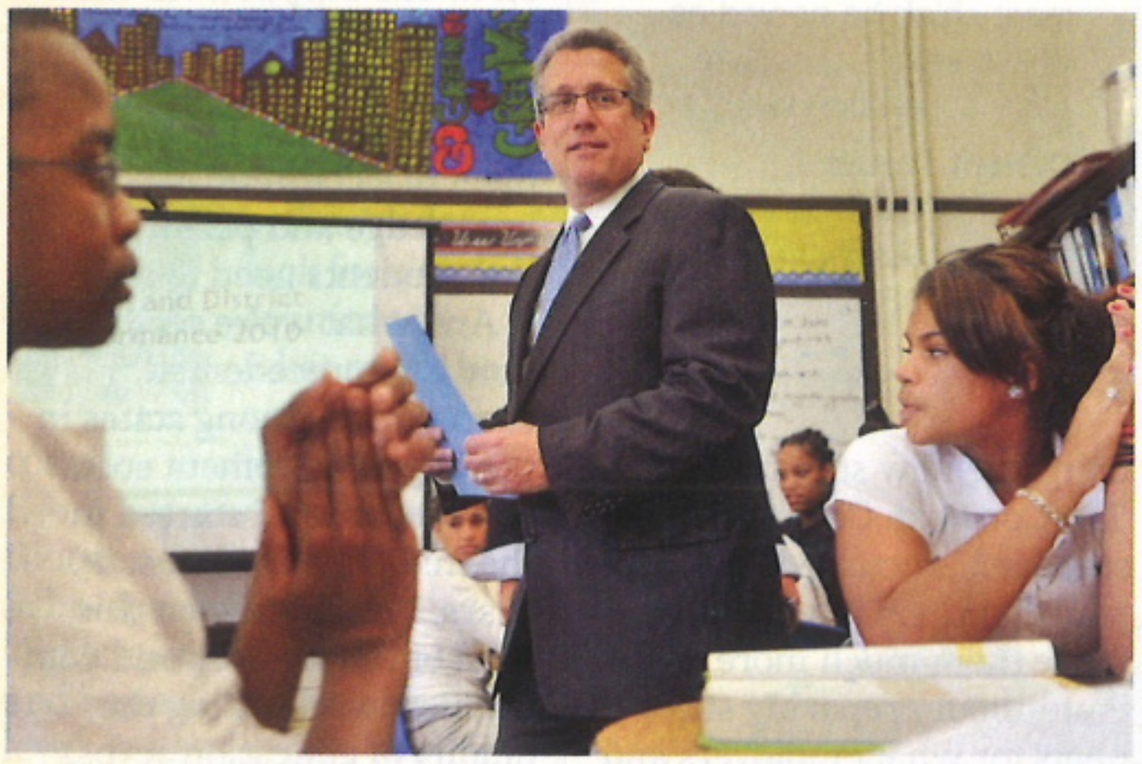
leadership

MITCHELL CHESTER



Massachusetts, already strong in education, keeps pushing. BY ERICH STROM

TAKE A LOOK AT the last four Nation's Report Cards going back to 2005, and you'll find Massachusetts ensconced in first place, in both reading and math. In a country with so many troubled districts, the venerable Massachusetts school system stands out as a city upon a hill. But even as Mitchell Chester, the commissioner of education, recognizes his state's "tremendous track record," he has been unafraid to point out, and address, the inequities of a system in which "many students are getting a world-class education, but most students are not."

Chester embraces the state-led movement to transform education. He served on the committee that first proposed the Common Core, and he paved the way for Massachusetts to lend its own standards expertise to build even better ones for the country. And now he's chairing another multistate effort, PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers), giving him a chance to develop an ambitious "next-generation" assessment model linked to the new standards, with open-ended tasks "that look more like assignments than tests." As he says, "It's the next logical step."

Q The Massachusetts school system has a sterling reputation. What's the secret of the state's success?
A You can trace Massachusetts' commitment to public education back to Horace Mann, establishing the first statewide education system for its citizens. So Massachusetts has long been a pioneer.

