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EDUCATION

Counterpint

by KATHLEEN KELLY
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I am sincerely disappointed that my friend Mark Roosevelt, co-author of the Education Reform Act, has chosen this critical time not only to abandon his own efforts, but also to undermine public education in Massachusetts. Let's be very clear about the argument he presents here: Low MCAS scores of public schools justify giving vouchers to parents to help them finance their children's private-school tuition. By the way, at private schools in Massachusetts, students are not required to take the MCAS exam.

The faulty line of reasoning he presents sings the often-used refrain that "choice is empowering." Choice at private schools is often exercised in a manner that actually denies admission to vast numbers of children. Private schools regularly choose not to admit students with special needs; students whose first language is not English; and students for whom physical and substance abuse are a daily part of family life. Religious private schools are revered by generations of their students. They even earn accolades from many of us who are passionate about public schools. Yet, while we respect their role, our constitution expressly prohibits providing public funds to religious institutions.

At public schools, MCAS scores are on the rise across the state. In this year's test, the first year that "counts," scores increased dramatically. Students and parents, and especially teachers, deserve tremendous credit for taking full advantage of the investment our state has made since 1993. As expected, urban districts with large bilingual and minority populations still lag behind more affluent suburban districts. It is the same across the nation. We should not be surprised that children who have the farthest to go will take the most time to get there.

The road for many of our public-school children is indeed long. It will never lead to the schools filled with the "people of privilege" Roosevelt knows. For while we have invested in Massachusetts public schools over the past decade, we have neglected these children in the other parts of their lives so critical to academic success. During the extraordinary economic boom of the past several years, access to decent housing and affordable health care became worse–not better–for many poor urban and rural families. Substance-abuse treatment remained woefully inadequate, countless parents with HIV-AIDS never received proper medical treatment, chronic hunger and poverty increased, and the number of single-parent families continued to rise. The children of these families, and the myriad of issues they carry with them, are the students in our public schools. The reality is that "competition" has left their families behind. Vouchers will only create a self-fulfilling prophecy, leaving the poorest of the poor trapped in their social and economic circumstances.

I believe we should be proud of the investment we have made and the progress that is clearly evident. Our state has instituted standards-based education reforms that are acknowledged as the most comprehensive in the country. The MCAS test is the toughest anywhere. Massachusetts students consistently score at or near the top in national standardized tests. We're number three in the nation for students taking the SATs. More of our students are going on to higher education than any other state in the country.

But the times of plenty appear to have ended just when the students who entered the first grade at the beginning of education reform are in high school. The real test will be in how we fund our schools in the budget now being debated on Beacon Hill. The governor has touted $100 million in additional education funds proposed in her FY 2003 budget. At the same time, her first round of cuts for this year slashed funding for kindergarten, early literacy, special education, and advance placement programs. Particularly distressing are cuts in the school breakfast program.

It is clear that all of us involved in education will be tested this year in the all-but-certain battle for adequate public school funding. Promoting vouchers undermines the progress we have made and the very schools we've worked to revitalize.

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Vouchers leave behind the neediest

By Sheldon H. Berman and Christopher Martes

Spring 2002 Education Reform Extra

Mark Roosevelt was a key architect of the Education Reform Act of 1993 and deserves a great deal of credit for his vision and determination. But there are four assumptions in his argument that need some clarification. The first is that there has been a major infusion of funding for public education that should now give every school the possibility of success. This is not accurate. State aid to education dropped significantly during the recession of the early 1990s. Much of the education-reform aid has simply gone to recovering from the losses schools suffered during that time. When adjusted for inflation, average per-pupil spending on regular education recovered to its 1990 level only in 1998, five years into education reform.

In addition, much of the new aid to education has been consumed by rising costs in special education. These costs have been due largely to medical advances that have enabled children with significant disabilities to attend public schools. The cost increases in special education from 1993 to 2000 were equivalent to 38 percent of all new education-reform aid. In many districts, rising special-education costs exceeded all new state aid. Even with special-education reforms recently enacted by the Legislature, districts have yet to experience any serious state relief for these rising costs.

The second assumption that Roosevelt makes is that it is solely the schools that need to be held accountable for student performance. Although the schools are a key element in providing equal opportunity, they cannot alone address poverty, homelessness, child abuse, drug addiction, and many other social circumstances that impact the performance of children. As the richest nation in the world, we still haven't figured out how to provide for all our children. Education is only part of the entire solution.

Third, Roosevelt recommends the use of MCAS to hold schools accountable. MCAS may be a good standards-based test, but it is still a crude instrument that cannot provide longitudinal data on student improvement. None of the tests are normed against each other. Therefore, results for a child in fourth grade bear only limited relationship to results for that same child in eighth or 10th. For most schools, the test cannot distinguish between differences that are the result of one grade having somewhat better students than the last and real changes due to teacher or school performance. We need to continue to refine the instruments we use so that we can begin to assess whether we are adding value over time for individual students. We also need to use multiple measures rather than relying on the simplicity of one test.

The fourth assumption that Roosevelt makes is that choice is a viable solution for turning around failing schools. We believe that if a school fails to show improvement on multiple measures of performance, state intervention through a school assistance team with the power to make major changes in staffing and programs is both viable and necessary. Choice, and in particular vouchers, is a failed solution for the parents and children who most need it and for addressing the needs of schools that educate our most challenged young people.

The policy motivation behind choice is twofold. First, it is supposed to create a competitive environment in which schools will be forced to improve in order to retain students. Second, it is supposed to create alternative models that public schools can use to advance their own performance. (This is particularly true in the rationale for charter schools.) Yet the improvement we have seen over the past seven years of education reform has not been due to the threat of choice, but rather to the enthusiasm and dedication of public educators who have used the tools provided in the Education Reform Act. Improvement has also been due to the new national and state standards and to innovative curriculum programs that are superior to ones we have used in the past. None of the choice programs–intra-district choice, inter-district choice, charters, or vouchers–has created the kind of competitive environment predicted by policy-makers because school districts face highly individual problems. Their solutions have to be community solutions. (Charter schools, because they can function under different union and administrative rules, have not been effective in creating alternative models that are viable, or even possible, in the public arena.)

Of all the choice alternatives, vouchers have shown the least potential. The research on voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and other areas have shown little impact on improving achievement among poor students. Because private and parochial schools can select the students they admit and because it is the wealthier parents who can take advantage of voucher programs, the programs tend to help a very small number of students who are not the most needy. In fact, it is a program for the privileged, not the poor. Instead of furthering the goals of equal opportunity, vouchers create greater economic segregation. Rather than leveling the playing field of opportunity, they exacerbate the inequality already present in the system. But most important, there is no evidence that a voucher program will result in improvement of public education. A voucher program takes resources away from the solutions we know improve education–investment in smaller class size, early childhood education, professional development of faculty, new

standards-based curriculum materials, and improved buildings–and invests them in a solution that gives advantage to the few. Public funds should be invested in public institutions that can be held accountable by the state.

Public education is our greatest national resource. It bridges the diversity among us. It gives young people the opportunity to change their circumstances. Public education needs a consistent and substantial investment of resources, not a further drain on these valuable resources. We need our schools to be vital public institutions, not symbols of economic segregation. We need to define the problems of children living in poverty systemically, and not blame schools for challenges the children who attend these schools face. But most of all, we need to realize that our public schools, for the most part, are working and, in fact, working well. For those that aren't, we have the tools and resources within the Education Reform Act to address their problems without creating solutions that undermine public education. We need to support our public schools as the vital resource they are and acknowledge the strength and vitality of the education they offer.

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