



A Roadmap to Closing the Proficiency Gap

Submitted by the BESE's Proficiency Gap Task Force
April 2010

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Dear Board Members,

Chronic educational underperformance, concentrated in particular schools and population groups, is a looming disaster for the lives of the affected children and a mortal danger for the Commonwealth's economy. It is the unfinished business of Massachusetts education reform, and the great moral challenge facing this generation of leaders and policy makers. Once aware of this most fundamental of social inequalities, how can any responsible person, in any position of authority, look the other way?

Recognizing this, Governor Patrick and Secretary Paul Reville each made impassioned statements of commitment to closing chronic achievement gaps at the induction ceremony for new members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in April of 2008. Their determination was inspiring. In early 2009, Maura Banta, the Chair of the BESE, asked me to lead the Proficiency Gap Task Force—an effort to produce an analysis of the gaps and a prescription for closing them.

Determination at the top is a mandate for operational action. The Task Force, including superintendents, teachers, labor, business and community leaders, a range of education experts, and four BESE colleagues (and with the close support of Chair Banta, Secretary Reville, and Commissioner Mitchell Chester) has produced this report in answer. I believe it is coherent, with a clear point of view about the nature of the problems, aligned with a concrete approach to change. It is simultaneously inclusive, with a range of stakeholders of varied perspective working together to produce a roadmap for strong, effective action.

The report is not meant to be another compendium of "best practices"; there are plenty of those around. Rather, it offers a framework for concrete action, in the form of recommendations focused on the work and organization of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The report should ultimately be judged against a very tough standard: it should directly contribute to a mobilization and focusing of DESE effort, and that of other stakeholders throughout the state, that will produce measurable progress in closing, and eventually eliminating, proficiency gaps.

I would like to offer special thanks to Heidi Guarino, the Commissioner's Chief of Staff, and Megan Bedford of the Efficacy Institute for their thought, feedback and editorial support.

Sincerely,

Jeff Howard

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We can whenever, and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.

Ron Edmonds

I have asked board member Dr. Jeff Howard to chair a committee on the Proficiency Gap in Massachusetts. Additionally I am asking fellow board members Harneen Chernow, Gerald Chertavian, Beverly Holmes and Dr. Dana Mohler-Faria to serve on the committee which will be complemented by experts in early childhood, K-12 and Higher Education. The committee is charged with creating a report containing policy and programmatic recommendations for the BESE to consider. After reviewing the report the BESE will ask the Department to develop a plan and timeline for next steps.

BESE Chair Maura Banta's Charge to the Proficiency Gap Task Force

Executive Summary

The Proficiency Gap Task Force

Massachusetts is widely acknowledged as having the highest performing students in the United States, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This is a significant achievement, catalyzed by the investments and policy changes mandated by the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, and realized by hard working educators and students in cities and towns around the Commonwealth.

But it is an achievement with an asterisk; Massachusetts has significant achievement gaps, and this is no honor. In 2009, our gaps were similar in magnitude to those of the rest of the nation for black and poor students, and substantially greater for Hispanic students¹. These gaps are portentous; they illustrate present inequalities that reliably predict future life prospects in a complex society and increasingly competitive global labor market. They represent the unfinished business of education reform, and are an appropriate focus for the current generation of leadership in the Commonwealth.

Despite our preeminence among the states, no group, not even whites or Asians, has achieved complete proficiency. All can do better. This is especially true for students of color and students from low income or second language households. Therefore, in an effort to improve our understanding of current performance patterns and with a commitment to leverage state resources to raise achievement among lower performing groups, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) formed a Task Force in February 2009, led by Board Member and Efficacy Institute Founder Dr. Jeffrey Howard. This group was made up of educators and administrators, business leaders, researchers and other education stakeholders.

Proficiency Gap:

A measure of the shortfall in academic performance by an identifiable population group relative to an appropriate standard held for all.

Among its initial decisions, the group agreed that there was a logical flaw with the term "achievement gap": because it is used to describe academic differences *between* population groups (e.g., white students and black students) it presupposes that the higher performing group is the appropriate standard of comparison for the lower. However, this cannot always be the case; if the performance of population Group A is mediocre, and the performance of Group B is abysmal, certainly A cannot be the standard to which B aspires. While comparisons between groups may be of interest, the Task Force believed it was of greater importance to compare each group to a standard held for all. To that end, the group adopted a new term: "*proficiency gap*,"² which is defined as a measure of the shortfall in academic performance by an identifiable

¹ See the US Dept. of Education's National Center for Education Statistics website ("The Nation's Report Card") for state comparisons on the 2009 National Assessment for Educational Progress.

² The term "proficiency gap" was originally coined and defined by Jeff Howard. See J. Howard "The Logical Flaw in the 'Achievement Gap'" in *From Now On*, the Newsletter of The Efficacy Institute, Dec. 14, 2009.

population group relative to an appropriate standard held for all³. In other words, rather than comparing Group B to Group A's performance, both groups would aspire to meet a universal target set for all student populations. The Task Force used this new term to define its purpose: *to offer a framework to mobilize and coordinate the efforts of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) and other responsible actors to reduce, and eventually eliminate, proficiency gaps for all population groups in the Commonwealth.*

Understanding Massachusetts' Proficiency Gaps

Proficiency gaps for the lowest performing groups in Massachusetts are severe, predictable, and very persistent—often, in fact, intergenerational. The largest gaps are associated with the same population groups across the cities and towns of the Commonwealth, and indeed across the nation: children of poverty; English language learners; African Americans; Hispanics; children with special educational needs. When children from these groups are present in large numbers, we are no longer surprised that most achieve at low levels, and only a few perform at the highest levels. When—as is often the case—children from these groups are concentrated in particular schools, these are typically our underperforming, or chronically underperforming schools.

Proficiency Gap Task Force:

Aims to offer a framework to mobilize and coordinate the efforts of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) and other responsible actors to reduce, and eventually eliminate, proficiency gaps for all population groups in the Commonwealth.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the magnitude of the problem, for English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics, respectively. Note that the proficiency gaps are defined by each group's variation from an 85 percent proficiency standard, inserted here for illustration:

Figure 1:

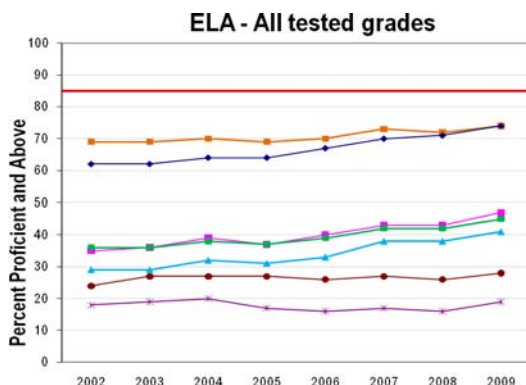
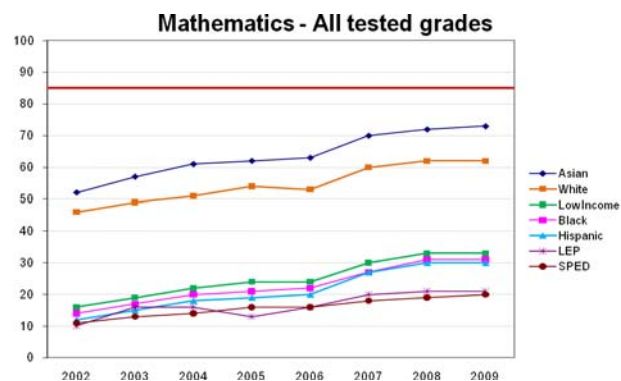


Figure 2:



³ Note that the idea of evaluating groups by their performance relative to a universal standard implies that we have clearly established that standard. To effectively use this concept, we must establish, as a state, the target proficiency standard we expect for the total population of the Commonwealth, and each of our population groups.

The lines on these charts predict an unequal and unstable future. While the term "proficiency gap" is new, the underlying reality it describes has been clear for so long it has become unremarkable, and until recently garnered little public attention or comment. But toleration of proficiency gaps is anathema to the essential democratic value of equal opportunity because they reliably translate to a range of other, important, lifelong inequalities. Continued acceptance of poor performance from *some* of our children in *some* of our schools is a profound injustice. It can no longer be tolerated.

Success Stories

Facing up to these realities can be very difficult. Too often the teachers, principals, and district leaders who preside over chronically underperforming schools are at a loss; difficult working conditions, and the challenges presented by many children and their families undermine

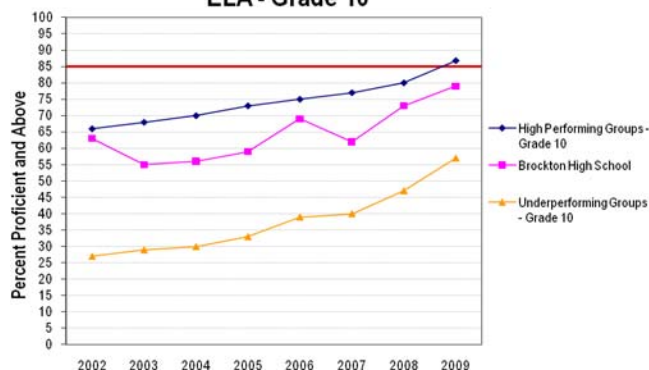
Exemplar schools represent undeniable evidence that poor and minority children can perform as well or better than the most advantaged students in the Commonwealth—when the education process is properly organized by responsible adults.

confidence and limit the sense of accountability for dramatic improvement. Yet there are *some* educators, working under the same conditions and with children from the same underperforming populations, who achieve significant academic successes. They provide the basis for a constructive shift in the conversation—to one about the levels of skills, determination and adaptability *among adults*.

Traditional Public School Exemplars

At Brockton High, the largest high school in the state, students have made spectacular gains, particularly in English Language Arts (See Figure 3⁴). Most Brockton High students are African American or Hispanics and live in low-income households. Nonetheless, their *gains* from 8th to 10th grade learning in ELA are at the 98th percentile, compared to other Massachusetts high schools. English Language Arts proficiency at Brockton High has risen to the average of the state as a whole, despite the fact that its student population is one many would consider much more difficult to serve. Other outstanding schools serving students from lower performing groups include University Park Campus School in Worcester, Clarence R. Edwards Middle School in Charlestown, Arthur T. Talmadge Elementary School in Springfield, and TechBoston Upper Academy in Boston.

Figure 3:
ELA - Grade 10



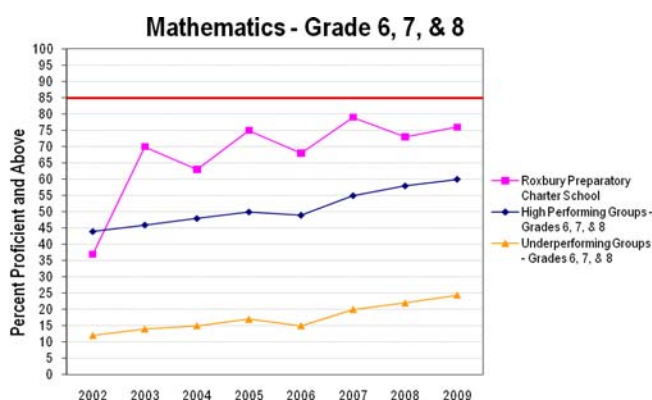
⁴ In the Figures 3 and 4 the line for High Performers represents the aggregated performance of whites and Asians; the line for low performers represents an *estimate* of the aggregate performance of blacks, Hispanics, LEP, SPED, and low-income, because some students are counted more than once (e.g. black and LEP or SPED and low-income).