But the modern era, I trace to 1993, when the state legislature passed an omnibus education reform package, increasing investment in public education, targeted to districts with the least ability to raise revenue, in return for accountability. Massachusetts set ambitious targets for student learning, codified both in curricular frameworks and its testing program. That combination of aiming high, holding students and adults accountable, and allocating resources to places that need it most is the backbone of our success.

Q Those same ed reform elements have been coming to the fore nationwide in the past few years, haven't they?
A That's right. It's not just accountability; it's setting a high bar. Students have to pass an exit exam in Massachusetts to earn a high school diploma. We hold our schools and districts accountable for results. We have, in the past year, taken over one of our districts for chronic low performance, and we identified 40 schools for aggressive turnaround plans. So results matter. And that's not just lip service—we back that up with our actions.

Q What role does the state's abundance of prestigious colleges and universities play? Is there a synergy?
A Clearly, they advantage us. We have a number of partnerships, and there's strong commitment on the part of those institutions. But one of the outcomes of having a world-respected set of private universities in the state is that the emphasis on the public higher education system is not as strong as it is in Midwestern states, for example. So that's been a little bit of a mixed blessing.

Q Despite your success, what are some primary challenges you face?
A There still remain substantial inequities in outcomes. Too often, the students who are not doing well are students from low-income backgrounds, students of color. I've focused on efforts to improve those schools, ramping up their accountability and assistance systems. We got new legislation two and a half years ago that gives us increased authority in the lowest-performing schools and districts. That's the authority under which we've taken over the Lawrence school district, and identified the 40 underperforming schools for turnaround.

The second initiative that I have taken on is looking at the variation in quality of instructional programs—revamping the opportunity for teachers to get feedback on their instruction, and for evaluators to be more systematic about looking at the quality of instruction.

Q You had a moratorium on new charter schools in place for 18 months before lifting it just recently. How does a slow-growth approach fit in with your vision for charters?
A Massachusetts has a high-performing charter school

PHOTO: JOSH REYNOLDS

system, which is not the case in every state; it certainly was not the case in Ohio [where Chester served as the state's deputy superintendent]. Part of that is because of the governance structure here. The state board of ed is the sole authorizer of charters. They've kept very high standards. We've been very careful, and willing to shut down charter schools that are not performing. I've closed two since I've been here.

In lifting the cap, we targeted districts from among the lowest performing, and we've only allowed applications from operators who have been successful in running high-performance charters for low-income students.

Our goal with charters was that we would learn lessons about how to restructure schools for success that we could then transfer to traditional schools. We have not done as much of that as I would like. So this fall, we are bringing in four successful charter school operators to help with turnaround in six schools in Lawrence. This will be within the footprint of the school district, not as charter schools, but as management organizations. I'm hoping this will break down the traditional barriers and point the way to a hybrid model, where successful charter operators are actually part of the turnaround of a traditional school district.

Q So you're doing a cross-fertilization experiment, injecting charter DNA into a public school?
A Exactly.

Q You supported adoption of the Common Core standards. Were there qualms they could weaken Massachusetts' high standards?
A Our curriculum experts were instrumental in developing the new standards. The Common Core took our standards, focused them, and added to them in ways that make them much more deliberate about preparing students for what employers and higher education expect.

CHESTER'S DOSSIER

- **Age:** 60
- **Salary:** $213,210
- **Career Path:** A native of Connecticut, Chester started as a teacher there, eventually becoming the state's head of curriculum and instruction. After a stint as Philadelphia public schools' accountability and assessment chief, he served as Ohio's senior associate state superintendent.
- **Current Status:** Commissioner of education for Massachusetts since 2008.

If you back up to the genesis of the Common Core, in 2007 or so, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers sponsored a task force to look at American competitiveness, and I served on that panel. That was a bipartisan panel—it had governors on it; it had chief state school officers such as myself on it. The output from that was, 50 states should not be setting 50 different targets. There should be the development of a common core of knowledge and performance that students need to succeed.

And what we're seeing now is unprecedented cooperation among states in pooling development costs and resources. I started in the mid-'70s. In almost 40 years, I have not seen this level of cooperation and commitment to elevating the quality of education across the nation. ■