



Henry Thomas III & Rick Burnes Receive Second Annual MBAE Awards in Recognition of Their Substantial Contributions to Educational Equity and Opportunity

Incoming Commissioner Pedro Martinez Offers a Vision for Massachusetts at Education Awards Luncheon

June 3, 2025 (BOSTON) – At a luncheon today, the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) presented awards to Henry Thomas III, long-term leader of the Urban League of Springfield, and Rick Burnes, venture capitalist and well-known philanthropist, in recognition of the substantial contributions they have made to educational equity and opportunity over many decades of service.

Pedro Martinez, in his first appearance in Massachusetts since being named the state’s next Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, delivered remarks outlining his early vision for the role, underscoring the importance of listening, building relationships and gaining insight into teaching and learning across the Commonwealth.

“My first priority is to understand what’s working and where we need to do more to support our students,” Martinez said. “The best way to do that is by showing up—listening to students, visiting classrooms, and seeing firsthand how Massachusetts’ vision for education is taking shape.”

Mr. Martinez, now CEO of Chicago Public Schools, was introduced by Katherine Craven, Chair of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Henry Thomas III received the MBAE Paul Reville Leadership in Education Award in recognition of more than five decades of leading change and advocating for his community of Springfield. A long-term leader of the Urban League of Springfield, Mr. Thomas served on the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Board of Higher Education, the University of Massachusetts Board of Trustees and the Board of the University of Massachusetts Building authority. In all these roles and in so many ways, Mr. Thomas was an equity warrior, standing up for Black, Brown and low-income youth.

“I can’t imagine a more fitting recipient of this award than Henry Thomas,” said Paul Reville, who presented Mr. Thomas with the award. “His career exemplifies all the civic virtues we so need today: an energetic commitment to excellence and justice, integrity, idealism, authenticity and a warm, joyful spirit.”

The Paul Reville Leadership in Education Award was established in honor of MBAE's co-founder, Paul Reville, for his lifetime of service in support of student success. Professor Reville served nearly five years as the state's Secretary of Education, chaired the Massachusetts State Board of Education, and founded the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy. He currently serves as the Francis Keppel Professor of Practice of Educational Policy and Administration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Rick Burnes received the MBAE Jack Rennie Award for Business Impact in Education in recognition of his tireless support and advocacy for improvements in public education and in Boston Public Schools. A co-founder of Charles River Ventures, one of the oldest and most successful venture capital firms in the U.S., Mr. Burnes is a passionate philanthropist with a focus on education. He sits on the Board of the Boston Plan for Excellence, which trains teachers to drive exceptional student outcomes. He was one of the founders of Boston Business Leaders for Education, which works with individual Boston public schools and supports reforms that have led to some success in transforming under-performing schools. He Chaired the Board of the Museum of Science and WGBH.

"Over the years and across so many initiatives, Rick has maintained a relentless focus on putting students first," said Bill Walczak, Chair of the Board of MBAE. "His business background helped him focus on the most important levers of change."

The Jack Rennie Business Impact award was established in honor of MBAE's co-founder Jack Rennie who was chairman and CEO of Pacer Systems, a Billerica-based technology company, when he joined with Paul Reville to lead a five-year push for sweeping reform in the state's K-12 education system, resulting in the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993.

"Here in Massachusetts, we believe in the transformative power of education, and the impact of investing in it at every level. That's why our administration has invested in programs that set everyone up for success — from Gateway to Pre-K to cost free community college — because we know that education is the core competitive strength of our economy, and we want to make sure that everyone has access to a brighter future. Leaders like Henry and Rick help us get there. Congratulations to them both for receiving this year's MBAE awards," said Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll.

This is the second year MBAE has given awards in recognition of its co-founders Paul Reville and Jack Rennie.

About MBAE

The Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education is a non-profit, non-partisan organization founded in 1988 that, together with our members, promotes and supports continuous improvement in our schools and innovation that is needed to ensure that EVERY student receives a high-quality education that prepares them for success in college, career, and citizenship.

The MBAE Affiliate Network, made up of 43 chambers of commerce and business and industry associations from around the state, works to present a unified voice of business on education policy issues. Network members share MBAE's commitment to ensuring every student gets the education they need to be successful.

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