

# A winning formula for Mass. schools

By Thomas F. Birmingham  
and William F. Weld

**I**t's said that those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it. But when it comes to the debate over updating the Commonwealth's public school funding formula, state residents should fear that policy makers *won't* repeat history.

Together with then-House Education chairman Mark Roosevelt, we crafted an education reform law in 1993 that dramatically increased the state's investment in public schools, but also demanded accountability from all stakeholders. That translated to rigorous academic standards and competency testing for both students and teachers.

Frankly, the results were better than either of us ever imagined. Beginning in 1993, Massachusetts' SAT scores rose for 13 consecutive years. The state's scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress shot up also. By 2005, Massachusetts students became the first to score best in the nation in all four major NAEP categories (fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math). Since then, they have repeated this feat on every subsequent administration of NAEP except one. While American students as a whole lag behind their peers globally, the 2007 and 2011 results of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study showed that Massachusetts students were competitive with their counterparts in places like Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. In 2007, the state's eighth-graders tied for first place worldwide in science.

Unfortunately, over the last decade, state leaders have strayed from the "grand bargain" of money in exchange for high standards and accountability. School district accountability, state English, math, science, and history standards, and the MCAS test have all

been watered down.

The consequences of retreating from reform have been swift and predictable. SAT scores fell. While Massachusetts still ranks first on NAEP, from 2011 to 2017 we were among a minority of states in which scores dropped. In math, the Commonwealth was among the states that saw the biggest declines.

Looking ahead, the signs aren't positive. There is a push underway to place a three-year moratorium on MCAS. Anti-testing advocates point to excessive federal testing mandates, but the state regime implemented under education reform is far more limited.

The momentum appears to be toward providing additional money needed to update the school funding formula with no strings attached. Instead, legislators and the Baker administration should leverage this opportunity to buy reforms that would improve student performance and narrow achievement gaps.

More students should have access to the Commonwealth's successful regional vocational-technical high schools. Using an innovative program that alternates academics and hands-on trade skills on a weekly basis, these schools now perform as well as comprehensive high schools and have microscopic dropout rates, even as they educate a significantly higher percentage of students with special needs. There are about 4,500 Massachusetts students on career and technical high school waitlists.

New leadership has reinvigorated the Metco program, which allows students in Boston and Springfield to attend school in surrounding suburbs. There is strong demand for the program and it

has a proven record of success; it too deserves to be expanded.

There are few issues in Massachusetts more controversial than charter schools, but the fact is that these innovative public schools have shown themselves to be the gold standard for narrowing achievement gaps. Legislators should fully fund reimbursements to school districts that lose students to charters and provide more seats for the 25,000 largely poor and minority students who are currently on waitlists seeking the opportunities that a charter school education provides.

And as we focus on learning from history, we shouldn't forget that the 1993 Education Reform Act called for US history to join English, math, and science as subjects in which students should be required to pass an MCAS test to graduate from high school. In the absence of the test, history and civics education has been decimated in Massachusetts, and

resources diverted to the subjects in which students and districts are held accountable.

More than a quarter-century of history teaches us that the recipe of money combined with reform and accountability is a winner for Massachusetts. State leaders should keep that in mind as they rework the Commonwealth's school funding formula.

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