

EDITORIAL

Education reform has worked for Mass.; it's time for the next round

| MARCH 13, 2014

EDUCATION REFORM has been one of Massachusetts' greatest success stories of recent decades. It has put the state's students at the very top in the nation by virtually all measures of achievement. It's played a major role in attracting high-paying jobs, because employers recognize that Massachusetts' commitment to educating students continues. There's no resting on laurels here. Much work remains to be done, especially in closing the achievement gap, and Massachusetts can't shrink from it. Too much depends on the state's maintaining its reputation for excellence by developing new mechanisms for improving its public schools.

That's why it's disturbing — but not entirely surprising — that the latest education-reform bill is languishing in the Legislature. Critics, led by some very well-funded teachers' unions, are trying to portray education reform as “teacher bashing,” and to redefine what has been an unprecedented, straight-from-the-heart commitment to public education as an attempt to defund public schools. It's a deeply unfair charge, but sobering enough that some legislators are taking it seriously.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

If so, they should look closely at what's happening in Lawrence. In 2011, concerned about the terminally poor performance of students in the very low-income district, state officials implemented “turnaround” provisions that had been authorized in the previous education-reform bill, in 2010. The results, in just two years, have been

astounding: Sudden jumps of between 10 and 17 points in all grades in the percentage of students proficient in math; an 8-point jump in the four-year graduation rate; and a single-year plunge in the dropout rate from 8.6 percent in 2011 to 5.9 percent in 2012.

This was achieved with the same students, sitting in the same classrooms, in the same public schools. The only difference was that a new superintendent, Jeffrey Riley, hired many new principals and gave them the power to choose their teams of teachers and extend the school day.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

The impressive success of the Lawrence schools gives the lie to the frequently heard complaint that education professionals are being scapegoated for intractable problems that low-income students carry to school from their troubled homes. Education reform has shown that better principals and better-supervised teachers working longer hours can make a difference for even the most disadvantaged students. Lawrence’s experience also proves that teachers aren’t being singled out unfairly; changes started with principals and administrators.

There would have been no mechanism for diagnosing the failures of Lawrence schools if not for the statewide testing regimen

inaugurated in the first round of education reform almost two decades ago. And there would have been no adequate mechanisms for improvement if the 2010 law hadn’t passed. Failing to approve the next round of education reform will consign thousands of students to unsuccessful schools without empowering either individual districts or the state to enact proven turnaround methods. Those children would see their opportunities in life foreshortened, simply because of legislative inaction.

Details of the current bill are still being hashed out, but it would give state officials the option of extending the turnaround tactics that proved successful in Lawrence to a larger number of troubled schools — those just above the current “level 4” designation

“

of chronically underperforming schools, in districts that have shown little ability to improve schools on their own. It would also allow the state to approve more charter schools, which are the testing grounds for innovation.

Alas, charter schools are the biggest stumbling block in the legislation, the point around which opponents are rallying. By almost every measure, they have been a success. Taking children by lottery, charter schools have produced markedly better test scores than traditional public schools. This is usually ascribed to the highly motivated principals and teachers, longer school days, and intensive tutoring at the most successful charters. Parents clearly believe that charters can be a ticket to success: The waiting list numbers in the thousands.

Just as architects of charter schools intended, their innovations are now being applied to public schools, either through the turnaround process or collective bargaining. But as districts start to pressure unions to accept reforms pioneered at charters, some unions are fighting back by insisting that the schools' success is illusory, and that the good test scores are more the product of skimming the best students from traditional public schools.

In Boston, critics of charter schools like to point out that if students drop out or flunk out of charters, they return to traditional public schools — making it unfair to compare the test scores of students at charters with those in the regular system. Traditional public schools, the argument goes, take all comers; charters can quietly dump the unsuccessful kids. But this charge isn't borne out to any significant degree in Boston's own statistics. During the 2011-12 school year, a grand total of 73 students left charters and returned to Boston Public Schools. Not all had flunked out. But even if they had, they still represent only 73 kids in a system of 57,000 students — way too few to skew any test scores.

Moreover, between school years, there is only a slightly higher attrition rate at charters than at Boston Public Schools, 9.7 percent to 8.7 percent. So if unsuccessful students are returning to traditional schools with their tails between their legs, they aren't showing up in the statistics.

But what about special-ed students and children who don't speak English well? They may not show up in the test-score comparisons, but charter schools' failure to admit a proportionate number of kids with these needs points to their limitations.

Still, according to the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association, charters have been quickly closing the gap in special education. In Boston, they've almost caught up in percentage of special-ed students, 16 percent versus 19 percent. The gap for English-language learners is larger, but charter schools are working to close it; 18 percent of students entering charter schools for the 2013-14 school year were classified as having inadequate English.

Boston Public Schools insist that their English-language learners and students with disabilities are more seriously impaired — which may be true. But it's also true that the highest-performing charter schools have higher percentages of low-income and minority students than their high-performing counterparts at the Boston Public Schools.

Advocates on both sides can argue these points all night. But the goal isn't to fuel a war between traditional public schools and charters; it's to develop the most effective education policies and then apply them broadly. The fact that charter schools are making a significant effort to enroll students with special needs, and to test-market innovative techniques to get them up to the level of other kids, is of enormous benefit to Massachusetts as a whole — not just the students who happen to win the charter-school lottery.

Charter schools aren't a replacement for traditional public schools. Currently, only 1 in 8 Boston public-school students is in a charter. Raising the cap would only change that ratio slightly. And school districts are given sufficient time to adjust to any loss of students. When kids leave for charters, the system gets a full reimbursement for one year, and a 25 percent reimbursement for five more years. When the Legislature funds the reimbursement formula at or near the target, as it generally has, there's more than enough money to cushion any blow.

Charter schools bring thousands of new, energetic, caring people into the education sphere and show the regular system how to turn around troubled schools. Some day, all public schools will have the flexibility of the best charters, under a fairly negotiated agreement with teachers' unions. Until then, though, the state is entirely right to encourage the very successful process of reform.

© 2014 BOSTON GLOBE MEDIA PARTNERS, LLC
