My least favorite summer jobs were the ones I held for three consecutive summers in a New England shoe factory. The routine was numbing: 7:30AM to 3:30PM with one 15-minute whistle break in the morning and one in the afternoon, and a half hour for lunch. The building was old and hot and smelled of leather, machinery, and people. The work I was assigned to—from putting soles on forms in the lasting room to rubberizing soles in the packing room—required little original thought, and the cacophony made building relationships or securing new knowledge all but impossible. If I had not previously understood how my father, a shoe factory foreman, supported our family, I certainly did thereafter, and I respected his adherence to rules and procedures he was powerless to control while he remained accountable to profit.

The history of public education in this country certainly reflects the influence of the factory model on its early evolution. Despite all the years that have passed and all the powerful reform efforts that have intervened, schools still retain the vestiges of the factory model and, in some instances, have deviated little from the original paradigm. Those districts that have undertaken organizational change in the spirit of real reform, especially those that are already or anticipate being labeled underperforming under strict new federal guidelines, are fast approaching a critical crossroad — one that could easily precipitate a further entrenchment of the factory model. This is especially true for urban school districts, whose work often feels narrowly defined by test scores, attendance and safety data, labels and timelines. Production (student achievement) is the goal legislators have set, and faulty machinery (unaligned curricula, outdated instructional materials), untrained or unsupported workers (few quality induction programs, fewer career ladders), and too little infusion of cash (capital support) are not excuses that communities and state departments of education (owners/regulators) accept. Yet there is fear that putting the organization into the hands of the workers (educators), with managers (administrators) in a facilitative role, is literally “risky business,” especially in times of economic uncertainty and federal intervention. So what is a school district to do?

The future is built upon lessons learned from the past, not by the past itself. Let’s realize that what no longer works in business, no longer works for schools. It’s time for urban schools, in particular, to speak out. In these times of educational accountability and amidst chants of “no child left behind,” urban educators can lead the way forward, and provide a compelling vision for the future.
Why Teach in an Urban School?

Intellectual Vertigo: Committing to Solutions in Urban Education

By Michael Mayo

One afternoon last year, a teacher at my school thought she'd give her students a break from a test review. She thought of a softball and threw it: “All right, girls, what's the capital of Massachusetts?” She called on two students, who turned to one another and conferred for a few moments. They turned back to the teacher and said with gravity and pride, “Ms. Belanger, there is no capital of Massachusetts.”

As a teacher, I often experience a kind of intellectual vertigo—those moments in the classroom when events get so bewildering, so suddenly, that the room seems to freeze, and I have no idea what to say or do next. The children at my school, the Uphams Corner Charter School, get on buses in Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan and come to our building in a place called South Boston. They all are citizens of the capital city. They just don’t know it.

This bewildering story holds at its heart, for me, the stunning challenge and ruthless, surprising joy of teaching at an urban charter public school. We could, of course, talk about how sad it is that these ten-year-old Bostonians can't get this question right. We could recognize, as we must, that ten-year-olds in Weston or Williamstown wouldn’t miss a softball like this. But even as you’re given evidence, every day, of the staggering distance between these students and the wider world, you can’t help feeling the enormous potential: these girls and boys are already bright, analytical, creative, highly functional people in a world that requires knowledge and skills they don’t yet possess. Imagine what will happen when they get those skills. There’ll be no stopping them.

I went into teaching for the same reason many people do—I loved wondering about the big questions, and I loved the ways children brought new, surprising ideas to those questions. I wanted a school, too, where we could live those questions together, as adults and children, figuring out some truth for ourselves. That had to be in a city, and that had to be in a charter school.

In the suburbs, as in private schools, children and teachers can be insulated from so much ordinary American life. I say this as a child of suburban schools, one who’s disappointed, every time, when the city’s reality strikes. One morning we came to school to find all our computers gone. At least once a week, our school buses show up at least an hour late, sometimes two, wrecking the work schedules for dozens of our families. As one mother put it to me forcefully when her daughter got into trouble for fighting, “You don’t need to talk to me about violence. On my way home from work, I walk by three memorials every day.”

Their suburban peers also know how to “play school.” There are students who act out, of course, but there’s a culture around school and learning, handed down by parents and peers, that carries most students along. Children’s idea of school can be like Scout’s attitude toward reading in To Kill a Mockingbird—she’d never thought of it until someone threatened to take it away. Most of our students had no such experience from their previous schools—and as a brand-new school, we had no culture ourselves. So many students came to us in the fifth grade fighting each other, swearing at teachers, refusing to obey rules—never mind being prepared to learn. One child had tantrums so wild he put his hand through a window; when we asked him what happened, he said, honestly, “I don’t know.”
And unlike district public schools, charter public schools are buffeted by wild fluctuations in politics and real estate. Unlike schools in the Boston system, we need to find our own space, and pay for it out of the same funds district schools get for textbooks and payroll. We found a building in Uphams Corner to live; the landlords raised the rent 1000%; and when we faced homelessness, it was real—there’s no safety net. As the political winds change on Beacon Hill, it directly affects our lives—a moratorium would take us out at the knees.

And yet the pleasure of charter schools is palpable, once you’re in them. It has nothing to do with “service” or altruism—the rewards are too immediate and rich to claim idealism. Try teaching writing to someone who doesn’t know how to “play school.” At first, like the girls who don’t know what the capital is, he might not be able to read or write. But he’s not going to give you what he thinks you want, either—no boilerplate, just raw honesty. And when he does learn to write, that honesty will let his brilliance shine through. Consider this testimonial a student wrote for his teacher, from a longer document he wrote in less than five minutes:

I thank you for all of the help you have given me. You are a perfect role model to follow. You know what you want and you have high expectations. You have met me after school and also out of school. I think that you are maybe one of the best influences in my life. … So I thank you for all the things you did for me, but even more for all of the things you have done for this school.

This relationship isn’t exclusive to urban charter schools, but it lies at the heart of them, and is only possible because of them. And it makes for brilliant work—that last line is poetry.

The honesty of this writing comes not only from a freedom from middle-class clichés about students and teachers, but from a sense of safety in the school community around him. Because we’re small, because we have a clearly defined mission, and because I can hire the people whom I choose, we can forge a deliberate community together. When our computers are stolen, the children find ways to make the day easier. When the buses are late, the teachers wait with the children, talking and playing and facing the hardship together. We make small solutions, piece by piece: we have long school days; we separate most classes by gender; we switch literacy programs as soon as something better comes along. We look at the data, and can adapt.

And when we figured out that the child with the violent tantrums couldn’t read—even after six years of schooling—we set about to teach him to read. He learned. Now he doesn’t have tantrums any longer.

I’m reminded of Max Frankl’s book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Happiness isn’t the avoidance of suffering, but the ability to find meaning in it. In a small, urban charter school, one with a specific mission and deliberate community, you can face that suffering and begin to make meaning of it, as part of a community, surrounded by books, learning, and children.