Charter School Exemplars

Five charter schools, KIPP Academy in Lynn, and Roxbury Preparatory, Neighborhood House, Excel Academy, and Edward M. Kennedy Academy for Health Careers in Boston, are among the highest performing schools in the state, despite serving children from the traditionally underperforming categories⁵ (see Figure 4 at right comparing Roxbury Preparatory to high and underperforming groups in Mathematics).

These schools, traditional public and charter, offer evidence that establishes beyond doubt that poor and minority children can perform as well or better than the most advantaged students in the Commonwealth—when the education process is properly organized by responsible adults. We believe that it is the proper role of BESE to mandate and facilitate a process to capitalize on these successes—to lay the foundation for the adult learning and action required to close proficiency gaps throughout the Commonwealth.

Figure 4:



Recommendations for Results

The new attention to gaps, in the nation and the Commonwealth, has not been accompanied by commensurate operational sophistication toward closing them, or a process to develop that sophistication. We lack a clear, compelling objective to mobilize our efforts. We lack a structural mechanism to focus the considerable resources of the ESE on measurable improvement, or to hold its leaders accountable for concrete action. We have been unable to capitalize on the strategies for success developed and proven by our exemplars, or to effectively use the available data about the gaps to drive new improvement strategies at the school, district and community levels. Facing these issues, the Proficiency Gap Task Force has worked with a simple focus: to address underperformance with a set of actionable recommendations, designed to have a significant impact on closing proficiency gaps.

The Proficiency Gap Task Force has a simple focus: address underperformance with a set of actionable recommendations, designed to have a significant impact on closing proficiency gaps.

With this in mind, the Task Force examined data across various student populations, and sought the experience of individual members with expertise in the field to identify key levers for closing the proficiency gaps. The Task Force's recommendations are meant to be used as a foundation for a set of policies for the BESE to adopt, and a set of supportive structures, strategies, measures and methods for ESE to implement, *all working together to produce actual improvement—a coordinated drive to significantly reduce the proficiency gaps among affected populations.*

Four subcommittees—English Language Learners, Early Literacy, Instructional Leadership, and Family and Community Engagement—were established to focus the expertise and experience of Task Force members on the work of developing actionable recommendations for effective strategies.

⁵ Higher attrition rates in charter schools may undercut, to some extent, the force of comparisons with traditional schools.

Our recommendations are organized in a simple format: 1) a clear objective; 2) an operational structure to focus our efforts, and 3) a set of concrete strategies we believe will be the basis for elimination of the proficiency gaps⁶.

Our Recommendations:

1. A Clear Objective
2. An Operational Structure
3. A Set of Strategies for Improvement

1

A Clear Objective:

An 85% Standard

- ✓ We recommend, as a benchmark against which to measure the progress of underperforming population groups, **that BESE adopt a goal that by the year 2020 at least 85 percent of students from every subgroup, statewide, will score Proficient or Advanced** on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exams. *This means that of 85% students from each subgroup entering kindergarten in September 2010 will have reached the proficiency standard (or higher) by the time they enter the 10th grade in September 2020.*

Goals that are emotionally significant, and challenging but realistically attainable—and we believe this one has all those characteristics—have a well-understood mobilizing effect on people. Attention is activated, energies are focused, effort more effectively organized. Compelling objectives initiate a search for good strategy and a commitment to execution, as well as on-going strategic course corrections based on feedback. All this is especially true when people feel accountable to achieve the objectives.

⁶ Task Force member James A. Peyser has submitted a letter, which appears at the end of this report, recommending additional steps, including: closing the lowest performing schools; placing such schools under new management; strengthening teacher evaluation and incentive systems; replicating high-performing charter schools in the lowest performing districts.

2

An Operational Structure:

The Office of Planning and Research to Close Proficiency Gaps

- ✓ The Task Force further recommends a reconsideration of the scope and focus of the current Office of Strategic Planning, Research and Evaluation (OSPRE). We recommend that the office be renamed the **Office of Planning and Research to Close Proficiency Gaps (OPRCPG)**, and serve as a critical liaison between established ESE offices and schools and districts throughout the Commonwealth to support change efforts and track progress in closing gaps.

The Commissioner should directly ensure the efficacy of the activities and progress of the OPRCPG. The organizational reporting structure for the office should reflect the centrality of closing proficiency gaps and ensure that the Commissioner exercises oversight of proficiency gap closing initiatives.

- The OPRCPG **will focus the activities of the ESE's established offices on measurable reductions of the proficiency gap, and ultimately, achievement of the 85% standard.**
- The OPRCPG will **support the Commissioner's office in its work with the Commissioner's Network** (described below). It will develop measures of school and district progress in closing proficiency gaps, and a template of data reports that will be common across the Commissioner's Network (CN).
- The OPRCPG **will integrate research and evidence** into the statewide drive to close proficiency gaps, and **disseminate lessons learned** in the CN to other schools and districts across the Commonwealth.
- The OPRCPG will **measure the impact of ESE efforts in facilitating the work of schools and districts at closing proficiency gaps statewide and provide a basis for accountability** in these efforts.
- The OPRCPG will **provide information, support and guidance to families and community leaders** around the Commonwealth interested in understanding and working to close proficiency gaps. It will establish a regular schedule of annual "family and community updates" about progress in closing them.

The OSPRE is not currently staffed to provide all of the services envisioned for OPRCPG; funding for additional staffing and expanded operations will be required.

3

Strategies for Change

A Commissioner's Network, a focused intervention working with willing schools and districts; and a Drive for Statewide Improvement, aimed at impacting students across the Commonwealth, utilizing the Office of Planning and Research to Close Proficiency Gaps (OPRCPG).

✓ **A Commissioner's Network**

As a focused intervention—a laboratory for working out strategies for closing proficiency gaps and demonstrating impact—the Task Force recommends the establishment of a "**Commissioner's Network**" (CN) of 15-30 low-performing Level 3 and Level 4⁷ schools with voluntary and active participation of district and school leadership. These schools will focus on the 85% standard, and be provided with tools, funding and support in return for their active participation in the activities outlined below.

- **The Commissioner or his designee will conduct quarterly⁸ data presentation and analysis meetings for CN schools,** with school/district leadership teams in attendance, to review and improve turnaround strategies and instructional leadership.
- **As an essential input for quarterly data analysis meetings, all CN schools will be required to periodically administer interim assessments,** aligned to MCAS, and to designate a standard set of additional school performance indicators, including student behavior, attendance, and other relevant data, to be presented by each CN school at each data meeting.
- **The district superintendent or his/her designee will be expected to attend the quarterly meetings** to learn about school needs, identify district practices that need improvement, and learn how s/he could expand the data analysis process to other district schools.

⁷ In the ESE's Accountability Framework, a Level 3 school is defined as a school in corrective action, or restructuring status in the aggregate under the federal No Child Left Behind law. A Level 4 school is defined as one of the up to 72 schools identified as the lowest performing, least improving schools in the Commonwealth, based on four-year trends in MCAS scores and high school dropout and graduation rates.

⁸ Dr. Carol Johnson, Superintendent of the Boston Public Schools, while generally in favor of this recommendation, suggests that quarterly meetings may be unduly burdensome on busy school administrators. She believes three meetings a year would be more workable.

3 *cont.*

✓ *A Drive for Statewide Improvement*

We recommend the ESE, working through its Office of Planning and Research to Close Proficiency Gaps (OPRCPG), focused on the 85% standard, organize support to schools and districts, individual educators, and families and communities statewide. It will disseminate change strategies (including lessons learned in the CN schools), and focus the services and resources of established offices of the ESE and other responsible stakeholders (such as relevant advisory committees to BESE) in this effort. Among the specific recommendations:

Supports for Schools and Districts

- Implement pre-K to grade 3 literacy assessments⁹
- Provide children in low-performing districts with access to high quality preschool and full-day kindergarten
- Utilize Readiness Centers for instructional leadership development

Supports for Educators

- Support development of innovative programs for English language learners, and provide professional development opportunities for school and district leaders who work with them
- In light of the challenges that English language learners face and the fact that they are one of the few growing segments of the K-12 population, we advocate substantial expansion of state funding and staffing to support teacher and program development for English language learners
- Strengthen licensure requirements, teacher training and professional development opportunities for current and future teachers of English language learners
- Ensure the availability of effective, intensive professional development opportunities for staff of underperforming schools

Supports for Families

- Work in conjunction with the Department of Early Education and Care to provide concrete early literacy supports for parents
- Develop an Office of Family and Community Engagement (closely coordinating with and, perhaps, as a sub-office of OPRCPG), and identify and disseminate promising strategies for reallocating resources so that each school can provide effective family outreach
- Adopt a set of Family and Community Engagement standards and indicators

For the full list of Task Force recommendations, see page 19.

⁹ This is one of several recommendations that imply a strong collaboration between the Departments of Early Education and Care, and Elementary and Secondary Education. Commissioner Sherri Killins has submitted a letter making concrete recommendations for aligning the activities of these two departments. See page 49.

A Roadmap to Closing the Proficiency Gap

The Current Situation

Consider a proficiency target of 85 percent. Given this target, the “proficiency gap” for any group is the difference between the 85 percent target and the percent proficient among that group. Accordingly, the proficiency gaps in Massachusetts can be represented by a few simple graphs that offer clear, visual evidence. (See Figures 1 and 2.) First, compared to an ambitious goal of having 85 percent of our students proficient, even white and Asian students fall short of the target. Second, compared to whites and Asians, our underperforming groups (blacks, Hispanics, LEP, SPED, and low income) show much larger proficiency gaps.

Figure 1:

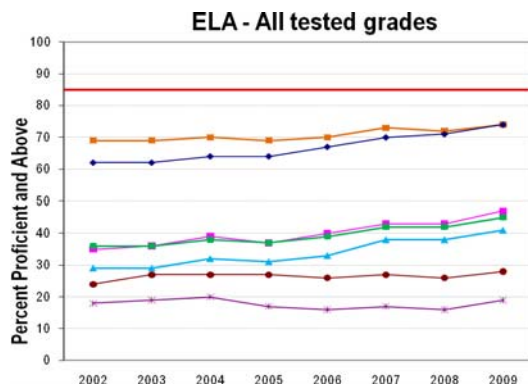
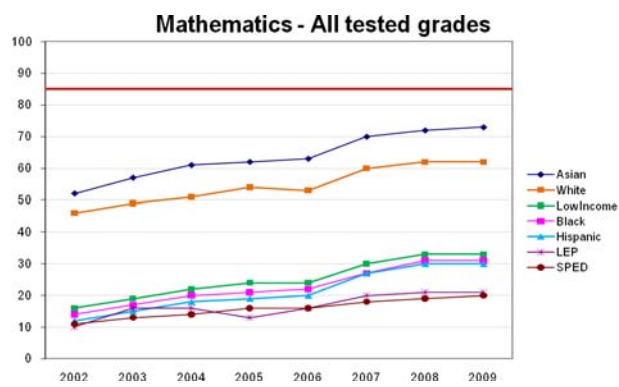


Figure 2:



The gap between the lines of the higher performing groups (those closer to the 85% target) and the lines of lower performing ones has critical personal and social significance. Serious, chronic differences in performance in school predict lifelong differences in educational attainment, employment, income, health, and family stability. If we can show that the differences are unnecessary, an artifact of inadequate policy, ineffective instruction and lack of family and community engagement, then continued toleration of them represents an unacceptable abdication of our responsibilities as policy makers, educators, citizens and leaders.

