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# A Thoughtful Approach to Public Education Reform

*John C. Rennie*

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*This article restates the underlying rationale for the importance of high-quality K–12 public education. The author describes some of the difficulties reformers encounter in engendering support for and determining the most cogent elements of reform. The differences between the aims and capabilities of school-business partnerships, which essentially assist the current system, and systemic reform, which aims to change the system, led to the formation of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education. Rennie summarizes the process followed by MBAE in developing a framework for reform and meeting its objectives.*

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## **Backdrop to Reform**

It is no exaggeration to state that public education in New England and the rest of the United States is at a critical crossroad. This marvelous system began with the Boston Latin School in 1635, was praised by Alexis de Tocqueville and revitalized by Horace Mann in the nineteenth century, and produced, in this century, a culture and economy unmatched in history. But it is now in trouble. Public education's many and continuing successes are being eroded by changes outside the system itself and by an incapability or unwillingness to adjust to change from within.

At the center of this crossroad are 50 million U.S. children and many millions to come. Their chances to seek "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" are at risk because they rely on preceding generations to live up to an unspoken but real inter-generational "compact," which would ensure that the youngsters are taken care of and afforded true opportunities to develop their talents and abilities, to have a real chance of achieving the American dream and making contributions to society. Their offspring, in turn, would enjoy the same opportunities.

These children, our future, cannot vote and therefore have no direct political power. They rely on other segments of the populace to provide the basic necessities

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of life, including a decent education. We are doing a poor job: a child in the United States is six times more likely to live in poverty than an adult older than sixty-five. Every day millions of children in school are undernourished and insufficiently rested. Too many of them are subject to being stereotyped into failure or are nameless "attende-ees" personally unknown to any adult in the school they attend.

In better schools in more affluent surroundings, parents exhibit misplaced and misguided complacency, believing that their schools are effective and their children well prepared. Complacency, sometimes accompanied by apathy, often translates into benign neglect; other aspects of life are given higher priorities. This meshes well with adult tendencies toward self-centeredness and short-term horizons; emphasis is on the here and now, not the future, and commonweal is an increasingly rare commodity.

How can this impasse be overcome? First and foremost we must realize and believe that we can reverse these trends and rebuild America's schools to their past preeminence. To achieve this goal, we must truly grasp the elements of the task before us, and promote understanding among our colleagues, communities, and constituencies.

- Understanding the central importance of education to the nation's society, security, and economic well-being;
- Understanding that educational improvement does not result simply from changing attitudes, from "turning our minds to it," but rather requires years of effort directed to the development of programs and techniques to impart knowledge, skills, and know-how to children;
- Understanding that the true solutions to this challenge must provide for *all* children, not just the easiest to handle and the most willing and able to learn;
- Understanding that "quick fixes" and partway solutions do not meet the requirement, that only comprehensive change and significant investment are needed. This investment must involve not only funding, but consistent commitment and caring and extraordinary volunteer efforts by people outside the traditional school system.

Short of national defense, one is hard pressed to find a more vital mission or role for government and the citizenry. Historically and constitutionally, most aspects of this mission have been delegated to the individual states. But while they have this responsibility, other parts of society must assist state government in bringing about needed change. Indeed, as is often true in large bureaucracies, the change agent or catalyst may have to come from outside the system.

In 1988, a group of business executives organized the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE), which assumed a catalytic role. This article summarizes their rationale, the process by which they responded to the challenge, and how they created movement toward enactment of sweeping reform and improvement of Massachusetts's public elementary and secondary education system.

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### **MBAE Rationale — Why Reform?**

For some time, evidence has been accumulating that U.S. leadership in many economic areas has deteriorated. This long-term trend has developed because of many

factors, some related to actions by countries that have emerged as aggressive competitors in global arenas, others related to the reordering of priorities of public policies and societal/demographic changes within our country. It is clear that perhaps the most important factor contributing to our difficulties has been the gradual slide of the public schools' performance, relevance, and effectiveness. This degradation has come about because of inability or failure of the educational system to cope with and react to change and because the net effect of many federal, state, and local policies has been massive neglect coupled with overregulation of the system that develops the raw material, the human capital which is the central element of the nation's future, its children. As newscaster Tom Brokaw commented in a TV documentary on schools, it is at least as equally true that we have let the schools down as that society has been let down by the public education system.

