

Michael Flaherty On Education

A Committed Leader for Public Education

As a parent with three children currently enrolled in Boston public schools, Michael shares residents' concerns about our school assignment process and the city's ability to provide equal educational opportunities to all of Boston's children. There is no easy solution.

Michael has always supported the idea of neighborhood schools, the idea that families could walk their kids to school and be involved with their school community. He believes our schools become stronger when they become a real part of the neighborhood. But he also strongly advocates for equal educational opportunities and right now, a return to neighborhood schools will not achieve such equality. What we need to work towards is a school system where everyone's neighborhood school is their number one choice school. But that won't happen overnight and our success will certainly require bold leadership, collaboration among all parties and the incorporation of best practices working in other urban school districts across the country.

Incremental progress and isolated victories are no longer good enough, not when it comes to the education of our children. As the birthplace of public education, Boston should be a city where all children have the right and opportunity to pursue a quality public education that puts them in a position to compete in a global economy; that puts our entire city - and its future workforce - in a position to compete in a global economy. We need to be proud of our history as an innovator in public education and recapture that pioneering spirit that we had in 1635 when our very own Boston Latin was founded and reinvest it in solutions that will transform how we school our children in the 21st century.

Revolutionizing Boston Public Schools

Empowering School Leaders. Over the last five to ten years, many urban school districts across the country have begun to realize the positive value that giving school principles greater autonomies over budgeting, staffing and resource allocation can have on improving underperforming schools. While having larger discretion over the allocation of resources is not a cure for our education woes, it is an important first step to take for a school system that needs serious overhaul. Such discretion and flexibility allows school administrators to design a school structure that better meets the needs of its particular student population. Rather than having someone at Court Street decide how many teachers and literacy specialist each school needs, it only makes sense to allow that decision to be made by someone who is physically on school grounds and working with the students on a daily basis. In addition, schools could have the opportunity to carve out specialty programs or organize around a specific core mission, giving parents a wider spectrum of school choice.

Mandating Greater Accountability. In exchange for greater autonomies, school principles should be required to meet higher standards and deliver better results, especially our underperforming schools which comprise 38% of our 143 schools. Similar to the review system required for the state's charter schools, our public schools - with their increased powers and

authorities - should undergo a thorough and frequent review process where problems could be identified and addressed early.

Putting Students Back on Track

Tackling the dropout crisis. With a four-year graduation rate hovering only at 60% for the last five years, we are losing many of our children to the dropout crisis. In fact, a report commissioned by the BPS and released in September 2007 indicated that 1,900 students dropped out during the 2005-2006 school year. With more children out of school, that's more children on the streets, engaging in gang violence and without a job or a legitimate source of income. According to a 2006 study released by the Private Industry Council (PIC), those living in Boston without a high school diploma or GED have greater challenges finding work than in other cities across the country. Specifically, Boston ranks 44th out of the 50 largest central cities in the employment rate of dropouts between the ages of 16 and 19.

Our abilities to combat youth violence and prepare our future workforce is contingent upon our success to genuinely address and solve the dropout problem. That's why Michael supports a renewed investment in our alternative educational programs, stronger transitional programs for students entering ninth grade, intensified support for transfer students and freshman-senior tutoring programs.

Reforming programs for English Language Learners. The recent proposal to change the Hernandez School from citywide to district status has incited a major outcry from parents who want their children enrolled in the school's successful and popular two-way bilingual program because the decision would shut out many families - especially Latino families in East Boston - from accessing a quality ELL program. The problem is, we don't have enough of these successful programs throughout the city. At a recent FY2010 BPS budget hearing, Michael implored the city to make sure that they replicate these programs in other parts of the city before restricting access to the Hernandez.

Regretfully, the city of Boston and its public schools are failing to keep English Language Learners (ELLs) in school and provide them a quality education, as illustrated by an April 2009 report released by the Maurico Gaston Institute for Latino Community Development and the Public Policy Institute of the University of Massachusetts at Boston. In fact, the report affirmed that the fastest growing achievement gap in the Boston Public School system is between ELL students and regular BPS students. The Boston Foundation's *Boston's Education Pipeline: A Report Card* report also concurred that the greatest achievement gap - in Boston and elsewhere - is not by gender, race/ethnicity or income but between regular students and students with linguistic or physical/cognitive challenges.

Our failures stem from two facts: the Boston Public Schools (BPS) has not effectively implemented or supported its ELL program and ELL students - and their families - are not provided adequate communication to make informed decisions about their program options. Until we reform the ELL programs offered by BPS, we will continue to fail our city, its children, and will compromise our ability to effectively compete in the global economy. This crisis has

both great financial and social costs to the city, making it imperative we take an honest assessment of current programs and determine what steps need to be taken to ensure that all children have equal opportunities to thrive in the classroom. Michael is very concerned about the city's failures and as Mayor, will make ELL programs a central focus for education reform.

