Target gaps in achievement early, before they take root

The Nov. 15 editorial “Fourth-grade test scores sound a warning bell” highlights the Commonwealth’s dismal performance in fourth-grade reading and raises questions about likely causes of the problem. While the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress rankings show Massachusetts as achieving top scores among all states, a startling 53 percent of Massachusetts fourth graders scored below proficient in reading.

Achievement gaps and the developmental foundation for literacy and learning take root in early childhood, long before children enter school. A new study by Stanford researchers identified an early language gap for toddlers at 18 months. The gap grows wider by age 2, putting children on two different learning pathways that influence their chances of success in school and beyond.

As interim superintendent of the Wrentham Public Schools, I know that schools cannot meet this challenge alone. Expecting elementary schools to see that every child is caught up isn’t realistic or cost-effective.

We will not succeed in closing these gaps until we target resources to early learning. These investments pay off for children, families, and communities in the short and long term.

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The writer is former president and executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents.

Without resources, ed reform push is doomed to fail

Your editorial “Fourth-grade test scores sound a warning bell” (11/15/13) glides over a crucial issue. You cite the concern of Mitchell Chester, state commissioner for elementary and secondary education, that the decline in reading scores is linked to the loss of elementary school reading specialists over the past few years as a result of budget cuts. But you stigmatize as “counterproductive grumbling” superintendents’ concerns about the concurrent implementation timelines of two massive new initiatives — the adoption of Common Core standards and the new teacher evaluations.

You omit a third large mandate: the pilot assessment this year of the new Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers. You denigrate superintendents’ objections that all this is “too much, too soon” as “weak excuses,” and to clinch the case, you refer to the MCAS adoption a decade ago when, despite “similar complaints,” schools “adapted admirably.”

What you have left out is that the education reform law of 1993 provided schools with increased resources to implement the new curriculum frameworks and MCAS testing regimen. State funding for public K-12 education rose 8 percent per year from 1993 to 2002. Since then, adjusted for inflation, it has fallen 8 percent. Since the fiscal crisis, local funding for education has also declined.

What you’re calling for is a formula for frustration and failure. It does not do justice to the legitimate needs of schools or to the grand bargain of education reform. If we want higher standards and accountability, we have to provide more resources, not less.

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