You start to unleash each child’s creativity, one by one. They desperately want to learn, and have very little anxiety about it—almost all of them want to learn because it’s fun to learn, and when their friends do well, they’re happy for them, too. It’s the ideal community for a teacher, I think—like their writing, the children’s questions are honest, because they care about the answers.

They can be pleasingly brutal, too. When Rep. Marie St. Fleur visited the school, the children asked questions no adult would have the guts to ask. “Are you the one who closes charter schools?” They had no idea they should be afraid to ask such a question.
I believe that charter schools, with their deliberate communities, can become centers of strength for families and the neighborhoods around them. When parents first come to the school, so many of them start by fighting us—arguing, nickel-and-diming, defending. I don’t blame them. It’s how they’ve learned to deal with their children’s schools, and for many it reflects their own personal experience of school. Over time we come to the same page, and we learn together about their children, we organize for the same causes, we argue about the things we care about. It’s what the city needs—engines of wider change, infused with the thoughtful analysis schools can offer, run by the people closest to the issues themselves. It’s exactly what a neighborhood like Uphams Corner needs—a crucible for careful inquiry and bold change.

The most obvious joy of working in an urban charter school is watching the community heal itself—strangers in a rough city learning together, taking care of one another, and achieving. And yet a deeper satisfaction is knowing that this is happening even in the midst of supposedly unsolvable problems: disparities in class and race, deadlocks between teacher unions and management, ridiculously low budgets, crime, single-parent families, and the rest. All these forces batter us daily—they’re part of the American scene. But your work becomes a kind of existence proof—while others argue in the stratosphere, you do your daily work, and it quietly becomes a place that can halt excuses. These children who could not read are reading. These children who could not control themselves are doing algebra in sixth grade. These children who were vicious to one another, who brought the skills necessary to the street into our building, along with weapons and hateful speech, have stopped.

In a charter school, you are confronted with the grim realities of American culture, but you also get tools to help fix them. Ms. Belanger’s students didn’t know what the state capital was, but now they know. Many of them have called their reps, asking them to support charter schools and take care of Uphams Corner.

Every morning, at assembly, I look into a room in our bleak, broken-down rental space. The room is filled with young African-American faces, and Haitian faces, and Vietnamese faces, and Cape Verdean faces, and faces from Puerto Rico and Guyana and Venezuela and Ireland, and with the faces of their teachers, who work around the clock to teach them. The children still argue. We are regularly disappointed in them, as adults often are. And the work we have ahead of us to bring them to academic parity with their peers in the suburbs is intimidating. Yet the people in that room go right to the heart of some of the greatest problems in American culture, and quietly and slowly, children and adults alike, they have begun to make solutions. There’s no better way to spend your day.

Michael Mayo holds a B.A. from Harvard University and was a journalist for the Washington Post and Washington Monthly. For six years, he taught middle school English in Roxbury. In 2002, Mike founded the Uphams Corner Charter School in Boston where he now serves as Headmaster. Mike has lived in Uphams Corner for the past nine years. He can be reached at mayo@uphamscornercs.net.
Why Teach in an Urban School?
Defying the Stereotypes

By Becky Fischer

“Hey Beck, that’s awesome that you’re going to Boston College! What will you study?” I hear this from every person with whom I share my news.

“I’m getting my Master’s in secondary education with a concentration in English and ESL,” I respond, then add, “I have two scholarships: one for ESL teachers, and one for teachers who want to teach in urban schools.”

An all-too-common response, even from those who have known me for many years, is, “Why in the world would you want to teach in the ghetto?”

People often cringe when I tell them where I work. I ask them why working in a large urban school elicits this reaction. “Because it’s scary there,” comes the reply. “Because the kids have guns and you have to enter school through metal detectors and they don’t care about learning. Their home lives are so messed up they can’t even focus. They just want to do drugs, steal, and have babies.”

I detest these stereotypes; they do not apply in any way to most of the students in my school. So I respond, “Interesting. When was the last time you taught in a ‘ghetto’ or worked with children who live in urban districts? If I recall correctly, most of the major school shootings have taken place in very well-to-do communities — places where the children, by stereotype, are supposedly ‘good’ or come from ‘good’ families.”

As a graduate of an urban high school with more than 2,000 students, I learned as much from the students themselves as from the teachers and textbooks. Perhaps this is why I enjoy working with students of all different races and from all different ethnic and religious backgrounds and socioeconomic situations. These are students in need — students who crave committed teachers and administrators.

I find I fit in best where the students are diverse, the challenges are great, and the students don’t fit the stereotypes that are often placed on them. They may speak English as a second language or their families may not have enough money to eat at the Ritz-Carlton, but these are the students who give me the confidence to face their challenges — and conquer a few of my own.

A Day at College Bound

At 8:45am on a Saturday morning, the lecture hall at Boston College is filled with tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders from West Roxbury and Brighton high schools. They arrive bundled up on this cold November morning, and the temperatures are significantly low. Despite the heavy jackets, scarves, and hats, the need to “look good” is always present. Brand names such as Fubu, Tommy Hilfiger, Nike, Gap, Abercrombie and Fitch, and Adidas are displayed proudly, along with various athletic team logos. Some students wear baseball hats, while others wear knit stocking caps. Others still, come in with do-rags, wrapped ever so carefully around their heads. The majority enter with disc-men playing the latest rap music. All come in carrying their notebooks, pens, and pencils. Since it is early in the morning, many also enter this lecture hall with bagels and coffee, or some other breakfast food of choice.

There are males and females, a variety of body types, and a range of skin tones from light to dark. In addition to English, these students speak Greek, Spanish, Albanian, Portuguese, Chinese, and French. The economic backgrounds vary as well, but many come from families that do not have a lot of money, have parents who do not speak English as their first language, or live with extended family members.

These students attend high schools that receive inad-
equate funding and our College Bound students talk about their overcrowded classes. Many of them regularly complain about being unable to get into the necessary honors classes because only one honors class is offered per subject. They worry about the necessity of these courses when applying to colleges.

These students have strong self-expectations. Every student in the College Bound program has made a conscious decision to be successful; after all, many of them have to be up at 6:00am on these Saturday mornings to catch the bus to Boston College, while their peers are still tucked safely in their beds. When asked about their favorite subjects they reply biology, physics, algebra, and English. They have plans to attend such respected universities as Stanford, Marist, Duke, North Carolina State, Boston University, Boston College, Harvard, MIT, Northeastern, and University of Connecticut. Students have realistic career goals; they want to be doctors, lawyers, journalists, teachers, and everything in between. These students are determined to overcome the demographic stereotypes.

Regardless of the early morning hour, their eyes are wide and the chatter is constant as they find their seats and prepare for the morning’s community meeting. They greet each other with high fives, and a “Wassup dawg?”, “Yo, you go to that party last night!!”, “Nice kicks, bro!”, or “Lemme get a piece of that.” The eleventh and twelfth graders are pros at this routine, as they have been coming to Boston College for a year or two. They have also developed friendships with students from the “other” high school. The sophomores, all of whom attend “Westy” (West Roxbury High) have learned the drill quickly, and act as though they’ve been coming to Boston College for years.

