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Many paths to school reform AS I SEE IT

By Melinda J. Boone and Joseph Palumbo

With schools and districts across the state and the nation grappling with tighter budgets and pressures to perform at higher levels, the call for education reform has never been louder. President Obama's Race to the Top program is one of the most powerful driving forces behind this push. Much ado has been made about making our teachers more accountable. Some are touting the president's program as the miracle cure for a broken system. The reality is, it is one possible cure among some other very sensible approaches happening right now in many schools. Great things are happening in our state's urban districts, even in advance of this additional federal funding.

Race to the Top and renewed federal attention is without question an important step for the American education system. The rejection of the status quo and recent bipartisan support for the commonwealth's education reform legislation proves that our government is committed to improving our schools and preparing our students to graduate ready for college or a career. Quality public education is our nation's and the commonwealth's promise to every student.

Still, as we consider changing programs or trying new reforms, we should remember that in Massachusetts there are many educators and administrators who are already proving that it is the common-sense approach — not the priciest — that best drives school improvement.

Standards are not the sole reason for increased achievement. They do not tell teachers how to teach or how to strengthen their teaching. Simple and clear hard work of educators focused on the right areas can do more than a new standard or punitive accountability systems.

Some of the state's lowest performing districts have recently shown improvement by taking a focused, practical approach to reform. Administrators in these communities understand that the key to improving student performance is creating a culture where faculty collaborates to improve instruction and monitor progress. By concentrating on these cores of educational improvement, Worcester schools have made demonstrable gains in student achievement over the past two years.

MCAS results from 2009 show the city's first improvements in third grade reading in eight years. The results also showed the highest percentage of Worcester students reaching the proficient or advanced categories for math in Grades 3, 7, 8, and 10, and reading in Grades 3, 5, 7, 8, and 10, since the inception of MCAS. Though we are aware there is much work ahead, we attribute these gains to a comprehensive strategy that employed seemingly obvious, though often neglected, tactics.

Get back to the basics of improving classroom teaching. Bells and whistles come and go, but the fundamentals of quality teaching have been the same for many years. Great teachers have high expectations for every student and employ a handful of key teaching practices. It is important to focus all of the school's resources — time, money, and intellect — on honing these skills.

In Worcester, this was accomplished by creating a partnership in which teachers provide their peers with guidance and support. The schools also set realistic goals and measured their progress internally, involving students in personal goal setting and supporting them with high expectations for achievement. As they review the results, they adjust their approach as needed, but always stay focused on providing exceptional instruction.

These strategies aren't glitzy or trendy, but they are proven and effective. It is no secret that better teaching is the key to better learning. Everything else is at best an added bonus, and at worst a distraction.

As unglamorous as it may be, Worcester's plan is showing results. Other districts, including Springfield, have decided to apply many of these commonsense strategies into their work with other underperforming schools, where they have also begun to show returns.

Reforms such as Race to the Top can help accelerate this work. Students, parents, policymakers, the president, everyone wants the same thing: an engaging learning environment in every school that will provide high expectations for all students and ensure that they learn and grow.

We must remember the simple fact that good teaching is irreplaceable. The primary emphasis of education reform must be the support and improvement of quality instruction. Such an undertaking is noble and difficult work that requires a significant investment in teachers, administrators, and district leaders, but it is critical to our students' achievement and the fulfillment of our promise to provide every student with a rigorous public education.

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