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How Mass. abandoned its recipe for educational success

Ditching superior standards, demonizing charters have put us on a downward path

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EINSTEIN DEFINED INSANITY as “doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results.” Education policy makers in Massachusetts have taken the concept to a new level by doubling down on policies that have brought a decade of decline.

The Commonwealth’s K-12 education funding formula was no longer providing adequate resources to less affluent school districts, and a recent update addressed the problem effectively. But sadly, adding more money is all that’s left of reforms that delivered unparalleled success.

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In 1993, Massachusetts enacted an education reform law that gave schools a massive infusion of new state money in return for high standards and accountability.

Implementation got off to a slow start, but soon state SAT scores rose for 13 consecutive years. In 2005, we became the only state whose students finished first in the country in reading and math at both grade levels tested on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as “the Nation’s Report Card.” By 2007, Massachusetts eighth graders tied for first in the world on international science testing.

Yet in the last decade, the Commonwealth has turned away from the recipe that led to unprecedented success. It began with the elimination of an independent agency that performed comprehensive school district audits, ensuring accountability for the now $10 billion that state and local taxpayers invest annually in public schools.

Academic standards were the next to go. In 2010, the Commonwealth ditched English and math standards that were a model for other states in favor of weaker national standards known as Common Core.

The new English standards cut the amount of classic literature and poetry students read by 60 percent. Unlike their Massachusetts predecessors, the new math standards fail to get students to Algebra I by eighth grade. A 2008 US Department of Education-appointed panel of math experts called Algebra I the gateway course to all higher math study.

The troubling trend continued when the Commonwealth installed weaker state English and math tests aligned with the new, weaker standards. Massachusetts later adopted dumbed-down science and US history standards as well. This across-the-board decline in academic quality was also coupled with fewer educational choices.

The Bay State has the nation’s best charter public schools. They dramatically outperform the districts from which their students come and a Stanford University study found that Boston charters were doing more to narrow achievement gaps than any other group of public schools in the country.

But today Massachusetts charter schools are an afterthought, victims of both friendly and unfriendly fire. By putting a question about raising the number of charters on the statewide ballot in 2016, advocates played into the hands of teachers’ unions that could turn out an endless supply of anti-charter ground troops to make phone calls and knock on doors. The initiative was resoundingly defeated, sentencing the schools to years in political purgatory – and preventing more families from accessing high-quality educational options.

The results of this retreat from educational excellence have been predictable. State SAT scores are down significantly. Third-grade reading scores – the best predictor of future academic success – have also fallen precipitously.

In the decade before Common Core was implemented, Massachusetts NAEP reading scores rose by 0.25 to 0.5 points annually and its and math scores jumped 1 to 1.5 points each year.

Since Common Core, fourth-grade reading scores have declined nearly quarter of a point per year and eighth-grade reading scores are down by three times that much.

Then, in 2019 the bottom fell out. Eighth-grade math scores fell 3 points since the last time NAEP was administered in 2017. Meanwhile, 15 jurisdictions tested showed improvement and 23 other states declined less than Massachusetts. A 2-point drop in fourth-grade math was worse than 40 states and D.C.

Math performance was downright encouraging compared to the state’s 2019 fourth- and eighth-grade reading scores, each of which fell by a stunning five points.

The Spanish philosopher George Santayana wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Today, state education policy makers don’t seem to remember the Commonwealth’s bleak pre-1993 public education landscape. Unwittingly or not, they appear determined to return to it.

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