

MASSACHUSETTS EDUCATION REFORM ACT IN SUMMARY

The push for change begins with a court case...

In the 1978 court case *Webby v. Dukakis* (known as *McDuffy v. Robertson* at the time it was resolved in 1993), a group from the general public sued the state of Massachusetts to equalize spending for education among districts in the Commonwealth. The plaintiff's supposition was that equalized spending would eliminate the disparity in academic performance between advantage and disadvantaged students, preparing *all* children with the skills and knowledge to succeed as adults.

In brief, the plaintiffs ask the court to rule that the state has an obligation to adequately educate every child but has failed to do so. Plaintiffs also asked the court to issue 'basic guidelines' that would force the state to set educational goals, spend the money to fulfill those goals and ensure accountability.

-Boston Globe 1992

It is ruled that all children must get an adequate education....

The court case was initially dropped in hopes that their pressure would cause the state to respond appropriately, but after continued ineffective remedies during the 1980's to make evident improvements to the education system, the case was renewed with new vigor. After a long series of hearings the Supreme Judicial court decided that Massachusetts had failed to meet the duty of its constitution to provide adequate education for *all* children. The court took on the theory of the plaintiffs, agreeing that equalizing funding among districts would in turn equalize the quality of education provided, ensuring an adequate education for all students.

Thoughtful leaders formulate the big ideas and shape the reform....

The ruling in favor of *McDuffy v. Robertson* would set the Education Reform Act of 1993 into motion. This act was developed and considered by a number of stakeholders, one major faction being the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education. The thoughtful leadership of MBEA produced the document "Every Child A Winner" that would serve as a framework for the creation of the act itself. The MBAE web site states that the group came about as "a result of concerns by members of the business community that the Commonwealth public school system needed substantial reform to produce the kind of quality graduates who would lead a 21st century democracy".

The Education Reform Act of 1993 was passed by the Legislature and signed by Governor William Weld in June 1993. It promised to provide "a public education system of sufficient quality to extend to all children the opportunity to reach their full potential and to lead lives as participants in the political and social life of the commonwealth and as contributors to its economy"(An Act Establishing the Education Reform Act of 1993). This systemic reform would dramatically affect the way Massachusetts's schools work and the sheer amount they are funded.

The goals of the Education Reform Act are:

- 1) Equalize funding among districts to level the playing field
- 2) Improve all student performance to succeed with high set standards

The major goals of the act would be tackled using these instruments for change:

- 1) Increase state spending on education
- 2) Create a set of curriculum frameworks that set high expectations for student learning
- 3) Create a means for assessing student performance that is in alignment with the curriculum frameworks

The reform act falls into action...**The funding...**

The state researched, defined, and set the level of “adequate” funding at \$5,500 per pupil. Some districts received little or no extra funding post-reform while others received much more, depending on the district’s previous spending level. By 2002, every district in the state had reached the “adequate” funding level. Once this occurred, the state began its attempt to hold schools and districts accountable for performance and to provide help for consistently under-performing schools.

The curriculum frameworks...

The act required that all students make progress on curriculum frameworks that address what young people should know and be able to do at certain grade levels and once they graduate from high school in a core set of subjects. The frameworks were created and agreed upon by work groups that consisted of individuals invested in education including teachers, administrators, policymakers, students, and community and business representatives and then approved by the Department of Education.

The assessments...

The reform act called for a number of methods to measure student performance. Currently, this call has only given birth to one mandated assessment, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). The MCAS is a high stakes test given at prescribed grade levels. Every student must pass the MCAS in order to graduate from high school. Supporters of MCAS credit the test for identifying weaknesses in the individual, the school, and the district. Once a school or district is identified as having persistent under-performance, the DOE is required to intervene and provide support in order to remedy the problem.

Reflection and a look to the future...

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act has come under a lot of fire for its weaknesses, but it also has been widely recognized for its measurable successes. Over the past decade, achievement gaps have begun to close and Massachusetts has performed at the top of the United States in math, reading, and overall SAT scores. Some reform strategies remain in the planning stages, while others have relied on some trial and error processes. However, the most important force has remained the same. The commitment and collaboration among policymakers, schools, parents and community members is the greatest factor in ensuring systemic transformation that will provide children with the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in the Global Information Age.