So what's the problem? It is common (and far too easy) to rationalize continuing failure as the consequence of the challenges presented by the gritty realities of urban education, and the deficiencies of children and their families. But we already have strong evidence that the challenges can be overcome. The deficiencies (such as they are) can be effectively managed, by policy makers, educators, and families committed to getting better results.

Success Stories

If we can demonstrate that *some* educators, working under the similar conditions and with children from the same underperforming populations can achieve significant academic successes, we can shift the conversation to one about the levels of skills, determination and adaptability among the adults.

To that end, Figures 1 and 2 offer clear evidence that the current trend lines are not set in stone. In both English Language Arts and Mathematics, children from every subgroup in the state, including the traditionally low achieving ones, have shown steady gains in proficiency, and

reductions in the percentage who fail, since 2002¹⁰. This positive trend attests to the underlying motivation of our children to be successful, and the capacity of our educators, at various levels of policy and practice, to improve performance.

Traditional Public School Exemplars

Five traditional (non-charter) public schools, working with students from our underperforming populations, demonstrate the degree to which proficiency gaps can be closed by skilled, committed educators and families.

At Brockton High, the largest high school in the state, students have made spectacular gains, particularly in *English Language Arts (ELA)*. BHS is filled with young people from usually underachieving populations: 69% of BHS students qualify for free and reduced lunch (FRL)—a standard measure of low-income; 68% are African-American or Hispanic; 14% are classified Limited English Proficient (LEP)¹¹. Yet over the past several years, their performance has skyrocketed: **In 2000, only 27% of BHS students scored Proficient or higher on English Language Arts portion of the the MCAS; in 2009, 79% did** (51% were Proficient, and 28% scored at the highest level, Advanced). This places BHS equal to the state average, where the average school has less than half the proportion of students of color or the percent qualifying for free and reduced price lunches. Indeed, Brockton’s learning *gains* in English Language Arts from 8th to 10th grade are at the 98th percentile among other high schools, according to the state’s most recent calculations.¹²

At **University Park Campus School (grades 7-12) in Worcester**, 79% are low income, 48% are African-American or Hispanic, and 10% are classified LEP. On the 2009 MCAS, **81% of University Park students scored Proficient or Advanced in ELA, and 62% in Math.**

At **Arthur T. Talmadge Elementary School, in Springfield**, 78% qualify for FRL, and 65% are African-American or Hispanic. On the 2009 MCAS, **68% of Talmadge students scored Proficient or Advanced in ELA, and 71% in Math.**

At **TechBoston Academy** (high school), 80% qualify for FRL, 74% are African-American or Hispanic, and 4% are classified LEP. On the 2009 MCAS, **72% of TechBoston students scored Proficient or Advanced in ELA, and 78% in Math.**

These schools offer undeniable evidence that we can move children from underperforming populations, and underperforming schools, to the highest standards of achievement—if we decide to do it.

At **Clarence R. Edwards Middle School in Charlestown**, 90% qualify for FRL, 71% are African-American or Hispanic, and 27% are classified LEP. On the 2009 MCAS, **52% of Edwards students scored Proficient or Advanced in ELA, and 42% in Math.**

¹⁰ There are two important exceptions to this: in English Language Arts, the lines for SPED and LEP students have been essentially flat during this period.

¹¹ Limited English Proficient (LEP) is the ESE designation for English Language Learners (ELL).

¹² Communication with Dr. Ron Ferguson. Calculations based on statistics collected by the Harvard University Achievement Gap Initiative, which Dr. Ferguson directs.

MCAS Comparisons for Traditional Public Exemplars

In direct comparisons of MCAS performance, our traditional public school exemplars—serving predominantly low-income children and students of color—have proficiency gaps more similar to whites’ and Asians’ than to underperforming groups’. In the Figures 3 and 4 below, the line for High Performers represents the aggregated performance of whites and Asians; the line for underperforming groups represents an estimate of the aggregate performance of blacks, Hispanics, LEP, SPED, and low-income¹³. The third line represents our high-performing Traditional Public School Exemplars. These data go a long way to eliminating questions about the capacity of public schools working with children from traditionally underperforming groups to make substantial progress in closing gaps.

Figure 3:

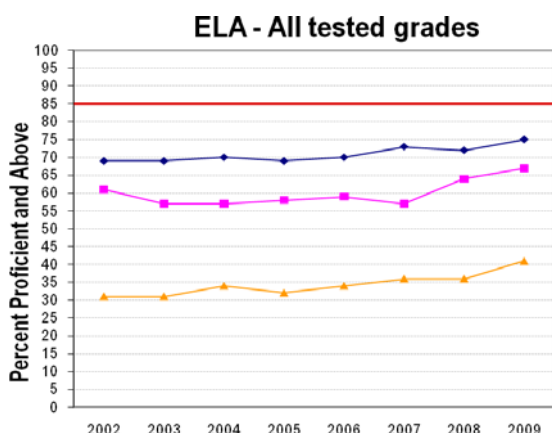
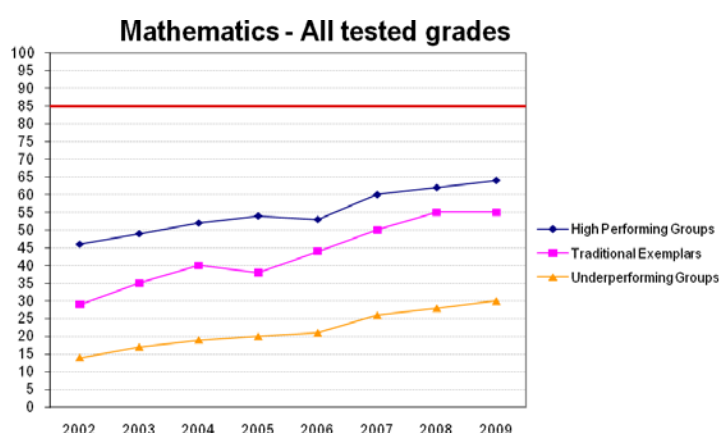


Figure 4:



Charter School Exemplars

Five charter schools, KIPP Academy in Lynn, and Roxbury Preparatory, Neighborhood House, Excel Academy, and Edward M. Kennedy Academy for Health Careers in Boston, are among the highest performing schools in the state, despite serving children from the traditionally underperforming categories¹⁴.

At **Roxbury Prep** (middle school), 72% qualify for free and reduced lunch (FRL), 99% are African-American or Hispanic and 2% are classified Limited English Proficient (LEP)¹⁵. Yet on the 2009 MCAS, **82% of Roxbury Prep students scored Proficient or Advanced in ELA, and 76% in Math.**

At **Excel Academy** (middle school), 69% qualify for FRL, 72% are African-American or Hispanic, and 4% are classified LEP. On the 2009 MCAS, **95% of Excel Academy students scored Proficient or Advanced in ELA, and 85% in Math.**

At **Edward M. Kennedy Academy for Health Careers** (high school; formerly the Health Careers Academy), 77% qualify for FRL, 88% are African-American or Hispanic, and 1% are classified LEP. On the 2009 MCAS, **85% of Kennedy students scored Proficient or Advanced in ELA, and 65% in Math.**

¹³ In the Figures 3 and 4 the line for High Performers represents the aggregated performance of whites and Asians; the line for low performers represents an *estimate* of the aggregate performance of blacks, Hispanics, LEP, SPED, and low-income, because some students are counted more than once (e.g. black and LEP or SPED and low-income).

¹⁴ Higher attrition rates in charter schools undercut, to some extent, comparisons with traditional schools.

¹⁵ Limited English Proficient (LEP) is the ESE designation for English Language Learners (ELL).

At **KIPP Academy** (middle school), 90% of students qualify for FRL, 81% are African-American or Hispanic, and 1% are classified LEP. On the 2009 MCAS, **68% of KIPP students scored Proficient or Advanced in ELA, and 75% in Math.**

At **Neighborhood House** (grades K-8), 76% qualify for FRL, 69% are African-American or Hispanic, and 2% are classified LEP. On the 2009 MCAS, **64% of Neighborhood House students scored Proficient or Advanced in ELA, and 47% in Math.**

MCAS Comparisons for Charter Exemplars

In direct comparisons of MCAS performance, our Charter School Exemplars, comprised of students who are predominantly poor and minority, not only dramatically outperform their underperforming demographic peers; in 2009 they actually outperformed the aggregate of whites and Asians in both subjects.

Figure 5:

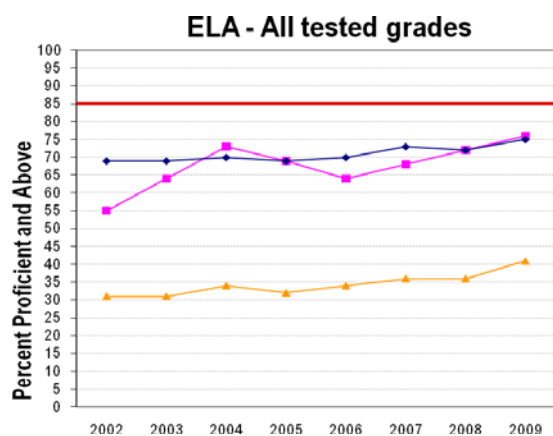
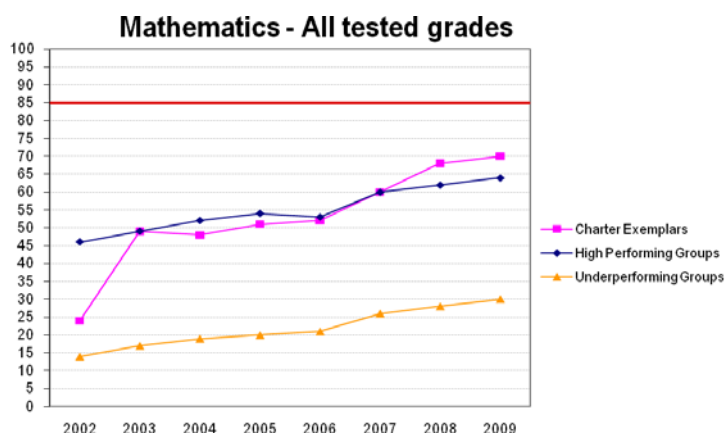


Figure 6:



These exemplar schools—traditional and charter—are evidence of what is possible; they highlight the impact of effective leaders, dedicated and skillful teachers, organizational and policy flexibility, continued support of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and, above all, appropriately high expectations for children from underperforming groups¹⁶.

They also sharply define the great moral challenge for the *next* round of Massachusetts education reform: they are undeniable evidence that we can move children from underperforming populations, and underperforming schools, to the highest standards of achievement—if we decide to do it.

¹⁶ For an excellent discussion of the instructional practices of public schools that are highly successful serving typically underperforming populations (including Roxbury Prep), see Karin Chenoweth, *It's Being Done*, (2005, Harvard Education Press).

Contributing Factors

To make the necessary changes, we need a clear fix on the nature of the problems. There is a dreary sameness about underperforming schools: most primarily serve children from at-risk populations; most face high turnover of children, teachers and principals; most operate in poor and/or urban communities; most have been sliding toward failure, or failing outright, for an extended period of time; *and most show little evidence of concerted, effective corrective action from the districts that oversee their operations.* Few, if any, face any organized pressure, or even awareness, from the parents or communities they serve.