Along with the large number of high school students, there are a number of Boston College students, as well. Boston College undergraduates serve as mentors to this group of high school students, while Masters students are the teachers for the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders, and focus on writing, SAT prep, math skills, and college essay writing sessions throughout the day. The doctoral candidates administer the program and a few professors are responsible for oversight of the College Bound program. All have gathered together in the lecture hall.

Teaching Academics and Advocacy

“Wassup Beck?!” numerous voices say to me as I enter the lecture hall. “Where were you last time?”

“I had to go for a dress fitting for a wedding,” I say. “You gettin’ married?” a few voices ask, with huge smiles on their faces.

“Don’t you think you guys would know if I was getting married?!” I roll my eyes.

“True dat! We’re all gonna be invited to your wedding, right?!”

“Sure. You guys could all come to the church!” I laugh.

“Well, we definitely missed you last week,” a chorus of tenth graders replies.

“I missed you guys, too,” I respond, because I truly did miss them.

Then one young man yells, “Becky, my favorite teacher!” with a huge smile on his face. Of course, this brings an even bigger smile to my face, and reminds me why I, too, have decided to give up a day of sleeping-in.

When most people think about teaching and college preparation, they think about academics. Although I spend a great deal of time working with these students to improve their writing skills, I also place great emphasis on becoming a better person and learning to advocate for one’s own education. As such, we have spent time brainstorming ways to obtain their educational goals, and in this particular instance, we considered how to deal with a tough Spanish teacher.

“I can’t stand her,” says Steevan, a native English speaker. “She’s just a terrible teacher.”

“Becky, I’m in the honors Spanish class, and all we do is ‘chill,’” adds Annie, a native Spanish speaker. “She tells us about what she did the night before, about the concerts she attends.”

“She just doesn’t care. I hate her,” says Elenie, a girl whose first language is Greek.

These are the views of the majority of these fifteen year olds. This is a common discussion, so I decide we need to talk about it.

“Okay,” I say, “Now, that you’ve gotten your complaints off your chests, what can you do to help yourselves?”

“There’s nothing, Beck. She just hates us,” pipes in Steevan. “She makes fun of the way I spell my name. I tell her all the time there are two ‘e’s in my name, but she still tells me I spell it wrong.”

“She doesn’t want to listen. She just tells us to work harder. How am I supposed to work harder, when I don’t get it?!” says Elenie.

My students are often incredulous when I relate my own experiences as a student in an urban setting. They don’t think I can relate to their frustrations, but when I tell them some of my own experiences, especially in middle school, they get a glimpse of our common ground. I share a story about my Spanish teacher in the
eight grade, who had a habit of putting on Mickey Mouse ears when returning our tests, while singing the ‘M-I-C-K-E-Y-M-O-U-S-E’ song if more than half the class had failed. He had a few kids in each class whom he would simply kick out for no apparent reason. I explained that we also had to develop ways to deal with him and learn how to play his games.

“What can you do to help yourselves?” I ask, with a calm voice. “How can you overcome these small hurdles before they become larger ones? It’s up to you.”

“Maybe if you talk to her, she’ll listen,” says Fanelly. Eyes roll and teeth are sucked at this idea.

“No, listen. I’m a native Spanish speaker, and was failing her class. I figured out that she thinks that just because I can speak Spanish, I should be able to write it, spell it, and use grammar correctly. Obviously, she was wrong. I mean, yeah, we speak Spanish at home, but my mom is busy; she works and doesn’t have time to come home every night and practice reading and spelling in Spanish with me.” She takes a breath, and then continues, “I finally decided that I needed to speak to the teacher, to explain this to her. At first, she didn’t get it, but I explained it again, and this time she listened. She told me she would keep that in mind from now on.” Fanelly looks sympathetically at her classmates.

“Do you really think that talking to her worked?” I ask.

“Yeah, I do. I mean, it’s not like she changed completely, but at least she listened. At least she knows where I’m coming from. You should try it.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I say. “Let’s come up with a list of ideas to help yourselves with a tough situation. Keep in mind that firing her is not an option. The ideas we develop need to be obtainable ones.”

I pick up the chalk and prepare to write their ideas on the board. They create the following list, without my help, to improve their Spanish education: try harder, have a positive attitude, stay after for extra help, talk to her, form study groups, get Spanish tutors, purchase and use a Spanish dictionary.

Then I explain that their homework for that week is to try at least one of these ideas. “I’m not promising any will work, as I don’t know her and, therefore, do not know her philosophies. However, you must try at least one of the things listed, and report back to us about the outcome,” I say to numerous sighs and eye-rolls.

“Okay, I’ll try, but it won’t work,” replies Steevan.

“She won’t listen because she’s stupid,” says Elenie.

“Have you tried?” I ask calmly.

“Ummmmm, no…” replies Elenie again.

“Okay, well, you have to this time. It’s part of your homework, and therefore, it must be done. I’ll tell you something. If I, as a teacher, had a student with a straight ‘F’ come to me, look me in the eye, speak in a calm, concerned voice and appear to be genuine, and a child with a ‘C’ who blamed me, rolled her eyes, stomped her foot, and made it obvious that she was taking no responsibility for her grade, who do you think I would help?”

“The one with the ‘F’,” replied my chorus of voices, once more.

“Exactly!” I say with a smile, because I know they understand where I’m going with this. “So, try it, and we’ll talk about it next week.”

“Yeah, but you’re cool. You actually get it. You’re willing to help,” says Steevan. He then adds, “You care and we know it; you’re our Becky.”

I smile and, for a moment, I am reminded of why I teach students from urban settings. I wish others were here, to witness the capacity, compassion, and commitment of these “bad kids, from the ghetto.”

Becky Fischer can be reached at Tapbeck@aol.com.
What is the Vision for Urban Schools?

The Development of Critical Minds: Reclaiming the Vision for Urban Schools

By Linda Nathan

I’m looking at an eleven-page report card from my child’s elementary school that describes the school’s performance on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) by content area and grade level, and for particular student populations. It says that 79.37 percent of the teachers in this school are licensed, and 87.69 percent are “highly qualified.” I have to wade through two pages of “frequently asked questions” to understand the difference between these two labels—and I am an educator! The report also claims that this urban school is not eligible for vouchers or tutoring services because students are making progress in the test results, at least among white students. The charts appear to show that African-American male students at the school are not meeting Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals.

The explanations are confusing, and the data hard to interpret. There may well be useful information here, but I wonder if our current obsession with test results is helping or hurting children. Tests, as we know too well, are just one way of measuring students’ competence and knowledge. And they say nothing about character, persistence, creativity, or judgment. Have we reduced education to a tally of test results rather than a discussion about the development of critical minds?

