

# Next Stop for the Grassroots Movement: Education Policymaking

DANA MOHLER-FARIA

For the first time in many years, Massachusetts has an “Education Governor.” Swept into the corner office on the strength of a historic grassroots movement and a mission of civic renewal, Gov. Deval Patrick has put education at the top of his list of priorities—and it’s little wonder why. Like so many who have experienced success in the Commonwealth, and so many more who anxiously await their chance to do great things, Patrick understands the awesome transformative power of education.

But an extraordinary task lies ahead. Though Massachusetts may be revered as the cradle of public education in America, recent data show that nearly half the state’s Hispanic 9th-graders and more than a third of its black, urban and low-income freshmen fail to graduate from high school four years later.

Though Massachusetts is known throughout the world as a hub of higher education, the state currently ranks 46th in the nation when it comes to the per-capita investments it makes in our community colleges, state colleges and public university campuses.

And though Massachusetts business leaders, politicians, educators and citizens alike increasingly agree that early childhood education constitutes the most critical phase of an individual’s lifelong development, such programs have lacked the critical resources and attention they deserve.

Beneath this set of acute ailments, however, lies an even more troubling and chronic problem: little connectivity and sporadic coordination between the three principal segments of the education pipeline. It’s important to emphasize that this predicament is not the result of apathetic or unresponsive educators. By and large, Massachusetts teachers and faculty—be they in pre-schools, K-12 districts, community colleges, or four-year colleges and universities—approach their work with great dedication and alacrity, and typically do so against the backdrop of salary inequity and unpredictable levels of state and local support.

Massachusetts educators at every level share equally in a noble mission: to prepare their students to succeed. But while the concept of an educational pipeline may seem obvious, precious and few are the occasions in which educators have either reason or opportunity to come together and behave as integral components of a much larger system of learning. It’s a problem not of *people* but of *policy*.

For too long we’ve operated as independent education silos. Even within these silos, there are important barriers to break down. For example, for years, the five public institutions in my region (Bridgewater State College,

Bristol Community College, Cape Cod Community College, Massasoit Community College and the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth) behaved as if they had nothing in common with one another and had little reason to cooperate.

Recently, however, these institutions have come together in Southeastern Massachusetts with an eye toward streamlining the path to student success. In 2003, we began a new dialogue through the “Connect Partnership” to improve transfer articulation, harmonize basic curricula in writing and math and share resources.

Connect showed us what is possible within the public higher education community. In regions all over Massachusetts, the walls separating our institutions have become more permeable—all for the betterment of our students and the public we serve. More important, though, Connect demonstrated a whole new world of possibilities made possible by beginning a new kind of conversation.

And that’s exactly the kind of conversation we’re trying to have throughout Massachusetts with the entire education community from early childhood through graduate education.

People are ready, willing and even eager to have this conversation. In the days immediately following the November election, Deval Patrick convened dozens of transition working groups, which held open meetings to solicit citizen input on an array of topics. Thousands turned out to participate and share their views and ideas. Their input has already informed governing in Massachusetts by focusing the higher education policy debate on the issues that are of most concern to people, including rising college costs, the need for immediate capital improvements on college campuses, instability in public higher education funding and the need to create partnerships between higher education and business, communities and schools.

Of course, policymaking naturally becomes more specialized and sophisticated as one drills down into its seemingly endless layers. It’s up to all of us to ensure that the public doesn’t lose its voice as we descend further into the details, and it’s up to every citizen to stay informed, interested and connected.

Building a coordinated pre-K-16 education pipeline means that the words of a district superintendent are as relevant as a university faculty member; that the suggestions of a hard-working community college student are on par with an early childhood special education teacher; and the proposals of a high school senior get the same consideration as those of a college president.

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*Dana Mohler-Faria is Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick’s special adviser for Education and president of Bridgewater State College. Email: dmohlerfaria@bridgew.edu.*