

# THE NEW OPPORTUNITY TO LEAD

**A vision for education in Massachusetts  
in the next 20 years**



MASSACHUSETTS  
BUSINESS ALLIANCE  
FOR EDUCATION

**Brightlines**

**Executive Summary**



## About MBAE

The Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) was established in 1988 by employers concerned about the educational attainment and skills of graduates entering the workforce. Our core work – improving public schools by influencing state policy – is driven by the business community’s commitment that all students graduate prepared for success in college, career and citizenship.



## About Brightlines

Brightlines, led by Sir Michael Barber acting in a personal capacity, brings together unrivaled global education experts who have advised, researched and written extensively on the subject. Moreover, they have also led highly successful large scale transformations in education systems across the world. Brightlines partners have worked with states and cities across the US to deliver education improvements including in Ohio, Louisiana, California, Delaware, Kentucky, Tennessee, Wisconsin and New York City. In addition, collectively they have developed, delivered and/or advised on education strategy and reforms across 6 continents and in many different countries including the United Kingdom, Ontario province in Canada, a number of states in Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Brazil, Chile, India and Pakistan.

## About the Lead Authors

Sir Michael Barber is a globally renowned education reformer who has worked on education reform in over 40 countries and has led this work for MBAE in a personal capacity. Formerly Head of the British Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit, Michael was also an author of McKinsey’s influential reports on global education systems *How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better* and *How the World’s Best Performing Education Systems Come Out on Top*. With Katelyn Donnelly and Saad Rizvi, he was coauthor of the influential reports *Oceans of Innovation* and *An Avalanche is Coming*. He is also leader of Pearson’s worldwide program of research into education policy and efficacy.

Simon Day worked with Sir Michael Barber in the British Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit where he led work on improving the performance of secondary and primary schools and supported the implementation of the highly successful London Challenge program. He has also worked in the UK Department of Education. He is currently working as a consultant on education reform in the UK in England and Wales, and has worked with a number of states in the US supporting the implementation of Race to the Top and other reforms.

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# THE NEW OPPORTUNITY TO LEAD

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Massachusetts has a new opportunity to lead and an urgent need to do so. The Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) asked us to consider what it would take for the Commonwealth's education system to advance from leading America to leading the world in preparing students for life, work and citizenship in the 21st century. That is a bold aspiration, and one we believe Massachusetts can and should pursue.

The state's education system already has many excellent qualities. It is high-performing when benchmarked against the US and the rest of the world. Massachusetts has a strong history of reform and capacity for further improvement and innovation. But it faces a number of challenges, and current efforts will not deliver the transformation needed to meet the demands of the new economy and create a society in which all young people have the opportunity to thrive.

We identify six major challenges facing Massachusetts:

### 1. The Employability Gap

The gap between what the economy demands and what the school system produces

### 2. The Knowledge Gap

The gap between what a 21st century American needs to know and what graduates of the school system actually know

### 3. The Achievement Gap

The gap in achievement between Massachusetts students as a whole and those from economically disadvantaged and under-represented minorities

### 4. The Opportunity Gap

The gap in opportunity to succeed between the children of the well-off and the children of low income families

### 5. The Global Gap

The gap between the performance of Massachusetts' education system and those in the top-performing education systems in the world

### 6. The Top Talent Gap

The gap between top-performing students in Massachusetts and top-performing students in the best-performing education systems in the world

In addition, recent evidence suggests that the state's rate of improvement has slowed and in some cases stalled; the 2013 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) results indicate that Massachusetts' performance in 4th grade reading has actually slipped backwards in the last two years. The ten-year improvement trends in NAEP between 2003 and 2013 show Massachusetts in the middle, not the front, of the pack. International comparisons from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that Massachusetts is a

long way behind the world's top performing systems, and without significant acceleration, Massachusetts can at best expect to stand still in rank order.

**To be a global leader 20 years from now will require** more than simply topping the international tables for tests in core academic subjects, although that would be a significant marker of success. It will also require that **ALL young people leave the Massachusetts school system genuinely college and career ready with the competencies needed for lifelong learning and active citizenship.** Our central conclusion is this: with the determined pursuit of the right strategies over a decade or more, the creation of the world's leading school system in Massachusetts – a system which meets all these requirements and enables all students to succeed – is an ambitious and achievable goal.

