

BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

December 21, 2009

Dear Boston Public Schools Families,

Last month, we presented to the School Committee a five-year Acceleration Agenda for Boston Public Schools (BPS). It affirms that we are fortunate to have some of the best schools, engaged parents, dedicated teachers and school leaders, and talented students. However, as we celebrate this success, we also recognize that too many of our schools are not yet delivering a world-class education to every student. After reviewing MCAS results and other achievement data, we have identified 14 schools that require special attention to improve their performance. These “turnaround schools” face many challenges, but in order to succeed, they must fundamentally change the way they are operating. These schools will receive additional resources and targeted interventions specifically designed to meet each school’s unique needs. In order to transform these schools, we must be willing to take innovative new approaches to persistent challenges, and we must be fiercely committed to putting the needs of children first. **An important step in that process is the passage of the Education Reform Act currently before the state legislature.**

School transformation, particularly in our lowest performing schools, cannot take place without an extremely talented team of educators who have the knowledge, skills and commitment to improve student learning. This legislation would give us the authority to assemble the strongest instructional teams to help all children achieve proficiency. In schools where we have been unable to achieve positive results, we must be able to make personnel changes without being hindered by a long process of appeals, hearings, and paperwork. These hurdles undermine the urgency of offering an excellent education to every child. While we continue to work collaboratively with the Boston Teachers Union, we also recognize that our current collective bargaining agreements, in some cases, have prevented us from retaining effective teachers and having the flexibility to make staffing decisions that best meet the needs of our students.

Our district’s pilot schools continue to be highly chosen by our families. These schools have provided flexibility and innovation, while keeping funding and accountability within BPS. **Mayor Menino’s in-district charter proposal will give the School Committee the opportunity to establish new in-district charter (Horace Mann) schools as a vehicle for turnaround efforts, but also for creating other innovative models.**

This is an exciting time in public education. President Obama has dedicated nearly \$5 billion in competitive grants to support a select group of states in adopting major school reform initiatives. State and local officials here in the Commonwealth are working closely with community leaders to bring this new “Race To The Top” funding to Massachusetts. **If signed into law, the Education Reform bill would bring us one step closer to more than \$250 million in new funding over the next four years.** During these challenging economic times, that influx of federal dollars could make a tremendous difference for the Boston Public Schools (BPS) and school districts throughout Massachusetts. However, *if this legislation does not pass, Massachusetts is likely to be unsuccessful in its bid for the grants*, and the funds will be awarded to other states that have demonstrated the readiness to move beyond “business as usual” and take bold new approaches to education reform.

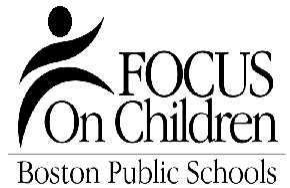
We have attached some background information about this legislation and hope that you find it useful. Our primary goal is to ensure that all reforms are focused on our students and what they need to succeed now and in the future. Thank you in advance for your partnership in this effort. We wish you and your family a safe and happy holiday season and ask that you encourage your child to read during the winter break. We thank you for choosing BPS, and look forward to our collective work to offer your child a first-rate education in the Boston Public Schools.

Sincerely,

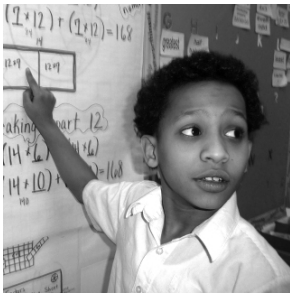
Carol R. Johnson
Superintendent



Putting Children First Through Education Reform



“To get the results we seek -- at the speed we want -- we must make transformative changes that boost achievement for students, improve quality choices for parents, and increase opportunities for teachers. We need to empower our educators to quickly innovate and implement what works.” - Mayor Thomas M. Menino



The Massachusetts Legislature is currently debating an education reform bill that could greatly improve schools across the Commonwealth and help children achieve. There is momentum and excitement behind the bill, but just passing a bill is not enough. To work for students, parents, and educators, the bill must include provisions that give school districts:

- the tools to turn around our lowest performing schools;
- the opportunity to compete for increased federal investment; and
- the ability to match the right teachers with the right opportunities.

Turn around our lowest performing schools.

While there are many exceptional schools across the Commonwealth, there is a group of schools that are persistently under-performing. In Boston, we have identified 14 schools in this category. There are educational strategies that we know can work for our youth and improve these schools. As currently drafted, the bill would require school districts to engage in a lengthy arbitration process prior to implementing any necessary strategies. Even after completing the arbitration process, there is no guarantee that the district would be able to execute the changes. The education reform bill must eliminate this lengthy process for turnaround efforts in our lowest performing schools.

Compete for federal investment.

Massachusetts is competing against other states for hundreds of millions of dollars in federal education funds in the “Race to the Top” program. The states that win this grant will receive new funding for almost all schools, as well as targeted funding for low-performing schools. To win, Massachusetts must show it is willing to innovate. This innovation can be realized through the creation of new Horace Mann charter schools, which operate as part of a local school district and have increased flexibility in programming and accountability for results. They can currently be established through the conversion of an existing school or by forming new schools, only after approval from the School Committee, Superintendent, and Teachers Union President. Horace Mann schools have the ability to foster new types of innovation and success, but only 7 Horace Mann schools have been created in the last 15 years, including just 2 in Boston. The education reform bill must allow for the unimpeded creation of Horace Mann schools.

Match the right teachers with the right opportunities.

Massachusetts has many tremendous educators; however, some school teams have not been able to create an effective learning environment in our lowest performing schools. Currently we do not have enough flexibility to assign personnel in a manner that best serves our children. Removing or re-assigning teachers in these schools is a slow and expensive process – one that prevents us from achieving the academic gains we need at the speed our children deserve. The education reform bill must increase the school district’s flexibility to assign staff members who are able to close the achievement gap in our persistently under-performing schools. In our 14 turnaround schools, teachers who are reassigned would not be fired, but given other opportunities to find placement at other district schools. They will also receive one year of professional development opportunities so that they can strengthen their skills as educators.

Our legislators are debating this bill now. They want to hear from you!

Please join the growing coalition of students, parents, civic and business leaders
who are calling for sensible education reform!

Call your State Representative at 617-722-2000 or visit www.racetothetopcoalition.org.