A Well-Educated Citizenry

One thing is sure: public education in Massachusetts has become more and more about raising test scores and less and less about creating well-educated citizens. This testing mania has largely obscured the larger purposes of schooling and is particularly felt in urban schools, where student need is highest and failure to meet AYP goals has resulted in available resources being funneled into improving the situation. Does testing nurture students learning to think better, to sift through evidence, to ask questions, to take intellectual and artistic risks, to be inventive? The MCAS numbers tell us nothing about progress on these fronts. Moreover, I suspect that the kind of thinking fostered by standardized tests actually undermines creativity and intellectual rigor. It is true that MCAS gives districts the mandate to institute high standards, but I am less certain that high stakes tests will help us create a better educated citizenry in the long run.

Our most vulnerable students — those who have learning disabilities, are English language learners (ELL), or are low income — represent a significantly higher percentage of our urban population compared to those outside urban districts (http://profiles.doe.mass.edu). These students now take or prepare for tests on up to 40 of their 180 days in school. Many urban
schools and students must invest in PSAT, SAT, and MCAS test preparation, biannual English language proficiency tests, special education tests, the state’s complete battery of MCAS tests, as well as MCAS retests for those who fail. Maria’s story [see below] provides a more personal view of this scenario.

**Testing Mania: An Avalanche Bordering on the Absurd**

Although a single student’s story may sound like the exception, I believe Maria’s story represents the current reality of many of our most vulnerable urban youth. The Boston Arts Academy has approximately fifteen students who are listed as ELL and of those, approximately eight are also students with IEPs. All of them will probably test as much as Maria. These are the very students who need to be in class as much as possible. Each of the tests these students are required to take, taken alone, can tell us something about the child. But taken together, this avalanche of testing approaches the absurd. It is abusive of students’ emotional and intellectual energies and devalues Maria: An Urban Youth’s Reality*

Maria is an extraordinarily skilled visual artist in her junior year at Boston Arts Academy (BAA). Her clay sculptures and drawings in a recent show based on Dante’s Inferno were some of the most evocative work I had ever seen. Her ability to draw the viewer into an understanding of suffering is truly at an adult level. Where do her insights come from? How, at sixteen, has she developed such visual acuity and expressiveness? Maria also dresses with a unique style, blending colors, fabrics, and accessories in ways that define her uniqueness and creativity. In her academic classes, Maria struggles to complete her math work and seeks out lots of individual help. Her teachers comment on Maria’s insight as she works through difficult texts of philosophy or Shakespeare or Virginia Wolfe. She participates well in class and always works on refining and re-editing her papers.

Maria failed the MCAS in tenth grade. She tested for two days in April on the writing test and then for five full days in May for Math and English language arts. Given that the MCAS is an untimed test, she had no other classes for those entire seven days, and she worked diligently throughout. Nor did she have any homework or projects because her teachers wanted her to focus solely on testing.

Maria wants to attend a state-supported art school in Massachusetts, but knows she must pass the MCAS to do so. In the fall of her junior year, she tested again for the MCAS for four days. When the results of a second failure came back, she tested last spring for an additional four days. (One might note, as well, that this spring (2005), for many tenth and eleventh graders, there will be from one to three additional days devoted to pilot tests in science and social studies which will soon be added to the state roster of MCAS tests.)

In addition, Maria is identified as an English language learner. She had to complete the MELA-O oral language test both in the fall and in the spring. A certified “tester” had to go into her class and listen to her read. Maria asked the teacher-tester if she would make it a practice of “bopping” in to class to listen to students read or if she was just picking on her since she had failed the MCAS so many times. In addition to the oral language test, Maria also had to be tested with the new MEPA which is being introduced to test written and reading fluency of English language learners. Much like the MCAS, Maria was pulled out of class for this test, too. It was given over a two day period.

Maria has also been diagnosed with a learning disability. This year her Individualized Education Plan (IEP) was up for review so she needed to take a battery of tests for her special education placement. The school psychologist and the special educator had to pull her out of class on four separate days to complete these tests.

In an effort to prepare for college admissions, and following her PSAT preparation classes the year before, Maria also participated in our afterschool SAT preparation course this spring, provided for our students both during the school day and afterschool, as private classes are not an economic option for most of our students. The afterschool class takes place two days a week for nine weeks. Although Maria’s combined SAT score is lower than 800, she hopes her efforts in this prep class will bolster her scores and allow her to gain entry into the only state-supported art school in the commonwealth.

* description based upon an actual BAA student
teachers’ professional expertise and their close working knowledge of individual students. In addition, research suggests that out-of-control-testing is leading some of our best teachers to leave the profession (Haney, 2000).

This year’s BAA sophomores spent the last two weeks of school in an intensive PSAT program run by The Princeton Review to try to increase their test taking skills. Recently, the Boston Public Schools Deputy Superintendent of Teaching and Learning announced an extraordinary collaboration with The College Board that will allow all sophomores next year to take the PSATs free of charge and the decision has been made that the PSAT will no longer be offered just on Saturday, but during the school day to ensure that more students will participate. In the abstract, this is an honorable intention. It is true, I believe, that more students will participate if the PSAT is given during the school day, but I discovered long ago that giving the test without the necessary test preparation is tantamount to dishing out more failure for urban students. In order to do well on these tests (just like the MCAS), enormous focus and test preparation must be provided. BAA raises well over $25,000 annually to support test preparation efforts with private companies. If the price for a PSAT/SAT course is over $1000 per student, the disadvantage for urban students is striking.

The Costs of Excessive Testing
If we expect student scores to increase on standardized tests we must provide schools with the financial resources to do so. BAA was named a COMPASS school by the State of Massachusetts because of our strong gains in MCAS scores. Those gains were directly correlated to additional funding. In the early years of MCAS, there was additional funding that allowed us to hire another teacher. Therefore, we were able to reduce mathematics class sizes substantially and make sure that we met all students’ needs in this area. That state funding no longer exists.

There seems to be a belief that educational reform has already been funded, and now everyone is passing the MCAS, so more funding is no longer necessary. Yet when one examines BAA’s “good scores,” it is important to note that “good” in urban districts means students have passed, not that students have attained advanced scores. On our math MCAS, only seven percent of our students received advanced scores and a few more received advanced scores on the English/language arts test. Upon a closer view, we discovered those students’ socio-economic backgrounds mirror their suburban counterparts where students are scoring at the proficient and advanced levels quite regularly (http://doe.mass.edu/mcas/2003/results/dpsummary.pdf).

Again, as urban educators, we are forced to ask about the correlation between student proficiency on the state tests and social class, fully-funded schools, small class size, and well trained, certified teachers — all of which present persistent stumbling blocks in urban education. Even as the state touts the high percentage of students passing the MCAS, it remains important to analyze the background and supports of those students who gain scholarships to the state colleges and university for attaining all advanced MCAS scores. It is also important to examine the quality, depth, and rigor of education that is offered at different schools and different districts and how it is funded. All of us must face complex issues of equity and access amidst an increasing need for an educated, engaged citizenry.

Are urban districts so unilaterally focused on having students pass the MCAS that classes have become a mix of test prep and cheerleading for standardized tests (Merrow Report, March 2002)? Are students engaged in complex and multi-layered projects that may result in more than one right answer? Are students flourishing because their individual talents are being recognized, developed, and
encouraged? Or, as I fear, has the conversation in schools and classrooms, become solely focused on test results and MCAS data to the exclusion of the other critical realms?

