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Despite Lofty Scores, Massachusetts Advised to Set New Ed. Goals

Business group calls for state to make ambitious changes

By **Sean Cavanagh**

Even though Massachusetts is one of the highest-flying states by academic reputation and test-score rankings, it needs to shake up how it operates and push ahead with a series of ambitious changes to its education system to avoid slipping into complacency, contends a **new report** released last week.

Commissioned by a leading business organization in the state, the document offers the latest and one of the most elaborate arguments to date that education systems in the United States, even high-performing ones, need to judge themselves against academically stellar foreign nations, whose practices are examined throughout the report.

The argument for educational changes comes from the **Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education**, which was a lead player in the state's efforts to establish strong academic standards and other policies in the early 1990s, steps that some argue helped pave the way for years of academic gains.

One of the report's authors is **Sir Michael Barber**, a former top adviser to the British government on education issues and a champion for the sharing of ideas on school policy across countries.

Massachusetts has consistently ranked at or near the top for state scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and it has performed well as an individual state taking part in international tests, including the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA.

Yet the alliance sees recent evidence of stagnation in Massachusetts' school performance. "We have grown complacent about public education and have failed to recognize the risk that without significant changes our schools will increasingly fall behind those of our global competitors," warns Henry Dinger, the chairman of the board for the alliance, in a statement accompanying the report.

As evidence, the alliance notes that despite **Massachusetts' sterling status on NAEP**, its performance in 4th grade reading slipped over the most recent two-year period, and its gains in that grade and subject over the past decade on the test placed it in the middle of the country, not at the top.

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The alliance also points to a survey, released to coincide with the report, that found that 69 percent of business leaders in the state said it was somewhat or very difficult to find people with the skills needed to fill jobs.

The authors of the report aren't trying to suggest that Massachusetts' schools are on the verge of decline, Mr. Barber said in an interview. Academically, "this is the best state in America," he said. The goal, he said, is to ask "what would it be like for Massachusetts to be the best state in the world?"

'Mandate Greatness'

Mr. Barber, who co-authored the report with Simon Day, another former British government official, believes that the state will benefit if it does a good job implementing the common-core standards, which Massachusetts adopted in 2010. But a central argument in the report is that the state needs to move beyond that work and press to make ambitious changes in how schools are run and funded, teacher preparation, and other areas.

Mr. Barber described the challenge for the state as, "you can mandate adequacy, but you can't mandate greatness." To create greatness in the education system, "the state's role has to change" and its policymakers have to become more daring, he said.

The report calls for Massachusetts to make changes that touch many areas of education policy, including:

- Giving more autonomy to different types of individual schools, regardless of academic-performance level. Massachusetts currently allows this primarily in schools required to make academic turnarounds, where school leaders can override pieces of collective-bargaining agreements to make changes in curriculum, budgets, and staffing, in exchange for setting goals for improvement;
- Overhauling the state's school funding system to make it more transparent, and to ensure that money is "weighted" to provide the greatest resources to schools with the greatest needs, such as those with large numbers of impoverished students or English-language learners. Massachusetts' state funding is weighted this way, but that weighting occurs inconsistently at the school level, the authors say;
- Changing teacher licensure by raising the bar for what it takes for teachers to obtain a credential—but only after evaluating their performance in the classroom for a few years. The state should also take steps to create professional ladders that recognize "master" and "advanced" teachers, the authors say; and
- Establishing new opportunities to innovate through the use of educational technology approaches such as blended learning, interactive social media lessons, adaptive learning and assessment platforms, digital gaming, the use of open educational resources, and the creation of an "accelerated learning challenge" grant competition for schools to fuel innovation in districts.

School autonomy, and tough standards for entering the teacher profession, are often cited as characteristics of top-performing nations such as Finland and South Korea. But some education experts question those comparisons, saying there is no way to accurately single out the primary reasons for any country's academic success, and it is difficult to apply the lessons from relatively small countries with more centralized education systems to a U.S. system run largely by state and local governments.

Mr. Barber now works for Pearson, a worldwide commercial provider of school resources, many of which are technology based. The alliance says Mr. Barber was working in his "personal capacity" in writing the report, and the author told *Education Week* that his work was "totally independent" of Pearson. The ideas in the report are broad, and drew from an array of education experts, he added, and are not connected with the company, which made no attempt to influence the document's content.

Foreign Competition

Gary Phillips, a vice president for the American Institutes for Research, a Washington-based research and evaluation organization, said it is smart for states like Massachusetts to study the K-12 practices of foreign countries—as long as they approach those lessons cautiously. But Mr. Phillips, who has studied comparisons of U.S. states' and other countries' academic standing extensively, also said he saw no real signs of academic stagnation in Massachusetts based on the NAEP and **PISA** results, despite the alliance's claims.

"This is really good performance," Mr. Phillips said of the state. "You should always worry about complacency, but I don't see evidence of it."

Overall, he said, states should worry that they "don't fall asleep," and should keep a close eye on what their domestic and foreign competitors are doing. In any state, he added, effective policy changes are more likely to occur when many players—including employers, parents, students, and teachers' unions—are involved.

Linda Noonan, the executive director of the business alliance, argued that the report is evenhanded in describing, but not overstating, the risks of academic slippage in Massachusetts. She said its overall tone mirrors what her business group hears from employers across the state, who worry about not being able to find enough workers to fill jobs.

Massachusetts Commissioner of Education Mitchell D. Chester told *Education Week* that he welcomed the report, and that several of its conclusions were on point, or at least worth considering.

Its argument in favor of school autonomy, for instance, makes sense, he said. While the state grants significant operational and academic leeway to struggling school systems, as is now the case in the Lawrence, Mass.,

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district, it's "the exception, not the rule," he said.

The report also rightly calls for more transparency in the state's funding system, he added, so that it is clearer how much money is flowing to schools with the greatest needs.

Other recommendations in the report, however, seem unlikely to be turned into policy anytime soon. For instance, the authors call for a "grand bargain" between the state and teachers' unions covering a range of salary and workforce issues across all districts.

Mr. Chester described a statewide bargaining agreement as a "very intriguing notion," but probably a "long shot."

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