

**Board of Education meeting
November 29, 2005
Malden**

Attendance:

X James Peyser, Chairperson	X Henry Thomas
X Pat Plummer for Judy Gill, Chancellor of Higher Education	X Richard Crowley, Vice-Chair
X Jonathan Urbach, Student Advisory Committee	X Roberta Schaeffer – term expired August, 2005
X Abigail Thernstrom – left at 12:00 Parent Representative – vacant seat	X Harneen Chernow X Ann Reale, Commissioner of Early Learning and Care

Meeting Highlight/Lowlight:

Item 2 – Approval of School Improvement Plans – Discussion of approval of School Improvement Plans for three underperforming schools generated unusual controversy among Board members and between the Department (Commissioner and Julianne Dow) and the Chair, who preempted the discussion by reading a statement [see end of notes] that criticized the school improvement planning process that the DOE and the BOE have implemented under his Chairmanship and announcing his intention to vote against the plans [the BOE has approved plans for 25 underperforming schools previously.] The statement included an idea to solicit proposals for autonomous management of underperforming schools and, for those that are unwilling to support such management, conversion to Commonwealth Charter Schools. The discussion ended with a failed motion to approve the plans; the Commissioner expressed extreme dissatisfaction with the Board’s vote. The BOE will discuss school accountability and improvement at its December meeting.

Public Comment:

- ◆ Frank Haydu, former Commissioner and former interim Commissioner, addressed the Board about Jonathan Kozol’s new book describing the conditions of education in inner city schools. He noted that the dichotomies between schools in, for example, Dover-Sherborn and Lawrence, are much broader than they should be. He asked if the board could become “a leader to raise the dialogue on behalf of our kids.”
- ◆ Ken Bertrand, representing the Technology Education Association of Massachusetts (TEAM) asked the Board to delay approving the technology/engineering framework until they had addressed the curriculum alignment between the middle school and high school framework. He noted that participants at a DOE forum on this topic had reached a clear consensus on this issue and had asked for their concerns to be communicated to the Commissioner.
- ◆ A former past president of TEAM asked the Board to delay action on the proposed framework until they have addressed the concerns of educators. He reminded the Board that they had adopted a framework that was opposed by a significant number of science and technology education teachers.

Routine Business: Approval of Minutes of the October 25, 2005 meeting– *motion to approve the minutes passed unanimously*

Regular Agenda - Items for Discussion and Action

1. Horace Mann League presentation

- ◆ Arthur Stellar, superintendent of schools in Taunton and member of the Horace Mann League, presented the League’s annual award to the Board of Education for its work in “promoting the ideas of Horace Mann.” State Representative Richard Ross, a grand-nephew of Horace Mann, presented the Board with a citation from the legislature, commending the Board for its commitment to Education Reform.