It is just as clear that these trends cannot be allowed to continue. The cultural and economic future, indeed the very security of the country, depends on the nation's resolve and willingness to overcome the inertia and indifference of decades to mount a massive and immediate effort to regain world leadership in education. Why must education be such a central focus in America's resurgence? Because the overarching needs are to increase productivity, relieve pressures on various other social support systems and institutions, and help those elements of the economy which are struggling to cope with change and international competition, all of which requires major contributions by the public education system. Good education relieves pressure on other social support systems; a weak education system stresses all other systems and services, including industry. In short, public education is central to America's quality of life and economic future.

Recognition of this crisis at the federal level has resulted in the establishment of a set of national goals aimed at reestablishing America's public education system as second to none in the twenty-first century.

Meeting these goals is a daunting undertaking because, unlike most other countries, the United States welcomes cultural diversity, independence of thought, and regional differences. These facets of our society forge the strength and fabric of the country, but make achievement of broad education goals difficult to bring about through nationwide policies. So while the establishment of national goals is important in expressing a leadership focus, implementation of meaningful change in public education falls to smaller jurisdictions, namely, individual state and local school districts.

Serious systemic reform must be initiated at the state level. Recognized throughout the nation's history, this is the underlying reason that the direction and administration of public education have been left largely to the states. It is at the state level that leadership for system improvement must emerge. Too often, however, state leaders have avoided taking this responsibility seriously, leaving local school districts to their own devices in reckoning with mounting difficulties without direction or support.

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### **Reform-related Observations**

Most adult Americans have a sense of the importance of education, but for many the reasons for its importance are fuzzy and obsolete because they are based on a recollection of the world of twenty, thirty, or more years ago. They think they know why



education is important, but most people don't fully perceive the significance of the following:

- The impact of societal and demographic changes on the operation of schools and the characteristics of the student population;
- The changing world of work and the increasing demands for knowledge and skills characteristic of jobs at all levels, from the lowest to the highest;
- The increased scope of modern knowledge, as compared with what was available two or three decades ago, which must be addressed;
- The changes in world socioeconomic relationships and the increased complexity of American society, which require deep understanding on the part of citizens if they are sensibly to evaluate policies/issues, elect officials, and contribute to their communities;
- The dynamic nature of technology, which creates a need for lifelong learning, which in turn contributes to the efficiency and effectiveness of education.

The average citizen's poor grasp of the situation and the enormity of the task are the biggest hurdles in the effort to place public education reform on the public agenda, and then do something to implement it.

Another factor that has made reform difficult is the decline in the percentage of the electorate with children in the public school system. In the 1960s about two-thirds of the voting public had children in the schools; in 1980 the number had declined to about 40 percent, and today is close to 20 percent. Therefore, movement toward reform of public education often encounters stiff resistance from voters whose personal priorities lie elsewhere.

Oddly, the very can-do spirit which boasts that Americans can do anything anytime we want to if we just focus on it also impedes reform. This attitude, illustrated by our response to such events as the attack on Pearl Harbor or the launching of Sputnik leads to a dangerously mistaken view that once we decide to solve the "education problem," it will be remedied quickly, and we'll be back on top. In fact, MBAE concluded that the solution will take far more than an attitude change, that once we have achieved it, we will have to work long and hard to bring our students up to world-class standards, which will require immense investments, monetary and otherwise.

This presents a significant challenge to leadership. Not only must we formulate a comprehensive plan for reform, but these adjunct attitudes of the public at large must be overcome through education to the dimensions of the need and the importance of implementing solutions.

