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Tie state ed funding to school committee seats

Let state appoint members in proportion to its aid to districts

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FEW DOUBT THAT the time has come to update the mechanism by which the Commonwealth funds local school districts. After 25 years, the current formula isn’t keeping pace with rising employee health insurance and special education costs.

The specifics may have changed over a quarter century, but as they address this issue, state leaders should embrace the approach of exchanging new money for reform and enhanced accountability that was the underpinning of Massachusetts’s landmark 1993 Education Reform Act.

Top of Form

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That law included a large infusion of new state money that was mainly focused on the Commonwealth’s poorest school districts. In return, it removed principals from collective bargaining units, created charter public schools, and brought high standards and rigorous accountability measures like MCAS and teacher testing.

Less than a decade after its implementation, Massachusetts had the nation’s top-performing public schools.

Fast forward to the present and it is entirely appropriate to ask state taxpayers to invest more in their public schools, and for much of the new resources to be targeted toward our neediest districts. But if taxpayers are to provide the additional funding, it is equally appropriate to take steps to increase the probability that they receive value for their investment.

As currently constituted, many urban Massachusetts school systems are unlikely to deliver that value, because of entrenched municipal special interests. Under the Commonwealth’s progressive approach to school funding, low-income districts get the vast majority of their K-12 education dollars from the state.

One way to increase the chances that taxpayers will see a return on their new investment would be to allow the Commonwealth to appoint local school committee members commensurate with the portion of school district funding it provides. For example, if the state provides 85 percent of the funding in a district with seven school committee seats, it should also appoint six school committee members.

This approach would pair more money with the appointment of officials whose role it would be to safeguard the interests of those who rightly expect improved performance in return for their investment. The state appointees could be chosen to provide needed managerial skills or academic expertise. Just as important, they would be independent, free of cozy ties to the school district they’re entrusted with reforming.

The inability of failing school districts to restructure from within has become painfully clear.  Springfield, Holyoke, Southbridge, and Lawrence are among the districts that are in or recently emerged from some form of receivership. Each experienced years of failed reform efforts prior to state control.  Even after an extended period on the brink of state intervention, signs of improvement are few and far between in New Bedford.

Combined state and municipal investment in Massachusetts public schools now tops $9.5 billion annually. Just as it is clear that this investment is critical to our students’ success, it is equally critical that new money be used to buy reform and rigorous accountability measures.

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As Massachusetts considers updates to its school funding formula, state-appointed school committee members in districts largely funded by state taxpayers would be an effective way to protect taxpayers’ investment and give underperforming school districts a realistic chance of reforming from within.

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