

Senate to tackle charter school reform

WITHOUT A GUARANTEE THAT HE CAN muster enough support for charter school expansion, Senate President Stanley Rosenberg has announced that a new group of senators will try to write a charter school reform bill that could clear that branch later this spring.

Charter school advocates and Governor Baker, who has made expanding access to charter schools a priority, have been waiting for the Senate to resolve an internal debate over whether it made sense to try again to pass charter reform legislation two years after a bill that would have lifted the cap was defeated.

In 2014, only nine Senators supported similar proposed charter legislation.

While much of the discussion on Beacon Hill and among charter advocates and opponents has centered on lifting the cap on charter school seats, Rosenberg has insisted that the cap will be just one component of a broader review of charter schools the Senate team will undertake. Other issues that will be studied will include finance, admission and retention practices, and governance.

In discussing the bill's prospects, the Senate President indicated that quite a number of additional votes would have to be found before the bill would clear the chamber. Senators Sonia Chang-Diaz, Patricia Jehlen (Chair and Vice Chair respectively of the Senate Education Committee) as well as Senator Dan Wolf and Sen-

ate Ways&Means Chair Karen Spilka will lead the effort to write a charter reform bill.

An incentive for moving ahead with charter legislation before the end of the current session is concern about putting the issue before voters in November in the form of a ballot question. The ballot question, which is a simple "yes" or "no", addresses only the issue of raising the charter cap and does not tackle any of the larger, more complex funding and enrollment concerns.

In a radio interview earlier this week, Auditor Suzanne Bump said that the state still lacks key data about the demand for charter schools and whether existing schools are mirror-

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Novick Joins MASC as Field Director

PLEASE JOIN MASC IN WEL-coming Tracy O'Connell Novick, a former member of the Worcester School Committee, who joined the MASC staff as a Field Director as of January 11. In addition to her responsibilities as a Field Director, which



include providing training and policy services to the Connecticut Valley geographical area, Tracy will also coordinate social media and advocacy activities of the Association. This will include educating members as to the value and use of social media and technology to enhance local communications and advocate on a state-wide level for education issues

of concern to the membership.

A lifetime Massachusetts resident, Tracy started her advocacy in elementary school when her mother told her to "tell someone who could fix it" about her concern that McDonalds had stopped serving root beer. Tracy has been attempting to tell someone who could fix it ever since, first as a high school English teacher at Algonquin Regional in Northborough, then as a parent of three in Worcester and, most recently, as a six-year member of the Worcester School Committee.

On the Committee, she served a term

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MCAS and/or PARCC: The Debate on Opting-Out

As districts prepare to decide whether to administer the traditional MCAS or newly developed PARCC assessments this coming spring, many parents are considering the prospect of "opting out" of the test for their children. To assist school leaders in making their decision and presenting parents with their options, MASC has prepared the following advisory on the PARCC/MCAS debate and an "opt-out" checklist of issues that parents and districts might consider (the checklist is available online at www.masc.org).

Background

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) provides

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MCAS and/or PARCC, continued from page 1

for annual standardized testing in English and Math in grades 3-8, in science once between grades 3-5 and 6-9; and at least once in high school in English, Math, and Science. A History/Social Studies test is to be implemented in the future.

Until 2015, the ELA and Math tests at lower grades and at high school were based on a state Curriculum Frameworks that evolved over more than 15 years. Over the past few years, the tests have been modified from the traditional frameworks that stressed carefully structured standards, fact-driven studies, and testing on the academic content to accommodate the standards in the Common Core curriculum, a proposed nationally based and modernized set of standards designed to encourage critical thinking, research, and analytic writing and to improve readiness for college and career. Proponents of both Curriculum Frameworks and Common Core have debated the merit of both systems. Some argue that any change from traditional MCAS is detrimental to student achievement. Others have advocated for an alternative that does not encourage “teaching to the test.”

Additional testing may be mandated by the state. For the 2015-16 year, districts will have a choice of MCAS or the new Performance for Readiness for Assessment for College and Career (PARCC) while policy makers debate the most appropriate examinations for the future.

State education officials, parents, and teachers, as well as other academic stakeholders and the business community, have also debated amongst themselves about the best testing tools. Some weighed the merits of MCAS vs. PARCC while others questioned the merits of standardized testing for students per se, citing a range of reasons including concern about how the test would be used, time spent on test preparation, diagnostic values of testing, costs of testing, and the social and emotional well-being of students being tested.

