Minutes of the Regular Meeting

**of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education**

**March 25, 2008**

**9:10 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.**

**Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education**

**350 Main Street**

**Malden, Massachusetts**

Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Present:

**Paul Reville**, Chairman, Worcester

**Christopher R. Anderson**, Westford

**Harneen Chernow**, Jamaica Plain

**Gerald Chertavian**, Cambridge

**Thomas E. Fortmann**, Lexington

**Jeff Howard**, Reading

**Ruth Kaplan**, Brookline

**Dana Mohler-Faria**, Bridgewater

**Sandra L. Stotsky**, Brookline

**Zachary Tsetsos**, Chair, Student Advisory Council, Oxford

**Jeffrey Nellhaus**, Acting Commissioner of Education, Secretary to the Board

Chairman Paul Reville called the meeting to order at 9:10 a.m.

# Comments from the Chairman

Chairman Paul Reville welcomed the three new Board members, who are Dana Mohler-Faria, president of Bridgewater State College and education advisor to Governor Deval Patrick; Jeff Howard, founder and president of The Efficacy Institute, Inc.; and Gerald Chertavian, founder and CEO of Year Up. The chairman said that each of the three new members brought experience and perspective and would contribute significantly to the Board’s thoughtful collaboration.

Board member Mohler-Faria said that he was thrilled to be joining the Board. Dr. Mohler-Faria said his fifteen months with the Governor’s office has been very interesting, and that over time he hopes to contribute to the Board and to bring a higher education perspective. Board member Howard said he has spent 25 years doing the work of education reform, and he has a deep interest in looking at the broader issues to identify what gets in the way of student success. Dr. Howard said he was very pleased to serve in this role. Board member Chertavian said it was an honor to serve on the Board. Mr. Chertavian said that for the past eight years as CEO of Year Up, he has worked closely with 18- to 24-year-olds who are low income and looking to make the transition to work and college. Mr. Chertavian said that a key aspect of his work was to identify the supports that young people need.

The chairman described the education secretariat established under the Governor’s reorganization plan to coordinate early education and care, elementary and secondary education, and higher education. He noted that he would serve as Board chairman through the June meeting and then become Secretary of Education and a member of each of the state education boards on July 1. The Governor will appoint a new Board chairman at that time. The chairman said that with the Readiness Project and its set of strategic plans going forward, this is a very exciting time, and he is delighted to be a part of it.

The chairman said that Commissioner-Elect Mitchell Chester has been in Massachusetts for the past few days, and has met with some Board members during his visit. Chairman Reville said that Dr. Chester will make a presentation to the Board during a special meeting on the evening of April 28th, before the April 29th regular meeting. This presentation will be part of the Board’s continuing review of the state system for accountability and support.

The chairman read a resolution from the Massachusetts General Court on international education and foreign exchange programs. The chairman also recognized Board member Zachary Tsetsos, who described a $9,200 grant that the State Student Advisory Council has secured to promote student leadership and encourage students to participate in service projects.

# Comments from the Acting Commissioner

Acting Commissioner Nellhaus said that Dr. Chester spoke to the entire Department of Elementary and Secondary Education staff at Malden High School on March 20th. The acting commissioner updated the Board on the Mathematics Curriculum Framework Review Panel, and commented that the Department has received over 150 applications from individuals expressing an interest to serve on the panel. He said the panel would be selected by the end of next week, and would convene in early April.

Acting Commissioner Nellhaus said that the updated Technology Literacy Standards will be on the Board’s agenda in April, and additional materials requested by the Board on this issue would be sent to Board members tomorrow. Noting that the Board would meet at Worcester Technical High School next month, the acting commissioner referred members to Tab 7 in the Board packet for an item on the Perkins Five-Year State Plan for Vocational-Technical Education that the Department will submit to the U.S. Department of Education. The acting commissioner also announced that the state’s grade 8 2007 NAEP writing scores would be released in early April.

The acting commissioner said that MCAS testing had begun this week with the administration of the English Language Arts (ELA) test in grades 3-10. He added that the May administration of the high school science and technology/engineering tests will count toward the graduation requirement for students in the class of 2010. Acting Commissioner Nellhaus noted that 40 percent of the class of 2010 has already met the Competency Determination requirement in science and technology/engineering by passing the test as 9th graders last year.