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### **Reform and Partnerships**

The last decade witnessed an important surge in school-business "partnerships." These usually involve a company's or group of companies' establishing a voluntary, long-term relationship with a school or school district for the purpose of improving education. The partnerships, which now number in the tens of thousands nationwide, vary in form. Some are narrow in scope, for example, enhancing a specific course or grade level; others are broader, encompassing an entire system and creating projects that help teachers and administrators as well as students. Some provide monetary assistance, others provide only services, and still others offer both types of aid.

Partnerships yield both short- and long-term benefits to the schools and their staffs and students. The short-term benefits range from direct enrichment of curricula to improved teacher morale. The most important long-term benefit is the increased interaction partnerships create between the education and business sectors, leading to the development of mutual understanding and trust. The educators, therefore, are helped not only in their immediate circumstances, but gain insight to the needs and characteristics of business and how businesspeople think. On their part, business participants come to understand the stresses on education and develop respect for the challenges to and achievements of modern schools and faculties. By focusing on the students, all participants contribute to better circumstances in their schools or districts.

But more and better partnerships, as valuable as they are, cannot bring about broad system reform. The reason is fairly obvious if one remembers that long-term system reform must take place at the state level. Since partnerships by their very nature are organized at an individual school or district level, they can affect only those with whom they come in contact. The factors that must be addressed in statewide reform are broader in scope, ranging across many districts and involving top-level public policies and political considerations.

It is a mistake for well-meaning partnership originators to think they can effect broad reform through their local efforts. Those who start with this premise will surely become frustrated when, after years of effort, they detect little long-term change. When that happens, the partners, especially the businesspeople, become disillusioned and even cynical, feeling that they are involved with merely "feel good" programs. This unfortunate and mistaken notion results from good intentions and misguided expectations.

While partnerships are important, even vital, the members should not expect to bring about sweeping reform. On the other hand, as we shall see, after reform has begun, partnerships may become even more important than in the past because they are natural vehicles to help carry out the changes needed to make the new systems work effectively. It was with this understanding and perspective that MBAE was formed by business executives who had been, and continue to be, actively involved with starting and improving school-business partnerships. They realized that while partnerships essentially take the schools and districts as they are and "help out" in a variety of ways, a new and distinctly different effort was necessary to bring about statewide reform.

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### **Business as Change Agent**

Business is well positioned to stimulate change in public education despite the historical estrangement between the two sectors; happily, their hostility has decreased markedly in the past ten years.

- Businesspeople enjoy the advantages of travel, market forecasts, and other activities that allow them to sense trends far in advance of their impact. These insights force business to constantly reassess the competition, technology, and other factors upon which they base plans and policies.
- Having digested these inputs and applied them to workforce and investment policies, business practitioners sense the capabilities demanded by the various positions in their companies. When the pool of available workers, or those they



expect will be available, exhibit shortcomings with respect to workforce demands, they sense deficiencies in the public education system. This concern extends to social and moral considerations as well, but it is the economic imperative that alerts and motivates business most immediately, and provides a powerful incentive to act.

- Outside the educational system, business represents a powerful, unique constituency, that is, public policymakers perceive it as having clout. Because children can't vote, the adult population is split with regard to the priority of education, and teachers are often considered to be a special interest group, public education has little clout. But business can reinforce that power by allying itself closely with the public education community.
- Although far from omniscient, businesspeople have the knowledge and skills to analyze and improve systems and organizational structures. They have resources to collect and investigate various solutions to problems, which they can assess objectively from outside the educational system.

The inherent advantages of business could be more than offset if would-be reformers are not careful to avoid mistakes that might defeat their efforts:

- Although their enlightened self-interest is acknowledged, business reformers must be mindful that necessary elements of education curricula do not relate directly to the world of work. Therefore, in defining the characteristics of the education process, and its graduates, they must consider broader guidelines than merely business interests.
- Any reform must begin with acknowledgment of the professionalism of educators as counterparts to businesspeople, which leads to an important but subtle constraint on business's role: business should stick to its areas of expertise: systems, structure, organization, and so on; it should not pretend to go further, encroaching on areas that are the realm of educators: pedagogical methods, curricula, certification requirements. Business may, and should, provide support in these areas but not to the extent of becoming dictatorial or reaching beyond its expertise.

