

# The Boston Globe

## The Answer

Fifteen years into education reform, we are still failing to fix the most troubled schools. Now there's no excuse.

By Michael Jonas

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SCHOOL LEADERS IN Holyoke are no strangers to finger-wagging state reports on student achievement at the Lynch Middle School. It was eight years ago this month that the state education department first declared the Holyoke school, which has a student-poverty rate of 84 percent, "underperforming." In the years since then, state officials have paid visit after visit to Holyoke, documenting shortcomings in written reports and recording the steps the school was taking to try to address them.

The Lynch was one of the first schools in Massachusetts to earn that unenviable distinction, which is part of the accountability system established by the landmark education reform bill passed in 1993. And today it is still among the 114 schools in the state - nearly all of them serving high-poverty populations - that are officially "underperforming." Of all the schools that have made this list, only nine have been able to climb off of it. Lynch, and many other schools, land on the list and tend to stay there.

Fifteen years into education reform, a growing number of critics charge that the effort has hit a wall. With MCAS, the sometimes controversial achievement test, the state has become quite good at identifying schools where performance is lagging. But it has failed at the crucial next step: fixing the schools.

This alone is cause for alarm. What makes the situation even more urgent today, however, is the clear evidence - based in part on rigorous achievement data from tests like the MCAS - that it is possible to build great public schools in poor areas.

"The thing that should be keeping us all awake at night is that now, for the very first time, we have enough achievement data with enough specificity over a number of years to show us that in fact it can be done," said Andrew Calkins of the Boston-based research group Mass Insight, speaking at a recent Washington conference on turning around the nation's worst schools.

Calkins and others point to a growing list of "high-performing, high-poverty" schools, including several in Massachusetts, that are radically remaking public education: extending the school day, providing intensive tutoring, giving schools wide latitude over teacher hiring, and setting high expectations for all students, regardless of the hurdles put in place by their tough backgrounds.

But rather than embracing bold steps to bring these more radical models to floundering schools and districts, the state has muddled along with an accountability system that has spent nearly a decade unsuccessfully trying to coax schools like Lynch into higher achievement.

The state's education reform drive could not have been bolder in its original aspirations. The Massachusetts law has pumped billions of dollars in new spending into schools, much of it directed to lower-income districts, while establishing clear performance goals expected of all students, anchored by the statewide MCAS graduation test. The effort was driven by the audacious vision that all students in the Commonwealth, when given the same opportunities and challenges as those in affluent schools, could perform at a high level.

The reformers sought to "eradicate the correlation between socioeconomic status and educational attainment," says Paul Reville, the incoming state secretary of education and one of the architects of the 1993 state law. "We'd have to say we've failed on that."

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If there is a model for high achievement among students from low-income households it might be found in an aging brick schoolhouse in one the poorest sections of Worcester. The University Park Campus School is part of the city's regular public school system, and the student body at the seventh- to 12th-grade school, which opened in 1997, reflects the demographics of its tough Main South neighborhood. Three-quarters of the school's 225 students come from low-income families, and more than half are from households where English is not the first language.

Most students arrive several years behind grade level in reading and math, with half of all entering seventh-graders reading at a third-grade level. A monthlong summer orientation program helps prepare them for the high expectations the school sets. The school, which has an unusual partnership with nearby Clark University, focuses intensively on boosting basic skills in seventh and eighth grade as part of its goal of preparing all students for success in college. Beginning in ninth grade, all students follow a demanding, honors-level curriculum, and many take classes at Clark, which also offers free tuition to any University Park graduate who is accepted into its undergraduate program.

The all-out effort has paid off handsomely. Over its 11-year history, every graduate has gone on to seek a college degree, and University Park has consistently ranked in the top quarter of all Massachusetts high schools on the MCAS math and English exams.

"Having a few such schools means it's possible to have such schools," says Chester Finn, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a national education policy organization. "The actual proves the possible."

The roster of high-performing, high-poverty schools in Massachusetts also includes, among others, the Roxbury Preparatory Charter School and MATCH Charter High School.

Perhaps the best known and biggest network of such schools nationally is the Knowledge is Power Program. KIPP, which began with a single Houston middle school in 1994, now has 57

schools in 17 states and the District of Columbia, almost all of them charter schools. KIPP has one school in Massachusetts, KIPP Academy in Lynn, which last year boasted the top sixth- and seventh-grade math scores in the state among schools with a student-poverty rate greater than 75 percent.

These schools all share a handful of core beliefs, which shape the structure of their school day and the operation of their programs. Nearly all believe students from low-income families need more time in school, so many of them extend their school day until 5 p.m. or even later. Another key factor, say leaders of these schools, is the freedom to assemble a teaching staff fully committed to the mantra of success for all students.

"It's absolutely essential that schools have the ability to recruit, retain, and reward high-performing staff in the way they see fit, and staff that is not high-performing - they have to have the ability to let them go as well," says Dave Levin, a cofounder of the KIPP schools. "You don't see any other industry where if you don't have control over your staff you have a successful organization."

