

# INCHING TOWARD REFORM

BY DAVE DENISON

**W**hen public schools were still young, an innovation came along that would change schooling forever. The inventor, in the words of one admirer, “deserves to be ranked among the best contributors to learning and science, if not among the greatest benefactors of mankind.” The year was 1841 and the magical new technology was the blackboard.

Nearly 20 years later, Elizabeth Peabody was part of a movement that was meant to dramatically improve the lives of children. She objected to the way graded schools treated students as little robots. Peabody urged teachers to regard their students as “children in society.” She spoke of “a commonwealth or republic of children.” In 1860 in Boston, Peabody founded the first English-speaking kindergarten in the nation. Soon kindergartens were seen not only as new models for child-friendly education but as a promising way to cure an array of urban social ills. Middle-class women went into the slum neighborhoods to save children from lives of poverty.

These educational artifacts are unearthed in *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform*, by David Tyack and Larry Cuban. It’s a useful book, because it describes Americans’ consistently high (almost utopian) hopes for public schools and, at the same time, the gradual pace of change in the nation’s schools. Some innovations, like the chalkboard, became rapidly accepted and had great staying power. Others, like kindergartens, were integrated into the system and fundamentally changed along the way (most are not run as little “commonwealths” but as introductions to learning in the graded school).

And so it goes with “education reform.” The promises are great; change comes slowly. This is almost a natural law that governs school reform. It is also a good starting place in understanding the latest round of changes to the educational system in Massachusetts. It’s been four years since the Legislature passed, and the Governor

signed, the Education Reform Act of 1993. Few who have any connection to the public school system here — or any sense of history — believe the schools have been “reformed” in the broadest sense. But in ways the reports in this *CommonWealth* show, Massachusetts is at least inching toward reform.

**T**he accomplishments of the Education Reform Act tend to be most impressive to those who had something to do with getting the bill passed into law. Those who took on the monumentally difficult task of changing the way the state finances schools, or the ordeal of getting compromises through the Legislature know how tough it is to move a large system a small way. But you can find teachers all around the state who believe the law has done little or nothing to improve their school, and you can find parents who have no idea what changes education reform made.

In our reports, we look at the five most important areas the Education Reform Act addressed: 1) school finance; 2) the need for tougher standards and regular assessment; 3) improving the quality of teaching; 4) giving schools more autonomy and less bureaucratic interference; and, 5) fostering change and innovation. One can acquire a surplus of opinions about education in four months of planning and editing a magazine such as this one. One can even come close to the point of thinking he may grasp certain

fundamentals of school finance. So by way of introduction, here’s an overview of where Massachusetts finds itself, in this editor’s opinion, with respect to each of those five pieces of terrain.

● **SCHOOL FINANCE.** The state has made a great leap forward by requiring each town and city to spend an appropriate part of their local budget on schools. It clearly makes sense that more state money should go to those places where property wealth is low. The state finance formulas are not perfectly fair and can never be made perfectly fair. For now, the bias is to err on the side of those districts that historically

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have had the most underfunded schools (see page 32 for our primer on school funding). A key concept here is the “tax effort” that each community makes. There is still a wide variation in how much each community taxes itself for school spending. Yet almost no one in any town or city knows what their “school tax” amounts to. Homeowners may know they pay \$12 or \$16 per thousand dollars of assessed value in property tax. How much of that goes to schools? State law uses a calculation based on property wealth and per capita income to come up with an adjusted “school tax” rate. According to economist Ed Moscovitch, the state average for this adjusted school tax is about \$8 per thousand. But the town of Athol taxes about 56 cents per thousand for schools, while the school tax in Newton is \$4.62, in Milton \$8.11 and in Worcester \$13.69. Like everything about school finance, the amount of local effort made for schools is poorly understood. The most democratic action the state could take at this juncture is to begin to publish comprehensible information about how school funding works across the state. A set of indicators should be devised and popularized.

◆ **STANDARDS.** There is still a good deal of resistance to statewide standardized tests. But the perennial arguments about testing tend to get caught up in a false choice. Done properly, testing can give us necessary information about whether students are learning what is important. It doesn’t mean there aren’t other important things that need to go on in the classrooms. To the extent that mainstream talk about school reform is all about test scores we will be stuck with a maddeningly shallow discussion. But for an example of how tests can be used to generate excitement about achievement, take a look at what’s happening in Everett and Worcester (page 68).

