

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TEST SCORES RAISE CONCERN — AND DEBATE

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.

Letters should be written exclusively to the Globe and include name, address, and daytime telephone number. They should be 200 words or fewer. All are subject to editing. Letters to the Editor, The Boston Globe, P.O. Box 55819, Boston, MA 02205-5819; letter@globe.com; fax: 617-929-2098

Patrick making concerted push on early education

YOUR NOV. 15 editorial “Fourth-grade test scores sound a warning bell” appropriately spotlights Massachusetts’ decline in a national fourth-grade reading assessment. While we celebrate our first-place scores for English and math for our fourth- and eighth-graders, these fourth-grade readers have our attention. Closing academic achievement gaps and ensuring reading proficiency by the third grade are central to the governor’s plan to promote growth and opportunity across the Commonwealth.

We’ve implemented strategies toward reaching the governor’s education agenda, and made unprecedented investments in K-12 education and increased investment in early education so that our students are prepared for kindergarten, elementary school, and beyond.

Our administration is making changes to ensure that we are providing high-quality early education. We have convened a panel of experts on early literacy, created by legislation signed by Governor Patrick. We are also developing practices across agencies and schools to build children’s early literacy skills from prekindergarten through third grade as part of a statewide strategy to enhance program quality and improve achievement outcomes.

As a former public school superintendent, I know firsthand the commitment and dedication that are required to make sure our schools succeed. Through my visits to schools and in conversations with superintendents, teachers, and parents, I see the great work schools are doing to make certain that all students have quality learning opportunities in their earliest years. The Patrick administration is committed to ensuring that our fourth graders reach the same high marks in reading that Massachusetts students have consistently achieved in other assessments.

MATTHEW H. MALONE
*Secretary of education
Commonwealth
of Massachusetts
Boston*

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 timetables 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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JFY Networks is a nonprofit provider of blended learning programs to high schools and community colleges.