Early and thorough monitoring of student performance. Research indicates that the signs for dropping out begin at the earliest of grade levels and include attendance and behavior, as well as academic performance. As a strong proponent of tracking data and data sharing, Michael has repeatedly stated the need for comprehensive tracking and monitoring of students, and that this data be shared with teachers so that they can anticipate and design their class instruction in a way that best meets the overall needs of his or her students.

Restoring peace to our schools. In the fall of 2007, the Harvard School of Public Health released a study that revealed 60% of its surveyed high school students reported being a witness to a violent crime and one third reported being directly involved in a fight. The 2006 PIC study reported that many youth cited a fear of violence as an obstacle to academic achievement and a reason for dropping out. Subscribing to the belief that a productive learning environment requires a safe learning environment, Michael has been a long-term proponent of returning street workers to the schools where they can diffuse student conflict before it escalates into street violence. He has held two City Council hearings on the issue and will put his calls into practice if he becomes Mayor.

Capitalizing on new technologies to improve parent-school communication. Too many times, poor communication with parents leaves students lacking critical support to succeed and make smart choices. Michael has consistently urged the city and its departments to make use of new technologies to increase efficiency and raise performance. In the case of BPS, better technologies can enable them to improve its ability to effectively reach out to parents and guardians as well as share data with other city departments like Boston Centers for Youth and Families.

Linking health care disparities to gaps in school readiness. Studies have linked student health to student performance, as high absentee rates for any student make it difficult to succeed in the classroom. With minority students having more health issues than their white counterparts, improving the school environment could inevitably help address health disparities and the achievement gap. Boston's alarming childhood asthma rates, combined with reports of BPS buildings' ailing condition, prompted Michael to work with community activists and convene a City Council hearing to see what the city could be doing to improve the schools' environments. While the city is required by ordinance to conduct annual environmental school audits, these findings are not being used to determine action or prioritize scarce funding for school improvements. Michael continues to work with the community, teachers and parents to seek out solutions such as the implementation of a comprehensive and efficient monitoring system that tracks school repair problems simultaneously with asthma problems for individual schools in order to formulate accurate and scientific correlations. As Mayor, he will make student health disparities a top education priority.

Providing access to free SAT preparation. For two consecutive years, Michael advocated for a partnership between the city and the company, PrepME, to bring online SAT preparatory programming to all Boston students. Last year, Michael even negotiated a deal that would grant the city access to the program for one year, free of charge. While the Administration denied the need for such free assistance, Michael, as Mayor, will renew negotiations to bring this critical and affordable program to Boston. While SAT prep will not better prepare our students to succeed in college, it will help many students improve their chances of being accepted into a school of their choice and may even make them eligible for important scholarship assistance. Especially now in our down economy, the city has a responsibility to help lift financial barriers that may prevent students from pursuing a post-secondary education.

Providing access to free financial literacy training. The fact that people across Boston are losing their homes, jobs or pensions makes it more important than ever for the city to take proactive steps to help residents of all ages acquire the financial knowledge they need to make smart money decisions. Youth are an important constituency to target as they are just beginning their experience in the workforce and they need to realize the significance of saving their earnings. Providing financial literacy training to youth is also important to our efforts to keep our children in school, as national studies have indicated economic pressures as a main reason for dropping out, particularly among male students.

Last year, Michael brokered a partnership between the city and Operation HOPE, which enabled 545 youth participating in the Boston Youth Fund summer jobs program to receive free financial literacy training, at no cost to the city. Since its inception five years ago, HOPE has educated 20,000 students in Boston. This year, Michael urged the city to renew its partnership with HOPE so that this year's participants in the summer job program will be provided the tools to make the most out of their important earnings.

Strengthening Boston's Public Education Pipeline

Expanding early education opportunities. We all know what the research says: that critical childhood development occurs at the youngest of ages and that early education provides the foundation for future learning. As part of its long-term efforts to improve the educational pipeline for Boston children, the city has an obligation to improve early education opportunities for the youngest of our residents - not take those opportunities away.

When the city announced it would cut critical funding to the FY2010 budget for the Boston Centers for Youth and Families' preschool and afterschool programming, Michael supported a resolution and stood with parents to protest these devastating cuts. An estimated 36,000 children ages 0-4 live in Boston and comprise one-third of all of our children under 18. Michael believes that we need to be increasing the educational opportunities that we provide for this population - not decreasing it.

The economic downturn makes it more important than ever that we not close the door on our shared commitment to improve our public schools system. So while we might need to restructure how we finance these programs, we owe it to our parents and their children to determine a plan that doesn't leave them panicked or scrambling for alternatives.