**Using What We Know Best: A Model for Change**

How do we help teachers return to what they know best—their students? How do we help schools re-invigorate the core values that the current mania is eroding? John Dewey’s principle is prominent among the core values of public education: schools should create educated citizens who are prepared to participate actively in a democratic society. “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife,” Dewey wrote in *School and Society* in 1907.

At the Boston Arts Academy, students know that school is more than just a hurdle on the path to college or a job. They experience high school as an opportunity to pursue their passions, to argue with peers and teachers about ideas that matter. The lenses of art and creativity promote critical reflection and questioning more naturally and easily than a narrow focus on facts and formulas. At the Arts Academy, we continually ask our students to walk in the shoes of others, to understand, empathize, and find connections to diverse and often challenging experiences. Our students ask: How do I fit into this world? How do I understand it? How can I change it? Only in this kind of open-ended, questioning atmosphere can the values of a democratic society flourish.

Last year, Obain Attouoman, a math teacher at Fenway High School (which shares our building), was jailed unjustly on immigration charges and was about to be deported to the Ivory Coast, his native country. Our students, along with Fenway faculty and students, organized a press conference and a demonstration at the immigration offices in Boston demanding his release. The press covered the story, Congressman Ed Markey got involved on Obain’s behalf, and the students’ efforts prevailed.

Immediately after his release from prison, Obain addressed a jubilant crowd of students in the school auditorium. “I would not be standing here if it wasn’t for you,” he said, brushing away tears. He told the students never to forget the power of their collective voices.

We made sure every student had parental permission before participating in the demonstration, but we decided, as a faculty, to encourage this kind of civic action. As one parent said, “How will students learn how a democracy is supposed to work if they can’t practice these skills?” Students need to see their teachers and themselves as powerful individuals who care deeply about one another and who are willing to act for justice in their communities.

I believe, as we all do, that schools must teach basic skills. Without basic skills, we cannot participate in a democracy. But we have lost sight of the need to create challenging high standards without labeling eight-year-olds as failures. We have lost sight of the importance of helping students demonstrate their knowledge in multiple ways. We have lost sight of the importance of developing divergent thinking—that is, the kind of thinking that recognizes there can be more than one answer to a question.

At a recent senior dance concert, I saw students exploring themes more complex than any represented on a standardized test. One student, Cedric, explored a personal journey—overcoming the stereotypes of being a black...
male dancer. His work was inspired by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and grew out of research he had done with members of that company. Karen and Dayah worked together on a piece that explored domestic violence. Ronnie paid homage to the different dance styles of Martha Graham, Bob Fosse, Lester Horton, and William Forsythe. “When I dance,” Ronnie explained, “I try to make the audience feel what I am feeling. What drives me as an artist is the love that the audience gives you when you have given them the best performance you can.” These are high standards in action and the results are personal and significant to the learner. In our frenzied, myopic pursuit of “adequate yearly progress,” have we forgotten to pay attention to the learner?

If I Had a Policymaker’s Magic Wand...

Just once, instead of more standardized tests, I would like to see our policymakers require that every student be taught to play a musical instrument. I think student skills would skyrocket if everyone had to learn to read music, to translate notes on the page into the movements of one’s fingers, to play in an ensemble. In fact, I would go even further. I would require that every student engage in some kind of visual and performing art every day. Imagine what our schools and children would be like if drawing, painting, acting, dancing, photography, and sculpting were valued as much as MCAS preparation. Jay Mathews, a reporter for the Washington Post, wrote in August, 2001 about why Barcroft Elementary, a highly successful school in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Arlington County, Virginia, has been able to attract and keep experienced teachers. “Why would skilled, experienced instructors want to come to Barcroft rather than any of the dozens of other disadvantaged schools across the Washington area?” he asked. The answer, he discovered, is the principal who, along with her staff, integrated an arts program into the school’s curriculum and who established “an ongoing, high-level conversation about pedagogy,” as one teacher described it.

The indisputable lesson of the Boston Arts Academy, Barcroft Elementary, and dozens of other good schools is that when students are involved in collective endeavors that matter to them—performing, exhibiting, discussing ideas, debating philosophies, arguing over solving equations, or how to create sound from a variety of means—they will work incredibly hard, and they will succeed. We have many urban schools in our commonwealth that model this kind of engaging and personalized education. But we also have too many urban classrooms where worksheets and unending test preparation are the daily norm, where the development of critical minds takes backseat to preparation for narrowly focused, high stakes tests. It is time for us to refocus on the diverse learners in our midst. As urban educators, in particular, it is time for us to reclaim our commitments to knowing our students well and leading them to discover the personal rigor of inquiry and expression and the critical engagements of dialogue and democracy. It is time for the pendulum to swing in a different direction.

References


Linda Nathan is the Headmaster of the Boston Arts Academy, a public high school for the visual and performing arts. She was co-director of Fenway High School for fourteen years, and co-founder of the Center for Collaborative Education, a not-for-profit organization that focuses on reforming schools. Linda can be reached at lnelathan@boston.k12.ma.us.

“A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God’s earth. What we should aim at producing is men who possess both culture and expert knowledge in some special direction. Their expert knowledge will give them the ground to start from, and their culture will lead them as deep as philosophy and as high as art. We have to remember that the valuable intellectual development is self-development....”

— Alfred North Whitehead, The Aims of Education, 1929
What is the Vision for Urban Schools?

Leading as Teaching

By Karla Brooks Bachr with D. Brent Stephens

So what’s different between urban and suburban schools, Karla? That’s a question I’ve heard often in the last four years. After nearly thirty years as a public school teacher, central office administrator, and superintendent in middle and upper income communities in Massachusetts – first Methuen, Arlington and Franklin; later Wellesley and Lexington – in the summer of 2000, I became superintendent of schools in Lowell, Massachusetts.

Lowell, Massachusetts
A city of 110,000 located in the Merrimack Valley, Lowell is recognized nationally as the birthplace of the American textile industry and home to generations of immigrants – first Irish and French Canadians, later Greeks and Poles, and more recently, Hispanics and Southeast Asian refugees. Today, 20% of Lowell’s public school students are Hispanic and 30% are Southeast Asian (primarily Cambodian). Nearly 25% have limited proficiency in English and over 60% come from families whose first language is not English. Over 60% are eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

In the mid 1980’s Lowell took two important steps to bring back its public school system. After contentious, painful and very public debate, a majority of the school committee and the mayor (who chairs the school committee) agreed under pressure from the court to implement a voluntary desegregation plan to insure that their exploding population of Cambodian refugees and their children, as well as the steadily increasing number of Spanish-speaking children would be educated in desegregated settings. This decision paved the way for the next: with the Desegregation Plan making Lowell eligible for 90% reimbursement, City leaders agreed to support an ambitious school building program designed to foster neighborhood revitalization and economic development. As a result, today nearly 90% of Lowell’s schoolchildren attend schools that have been newly built or totally renovated since 1991.

