The Bostonian

Tom Payzant had an extraordinary ten-year run as superintendent of schools in Boston, as described in Alexander Russo’s fine story (“The Bostonian,” features, Summer 2006). Although it’s hard to remember now, Boston public schools were in free fall a decade ago, with a dysfunctional school committee, a series of short-term superintendents, and a rudderless education program. Notwithstanding the venerable Boston Latin School, the district’s image was defined by the chaotic Jeremiah Burke School, which lost its accreditation as Payzant was walking in the door. Payzant established order and stability. Under his unwavering leadership, the district turned its focus to improving the quality and consistency of instruction. His forthright support of state graduation standards, at a time when other superintendents were praying for a reprieve, was critical to the success of the Massachusetts education-reform efforts.

Although Payzant was open to stretching the boundaries of the established order (as his push for Pilot Schools demonstrates), he was primarily concerned with getting the most out of the existing system. To a very great degree, he succeeded. Through his persistence, skill, and thoughtfulness, Payzant achieved as much as any superintendent could have, given the constraints. Indeed, compared to most other urban school districts, Boston is a major success story. And that’s the fundamental problem.

After ten years of exemplary leadership, Boston’s students are still struggling. Today close to 70 percent of Boston students are performing below grade level in English or math (that is, below proficient on the state assessment). That’s down from almost 85 percent in 1998, but only slightly better than the 75 percent rate in 2001. While further incremental improvement is likely, the trend line seems to be flattening out. Indeed, the proficiency rate went down slightly in 2005. As for the achievement gap, the story is much the same. The aggregate proficiency rate of black students in Boston today is about 35 percentage points below that of white students, almost unchanged since 2001.

The implications of this are not that Payzant’s initiatives should be abandoned, but that they should be complemented by a much more aggressive effort to address the structural barriers that plague Boston and virtually all other urban districts, in order to open the district up to new talent and effective school models.

Despite being home to some of the best charter schools in the country, Boston has lost many of its most entrepreneurial and successful charter leaders to other states because of persistent opposition to charter schools. This is both a shame and a scandal. There is no excuse for not offering these proven schools and school leaders the opportunity to expand and replicate—in district buildings and with the wholehearted support of the central office. If this can happen in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Oakland, it can and should happen in Boston.

Absent a willingness to be bold and take risks, I’m afraid there is little hope that Boston public schools will realize the level of excellence that Tom Payzant has worked so hard and well to achieve.

JAMES A. PEYSER
Chairman
Massachusetts Board of Education

No doubt Tom Payzant has done a good job in Boston. With a revolving door of superintendents being the norm for large city school systems, as well as dissension among community groups and low or stagnant student performance, the adjective “outstanding” is warranted in Payzant’s case. Those who wanted faster change and larger improvement in achievement may prefer the term “modest,” but in a period of faltering confidence in educators, it is reassuring to see a consummate professional have a long tenure and success, whether it is termed good, outstanding, or modest.

The Boston success story is about raising student achievement. But the Russo piece does not address the school completion rate, and it is low. To learn the lesson of Boston schools, we also need to look at what the city and its constituencies achieved. Discord has run many good educators out of big
Union and Politics

It’s hard to disagree with the analysis by Frederick Hess and Martin West (“Strike Phobia,” Features, Summer 2006) detailing how standard union contracts stifle education innovation, management flexibility, and results. The real debate is over what to do about these well-documented problems.

School board members, by and large, are not gripped by “strike phobia,” but rather reflect a very rational fear of the political power of teacher unions. They also approach contract negotiations asymmetrically weaker. Their relative inexperience, high turnover, and part-time service constitute no match for the experienced, long-term, full-time union negotiators.

The remedies outlined by Hess and West (transparency, rallying the public, and increasing capacity of board members) are necessary, but not sufficient. Let me suggest a few others.

First, we need more models of reasonable union contracts. Charter schools are one outlet for trying out different collective-bargaining arrangements. Since charter school boards typically are not elected, they have greater freedom to negotiate more reasonable agreements.

Second, more parents need a meaningful “right of exit.” School districts, especially urban districts, will not feel the public pressure to change unless a large segment of students are actually able to leave. Since most parents in urban districts are poor, we need a plentiful supply of well-funded vouchers, education tax credits, and tuition-free charter schools. Yet in most urban communities the number of available “choice” seats is very small when stacked up against the number of kids in failing district schools. Out of thousands of school districts, only three—Dayton, D.C., and Milwaukee—are currently on the cusp of offering sufficient scale to make a real impact.