**Achieving this goal will require a new approach to reform. At its heart is a single insight: you can mandate adequacy but you cannot mandate greatness; greatness has to be unleashed.** This has profound implications. Instead of the state imposing reform to drive performance up, its task becomes to create the conditions in which schools continuously advance their own performance through improving teaching and learning. A leadership mindset needs to replace a compliance mindset across the school system. Truly stellar performance in the future will require not just setting bold aspirations, but also unlocking the talent, skill, energy and motivation of all those working and learning in the system.

Standards-based reform, as represented by the Commonwealth's 1993 Education Reform Act, has made a great contribution to American education, culminating in the multi-state development and implementation of the Common Core State Standards over the past five years. This has been the most important development in US education for a generation, and we are unequivocal that seeing through implementation of the new Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks should be the top priority for the state over the next three years. The central question, though, is what lies beyond. In seeking to answer that question, we have realized that standards-based reform will not be **enough for Massachusetts. A new paradigm will be needed to achieve the levels of performance and the closing of gaps required for Massachusetts to be world-leading.**

Globally speaking, various elements of this new paradigm are becoming apparent: the knowledge we have developed

over the past decade of what good system reform looks like; the new understanding we have of what characterizes effective implementation; much greater precision in our understanding of good teaching and learning; the increasing availability of good data; the growing power and ubiquity of modern technology and, last but not least, some impressive examples of innovation. In this report, we have attempted to combine these elements into a coherent new paradigm of reform.

We argue that, in order to bring this about, the state needs to combine the following:

- the application of the best knowledge we have of how to reform education systems (**Whole System Reform**)
- the creation of innovative capacity so the system learns rapidly what works and applies it (**Systemic Innovation**)
- successful implementation so that when things are done they are done well and benefit every school and student in the state (**Effective Implementation**)
- We have also been mindful throughout that we live in an era – one which is unlikely to end any time soon – in which public finances are under pressure and taxpayers demand transparency; they want evidence that their tax dollars deliver real benefits. The education system also needs to show it can deliver more for the resources the state has invested (**Increased Productivity**)

A system that achieved this combination would be designed to match the best in the world and have the capacity to keep getting better. **No large education system in the world, to our knowledge, has put all of these elements together over a sustained period.** The first one that does will surely not just improve faster than others; it will generate the capacity to sustain improvement and the resilience to adapt to changes in the external environment. **Given its strong platform, history of successful reform, and the evident ambition of its leaders, Massachusetts could be the first if it seizes the new opportunity to lead.**

In this report, we set out how Massachusetts could apply the notion of unleashing greatness. We argue Massachusetts could learn from the top-performing education systems in their long-term approach to reform. Both Singapore and Hong Kong set out a phased approach to reform that was planned and implemented carefully over a period of many years so that reforms deliberately built on each other. While this is much more difficult in the combative political culture

of the United States, we would argue that a similar phased approach is now needed in Massachusetts.

**In the first phase, over the next three years, Massachusetts should create the conditions for unleashing greatness.**

This will include implementing the new curriculum standards and assessments, debating the wider knowledge and skills Massachusetts wants every student to have, giving greater freedoms and flexibilities to all schools, creating new networks or clusters of schools to support peer-to-peer learning, raising the bar on the quality of teacher preparation and the quality of teachers entering the profession, creating new routes for the best teachers to progress, deploying the best leaders across the system, starting to generate greater innovation, promoting greater school-community and school-employer partnerships, and looking more closely at the use of resources at the district and school levels.

**In the second phase of reform to 2020, Massachusetts should start to see the early results from implementing these reforms.** Greater personalization of learning, building on new online curriculum materials and assessments, should become the norm. School clusters and partnerships will have become the driving force of progress and innovation from within the school system, teachers will be systematically learning from each other and the best teachers will be incentivized to work in the most challenging schools across the system. A new Innovation Collaborative will be capturing and sharing the most promising practices, especially in relation to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps.