# Comments from the Public

* Susan Verdicchio, a parent from Winchester, addressed the Board on school libraries.
* Stanley Pollack, executive director of the Center for Teen Empowerment, addressed the Board on dropout prevention.
* Gerald Mroz, a parent from Melrose, addressed the Board on gifted education.
* Marilyn Segal from Citizens for Public Schools addressed the Board on dropout prevention.

# Approval of the Minutes

Board member Ruth Kaplan requested an amendment to page 11 of the minutes. Board member Harneen Chernow requested an amendment to page 7 of the minutes.

**On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:**

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approve the minutes of the February 26, 2008 regular meeting, as amended.**

The vote was unanimous.

**Dropout Report for 2006-2007 and Initiatives to Reduce Dropout Rate**

Acting Commissioner Nellhaus summarized the Department’s 2006-2007 dropout report, which showed that over 11,000 students in grades 9-12 (3.8 percent) dropped out of school last year. The acting commissioner said the increase over the prior year’s rate is due almost entirely to better reporting, but 11,000 dropouts is still 11,000 too many. He noted that 70 percent of 12th graders who dropped out of school last year had already met the Competency Determination by passing the grade 10 tests or retests in ELA and mathematics.

Chairman Reville said that the Board’s policy deliberations on this important question must be informed by evidence. The chairman asked Board member Harneen Chernow, who chaired the Graduation Rate Task Force, to provide an overview and introduce three panelists: Janet Powell, senior director of student support services in the Quincy Public Schools; and Neil Sullivan, executive director, and Emmanuel Allen, street research and referral specialist, from the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC).

Ms. Powell presented a brief report on dropout prevention programs in Quincy. She said that addressing the dropout issue requires the support of the school committee and central office and strong site-based leadership with high expectations and a personalized approach. She added that differentiated academic instruction and a focus on educating the whole child are also very important. Ms. Powell also said that no single program will fix the dropout problem.

In 2003-2004, the Quincy superintendent and school committee established a dropout task team comprised of teachers, administrators, school committee members, and parents to study the dropout issue and make recommendations. Those recommendations included additional alternative programs for at-risk students. The district used grants from the Department of Education for Alternative Education Programs to create a high school program for incoming at-risk 9th graders, repeat 9th graders and for academic and social-emotional support to students in grades 10-12 and used grant funds under Safe and Supportive Learning Environments to institute an academic and social-emotional home-base for trauma-related, at-risk 8th graders and to train staff on “Trauma Sensitive Schools.” Ms. Powell distributed copies of a Massachusetts Advocates for Children report, “Helping Traumatized Children Learn,” which she said has provided a framework for the “Trauma Sensitive Schools” work.

Ms. Powell described the Quincy Evening High School, which is funded by the Workforce Investment Board. To enter this program, students must have passed the MCAS and have 50 credits toward graduation. The program offers local course requirements along with life skills and career exploration and planning. The evening high school has graduated 140 students over the past 4 years.

Ms. Powell also described the Quincy Teen Mothers’ Program, which is in its 30th year of operation and has graduated over 300 young mothers; a system-wide early literacy program, which assesses all children in grades K-3; the district’s move to institute free, full-day kindergarten in 2006; and the CASASTART program to support wrap-around services for students.

Neil Sullivan said he believes an incremental reduction in the dropout rate is the most promising action to improve education and economic prospects. He presented an overview of the findings and recommendations in the 2006 report of the Boston Youth Transitions Task Force, *Too Big to Be Seen: The Invisible Dropout Crisis in Boston and America*. The task force is a coalition of many organizations and agencies convened by the Boston PIC, including the Boston Public Schools, the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, and the Massachusetts Departments of Education, Social Services, Transitional Assistance, and Youth Service. The task force report is posted at: <http://www.bostonpic.org/youth/Too_Big_To_Be_Seen.pdf>. He described four key components to address the dropout crisis: (1) gathering, analyzing, and using data; (2) using early indicators and early intervention strategies for struggling students as well as effective dropout recovery; (3) building partnerships and increasing coordination among schools, alternative programs, local and state agencies and community organizations; and (4) implementing local strategies that address the needs of young people.

Emmanuel Allen, the PIC/Boston Public Schools dropout recovery specialist, discussed strategies he uses to engage students who had dropped out and bring those young adults back to school. Mr. Allen said that he was a former dropout at age 17 who tried to work but didn’t make a lot of money. Mr. Allen said that he returned to school at age 19, graduated, and went on to attend and graduate from college.

Mr. Allen said the core issue is relevance, because many students who left school do not connect school with their life. He said the best strategy to use with these students is to talk with them to better understand why they left school, tell them it’s not too late to return, and help them understand that education is tied to one’s freedom and independence.