While business is an excellent candidate for educational reform stimulator, it must exercise this role sensitively and thoughtfully to be effective.

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### **Genesis of MBAE**

The business executives who founded the MBAE were experienced in school-business partnerships, and they sensed the strong signals that the Massachusetts economic, social, and moral climate was ripe for public school improvement. They were also geared for action, feeling that the time in which to achieve important change was already short. They formulated their mission as follows: "The purpose of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education is to participate in shaping the future of education in the Commonwealth and restoring its preeminent position of educational leadership, by bringing about statewide, systemic improvement in public elementary and secondary education."

A nucleus of industry activists, members of the Massachusetts Committee on School-Business Partnerships, first had the notion of a systemic improvement effort in late 1988. After several meetings which included consultants from as far away as California, the group decided that the statewide effort should be undertaken. Pledging the support of their companies, they undertook the establishment of the organization and its governing board. MBAE, Inc., formed as a Massachusetts nonprofit corporation, requested designation as a 501(c)4 education and community advocacy group. The first board of directors was comprised of representatives from participating companies; other firms were solicited for financial and intellectual support.

Using initial funding, MBAE contacted virtually every major stakeholder group in the commonwealth to advise them of the intended MBAE effort and welcome their opinions. Essentially unanimous support for the MBAE undertaking was expressed by those in the public, private, and educational sectors who were briefed.

A preliminary compilation of key areas based on stakeholder interviews and views of the MBAE participants was completed. The major topics included the teaching workforce, management of cultural diversity, organizational restructuring, use of technology, educational financing, use of physical plant, parent and community involvement, choice, youth at risk, accountability, legislative mandates, curricula, and early childhood education. Each item had numerous subtopics of concern.

MBAE further queried educators, education leaders, legislators, professional associations, and other stakeholders as to their reactions to these issues and added its own assessments to this perspective. MBAE also gave special weight to those areas in which business could most usefully apply its expertise.

After careful consideration, the MBAE board selected four major areas as the cornerstone of its agenda for reform: (1) the future of the teaching workforce; (2) the education finance system; (3) youth at risk/early childhood education; and (4) school system organization, restructuring, management, and oversight. Even though these topics focused the discussions, the analyses necessarily crossed over into other areas as total-system considerations or ramifications were assessed.

MBAE then embarked on a research effort in which consultants were appointed to examine each priority area in detail. The researchers, specifically selected for their insight and experience in disciplines relating to the areas of interest, were encouraged to examine and assess not only Massachusetts's programs and experiences, but also other states' initiatives. After months of research, reports and briefings were submitted to the MBAE board, which analyzed the results and drew their own conclusions and defined areas for further examination.

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### **Development of a Framework**

After a year of detailed analysis and involvement, certain fundamental conclusions emerged as a consensus in the group. These formed the backdrop to the more detailed, substantive deliberations leading to the agenda for action. This framework was summarized in MBAE's March 1990 Interim Report:

1. Improving the public education system is a compelling priority for the business community.



2. Many valuable initiatives within Massachusetts and in other states to reform the public K–12 system are already under way and can serve as models for further system improvements.
3. Any effort to reform the system must acknowledge and accommodate the enormous range of individual differences in the needs of both schools and students.
4. Systemic reform, involving major new approaches to the public education process, will be required to produce fundamental and lasting improvement.
5. An effective long-term plan for improvement must include built-in incentives to ensure that the needed changes will be implemented and self-regenerating over time.
6. Substantial improvement in public education cannot and will not occur in Massachusetts without revisions in the law to provide adequate revenues targeted directly and specifically to public education.
7. The entire community, not the individual school, should be the learning center of the public school system.

As the MBAE project progressed, it benefited from expanded participation of a broader array of Massachusetts companies and more detailed research. The express purpose of this work was to refine the specific issues into actionable items upon which recommendations for systemic improvement could be based. There was a sense of urgency in this effort, but MBAE wanted to develop its agenda thoughtfully, even if more time and funding were needed. So after fifteen months of “homework,” the board felt sufficiently grounded in the relevant topics to develop recommendations for improvement.