◆ **BETTER TEACHING.** Too many teachers seem to get caught up in the idea that they are being abused by the system. When Board of Education chairman John Silber criticized the soft-headedness of some education schools, there were teachers who took it as another reason to feel unappreciated. Indeed, there is strong sentiment among education leaders that Silber’s style is counter-productive. “This is not an adversarial business,” former Board of Education chairman Martin Kaplan told us. “My belief is that change in an education system requires the participation and buy-in of 60,000 educators.” That is certainly true, but there is something false about casting Silber as an obstacle. Silber

**The most democratic action the state could take is to explain school finance.**

does us some good by speaking boldly and directly — the education profession tends to be full of people talking jargon and mush. Clearly, there are times when Silber doesn’t know what he’s talking about (recently he scolded a Plymouth sixth-grader for supposedly misspelling “Plimoth Plantation”). But teachers, like anyone else, are free to take part in a vigorous dialogue without assuming the role of public whiners. Perhaps it’s only a small minority who are so easily demoralized. It’s worth understanding what the job is like these days for a hard-working, well-educated and resilient teacher (see page 58).

◆ **MORE AUTONOMY.** This is the rockiest ground. Education reform so far has been strong in “top-down” methods but weak from the bottom up. One principal told us, “I really hate what I see parents being able to do in the schools. I think parents think they’re the educators; I think parents blackmail the principal. And it’s because of ed reform.” Not many observers think Massachusetts has found a way to create meaningful parental involvement in the schools (see page 91). But there are models out there, and they have to do with communities learning to address the common interest in school reform, which doesn’t mean “micro-managing.” *Teaching the New Basic Skills*, by Richard Murnane and Frank Levy, gives an especially compelling example (see review, page 105).

◆ **CHANGE AND INNOVATION.** The press has little interest in reporting on “best practices.” Most of the media coverage of what really goes on inside schools is left to local weekly newspapers, which are seldom up to the job. Within the education profession there is a lot of talk about new and innovative practices, but the public needs to be brought into the loop.

What the Education Reform Act tried to do in Massachusetts is to override the dysfunctions of localism in a system that preserves local control. It’s always been easy enough to participate in neighborhood school events, but the citizen role in the larger education system is weak. The state’s effort has reasserted that we have an interest in our entire community of schools — that we can think of education as members of a commonwealth. The “top-down” experts have advanced that cause. Now, a broader movement for education reform has a chance to continue the work from the bottom up, and from the inside out. ■

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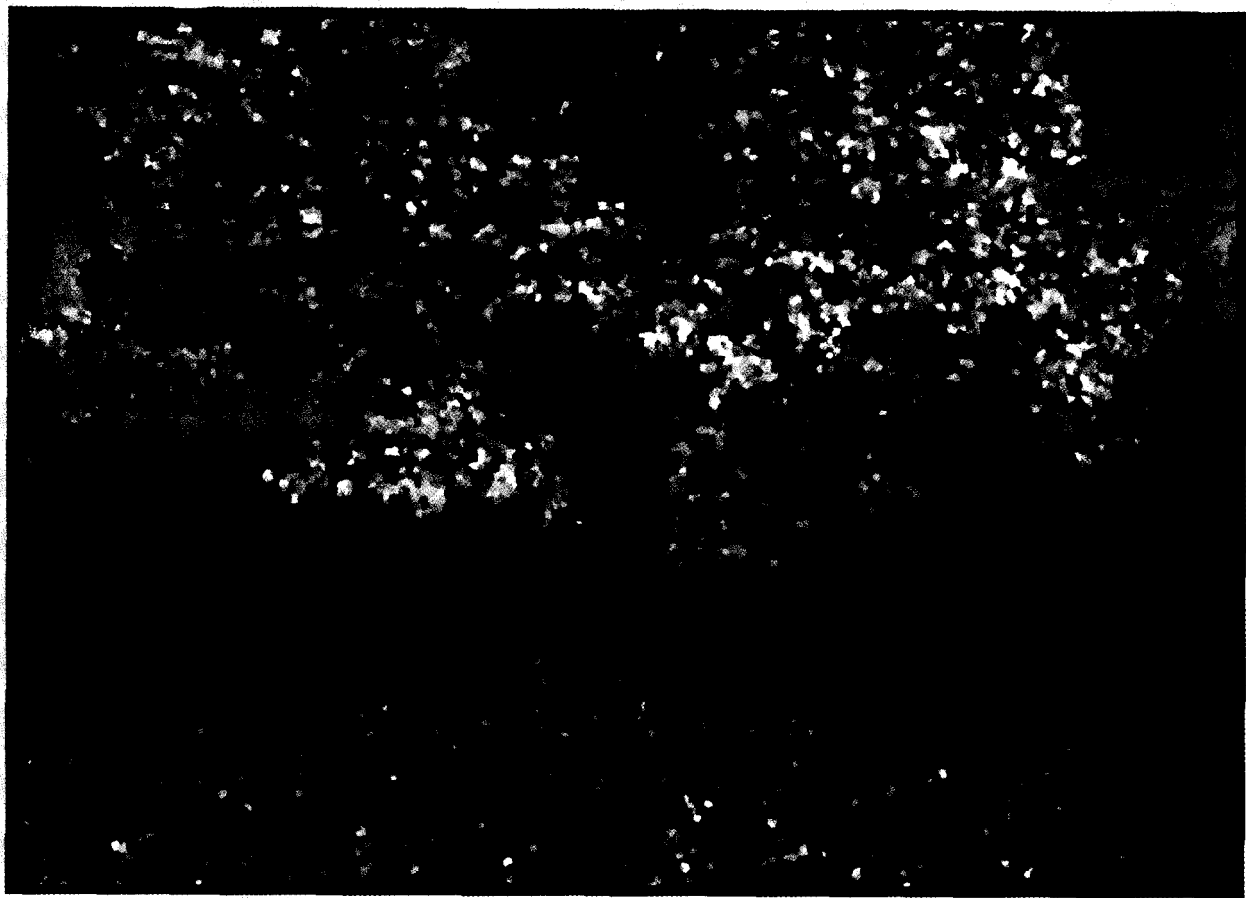
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# Framingham: back to the future