2. Improvement Plans for Five Under-performing Schools

- ◆ Prior to the discussion, Peyser read a statement regarding the school accountability and improvement process that the BOE, under his chairmanship, and the DOE have followed for the past 5 years. [the full text of his statement is at the end of these notes] A summary of this remarks follows:
 - He asserted that typically school improvement plans presented by underperforming schools have “failed to produce meaningful, measurable results.”
 - He identified three underlying causes of underperformance: “political interference in schools, command and control ethos in district offices and district-wide collective bargaining agreements,” and stated that “rightly conceived, our state accountability process should directly address these crippling barriers.”
 - He offered his own idea for school improvement, involving soliciting proposals for “autonomous management of the school” and for districts that were “unwilling or unable” to do so “would be turned into commonwealth charter schools.” He stated that he planned to vote against approval for each of the three plans.
 - ◆ Driscoll responded by acknowledging the incremental progress that has been made, noting that similar problems exist nationally and that all the underperforming schools are “in areas that have the typical problems of urban areas.” He agreed with Peyser that the “situation requires a sense of urgency that just isn’t there.” However, he stated that he believed the plans should be approved given that the DOE and the school staffs had worked hard and substantial improvement had been made in the plans. He explained that they had withdrawn the plans proposed by two schools in Worcester because they were not “ready” to be approved. He acknowledged the plans did not include changes such as those suggested by Peyser, but that the Board would discuss its role in the school accountability process at its December meeting. He stated that “DOE owns this, if the plans are not acceptable, than we are responsible for it.”
 - ◆ Thernstrom agreed that “it is time for more radical action” and stated that the Board should be a “bully pulpit that is a voice for what really has to be done to meet the needs of students.” She ridiculed one of the plans that stated that the school was “going to institute a culture of learning,” and commented that “a school that has just discovered that it should be dedicated to learning” will be unlikely to improve.
 - ◆ Peyser cited Philadelphia as a successful example of his autonomous turn-around partner model.
 - ◆ Schaeffer stated that she was “shocked by reading the school improvement plans” because she thought that there would be considerable change and there is not.
 - ◆ Chernow expressed concern that it did not appear that “teachers are engaged in the process” of school improvement planning. She noted that the BOE does not “hear from teachers” about the “challenges they are facing, what they are being asked to do, how it plays out in the real world.” She asked to Board to address this “disconnect” that Julianne Dow mentioned was an issue in the plans that were presented at the September BOE meeting. She also noted that the lack of instructional leadership is a “huge issue” and that the plans do not appear to address it.
- a. **Normandin Middle School, New Bedford**
- ◆ Superintendent Longo expressed his complete agreement with the importance of “the autonomy of the principal working in collaboration with the school leadership team.” He stated that he had hired “a principal who has been successful in creating a collaborative culture,” and had given her “complete autonomy in the school.” He described the principal as “believing in a strong feeling of change” and that she has “created change wherever she has had a leadership role.” He described the staff at Normandin as having been “paralyzed by fear of what they didn’t know and the fear of not keeping up.” He stated that the veteran staff now has “a freedom of knowledge” and are not afraid to make change.”

- ◆ Dr. Bonneau, principal of Normandin Middle School, stated the sense of urgency she has about improving the school. She described professional development courses that she and the staff are participating in. She thanked the superintendent for his support, describing a situation when she needed to make a leadership change to remove an assistant principal and “that was done.” As an example of the extent of the collaborative culture at the district, she explained that she provided her instructional leadership team with resumes, asked them to find three candidates who would be a good fit to replace the assistant principal and took the recommendation of the committee. She described how they have used data to identify patterns of student misbehavior and have provided teachers with professional development on instructional strategies that would help to reduce the number of incidents of misbehavior. With regard to the School Improvement Plan, she stated that “teachers know what is in the plan,” and that the staff has provided feedback on what professional development they need to implement the plan.
- ◆ Peyser asked why the Board should expect a different outcome given that the school had been reviewed in 2001, found to be not underperforming, went through the PIM process and “here we are back in the same place.”
- ◆ The Superintendent responded that “the leadership was not in place to lead that plan” and that the “greatest failure was the failure to provide autonomous leadership that is needed.”
- ◆ Plummer noted that the district had a “record of success” with two other underperforming schools.
- ◆ Reale asked about the “evaluation component for teachers.”
- ◆ Super responded that “negotiations are going on right now to include test results data for students in the annual evaluation.” He stated that he “tried to decommission our assistant principals,” but “you can imagine what that brought on.”
- ◆ Thernstrom stated that she “would like to vote for this plan, but I am not going to do so.” She complained that the “words on a page don’t have enough clarity, enough specificity,” making it “very hard for me to get a grasp on what are the three things that are going to change this picture radically.”
- ◆ Chernow asked how they would explain to a parent what three things will be different about the school.
- ◆ Superintendent responded that the school would be “more engaged and disciplined; teachers with a better handle on instructional practice and how they measure that.”
- ◆ Thernstrom, after asking the Superintendent to repeat his response because her “attention wandered,” engaged in series of questions with the Superintendent asking him to explain why the teachers would be more engaged; how instructional strategies would be different; how they will be measured.
- ◆ Schaeffer asked what would happen if the negotiations around teacher evaluation did not “succeed.”
- ◆ The Superintendent stated that negotiations involved “give and take” but they did “agree to put the issue on the table.”

