

July 15, 2008

**Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
Meeting Report
June 25, 2008**

Items:

1. Comments from the Commissioner

- Commissioner Chester introduced new Board members Maura Banta of Melrose (the new Board chair), Beverly A. Holmes of Springfield, and the newly elected chair of the Student Advisory Council, AJ Fajnzylber, from Brookline High School. The new members begin their terms on July 1.
- Commissioner Chester expressed appreciation for the service of Board member Christopher Anderson, who was not in attendance. Mr. Anderson's term expires June 30.
- The commissioner congratulated Board Chairman Paul Reville and Board member Dana Mohler-Faria for their outstanding work on the Readiness Project report.
- Commissioner Chester recognized George Watson, a Spanish teacher from Walpole High School, who was named the 2008-2009 Massachusetts Teacher of the Year. David Mitchell, a History/Social Studies teacher from Masconomet Regional High School was recognized for winning the 2008 Preserve America History Teacher of the Year Award.
- The commissioner reported that the Department is seeking nominations to their advisory councils. The Deadline for applying for an Advisory Committee is July 31, 2008.
- The commissioner stated that he will appoint a group to make recommendations to him on amending the MCAS Performance Appeals process to include Science and Technology/Engineering. The commissioner plans to make his recommendations to the Board in August or September. The proposed amendments will be posted for public comment. The updated performance appeals process is expected to be finalized during the 2008-09 school year.
- The Commissioner referred the Board members to a report he submitted to them on the Greenfield Public Schools. He stated that the Department is closely monitoring the district's finances and working with its School Committee and Town officers. He noted that the Interim Superintendent was leaving in July along with 4-5 principals in the district.

2. Public Comment

- The parent of a special needs student and her son spoke against proposed changes to the MCAS reading accommodations currently allowed under the DESE guidelines. She stated that the new regulations would limit the reading of the ELA MCAS to students who read at the 1st or 2nd grade level.
- A teacher with 35 years of teaching experience in Massachusetts criticized the MCAS History Exam, stating that it focused on knowledge not on critical analysis of history. He recognized two other teachers with him and submitted a petition. He reported that the recent MCAS History Test was 80% multiple choice and contained only 6 open ended questions. He also said that 291 topics are included in the History Frameworks which allows less than one class period per topic.
- A second Massachusetts History teacher also spoke about the failure of the MCAS test to measure analytical skills and 21st century citizenship skills.
- A retired Massachusetts History teacher spoke and opposed any changes to the MCAS History Exam.

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- The Valedictorian of Dartmouth HS, who will be attending Yale University in the fall, spoke about how important the library and librarian were to her education at Dartmouth HS.
- A parent from Melrose spoke about the need for programs for gifted and talented students.

3. Comments from Chairman Paul Reville

- Chairman Paul Reville stated that this would be his last meeting as chairman, since he will become the Secretary of Education on July 1. The chairman also said he is proud of the work that new Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education has done during his first month on the job.
- Chairman Reville acknowledged the release of the Readiness Project report and distributed copies to Board members. The chairman stated that the Department and the Board will be working with the Governor to translate his vision into action.
- Chairman Reville announced that Board member Jeff Howard will serve on the Commissioner's working group on amending the MCAS performance appeals process to include Science and Technology/Engineering.
- The chairman thanked Jeffrey Nellhaus, who he said served so well as Acting Commissioner, the new Commissioner Mitchell D. Chester, and others who have provided valuable assistance. The chairman said he has always seen the wide range of opinion on this Board as one of its greatest strengths. Chairman Reville said the work that lies ahead, outlined in the Readiness Project report, is nothing less than reinvention of the education system for the 21st century, and it will require all hands on deck. The chairman said this work will be done in partnership with the Department and the Board, and the expertise of the Department will be critically important.