Lowell and Education Reform
Self-help can take a city just so far, however. Lowell needed the Education Reform Act of 1993 for its schools to flourish. Personnel decisions were no longer made at the school committee level, as principals and the superintendent gained authority for hiring and transferring all staff. A massive infusion of state Chapter 70 funding enabled the schools to reach Foundation Budget by 2002. Teachers went from being among the fifteen lowest paid in the Commonwealth to among the highest paid in the Merrimack Valley. Class size was reduced. Children gained access to full day kindergarten and expanded preschool programs. They and their teachers gained the support of library media specialists and technology integration specialists. Guidance counselors were hired at the middle schools. Lowell High School dramatically expanded its interscholastic athletic program, introduced interdisciplinary teaching teams for ninth grade, and staffed a television studio to serve as the hub for one of five career “Academies” open to juniors and seniors. The Latin Lyceum opened — a four-year, 200-student examination “school within a school”— graduating its first class last year with MCAS scores that rival the most prestigious high schools in the Commonwealth.

Cultures that Support Adult Learning
A special challenge for Lowell and other urban schools is that their cultures are often more resistant than their suburban counterparts to the development of the kind of professional learning community that we have come to understand is essential for school improvement. Filled with often delightfully feisty educators who relish the special challenges they face, urban school systems have been shaped by dependence on grants; the bureaucratization and fiefdoms that arise from large size and grant oversight; relentless attacks on their effectiveness in the media; limited parental knowledge of how to challenge mediocre instructional practices (as well as a belief system in many immigrant communities that parents must not approach the school); and the suspicion and fear of victimization caused by a history of factory wage labor and class antagonisms. These have produced urban school cultures often characterized more by compliance and cynicism than by empowerment, cultures in which there is a predisposition to take orders (and also satisfaction in undermining
them), as well as a disposition toward a “command and control” approach to leadership where implementation can be seen as giving orders and “checking off” tasks completed. While there are definitely “pockets of excellence” in every urban district (the quality of what goes on in some Lowell classrooms is every bit as good as the best I ever saw in Wellesley or Lexington), an unwavering commitment to and vision of excellence is not yet the norm in every corner of the school system. All of these characteristics make it especially challenging to create and participate in a strong culture of adult professional learning – the cornerstone of school improvement as we have come to understand it.

Since my days in Wellesley, I have understood leadership as teaching to build strong cultures of professional collaboration and reflection. That is, I have seen leadership less as telling and giving answers as about teaching and asking questions. The particular school culture I have found in Lowell has reinforced that commitment to teaching as leading, at the same time as it has pushed me to expand my own teaching repertoire and deepen my understanding of the process for developing professional learning communities.

Teaching to Build a Professional Culture
Classrooms with compliant or rebellious learners and controlling teachers rarely yield learners who are skillful, deeply knowledgeable, and reflective about their own learning. Likewise, school cultures where teachers are wont to comply or rebel while principals and central office administrators attempt to command and control rarely yield teachers or administrators who are skillful, deeply knowledgeable, and reflective about their own learning. Instead, leaders need to behave like good teachers. Just as good teachers work to create classroom environments in which all students can reach high standards of performance, good leaders must create work environments in which all teachers can reach high standards of performance. Just as the test of a great classroom is one in which “ordinary” children are supported to do extraordinary work, the test of a great school (or school system) is one in which “ordinary” teachers and principals are supported to do extraordinary work. Good leaders, I have come to learn, apply to their leadership of adults the same core beliefs that good teachers bring to their classrooms. Here are some of the core beliefs that have guided me:

1. The power of Positive Expectations
In the very best schools I’ve seen, whether in Wellesley or Lowell, teachers and administrators work hard to convey their belief that all students can learn more than they already know. Jon Saphier, Founder and Executive Director of Research for Better Teaching, describes these kinds of schools as places where adults consistently use words and actions to send a very powerful message: “This is important. You can do it. I’m not going to give up on you.”

In my work as superintendent, I’ve tried to enact this belief in much the same way as an effective teacher. For example, I worked over a period of two years to support a principal as he developed an understanding of what high expectations look like in the district’s new mathematics program. Even though it may have been more consistent with the principal’s experience had I simply criticized his understanding, I chose to act differently. By thoughtfully teaming him with other principals, by creating new opportunities for him to learn, and by voicing my belief in every principal’s ability to become an effective instructional leader with this new program, the principal is now leading the charge in math in a very different way. Most important, he has become a messenger with his own staff of the importance of the work, and of his belief that all teachers can become ever more effective in their work with each child.

2. The power of Effective Effort
Another important idea that effective teachers make evident in their classrooms is that all students can “get smart” through their own and their teachers’ effective efforts. We know the limits of exhortations to “try harder”. We know that the kind of effort matters. For example, urging a struggling reader to “read it over” is unlikely to produce “effective effort”. We know that eliciting “effective effort” requires that we teach that struggling reader comprehension strategies to use and then prompt him to select and use an appropriate one when he gets stuck. This “getting smart through effective effort” idea is one that I have had the privilege to explore through work with Jeff Howard and the Efficacy Institute, and it has had profound implications for my leadership. First, my belief in effective effort guides me in my work with other educators, helping me to get past a traditional belief in education that great teachers (and administrators) are born rather than developed. I’ve learned that each of us is always capable of improving, and that our own attitudes towards reflection and learning are a critical step in this process. It’s this idea that helps me to see that my colleagues’ decisions and responses are feedback for me about the effectiveness of my work. In the “leading as teaching” metaphor that guides my work, my colleagues’ decisions and responses are feedback about the effectiveness of each of the “lessons” I create.

This “lesson” idea has been especially powerful for me as I consider the effect
of the administrative meetings that I plan and run. I try to frame each meeting as a lesson with explicit learning objectives, strategies that actively engage participants (learners), and opportunities to check for understanding. Just as each lesson is an opportunity for the effective teacher to assess student learning, each meeting is a chance for me to ask what I need to do to be more effective, what I need to “re-teach”, and for whom do I need to do this.

3. The power of Questions
On occasion, principals and others do make decisions that work against the goal of creating a culture that nurtures adult professional learning. This is true of every school system in which I’ve worked. As they do for teachers who aspire to help students make effective decisions, these moments present a real challenge. It’s easy and faster just to tell someone that they’ve done wrong than it is to try to learn about the thinking that led to their decision and to reflect on your own role in these events. Yet telling them very rarely leads to any new learning or to any new behavior in the future— for the student or the teacher. This is the challenge that teachers face when they teach through questioning, rather than through telling.

In my leadership, I’ve faced many of these challenges. For example, one principal with whom I worked once passed on to his staff as “the superintendent’s orders” the feedback that I gave to him in private. By doing this, he compromised his own role as a proactive leader, and risked undermining our efforts to create a relationship between schools and the central office that is based on support and trust instead of control and compliance. Despite this, I chose to probe his thinking rather than tell him that he had done wrong. In doing so, I learned that he was uncertain of his own knowledge of the district’s literacy program, and this discovery helped me to think about using future meetings to support his learning. After many months of additional support, the result was more positive than if I had elected to “teach through telling.” More importantly, the school now benefits from a leader who is more confident of his ability to know and support effective teaching.

