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MASSACHUSETTS
BUSINESS ALLIANCE
FOR EDUCATION

TESTIMONY OF ROBERT W. RICHARDSON, EAST COAST EDUCATION MANAGER, INTEL AND CHAIRMAN, MBAE, ON BEHALF OF THE MASSACHUSETTS BUSINESS ALLIANCE FOR EDUCATION TO THE BOARD OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION REGARDING 21ST CENTURY SKILLS – DECEMBER 16, 2008

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the importance of integrating 21st century skills into the public school curriculum. In addition to my involvement in this issue at Intel, I served on the Board's Task Force on 21st Century Skills representing the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) as its Chairman. MBAE has a proud history of working to improve educational opportunities that will prepare all students to engage successfully in a global economy and society and fully supports the Board's goal of transforming the Commonwealth's schools into 21st century centers of learning.

In 2006, MBAE's report *Preparing for the Future: Employer Perspectives on Work Readiness Skills* documented the same concerns in Massachusetts that the Partnership for 21st Century Skills has raised at the national level and that the Task Force summarizes in its report. Over the past year, MBAE engaged leaders of the business community in discussions that led to the strategies and tactics proposed in our October report, *Educating a 21st Century Workforce: A Call to Action on High School Reform*. What we have learned from this work is that a 21st century education requires more than adjustments to our current school model. Major change in our delivery of educational services is necessary. In addition to content mastery, critical thinking and problem-solving, communication, and other applied skills that cross disciplinary boundaries are essential to meaningful participation in our communities and workplaces and, therefore, must be part of a 21st century education for our students.

As the Board acts on the recommendations in the report, *School Reform in the New Millennium: Preparing All Children for 21st Century Success*, MBAE encourages you to consider the following points:

- **Vision** – To resolve any confusion about the purpose of this effort, the Board must clearly and unequivocally articulate a collective vision for the Commonwealth's 21st century public education system that, as recommended, emphasizes your "commitment to maintaining strong, rigorous standards and ensuring that all students are taught the basic core academic content they will need to be successful in school, higher education, and in life." (p.10) It is critical that all stakeholders understand and accept the reality that 21st Century Skills are a tool to raise student achievement, not a ploy to dilute the standards and assessments that have led to our state's progress over the past fifteen years. Ensuring that all students meet proficiency in basic skills will require continued measurement of performance statewide but should be regarded as a "floor" for achievement while 21st century skill development raises the "ceiling" for all students in every community.

- **Lever 1: Educator Quality and Support** – MBAE endorses the recommendations of the Task Force on this issue and encourages immediate action to provide alternative routes for training and certifying qualified professionals to fill current gaps in our teacher corps in STEM and other high-need disciplines. However, we also encourage the Board to look beyond the recommendations regarding teacher training and professional development to more systemic change. As part of a 17-member Working Group for Educator Excellence, MBAE supports a comprehensive approach to transforming the teaching profession and the educator workforce that will include teacher preparation meeting the highest standards; comprehensive induction that contributes to high performance and teacher retention; a fair yet student-oriented teacher evaluation system that incorporates intensive support; career ladders to leadership positions that provide opportunities for teachers to grow and advance throughout their career; effective professional development; administrative leadership that builds schools committed to measurable results; and structures that enable effective teamwork and joint responsibility for student achievement. Attention to our educator workforce is as much about economic development as it is about education. Without a comprehensive system to increase the capacity of the people who work with children, our state's economy will not have the workforce it needs to compete and our graduates will not be able to attain the standard of living they expect.

- **Lever II: Standards** – Adding 21st century skills to the competencies we expect our students to demonstrate is not a retreat from standards. Regardless of their postsecondary goals, all students need a solid base of math, English language literacy, and applied skills to succeed in today's economy. MBAE's view is that 21st century applied skills should not be viewed as "add-ons," but instead should be incorporated across disciplines through articulation in all curriculum frameworks as measurable and high standards. MBAE has consistently advocated that all students receive the support necessary to complete a rigorous academic course of study and believes that integrating applied skills into the curriculum can help engage students to reach higher standards and achievement. Our work with the State Scholars Initiative has shown us that understanding the relevance of academics to students' current interests and future pursuits can be a powerful motivator. Despite alternative interpretations offered by some, we believe that the Task Force's recommendations support building on our state's existing high standards and MBAE would oppose any activity to the contrary.

Lever III: Assessment – The Board took a positive step toward accelerating the acquisition and application of 21st century skills in the lessons of core subject learning, when it voted to require every student beginning with the class of 2010 to reach proficiency to earn a diploma. Yet, a 21st century education requires more than mastery of core subjects and should also include demonstration of proficiency in the skills essential for lifelong learning. This requires assessing the ability of students to synthesize information and give presentations; collaborate on group projects (supervised by well-trained faculty to model and ensure shared responsibility and limit parental assistance); and pursue age appropriate work-based and service learning opportunities. New methods to assess skills and reinforce the connection between what students learn in the classroom and the real-world skills that they will need once they graduate must be developed. Statewide rubric-based assessments that measure competency can be administered locally with an effective statewide accountability system that ensures equity for all students regardless of where they live. We have seen this accomplished by technical schools with the Certificates of Occupational Proficiency and in the Work-Based Learning Plan used by Connecting Activities. Similarly, senior projects and internships can engage students and reinforce the value and importance of the 21st century competencies demonstrated through such assignments.

- **Lever IV: Accountability** - MBAE is committed to the education reform compact that has resulted in significant progress in Massachusetts - establishing high standards, holding districts accountable for meeting these, and allocating funds sufficient to ensure educational equity for all students. The proposals offered by the Task Force, particularly with regard to development of a growth model for assessing student progress and new measures to gauge the quality of teaching as part of the accountability process, hold great potential for building public confidence and growing support for our public schools. In an era of diminishing resources, a strong accountability system is an essential element in garnering taxpayer support necessary for a high quality public education system.

- **Lever V: Demonstration Vehicles** - While there is much value in the proposals offered here, we are disappointed that these rely on extending present initiatives in only 5 districts and 10 schools (with preference for those currently struggling) rather than advancing bold innovations that can bring about dramatic change. Preparing our students for jobs that do not yet exist and for life in an increasingly diverse society requires that we abandon the agrarian schedule and industrial school model for an educational approach more suited to a knowledge-based economy. This means not only extending learning time (both day *and* year) but also redefining where and when learning takes place and from whom. On-line learning presents opportunities for students of all ages. For high schools, this may include dual enrollment, credit for independent study, international travel, and work-based learning, and increased opportunities for interdisciplinary and service learning. In addition, demonstration of content mastery through end-of-course exams and proficiency in applied skills through practical assessments should take precedence over seat time in meeting school, district, and state requirements. Our schools must also maximize the advantages and potential of technology for innovation and student progress. The Board should consider opening the opportunities to apply for 21st Century School or District designation and support to the most innovative and promising proposals from any source.

There is little dispute that our children need the skills to function successfully in a competitive global economy and society. Our students' high performance on NAEP and TIMSS tests is cause for celebration but not complacency. We must support the models of excellence that exist in some of our schools and ensure that these are replicated for every child in Massachusetts while continually pursuing new and better approaches for the future. Even in a fiscally challenged environment, if we collectively commit to ensuring that every student is prepared for responsible citizenship and postsecondary success, we can reallocate the resources necessary to accomplish this goal. MBAE looks forward to working with you to get there.

For more information, please contact:

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