**It is more difficult for us to predict what the third phase of reform, between 2020 and 2030, will look like.** Many of the best predictions are likely to be wrong! In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes commented famously, “The telephone is a marvellous invention but who on earth would want to use it?” In 1993, the British Broadcasting Corporation published a visionary new, long-term strategy but totally missed the Internet. Rather than specify details, therefore, we have tried instead to describe a process in which the Massachusetts education system would have the capacity to experiment, learn and apply lessons in a continuous cycle while responding intelligently and nimbly to the inevitable surprises. In this way, we hope it would reach performance levels far beyond any current system in the world.

**One thing we are clear about: in this third phase, there should be less system reform and much more systemic innovation.** Once the process of systemic innovation is set

in motion, it will take over and lead the system to places unimaginable a few years earlier.

In the report we set out our detailed ideas and recommendations about:

- World Class Standards, Curriculum, Assessment and Student Pathways
- The future Delivery System
- Developing World Class Teachers and Leaders
- Unleashing Innovation and Technology
- Closing the Opportunity Gap
- The future Funding System

In each chapter we present a mix of recommendations that would entail reforms to the current system – **System Reforms** – as well as ideas for how the education system will need to evolve and change in future – **Systemic Innovations**. Underpinning all of our recommendations is a need for Massachusetts to focus on more **Effective Implementation** and **Increased Productivity**.

Once the process of systemic innovation is set in motion, it will take over and lead the system to places unimaginable a few years earlier.

Each of our chapters is informed by this thinking. Our recommendations are underpinned by this analysis. They are intended to be a coherent set of proposals which can work together to create the new paradigm of reform that will enable Massachusetts to educate every child for future success to sustain a dynamic economy and society. This is the route to transformation. The proposals are not a list of ‘initiatives’ from which a few can be cherry picked; simply adding a new set of policy initiatives to those that already exist would simply lead to further fragmentation across the state.

A summary of our main ideas and recommendations from each chapter is presented on the next page.

## Chapter 1: The Challenge

Our first chapter sets out the context and the current state of performance. It starts with the undoubted success of Massachusetts over the past two decades: Massachusetts is the highest performing state in the United States, and the PISA results of December 2013 suggest that the state compares well with many systems around the world. However, its performance falls short of the best-performing countries, and a number of others are improving faster. **If Massachusetts is to become the best-performing education system in the world, it will need to make faster progress.** Moreover, we identify a number of significant challenges that the education system will need to overcome, which we characterize as six gaps and a plateau.

## Chapter 2: World Class Standards, Curriculum, Assessment and Student Pathways

In this chapter, we argue the Commonwealth must prioritize implementation of the *Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks* in tandem with developing new assessments that provide the real time information and data that educators need to inform instruction and address individual needs. **The combination of new standards and assessments provides the best opportunity in a generation to improve academic outcomes across the state.** We also set out the need for the state to develop and adopt new models of schooling which are student-centered and personalized: where students can learn anytime, anywhere; where teaching is more tailored to their needs and aspirations; where students play a much more active role in their own learning; and where they move ahead once they have mastery of the relevant knowledge and skills. In addition, the state needs to address the Top Talent Gap by establishing a statewide network which can provide opportunities to enable gifted and talented students, from whatever background, to excel in a wide range of fields.

## Chapter 3: The Future Delivery System

There is a global trend in the highest-performing systems towards ‘unleashing greatness’. This means reducing regulation and devolving budgets and responsibility to the school level, thus enabling schools to take charge of their own destiny. **At the moment, paradoxically, the state provides more freedom and flexibility to low-performing schools than it does to the rest. This has to change.** We recommend that Massachusetts should grant the management

flexibilities shown to be effective in improving turnaround schools to leaders in all schools. The state should couple this devolution of authority with systems to hold educators accountable for their success in improving student performance. The devolution of autonomy to schools and school leaders should include flexibility to select proven school models that best meet student needs, so Massachusetts should eliminate the current charter school cap and encourage the development of diverse school models. As schools take more control of their own destinies, the drive for improvement and innovation will increasingly come from deep partnerships with other schools, rather than through a traditional administrative hierarchy. This implies a new and changing role for school districts, and we recommend a district redesign competition that will invent new models of district administration fit for the 21st century and consistent with growing school autonomy.