b. Springfield Academy for Excellence, Springfield

- ◆ Superintendent Burke noted the “unusual relationship” that Springfield has with the state, due to the Financial Control Board. He described the district as “in the midst of negotiating a substantially different compensation model” and also involved in “an arbitration hearing on Section 38 of Chapter 71 dealing with the issue of student achievement in the evaluation of teachers.” He stated that the arbitration will “have a significant impact on what happens as it relates to the process of including student achievement in evaluation statewide.” He explained that the district has been “talking about different kinds of relationships – charterizing the whole district, for example.”
- ◆ Burke explained that the schools had “followed the rules of the standard process in preparing these plans.” Specifically, a number of alternative school programs had been organized under one principal, at the “urging of the DOE.” He asserted that “teachers participated in the process in developing the plan” and there is a “degree of buy-in” among the staff. He also noted that they are

“mirroring the best practices that are going on in some of the charter schools in the state, for example, Sabis in Springfield.”

- ◆ Peyser questioned whether the model, described as a “federation of programs,” is actually a single school.
- ◆ Burke responded that although the school exists in different locations, the “actual integration is quite real.” He described the goal of the plan to “create a unified and focused academic approach to our neediest students” and also cited the work of the collaborative professional development teachers as the primary levers to change instruction.
- ◆ Board members asked a number of questions about the student population at the school and the process of assigning students to the school.
- ◆ Crowley asked about how the outcome of the “union negotiations” would affect the school.
- ◆ Burke responded that “teachers should be compensated at different levels based on their talents” and that the “overall model has wide reaching effects and will have significant impact on the district’s ability to improve student achievement.”
- ◆ Thomas asked about the high minority population at the school and asked about the process by which a student can “get out” of the school.
- ◆ Thernstrom suggested that the district look at “superb examples of middle schools that should serve as models.” With regard to collective bargaining, she opined that “principals have to have the authority and autonomy to hire a team that works well with that particular principal and that group of schools.”
- ◆ Burke explained they have looked at the practices at Sabis where they have a “clearly explicated set of outcome expectations for students at different grade levels and provide periodic assessment.” He commented on the collective bargaining proposals that “will do exactly what you suggested.” He also explained that “in identifying the more talented teachers,” the proposals will do “a reallocation to make sure there is an equitable distribution of teachers across the 48 schools to insure the talent pool is distributed to begin to eliminate the have and the have not schools.”

c. Brightwood School, Springfield

- ◆ Burke described the “root causes involved accountability of teachers and administrators and the lack of a unified mission or vision.” He also noted that a “tremendous variation on teacher skill sets” existed at the school, as well as discipline issues.
- ◆ Yolanda Gomez, principal, described the process of developing the school improvement plan, noting that “teachers participated in the plan”. She stated that professional development, support of the community and data analysis have helped them to move in the same direction.
- ◆ Peyser asked what initiatives exist uniquely at Brightwood, that were not part of district initiatives.
- ◆ Burke responded that “grade level teams are going to be meeting on a regular basis to look at student work with a particular rubric,” and noted that the degree to which this is being done is somewhat unique to Brightwood.
- ◆ Gomez described the development of an electronic format for submitting lesson plans and a rubric to evaluate them that allows consistent feedback to teachers.
- ◆ Chernow asked if the large number of teachers who have left Springfield has had an impact on these schools.
- ◆ Gomez responded that during the last two years, three teachers have asked to transfer. She also stated that there were five or six new teachers at the school and that induction and mentoring programs were provided to them.
- ◆ Chernow noted that the DOE had found the school to be Not Underperforming in 2001 and asked what did or did not happen since then and what will change.

- ◆ Burke responded that there had been a series of changes in leadership and offered that they had not “quite implemented the ELL plan and the reading plan.”

