

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions

Based upon our research, we offer the following conclusions about areas of success and areas for further work.

**Areas of Success:**

- 1. The legislature has brought virtually all districts to foundation level.** When the legislature committed itself in 1993 to supporting an unparalleled increase in state support for K-12 education, few thought they would actually do it. They did it, and a greater level of district equity is the result.
- 2. DOE has developed high-quality, well-aligned standards and assessments.** There is growing recognition, supported by external evaluations, that Massachusetts has some of the best standards and assessments in the country. The use of quality standards to align everything from teacher preparation to classroom instruction to school and district accountability is a truly systemic reform effort.
- 3. The state is paying more attention to the neediest students.** While controversial in their implementation, the system of standards and assessments has served to illuminate the persistent inadequacy of the education of many of our young people who might previously have fallen through the cracks. The foundation formula and subsequent appropriations for MCAS remediation have significantly boosted resources for those students who historically have been the least well-served.
- 4. Districts are paying more attention to curriculum and instruction.** With relatively clear standards, and as the standards stabilize and assessment results come in, schools have been able to re-examine their offerings and align them both internally, from grade to grade, and externally with the Frameworks. The majority of districts appear to have realigned their curricula, teacher preparation programs have examined their standards and alignment, and professional development has been supported as a matter of state policy.
- 5. Students, overall, are increasing their performance.** The passing threshold is still low (“needs improvement”), and the achievement gaps are cause for real concern (see below), but 87% of regular-education students in the Class of 2003 have been able to attain competency determination status to date. English language arts performance is improving across the board. And improved NAEP results and relatively high SAT and TIMMS results further indicate that, on average, Massachusetts students are making significant progress.

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**Areas for Further Work:**

**1. The achievement gaps.** While regular-education students are for the most part meeting the minimum graduation standard, special education students and participating LEP students, on average, are not. Students from poor districts, in general, are not. And African-American and Hispanic students, on average, are not. Further research is needed to delve into the relationships between these variables to identify key areas of opportunity. At the least, attention to instruction, resources, and a realistic timeframe for success will be important.

**2. Mathematics.** The state has made a great deal of progress in terms of English language arts performance, but in mathematics, particularly at the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>-grad levels, progress has been less satisfactory. One-third of 8<sup>th</sup>-graders are still scoring at the Warning level in math, and the percentage in the Advanced or Proficient categories has increased only slowly, from 31% to 34% over the past five years. Educators have successfully placed increased emphasis on literacy and writing across the curriculum in response to the writing components of MCAS; new approaches to mathematics now seem warranted as well.

**3. Proper implementation for accountability.** Effective implementation is as important as high standards and systematic assessments. A number of stakeholders have noted a significant gap between the implementation of student accountability and the implementation of adult accountability. Others have countered that high stakes for students were necessary if students and educators were to take the goal of meeting standards seriously. Having reached this point, it will be important to ensure that students and educators have sufficient “opportunity to learn” resources to enable them to meet the standards (including curriculum aligned to standards, teacher professional development, current textbooks, and time for these to take effect). If the resources and timeline are insufficient, this could have dire consequences for both individual students and the collective reform effort.

**4. Post-12<sup>th</sup> grade options.** If Massachusetts is to maintain the expectation that all students can reach common standards, post-12<sup>th</sup> grade pathways will be an important vehicle for ensuring that the system can accommodate student needs, in terms of both time and resources. As of the publication of this report, no programs, policies, or resources have been finalized for solving this looming challenge. Post-12<sup>th</sup> grade pathways to competency determination would represent significant progress toward a system in which standards are held constant and time spent on learning varies with student needs—as opposed to the traditional system of time being held constant and learning varying among students.

**5. From “needs improvement” to proficiency.** Massachusetts has set an ambitious target of getting all students to meet the minimum standards required for competency determination status. However, it should not be forgotten that “needs improvement” is an intermediate stage, and that the standard of “proficiency” is the level that more closely approximates the skill levels required for college-level work and/or skilled careers.

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**6. Educator supply, quality, and distribution.** As standards have become more ingrained, attention has begun to shift to the critical importance of highly qualified teachers in helping students meet the standards. Looming retirements of experienced teachers, insufficient retention of new teachers, teacher shortages in urban schools, teacher shortages in certain content areas (especially math, sciences, special education, and languages), higher expectations, and a dwindling supply of principals present formidable challenges. New methods of preparation, induction/mentoring, professional development, scheduling, and pay will all require consideration and evaluation.

**7. Updating the funding formula.** Our research appears to indicate that the current formula inadequately estimates costs in some areas. Now that we have a number of years' experience with the demands of education reform, it is time to revisit the formula to ensure that it reflects the real demands of the new environment. In addition to accurately funding the costs of regular education, attention should be paid to ensuring that the special costs of bringing all students to competency are supported equitably.

**8. Improved systems for data-based decision-making.** MERA has generated a great quantity of potentially useful data, and the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act will generate much more. Districts are already overburdened with information requests, and they feel that they have little opportunity or capacity to make use of the information that is collected. DOE has recently made TestWiz software available to all districts to help them analyze their MCAS results. This is a very positive step, but issues of local and state data capacity require continued effort. More attention will need to be paid to making the overall data gathering and distribution system more efficient, connected, and effective—both at DOE and at the local level.

**9. Re-connection of policymakers and educators in the field.** A great deal has been accomplished to date, but many front-line educators have come to feel disengaged from the process. As the state thinks about fine-tuning MERA implementation, it will be important for the governor, the legislature, the Board, the Department, and the various education associations to agree that Education Reform is a worthy goal, that we have much to celebrate, and that we will move forward together.

**10. Continued monitoring and evaluation of the reform effort.** This Annual Report is a useful step in the collection and analysis of information about the successes and challenges of MERA, but there are a number of areas for future research. These include analyses of the:

- various achievement gaps and how they interact, using student-level data;
- foundation budget formula and the real costs of ensuring that all students have the opportunity to learn in a standards-based environment;
- exemplary programs for helping special education, LEP, and high-poverty students to reach achievement goals;
- roles of postsecondary and community institutions in expanding opportunities for students to meet standards;
- supply and demand “pipeline” for teachers and administrators;
- effectiveness of various teacher preparation, induction, and professional development approaches; and

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- data needs and capacity of the state and local districts and how a data system might be developed to accommodate them.