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New standards flunk as bid to cut MCAS testing gains

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The history of education reform in Massachusetts over the past quarter century could be a case study in playing the long game. A 1993 law provided a massive increase in state funding in return for high standards, accountability and more choice. Teachers unions, school committees, superintendents and others in the education establishment liked the money, but not the reforms. They kept fighting, and less than 25 years later, little but the money remains.

The sad thing is that the establishment’s success at eliminating reforms has brought a steep decline in the quality of public education in Massachusetts.

Once the 1993 combination of money and reforms took hold, state SAT scores rose for 13 consecutive years. In 2005, Massachusetts students became the first ever to finish first in all four categories of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP. They repeated the feat every time the tests were administered through 2013. Scores from the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, the gold standard international assessment, proved that the commonwealth’s students were globally competitive in math and science, with our eighth-graders tying for first in the world in science.

Then the retreat began. Accountability was the first domino to fall. In 2008, the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability, which conducted independent, comprehensive audits of school districts, was eliminated.

Standards were next. In 2010, Massachusetts adopted national English and math standards known as Common Core that were demonstrably inferior to the commonwealth’s previous standards. A 2017 rebrand has further weakened the mediocre Common Core standards, and recently revamped science standards are also vastly inferior to their predecessors.

Massachusetts has the nation’s best charter schools, which not only dramatically outperform their district counterparts, but do so among virtually every subgroup, such as low-income and special needs students. Last year voters rejected what turned out to be a politically unwise statewide ballot initiative that would have increased the number of charters.

Today most urban areas in the commonwealth are at or near the statutory cap on charter school enrollment. Diminishing competition from charters marks a return to the policy of granting the establishment a monopoly on public education and *hoping* they will put our kids first. The failure of that approach is what triggered reform in the first place.

Results from the dismantling of education reform have been swift and predictable. Massachusetts students are no longer first in all four categories on NAEP. From 2011 to 2015, state NAEP scores fell in both English and math, with only nine states seeing a bigger drop in English.

SAT scores have also dropped significantly, especially in writing. And when it came time for the 2015 administration of the international assessment tests, Massachusetts chose not even to participate.

What’s harder to understand is how this precipitous decline has generated so little coverage. Perhaps lack of awareness explains why another bill that would eliminate high-stakes MCAS testing has more than 100 signatories in the Legislature. If it succeeds, the counter-reform work of the education establishment will be all but complete: They will have secured the increased funding that came with the 1993 reform, but without high standards, competition or accountability for outcomes.

If we allow that to happen, the deterioration will only accelerate.

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