Minutes of the Regular Meeting

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

**May 20, 2008**

**9:05 a.m. – 12:05 p.m.**

**Oxford High School**

**495 Main Street**

**Oxford, 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

**Mitchell D. Chester**, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, Secretary to the Board

Chairman Paul Reville called the meeting to order at 9:05 a.m.

**Comments from the Chairman**

Chairman Paul Reville said the Board was delighted to be in Oxford in recognition of Board member Zachary Tsetsos, the Chair of the Student Advisory Council, who is a senior at Oxford High School. The chairman said the Board traditionally holds its May meeting at the student representative’s high school. Chairman Reville said the Board has been reminded on numerous occasions over the past year of the importance of having a student voice on the Board, especially in selecting the new commissioner of elementary and secondary education. The chairman read and presented a citation to Mr. Tsetsos. Mr. Tsetsos thanked his fellow Board members and said the past year has been an amazing and valuable experience that has taught him about state education policy and how to represent his constituents.

Mr. Tsetsos introduced Oxford Public Schools Superintendent Ernest Boss and Oxford High School Principal David Grenier, who welcomed Board members.

Chairman Reville recognized the extraordinary service that Deputy Commissioner Jeffrey Nellhaus gave to the Board in his nine months as Acting Commissioner. The chairman said the Board was delighted that the deputy commissioner would remain at the Department, as he is one of its great assets. The chairman presented Deputy Commissioner Nellhaus with a Board citation, a Governor’s citation, and a pair of Red Sox tickets as a gift from the Board. The deputy commissioner said he appreciated the recognition, and he thanked the Board and Department staff for their support. Deputy Commissioner Nellhaus distributed a handout summarizing the Department’s major accomplishments over the past year.

The chairman described the ceremony that took place at the Joseph J. Hurley School in Boston on May 19th, where Governor Patrick swore in Mitchell D. Chester as the Commonwealth’s 23rd Commissioner of Education. Board members Christopher Anderson, Ruth Kaplan, and Tom Fortmann also attended the ceremony. The chairman said Commissioner Chester gave an excellent speech, and that everything that has happened since his selection has confirmed the wisdom of the Board’s choice. Commissioner Chester thanked the Board for its confidence in him, and thanked Deputy Commissioner Nellhaus for his generous support during the transition period. Commissioner Chester said the ceremony at the Hurley School was wonderful for him and his family.

Chairman Reville said he was honored to deliver the commencement address at Bridgewater State College this past weekend. The chairman noted that U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings visited Boston on May 6th. The chairman said that he and Board member Christopher Anderson attended and learned a lot from a Commonwealth Pilot Schools conference at Holy Cross. The chairman asked Board member Dana Mohler-Faria to update the Board on the Governor’s Readiness Project. Dr. Mohler-Faria said that staff is working to complete the project over the next few weeks, and announced that Board members were invited to a special event at Framingham State College on June 2nd.

Chairman Reville updated the Board on the 21st Century Skills Task Force and said that members would be announced later today. The chairman said this endeavor is intended to complement the state’s already high standards. Board member Gerald Chertavian, who will chair the task force, said the group will meet six or seven times between now and the end of October, and will produce a white paper to present to the Board at its November 2008 regular meeting. Board member Ruth Kaplan noted that she recently attended a presentation of high school senior projects at the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, a program that she said might be relevant to the task force’s work.

**Comments from the Commissioner**

Commissioner Chester deferred to Deputy Commissioner Nellhaus, who reported on the progress of the FY09 budget, currently in the Senate.

**Comments from the Public**

No individuals requested to speak during the public comment period.

**Approval of the Minutes**

Board member Ruth Kaplan requested an amendment to page 9 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 April 29, 2008 regular meeting, as amended.**

The vote was unanimous.

**Update on Randolph Public Schools**

Deputy Commissioner Nellhaus said the Board voted to designate the Randolph Public Schools as an underperforming district at its November 2007 regular meeting. At its February 2008 meeting, the Board voted to accept the acting commissioner’s recommended actions and benchmarks and to defer action on the question of chronic underperformance and state receivership for 120 days. The acting commissioner appointed a District Support Team after the February 2008 Board meeting to work with local school, municipal, and community leaders to define actions to be taken over the next 24 months and to assist in a community-wide, consensus-building effort.

Associate Commissioner Lynda Foisy gave a brief report on Randolph’s efforts to develop its Turnaround Plan, which will be submitted to the Department by May 31, 2008. Randolph officials will present the plan to the Board at its June 24, 2008 regular meeting. Ms. Foisy said it appears the community has made good progress to date, and she noted that the school committee and selectmen unanimously approved the Turnaround Plan the previous evening. Ms. Foisy said the successful override vote in Randolph in April helped to bring people together.