4. Readiness Project

- The Board discussed the Governor's Readiness Project Plan. Chairman Reville stated that although Massachusetts is a national leader in education reform, we still experience persistent and complex problems, including the correlation between low academic performance and poverty. He identified the two priorities of the Readiness Project: to improve teaching and learning and to connect more deeply with the lives of children so they come to school ready to learn. Board member Dana Mohler-Faria added that the Readiness Project is intended to be comprehensive, cohesive, and child-focused.
- Chairman Reville stated that it is a challenge to deliver on the promise of education reform so that all students reach proficiency and beyond. The chairman repeated the Governor's words "all means all." He said that as Secretary of Education, he would regularly convene the chairs of the boards (early education, elementary and secondary education, higher education) to initiate a collaborative planning process for this work.
- Harneen Chernow asked what the difference was between a Readiness School and a Pilot School. The Chair responded that a Readiness School would come under the jurisdiction of a district School Committee. A group of teachers could request approval or the district might dedicate a school and invite teachers to own it. The School Committee could also send out a Request for Proposal and parents, community groups or the teacher union could contract with the School Committee to run a school.
- Ruth Kaplan stated, "As a Board we haven't had any input or discussion. We need to have a discussion. It's an issue of revenue. School systems are really suffering now and

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there is a lack of capacity. The more I go to see schools, the more innovation I have seen. One of the biggest challenges is to marshal that information and share it.”

5. Districts' Plans for Commonwealth Priority Schools

1. The Board voted to approve District Plans for School Intervention submitted by the nine Commissioner's Districts: Boston, Brockton, Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, New Bedford, Springfield, and Worcester upon the recommendation of the Commissioner with the understanding that he intends to review the current process and criteria for identifying and intervening in schools with low performance and to develop a system of accelerated technical support. Commissioner Chester stated that the key question is whether the plans will improve student learning. He reported that the Department is committed to monitoring results and providing services and support to the districts as they work with these 54 Commonwealth Priority Schools. The Commissioner visited Boston, Brockton, Lowell, Worcester and Fall River schools. In his visits he was able to see those things that don't come through in the written documentation. He stated that it is “our duty to minimize paper work and maximize value.”
2. Dr. Fortmann commented that it was a good process and he was particularly impressed with the Review Panels. He found the surveys included in the plans very interesting. He stated that the members of the Review Panels were very well qualified to assess the leadership in the districts and schools, and that “we should ask them to do that.”
3. Board Member Ruth Kaplan stated that she supported the Commissioner going forward and developing the process. She said, “I am not in favor of automatically labeling a district based on not making AYP in 4 years. I am impressed with some of the innovative things going on in the schools I have seen.” Ms. Kaplan supports an open process, hearing from people in the field. “I am hoping the surveys of teachers and administrators are used. It will be disheartening if the surveys come back with the same results and someone needs to get to the bottom of what teachers are saying”.
4. Harneen Chernow stated that the whole process for how we identify Commonwealth Priority schools was developed under a previous Board and it's time for us to reconsider the 10 Conditions. She stated, “Springfield used the TeLLS Survey and I was struck by the disconnect between the administrators and teachers in what they saw is going on in the schools.”
5. Chairman Reville stated that, “At the Rennie Center we worked with district surveys asked teachers to look at the disconnect. Rather than shaming people, we used them to have a discussion. We asked teachers to use the data to inform their classrooms”.

6. English Language Arts Curriculum Framework Review: Second Progress Report

- Commissioner Chester gave an update on the review of the ELA Curriculum Framework. He stated that he is very interested in incorporating the recommendations of the Board's 21st Century Skills Task Force into this curriculum framework and others.

7. Charter Schools

- The Board approved amendments for three charter schools: Conservatory Lab Charter School (grades served), Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School (location of facilities), and Roxbury Preparatory Charter School (maximum enrollment and grades served).

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8. Non-Operating Schools

- The Board voted to allow 20 small communities to tuition their students into other school districts for the 2008-2009 school year.

9. Randolph Public Schools: Proposed Turnaround Plan

- Upon the recommendation of Commissioner Chester, the Board voted to accept the Turnaround Plan for the Randolph Public Schools. The Commissioner gave the following reasons for his recommendation: (1) the Turnaround Plan has focused on critical priorities and has articulated broad strategies to address them; (2) the successful April 2008 override vote in Randolph has provided more resources for education in Randolph and indicates the community's willingness to assume responsibility for improving its schools; and (3) Randolph leaders have taken initial positive steps to craft a new, more collaborative working relationship with a shared focus on improving the quality of public education in the Randolph schools.

10. Grants

- The Board voted to authorize the Commissioner, in consultation with the Chair and the members of the Board, to approve grants and any other matters that require action between the June meeting and the next regular Board meeting.

Submitted by: L. Hayes