

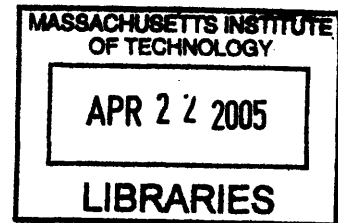
Organizational Sense Making: Responses to the MCAS Reform  
in the Massachusetts Public Schools

ARCHIVES

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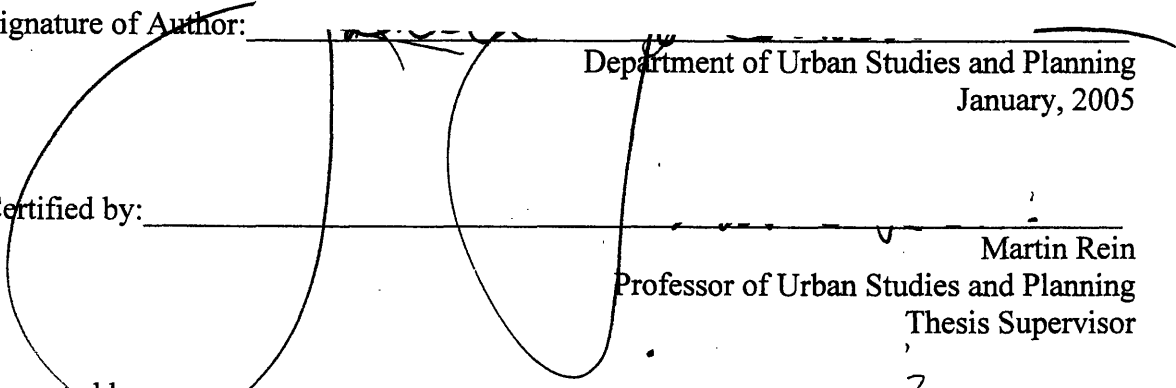
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ABSTRACT

Educational reform has become a central concern of public policy debates at both the state and federal level. The policy trend both nationally and locally is towards uniform standards in education, with testing as the single metric of assessment of public school performance. But can a one size fits all reform really fit all? This dissertation addresses this question through a study of the organizational responses of two public high schools to the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) a system of standards and accountability passed by the Massachusetts state legislature as part of the Education Reform Act, 1993.

Conceptually the dissertation draws from foundational studies of public schooling which establish education as a social institution, illustrated in historical and contemporary case studies in the education literature. It builds links from this literature to the field of institutionalism and organizational studies. To understand the divergent responses of the schools to the MCAS reform, two theoretical concepts, that of *organizational identity* and *sense making* are fused to create the concept of *organizational sense making*. *Organizational sense making* is comprised of three inter-related activities in which the schools engage: discernment, enactment and strategizing. My theoretical finding is that each school's response reflects a unique process of sense making which is driven by its organizational identity.

This comparative case study finds that Lowell High School, a low income, ethnically diverse urban high school adopts a strategy of 'Compliant Engagement' and draws upon its bureaucratic strengths to meet the reform's mandate. The MCAS reform and test become mistaken for classroom pedagogy, which derails the school's efforts to shift away from a transmission model of education. Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, a wealthy, suburban school renowned for its capacity to deliver good education, adopts a strategy of 'Antagonistic Compliance', engaging in actions of resistance. The school perceives the MCAS reform to be a threat to its identity: its social values, academic programs as well as the professional autonomy of its teachers. The findings of this dissertation challenge the efficacy of uniform, centralized policies to achieve public school reform.

Thesis Supervisor: Martin Rein  
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## Dedication

*I dedicate this work to my dear friend, in life and in spirit,  
Malora Matthaei*



## **Chapter One: Introduction**

In 1993, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts State Legislature passed an omnibus legislation on school reform whose central policy was the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, known as 'MCAS'. With this law, Massachusetts was joined to a nation-wide movement of states which had legislated a centralized curriculum, academic standards, and accountability system, known as standards-based reform. The standards reform called directly for systemic changes in the instruction and pedagogy of schools. It appeared that the intent of this reform was to throw down the gauntlet – demanding that schools make changes to their 'technical' instructional core (Meyer and Rowan, 1983, Scott, 1995, Scott and Meyer, 1995).