Board member Harneen Chernow asked about structural challenges. Mr. Allen said that for most students who return to school, the practice is to reenroll them in the same school. He said that he works with the Boston Public Schools to see that students are not returned to the same school and are offered a fresh start. Mr. Sullivan added that dropouts become isolated from society and need its benefits rather than contributing to it; 70% of state prisoners are dropouts. He said two keys to dropout recovery are a system for students to recover academic credit and the availability of targeted seats for returning students.

Chairman Reville asked what are the most highly leveraged actions the Board and Department could take to be responsive to this issue. Ms. Powell recommended that the Board focus on both dropout recovery and early intervention with students and their families, especially for young students with poor school attendance and high tardiness. She said the Board could send a message about the whole child and systemic change. Mr. Allen said that more direct outreach should occur with students who have left school, and the message should be that the situation is not hopeless. Mr. Sullivan advocated for technical support around an early indicator system, and active engagement with a coalition of stakeholders beyond the school district, including employers.

Board member Sandra Stotsky asked what connections are made with the development of work and occupational skills. Mr. Sullivan said that every Boston high school freshman used to take Skills for Success to learn about the labor market. He said it was important to provide relevance as well as rigor. Mr. Sullivan said that schools can’t do it all in the classroom during a 6 ½ hour day. Schools must broker with community organizations and the business sector to provide students with career exploration.

Board member Jeff Howard asked whether the Department had the means to inform elementary and middle schools as well as high schools about the number of their students who drop out. Dr. Howard said this would show the rate of dropout for students who went through that elementary or middle school, not to imply that the school was responsible, but rather to report on early indicators.

Board member Kaplan said the issue at hand was money and capacity. She suggested that the Board and Department should analyze the costs of incarceration versus dropout recovery. Ms. Kaplan said some schools staff believe they have no control over dropouts.

Mr. Allen said that he and a colleague encouraged Boston Public Schools officials to do outreach with students who had dropped out of school. He also said it is important to help teachers to plan and prepare for the reenrollment of students.

Mr. Sullivan said that the Governor, education, workforce, and human services all need to collaborate and lead the way on this issue. He noted the importance of goal-setting.

Board member Christopher Anderson asked about comparative data in other states, what works in other states, and what obstacles are in the way. Mr. Sullivan said that Boston is leading the nation in bringing back dropouts. He also pointed to New York City and its use of transfer schools and school-based services, and Portland, Oregon, where the head of the adult education system has recently become superintendent, as two good models where dropout prevention was made a priority.

Board member Dana Mohler-Faria commended the panelists for their work, and noted the pockets of success they have identified. Dr. Mohler-Faria said the Governor’s Readiness Project is seeking systemic solutions. Chairman Reville said the secretariat would convene an education cabinet around these issues.

Board member Thomas Fortmann said he is impressed with the work of the Boston PIC. He asked about the potential role of vocational technical schools. Dr. Fortmann also asked about cost-effective strategies for districts faced with resource allocation problems.

Mr. Sullivan said it is important to engage schools and teachers at the local level. He said that vocational technical schools were good at dropout prevention, not dropout recovery. Mr. Allen added that vocational technical programs were good at showing students what’s down the line and what they have to do to get there.

Board member Zachary Tsetsos suggested surveying students on why they are not in school, and looking at behavioral and/or family issues. Mr. Sullivan said that students want to know how to get out of school with a diploma and where that will take them.

Chairman Reville thanked the panelists for their public service and their testimony. He noted that this issue is a top priority for the Board and for the Governor. The chairman also thanked Board members Chernow and Anderson for their work in this area. Acting Commissioner Nellhaus commended Department staff for their excellent work on the 2006-2007 dropout report.

# Winchendon Public Schools

Acting Commissioner Nellhaus said he will recommend that the Board remove the Winchendon Public Schools from underperforming district status, which the district has been in since the Board’s vote in November 2003. The acting commissioner said the district is not in any accountability status, it has been successful in implementing its turnaround plan, many deficiencies originally cited by the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA) have been addressed, and there have been modest improvements in relations between the school department and the town government. He said that while the district has a ways to go, the Department has done what it can for the Winchendon Public Schools and needs to focus scarce resources on other school districts.

Associate Commissioner Lynda Foisy said that the Board received in November 2007 the EQA’s progress report on the district. She said that EDC had been chosen as the turnaround partner for the district. Ms. Foisy said that the report showed many deficiencies had been addressed and a significant improvement had been made in the management and delivery of educational services.