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### **Proposal for Reform**

After establishing its framework, MBAE worked for another fifteen months or more to evolve a specific plan for reform. Published in July 1991, it was entitled “Every Child a Winner!” Its recommendations essentially broke down into four major categories:

1. Raising expectations of system performance by setting new goals, standards, and indicators at both state and local level; more emphasis on outcomes; accountability introduced at all levels.
2. Changes in the system structure, oversight, and management, decentralization of decision making and resource authority; changes in tenure; elimination of conflicts of interest; refinement of the roles of principals, superintendents, school committees (boards).
3. Improvements/enhancements of the system, including major early childhood programs, parental outreach, extended school time, and expanded professional development for teachers and administrators.

4. Completely revised educational finance system with foundation-level budgeting founded on a zero-based service delivery model; objectives were overall adequacy, equity, and stability in the statewide system.

It was emphasized that all elements of the plan were interactive and interdependent. In short, it would be self-defeating and ineffective to attempt reform without adequate resources, and similarly incorrect to advance resources without accompanying reforms. The structure of the plan ensured that both would flow at roughly the same pace.

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### **Advocacy for the Plan**

As the final draft of the MBAE reform plan took shape in early 1991, it was time to begin testing reaction and receptivity to it. Throughout its thirty-month process, MBAE had held many meetings or exchanges of ideas and thoughts with groups ranging from teacher unions to business associations. These interactions took place in private, so they had the advantage of remaining out of the glare of publicity and off the record. But owing to this consultative approach, when the plan was circulated to them in 1991, there were few surprises. Most groups found individual features with which they took issue, but usually they found so much more that was positive that on balance their collective reaction was good.

Exposure of the plan to public policymakers, however, signaled the beginning of a new and most vital phase of MBAE's mission: transforming the plan into legislation. Since MBAE had not been "commissioned" by anyone, it was possible that its work could be ignored, so it was with some trepidation that the reformers approached this stage of their work. But the reaction of the political leadership was very encouraging. When MBAE approached Governor William Weld's education adviser with its ideas, it became evident that he had been directed to gather ideas for a longer-range solution for the public schools — and MBAE had just such an approach, at least for the K-12 aspect of the system. Rather than encountering the expected "not invented here" attitude or bureaucratic resistance, MBAE's ideas and plan were quickly absorbed into Weld administration thinking.

While MBAE was heartened by this, it caused an immediate tactical political problem: the reception by the administration was so swift, there was a danger that it could appear to have been developed by and for the Weld team. This would undermine the nonpartisan, independent nature of MBAE's work, a potential fatal characteristic in the Democratic-led legislature! Within a week, appointments were made with state Senator Tom Birmingham and Representative Mark Roosevelt, cochairmen of the Joint Committee on Education. These meetings had two purposes: to acquaint the chairmen with the existence of MBAE's plan and how it had been formulated and to seek their help in arranging follow-on introductory meetings with Senate President William Bulger and House Speaker Charles Flaherty. The success of these meetings led to the launching of the public part of the education reform process.

Using the MBAE plan as a centerpiece, the administration and the legislature's Education Committee began separate processes aimed at developing education reform bills by autumn. These efforts continued all summer and into the fall of 1991. MBAE was invited to participate in both these efforts, assuring both sides that it was observing a "Chinese Wall" separation to preserve the proprietary aspects of each



team's approach and analyses. This was successfully achieved, which underlined the trust both groups placed in MBAE.

During this period, MBAE strengthened its communications with such educational stakeholder groups as teachers unions, the associations of school superintendents, principals, school committees, and so on. Other interested groups, including those responsible for city and town management/governance and leaders of the minority communities, were contacted and briefed when possible. MBAE board members also acted as a speakers bureau, responding to the growing requests for presentations on "Every Child a Winner!" and school reform in general.