The Massachusetts version of the standards reform was unique in that its framers were committed to both equity and academic standards. The logic of equity/opportunity has roots in the belief that education could help to alleviate poverty, and in the view that government has a legitimate role as a maker and guarantor of constitutional rights which include the provision of public education to all. In contrast, the logic of skills/accountability has roots in the enduring market ideology of competitiveness which favors reward and punishment in the interest of efficiency. Framers of this legislation, particularly members of the business community and state legislature believed that these two goals of equity and efficiency were synergistic, of equal worth, and achievable.

To carry through on this commitment to equity, and unlike other states, the framers enacted a funding formula to demonstrate their commitment to restoring equity to the Massachusetts public school system, but the allocated funds fell far short of equalizing per pupil spending across schools. The hope then was that the introduction of high standards and expectations would suffice to bring schools into alignment in performance. However, the political bodies which would implement the legislation adopted a narrow interpretation of assessment, and the MCAS reform came to focus upon the development and administration of a *high stakes* testing regimen.

My interest in understanding the social processes of institutional change drew me to study the MCAS reform in Massachusetts. The reform's stated goal to effect systemic change in public schools would potentially provide rich, new data about the process of institutional change in schools, which have been described as intransigent to reform efforts (Elmore, 1995, 1996, Tyack and Cuban, 1995). I developed research questions that explore the social processes engaged by schools in their organizational response to the MCAS reform. My selection of case study schools, two public high schools at opposite ends of the socio-economic and achievement spectrum, was an intentional choice, to test the isomorphic predictions of policy makers.

The performance of public schools has been a long-standing policy issue, and one of national as well as local concern since the 1980's. Public education's centrality to domestic public policy is commensurate with its importance to American society. The school is a lynchpin institution, deeply embedded in the mores of its local communities

with a mission that gives it a national stature. The public school is vital to preparing the next generation for workforce participation, as well as the exercise of democratic citizenship. Public education is the largest public enterprise in this country.<sup>1</sup> However we choose to reform the public school system, it will have far reaching effects upon the rest of society.

The reform of the public schools, in turn, is directly tied to the ways in which public schools are conceived of as institutions. When conceived as monolithic institutions which are similar in their organizational operations and procedures, a 'one size fits all' policy such as the MCAS reform which imposes a centralized curriculum and high stakes testing regimen upon schools would be expected to bring about uniform results. If schools are conceived of as institutions embedded in their communities, with differences along the lines of the composition of their student body, teaching staff, or institutional patterning, a uniform policy reform, while well intentioned, may end up narrowing our understanding of schools into the frame of scores and numbers rather than embracing the institutional complexity of schools.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Schools in the United States absorb a huge share of the nation's public outlay of funding, employment and contracting. In 1999, almost seven million people held full-or-part time jobs in public elementary and secondary schools; they constitute almost half of all government employees. About forty-seven million children are in public K-12 schools, almost 90 percent of school age children in the United States. In 2001, it cost about \$390 billion a year from all sources to educate children in public schools, which is more than the defense budget of \$299 billion and slightly less than the \$434 billion spent on social security. The majority of funding is provided by local and state revenues. The federal government provides only 8 percent of the funding spent on schools and dedicates barely 2 percent of its budget to schools. (Hochschild and Scovronick (2003), PP.20-21

<sup>2</sup> The early institutional sociologists, such as Meyer and Rowan (1983), Scott (1982) published studies which treated public schools at the level of a national, public school system or state public school system, examining its bureaucratic functions such as funding flows, certification requirements and other aspects which addressed questions of an 'institutional' nature. The second theoretical formulation, 'schools embedded in their communities', borrows the term 'embeddedness' from Granovetter (1985) which situates institutions in networks comprised of institutional ties. At this level of analysis, the subject of the study

This dissertation research was undertaken to answer these questions. Can a uniform policy like the MCAS reform achieve its stated goals of higher standards, academic performance and accountability in the state's public school system? What can we learn from the experience of the MCAS about how schools implement a state mandated reform? These questions become especially important given the passage of the *No Child Left Behind* Act in 2002.

The *No Child Left Behind* Act is the federal government's policy to reform public education. It is modeled after standards based reforms such as the MCAS reform. The federal legislation requires public schools to test students in grades three through eight in English and Math annually, with the goal of reaching a standard of academic proficiency by the year 2014. The Act requires states to implement 'Average Yearly Performance' (AYP) goals whereby states establish a gradient performance level for schools to achieve each year. Standardized test scores are binding upon schools and are the sole metric used to assess school performance. Should schools submit low test scores for three consecutive years, the state government is empowered to close the public school for its failure to meet standards. The questions raised in this dissertation are all the more important now that there is a 'second stage' of a national standardized testing reform that has been put into place.