In response to the heavily politicized rhetoric in the testing debate, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education recently approved the Commissioner’s recommendation to create a hybrid test with some of the best of both tests. It is tentatively and unofficially called MCAS-II and will be implemented over three years.

Because of the complexity of the issue, the nature of the debate, and the intense arguments around many elements of the tests, some parents and teachers have encouraged students to “opt-out” of standardized testing. Parents may exempt their children from testing by writing to the principal, but the principal may ask the student to take the test even with the parental “opt-out” request.

The following arguments explain the rationale for taking the examinations:

- DESE has opined that the local school districts must implement the tests and that students should take them. It is important to comply with regulations and law.
- There is no legal basis of “opting out” even if there is no clear mandate to comply.
- Families reserve the right to opt-out in a subsequent year if their concerns continue to grow.
- With ESSA as with NCLB, districts with lower than 95% testing participation may have sanctions imposed on them. Those sanctions now will include:
 - Lowering a school’s ranking, including designating a school as high risk, subject to additional sanctions.
 - A student may be declared “not proficient.”
 - A district may face financial sanctions by the federal government including limits on federal funding or restrictions on how funding may be used.
 - State financial aid may be withheld, although the legal basis of this is not clearly established.
 - Student test data may be used to help teachers target the best strategies to improve student achievement.
 - Testing data may be used to help im-

prove the performance of a teacher or in making an employment decision, including termination of an underperforming educator.

- High school students who do not pass (score of 220 or better) the MCAS English Language, Math and Science tests may not receive a high school diploma unless they qualify for an alternative test.
- Political implications of opting out may influence how local or state officials respond with funding for your district.

The following points are used to explain why parents and students may elect to “opt out”:

- Testing has been a source of distress for some students who experience anxieties, sleeplessness, emotional distress and parents wish to address the best interest of their children and/or school.
- Educational professionals have mixed opinions about the value of standardized tests.
- Tests that require use of a computer add to the stress for some children and in other cases, lower scores.
- According to the Commissioner, other than being declared absent or being assigned to an alternative program for the day, there are no penalties for elementary school students who do not participate.
- A child may be stereotyped in some way based on results of a standardized test.
- Parents and students may be concerned that test data will be used to make an unfair assessment of a teacher or principal.
- Some object to the value of the state and federal testing program or to standardized tests in general as bad educational theory and practice and poor public policy.
- Some families wish to make a statement of objection to testing, excessive testing, or student/educator assessment based on standardized tests.

For a more in-depth criteria/procedural checklist of opt-out concerns, go to www.masc.org.

Schools, Polyglots, and Xenophobes

Celebrating language diversity and cross-cultural learning in MA school communities

By Eric Silverman, Framingham School Committee

You may have seen a Facebook meme last year, something akin to “Don’t make fun of someone who speaks broken English. It means they are fluent in another language.” Polyglots—those who speak more than one language—are a gift, not a burden, whether walking our streets or the hallways of our schools. They should be celebrated as models for 21st-century global citizenship.

In Boston, public school students hail from 140 different countries – about three-quarters of the United Nations. Among the more than 8500 students in the Framingham school system, one may hear more than 70 languages. This astonishing linguistic diversity ranges from Amharic and Arabic through Bantu, Bengali, Farsi, Hindi, and Kikuyu to Marathi, Nepali, Quechua, Shona, Urdu, and Yoruba. For these young people, as for their friends and families and classmates, globalization and cross-cultural understanding are not just textbook terms: they are an everyday reality. With appropriate services in and outside the schools, English Language Learners will grow up to be bicultural adults (if not tri- in some cases), capable of seamlessly passaging between cultures. Xenophobia was as anachronistic in the 1880s and 1930s as it is today.