Board member Harneen Chernow asked whether there was anything learned in Randolph about bringing together constituencies that could be helpful to other communities. Ms. Foisy said that the Department will learn more about this process during a more formal debrief with the district team and others. Associate Commissioner Juliane Dow said the Department purposefully placed a professional facilitator on the district team since the communications problems were significant. Ms. Dow said the structured approach to conversation provided by the facilitator was essential.

The chairman said the process in Randolph sounds very promising, and thanked staff for their work. Deputy Commissioner Nellhaus said he would forward the Turnaround Plan to Board members for review early in June, after the plan is submitted to the Department.

Chairman Reville said he hoped the Board would be able to vote on the plan at the June meeting.

**Districts’ Plans for Commonwealth Priority Schools**

Chairman Reville said the Board received a report from the State Review Panels containing their recommendations on the adequacy and viability of the plans submitted by the nine Commissioner’s Districts that have Commonwealth Priority Schools. The nine districts are Boston, Brockton, Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, New Bedford, Springfield, and Worcester. The chairman said the detailed review of the plans has been done by the State Review Panels working with the Department. The Board’s role is to oversee the process, which reflects the criteria that the Board established, and to discuss the findings and recommendations presented by the State Review Panels.

Commissioner Chester said the process has been consistent with the regulations that the Board adopted in 2006. The commissioner said the Board should judge the plans in light of the process and standards that have been in place. Commissioner Chester said that moving forward we would build on strengths and address areas where we can improve.

Deputy Commissioner Nellhaus said that schools that fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in the aggregate for four or more years are identified as Commonwealth Priority Schools. He said there are currently 114 such schools, including 65 schools newly identified by the 2007 AYP determinations. The deputy commissioner said that of the 65 schools, plans for the 53 newly identified Commonwealth Priority Schools located in the nine Commissioner’s Districts are before the Board today.

Board member Sandra Stotsky asked in how many districts were the remaining 12 newly identified schools. Deputy Commissioner Nellhaus said the additional 12 schools were in 10 districts. Board member Kaplan asked how many schools are in the state, and how many would be identified as underperforming going forward. Deputy Commissioner Nellhaus said there are approximately 1,800 schools in the Commonwealth, and it is difficult to predict how many schools would move into Commonwealth Priority School status.

Associate Commissioner Juliane Dow said that between 2000 and 2006, the Department allocated most resources toward conducting on-site panel reviews of schools to determine which needed help. Ms. Dow said that by 2006, it became clear that using the AYP determinations would be more efficient, and would allow a shift in resources to intervention and assistance to schools, rather than on the identification of schools. Beginning in 2006, the designation of Commonwealth Priority School status became automatic, and changes to the regulations directed districts to address the key conditions in a strategic plan that is presented to the State Review Panels.

Ms. Dow said that Commissioner’s Districts were outlined in a concept paper that the Department presented to the Board in 2007. Commissioner’s Districts are districts in Corrective Action, per *No Child Left Behind*, that have four or more Commonwealth Priority Schools.

Associate Commissioner Foisy said that all nine Commissioner’s Districts are part of the Urban Superintendents Network, and each district has participated in National Institute for School Leaders (NISL) training. Ms. Foisy said that each of these districts has developed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Department to identify their priority initiatives. The Department has worked with the districts on expectations for the strategic plans that were sent to the State Review Panels. Each district’s plan sets three or four highest priority initiatives.

Ms. Foisy described the panel process to review the plans, which included a day of training for panel members. The district team, led by the superintendent, gave a formal presentation of the plan. That was followed by a three-hour discussion conversation between panelists and the district team. Panel sessions were held between March 31 and April 30. Five sessions were held for Boston, which had 21 schools, and one session was held for each of the remaining eight Commissioner’s Districts.

Ms. Foisy said that each district superintendent brought union representatives and school committee members into the planning process. The intent was for districts to ensure that this was a collaborative process. Chairman Reville commended staff for their work and for including union and school committee voices, which he said was critical.

Commissioner Chester commended Department staff for designing a process that is true to the standards established by the Board. Commissioner Chester said the alignment of federal and state criteria is key, and he wants to look beyond aggregate results to include student results by subgroups. The commissioner said the challenge that every state is facing is to build a system to support schools that are struggling, and districts have to have the capacity to be part of the solution. Commissioner Chester said the plans submitted by districts must be more than compliance mechanisms, they must also be action mechanisms that will lead to positive change.