But perhaps the overriding quality that distinguishes these schools is one that can't be quantified or spelled out in a contract: a culture of high expectations for all students.

"We need to stop making excuses for these kids," says June Eressy, the principal at Worcester's University Park Campus School. "You need to hold them to the same standards you would hold your own children to."

A similar culture of high expectations pervades the hallways and classrooms of the MATCH Charter High School, housed in a former auto supply shop on Commonwealth Avenue near Boston University. Seventy percent of the students come from low-income families, and many arrive with low skills and all the baggage that comes with an upbringing in violence-prone urban neighborhoods.

The MATCH School has tried to support its ambitious college-going goal for all students by giving them lots of one-on-one help. The top floor of the three-story building was built out as a mini-dorm, with 45 recent college graduates bunking down for yearlong stints as school tutors.

Last week the Globe reported that about 25 percent of the senior class at MATCH transferred this year to the Boston public schools system. While Boston public schools officials say those arriving at their schools weren't getting enough help at MATCH to make it there, MATCH leaders attribute the exodus to the high standards they insist on and the lower bar for promotion in the Boston system. By any measure, the achievement of MATCH students is impressive. On last year's MCAS test, MATCH was tied with two other schools for first place out of all 341 Massachusetts high schools in the percentage of 10th-graders scoring proficient in math.

"You have to accept the challenges kids are up against without being prisoners to them," says school founder Michael Goldstein. "If a kid arrives behind grade level, whatever the complicated causes that lie behind it, the only plausible way for that kid to get caught up is to exert a ton more effort."

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To date, the state response to underperforming schools has largely consisted of education department officials and outside consulting groups working with schools and districts on strategies to boost student achievement. A school designated as underperforming, defined as showing inadequate progress for four straight years in moving students toward proficiency in math or English, must develop a school-improvement plan laying out steps it will take to address curriculum shortcomings, teacher training deficits, or other things that may be impeding student achievement.

As part of a set of new regulations passed by the Board of Education in 2006, the state also identified a list of what it termed "10 essential conditions" that underperforming schools should meet, such as regular meetings among faculty to discuss individual student progress and after-school tutoring programs. Education department officials have taken to calling this list "the 10 commandments."

But since schools are merely encouraged to make an effort to adopt them, "the 10 commandments" could more appropriately be called the "10 suggestions."

The most far-reaching of the 10 conditions calls for principals to have "authority to select and assign staff to positions in the school without regard to seniority." But principal autonomy over staffing decisions, regarded by many as a linchpin of meaningful school reform, must be negotiated with teachers' unions, effectively preventing its implementation in struggling schools.

"Because the more intrusive and disruptive makeovers are politically and bureaucratically unpalatable, every state and district has nearly always picked the least intrusive option," says Finn, the Fordham Institute president. "You shouldn't be surprised that the schools aren't much better; the interventions aren't very strong."

While Massachusetts has made no wholesale moves to reconstitute the basic genetic makeup of underperforming schools, it has begun inserting pieces of the DNA found in high-achieving, high-poverty schools into a handful of other schools.

A total of 18 Massachusetts public schools are now operating with extended school days, a two-year-old state program that is the first of its kind in the nation. In the first year, the extended-day schools narrowed by more than one-third the gap between the percentage of their students reaching proficiency in English and the statewide average.

Massachusetts also began an experiment this year giving a handful of the state's most troubled schools the sort of management autonomy often associated with high-performing, high-poverty schools. Four underperforming schools became the state's first "Commonwealth pilot schools." Pilot schools, which are part of regular district school systems but share many of the attributes of charter schools, including leadership discretion in hiring and budgeting, have exhibited strong achievement scores in Boston, where there are 19 such schools. But this marked the first time the model was proposed as a state strategy for underperforming schools.

The original pilot model is based on schools that are often already doing well academically, where staff and parent interest drives the interest in school-based autonomy. "There's some caution to have when you are essentially imposing a model of freedom and autonomy on a school," says Dan French, executive director of the Center for Collaborative Education, an education nonprofit that has aided Boston's pilot schools and is providing consulting help to the four Commonwealth pilot schools. "There's a little irony there."

Eressy, the University Park principal, says turning around underperforming schools is a much tougher task than launching a new school with high expectations for student achievement. "It's much easier to do when you're starting from scratch," she says.

That has led some reform efforts, including an ambitious one underway in New York City, to close down underperforming schools and reopen them under radically different terms - usually much smaller and with a principal who has been given leeway to hire his or her own teaching staff.

While turning around failing schools may be harder, it's not impossible, says Calkins of Mass Insight. The organization has called for the formation by states of semi-autonomous school turnaround zones, which would include all underperforming schools within a district or perhaps across district lines. The zones would make heavy use of outside school consultants, but would also have charter-school-like freedom over hiring, budgeting, and the length of the school day.

Eressy says we must equip struggling schools with exactly that sort of "perfect storm" of tools. The metaphor seems awkward at first, but it captures what many say is urgently needed for reform to succeed: overwhelming force, mixed with the kind of creative destruction it will take to dramatically remake these schools.

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