Third, particularly in urban districts, shifting authority from school boards to an elected mayor may be a more effective reform strategy than trying to get school boards to step up. Mayoral control, which has shaken up the education establishment in Chicago and New York City, for example, needs to be expanded all over the nation. Mayors are not impervious to union politics, but their visibility makes them much more accountable than a multi-member, largely unknown school board.

Thomas W. Carroll
President
Foundation for Education Reform & Accountability

Frederick Hess and Martin West do not pull any punches with “Strike Phobia.” As they say, school boards, superintendents, taxpayers, and politicians need to be less anxious about provoking teacher work actions in order to restore the balance of power in American public education.

Yes, the majority of our nation’s teachers are passionate, professional educators who work daily to find the effective pedagogical formula needed to increase student achievement. But the majority of our unions, by their nature, exist to serve the needs of adults rather than those of students, and ultimately work to maintain the status quo of collective bargaining agreements that all too often serve as barriers to innovation, efficiency, and common sense. The struggle between management and teachers unions therefore plays itself out politically by pitting the “system” against the “teachers.” This is a false dichotomy. In reality, the struggle is between the status quo perpetuated by collective bargaining agreements and the conditions needed to increase student achievement for all students.

Matthew H. Malone
Superintendent of Schools
Swampscott, Massachusetts

Parsing Partisanship

The Summer 2006 issue of Education Next contains accusations about the research done by the Center on Education Policy (“Donkey in Disguise,” Check the Facts). The work by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) on the No Child Left Behind Act, high-school exit examinations, and other education policies uses exactly the same research methodologies as those employed by the U.S. Department of Education, state legislatures (controlled by both political parties), and other entities.

The article also contends that the CEP is in reality a partisan organization. Although I worked for the Democrats on Capitol Hill for many years, I have always thought that education is too important an issue to be partisan. Therefore, when I crafted legislation in the three decades I was on the Hill, I tried to be bipartisan. Almost every meeting that I convened was for both Democrats and Republicans, and the results were that nearly every law I helped to write was passed by large bipartisan majorities.

When I established CEP, I carried that same policy of nonpartisanship into this work. The first chair of our board of directors, Christopher Cross, was a former Republican staff director on Capitol Hill and was also a political appointee in the George H. W. Bush
administration. In the last several years, as we have tracked No Child Left Behind, we have been contacted by both Republican and Democratic members of Congress. We have happily helped all. This year, the Republican and Democratic leaders of the Senate and House education committees asked CEP to brief staff members on our organization’s latest NCLB report. Members of Congress do not sponsor such bipartisan events if they believe you have a partisan agenda.

Jack Jennings
President
Center on Education Policy

When Jack Jennings created the Center on Education Policy (CEP) as a freestanding organization, he asked me, a clearly identified Republican who had been his nemesis on the Hill for six years and a presidential appointee in the administration of George H.W. Bush, to serve as chair of the board. I did so with the clear understanding that CEP would pursue an agenda that was not partisan. The fieldwork for CEP has been undertaken by organizations with a reputation for scientific rigor and independent analysis. CEP cannot be responsible for how the media have played some of the findings. While the reporting by the media may not have been as balanced and thorough as we all would have liked, CEP did report the positive aspects of what it found. Unfortunately, positive results rarely get a great deal of media attention.

Christopher T. Cross
Chairman, Cross & Joftus, LLC

Greg Forster replies:
Jennings points out that the Department of Education and state legislatures use “exactly the same research methodologies” as CEP. Sadly, this is sometimes true; I said the same thing in my article. Neither the Department of Education nor state legislatures (even Republican-controlled ones!) are exempt from the realities of politics. Junk science is junk science no matter who sponsors it.

Cross says CEP’s research is scientifically sound because CEP hires prestigious organizations to carry out its surveys, which is like saying that a letter is truthful because it was delivered by a reliable courier. I’m sure CEP’s surveys are conducted with the most meticulous care; my article criticized the way CEP analyzes the results of those surveys, a subject on which neither Jennings nor Cross offers any defense.

It’s admirable that CEP has a Republican board chair and sometimes works with Republicans, but this hardly proves nonpartisanship. If CEP’s research adhered to the generally accepted standards of empirical science, the mere fact that CEP also has policy preferences would not be a legitimate reason to doubt its findings. But when CEP uses faulty research methods that are rigged to support its agenda, other researchers have a responsibility to point this out.

High School
I read David Ferrero’s review essay “Tales from the Inside: Five Books about High School” (book reviews, Spring 2006) with great interest. I grew up in a suburban community that went through a “population explosion” in the early 1960s and was fortunate to go to grade school and high school in newer facilities, like many of the kids interviewed in the books Mr. Ferrero reviewed.