Experience tells us that there are consistent contributing factors that combine to produce underperformance¹⁷:

Needs for Improved Leadership

- ✓ **Lack of instructional leadership.** Because of a lack of instructional leadership, we too often have a "one size fits all" approach to instruction. Schools and classrooms need to become platforms for addressing a range of issues associated with children from underperforming groups, and they need experienced leadership to generate an ethic of tailored instruction, and training for teachers to generate the expertise to deliver it, focused on the needs of individual learners.
- ✓ **Weak, ineffectual turnaround interventions.** District pressure to improve is often ineffective. Districts with failing schools have themselves failed to create powerful links between evidence of what has worked elsewhere, and intervention strategies in their own schools. This district-level failure is too often mirrored by a failure at the state level; the ESE has not been effective enough in disseminating and sharing evidence of effective practices and successes. When we fail to confront people with evidence that success is attainable, we weaken the drive to improve.
- ✓ **Lack of effective analysis of data (evidence).** Because of a lack of training, effective analysis of data is still not driving a reconsideration of curriculum and instruction within low performing schools. Without such reconsideration, 'instructional inertia' prevails, and we know that doing more of the same won't get better results. At the district and community levels, there is currently little public transparency or effective analysis of data comparing low performing schools with higher performing buildings serving similar populations. As a result, there is little accountability for continued failure, or pressure to change.
- ✓ **Low expectations for schools.** In many communities, there is a history of low expectations for schools that serve underperforming populations, resulting in little pressure for improvement, and insufficient direction and support from district offices. Community and district leadership have been far too tolerant of chronic underperformance concentrated in particular schools and populations of children.

There is a dreary sameness about underperforming schools. They serve children from at-risk populations; face high turnover; operate in poor communities; have been failing for many years; show little evidence of corrective action from the districts that oversee their operations. And few face organized pressure from the parents or communities they serve.

¹⁷ This list was developed by ESE Commissioner Mitchell Chester and Proficiency Gap Task Force Chair Jeff Howard, and is based on their own direct experience in the work of education reform with additional input by other experts.

Needs for Improved Teaching and Parenting

- ✓ **Differences in educator effectiveness.** Too often the most inexperienced teachers are assigned to schools with the most challenging populations to teach, with little or no effective professional development and support. As a result, many of these schools experience high faculty turnover, and replacement teachers are equally inexperienced.
- ✓ **Awareness of emotional issues in our responses to children.** Effective teachers know that students will not learn if they are not engaged, and that "readiness precedes engagement." The definition of great teaching, especially in underperforming schools, must be expanded to include effective diagnosis and response to the range of emotional issues and challenges that affect readiness, and therefore student engagement in the learning process.¹⁸
- ✓ **Lack of family engagement.** There is not enough direct involvement by families in their children's education, and a lack of parent activism to hold schools accountable, and to challenge them to achieve better results. Families, too, are affected by low expectations, undermining their capacity to engage in effective instruction in the home, or mobilize to demand better instruction from the school.

Lack of Effective Responses for Groups Facing Special Challenges

- ✓ **Not enough time in school.** The expectation that children who face substantial challenges can achieve proficiency in the full range of subjects in the same timeframe as children who do not face these challenges is, in most cases, unrealistic. Children in challenging circumstances may simply need more time in school to achieve proficiency.
- ✓ **Lagging early literacy.** Children from underperforming groups share a crippling early deficit: lack of reading readiness when they enter school, and lagging reading skills in the early grades. If unaddressed, these deficiencies generate a disadvantage from which many never recover.
- ✓ **Issues for English language learners.** ELLs face the daunting dual challenge of both learning English and simultaneously being held accountable for the mastery of academic content *taught* in English and tested on the MCAS. ELL children are often members of population groups subject to low expectations about their academic capabilities and suffer a history of low high school graduation rates. Critical factors in this underachievement include faulty assessment, lack of trained teachers, constraints on program development, lack of general knowledge about education of ELLs and the inadequacy of currently available data for more precise program planning.

As these and other challenges go unmet, year after year, a sense of complacency emerges, accompanied by an unacceptable sense of inevitability—the belief that persistent failure is quite simply the natural, expected state for “kids like these” and the adults responsible for them. The Proficiency Gap Task Force has worked to provide recommendations that respond to these contributing factors.

¹⁸ Communication with Massachusetts Department of Education Secretary Paul Reville.

Recommendations for Results

Our exemplar schools prove that failure is not, in fact, inevitable; that with commitment, effective practice and hard work, success is within our reach. Complacency about chronic underperformance must be replaced with confidence that the rest of us can make the necessary changes, too, and an appropriate sense of urgency about doing so (we are, after all, talking about the lives of children here, and the future of the Commonwealth).

To this end, the Proficiency Gap Task Force offers recommendations in three stages: a **Clear Objective** meant to set an appropriate standard for students from all subgroups; an **Operational Structure**, the Office of Planning and Research to Close Proficiency Gaps (OPRCPG), to focus our efforts; and **Strategies for Change**. The Strategies are broken into two sections: *Focused Interventions* that offer a laboratory for learning and demonstrating impact; and *A Drive for Statewide Improvement* utilizing the OPRCPG to disseminate best practices and offer support to districts and schools across the Commonwealth.

The BESE is asked to approve the Task Force's **Recommendations for Results**:

1 A Clear Objective: An 85% Standard

To give force to the concept of 'proficiency gaps' (defined as the gaps between particular population groups and the standard held for all) it is necessary to establish the general proficiency goal against which to measure each group's performance. **We recommend the BESE vote to adopt a goal that at least 85 percent of students from all subgroups, statewide, will score Proficient or Advanced on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) by 2020.**

To render this objective in more compelling human terms, what we are proposing is that children who enter Kindergarten in September of 2010 will be operating at the 85% standard no later than the time they reach the 10th grade in September 2020.

To render this objective in more compelling human terms, we are proposing that children who enter Kindergarten in September of 2010 will be operating at the 85% standard by the time they reach the 10th grade in September 2020.

Goals that are emotionally significant, as well as challenging but realistically attainable—and we believe this one has all those characteristics—have a well-understood mobilizing effect on people. Attention is activated, energies are focused, effort more effectively organized. Compelling objectives initiate a search for good strategy and a commitment to execution, as well as on-going strategic course corrections, based on feedback. All this is especially true when people feel accountable to achieve the objectives.

2

An Operational Structure

The Task Force further recommends a reconsideration of the current Office of Strategic Planning, Research and Evaluation (OSPRES) as the **Office of Planning and Research to Close Proficiency Gaps (OPRCPG)** within the ESE. This office will serve as a critical liaison between established ESE offices, and districts and schools across the Commonwealth to support change efforts and track progress in meeting the 85% objective. Its mission will be to coordinate ESE efforts and provide relevant research, analysis, and planning support so that ESE and districts can make evidence-based policy and program decisions to close proficiency gaps.

The Commissioner should directly ensure the efficacy of the activities and progress of the OPRCPG.

The organizational reporting structure for the office should reflect the centrality of closing proficiency gaps and ensure that the Commissioner exercises oversight of proficiency gap closing initiatives.

It is important to note that the OSPRES is not currently staffed to provide all of the services envisioned for OPRCPG; funding for additional staffing and expanded operations will be required for full implementation.

- 2.1 The OPRCPG **will focus the activities of the ESE's established offices on measurable reductions of the proficiency gap**, serving as a liaison to these offices to set appropriate goals and measures of progress for the work of data dissemination and analysis, professional development, early literacy, instructional leadership, support for English language learners and any other ESE functions deemed important in closing proficiency gaps, and to hold people accountable for this work.
- 2.2 The OPRCPG will **support the Commissioner's office in its work with the Commissioner's Network** (see recommendation 3.1). It will develop measures of school and district progress in closing proficiency gaps, and a template of data reports that will be common across the Commissioner's Network (CN).
- 2.3 The OPRCPG will integrate research and evidence into the state-wide drive to close proficiency gaps; it will measure individual schools' and districts' efforts at closing gaps, and **disseminate lessons learned** in work with CN schools to other schools and districts across the Commonwealth.
- 2.4. The OPRCPG will **measure the impact of ESE efforts in facilitating the work of schools and districts at closing proficiency gaps statewide and provide a basis for accountability** in these efforts.
- 2.5 The OPRCPG, working through the proposed Office of Family and Community Engagement (see recommendation 3.2.13), will **provide information, support and guidance to families and community leaders** around the Commonwealth interested in understanding and working to close proficiency gaps. It will develop presentations to help families and community leaders understand the critical importance of academic proficiency to their children's futures; templates to display, in understandable and compelling ways, data about the magnitude of current gaps; and, especially in communities with large gaps, establish a regular schedule of annual "family and community updates" about progress in closing them.

3

Strategies for Change

The following recommendations are broken into two sections: **Focused Interventions centered on a Commissioner's Network** of underperforming schools and districts, aimed at developing a laboratory for working out strategies and demonstrating impact on closing proficiency gaps; and **A Drive for Statewide Improvement**, utilizing the Office of Planning and Research to Close Proficiency Gaps (OPRCPG), aimed at impacting students across the Commonwealth.

3.1 Focused Intervention: Establish a Commissioner's Network (CN) of 15-30 low-performing Level 3 and Level 4 schools with voluntary and active participation of district and school leadership. These schools will be provided with tools, funding and support in return for their active participation in the activities outlined below.

- 3.1.1. Require quarterly¹⁹ data presentation and analysis meetings for CN schools,** conducted by the Commissioner or his designee, with school/district leadership teams to review and improve turnaround strategies and instructional leadership. These quarterly meetings are an example of a method we know to be at the heart of successful transformation processes: leaders using effective analysis of data to develop targeted strategies for improvement.
- 3.1.2.** As an essential input for quarterly data analysis meetings, all CN schools will be required to periodically administer **interim assessments**, in addition to MCAS, to track student performance. In addition, the Commissioner will also designate a **standard set of school performance indicators** (to be coordinated with the OPRCPG), including student behavior, attendance, and other relevant data, to be presented by each CN school at each data meeting.
- 3.1.3.** The school teams will be made up of the principal and other key leaders from the school. **Quarterly data analysis meetings will evaluate school performance and improvement, and serve as a forum for discussion of the effectiveness of action plans, and for discussion of new programs, strategies and approaches,** based on analysis of the most recent interim assessments, and other school performance data. **These meetings will not be platforms for performance evaluation and accountability; rather, their purpose is formative.** The analysis will highlight gains (and thus build confidence) and target continuing challenges as points of focus for improvement. They will also serve as forums for CN district leaders to learn from the analyses developed by other school teams.
- 3.1.4. The district superintendent or his/her designee,** in order to learn about school needs from the analyses, identify district practices that need improvement, and learn how s/he could expand the data analysis process to other district schools, **will be expected to attend the quarterly meetings** and provide input on district supports for the school improvement process.

¹⁹ See footnote 6.

3.2 A Drive for Statewide Improvement: Dissemination of Best Practices and Support

The following recommendations build on the mobilizing power of the 85% standard, and position the ESE, working through its Office of Planning and Research to Close Proficiency Gaps (OPRCPG), to organize support to schools and districts, individual educators, and families and communities statewide. The OPRCPG will disseminate change strategies (including lessons learned in the CN schools), and focus the services and resources of established offices of the ESE and other responsible stakeholders (such as relevant advisory committees to BESE) in this effort. Many of these recommendations were drawn from the work of our Four Subcommittees.

