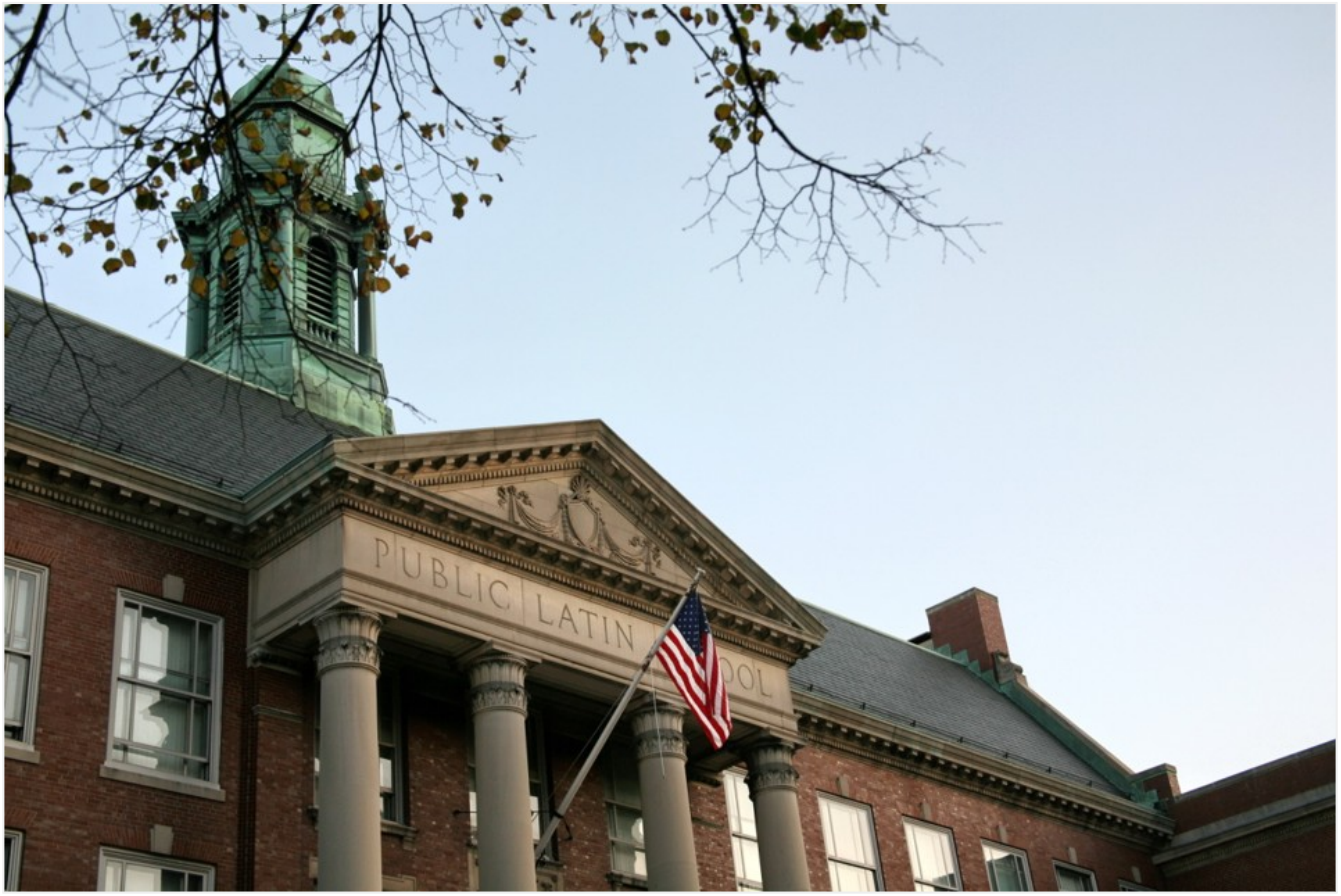
The Atlantic

What Are Massachusetts Public Schools Doing Right?

Widely seen as the best public-school system in the U.S., the Massachusetts school system's success can offer lessons to other states.



Boston Latin, the nation's oldest public school, in Massachusetts

cliff1066 / Wikimedia

ALIA WONG | MAY 23, 2016 | EDUCATION

TEXT SIZE

When it comes to the story of Massachusetts's public schools, the takeaway, according to the state's former education secretary, Paul Reville, is that "doing well isn't good enough."