Chairman Reville said that after 15 years of education reform, there is still a strong association between poverty and low student performance. He said focusing on schooling is necessary but insufficient to get all students to proficiency. The chairman said this is about strategy selection, not just the competence of the adults in the system. The chairman also noted student mobility is a recurring factor associated with poverty and low performance.

Board member Christopher Anderson said the Board shouldn’t miss opportunities to make tangible improvements. He said without a sense of consequence, we don’t build a sense of urgency, and Randolph is a prime example. Mr. Anderson said the four Commonwealth Pilot Schools have instituted an immediate culture change that has been positive for staff and students. He said the role and authority of the principal is significant, and co-pilots address that. Mr. Anderson said we need to look for tangible-impact solutions. Chairman Reville said he is sympathetic to much of what Mr. Anderson said

Board member Jeff Howard asked whether the focus should be on districts or on schools. Chairman Reville noted that at the last few meetings, the Board looked at districts that were very small and had limited capacity. But if the Department works directly with individual schools, quickly its capacity and resources will be spread too thin. Dr. Howard asked who designates schools as co-pilots. Ms. Dow said that union and district leadership must agree for it to happen, and then the school faculty must vote.

Board member Dana Mohler-Faria asked about results in the schools that have gone through the improvement planning process. Ms. Dow said the Department saw immediate improvement in almost all of the schools, followed by a flattening out in the 2nd and 3rd years. Progress was incremental, and gains were modest.

Ms. Dow said that between 2000 and 2006, 8 out of 50 schools exited underperforming status. Dr. Mohler-Faria asked about the characteristics of the 8 schools that exited. Ms. Dow said they included strong leadership, changes in instructional practices and use of time, district leadership that worked closely with school leadership to change the faculty composition, and additional resources for training and coaching placed by the districts once the schools were identified as underperforming. Dr. Mohler-Faria expressed concern that only 16 percent of schools exited underperforming status between 2000 and 2006, which he said raises questions about the effectiveness of the process. Ms. Dow said that is why the Board made changes to the system in 2006, because prior to that time there were too few resources to help districts and schools tackle the problem. She said that only in the past 2 years has there been additional state and federal funding for targeted assistance. The Department has also helped larger districts put in place good instructional oversight systems.

Board member Sandra Stotsky commented that teacher mobility might mean that the use of coaches and professional development are wasted. Dr. Stotsky asked how many people were on the State Review Panel, and whether there would be an opportunity to review what the panelists learned. Ms. Dow referred Dr. Stotsky to Attachment D in the Board materials for a list of the names of the panelists. Ms. Dow also said there would be a gathering of the review panel shortly to evaluate the process. Ms. Dow said that turnover in school faculty is a significant factor, and that for the first time this year, the Department’s new Education Personnel Information Management System (EPIMS) would provide information on educators statewide, including who is teaching and how long they have been licensed.

Board member Chernow said that recruiting and retaining good teachers at these schools is a bigger problem than removing teachers. Ms. Chernow said that districts’ answers were uneven relative to perceived barriers in staffing and principal autonomy. She said the story on paper does not necessarily reflect what she has heard from parents, teachers, and others at schools she has visited. Ms. Chernow said she would like to know more about the school culture. Ms. Foisy said that teachers and administrators in those schools completed surveys, which were a source of evidence and generated a lot of discussion. Ms. Foisy added that where appropriate, students and parents would also be surveyed.

Board member Tom Fortmann asked about the district leadership report for Lowell, which Ms. Foisy said was embedded in the school reports. Dr. Fortmann said that much of the Board’s authority relates to schools rather than to districts until they become chronically underperforming. He said the 10 conditions provide a lever, but based on the nine district reports, the impression is one of business as usual. He said the plans generally did not reflect the kinds of changes identified in the Turnaround Challenge Report or in the book, *It’s Being Done*.

Dr. Fortmann said the process seems adequate but he would have liked to see more evidence of what is being done in those districts. One example would be evidence of curriculum alignment to the state frameworks. He also said principals have only limited authority when it comes to staffing and financial resources. Dr. Fortmann said he is concerned that the conditions in the regulations are not being met, and he would like to see if any changes to contracts have been made to meet the conditions. Dr. Fortmann noted that the Department recruited principals in two of three chronically underperforming schools, and suggested a careful review of principal leadership as well as the other factors identified in the 10 conditions.

Dr. Fortmann said he would like the Commissioner to convene a focus group of principals, especially those with experience in successful turnarounds.

Board member Kaplan said that only New Bedford had a school committee member on the panel. Ms. Dow said the inclusion of school committee members was encouraged but not required. Ms. Kaplan asked about getting feedback from superintendents. Ms. Foisy said feedback would come from panelists, moderators, and superintendents and other district representatives.