Recommendations to Support Districts & Schools

- 3.2.1** Identify and implement a set of **comprehensive pre-K to grade 3 literacy assessments**. *[See the Subcommittee on Early Literacy Report]*
- 3.2.2** The ESE will make available interim assessments aligned to MCAS, that will provide a **steady flow of appropriately tailored academic performance data to facilitate analyses and program development for local districts** and will work with districts to ensure that planning is dictated by data and evidence. *[See the Subcommittee on English Language Learners Report]*
- 3.2.3** Utilize **Regional District and School Assistance Centers (DSACs) for Instructional Leadership Development**. These centers will collect and distribute written and visual materials to **highlight exemplars of instructional leadership** statewide, with a special focus on serving underperforming groups. *[See the Subcommittee on Instructional Leadership Report]*
- 3.2.4** Mandate the participation of Level 3 and 4 district and school instructional leaders in **instructional leadership training and activities**, especially those focused on more effective instruction of underperforming groups, hosted by the DSACs.
- 3.2.5** Provide school and district leaders with **professional development opportunities** to strengthen their ability to work with **English language learners**. *[See the Subcommittee on English Language Learners Report]*
- 3.2.6** Support districts in the development of a **range of innovative programs for English language learners** that are appropriate for the age and English proficiency of the students. *[See the Subcommittee on English Language Learners Report]*
- 3.2.7** ESE will **assess the impact of the current professional development required for teachers in sheltered English content instruction** (“Category Training”); improve its design based on that assessment; provide implementation support; and expand access to it.
- 3.2.8** **ESE will identify and disseminate** promising strategies for reallocating resources and roles so that each school can provide effective family outreach that connects families to the help and support they need to get their children to school each day, ready to learn.

Recommendations to Support Educators

- 3.2.9** For current and future teachers of English language learners, strengthen licensure requirements, teacher training programs and professional development opportunities. *[See the Subcommittee on English Language Learners Report]*
- 3.2.10** Over the past several years DESE has experienced funding and staffing cuts to programs that support instruction for English language learners. In light of the challenges that English language learners face and the fact that they are one of the few growing segments of the K-12 population, **we advocate substantial expansion of state funding and staffing to support teacher and program development for English language learners**
- 3.2.11** Build a statewide system of ongoing **professional development opportunities in early literacy**, run out of the District and School Assistance Centers.
- 3.2.12** ESE will ensure **the availability of effective, intensive professional development training opportunities, focused on working with underperforming groups**, for staff in underperforming schools across the Commonwealth.
- 3.2.13** ESE will ensure the availability of effective **professional development for teachers focused on meeting the social and emotional needs of students** to lessen non-academic barriers to learning.

Recommendations to Support Students & Their Families

We know that many children from underperforming groups face severe socio-emotional challenges, sometimes on a daily basis. Others are encumbered by language and culture differences. We also know that stability—a degree of security and predictability in life—precedes academic engagement. Closing proficiency gaps will demand that we work effectively with children and their families to address culture issues, health issues, and the psychological impacts of trauma and fear. We need to close early childhood language and literacy gaps, and work more effectively with English language learners. Schools need support to find effective ways to deal with these issues.²⁰

- 3.2.14** Develop an **Office of Family and Community Engagement** (closely coordinated with and operating, perhaps, as a sub-office of OPRCPG), to support development, implementation and evaluation of engagement initiatives statewide. This office will also be responsible for the creation of professional development opportunities to help educators better **engage parents and members of the community** in the work of promoting stronger academic achievement, especially with underperforming populations. *[See the Subcommittee on Family and Community Engagement Report]*
- 3.2.15** Adopt a set of **Family and Community Engagement standards and indicators** to provide districts with a framework for their own FCE outreach, and to establish benchmarks for assessment and evaluation. *[See the Subcommittee on Family and Community Engagement Report]*
- 3.2.16** Work in conjunction with the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) to **provide concrete early literacy supports for parents** including concrete vehicles and benchmarks for parent/school partnerships, including literacy support in the home through oral language and print. *[See the Subcommittee on Early Literacy Report]*

²⁰ Personal communication with Massachusetts Department of Education Secretary Paul Reville

- 3.2.17** Improve the process of **identification, assessment and placement of English language learners**. *[See the Subcommittee on English Language Learners Report]*
- 3.2.18** To support early literacy, provide all children in low performing districts with **access to high quality preschool and full-day Kindergarten**. *[See the Subcommittee on Early Literacy Report]*
- 3.2.19** Develop and disseminate resources designed to reverse low expectations by providing students from underperforming populations, and their families, with new mental models and understanding about the nature and distribution of learning capacity, and the role of sustained effort in stronger academic achievement²¹.

²¹ See K. Anders Ericsson and Neil Charness, *Expert Performance: Its Structure and Acquisition*; Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers*; Richard E. Nisbett, *Intelligence and How to Get It*; and David Shenk, *The Genius in All of Us*.

Subcommittee Reports

- I. Instructional Leadership Subcommittee Report
- II. Early Literacy Subcommittee Report
- III. Family and Community Engagement Subcommittee Report
- IV. English Language Learners Subcommittee Report

Instructional Leadership Subcommittee Report

Co-Chairs: Dr. Ron Ferguson, Harvard University &
Dr. Susan Szachowitz, Principal, Brockton High School

Subcommittee Members:

Ricci Hall, University Park Campus School
Carol Johnson, Boston Public Schools
Dana Lehman, Roxbury Preparatory Charter School
Thomas Fortmann, Mathematics by the Bushel; Member, BESE

Recently released reports on “value added” achievement growth in Massachusetts schools show that exemplary schools—schools that excel in raising student achievement levels by much more than might be predicted based upon students’ backgrounds—exist in all types of cities and towns, serving all types of students. However, some schools are much more effective than others. The time has come to learn from our most effective schools and share the lessons where students are progressing less rapidly and consequently remain further removed from achieving their academic potential.

Which lessons are most important to share? Evidence is accumulating that students’ academic growth depends fundamentally upon the quality of instruction that they experience in classrooms which, in turn, depends fundamentally upon the quality of instructional leadership that teachers experience in their school- and district-level professional communities. The latter proposition—specifically, that the quality of instruction depends importantly upon the quality of instructional leadership—is only beginning to achieve the attention that it deserves. Instructional leadership in this context includes not only principals, but also assistant principals, coaches, consultants, department chairs and lead teachers in positions to help others improve instructional practices.

Evidence. In December 2008, researchers Viviane Robinson, Claire Lloyd and Kenneth Rowe published the most authoritative literature review currently available on the question of how school leadership affects student outcomes. Entitled, “The Impact of Leadership on Student Outcomes: An Analysis of the Differential Effects of Leadership Types,” their report analyzed 27 published studies measuring the relationship between school leadership and student outcomes. The greatest estimated impacts on student outcomes came from instructional leadership—in other words, leadership focused explicitly and actively on improving the delivery of instruction.

To examine the role of instructional leadership more closely, Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe grouped survey items that the various studies had used to study instructional leadership into the following five categories:

- *Establishing Goals and Expectations.* The studies of this category show that the effect is moderately large and educationally significant. Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe write, “In schools with higher achievement or higher academic gains, academic goal focus is both a property of leadership (e.g., ‘the principal makes student achievement the school’s top goal’) and a quality of school organization (e.g., ‘school-wide objectives are the focal point of reading instruction in this school’).” However, they caution that the details of how people act to realize their goals matter. In particular, goals should help direct time and resources toward priorities, and away from less important activities. Otherwise, goals are of little value.
- *Resourcing Strategically.* This is not about raising lots of money. The authors emphasize that effective fundraising without clear direction is not necessarily supportive of higher achievement. Resourcing strategically means using time and energy to assemble the types of resources most directly related to the achievement of priority goals for teaching and learning, then applying those resources appropriately.

- *Planning, Coordinating, and Evaluating Teaching and the Curriculum.* Measures of this third category predict student achievement more strongly than “resourcing strategically” and just as strongly as “establishing goals and expectations”. Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe identified four interrelated subdivisions of this category that distinguish between higher and lower performing schools. Specifically, leaders in higher performing schools:
 - *Were “actively involved in collegial discussion of instructional matters, including how instruction impacts student achievement;”*
 - *Were “distinguished by their active oversight and coordination of the instructional program;”*
 - *“Set and adhered to clear performance standards for teaching and made regular classroom observations” that helped teachers improve their teaching;*
 - *Made sure that “staff systematically monitored student progress and that test results were used for the purpose of [instructional] program improvement.*
- *Promoting and Participating in Teacher Learning and Development* concerns whether leaders are *active learners* along with teachers. This category predicted student outcomes more strongly than any other leadership characteristic measured in the review. The authors write, “This is a large effect and provides some empirical support for calls to school leaders to be actively involved with their teachers as the “leading learners” of their school.
- *Ensuring an Orderly and Supportive Environment* concerns cultivating a school culture and environment where students and adults alike can feel physically and psychologically safe to pursue their work. Some of the specific measures associated with this category include leaders’ capacity to protect teachers from undue pressures (e.g., from education officials and parents), to identify and resolve conflicts, and to make people feel cared about.

Recommendations to Strengthen Instructional Leadership in Massachusetts Schools

It is a fact that for any give student-body profile, including schools with concentrations of children from traditionally underperforming populations, there are some schools in the state that are producing much higher achievement gains than others; have improved a great deal over the past decade; or have sustained a high level of achievement for many years. *We propose that the Commonwealth establish mechanisms to expose instructional leaders from all schools to the ideas and practices that are routine in the state’s most effective schools.* “Most effective” in this context is to be measured using school average year-to-year value-added achievement gains, adjusted to compare students who begin the year at comparable levels of achievement, but grow academically at different rates presumably because of differences in their educational experiences. The goal is to provide all students the types of educational experiences that yield high rates of academic growth.

The Commonwealth has a responsibility to provide a high quality education to all its children. Given the reality of huge variation in the success of different schools in providing such education, and the large body of research about the role and nature of effective instructional leadership at the heart of this variation, we recommend the BESE mandate a system for instructional leadership, operated by the ESE, focused on schools with traditionally underperforming populations, and organized around specific *structures, mandates, monitoring, and dissemination.*

- *Structures: A system of Regional Centers for Instructional Leadership Development should be established.* The primary role of the centers will be to disseminate models of exemplary instructional leadership practice. The exemplary models will be drawn primarily from exemplary schools in Massachusetts, identified on the basis of their exemplary performance on the MCAS. Again, exemplary performance should be judged not (or only partly) in relationship to absolute scores or proficiency levels, but instead in terms of value-added achievement gains that students achieve from one administration of the MCAS to the next.

- *Mandates: Each district will identify central office and school staff who will be designated to play key instructional leadership roles.* This group should include district curriculum and instruction specialists; school principals, lead teachers and department chairs. These designated instructional leaders will be held accountable for active participation in the work of the regional centers. An appropriate system of rewards and penalties will be established in order to provide incentives for effective participation to districts, schools and individual staff.
- *Monitoring: The ESE will designate agents responsible for monitoring the work of the regional development centers,* including the level and nature of participation by district and school-level personnel assigned to each center, and the penetration of effective instructional leadership practices into the operations of district schools. This monitoring will include periodic visits to schools, including interviews with randomly selected teachers concerning their experience as the beneficiaries of instructional supervision.
- *Dissemination: The ESE will organize production of written and video-graphic materials for the dissemination of exemplary practices.* These materials will be made available on the Internet for the use of educational professionals in Massachusetts and potentially anywhere else in the world that may find them useful.

