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Where's that school improvement you promised, Mayor?

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In 1996, Mayor Thomas M. Menino proclaimed in his State of the City address, "I want to be judged as your mayor by what happens now in the Boston public schools." Laying out a specific list of goals, he charged residents, "If I fail to bring about these specific reforms by the year 2001, then judge me harshly."

Undeniably, the most important goal he set was to raise standards for all students. But 12 years after that speech and seven years after the mayor's self-imposed deadline, Boston public schools have improved little, if at all. Benchmarks set by the mayor himself have not been met and the system remains in disarray. Many children graduating from high school do so lacking a quality education, leaving them ill-prepared for future challenges like college.

The school dropout rate has been increasing. According to data compiled by the Boston Public Schools (BPS), 9 percent of students dropped out during the most-recent school year, up from a six-year low of 7.2 percent, during the 2003-2004 school year. Thirty-three percent of all high school students will drop-out sometime between ninth and 12th grades.

According to the Boston Globe, just 60 percent of current BPS students will graduate high school within four years, half of all sixth graders failed their MCAS math tests, and less than half of black and Latino 10th-graders passed the MCAS math and English tests.

The mayor, of course, does not have absolute control over the public school system. He is just one part of a complex community made up of students, parents, school administrators and, of course, educators, who are among the most intimately involved adults in the development of our children. But where he has been able to influence policy, the results have been less than encouraging.

The Boston School Committee has a large role in public education. In Boston, the school committee is appointed by the mayor, and has been since 1992. It was Menino's predecessor, Ray Flynn, who wrested control of the school committee from citizens, in an attempt to stop political infighting and to have a hand closer to the till while his initiatives were being implemented. It is now 16 years later and little has changed for the better. In fact, some would argue that an appointed committee has done nothing more than foster a sense of disenfranchisement in the community. Mayor Menino has had more than enough time to assemble a team of skilled and knowledgeable professionals, yet results have been weak.

The school system enjoyed a decade of stability under Superintendent Thomas Payzant. But, once he left in 2006 the city found it hard to replace him. The mayor offered the job to Manuel Rivera, who accepted the job but subsequently withdrew in order to take a position in New York state. Longtime BPS veteran Michael Contompasis took over the position and was roundly applauded for his work, but, after 40-plus years in the system, he decided to retire. We are now on superintendent number three in as many years, which could lead one to wonder if there is too much meddling from City Hall - or at least why good help is so hard to find.

Residents of Boston have been paying so much toward better schools, yet have evidently received little in the way of a return on investment. In 1998, the Boston Public School's budget was \$507 million. By 2008, it had ballooned to \$782 million, and the BPS has approved a 2008-2009 budget of \$827 million. Transportation and insurance costs are eating up increasing amounts of valuable dollars. This is money that isn't going to classroom

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instruction, to books, or to school facilities. The schools' budget seems to be careening out of control, with no captain at the wheel. Over 10 years, the schools' annual budget has averaged at least \$600 million. Yes, during the past decade, the city of Boston has spent over \$6 billion on public education. Meanwhile, public school enrollment has dropped eleven percent, from 63,000 to 56,000 students. More money to educate fewer students, with less than encouraging results.

The mayor's defenders can point to at least a handful of achievements during the past decade. The school system won the Broad Prize for Urban Education in 2006, after being a finalist the fifth year in a row. In 2007, 85 percent of BPS teachers in core academic subject areas were classified as "highly qualified." This is defined by the national No Child Left Behind program as teachers who are state-licensed, have received a bachelor's or graduate degree in their subject matter or have passed state exams to determine their competency. And, the 2004 BPS Whole-School Improvement initiative has paid off, with double the percentage of students passing MCAS tests on their first try.

Yet, successes are fewer and farther between than they ought to be. If you analyze the system by individual schools instead of as a whole, you will see too many examples of failure among a few glimmers of hope. NCLB, for example, identifies 99 of the 144 schools in the Boston school system as "Needs Improvement." ("Needs Improvement" may sound more positive than it really is; there are five classifications in the program with "Needs Improvement" being the fourth lowest out of five.)

The biggest problem facing the mayor and the public schools may not even be the quality of education, but the perception of the quality of education. A parent of a child enrolled in a public elementary school recently remarked to me, "The system's still too hit-or-miss (due to the schools' lottery), middle schools still seem to suck, and the non-exam high schools still need a lot of work."

While not every issue facing our public schools is the responsibility of Mayor Menino, he asked the public to keep him accountable, yet we haven't done so. Thus far, at least.

John Keith is a South End resident and real estate broker. Check out his blog at bostonREB.com.

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