The recently released MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) results confirm once again what many of us already knew: the communities with the lowest test scores are the communities with the highest percentage of poor children – especially poor immigrant children. Cities like Boston, Holyoke, Springfield, New Bedford, Chelsea, and Lawrence see their economic woes reflected in their schools’ MCAS performance. In fact, a ranking of school districts by the percentage of children who receive free or reduced-price lunches would be a nearly exact inversion of a ranking of districts by MCAS scores.

The strong correlation between poverty and poor academic performance has always been known to those involved in the implementation of new standards and assessments. The unanswered question, however, remains: given all the talk about school reform, why haven’t we done something about it?

There is a tremendous irony in how America approaches the question of standards and accountability in education. The Food and Drug Administration, for example, sets high standards for the products subject to its approval. But the FDA holds producers, rather than consumers, accountable for meeting health and safety standards. The champions of educational accountability, on the other hand, hold students accountable for the quality of education they receive. In essence, these “consumers” are accountable for a product over which they have no control. Not only is this approach unfair, but there also is no evidence that it will give us what we claim to be seeking – higher quality education for all students.

The state Department of Education reports that as many as 12,000 students are in danger of being denied high school diplomas if they are unable to pass the MCAS this year. The number of failures is even greater when we consider that many students have dropped out of school even before entering the 12th grade. Failure rates of this magnitude pose a serious situation that cannot be taken lightly. Having large numbers of young adults unable to find work because they lack the skills and credentials will be a problem for the entire state. A recent report by the Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth points out that more than a third of workers in the state – 1.1 million people – lack the skills to compete for jobs in today’s economy.

We know that education can and should be the key to addressing widening disparities in wealth and opportunity. We also know that jobs in the New Economy will require a higher level of technical skill than the blue collar jobs of the past. The key factor in the success of America’s “new majority” will be our public schools. The challenge will be to give teachers the tools, skills, and credentials they need to be effective in reaching this
new population and meeting the demands of a rapidly changing, high-stakes educational environment.

School reformers have initiated school reforms without thinking about teaching reforms. Reformers, too often, incorrectly assume that reducing class sizes, raising student standards, or creating small schools could be accomplished in a vacuum without teachers. However, studies confirm that the quality of teaching is the single most important factor in closing the student achievement gap. A new Carnegie Corporation Challenge paper [released Sept.18] calls for a major overhaul of the teaching profession. The paper summarizes the challenges facing the teaching profession and offers a conceptual answer: treat teaching as a modern clinical profession.

(September 25, 2002) This concept and other teaching strategies will be explored at a symposium sponsored by Cambridge College in partnership with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, the Boston Globe, the Boston Foundation, Education Week, FleetBoston Financial Foundation, Jobs for the Future, Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., MassINC, and The Trefler Foundation. It will be held at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cambridge. More than 200 educators, policymakers, and philanthropists will delve into the complexities of educating America’s “new majority” – the African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American communities who, together, represent the majority populations in major cities across the United States today. Discussion will focus on methods to recruit and prepare teachers of color, ways to keep teachers in the profession, and models for education and public policy.

In addition, the symposium will look at public education's role in reducing poverty and expanding opportunity for all children. With this in mind, we hope to highlight three simple, yet important, academic standards that can truly help create a better future for our children and our society. We suggest that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts will not achieve a “passing grade” until it can:

1) Ensure that all students have access to well trained teachers from diverse backgrounds who have been educated in the content area that they teach;

2) Ensure that schools can serve the non-academic needs of poor children (health, nutrition, safety, counseling, etc.) that affect their ability to learn; and

3) Establish basic educational standards for facilities, instructional materials, personnel, and safety, and hold all schools and school districts accountable for meeting these standards.

Of course, we need more than these standards. Parental and community engagement, a curriculum that promotes a tolerant and informed civic culture, and strong and effective educational leaders are just some of the other important factors affecting school performance. However, if the state were just to make the three areas noted above a priority for educational policy, we believe that significant progress would be made.
Massachusetts is not alone in coping with larger numbers of failing students and schools. Wide disparities in academic performance that are manifest along racial and socio-economic demarcations – the so-called achievement gap – represent a challenge to the entire nation. However, we believe the state that gave birth to public education can and should be the national leader in showing what it will take to fulfill the promise of "leaving no child behind."

Published in In Motion Magazine September 27, 2002