

School Committee vice chairman Fred Fantini had a strong response Sept. 16, 2014, to criticisms heard that night from state education officials:

While parts of the District Review Report may be enlightening to the school community and the public and help the Cambridge School Department continue its work to improve outcomes for students, the comments related to “governance” are deeply flawed. In fact, they are rooted in abject ignorance of our state and federal constitutions, law, political principles, fiduciary responsibilities, relevant local history and a general understanding of what a school committee is.

GOAL SETTING

We find it hard for the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to defend its allegation that “the committee members have many visions, making it hard to have a cohesive message all could agree to,” when the state agency itself has overwhelmed school districts with one major initiative after another, dozens of mandates, dozens more of reporting requirements and a bureaucracy that forwards advisories and directives prolifically.

Knowing of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s contempt for holding itself accountable to anyone but itself, it is stunning to see such naïve and inappropriate comments aimed at legitimately elected representatives.

The School Committee should be offended by the report and take a strong position to reject some of the recommendations.

However, DESE would also be well advised to note that number of major local policy initiatives over the past decade and in most recent months to restructure and reorganize the public school district based primarily on recommendations from the staff and parents. Other districts should emulate this record, and the state should not be making gratuitous criticisms.

THE REPORT AUTHORS’ IGNORANCE OF WHAT MAKES EFFICIENT MEETINGS

The purpose of a School Committee meeting is not to act as briefly as possible to do what the superintendent and principals want. It is to develop an agenda and conduct a meeting that allows for thoughtful discussion of a full range of relevant topics and to address concerns of the public without trampling on the legal authority of the Superintendent. Discussion and debate is not a tool of obstruction, but a means of enlightening the public.

While criticism is tossed about in this report, few citations are provided.

It is interesting that teachers, whose union bargains aggressively for power sharing with the administration, would criticize the School Committee for looking “way too deep” at issues. And this is presented as evidence to back up a caustic statement of criticism.

Suggesting that it is offensive to allow parents to present motions to members of the School Committee or that the School Committee has offended public policy by having its own agenda rather than a parallel agenda with the superintendent is nothing more than an assault by the executive branch (the bureaucracy of the state) against the legislative branch (the school committee as the legislature for schools in the district). It is an unambiguous fact that the agenda of the meetings of school committees are the property of the school committee – the board does not need the approval or the permission of the superintendent to organize its agenda or to decide what is discussed. DESE should remember well that absent a legal receivership, it is well advised to stay out of making of agendas, controlling of discussion and determining who may speak to or recommend what to a school committee or individual members.

Moreover, allowing parents to recommend courses of action to their elected officials in the form of draft motions that a legitimately elected official may introduce merely allows for public discussion where the wisdom of the board may well reject such a motion. No such clarification is forthcoming from the authors of this report.

The state would be well informed to consult the state and federal constitutions that provide residents with an unfettered and unrestricted right to petition their government and address their elected representatives. School committee members are encouraged by law and through professional development training to welcome and listen respectfully to any concern brought to them by any citizen bringing those concerns to the superintendent either through personal communication or at a public meeting of the school committee.

We should not be surprised that some principals or central office administrators, including the superintendent, would repel the effort of parents or local elected officials to disagree with them.

But, were it not for access to the school committee, what other recourse would parents, citizens and other stakeholders have to air their grievances and concerns; and what other recourse would the board have but to ask the administration for information to justify its decisions?

In fact, how else would a school committee build a sufficient base to evaluate its chief executive without the ability to probe for the rationale behind decisions in order to assess judgment, decision making processes, alignment with goals or a professional culture that respects concerns of the public?

THE FIDUCIARY RESPONSIBILITY OF THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE

The Education Reform Act of 1993 did not change the fiduciary responsibility of locally elected boards in Massachusetts, and the role of the school committee with regard to budgeting, budget oversight, budget reporting and gathering information necessary to fulfill these responsibilities remains as it has for decades. School committees have been improperly criticized by ignorant bureaucrats who do not understand the principles of fiduciary responsibility. Asking questions, seeking justifications and using public meetings to engage the public around budgets, expenditures and revenues are part of the role of the locally elected official, including members of school committees.

THE REPORT'S ATTACK ON PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

The report's criticism of the city's form of government for schools (and indirectly for its City Council) is not only misplaced, is among the most offensive portions of the report, not only because it is based on pure ignorance.

Moreover, DESE and its evaluation team has no business whatsoever recommending changes to the form of government that the people have chosen for themselves, especially when this system has a demonstrated record of empowering its citizens. (An assault on civic engagement, however, may be the intent of the recommendation, given the level of contempt that DESE has shown for citizens at large overseeing their public schools.) Had the team taken but an hour to review the history of proportional representation and known that advocates for election reform across the country have called for expansion, rather than elimination, of the single transferable vote, they would understand just how foolish they are.

In fact, the form of government and the electoral process in place in Cambridge since the reforms of 1941 have been recognized as a major element in civic pride, clean government, civic engagement and harmony. The fact that the Cambridge School Committee is virtually unique in how its membership actually looks like the citizens of the city is sufficient defense. An investigation of the credentials of the members of the Cambridge School Committee would further demonstrate that they are as well prepared to serve in their constitutionally mandated function as most high performing boards.

Proportional Representation and the STV have been cited as one of the most under-appreciated potential elements of real education reform: a system that empowers the otherwise excluded residents and enriches the debate by ensuring that viable constituencies are represented.

Further, the two-year election cycle is hardly divisive. By creating a single district within the city and requiring candidates to build coalitions and consensus, a School Committee like Cambridge's is more likely to work together for meaningful change and reform. And for the information of DESE, there has never been an election following which a majority of the

incumbents was not re-elected. So much for failure of continuity. DESE's researchers should have done some homework. That the department should call for changes in something about which it knows nothing is a further warning to all public policy-makers that within DESE lies a desire to exceed its authority and undermine local democracy.