wide improvement in seven core domains: shared vision, leadership, development and deployment of a strategic plan, curriculum and instruction, engagement and empowerment of internal and external stakeholders, accountability, and the development of an efficient, effective and equitable organization. The Foundation is expanding its work to selected urban districts across the nation to include Clarksville-Montgomery County School District (Tennessee), Cleveland Municipal School District (Ohio), Cumberland County Schools (North Carolina), East Baton Rouge Parish School System (Louisiana), Illinois School District U-46 (Illinois), Jackson Public Schools (Mississippi), New Haven Public Schools (Connecticut), and Paterson Public Schools (New Jersey). For more information, see <http://www.stupski.org>

3. Engage a turnaround partner. If the leadership evaluation team determines that district leadership does have the requisite capacity to effectively execute an improvement plan in partnership with the state, the Department and the district will then jointly engage a turnaround partner through a three-way agreement. The roles and responsibilities of the three parties—the district, the turnaround partner, and the state—should be clearly defined in a Memorandum of Agreement at the outset of the partnership. The turnaround partner will be a single organization or an ad-hoc group of independent contractors, approved by the Department of Education, who will work closely with the district leadership (including principals) over a 1-2 year period to support strategic planning, provide training and coaching to the leadership team, and provide project management support for critical reforms. The cost of the turnaround partner should be borne primarily by the state, at least through the first year. As long as the district is classified as under-performing, the turnaround partner may not be dismissed by the district, without the agreement of the Commissioner. The district and its turnaround partner will make regular joint progress reports to the Commissioner (at least twice per year). Such reports will include the identification of any major problems that threaten the success of the improvement plan or violate the terms of the agreement. If the Commissioner determines that the district is not fulfilling its obligations under the agreement, he may recommend that the Board declare the district “chronically under-performing.”

4. Involve the community. An attitude reflecting a “fresh start” focused on students is needed to propel the planning process in an under-performing district. This process will begin by engaging the entire community in an open dialogue about the problems, opportunities and aspirations of the public schools. This dialogue should not take the status quo as a given, but should instead consider what could be accomplished if the school system were re-designed from the ground up. After a

thorough engagement with all sectors facilitated and recorded by the turnaround partner, the district leadership and the turnaround partner will develop a focused and concrete plan for substantially improving district performance. This planning process, including the community dialogue, should be funded through a grant from the Department of Education.

- 5. Develop a focused and action-oriented district improvement plan.** Under the existing law and regulations, under-performing districts must develop improvement plans, subject to the approval of the Board of Education. The district improvement plan must address the 10 characteristics of effective districts, outlined in this report, as well as the specific areas of under-performance identified in the fact-finding report. It should also include the development of grade-by-grade learning standards in core academic subjects and corresponding assessments, which are administered in all schools on a quarterly basis. Such development should be led by the Department of Education. As part of this process, the Department should identify possible private vendors who could provide tools and systems for collecting and analyzing assessment data. The Department will also help the district identify possible sources of new revenue, through both public and private grant programs, to support systems development and other critical reforms. In reviewing a district’s plan, the Board of Education will confirm the level of agreement and commitment among the district’s key stakeholders. In addition, the Board will confirm that the plan includes specific milestones and timelines for successfully implementing the turnaround strategy and for demonstrating measurable student achievement gains. If the plan does not address the changes needed to substantially improve student achievement, the Board may declare the district to be “chronically under-performing,” which would then require the Commissioner to appoint a receiver, as per existing law.
- 6. Address problematic contract terms.** District improvement plans may include provisions for re-opening negotiations on existing collective bargaining agreements, if such agreements present significant obstacles to effective implementation of the improvement plan. Such barriers may include restrictions on school-day schedules, limits on professional development time, restrictions on teacher evaluations, prohibitions against the use of incentives or bonuses for exceptional performance, constraints on starting salaries for mid-career professionals

Community Training and Assistance Center

The Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC) is a Boston-based not-for-profit organization with extensive experience in providing technical assistance to school districts in areas including improving leadership of school reform, ensuring comprehensive district accountability, and guiding data-informed decision-making. CTAC has particularly focused on providing on-site assistance to school districts, such as Cleveland and Newark, which are undergoing state interventions. CTAC has also assisted districts in increasing student achievement by providing capacity-building assistance in cities including Albuquerque, New Mexico; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Camden, New Jersey; Cleveland, Ohio; Jackson, Mississippi; Newark, New Jersey; Salt Lake City, Utah; Denver, Colorado; and numerous districts in California. For more information, see <http://www.ctacusa.com>

with little K-12 teaching experience, and inclusion of administrators under collective bargaining. Although the state has the power to set aside certain aspects of collective bargaining agreements in schools and districts that are declared “chronically under-performing,” every attempt should be made to address problematic contract terms during this earlier phase of the accountability process. If negotiations fail to remove or reduce these barriers, the Board of Education may declare the district to be “chronically under-performing,” which would then require the Commissioner to appoint a receiver, as per existing law.

7. **Create a community-wide compact.** An outgrowth of the community engagement will be a community-wide, public-private compact to create a culture of high expectations for student achievement and to support the district’s improvement plan. This compact will include a commitment by various local and state non-profit organizations and public agencies to deliver specific “wrap-around” services, aligned to the district’s core educational objectives. The compact will place special emphasis on improving and expanding “out-of-school” (e.g., before-school, after-school, weekend, and summer) programs. To the extent the community lacks the capacity to provide every child with access to such programs, the state should allocate new resources to help build additional capacity. The compact should also ask parents to commit themselves to supporting their children and one another. Specifically, the compact should include a commitment by the local PTO to provide orientation and support for all parents with children entering the public schools. Finally, the compact will also include a pledge by students to live up to their responsibility to support one another and give their best effort in school.
8. **Train and support the leadership team.** Following the development and approval of a district improvement plan, the district—supported by its turnaround partner—will sponsor a focused program for all school and district leaders (i.e., key central office staff, principals and assistant principals, department heads, program directors). These sessions will provide staff with in-depth information about the improvement plan, as well as initial training to support its implementation. They should also motivate personnel to raise expectations for themselves, their staff, and their students.

“Step Up Springfield” Campaign

The city of Springfield is engaged in a community-wide commitment to a common educational mission: “Proficiency for all children in each subject area and in character development.” The goal of the campaign is to create a “culture of achievement” in the Springfield community. The Step Up Springfield Campaign offers specific ways for parents, community organizations, houses of worship, local businesses, government and elected officials, and senior citizens to get involved in supporting students’ academic and character development. For more information, see www.stepupspringfield.org

District leadership will ensure that all stakeholders, including those signatories to the community compact, are fully informed about the improvement plan.

- 9. Empower superintendents to reform the lowest performing schools.** In order to support the effective implementation of an approved district improvement plan, the Board of Education may vest the superintendent with new authority to reconstitute the district's most troubled schools. *Such authority would require legislation.* Reconstitution may include the following: removal of staff by the principal for good cause, regardless of certification status or years of service; removal of administrators from collective bargaining; establishment of schools within schools; conversion to pilot school status, exempting staff from all work-rule provisions of the existing contracts; or conversion to charter school status.

- 10. Monitor effectiveness of implementation.** Execution of the district's improvement plan will be monitored on a continuing basis by the Department of Education. On an annual basis, district progress will be reviewed independently by the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability.

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