

Introduction

In 2005, Massachusetts public school students scored the highest in the country on the national annual tests (the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP) of fourth and eighth graders in reading and mathematics—an extraordinary accomplishment that has now been repeated for over a decade. Not only that, when you break down international comparisons of scholastic performance by state, Massachusetts does very well against all the countries of the world. In 2015, Massachusetts eighth graders finished second only to Singapore in science.

I was part of this successful effort and, at a crucial time, at the center of it. I have watched as many others have explained the reasons for our success. They usually get a piece of it right. More recently, as society has become more polarized, the reasons given have taken on a more partisan bent. Those favoring choice cite the great success of our charter schools. Strong proponents of public schools point to the \$2 billion in new money over the first seven years as key. Guess what—they are both right.

I started writing this book primarily to document what I knew had happened as we implemented the Education Reform Act of 1993. I then began to realize that I had a lot more to contribute to the debate because of my unique background. I started out as a classroom teacher and, for me, that made a big difference. For one thing, I came to know that most teachers ignore new initiatives because they have seen that they will eventually be replaced. Fads in education are commonplace. Teachers also knew when new ideas or programs were actually going to help them in their work.

A Story of Leadership

In Massachusetts, our 1993 law told us what to do, and we went about those tasks with fidelity and success. There were scores of people who showed

leadership and provided the tools for people like me. We can start with the Republican governors and Democratic legislative leadership. It was a remarkable thing for a conservative Republican governor (William Weld) who had made significant reductions to balance the budget to announce that he was committing to \$2 billion in new money over seven years. The goal was to bring all districts up to what the law called a foundation level. He pledged to do so without raising taxes, and that happened! This commitment to the foundation budget continued through two additional Republican governors who were part of the Weld regime, Paul Cellucci and Jane Swift, and was then followed by a rival Republican (Mitt Romney), a Democrat (Deval Patrick), and most recently, the 2015 return of a Weld protégé, Charlie Baker. Democratic leaders in the House and Senate have also turned over several times. Despite all these changes, all top elected officials remained faithful to the tenets of the 1993 law.

Many others showed courage and leadership, and that was a fundamental factor in our success. However, a lot of people credit one individual businessperson, and I count myself among those. I tell the tale about the remarkable Jack Rennie. The larger context was a proud state that had become weary over the fits and starts of “fixing public education.” The timing was right for a catalyst, and Jack took full advantage. He also worked about as hard as anyone could, and met with anyone willing. He had a very focused message accompanying a very thoughtful report commissioned by his organization, the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE): we all need to come together, put aside our differences, and find ways to move forward together. Or as he liked to say, “Everyone needs to get in the boat and drink a little castor oil.”

Looking back, I feel pretty confident in saying that, were it not for the appointment of Bob Antonucci as commissioner of education, success would have been only modest. Bob brought me in as his deputy and together we were the instruments in connecting the policy of the law with the realities on the ground. I like to say we were the safecrackers—an image that will resonate with those old enough to remember when you had to carefully move the dial back and forth between the right numbers to open a safe. We had to impose mandates from above, but we always went back into the field to make sure they made sense to the people doing the actual work.

We were not always successful. There were bumps, bruises, and setbacks. In fact, a substantial part of our story is how we overcame adversity. We

persevered by focusing, working hard, and occasionally benefitting from luck.

About This Book

I have organized the book into five parts. The first four parts chronicle my career from being bowled over by a group of ninth graders to becoming the successor to Horace Mann as the twenty-second commissioner of education. Along the way, I offer “Driscoll truisms,” commonsense insights gleaned from my years as an education leader. In each chapter, I also share some personal leadership skills that I believe contributed to the success of education reform in Massachusetts, in a concluding section entitled “Reflections and Lessons Learned.”

In the final part of the book, I offer further reflection on the implementation of statewide reform, highlighting things we did that could be borrowed by education leaders in states. These are easy to explain but difficult to pull off because they rely on political courage and sticking with commitments.

One of my favorite truisms is, “When someone makes a definitive remark about public education, you should cut it in half, and then cut it in half again.” As far as I can tell, the divide between those who think the system needs to be completely overhauled and those who defend it has become wider than ever. I will be making the case in a number of areas that each camp is partially right. You really cannot fully support a system where people are paid according to how long they have been there instead of how good they are. However, for those who think the system is a failure, I will also make the case that student achievement is alive and well in America and that much has changed for the better since I began my career.

The importance of the personal side of leadership was not something I had thought a lot about until I began to write this book. As I unfold this story that some refer to as the “Massachusetts Miracle,” I recognize that my and Bob Antonucci’s unique personalities were critical. In one sense, we could not have been more different. He is feisty and emotional, while I have a much calmer approach. However, we were remarkably alike in our effort, our ability to interact with others, and our determination to not forget our modest family beginnings or life in the classroom.

That leads to another one of my truisms: “Reform needs to be about sameness and difference.” Who would not want to see a high school that provides

strong academic offerings in the four basic subject areas of math, English, science, and social studies? But we also need to offer other experiences that address individual differences. My mother of ten liked to say about her children, “They are all different, thank God!”

There are undoubtedly those who will say this is Massachusetts and they have advantages that other states do not have. While that is true, it does not explain the bulk of our success. There were years when we were not even among the top ten states tested. Something great happened, and I hope to explain a lot of it.

Writing the last chapter, which looks into the future five years from now, was fun for me. We are at an interesting time as states are being given more autonomy under the Every Student Succeeds Act, the 2015 federal law known as ESSA. While I liken ESSA to giving the keys back to the drivers who caused the accident in the first place, this could be a remarkable period, and I still remain an optimist.

I’ve been lucky, and as I say, luck is part of the story. Few classroom teachers eventually get to play a major role at the state level and participate in various national education endeavors (and even get invited to the White House). But I like to think I never forgot my roots. For most of my life, six older sisters and three older brothers have been only too happy to remind me of my rightful place.

I hope readers of this book will laugh often and think a lot. My ultimate wish is for what I’ve set down here to help others make a difference for students.