My senior year in high school was marked by a teacher strike. The strike made me realize that while kids go to school, teachers go to work. Our teachers wanted better pay and benefits; a fairer process for tenure review; and fewer noneducational “babysitting” tasks. Today, I don’t blame my teachers for their requests; as Mr. Ferrero points out, they are inherent to the dynamics between teachers and school boards and their full-time administrators.

But I agree with Mr. Ferrero that these dynamics must change.

Teacher development programs and partnerships between union and management could help new teachers succeed. It is in no one’s best interest to see a new teacher fail.

We need a new approach to Advanced Placement. Why not consider tax credits for parents to send a bright child to college for a couple of classes, instead of placing the burden for instruction on public schools?

We need more flexible schedules. Summer school could help kids gain advanced standing and graduate early, just as it is used to help stragglers keep up.

Organizational change happens with leadership. I do not believe a superintendent must be an educator. A superintendent’s skill set is more like that of a municipal business administrator: manage people with varied skills; negotiate contracts; arrange financing; develop facilities; direct budgets; and answer to voters.

Stuart Nachbar
Princeton, New Jersey

Keeping Out the Christians
Naomi Schaefer Riley claims that the University of California admitted only 8 students through its “admission by exception” policy last year, when the number was actually more than 1,000 students (“Keeping Out the Christians,” features, Summer 2006). She also wrongly asserts that students from the Calvary Christian school would need to score in the top 4 percent of the SAT II (now called SAT Subject Tests) to gain admittance based on test scores. In fact, students can fulfill individual course requirements by attaining relatively modest scores—ranging from 530 to
550 in science and social science subjects—on the SAT subject examinations.

Moreover, Riley fails to note that a large number of Christian schools, including Calvary, offer a full list of college preparatory courses that have been approved by the University of California (UC) system. Calvary has 60 such courses. In fact, all nine students from Calvary who applied to UC this year were accepted for admission, and well over 75 percent of applicants have been admitted over the last four years.

Perhaps more objectionable than the factual errors is the unfounded notion that Christians are being kept out of the University of California based upon their religious beliefs. Even the most perfunctory research will show UC campuses host literally hundreds of Christian student organizations. UC believes enrolling students from many different faiths and backgrounds enriches the university’s community and the learning experience of our students. High-school courses are evaluated on the basis of academic criteria. As a result, the university sometimes must decline to approve courses from all types of high schools, not just Christian schools. The percentage of courses approved from Christian schools has been basically identical to the percentage approved from all schools. Christian schools are treated no differently than any other type of school.

Christopher M. Patti
University Counsel
University of California

Naomi Schaefer Riley replies:
Mr. Patti is correct that the total number of admissions by exception is not 8. According to public records recently obtained by the lawyers for the Association for Christian Schools International (ACSI), the number was 871 for the 2004-2005 school year. About a third of those exceptions were used for athletes who did not qualify for admission under the regular rules. Many others were admitted, I gather, for outstanding artistic talents, or because there were other special circumstances involved (they may be veterans, for example). Students admitted by exception still make up a tiny percentage of the approximately 50,000 freshmen allowed in each year. And one doubts that UC will be giving any of the slots of its prize athletes to well-qualified graduates of Christian schools. The number 8 is the number of home-schooled students who were admitted by exception, and it is still significant in this sense. These homeschooled students are in the situation most similar to graduates of ACSI schools because they generally have a rigorous academic course load, but it is one that does not have UC’s stamp of approval.

Mr. Patti and I can quibble over the numbers, but the bottom line is this: the counsel for a public university is trying to defend a policy of “admission by exception” for students who take high-school classes taught from a Christian perspective. He has not offered any explanation for why these students should have to go through an admissions process that is different from the one entered into by students who take classes in secular private schools or public schools or other religious schools. Indeed, there is no moral or legal justification for this policy.

The fact that the percentage of students admitted from Christian schools and secular schools is fairly similar is irrelevant, because the UC only launched these discriminatory policies in the last year. The fact that most of Calvary’s classes are still counted for credit is also irrelevant. UC has changed its rules about the new classes it reviews and there’s no reason that, with one pen stroke from a UC bureaucrat, the rules about existing classes couldn’t change tomorrow.

Finally, I did not write that the University of California doesn’t like Christians, but rather that the UC administration believes that Christian ideas are backward and water down academic subjects. As long as Christian schools in California are offering academically rigorous and substantive courses—which, from the looks of the curricula they submitted and my interviews with faculty, students, and parents, they are—there is no reason they should be subjected to a different standard.