Board members discussed the plans of all three schools prior to taking a vote.

- ◆ Thernstrom asked whether the vote should be postponed until the BOE has a larger discussion about school improvement in December.
- ◆ Peyser explained that if the BOE “rejects the plans, there is a pause until the Board gives guidance about what an approvable plan should include.”
- ◆ Driscoll described the DOE’s efforts as “trying to figure out how to deal with a larger number of schools.” He noted that “we didn’t have the PIM process 18 months ago” and that DOE is “figuring out how to get ownership.” He stated that the schools are looking at data, curriculum and instructional practices. He commented that often “too much is put into the plans” and that he likes “the plans that don’t claim they have everything.” He explained that he believes that these plans are approvable; “some plans have not been brought forward.” Although he recognizes that the BOE would like to have higher expectations for plans, they have “already started down a process.” He stated that a “pause button is going to send a chilling effect that they don’t need to send it to these schools.” He “pleaded with the Board to approve the plans” since the schools had made a “good faith effort.”
- ◆ Reale asserted that “there is nothing to prevent them from implementing the plans.”
- ◆ Driscoll responded strongly that “they are human beings; this is a very big deal...it is a big deal to me too. “
- ◆ Reale reiterated that “whatever the action of the board is, it shouldn’t necessarily send the message that they shouldn’t do all the terrific things they are doing.”
- ◆ Schaeffer expressed concern that “these are the rules of the game and we can’t just change the rules.”
- ◆ Peyser responded his “concern is not direction but with a pace that is incremental not substantial.” He tried to argue that “if we accept the plans, this is our only chance to have any impact on these plans for the next two years.”
- ◆ Chernow stated that although she does not “agree with some of the processes but this board has asked them to go,” they have gone “through the processes as they were asked.” She pointed out that the BOE can review and make changes in the plans after they are reviewed and that DOE requires regular monitoring reports from the schools.
- ◆ Peyser, Schaeffer and Schneider briefly debated whether the statute and regulations require the BOE to “accept” or “approve” the plans and what the significance of the difference is. Apparently the regulations actually use both terms.
- ◆ Julianne Dow informed the BOE that the DOE is currently reviewing 32 schools under this process and that “putting things on hold that urgently need to be done is not in the interest of children.” She “ardently urged” the BOE “to move these plans to implementation.”
- ◆ Peyser responded that all schools are required by statute to have a school improvement plan; therefore these schools “must implement those plans.”
- ◆ Reale stated that she would “hope that it [the BOE’s action] would not bring the message that the plans should not be implemented.”
- ◆ Chernow disagreed with the implication of the BOE’s action, saying, “the message is very strong that we are not supporting what they have proposed in these plans. They are going to implement a plan that the Board has said is not good enough. If I were a school I would not start going down a path knowing that the Board has not approved/accepted it.”
- ◆ Schaeffer stated that given that the BOE can review the plans over the two years, “we have to act in good faith...can’t pull the plug.”

- ◆ Plummer expressed concern that if she had known that the BOE would be considering such a substantial change in reviewing the plans, she might have prepared for the discussion differently. She stated she was not prepared to change after such a brief discussion.
- ◆ Driscoll reiterated that if the BOE decides additional elements are needed in the plans, they can require every plan to be amended. He stated that not approving the plan “is a much more important message than you realize. If you knew the seven things that needed to be there, it would be one thing. We don’t have a clue about how to get there.” He strongly urged the Board to accept the plans.
- ◆ Board members offered a motion to accept the plans on a interim basis with a 6 month review.
- ◆ Vote to accept the motion for the Normandin Middle School Plan failed - 4-4 (Peyser, Reale, Crowley, Thomas opposed) Thernstrom left the meeting at 12:00 PM and did not vote.
- ◆ Schaeffer asked if those who voted against the motion could propose a change in language that would allow them to accept the motion.
- ◆ Reale stated that the negotiations on evaluation are critical part of implementing any plan.
- ◆ Peyser stated he does not have any suggestions for modifying the language and that he believed the school has an obligation to implement the plan.
- ◆ Schaeffer expressed concern with an expectation that “the school must go forward and in three months you will tell the school there is an RFP out.”
- ◆ Driscoll expressed serious concern with the Board’s vote and stated that the Board “has not distinguished itself; this is a difficult process; the BOE is looking at moonbeams; schools in good faith have come forward.”
- ◆ Peyser responded that he “knows this is disconcerting to the school staff, but they are not our first responsibility; he will not accept a process that is designed to accommodate adults.”
- ◆ Motions for Brightwood School and Springfield Academy for Excellence also failed with the same 4-4 vote.

