



# Getting it Right

## Education Policy Brief #1

### Reconcile Multiple and Conflicting Accountability Systems

#### MassPartners for Public Schools

American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts

[www.aftma.net](http://www.aftma.net)

Massachusetts Association of School Committees

[www.masc.org](http://www.masc.org)

Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents

[www.mass.org](http://www.mass.org)

Massachusetts Elementary School Principals' Association

[www.mespa.org](http://www.mespa.org)

Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators' Association

[www.mssaa.org](http://www.mssaa.org)

Massachusetts Parent Teacher Association

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#### A Systemic Weakness Uncovered

The performance of public schools in Massachusetts is measured by at least six separate assessment systems that include as many as eight different sub-assessments. These competing systems are complex, intricate, and demanding. Even the most experienced educators and administrators find it challenging to master these assessments while, at the same time, working to educate children.

Significant adjustments need to be made in order for the state assessment system to be a meaningful diagnostic and analytical tool that guides teaching and learning. Currently there are three major agencies conducting assessment and accreditation visits in schools: the Massachusetts Department of Education; the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability, and the New England Association of School and Colleges. Evaluations sometimes result in diametrically opposite conclusions.

The Boston Globe reported that parents are increasingly confused by assessments that rank Massachusetts students as among the best performing in the nation, while, at the same time, schools are underperforming. According to independent research commissioned by MassPartners\*, seventy-four percent (74%) of Massachusetts schools will be named underperforming by the year 2014 under the accountability system created by the state for the federal No Child Left Behind act.

The voluminous reports resulting from these assessments have put a spotlight on the academic problems that some public school children face, however, these have been known all along – schools in wealthy communities perform better than those in poorer communities; achievement gaps between students of color and white students persist; students who do not speak English as their first language struggle. Then, sanctions are levied against schools when what is needed most is professional assistance and guidance that finds new ways to support the state's most vulnerable students and the schools that serve them.

#### Recommended Policy Solution

The members of MassPartners welcome high standards and effective measures of accountability; however, the multiple assessment systems in place must now be reviewed and evaluated to determine their inadequacy, duplicity, and redundancy. A redesigned system must serve one purpose: to identify problems for children in schools and determine practical solutions.

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\* MassPartners for Public Schools (2005). *Facing Reality: What Happens When Good Schools are Labeled Failures? Projecting Adequate Yearly Progress in Massachusetts Schools.*

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### Reconcile Multiple and Conflicting Accountability Systems – *continued* –

**MassPartners for Public Schools** is a coalition of the statewide teacher, parent, school committee, principal and superintendent organizations in Massachusetts. These organizations pledged to find common ground on issues that affect everyday life in schools. The leaders of these organizations share a commitment to improving public schools, to educating all children to high standards, and to supporting accountability within the education workforce.



MassPartners recommends that a fund of up to \$300,000 from within the \$3.4 million requested in the Department of Education's FY08 Budget for the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability be earmarked to support the work of an Accountability and Professional Assistance Study Group. This Group would have two functions:

- to assess the accountability system and recommend changes, including detailed cost projections for a streamlined system and scheduling its phased implementation; and,
- to develop an operational structure for the professional assistance system outlined in the position paper, *Improving Underperforming Schools: A Viable Massachusetts Approach*\*.

One result of the current accountability system is that 629 schools in the Commonwealth are already designated as not performing up to acceptable standards. Planning a technical assistance system in which qualified educators provide sustained in-school professional guidance and assistance to schools already in the accountability system's net is an integral counterpart of a refined accountability system.

The Group would be authorized by the legislature and managed as a joint venture of the Department of Education and MassPartners for Public Schools. It would report its findings and recommendations about how to modify the accountability system within six months. Research would include documents review, interviews with affected schools and state policy leaders, and testimony from educators and parents. The work of this Study Group can be a valuable input to an independent study commission that may be created to determine the resources necessary to meet state standards as called for in Senate Bill 299. Before the end of the year, the Group also would prepare to implement the professional assistance system, including recruiting and training teams of educators to serve in the system.

#### **What can you do?**

Contact your legislators and the Department and Board of Education via letter, email or telephone to urge their support for creating the Accountability and Professional Assistance Study Group.

Become a partner in analyzing the accountability system by quantifying the time and resources you spend responding to state and federal accountability requirements and examining the outcomes of participating in those assessment systems. Tell us about your experiences with the accountability system by sending an email that quantitatively and qualitatively describes your experiences.

\* MassPartners for Public Schools (October 2006). *Improving Underperforming Schools: A Viable Massachusetts Approach*.