Superintendent Peter Azar said that the audience included representatives of teachers, administrators, town government, and school committee members. Dr. Azar introduced his fellow panelists: Val Miller, a data analyst from the superintendent’s office; the chair of the school committee, Michael Niles; and Barbara Miller from EDC.

Dr. Azar said that Winchendon was very different than it was three years ago. He said the culture in the town had changed to one of collaboration and trust, and one that values people’s perspectives no matter what their role. Dr. Azar said the district used data to develop the turnaround plan and the school improvement plan and turnaround plan are mirror images.

Dr. Azar said the district has embraced NISL training and data-driven decisions. The superintendent noted that he is leaving at the end of the year, but the turnaround plan is independent of one school or one person. He said the strength of the plan is its flexibility, and that it is reviewed through monthly meetings. Dr. Azar said the district has benefited from its connection with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Board member Chernow asked about the size of the district and what impact the under-performing label had on the district. Dr. Azar said the district has 1,700 students. He said the declaration of under-performing was devastating. School Committee chair Niles said he was the only remaining member of the school board from the time when the district was declared under-performing, and agreed that the under-performing declaration was devastating.

Board member Anderson said that districts need to be motivated and funded to make change before the label attaches. Mr. Anderson asked about the Ten Essential Conditions, especially the assignment of school personnel and finance. Dr. Azar said that principals are not bound by seniority in teacher assignments. He added that the teachers’ union was motivated to get out from under the under-performing label.

Board member Anderson asked whether the Priority School label would have had some motivational factor. Dr. Azar said it was hard to say. Dr. Azar noted that the district spends $600,000 for students leaving under school choice. Chairman Reville said the labeling question was largely symbolic, and the most important issue was the incentives created and technical assistance provided to the district. Dr. Azar said the three consultants provided by the Department were a huge help.

Board member Gerald Chertavian asked what advice the superintendent would have for the Board and Department. Dr. Azar described the district’s relationship with its state-funded turnaround partner, EDC, which he said was very helpful. He also said he would speak regularly with the superintendents from Holyoke and Southborough. Dr. Azar said the district created its plan in collaboration with the Department and its turnaround partner.

School Committee Chair Niles said that when the district was declared under-performing, there was no plan in place. He said that George Blasdell and Gene Thayer, who went to the district under the Department’s auspices, helped to get things moving in a short time.

Board member Tsetsos asked about the community’s role in creating the plan. Dr. Azar said that there was representation from across the community, including various boards, the newspaper, and parents.

Board member Kaplan asked what is different in classrooms from five years ago. Val Miller talked about differentiated instruction in the classroom, data-driven classrooms, and teachers working together in collaboration to examine student work.

Chairman Reville thanked the panelists for their testimony and for their work. The chairman said that the Board would vote on the acting commissioner’s recommendation at its April 29, 2008 regular meeting.

# Gill-Montague Regional School District

Acting Commissioner Nellhaus said that the Board identified the Gill-Montague Regional School District as an underperforming school district in January 2007. The Department sent a three-member team to the district to examine its leadership and governance structure. That team then prepared a district leadership evaluation report, which the Board reviewed in November 2007.

Associate Commissioner Lynda Foisy introduced Gill-Montague Regional School District Interim Superintendent Kenneth Rocke and Sheffield School Principal Chip Wood. Dr. Rocke thanked the president of the teachers association, which was key in allowing the district to join the Group Insurance Commission to reduce the cost of health insurance. Dr. Rocke acknowledged the assistance that the Department provided to the district, including leadership and excellent, focused professional development training. The superintendent described Gill-Montague as characterized by declining enrollment, an economically-challenged area, decreased state aid, and decreased support of the towns. Dr. Rocke said that thanks to a waiver from the Commissioner, he will serve as interim superintendent for another year. The superintendent said that the school committee is committed to resolving the issue of school closings. Dr. Rocke said that the leadership evaluation visit had a galvanizing effect on the school committee.

Chip Wood said that he will oversee all elementary education in the district in 2008-09. Mr. Wood talked about the leadership discontinuity, fiscal problems, and serious staff reductions that have occurred during the past five years, as well as the stress and trauma that affect students and families. He discussed the district’s efforts to align the curriculum in K-12 and to create continuity in professional development. Mr. Wood talked about the need for full-time math and reading coaches. He said the district’s dropout rate is very high, in the 20 percent range, disciplinary rates in the elementary grades for male students are high, and he would like to see more support for education in the early grades.