Early Literacy Subcommittee Report

Chair: Dr. Sherri Killins, Commissioner, Department of Early Education and Care (EEC)

Subcommittee Members:

Margaret Blood, Strategies for Children
Harneen Chernow, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
Gerald Chertavian, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
Beverly Holmes, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
Wendell Knox, Efficacy Institute
Lisa McGeorge, Adams School, Boston
Marta Rosa, Wheelock College
Jason Sachs, Boston Public Schools
Paul Toner, Massachusetts Teachers Association
Barry Zucherman, Boston Medical Center
Titus DosRemedios, Early Education for All
Cheryl Liebling, ESE
Earl Phalen, Reach Out and Read
Marion Borunda, Lesley College
Nicole Mancevice, ESE

It is a truism that literacy is fundamental for the complex learning required for 21st century success in school, life and careers. It is also clear that children from the affected groups lag in their early acquisition of reading skills, and remain behind through the rest of their academic careers. Research affirms the causal connection: when children lag behind their peers in language and literacy skills when they begin first grade, they typically stay behind throughout their schooling (Snow, Porche, Tabors & Harris, 2007). But there is good news from the research, too; conventional reading and writing skills developed in the preschool years from birth to age 5 have a clear and consistently strong relationship with later conventional literacy skills²², and once children begin school, there are reading instruction methods that consistently relate to reading success in the critical early elementary grades (K-3)²³.

We believe that the drive to close the proficiency gap in reading will demand a successful campaign, grounded in the research on what works, for early literacy in homes, schools and communities where at-risk children are concentrated.

Recommendations. To build on what we have learned from the research, and construct an infrastructure to advance early literacy across the Commonwealth, the Subcommittee makes the following recommendations to the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education:

- **Professional Development.** The Commonwealth's Departments of Early Education and Care (EEC), and Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) should build a shared *statewide system of ongoing pre-service and in-service professional development in literacy, initially focused on low performing schools and districts*, that addresses the full continuum of pre-kindergarten to 3rd grade (pre-k to 3) standards, assessments, and research-informed instructional practices. The operational hub for this professional development should be the Commonwealth's District and School Assistance Centers (DSACs) in the regional Readiness Centers, with services radiating out to districts and schools.

²² The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) convened in 2002 to examine the implications of instructional practices used with children from birth through age 5. The NELP carried out its work under the auspices of the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL).

²³ The National Reading Panel's (NRP) report in 2000 responded to a Congressional mandate to help parents, teachers, and policymakers identify key skills and methods central to closing the early literacy proficiency gap.

Professional development frameworks should be comprehensive and data-driven, and lead to targeted supports to address gaps in language and early literacy skills. These frameworks should include, but not be limited to, the following:

- Training to ensure the provision of differentiated support (based on a standardized comprehensive literacy assessment) for children through multiple tiers of instruction and intervention, universal screening and progress monitoring, and research-based instructional and behavioral practices. This level of support should begin with target schools and low quality early education and care programs, identified as those rated below level 3 on EEC's Quality Rating and Improvement System for Pre-k (QRIS)²⁴.
 - Training for appropriate building-level staff, such as reading specialists and student support coordinators, to lead collaborative, team problem-solving process focused on the needs each child at risk. The problem-solving teams will include teaching staff and families.
 - Interdepartmental coordination to ensure that:
 - EEC and ESE professional development policies are aligned across the birth to age 8 continuum of programs.
 - Current ESE licensure for reading consultants or specialists differentiates core competencies within the QRIS system, including intervention experience with students, peer coaching, and working with children and families.
- **An Early Literacy Assessment System.** The Commissioners of the Departments of Elementary and Secondary Education and Early Education and Care shall convene a task force to identify comprehensive pre-k to 3rd grade literacy assessments (formative and summative) for uniform statewide implementation and guidance to districts. This task force should provide recommendations by September, 2010, and work to ensure that:
 - All low performing school districts, and early education and care programs that feed into such districts, provide uniform assessments for 4 year olds within 30 days of preschool entry, at preschool exit and at the beginning and end of the kindergarten year to ensure early identification for individualized planning and instruction.
 - Target schools institute a program-based early literacy self-assessment, such as the Verizon Early Literacy Program Self-Assessment (VLP-SAT), to help programs view their practices through an early literacy lens, and make concrete, evidence-based improvements to instruction.
 - Adaptive assessments are provided for English Language Learners (ELL). ELL's are a growing population in the Commonwealth, and require a differentiated approach to reading instruction, from birth to age 8.
 - **Access to Preschool and Kindergarten.** In low performing school districts all children should have access to high quality preschool and full day Kindergarten. We recommend that EEC and ESE jointly work to:
 - Pilot a project to explore the feasibility of blending multiple funding streams to achieve this goal.

²⁴ A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is a method to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early care & education and after-school settings.

- Provide information outreach to families of children ages 0- 8 about the availability and quality of the early education and care and out-of-school-time supports in their communities.
 - Review access demands annually and target state resources based on the demand for early education and care in low performing school districts.
 - Ensure that early educators in pre-k and kindergarten are trained in literacy instruction, curriculum and assessment in alignment with K-3.
 - Use QRIS incentives to move pre-k programs in underperforming school districts to achieve higher levels of quality as well as strengthen proposed QRIS to include specific literacy activities.
 - Encourage and provide incentives for all early childhood programs to achieve nationally recognized accreditation, such as NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children).
- ***Literacy Support for Parents.*** ESE and EEC should develop, promote and provide concrete vehicles and benchmarks for parent/school partnerships including literacy support in the home through oral language and print. These may include, but are not limited to:
 - Development of a tool kit of individualized literacy supports to be used by educators to support families' enhancement of literacy development at home.
 - Workshops that encourage parents of young children to engage in language-building activities with children, including stories, songs and games.
 - Reading contracts between parents and schools in which parents agree to read to children multiple times per week.
 - Parent-teacher conferences throughout the school year, during which literacy and reading at home and school are discussed.
 - Expand school-based and community-based family literacy initiatives that use existing models of best practice.

Family and Community Engagement Subcommittee Report

Chair: Dr. Karen Mapp, Harvard University

Subcommittee Members:

Abby Weiss, Executive Director, Full-service Schools Roundtable

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Howard Eberwain, Superintendent, Pittsfield, MA

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Bill Lupini, Superintendent, Brookline, MA

Jim Peyser, NewSchools Venture Fund

Neil Sullivan, Boston Private Industry Council

Definition of Family and Community Engagement (FCE)

The FCE subcommittee endorses a research-based definition of family²⁵ and community engagement that can be applied to policies and practices across the state and will increase the likelihood of student success.

Family and Community Engagement (FCE) is:

- *A shared responsibility* where schools and community organizations commit to engaging families in meaningful and culturally respectful ways and where families actively support their children's learning and development;
- *Continuous across a student's life*, beginning in infancy and extending through college and career preparation programs; and
- *Carried out everywhere that children learn* including homes, early childhood education programs, schools, after-school programs, faith-based institutions, playgrounds, and community settings.

This definition supports the creation of pathways to partnerships; it also acknowledges that family engagement is everything family members do to support their children's learning—including guiding them through a complex school system, advocating for them when problems arise, and collaborating with educators and community groups to achieve more equitable and effective learning opportunities. As students become older and more mature, they should take increasing responsibility for their own learning; but they will need support from the adults in their lives throughout their educational careers.

Rationale for Recommendations

We know from the research on family and community engagement that when school staff, families, and community members work together and create a system of supports for children, these collaborative efforts lead to better educational and development outcomes for children.

At the Early Childhood level:

- Children whose parents read to them at home recognize letters of the alphabet and write their names sooner than those whose parents do not.
- Children whose parents teach them how to write words are able to identify letters and connect them to speech sounds.
- Children's early cognitive development is enhanced by parent supportiveness in play and a supportive cognitive and literacy-oriented environment at home. These advantages often continue into the school years.

²⁵ The terms parent or family are intended to mean a natural, adoptive or foster parent, or other adult serving as a parent, such as a close relative, legal or educational guardian and/or a community or agency advocate.

At the Elementary level:

- Children in grades K–3 whose parents participate in school activities have good work habits and stay on task.
- Children whose parents provide support with homework perform better in the classroom.
- Children whose parents explain educational tasks are more likely to participate in class, seek help from the teacher when needed, and monitor their own work.

At the Middle and High School level:

- Adolescents whose parents monitor their academic and social activities have lower rates of delinquency and higher rates of social competence and academic growth.
- Youth whose parents are familiar with college preparation requirements and are engaged in the application process are most likely to graduate from high school and attend college.
- Youth whose parents have high academic expectations and who offer consistent encouragement for college have positive student outcomes. Defined as...?

Impact on Narrowing the Achievement Gap:

- Low-income African American children whose families maintained high rates of parent participation in elementary school are more likely to complete high school.
- Latino youth with parents who provide encouragement and emphasize the value of education as a way out of poverty have higher school completion rates.

Research also shows that community engagement in schools improves educational opportunities for children and adults:

- Upgraded school facilities
- Improved school leadership and staffing
- Higher quality learning programs for students
- New resources and programs to improve teaching and curriculum
- Resources for after-school programs and family supports
- Increased social and political capital of participants

FCE Recommendations

Given what we know from research and promising practices implemented by other states and districts, we offer recommendations to enhance the capacity of the ESE to support community and family advocates, school district leaders, principals and teachers as they, in turn work to generate family and community engagement (FCE) initiatives that support children’s learning and development.

Recommendation One:

Set Standards. Adopt a set of Massachusetts FCE Standards and Indicators

In June of 2009, the Massachusetts’ Board of Elementary and Secondary Education’s (BESE) Parent and Community Education and Involvement Advisory Council (PCEI) presented to the BESE a draft of six FCE standards (see Appendix #) for their consideration. The BESE members, the Commissioner, and the Secretary of Education agreed that the PCEI should take this work to the next stage, including sharing best practice examples of the standards in action. The PCEI’s work for 2009-2010 year is to refine the standards, get stakeholder feedback and input on them, and develop a set of indicators and rubrics of successful implementation. The adoption of the standards and indicators will give districts and schools an operating framework for their FCE work. They will also provide the state with a set of benchmarks that can be used for assessment and evaluation.

Recommendation Two:**Build Capacity. Establish an Office of Family and Community Engagement in the ESE to support development, implementation and evaluation of engagement initiatives throughout the Commonwealth**

Currently, family engagement efforts are spread across a number of offices, programs and initiatives within the ESE. As a result, there is no overall strategy or consolidation of resources to oversee family and community engagement investments. We recommend the ESE centralize responsibility for family engagement in a separate, well-resourced and focused office that reports directly to the Office of the Commissioner.

An effective Office for Family and Community Engagement (OFCE) represents an infrastructure to support and assess family and community engagement initiatives, and ensure they are aligned with state learning goals and standards. The OFCE would actively promote family and community engagement across the Commonwealth.