With linguistic diversity comes diversity in all sorts of forms, including worldviews and religions. As in classrooms everywhere, many local kids seek otherworldly assistance for tests. Such entreaties are now Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Ethiopian Orthodox, Vodou, Zoroastrianism, Shinto, Santeria, and a host of indigenous religions, embracing a pantheon of goddesses, bod-

hisattvas, and ancestral spirits. As an anthropologist, I tend to travel overseas to study other cultures. But I may as well just drive downtown or stroll my own neighborhood. To be sure, such remarkable diversity is not always easy in the classroom, at least not with current levels of funding and support. There is a cost. And, to be honest, these costs will only increase if we are to appropriately teach all students. We need the resources to sustain a range of relevant and robust academic programs for English-Language Learners, such as two-way immersion, transitional bilingual, and sheltered English. We need to increase the availability of school-based social workers, nurses, and mental health professionals. We need to provide all students with opportunities for honest interaction across differences so they can safely dialogue about tensions and confusion, and learn conflict resolution. We need to make certain that the overall environments in our schools and municipalities make all students feel included in the community. We need more collaborations with organizations, businesses, and assets across the town-gown divide. We need to diversify teachers, administrators, and the curriculum while not alienating existing staff from so-called dominant groups. We need safe, culturally-competent policing and school resource officers. We need to understand that immigrants today arrive in a different world, and with different expectations and goals, that new arrivals did in 1900. We need to cease viewing the English-Language Learner through a lens attuned only to deficits. And we need to stop the scapegoating that shreds our social fabric.

In the 1930s, public opinion polls showed that most Americans not only feared the arrival of Jewish

refugees from Germany as potential terrorists, but also wanted to expel existing Jewish citizens. No student today should be greeted by the same bigotry. In our schools and communities, we need less nativist bombast and fewer walls, and more concerted efforts to welcome and teach to all cultures, languages, and religions. Xenophobia, however much a time-honored American tradition, is so last century.

To paraphrase Margaret Mead, one of my anthropological heroines, public schooling in multicultural, multilingual, multi-religious, global America in the 21st-century is like a parachute jump: You gotta get it right the first time.

Eric Silverman is a professor of anthropology in the Psychology/Human Development and American Studies departments at Wheelock College in Boston, and a member of the Framingham School Committee. His latest book is *A Cultural History of Jewish Dress*.

SAVE THE DATE

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 12

Division VII:

Legislative Breakfast

Cape Cod Collaborative,
Osterville

SATURDAY, MARCH 5

Division III:

The Opiate Crisis in MA

Somerset-Berkley High
School, Somerset

SATURDAY, APRIL 2

Charting the Course

West Bridgewater
Middle-Senior High School

TUESDAY, APRIL 26

DAY ON THE HILL

The State House, Boston

BESE votes receivership for Southbridge

AT ITS MEETING ON TUESDAY, JANUARY 26, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted 9-0 with one abstention to designate Southbridge Public Schools a chronically underperforming ("Level 5") district, thereby authorizing Commissioner Chester to appoint a receiver for the district.

That receiver, who will be an individual or a non-profit group with a proven record of success in improving low-performing schools or districts or the academic performance of disadvantaged students, will have all the powers of the superintendent and school committee and will report directly to the commissioner.

The Board's level of concern about the Southbridge Public Schools grew following the release of a recent district review that found:

- Southbridge was among the lowest performing districts in the state in terms of the percentage of students who scored Proficient or Advanced on the 2015 MCAS assessments;
- 34 percent of students at Southbridge Middle/High School failed at

least one course in 2015;

- 19 percent of students at Southbridge Middle/High School were suspended at least once in 2015;
- The needs of English language learners were not being met, and the district was out of compliance with regulations regarding English language learners; and
- The district has had seven superintendents and seven high school principals since 2011.
- The Achievement Gap Act of 2010 provided the mechanism for the Board's vote to designate a school district as chronically underperforming. Under the statute, Commissioner Chester and the receiver he appoints will create a Level 5 District Turnaround Plan that will include priorities and strategies to accelerate achievement with measurable benchmarks of progress that connect directly to improved outcomes for students in all schools. To assist in the development of that plan, a local stakeholder group will be convened to provide recommendations on the plan's content.

That group will include representatives from multiple stakeholders groups, including teachers, families, social service agencies, early education, higher education and the Southbridge community.

The Commissioner is expected to name a receiver in the near future, with the goal that the receiver will assume authority as soon as possible. During the 2016-17 school year, the receiver will begin to implement the Level 5 District Turnaround Plan. The Commissioner and receiver will provide regular updates to the Board, the Southbridge School Committee, and Southbridge stakeholders regarding Level 5-related efforts to improve outcomes for students.

The Board's vote was informed by public comment from the Southbridge community, which included written statements and a special meeting in Southbridge on January 25 at which more than 40 individuals representing municipal, district, union, parent, student and community stakeholders addressed the Board directly.