## Chapter 4: World Class Teachers and Leaders

High standards for students must be matched by similar high standards for educators. Evidence shows that the quality of teaching and the quality of school leadership are the two most important factors affecting student learning. **Massachusetts must redouble its own efforts to redesign the recruitment, preparation, support and evaluation of its educators.** A thorough review of all teacher preparation provision is required, going back to first principles. New models of provision, especially those led by groups of successful schools, should be developed and implemented. Licensure and tenure must be reformed to set a higher bar for entry and progression. We propose a higher bar for professional licensure. To recruit and retain highly skilled teachers, the system must offer career ladders for master and advanced teachers to apply their expertise to solve problems, especially in schools serving low-income students. Massachusetts should develop a much more systematic approach to identifying, developing and deploying principals. The state should be playing a more active role in the appointment of principals to Level 4 schools at least, provide specialized training for principals and recognize and reward principals that have served in the most challenging schools and locations.

## Chapter 5: Unleashing Innovation

In this chapter, we consider how Massachusetts can become the epicenter of education innovation. We explain how

Massachusetts can foster the rapid development and application of innovative technologies to close the gap between what students are taught and what they will need to know and do in the 21st century to become both productive citizens and thriving members of the workforce. **Such technology will enable more personalized and blended learning for students and provide instantaneous data on both student progress and educator performance.** An Accelerated Learning Challenge that provides incentives for developing such technologies, in collaboration with educators, should be implemented immediately. Massachusetts must substantially upgrade the infrastructure (e.g. high speed data networks and networked devices to link students and teachers) to support such technological innovations. It also needs to create an Innovation Collaborative Network that brings together educators, education technology innovators and venture capitalists to develop a common dialogue on innovation and to oversee the Massachusetts Accelerated Learning Challenge. In time, this network would become a recognized brand, not just in the state but across the nation.

## Chapter 6: Closing the Opportunity Gap

In this chapter, we argue schools can do much on their own to close the Achievement and Opportunity Gaps that exist. Indeed, many schools in Massachusetts have already demonstrated what it takes. However, we recognize there are a wider set of factors behind these gaps, which in many cases exist from birth and grow wider through the school system, where students from disadvantaged backgrounds and low-income families have less access to the wider opportunities outside school that many families take for granted. **If Massachusetts is to achieve the best learning outcomes in the world in 20 years' time, investment in high quality pre-K education, starting immediately, is essential.** We also recommend building on the work of the Extended Learning Time movement, to support a greater number of schools to introduce an extended day or year, especially in low-income communities. We argue for the introduction of Personal Opportunity Plans that set out how students who fall behind will catch up. Massachusetts should also promote the lessons learned from the Wraparound Zone Initiative to develop stronger school and community partnerships, and promote new and innovative partnerships with business and higher education that enable deeper connections between school, community, career, and lifelong education.

## Chapter 7: Funding

In this chapter, we set out a revised set of principles on which an effective and fair funding system might be based. We test the current system against them and **we propose changes that would involve a greater devolution of resources to schools combined with a strong focus on productivity at district and school levels.** We argue that, as in 1993, it is time to go back to first principles and rethink the way funding is allocated. Above all, our argument is that all public funding is intended to benefit students, and spending not allocated directly to schools therefore needs a higher burden of justification. We recommend that a minimum proportion of total funding must be delegated to and controlled by schools, and that the weighted student funding formula, on which the foundation budget is based, should be extended fully to the school level, ensuring that expenditures directly serve the student. In addition, we argue Productivity Reviews should be conducted for schools and districts, to ensure every dollar of taxpayers money is being used effectively. We believe this idea should be piloted as soon as possible, to enable districts and the state to learn rapidly and deeply about what it takes to drive better outcomes per dollar. As a result, the system could improve its performance without increasing spending, by releasing inefficiently-used funding and allocating it where it would make a greater difference.

## Conclusion

Our task has been to offer a view from outside the system, and to be purposefully provocative about what the next phase of reform should look like. The debate which MBAE will lead following the publication of this report provides an unparalleled opportunity for all stakeholders to engage in the deliberations that are vital to making the right choices about what comes next. MBAE is committed to building a coalition of support that is as essential to driving improvement today as it was 20 years ago.

As the title of our report makes clear, we believe Massachusetts has a new opportunity to lead. We urge all those who contribute to the leadership of education in the Commonwealth to seize that opportunity. Then, for the rest of the United States and even the world, the education system in Massachusetts could indeed become that shining 'city on a hill'.