3. School Performance: Recommendation on English High School

- ◆ Driscoll recommended that the English High School [designated Underperforming in 2003; BOE required to vote on Chronic Underperformance] remain Underperforming.
- ◆ Peyser reported that they had discusses the school’s progress with the Superintendent and the Deputy Superintendent and explained that, with the exception of the 2005 results, the school had shown strong improvement.
- ◆ Motion to retain English High School as Underperforming passed unanimously.

4. Proposed Order on Dr. William Peck Middle School, Holyoke

- ◆ Dow explained that the Peck Middle School [declared Chronically Underperforming in November] has been assigned America’s Choice as the Turn Around Partner; the principals are receiving training through the National Institute for School Leadership since they have not been successful in attracting an experienced principal.
- ◆ Motion to approve the order for the Peck Middle School passed unanimously.

5. Turnaround Plan from Southbridge Public Schools – discussion

- ◆ Driscoll commented that the superintendent has done a “tremendous job,” noting that she has had to deal with a “large number of layoffs,” and that he has “high hopes for success.”
- ◆ Superintendent Dale Hanley described the issues confronting Southbridge. She stated that “we are underperforming first and foremost because of leadership.” She provided details about curriculum and professional development initiatives, noting that there has not been any professional development in the district for several years. She explained that they have had to “convince the town government that

they have to support their schools” and described progress that was occurring in the town’s commitment. She outlined the district’s work in developing district and school goals and improvement plans, focused on student achievement, including the creation of a “curriculum support infrastructure, which she “negotiated with the unions.” She identified the need for floating a bond for technology and for addressing the relationships among parents, the community and the school department.

- ◆ Peyser “commended” her for taking the job and for her clear and refreshing insights into the problems in the district. He asked her to identify her personal priorities.
- ◆ Superintendent responded that “constant communication between principals, school committee, the superintendent and staff” was her first priority. She elaborated that “if the staff is not informed, the staff can become complacent or worried.” Consequently, she “meets with the staff regularly,” although it takes time. She stated that “if we want the staff to buy in, we must have constant communication,” and noted that “there are leaders among the staff; right now I don’t see them, but I know they are there.”
- ◆ Chernow supported her comments regarding a “team effort.” She expressed “some concern that there will not be a real partnership that uses “the institutional knowledge of the teaching staff, sharing information like the turn around plan and the goals.” She encourage the superintendent “to make that team effort a real partnership.”

6. Lawrence Partnership Agreement

- ◆ Driscoll reported to the BOE that they were not going to renew the Partnership Agreement with the Lawrence Public Schools, stating that “they need to be on their own.”

7. Charter Schools

a. Renewals – Pioneer Valley and Codman Academy Charter School

- ◆ The initial discussion of renewals for two charter schools produced few comments. Chernow asked for information about the drop out rate for each school.

b. Amendment Requests from Academy of the Pacific Rim and Pioneer Valley

- ◆ Motions to approve amendments to the charters for two charter schools was approved unanimously

c. Approval of Extended Loan Term for Academy of the Pacific Rim and Pioneer Valley

Motion to extend the loan term for the two charter schools was approved unanimously.