To function effectively, the OFCE will require staff with the appropriate expertise and authority to develop and implement a multi-year strategic plan; coordinate family engagement programs within the state and across other agencies; improve state and local capacity for FCE; and monitor and ensure accountability of current and future family and community engagement efforts. Specifically, the OFCE will:

- Consolidate and Coordinate Services. Work to build meaningful connections between the range of efforts across the state, that support meaningful engagement of families and communities in the education of the Commonwealth's children and youth.
- Promote Professional Development Opportunities. Serve as a convener of and work in collaboration with existing FCE organizations and initiatives, as well as [outside providers] to create professional development, technical assistance and training opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers and school leaders to enhance their capacity to develop meaningful and productive partnerships with families, community members, and organizations that support children's learning.
- Build Family Capacity. Work in collaboration with existing FCE organizations throughout the state to create initiatives that enhance the capacity of families to support children's learning and to be effective educational advocates. These initiatives could include innovative strategies such as a statewide Parent University program and a Parent-Teacher Home visiting program; both have been recognized as "innovative" approaches by the National Family and Community Engagement Working Group²⁶ and the US Department of Education.
- Monitor Compliance. Monitor the implementation of Title I family engagement requirements, oversee the adoption of the PCEI's family and community engagement standards, and implement an accountability mechanism to ensure compliance with Title I.

We believe that these FCE recommendations will position the State to provide support to all districts and schools in the Commonwealth, especially those identified for turnaround, as they work to increase the number of students who meet the proficiency standard.

²⁶ The National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group is a leadership collaborative whose purpose is to inform the development and implementation of federal policy related to family, school, and community engagement in education.

English Language Learners Subcommittee Report

Chair: Miren Uriarte, Associate Professor of Human Services, University of Massachusetts Boston and Senior Research Associate, Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy, Chair

Subcommittee Members:

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María Estela Brisk, Chair of Teacher Education, Special Education, and Curriculum & Instruction, Lynch School of Education, Boston College

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Rosann Tung, Director of Research, Center for Collaborative Education, Boston

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Faye Karp, Research Associate, Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy, University of Massachusetts Boston, Staff to the ELL Sub-Committee

Massachusetts students of limited English proficiency (LEP)²⁷ do better academically than LEP students in other states, but show a proficiency gap relative to their English Proficient (EP) peers that is greater than that faced by LEPs in most other states. On the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Massachusetts ranked first in the nation for the largest gap between 8th grade LEP and EP students on the Mathematics and Reading assessments. With respect to 4th graders, Massachusetts had the third largest gap between LEP and EP students on Mathematics and the ninth largest gap on Reading²⁸. This suggests that while the overall higher levels of education in the Commonwealth benefit LEPs here, current policy and practice leads to significantly greater inequality. As we take steps to improve performance for all students, and particularly those in low performing schools, a clear vision and decisive leadership in addressing the EP/LEP gap is essential.

English learners constitute the only group of public school students whose numbers are growing in the state; as such, they will have an increasing impact on the state's overall outcomes. The next generation of scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs, businesspeople, teachers, artists, and civic leaders must come from the students in our schools now, whether or not they grew up speaking English at home. Immigrant students will constitute an increasing sector of the state's future workforce, a workforce that needs to remain educationally competitive for the state to

²⁷ The terms "students of Limited English Proficiency" and "English Language Learners" and their abbreviations (LEPs and ELLs) are used interchangeably in this report. Those students sometimes referred as Non-LEPs are referred to here as English Proficient students (or EP).

²⁸ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2009 Mathematics and Reading Assessments. Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/dataset.aspx>. It should be noted that NAEP gap data is incomplete. A large number of states did not meet the reporting requirements and therefore were not included in this ranking.

remain a leader in the global economy. A careful look at the current reality presents us with significant challenges, as well as an important basis for hope:

- **Increasing Enrollment.** The enrollment of English language Learners in Massachusetts has increased by 27% since 2001, with large concentrations in low performing districts. LEPs make up an especially large proportion of the enrollments in the Boston (which has the highest number), Lowell, Worcester, Lynn, and Lawrence public schools.
- **LEPs in Special Ed.** The proportion of LEPs enrolled in special education programs has markedly increased in the last six years, with proportions reaching over 30% in some districts²⁹.
- **Strong Engagement.** English language learners demonstrate strong engagement with school, with high levels of attendance and low levels of suspensions. Data from Boston (Tung et al, 2009) shows better outcomes for LEPs in these engagement indicators than English proficient students; similar findings from the Worcester case study conducted for this report echo the Boston findings³⁰. Together, these studies suggest that student motivation is relatively strong in EP students, and is not the defining factor in the EP/LEP proficiency gap.

Our focus on improving the outcomes for English Language Learners must focus on three essential challenges—learning English, learning content, and staying in school. Our research findings:

- **Learning English.** The Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA) measures students' proficiency at 5 performance levels. Few students are able to reach "proficiency" in MCAS ELA unless they score at levels 4 or 5 on the MEPA (Figure 1). The number of LEPs that reach MEPA Level 5 is very small (less than 25%) and the time required for even that small group is long—five years or more in Massachusetts schools (Figure 2).
- **Learning Content.** The proportion of students scoring at the *highest* levels of MEPA who attain "proficiency" in MCAS Math and Science – used here as measures of mastery of academic content – was also low, substantially trailing EP students in both subjects at all grade levels. This gap is particularly evident in Science, which is the area that relies most heavily on English proficiency; only 29% of 10th graders at MEPA Level 5 scored proficient in Science in the MCAS (Figure 3).
- **Graduating.** In the last five years, there have been substantial increases in the drop-out rate of English language learners across the state, now doubling that found among English proficient students (Figure 4). Statewide data was unavailable for deeper analysis of this trend, but data from our case study of Worcester students of limited English proficiency shows that, currently, the highest proportion of dropouts (67%) comes from those students at the *highest* levels of English proficiency, that is, those LEPs transitioning into general education programs (Table 1). This raises questions about the preparation of these students to address content in general education, as well as about the preparation of teachers and schools to address their needs.

²⁹ Holyoke and Springfield are the districts with these high proportions of ELLs in SPED programs

³⁰ The brief case study appears as Appendix 4 of the Sub-Committee's full report.

Figure 1:
MCAS ELA Proficiency Rate for LEPs at MEPA Performance Levels 4 & 5 and English Proficient Students. MA, 2009

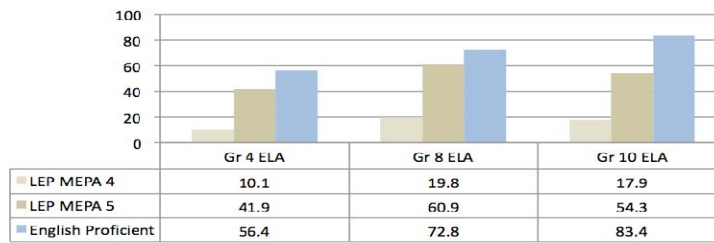
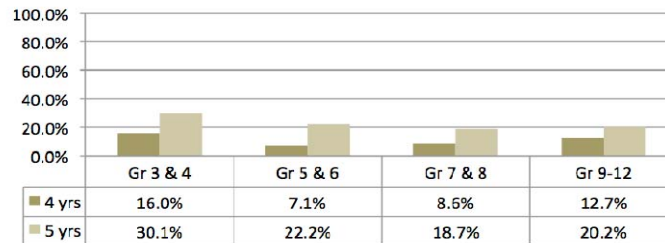


Figure 2:
Proportion of LEPs Reaching MEPA Levels 5 in 4 and 5 Years in Massachusetts Schools By Grade Span. MA, 2009



Source: Computed from data in ESE, 2009

Figure 3:
Proportion Attaining MCAS Math and Science Proficiency. LEPs at MEPA Performance Levels 4 and 5 and English Proficient Students. MA, 2009

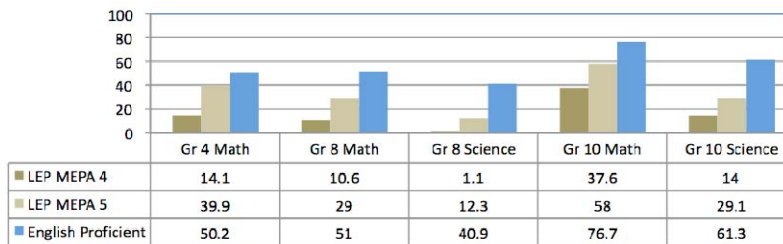
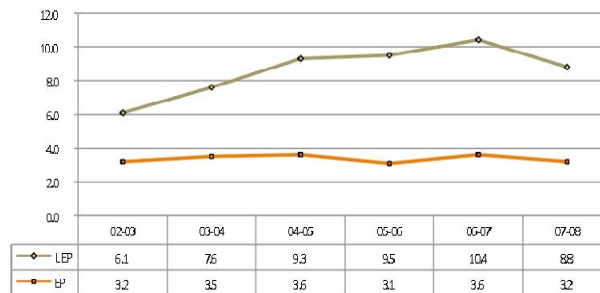


Figure 4:
Annual High School Drop-Out Rate. EP and LEP. MA, 2003–2008



Source: Data provided by ESE to the Gastón Institute, UMass Boston on 5/20/09

Table 1:

Proportion of Dropouts by English Proficiency Level of the Dropout. Worcester Public Schools, 2003–2008

Year	# of Dropouts	English Proficiency Level of Dropout				Total
		Beginner	Early Intermediate	Intermediate	Transitioning	
2004	162	11.7%	31.5%	27.2%	29.6%	100%
2005	156	13.5%	26.9%	33.3%	26.3%	100%
2006	139	13.7%	27.3%	28.8%	30.2%	100%
2007	180	18.9%	13.3%	27.8%	40.0%	100%
2008	124	10.5%	8.9%	13.7%	66.9%	100%

Source: Worcester Public Schools, 11/20/2009

Recommendations

In order to address the educational challenges summarized by these findings, the committee highlights interventions in five areas: (1) the development and implementation of student centered programs appropriate for the age and English proficiency of LEP students; (2) stronger requirements for professional development of teachers providing instruction to LEP students; (3) the development of stronger capacity at the district level for data-driven monitoring of the progress of ELLs, and planning, monitoring and evaluating programs for English Learners; (4) improvement in the identification, assessment, and placement of LEP students and (5) enriching the professional development of educational leaders across the state in relationship to the education of ELLs.

Recommendation I: Support districts in the development of a range of innovative programs for English language learners that are appropriate for the age and English proficiency of the students.

It is important to understand that while state law favors immersion programs³¹, it also provides avenues for districts to address the diversity of needs of English language learners, and it allows parents of these students to make choices regarding the education of their children. Districts are required to develop additional types of programs to meet these needs.

In practice, Massachusetts has fallen into a “one size fits all” approach to the education of English language learners. Across the state, the great majority of LEPs (94.2%) is enrolled in Structured English Immersion (SEI) programs³² and the concentration in SEI programs increases progressively every year; six of the ten districts members of the ELL subcommittee have studied offer only SEI programs for LEP students.³³ We believe that effective education for LEPs requires a range of programmatic options that would allow the district to respond appropriately to the needs of this increasingly diverse population. There is a strong need for programs where students can be grouped by language level more effectively, where the instruction can be tailored to the level and type of language, and where student performance can be accurately measured, analyzed, and used to improve the delivery of service. To meet these needs we recommend that the ESE support districts to:

³¹ In 2002 the voters of Massachusetts passed Referendum Question 2, which replaced a Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) programs with Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) as the preferred method of instruction for English language learners in the state. The former uses the students own language to attain English language proficiency and academic content while the latter relies primarily on the use of English for both. Referendum Question 2 became law as Chapter 386 of the Acts of 2002 in December and was implemented across the state in the Fall of 2003.