Ms. Kaplan said that sometimes there is a disconnect between the paper report and what is observed in person. Ms. Kaplan mentioned her conversation with the principal of the Hurley School in Boston about the need for a good after-school program, in which the principal reported that her biggest challenge was transportation for the after-school program.

Chairman Reville said this is development work, noting that no one in the country has figured this out yet. We have had some limited success, but there is limited capacity at the Department. The chairman asked Board members if they had questions about individual district plans.

Board member Chernow said there didn’t seem to be a connection between the challenge and the action steps in the Boston plan. Ms. Dow said the districts were limited by the abbreviated form that the Department asked them to follow.

Board member Howard asked whether, if Board members were to look at these plans and deem them to be inadequate, they should vote “no.” Chairman Reville said the Board needs a constructive plan on what to do, including resources. The chairman noted that a lot of work went into these plans, the districts have to move forward, and the Board in the near term needs to send a signal to them. Chairman Reville said the Board could shape a new vision with the Commissioner in the future.

Commissioner Chester said this is about reciprocal accountability, and he is committed to improving the system as we go forward. The commissioner said that by approving the plans, the Board is not signaling that the work is done. The Board and the Department will continue to monitor these schools and districts. Board member Howard said that if the work the Department is doing does not result in dramatic improvement in the rate and speed of schools coming off the underperforming list, it is just an exercise. Commissioner Chester agreed, and said this has to be about action and results. Chairman Reville said it is important to remember that this is a redesign of a previous process, and that the Readiness Project is also looking at these issues.

Ms. Kaplan said she thought the Board would be hearing from superintendents. Chairman Reville said the Board cannot do an in-depth examination of every school; the Board’s role is to set the framework and have confidence in the commissioner and staff to carry out the work. The chairman said the superintendents have each gone through the state review process. Ms. Kaplan said that at some point she would like to hear from a few superintendents and principals as part of feedback.

Ms. Kaplan also asked whether recent interim report on Reading First would have any impact on these districts. She added that when she visited a school in Lowell, the principal told her the school doesn’t teach science and history because of double blocks of reading and math.

Dr. Stotsky said that most of these schools have declining populations. She requested an update from the Department on general school enrollment trends. Dr. Stotsky said the math strategies and programs used in these elementary schools are found unsupported in research by the National Mathematics Advisory Panel. Dr. Stotsky suggested the use of an anonymous teacher survey to get feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the math programs they are using.

Board member Mohler-Faria said this is the epicenter of the achievement gap, and this work is what will elevate us as a Commonwealth. Chairman Reville agreed that this is top priority work. Associate Commissioner Dow said that in each of the past two years, the Board has asked for $30 million for targeted assistance for schools and districts, but that level of support has not been available.

Ms. Kaplan asked about the teacher survey in New Bedford. Associate Commissioner Foisy said those results were made available to the leadership team and that New Bedford commented on the use of the analysis in their planning. Ms. Foisy said the Department advises districts to take the surveys seriously. Ms. Kaplan asked about individual school improvement plans, which Ms. Dow said are more detailed than appears in these district plans. In response to a question from Dr. Stotsky, Ms. Dow said the Department encourages districts to be systematic about collecting feedback from teachers.

Commissioner Chester thanked the staff for its excellent work, and pledged to bring to the Board ideas for strengthening the system in the next several months. At its June meeting, the Board will accept, reject, or direct changes to each of the districts’ Plans for School Intervention that were presented today.

**Grants**

The Board approved state grants totaling $2,339,130 under the following programs: Transportation Routing Software and Program, and Staff Development Regional Support Centers for Adult Basic Education (ABE). The ABE grants are contingent upon approval of the FY09 state budget.

**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 Commissioner, provided that the state grants for Adult Basic Education for FY09 shall be subject to appropriation.**

The vote was unanimous.

**New Business**

Board member Stotsky asked the Department to provide the Board with information on Reading First schools in Massachusetts, including what the state has learned from its own evaluation. Dr. Stotsky also requested, if possible, the names of the schools from Massachusetts that participated in the Reading First interim evaluation report, and what the reading scores of students at those schools were.

Chairman Reville commented on a situation where in Boston where high school seniors at a charter school were seeking to transfer to a regular Boston high school late in the year in order to receive a diploma. The chairman said that perhaps the Department could clarify for districts and charter schools the options available to students in these situations.

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

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adjourn the meeting at 12:05 p.m., subject to the call of the chairman.**

The vote was unanimous.

Respectfully submitted,

Mitchell D. Chester

Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

and Secretary to the Board