Massachusetts is widely seen as having the best school system in the country: Just 2 percent of its high-schoolers drop out, for example, and its students' math and reading scores rank No. 1 nationally. It even performs toward the top on international education indices.

But as Reville and others intimately familiar with the Bay State's school-improvement efforts emphasized in a panel at the Education Writers Association National Seminar earlier this month, the "Massachusetts story" is complicated. The Bay State's famous successes are juxtaposed with stubborn achievement gaps and concentrations of poverty that have made across-the-board strides all but impossible. Income-based disparities in academic performance have actually grown over the last decade or so, and last year the state's achievement gap was the third highest in the nation.

"On the one hand, these first-place finishes and so forth—which are all based on averages—are great, we're proud of it, but it should be a pretty short celebration in light of the deep, persistent achievement gaps that look a lot like they did when we set out on this," said Reville, now a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

The Massachusetts experiment with transforming public education traces back to 1993, when state leaders decided to set high standards, establish a stringent accountability system aimed at ensuring that students from all backgrounds were making progress, and open its doors to charter schools. And despite some hiccups, it was able to do so largely without all the partisan wrangling and interagency tensions that have notoriously confounded such efforts on a national scale.

The goal wasn't just to boost performance in some pockets, but to "get everybody there," Reville said. "Not just in our rhetoric, but in our intent, we said, 'All means all.'" By 2000, the state also had doubled its funding of public education, when compared with 1993.

Still, as Hardin Coleman, the dean of Boston University's School of Education, stressed to the EWA audience, the reason the state has struggled to achieve wholesale improvement has to do with phenomena that exist outside the classroom.

The widespread misconception is that "if you say poverty's a problem ... we're backing off the issue," said Coleman, who also serves as vice-chair on the Boston School Committee, the district's governing body. Now that the improvement in Massachusetts is slowing down—and achievement gaps are widening—"I think there's going to be a change away from a significant primary focus on academic-skill acquisition to those other aspects of what children need in terms of their social-emotional learning ... being engaged in school, learning more about themselves, having access," he continued.

Tommy Chang, the superintendent of Boston Public Schools, said at the EWA event that he sees the conversation shifting, too, pointing to the district's recent appointment of an assistant superintendent of social-emotional learning and

wellness.

Echoing national trends, the school system is homing in on how childhood trauma can undermine achievement and developing means for helping kids cope with it. In fact, the district recently received a $1.6 million federal grant to address the early symptoms of trauma in students. Trauma is one of the many barriers, Chang said, that keep disadvantaged students behind. So are things like a lack of access among many low-income families to jobs that pay a living wage and quality health care. Dental disease, for instance, is one of the most common reasons kids miss school. All this explains why Chang and others are now thinking of achievement gaps as "opportunity gaps."

Still, as much as external factors stymie efforts to lift disadvantaged students' performance, Chang notably criticized certain district policies in Boston as contributing to those inequalities, including its approach to selective schooling and gifted-and-talented programs. (Chang became the Boston superintendent in July of 2015.)

"In BPS, we start segregating kids at very young ages," he said, noting that children are separated by ability starting in the fourth grade in ways that often correlate with race and linguistic background. "We have to figure out how we stop doing that at such an early grade level. We are literally tracking kids still."

It's no wonder a forthcoming ballot measure that would lift the state's cap on charter schools is so controversial.

To address the poverty-based obstacles to the goal of "all means all," Reville envisions differentiating the classroom experience so that it meets kids' myriad non-academic needs.

"Is it just a coincidence that all the inadequacy in education is aggregated around poor kids or is there something about poverty, which on average is just too strong for the relatively weak intervention for a school to overcome?" Reville asked rhetorically. "That's one of the problems with our current delivery system: It dismisses or marginalizes or avoids coping with the impact of poverty on the lives of children."

The kind of high-quality "common school" envisioned by the 19th-century political and educational leader Horace Mann, Reville said, isn't "enough to rectify the massive inequalities in financial and social capital that exist outside of school."

This article appears courtesy of the Education Writers Association.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALIA WONG is an associate editor at *The Atlantic,* where she oversees the education

section. She previously wrote for *Honolulu Civil Beat*.

Twitter