In addition to protecting these programs, as Mayor, Michael will work with school leaders and parents to develop a universal pre-k program for four-year olds. Currently, only 22% of our city's three and four-year olds are enrolled in a BPS pre-k class. We can do better than that and when we do, more families will want to keep their families here.

Putting more advance work programs in more of our schools. While many of our resources must be directed toward programs and supports for our struggling students, we need to take steps to ensure that our public school options include programs that will keep students challenged - even our top performing students. When parents talk to Michael about what influences their school choice, they often tell him they want more schools to offer advance work programs, which is why Michael has asked school officials during school budget hearings to make this part of their Pathways to Excellence Plan.

Prioritizing struggling neighborhoods for K-8. Before we can responsibly transition over to neighborhood schools, we need to eliminate disparities among our schools. Money saved through any reduced transportation spending should be directed towards those neighborhoods in need of the most support and improvement. Michael will continue to advocate for more K-8s in our poorest neighborhoods.

Improving transition from high school to college. A 2008 report released by the Boston Private Industry Council and BPS revealed disappointing findings, further indicating a troubled school district. According to the report, two-thirds of BPS graduates from the Class of 2000 who enrolled in college failed to earn a degree. At the time of the report's release, Michael called upon city leaders to consider bringing an Early College High School (ECHS) to Boston. As Mayor, Michael will work with the city's education partners and concerned parents to explore the feasibility a Boston-based ECHS.

First launched in 2002, there are 160 ECHSs in 24 states that seek to ease the high school-to-college transition by allowing students to pursue high school and college credits at the same time. Unlike more traditional dual enrollment programs and advance placement courses, most ECHS target students experiencing the most difficulty with transitioning into post secondary-education. The primary focus for ECHSI is to reach low-income youth, first-generation college attendees, English language learners, and minority students. For the ECHS 2006-2007 school year, two-thirds of participating students were African-American or Latino. This is the type of educational pathways that kids and families are counting on the city to provide. We've let down class after class and it's time we give BPS students a real chance at acquiring a quality secondary and post-secondary education.

Intensify partnerships between BPS and area colleges and universities. Over the years, our post-secondary education partners have provided our city with many valuable contributions and services. For our struggling BPS schools and students to truly capitalize on the city's intellectual capital, Michael believes that further partnerships are needed to help turn around our failing public schools. Cultivating partnerships that are mutually beneficial to both our public school students and our local college students is a common-sense approach that must be considered. As Mayor, Michael would like to explore the feasibility of replicating a model partnership

between the city of Worcester and Clark University. Through Clark's strategic investment in one Worcester neighborhood, more students are graduating from high school and attending college.

Expanding School Choice

Charter schools. Certainly, there are conflicting opinions as to what is the best strategy to ensure that our children receive a strong and quality education. But we all lose if we can't come together to agree that no one approach works for every student. While the idea of school choice is often talked about, we shortchange that discussion when we can't commit ourselves to the belief that real school choice can only happen when we allow money to follow the child. Michael supports continued investment in our city's charter schools because he recognizes the valuable learning opportunities they provide to Boston's students.

Many critics of charter schools have charged that the success in charter schools has more to do with demographics than curriculum design and implementation. However, a breakthrough January 2009 study by The Boston Foundation debunked the myth that high student performance at charter schools is a result of student "pedigree" and not innovative teaching practices. The study controlled for the intangible factors of parent involvement and student motivation by tracking the MCAS scores over time of two groups of charter school applicants who either enrolled at a charter or attended BPS. The results revealed that the charter school students outperformed the BPS students, particularly in middle school math. Advocates for charter schools believe this study highlights that the curriculums and policies of charter schools – not student demographics – are the reason for high student performance at charters.

Many charter schools, including our own MATCH, the Neighborhood House Charter School and the national KIPPS schools have strong records of success. Ignoring the successes of these charter schools handicaps our ability to improve the quality of education available to Boston students. The city of Boston must work with the State Legislature to raise the current cap on charter schools so that underperforming districts such as BPS have the opportunity to expand parents' choice of quality public schools.

Pilot schools. Michael has always supported having pilot schools within BPS as he sees their flexibilities and autonomies as important to the diversity of our school offerings. As Mayor, he will work with the Boston Teachers Union, parents and school administrators to make sure these schools remain a sustainable option for our students.

Preparing Students for the Green Economy

Greening BPS curriculum. Michael recognizes the important opportunities that the emerging green sector presents for our youth and to our efforts to keep students inspired to stay in school. That's why Michael believes that the city should formalize these opportunities by establishing a green vocational school within the city's public school system where they can learn about the

importance of sustainable innovation and receive the appropriate guidance and encouragement to pursue productive career paths such as those in the green economy.