Dr. Rocke asked how improvements could be made without additional resources. He said the district joined the GIC in 6 weeks, consolidated elementary schools, has collaborated with other districts, and has discussed super-regionalization with state Senator Stanley Rosenberg. Dr. Rocke advocated for more adequate Chapter 70 aid. He said the Commissioner’s support in setting the budget by July 1, saved Gill-Montague last year. The superintendent said school choice and charter schools cost the district $750,000 last year. Dr. Rocke said that vocational technical education could help with dropout prevention, and suggested a need for satellite vocational-technical programs at each academic high school.

Chairman Reville said the Board is acutely conscious of Chapter 70, having commissioned the recent report on fiscal conditions. The chairman said a concern was the size and viability of small districts, and noted that Gill-Montague has faced a declining enrollment of 2 to 3 percent per year.

Board member Stotsky asked whether the district had considered full-time math teachers rather than coaches, citing the national mathematics panel report that found no evidence of the efficacy of math coaches. Mr. Wood said the district had considered that, but hasn’t been able to make the shift during the consolidation process.

With regards to the statement on the district being under-resourced, Board member Chertavian asked compared to what. Dr. Rocke said compared to the level of funding from a few years ago. The superintendent said a small district with declining enrollment cannot contract its operations efficiently or simply.

Board member Fortmann suggested a hypothetical study to look at several small districts to see if consolidated, what would be the financial gains and efficiencies, and would there be enough potential savings. Acting Commissioner Nellhaus said there was money in the budget to do such a study.

Board member Chernow asked how trust, confidence, and collegiality between the district and two member towns could be rebuilt. Dr. Rocke said that the 5-year sustainability study came up against resources, and if no new funding is found, solutions will be hard.

Board member Kaplan said the district’s plan was clear and easy to follow. Ms. Kaplan asked about school choice. Dr. Rocke said it is a well-intentioned policy with unintentioned consequences.

Board member Tsetsos asked, given the district’s high dropout rate, how Gill-Montague would be affected if those students returned to school. Dr. Rocke said the district can fund only one section of Reconnect Youth, and has no money to expand the program. The superintendent said that a grade 11 and 12 vocational technical program with grade 10 MCAS as a prerequisite would be a good way to bring students back.

Chairman Reville thanked the panelists for their work and said that the Board understands the challenges the district faces. The chairman said the Board will vote on the acting commissioner’s recommendation at its April 29, 2008 regular meeting.

**Charter Schools: Extended Loan Term for Holyoke Community Charter School and Innovation Academy Charter School**

The Board voted to approve requests from Holyoke Community Charter School and Innovation Academy Charter School for extended loan terms that exceed the duration of the schools’ charters. State law permits a charter school to incur temporary debt in anticipation of receipt of funds but requires approval by the Board of any repayment terms that exceed the duration of the school's charter. Neither the Commonwealth nor the Board or Department has any liability for the loan and the extended term has no impact on any action the Board might choose to take in the future with respect to the school's charter.

The chairman asked the Board to waive its two-meeting rule for consideration and vote on an agenda item, which it did.

**On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:**

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, in accordance with General Laws chapter 71, section 89(j)(6), approve the request of the Board of Trustees of the Holyoke Community Charter School and of Innovation Academy Charter School to enter into proposed loan agreements that extend beyond the terms of each school’s current charter and are not to exceed thirty years. The Board’s approval is explicitly conditioned upon the inclusion of the language that follows in the loan agreements, as executed by the schools and their lenders.**

**The [parties] explicitly acknowledge and agree that the Commonwealth, including but not limited to the Board and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, has no liability for any portion of the loans and provides no representations or guarantees with respect to these loans. Furthermore, the [parties] explicitly acknowledge and agree that the Board’s approval has no impact on any action the Board may choose to take in the future with respect to probation, revocation, or renewal of the school’s charter.**

The vote was unanimous.

**Grants**

The Board approved state grants totaling $556,400 under the following programs: Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students and Quality Full-Day Kindergarten.

**On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:**

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approve the grants as presented by the Acting Commissioner.**

The vote was unanimous.

Chairman Reville congratulated the three new Board members on their first meeting, and reminded Board members that the next regular meeting and a special meeting the prior night will take place in Worcester.

**On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:**

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adjourn the meeting at 12:15 p.m., subject to the call of the chairman.**

The vote was unanimous.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeffrey Nellhaus

Acting Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

and Secretary to the Board