³² Structured English Immersion is a technique that advocates contend is effective in rapidly teaching English to English Language Learners.

³³ Data obtained from DESE, 11/14/2009 The Committee studied in depth the enrollment patterns and outcomes of Boston, Brockton, Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn, New Bedford, Springfield and Worcester. Of these, all had over 99.8% of the ELLs in their district in SEI programs except Boston, Brockton, Lynn and Worcester.

- alleviate the impact of the lack of content instruction for middle school and high school students at the lower MEPA performance levels by including bilingual content classes while sustaining a strong ESL component;
- strengthen the required qualifications for teachers providing instruction to English language learners at all levels, including –for students at the lower levels of MEPA performance-- the assignment of teachers capable of providing clarification of content areas for students in their own language, as is permitted by law; and
- offer academically strong alternative education programs for high school students who are at risk of dropping out because they enter school with very low levels of English proficiency and/or interrupted schooling in their own language.

Recommendation II. Require That Every English Language Learner Be Taught by a Teacher Trained to Teach Them.

Teacher quality is one of the most critical factors in any student’s learning yet ample evidence from the field indicates that many English Language Learners are not yet receiving instruction from appropriately qualified teachers. Changes in the licensure of teachers following the 2003 changes in state policy demoted bilingual licensure to an endorsement, even though provisions in the law –allowing for two-way bilingual programs and, with appropriate waivers, transitional bilingual education programs– make skilled bilingual teachers still necessary. The result is that LEP students making a transition into general education programs may be exposed to teachers who are not trained to teach them. The current situation ill serves our students—as evidenced by their academic outcomes and drop-out rates. We recommend ESE:

- Strengthen current requirements for the licensure of teachers providing instruction to English Language Learners
- Strengthen in-service professional development for teachers providing instruction to English Language Learners
- Strengthen pre-service requirements for future teachers of English Language Learners
- Strengthen the meaning of “Highly Qualified Teacher” designation by including in its definition elements of competence related to the culture and language of ELL students.

Recommendation III. ESE Support for Data-Driven Planning, Monitoring and Transparency at the District Level

Useful data guides intelligent action. Information must flow to districts in a way that facilitates: development of programs that are evidence-based and data-driven; appropriate assignment of teachers; effective anticipation of problems in enrollment patterns; and knowledgeable decision-making by parents about the full range of choices available to them for the schooling of their children. Experience from the field indicates that there is large variation in the in-house data analysis capacities of districts, and little direction and support from ESE³⁴.

We recommend that ESE work with a committee of ELL directors from five districts with the highest concentrations of ELL students to:

- Create a common template of data charts, comparisons and analyses appropriate for planning and evaluating programs, and for monitoring LEP student progress.
- Provide district staff with the training necessary to appropriately use data in the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of programs for English language learners.
- Mandate and support *informed* choice for parents of ELLs. Make data on program effectiveness freely available to support strong parental decision-making

³⁴ A salient example of this is the unavailability of cross-tabulations of MCAS and MEPA data – in fact, all three ELL directors participating in this committee had manually carried out that analysis.

Recommendation IV. Improve the Processes of Identification, Assessment, and Placement of English Language Learners

Both previous research and the data reviewed here show evidence that the systems for identifying, assessing, and placing LEPs in appropriate programs should be streamlined and monitored closely. We recommend:

- Standardize the identification of students of limited English proficiency and the assessment of language proficiency and disabilities in this group.
- Review re-classification guidance to the districts to insure that students who are eligible for re-classification are sufficiently prepared to function in a general education classroom without support for English language development.
- Develop clear statewide guidelines and procedures for the testing of LEP students suspected of learning disabilities. Monitor implementation closely.

Recommendation V. Enrich the Professional Development of Educational Leaders at the School, District, and State Levels

In the current environment, we face real restrictions on instruction for English language learners. To be effective, leaders at the state, district, and school levels need a heightened understanding of the key elements of the learning process and the methods of teaching of English and content to English language learners. We recommend that ESE develop, implement, and evaluate professional development for state, district, and school leaders. ELL-focused professional development should:

- Be mandated for those responsible for planning, developing, monitoring, and evaluating programs for English language learners as well as those charged with the assessment of the academic performance of ELLs and the performance of teachers.
- Be included as part of the process of re-licensure
- Address the following areas of competence:
 - Understanding of the laws governing compliance in providing education services to English language learners
 - Understanding the process of language acquisition and its implications for program development and instruction
 - The use of data in monitoring enrollment and outcomes of ELLs and in the planning, implementing, and monitoring programs for these students
 - Evaluating ELL instruction
 - Cultural competence for educators

Letters

Letter from James A. Peyser

I was pleased to be a part of the Proficiency Gap Task Force, which made a serious attempt to understand the reasons why certain categories of students persistently fail to meet state standards and to grapple with the difficult challenge of identifying effective, yet practical solutions. The recommendations in this report are all worthy of consideration by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, along with educators and policymakers at all levels.

While I am supportive of what this report contains and embrace its call to urgent action, I am disappointed by what it leaves out. In particular, I believe the interventions recommended for the lowest performing schools are inadequate to address persistent school failure and I am troubled by the absence of any plan to create viable alternatives for the students who are trapped in them.

The report recommends establishing a new Office of Planning and Research to Close Proficiency Gaps within the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, which would evaluate the state's gap-closing efforts, while capturing and disseminating lessons learned. The report further recommends creating a voluntary Commissioner's Network of low-performing schools and districts, which would serve as a "laboratory" for school improvement strategies.

These are sound proposals, but they fall well short of what is required – not only to fix or replace failing schools, but also to express the sense of urgency that this report rightly seeks to convey.

Among the steps that this report should have included, are the following:

- Require districts to close chronically underperforming schools or place them under new, empowered management through performance contracts, pilot-school status and Horace Mann charters.
- Support school districts in establishing fair and rigorous teacher evaluation systems (including measures of student learning), with incentives for rewarding or recognizing the most effective teachers and encouraging them to work in the highest need schools.
- Actively support the expansion and replication of high-performing Commonwealth charter schools in the state's lowest performing school districts.

Initiatives like these are no longer out of the mainstream of education reform. They have been embraced by the U.S. Department of Education through its Race to the Top program. The recent education reform law enacted here in Massachusetts also moves in this direction. The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education should take full advantage of this favorable policy environment by acting forcefully to create dramatically better opportunities as soon as possible for the thousands of students stuck in failing schools.



April 26, 2010

Dear Chair Banta and Dr. Howard:

Thank you for the opportunity to participate on the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (ESE) Proficiency Gap Task Force and for your leadership of the Task Force over the past year. Your guidance has been instrumental in developing a cohesive body of recommendations that will advance the Commonwealth's efforts to move all children towards achieving higher outcomes and having greater educational success. Working in partnership with key stakeholders, I am confident that ESE and the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) can effectively close the performance and proficiency gaps that currently exist among some of our students.

EEC's mission is to provide the foundation that supports all children in their development as lifelong learners and contributing members of the community, and supports families in their essential work as parents and caregivers. EEC was established over four years ago within the context of strong evidence from brain development research showing the long-term impact of high-quality early education and its potential return on investment. In this work, EEC remains committed to an ongoing improvement process that addresses both the performance of programs and the developmental outcomes of young children. EEC continues to build a strong, integrated infrastructure for a system of high quality early education and care and out of school time in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

In 2008, Massachusetts was home to just over 1 million children under the age of 13. Of these, 475,131 were under the age of six years and 231,083 were younger than three. One third of Massachusetts' adults had children, leaving two thirds without a child in the family. Annual births in Massachusetts number nearly 78,000.

The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) publishes and updates a profile on young children in each state. Data are provided for service areas such as health and nutrition (including access and quality), early care and education, and parenting and economic supports. Based on the Massachusetts profile updated in December 2009, 27% of the state's young children experience one or two risk factors, including single parent, living in poverty, linguistically isolated, parents have less than a high school education, and parents have no paid employment. Another 8% experienced three or more risk factors. (NCCP, Massachusetts Early Childhood Profile, 2009, p. 1) The presence of multiple risk factors in the early lives of children has been shown to result in both short and long term health, development and learning challenges (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2010).

EEC is often an entry point to the Commonwealth's education system for families with children birth through age eight, through our community and family engagement activities. EEC provides community-based literacy support activities that are open to all families, with the goal of connecting with the hardest to reach or most educationally at risk ones. We also license over 12,000 early education and care and out of school programs and provide standards and accountability measures for these programs. In the last year we have published clear definitions of quality for programs and core competencies for early educators.

EEC shares a responsibility with ESE for ensuring program and educator quality within respective age groups, which includes formative assessment for children to support individualized teaching and learning. To create and sustain improvement in districts will require a strategy from birth to 8 and must include individualized strategies to support children, families and communities. Statewide efforts must include the entire workforce and caregivers that are responsible for the development of children including early educators, informal providers and institutions, and other professionals in the community. These efforts must also recognize that families are children's first teachers. A broadly inclusive approach will be necessary for both rapid and sustained success.

EEC recognizes that the ESE Proficiency Gap Task Force report is targeted at improving low performing schools in specific school districts. However, these districts are within communities and will be unable to create rapid or sustainable change alone inside the school building. Therefore the partnerships between early education and care,

elementary and secondary education, and higher education must include shared strategies and intentionally align efforts to support children and families as well as the professionals in the communities that are responsible for the development of children. Any successful plan must provide opportunities for interaction and support with families from birth through 8 if the goal is to prevent delay or gaps in proficiency by the 3rd grade.

To address the challenge of -- and to provide a framework for -- continuous program quality improvement, EEC has begun implementing a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) for early education and care and out-of-school time programs. The QRIS defines "high quality" for programs serving children birth to 13, focusing on the following areas:

- *Curriculum and Learning*: curriculum, assessment, teacher child interactions, special education, children with diverse language and cultures
- *Workforce Qualifications and Professional Development*: directors, teachers, assistants, consultants
- *Environment*: indoor, outdoor, health and safety
- *Leadership, Management and Administration*: supervision, community involvement
- *Family Involvement*

The efforts of EEC and ESE must be aligned in the areas of curriculum and workforce development expectations to support the science of children's development, which indicates that children's experiences build upon one another from birth to 8. The Task Force recommendations provide an opportunity to support partnerships in this area.

EEC views the work of the Proficiency Gap Task Force with a broad educational lens that goes beyond interventions within districts with low performing schools and includes the community in which educationally at risk children and their families live, informal caregiving networks, and the system of programs (both licensed and license-exempt) which support the early education of children using developmentally appropriate curricula for cognitive social and emotional development of children.

EEC respectfully requests to be full partner with ESE in its work to close the performance and proficiency gap, especially in the following areas:

- Professional Development, program quality, and teacher quality (birth to 8);
- Aligned curricula that is sequential and rooted in the developmental characteristics of each grade level, preK to 3rd grade;
- Screening and assessment (birth to 8);
- Family Involvement, with a specific focus on families which children who are educationally at risk, developmentally delayed or who have multiple agency involvement; and
- The development of district or community wide interventions.

The change we seek cannot happen within the confines of the school building. EEC stands ready as partner, to support all efforts to have children and their families be developmentally ready for school and to close any gaps before the 3rd grade.

Sincerely,

Sherri Killins, Ed.D
Commissioner