8. Approval of Grants

Motion to approved the grant awards was approved unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at 1:00 pm

Next meeting – Tuesday, December 20, 2005 in Malden

Underperforming Schools
Statement of Jim Peyser, Chair, MA Board of Education
Board of Education Meeting
November 29, 2005

Since we began evaluating schools for underperformance in 2000, we have largely relied on turnaround strategies derived from an inclusive process of analysis and planning conducted by the school's existing staff, in collaboration with the local district and the department. This process has typically resulted in incremental improvement initiatives, sometimes accompanied by leadership changes. Most of the improvement plans brought to the board have focused on increasing the collection and use of student performance data, strengthening professional development programs, and implementing curriculum changes.

Although most of these steps are usually consistent with accepted research on effective schools, and even though everyone participating in these efforts has worked hard and acted in good faith, after five years we can now say that this approach to fixing failing schools has itself failed to produce meaningful, measurable results. On average, the 40 schools that have received "panel reviews" and have operated under improvement plans for at least two full years have seen combined MCAS gains in English and math slightly below the state as a whole – a mere four percentage point increase in the rate of proficiency since 2002. Of these schools, 10 actually saw declines in their aggregate proficiency rates during this period. Another 10 posted gains that averaged less than 2 percentage points per year. Only 10 of these schools achieved overall annual proficiency rate increases of 3 points or more.

It is my belief that one of the principal reasons these improvement plans have failed to create more dramatic change is that they do not address the underlying causes of underperformance. The educational problems we face in low-performing schools are fundamentally structural and systemic – not programmatic. Instructional practices in these schools may be weak and inconsistent, but they cannot be fixed by putting in place a new curriculum or a professional development program. Neither can they be fixed by simply replacing the staff or increasing resources. All of these things may be sorely needed, but without radically changing the context, they will prove unavailing.

There is little debate or disagreement about WHAT high-performing schools look like. What is not well understood is HOW to create organizations that can actually execute effectively and consistently over time. I believe that effective execution is dependent on at least four things:

- empowered leadership, with responsibility for managing both money and people;
- incentives & accountability for everyone, tied to student performance;
- clarity of educational beliefs and practices that all staff and families understand and embrace; and
- organizational & operational coherence that reinforces the school's core educational strategy.

Current policy and practice makes this extremely difficult to do, because of:

- political interference in schools;
- a command and control ethos in district offices; and
- district-wide collective bargaining agreements.

Rightly conceived, our state accountability process should directly address these crippling barriers. Unfortunately, none of the improvement plans we have seen or approved has even identified these obstacles as a problem, let alone offered a strategy for overcoming them. While the limitations of our accountability statute make it difficult to tackle some of these issues head on, I am afraid that we are not even trying to use the authority we have. Moreover, the incrementalism of our school turnaround efforts reflects a lack of imagination, a lack of will, and most troubling, a lack of urgency.

Under the existing law and regulations, the board has broad authority to make such changes as it sees fit to the remedial plans submitted on behalf of underperforming schools. Here's an idea for what we might do to break the established pattern:

1. In collaboration with the department, school districts would issue RFPs for the autonomous management of all schools declared underperforming.

2. Proposals may be submitted by the school's faculty or other educators in the district, colleges and universities, non-profit organizations, charter school operators, or independent school management firms.
3. Based on the quality of the turnaround plans and the capacity of the leadership teams, the district and department would recommend the best proposal to the board of education for its approval.
4. The district would then enter into a multi-year performance contract with the new school management group, based on guidelines established by the board.
5. If a district is unwilling or unable to enter into such a contract, the board would seek the approval of special legislation to convert the school into an independent Commonwealth charter school.

In my view the plans before us today offer hope for modest improvement, at best. At worst, they merely endorse pre-existing reforms and protect the status quo relationships of adults. While each plan has its own unique set of weaknesses, they all reflect an underlying belief that the schools in question are not in crisis and no extraordinary measures are needed. This belief is simply false and will only serve to perpetuate underperformance, while condemning another generation of young people to lives of limited opportunity.

While I will listen closely to the conversation this morning, it is my intention to vote against these plans.