BY DAVE DENISON

FRAMINGHAM — Talk about your laboratories of democracy! This town is a veritable research complex when it comes to studying, debating, and re-studying what kind of municipal government could or should work best.

For more than 25 years, arguments about turning this oversized town into a City-with-Someone-in-charge have been a regular feature of Framingham politics. This spring voters went to the polls, in what has become almost a biennial ritual, to have their say again: City or town?

With 63,000 residents, Framingham is the size of a small city. But voters take a stubborn pride in maintaining a town form of government. This may be, it is often said, the largest town in America. The April 8 referendum wasn't close. About 68 percent of the 12,190 who voted were pro-town: Instead of a mayor, they'll keep a town manager; instead of a city council, a Board of Selectmen. And, of course, an elected Town Meeting.

But because there is something close to an unquenchable appetite here for discussing governmental mechanics, that didn't quite settle the matter. The warrant for the annual Town Meeting carried an article

proposing to cut the size of the Town Meeting from 204 representatives to 136. Figuring that meant another good round of debate on the eternal questions of "what makes democracy work?" and "can citizens govern themselves?" I made plans to attend the meeting.

Driving into town, it's hard to work up a sense that the questions matter much — at least, if you come in (as most people do) by way of the Massachusetts Turnpike and then the Rt. 30 and Rt. 9 commercial corridors. You are in the Shopper's World vortex. Traffic, malls, chain stores, fast-food, quick lubes... This is the geography of nowhere, in author William James Kunstler's words. What kind of "town" life is there to preserve in a place like this?

But if you follow Concord Avenue to the old downtown you catch up with Framingham's past. The big thriving businesses have long since moved out to Where the Cars Are. But government has never had the same

need to be where the action is, so town offices are tucked away in the lithic Memorial Building at the center of town.

Inside the Memorial Building is Nevins Hall — almost certainly the grandest hall in the Commonwealth for conducting a Town Meeting. Built in 1928 and recently refurbished, Nevins Hall is everything the soul-less commercial corridor is not. It's the Framingham that honors its history and tradition.

When you step into the auditorium, you are struck first by the gargantuan American flag that forms the backdrop for the stage at the front. The hall is overseen by a graceful U-shaped gallery that gives the square room a circular feel. New paint, better lighting, and a sophisticated speaker system provided by Framingham-based Bose, Inc., are part of the recent improvements. The well-polished hardwood floors make the place seem fit for a dance marathon — all that's missing is the Big Band music.

By electing to remain a town and keep its Town Meeting, Framingham could be seen as a national model of how municipal government can be run with wider citizen participation than a city council allows. In effect, this is a continuing experiment in running a small city with its own legislature. But as fine as that may sound in theory, has it made any difference over the years?

I put the question to Deborah Blumer as we spoke shortly before the debate on reducing the size of the meeting. Ms. Blumer has been a member of Town Meeting since the early 1970s. She served on a Charter Commission that recommended

## FRAMINGHAM

**Founded:** 1700

**Population:** 63,366 (1994)

**Town Meeting:** Representative,  
204 elected members

### FACTS:

- Largest town in Massachusetts still holding town meetings.
- Until 1996, the town had only a three-member Board of Selectmen and no town manager. Voters increased Board to five members, and a town manager and chief financial officer have been hired.