MA Graduation Rate Improves for Ninth Consecutive Year

Earlier this month, DESE announced that the state's four-year graduation rate improved for the ninth consecutive year, with 87.3% of students who entered as ninth graders in 2011-12 – or who transferred into that same cohort at any time during high school – graduating within four years. In addition to the overall improvement in the graduation rate, the graduation rate among Hispanic students exceeded 70% for the first time, the graduation rate for urban districts crossed the 75% mark, and the graduation rate for black females exceeded 80%.

The state's annual dropout rate declined to 1.9% in 2014-15, dipping below 2% to the lowest overall rate in more than three decades.

According to the data released this year, 87.3% of the 72,474 students in the 2015 cohort graduated within four years, an increase of 1.2% points from the 2014 cohort and an increase of 7.4 percentage points from the 2006 cohort,

when DESE first began calculating the cohort graduation rate.

A cohort is comprised of students who entered high school as ninth graders or who transferred into the same cohort at any time during high school.

The dropout reduction – from 3.8% (2006-7) to 1.9% (2014-15) – resulted in less than half as many students dropping out in 2014-15 (5,346) than in 2006-07 (11,436). Four hundred fewer students dropped out in 2014-15 than in 2013-14, and 6,090 fewer students dropped out than in 2006-7, when the annual dropout rate was at a high mark of 3.8%.

All major subgroups improved their four-year graduation rates compared to the previous year. The largest gains were made by Hispanic males (up 3.4 percentage points from 64.4 to 67.8%), black females (up 3.1 percentage points from 79.2 to 82.3%), and Hispanic students overall (up 3 percentage points from 69.2 to 72.2%).

Improvements for other major sub-

groups were: low-income/economically disadvantaged students overall: up 2.7 percentage points from 75.5 to 78.2%; students with disabilities: up 0.8 percentage points from 69.1 to 69.9%; English language learners: up 0.1 percent from 63.9 to 64.0%; male students: up 1.3 percentage points from 83.4 to 84.7%; female students: up 1 percentage point from 89 to 90%; black students overall: up 2.6 percentage points from 74.9 to 77.5%; white students: up 0.7 percentage points from 90.9 to 91.6%; and Asian students: up 0.3 percentage points from 92.1 to 92.4%.

Over the past five years (between 2009-10 and 2014-15), the urban school districts that have made the largest gains in reducing the number of dropouts included:

- **Boston**, which had 430 fewer students drop out in 2014-15 than in 2009-10, a 36% change;
- **Springfield**, which had 382 fewer

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MASC President Responds to Media on Governor's Budget

Within an hour of the Governor's 2017 budget being released on Wednesday, January 27, MASC President Jake Oliveira was responding to media inquiries about the impact of the budget on local school districts. Following is the text of his news release response.

A more detailed analysis of the impact of the proposed budget on education services and communities is being prepared by MASC General Counsel Stephen Finnegan and will be mailed to all members later this week.

MASC responded to Governor Baker's proposed FY17 budget with a sense of disappointment but with determination to work with our friends in the House and Senate as well as our municipal partners in the coming weeks for fair school budgeting and sound educational policy.

MASC President Jake Oliveira, a member of the Ludlow School Committee, noted that "MASC recognizes the difficulty faced by Governor Baker in crafting a balanced FY 2017 budget, but we are disappointed that the important recommendations of the Chapter 70 Foundation Budget Review Commission were not considered in this budget. Further

delaying the implementation of these recommendations continues to leave Chapter 70 inadequately funded for yet another year. Our schools are being short-changed, and this leads to an even greater toll on our communities. We are especially disappointed because the Chapter 70 Commission did incredible work to recommend some important funding reforms especially around special education and health insurance."

The proposed FY 2017 budget contains a \$72 million (1.6%) increase in Chapter 70 education aid over FY16, well below the roughly \$100,000,000 increases allocated in recent years. "State aid to our cities and towns is critical as municipalities struggle to balance budgets and invest in education. Although unrestricted local aid was increased by 4.63%, a minimal 1.6% increase in education aid makes it hard for municipalities and districts to grapple with normal inflationary costs." MASC will ask the Legislature to increase the funding for Chapter

70 at least to the levels of the recent budgets.

The Governor's budget has level-funded the Special Education Circuit Breaker, which helps school districts to offset some of the costs associated with expensive special education placements. The students benefited by this account are the most vulnerable population that school districts serve.