4. The power of Collaboration and Concerted Action
Over the last several years, principals and central office administrators in Lowell have worked together to become more effective in their supervision and evaluation of teachers. As with many other school systems, teacher evaluation had become something of a burden for both principals and teachers, with a lot of effort, consternation, and very little tangible reward. In fact, most administrators felt that no improvements in the evaluation process would be possible until the district negotiated an entirely new evaluation instrument with the teachers’ union. However, after two years of conversations, professional development, modeling, coaching and support for taking risks, most principals and administrators now feel differently. They see that we have many of the tools and understandings we need to support teachers to become more effective. They feel that they know how to use them and— most importantly— can count on their colleagues to use them, too. In setting our sights on a common goal, in matching support with our needs, and in insisting that everyone does it, we can now be proud of our success in supporting and evaluating teachers, especially as principals hold themselves and their teachers accountable when teaching is mediocre or unacceptable. Through this work, we learned that we can achieve far more when we work together than when we work alone. And as it would be for any class of students, it’s a learning that will make a huge difference in everything we do from now on.

A Final Word
So what is the difference between urban and suburban schools? All children need teachers who are active participants in professional learning communities. All teachers need leaders who can create and sustain these learning communities by seeing themselves as teachers and applying core beliefs about teaching and learning to their work as leaders. Yet, because urban children face greater life challenges, they and their teachers need these leaders more. As urban school leaders we must see ourselves as teachers and our core work as teaching. We are culture builders, and the cultures we must build are those that can support and sustain powerful adult learning.

Karla Brooks Baehr has worked in public schools in Massachusetts for 30 years as a middle school and high school teacher of social studies, a central office administrator for curriculum and personnel, and as a superintendent. She was superintendent in Wellesley for nine years and has been Superintendent of the Lowell Public Schools since July, 2000. She can be reached at kbaehr@lowell.k12.ma.us

Brent Stephens is the newly-appointed principal of the Healy School, a K-8 school in Somerville. He is a National Board certified Spanish bilingual teacher who has taught in Oakland, California and Boston and is completing his dissertation in school administration in the Urban Superintendents Program at Harvard. He completed a six-month internship with Karla in Lowell in 2003. Brent can be reached at ustpstephens@aol.com
What Is Needed for Urban Schools to Succeed?

Hope and Expectations:
Advocacy in an Urban District

By Joan Connolly

I am completing my fourth year as superintendent of the Malden Public Schools. The city of Malden with a population of 56,000, situated eight miles from Boston, is considered an urban rim community. I came to Malden from a superintendent in another community for very specific reasons. Every superintendent works very hard, putting in long hours away from home and family. I decided that if I were going to continue to expend that kind of time and energy at work, I wanted to serve an urban population of students who needed public schools designed to meet their highly diverse needs. I wanted to work with schools whose mission was crafted around deliberate and passionate advocacy for under-represented students and their families.

The Context
I began work in Malden in August of 2000 and, four years later, remain committed to the work of urban education. I am more aware than ever of the challenges that our teachers and administrators meet every day as they navigate the waters of high stakes accountability with students who come from families who struggle daily with issues of survival, or who are new to this country or who do not recognize the critically important role that a solid education will play in their lives in the future.

The student population in the Malden Public Schools is a real treasure, a gift to those of us who have the privilege to work with them. Of our 6,128 students PK-12, 44 percent are eligible to receive free or reduced lunch and 47 percent are minority. Our largest minority groups, represented officially identified as English language learners. Our students’ faces truly reflect a multi-cultural community. They represent the future of our country and the hope for the democratic way of life that their parents have sought in this country.

The rich diversity of these students presents huge challenges to their teachers, who, by federal, state, and local mandates, cannot leave even one of them behind. Every single child in our school system must be prepared to pass MCAS tests in order to eventually earn a diploma from Malden High School.

Differences
A few months ago I was reading in a kindergarten classroom as part of a Kiwanis-sponsored reading program. The book that I had selected to read was The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats. I settled down, ready to read with twenty or so eager little children sitting on the rug around me. I held up the book and asked what they thought the little boy in the story would be doing. Several hands went up and as I quickly learned, they were more interested in telling me things that they had done or were going to do than to wonder about what was going to unfold in the story. Since I don’t have the skill that a kindergarten teacher has to redirect them to the book, I decided to hear...
what a few of them had to say. I called on a little girl sitting at the back edge of the circle. She looked pale and tired and her hair was messy even though it was the beginning of the day. She said, “Tonight I’m going to see my mother, or at least I hope I’m going to see my mother…if my father lets me.” The next child, a perky little Chinese girl with her hair tightly up in a bun with a bright blue ribbon, offered, “On Saturday night I’m going with my mother to hear Sarah Brightman in a concert.” The next one said, “I went to Bangladesh to see my mamma.” The child spoke in perfect English so I asked her, “Do you speak English when you go and visit?” She looked at me as if that were quite a foolish question and said, “No! I speak Bengali.” The teacher later told me that although the girl had been gone for a few weeks, she transitioned back to speaking English immediately. After I finished the story, I told the student who was going to hear Sarah Brightman that I had one of her CD’s; she responded that she had two of her DVD’s.

Just imagine being the teacher who instructs this class every day, with its broad array of talents, needs, and interests. The only way to reach each and every one of them would be to have a reasonable class size, a plentiful supply of differentiated materials, and ongoing training and support to properly reach a constantly changing student population. Our schools experience about a 30 percent turn over of students during each year. At least one third of the students whom a teacher meets on the first day of school will leave at some point in the year and be replaced by another third new to the city or to the country.

**Resources**

The lack of adequate resources is one of the key issues that we struggle with in urban school systems across this state. An Amicus Brief was filed on behalf of twenty urban superintendents in Massachusetts as our judicial system once again gears up to deal with the issue of inequity of resources for our cities’ children. The court case, titled *Julie Hancock et al., (Plaintiffs) v. Commissioner of Education et al.*, is a continuation of the McDuffy Case of the early nineties. This brief, as well as another filed in late winter of 2004, outline the major areas that are problematic in this era of high stakes testing and accountability. Evidence is presented in the brief that the “Foundation Budget is insufficient to provide adequate education to children living in impoverished communities.”