Meanwhile, it was vital for MBAE to engender the support of the business community of the state. Over the latter half of 1991, MBAE successfully achieved such broad support when all the major business associations voted to back its plan. These groups included the Massachusetts Business Roundtable, Associated Industries of Massachusetts, the Smaller Business Association of New England, the Massachusetts Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives, the Boston Chamber of Commerce, the American Electronics Association (region), the Software Council, the Biotechnology Council, and the "Challenge to Leadership" group. As winter approached, MBAE had achieved solid business backing, and the reform effort was picking up momentum.

In December 1991 the governor proposed that an attempt be made to formulate a single "consensus" bill rather than pursuing the two bills which had been released separately. Also, at the request of the business community, the governor, Senate president and House speaker agreed to meet with key players to help speed the process along. In December and January several "summit" meetings were held and considerable progress was made. The leadership eventually agreed to provide \$2.5 billion in new educational funds over the fiscal year 1993-1997 period if a comprehensive set of reforms could be agreed to which would accompany the funding. MBAE was invited to and attended all the summits, a unique and influential position for a business group to have, especially in discussions concerning education!

The spring of 1992 revealed intense education-related efforts. Between late January and May, a long series of discussions or "negotiations" between the administration and the committee chairs and their staffs were held in the State House to hammer out a "consensus" package of reforms, including an acceptable financial plan. MBAE was the only "outsider" invited to attend. Since all parties were in favor of reform, it was an exercise to find agreement on *how* reform was to be accomplished. There were scores of specific items to discuss, ranging from the points proposed in MBAE's plan to those which emerged in the 1991 processes carried out by the public policymakers. Despite the complexity of the issues and variance in approaches, by late April agreement was reached on most issues, with a few admittedly difficult ones remaining. This was very encouraging, and it appeared that the prospects of a bill passing in May or June were improving.

At the same time, however, as the participants wrestled with the finance aspects of the package, the true dimensions of the school-funding crisis emerged. The \$2.5 billion of new moneys agreed to in January was targeted to bring all districts up to acceptable funding levels, provide for early childhood education, increased professional development and major maintenance, increased technology, and other system improvements. But now the projected increases in costs due to inflation and increasing enrollments surfaced. These costs, which had not been adequately reckoned with,



presented an impasse, as the majority of funds agreed to in January would be needed just to offset these costs and would not be available for the new programs needed to *improve* the system.

In late April and May, the effort to develop a consensus bill foundered. In early June the governor filed a bill that was not broadly supported. MBAE was one of the groups which testified against its passage, feeling that a better bill could and should be fashioned, although it meant a year's delay in implementation. In late June, at another "summit," all parties agreed that a comprehensive bill was needed and that if one could be put together by fall, it could be passed after the election but before the year end.

MBAE had worked all spring on the bill development process, visiting many communities to promote the need for reform and its approach. Its board was determined to persevere. While disappointed that the first cycle had not produced a good bill, MBAE was not discouraged and voted to rebuild momentum for the "next round." As the summer of 1992 progressed, MBAE reestablished contacts with key public figures and stakeholder groups. At the same time, it embarked on an effort to draw up a draft bill based on all the work to date. Close liaison was maintained with the committee and administration, and as the process evolved, the effort slowly melded into leadership by the committee, as was inevitable to get a bill through the Great and General Court.

As of this writing, the filing of a comprehensive reform bill is approaching. MBAE believes that an effective reform package has been fashioned and that an acceptable finance plan has been formulated, addressing both new programs and inflation/enrollment impact on costs.

MBAE achieved three major objectives:

1. It formulated an initial comprehensive reform plan.
2. It raised public education and reform to the top of the state's agenda.
3. It stimulated concrete legislative action with the aim of passing a historic education reform bill.

The effort has been long and at times intense, but MBAE demonstrated how concerned and thoughtful business executives can influence the future of the state's and the nation's children. Business can only be a catalyst or stimulator, because in the end the elected officials have the power to do or not do what is advocated. But there is intense satisfaction that the twin behemoths of state government and public education can be moved by a few dedicated volunteers who take the time to care. 🐼

*“The fact is if you take a look at achievement data for the past twenty years, including during the so-called reform era, the lines are flat. If we were a doctor looking at an electrocardiogram, we would call the family.”*

— Dale Mann