MASC will request funding from the Legislature to adequately fund the educational offerings that are mandated by state and federal law.

MASC is interested in the Governor's proposal to support career vocational technical education, which includes a \$75 million capital authorization to fund grants for equipment to expand technical education programs. This capital authorization is spread over 5 years. In addition, the budget contains \$7.5 million in increased funding for school to career connecting activities.

"MASC has long advocated for

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Graduation rate

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students drop out in 2014-15 than in 2009-10, a 51.8% change;

- **Lawrence**, which had 150 fewer students drop out in 2014-15 than in 2009-10, a 48.2% change;
- **New Bedford**, which had 146 fewer students drop out in 2014-15 than in 2009-10, a 61.6% change; and
- **Worcester**, which had 136 fewer students drop out in 2014-15 than in 2009-10, a 52.9% change.

In addition, several urban school districts had annual dropout rates below the statewide dropout rate of 1.9%. They include: Leominster (0.7%), Cambridge (1.0%), Salem (1.2%), Taunton (1.4%), Quincy (1.6%), Worcester (1.7%) and Lowell (1.8%).

Several other urban school districts had four-year graduation rates above

the statewide rate. They include: Cambridge (91.5%), Leominster (90.7%), Quincy (90.1%) and Salem (89.2%).

In October 2015, DESE was awarded \$200,000 through the America's Promise Alliance for a multi-year effort to raise statewide graduation rates. The Department is using the grant to create a coalition of up to 10 school districts to improve high school graduation rates for students whose first language is not English. Eight districts have confirmed their involvement so far: Boston, Brockton, Chelsea, Holyoke, New Bedford, Worcester, Everett and Revere.

In October 2009, when the state's annual dropout rate was more than 3%, the Massachusetts Graduation and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission made a number of recommendations to dramatically reduce that rate. A number of those recommendations have been fulfilled, including expansion of what is

now called the Early Warning Indicator System (EWIS) to make it available to all districts for grades 1-12 and reformed discipline laws to provide continued education for suspended and expelled students. The state, using federal High School Graduation Initiative funds, has also created a dropout prevention and recovery program, which was another of the commission's recommendations.

Graduation rate data is available online at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/gradrates/> and http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/gradrates.aspx.

For additional information on the annual dropout rate, including school and district numbers, go to <http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/dropout/> and http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/dropout.aspx.

Charter School Reform

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ing the mix of students enrolled in traditional public schools. An audit by Bump's office in the fall of 2015 found that charter school waiting list numbers were "significantly overstated" because students were on multiple lists or names were automatically rolled forward from one year to the next.

The report also raised concerns whether charters enroll and, more significantly, retain, nontraditional students, including English Language Learners and those with developmental disabilities, special needs or low-income students.

MASC will be reaching out the Senate leadership on this issue and, in particular, will advocate for following positions as endorsed by the Delegate Assembly:

- Some form of meaningful local approval that cannot be overridden by the commissioner.
- A study of the social, economic, and financial impact of any proposed charter school or charter expansion upon the sending communities.
- Local approval of the charter school budget.
- Some meaningful local oversight of charter school operations such as two representatives of the majority sending community appointed by the school committee to sit on the charter governing board.
- Real mandates to accept—and retain—students at risk.
- Charter finance reform, including, if feasible, a single state line item for charter schools rather than a single district expropriation.
- No cap lift without meaningful reform and full funding of the charter school expropriation amelioration account.

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as Vice Chair as well as a member of numerous standing and ad-hoc committees. She also served from 2011-2015 as Vice Chair of MASC's Division IX, and has been a presenter at recent MASC conferences on social media, school budgets, and standardized testing.

An early adopter of blogging and social media, Tracy has shared her coverage of Board of Education and other state meetings with the MASC listserv and other readers. She will continue to report on education-related forums and events in her new role at MASC.

MASC Response to Budget

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additional funding for our Vocational Technical Schools and we look forward to working with the Governor and the Legislature as the budget progresses through the Branches."

"We will be working with our municipal partners, the Legislature, and other education associations to fully fund the regional school transportation account, which the Governor has level funded."

Finally, the FY 2017 budget recommendations contain a \$20 million increase to those school districts that send students to Charter Schools.

"While we appreciate the increase it does not seem to fully fund this account and also makes one time changes to the current reimbursement formula which appears to only provide additional relief to a small number of districts."

MASC

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