The results of the MCAS tests published each fall clearly indicate that there is a significant gap between the achievement of poorer urban districts and that of wealthier districts. One of the reasons for this gap is the lack of adequate funding to assure that all teachers have appropriate resources to educate their students in accordance with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. In Malden for example, although our local curriculum documents in major subject areas are aligned with the frameworks, the amount of funds available in the budget each year fall far short of allowing for the purchase of the necessary materials, texts, and instructional supplies. Our Five-Year Strategic Plan for purchase of instructional supplies has to be modified several times each year as part of the normal budget process. This year, the amount of the original request for instructional texts and supplies was $694,779. That amount was then lowered to $561,521, and then lowered again to $486,521. This represents a per pupil expenditure of approximately $78.50 for instructional materials for the entire year. We have just enough funds, for example, to spend on new texts for just one grade in one subject in a given year. Our situation definitely supports the sense of the plaintiffs in the court case that urban school districts are not provided sufficient resources under the current Foundation Budget to provide urban children with a sufficient education as articulated by the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

**Gaps**

Another challenging issue we face is the historic achievement gap between racial and ethnic groups, as well as the increasingly apparent achievement gap between those students whose first language is English and those for whom it is not. As we reviewed the Tier I analysis for the Malden Public Schools based on 2002 and 2003 MCAS results, African-American students scored lower than all other subgroups in Malden except special education and limited English proficient (LEP) students. Our LEP students scored the lowest of all subgroups in Malden; the children on free or reduced lunch scored lower than the children who do not receive free or reduced lunch; and the African-American, Hispanic and White students all scored lower than the Asian students in Malden. To date, the MCAS performance of all the district’s students do not meet the state average performance nor does it meet or exceed state proficiency standards. The professional staff in our schools in Malden have become quite proficient in disaggregating the test data of our students and have a clear picture of those performance gaps. The Amicus Brief of the Massachusetts Urban School Superintendents states strongly that, “the persistence of these gaps in student achievement is morally and constitutionally intolerable.”
In addition to the issues of inadequate resources and persistent achievement gaps, the Amicus Brief also speaks to the issues of inadequate funding for pre-school, which is of great importance to children who are considered “at risk”; inadequate funding for children with special educational needs, who are disproportionately represented in urban districts; and finally, inadequate funding for educating children whose native language is not English.

The Work
Crafting instructional practices, identifying and securing appropriate materials, and developing an understanding of the ways in which cultural and linguistic differences play out in our classrooms is work that fills our days and nights. Our teachers come into their classrooms each day to teach children who are struggling with issues of poverty, language, and special needs. The progress that we see is slow and sometimes inconsistent. At the same time, it is clear that our families desperately want their daughters and sons to see the kinds of successes in school that will open doors to their futures. We do not have the luxury of time on our side to achieve what is necessary on behalf of our children.

Our children need to be prepared to compete with their peers from more affluent backgrounds as they apply to colleges and enter the world of work. In addition, the requirements of NCLB mandate that all of our schools make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) not only in the aggregate scores, but in the sub-groups, as well. Consequently, all of the students who are most at risk of failure because they have special needs, or because their first language is not English, or because they are children of color, fall victim to a system that perhaps has not provided them with adequate support and resources in the first place.

The administration and staff of that school had to respond immediately to meet strict state deadlines for putting in place several mandated initiatives. A Performance Improvement Map (PIM) had to be developed, a planning document that took many hours on the part of an interdisciplinary team of teachers and administrators. A Supplementary Service model had to be developed for families who opted to take advantage of this opportunity for additional after-school services. Letters had to be sent home to every family to inform them of their right to take their son or daughter out of the Ferryway and send him or her to another school in Malden. The district would be responsible for paying for the transportation of these children even though there were no funds available in the school budget, nor additional monies from the state or federal government. An already hard working staff rallied and accomplished what was necessary to demonstrate additional improvement efforts.

One Student
Ironically, the Ferryway School was simultaneously dealing with another crisis. One of their sixth grade students had been diagnosed with a fast moving form of leukemia. This beautiful Vietnamese student lived with his young mother who was overwhelmed by sadness, panic, and the complications of learning to deal with the medical establishment. The school nurse became her friend and
confidant and worked with her to get her child to the appropriate medical facilities. At one point the doctors told the mother that her son would be a good candidate for a bone marrow transplant. The principal and his staff took the lead and organized the donor drive. Over 250 people came from the greater Boston area and a bone marrow match was found. Unfortunately, although the surgery was successful, an infection set in and this young boy died after a struggle of several weeks. But this communal act that went far beyond anything this mother expected from her son’s school, has made an enormous impact on the life and work of the Ferryway School.

A month ago, the school held a small ceremony to dedicate a cubby in the library to this boy because he loved to read. His mother was there, sad of course, but appearing confident and supported by her Ferryway family. Many of her friends and extended family were there, as well. Since these events have passed, there has been a significant increase in the participation of Vietnamese families in the life of the school. They are coming to teachers’ conferences and other school events more often. All of this from the staff and community’s significant efforts for a child and his family — all of it emanating from “a school in need of improvement.” As I sat in the audience that afternoon and felt the strength of the school community, I wondered where this could be reported on the myriad of forms that need to be completed and sent off to the educational bureaucracy. How does this get calculated into the formulas that measure performance? School improvement is a complicated business — messy, as we say. Continuous growth and improvement in a school such as the Ferryway, where the range of students served is broad and complex, must be supported with extraordinary resources and measured using multiple indicators.

News From the Court
Recently, there is good news from Suffolk Superior Court. Judge Margot Botsford has delivered her recommendations on the Hancock Case. Her decision has found that the state has not fulfilled its constitutional responsibility to provide educational programs in the plaintiff districts that are sufficient to bring students to the standards set in the original McDuffy court case. While this matter is far from being resolved, Judge Botsford’s report validates the issues and concerns experienced every day in our urban schools. The Supreme Judicial Court will now respond to her recommendations.

The Future
In the time that will pass between today and the day that the Supreme Court will make its recommendations, life in our schools will go on. Over 6,100 students will arrive at our doors in the Malden Public Schools each day, most of them filled with hope and expectations while also bringing the complications of their young lives and the challenges connected with meeting their educational needs. Those of us who have chosen to work with these beautiful and exciting young people and their families must keep our focus clear and our vision alive. We must not make excuses for our children or for ourselves. They must meet high standards and receive the highest quality education possible. They must have access to rich and interesting curriculum and be given all of the supports necessary to find success in their studies. They must be given introductions to the world beyond Malden at appropriate points as an integral part of their education. It is our job to be their principal advocates and to insist on only the best for them.

Does this sound like challenging work in the face of difficult odds? Yes it does and yes it is. But in the absence of such work on behalf of our students, their futures and the future of our democracy are at risk. These young people and others like them in urban schools across the country make up the future working force of this country. If they do not receive an education that gives them the skills and learning that they need in order to compete in the market place and to participate in our democracy then our nation will truly be at risk.

Joan Connolly is the Superintendent of the Malden Public Schools. She has worked in public education for thirty-two years as a teacher, principal and superintendent. Joan can be reached at j.connoll@rcn.com.
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For information or to volunteer contact:

**Governance**
Elizabeth Keroack
781-397-7215

**Influence/Advocacy**
David Troughton
978-664-7810

**Membership**
Jeff Lord
508-841-8672

**Nominations**
Isa Kaftal Zimmerman
617-349-8642

**E-Learning Committee**
Ann Koufman-Frederick
617-277-2356

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