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requires research questions that are more case-specific and will produce empirical findings of a very different nature.

This study examines the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, one state's version of the standards reform. The dissertation is organized as follows. In Chapter Two I describe the education literature and how it is relevant to the study of public school reform, and discuss the theoretical concepts and framework which guided my research. I build from two concepts: *organizational identity* and *sense making* to create a new, conceptual framework *organizational sense making* which guides both the empirical research and the interpretation of my empirical findings. Chapter Three provides background to the politics of the standards based reform and the MCAS reform in particular. The interplay between the national and state levels in this policy making process is described, and resolved with states remaining as the locus of the standards reform. The politics, goals and the implementation of the MCAS reform is recounted in this chapter as well. Chapter Four introduces the two case study schools, Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School from an historical perspective, presenting them first through their 'creation stories' and tracing their evolution as institutions through time. Chapters Five and Six present the case studies of the two schools. Chapter Seven is a review of the effects of the MCAS reform as measured by the MCAS test scores. Chapter 8 presents my conclusions.

## ***Chapter Two: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Organizational Response of Schools to the MCAS Reform***

### ***Literature on School Reform: Three Strands of Inquiry***

My interest in understanding the social and political processes intrinsic to organizational change led me to the study of public school reform in Massachusetts. My interest in education draws from this institutionalist perspective, and my conception of education and the public school as a *social institution* focuses my entrée into this literature. Within the discipline of education there is a significant body of literature that addresses the topic of public school reform, through historical and contemporary analysis, through the study of teachers and classroom pedagogy, and through studies of school restructuring and institutional change. There are three strands of inquiry into public school reform: the *Historical* strand, the *Strategies for Change* strand and the *School Restructuring: Structure and Pedagogy* strand which I identify as particularly germane to this dissertation study of public school reform and institutional change. These strands of inquiry, while independent, weave together and connect around particular issues, reforms and historical time periods. Combined, the strands provide a rich foundation for understanding the public school as a *social institution*. This analysis of the literature, in turn, provides a strong base from which to enter inside the ‘black box’ of schooling

The first strand of inquiry is *Historical*, and traces the origins and development of public schooling to present day. The historical literature is both descriptive and analytic, often enfolding the school and its evolution into the political and social currents taking

place in society. For example, Dow's 1991 study, *Schoolhouse Politics: Lessons from the Sputnik Era*, relates changes in the public schools to political events, in this case explaining curriculum (and funding) reforms imposed upon schools as a result of the launching of the Russian Sputnik. This political event led to the involvement of the National Science Foundation in the finance and design of public school's science curriculum. Historical, analytic reviews include Cubberly's (1934) historical account of the public school in American history and Cremin's documentation of progressive-era school reforms (Cremin, 1961, 1977). Ravitch's (1983) *The Troubled Crusade, American Education, 1945-1980* and Ravitch (2000) *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* are historical accounts of the 'battles' over school reform which analyze the philosophical and institutional tensions inherent to reform efforts over the course of a century, and in the former case, the institutional tensions post-World War II.. Anti-intellectual currents in the evolution of public schools are addressed by other scholars (Bestor, 1956, Kaestle, 1983, Tyack, 1988); John Dewey (1899) sets forth some of the earliest conceptions of the public school. Tyack makes significant contributions to the evolution and reform of public schools in studies which include *Managers of Virtue* (1982), the essay "Pilgrim's Progress: Toward a Social History of the School" in (1988) and in a book co-authored with Robert Lowe and Elizabeth Hansot, *Public Schools in Hard Times: The Great Depression and Recent Years*. Finally, the institutionalization of schools and teaching is discussed in an historical context (Tyack, 1967, 1974, Cuban, 1990, 1998), and the historical role of the state in the institutionalization of schools is addressed in this strand of inquiry (Elmore and Fuhrman, 1995).

The second strand of inquiry is a body of literature devoted to the issue of *Public School Reform: Strategies for Change*. Several of the historical studies named above dovetail with this literature on school reform, illustrative of the cross-disciplinary nature of the field of education. In this strand of inquiry I borrow from Tyack (1995) and define the term ‘public school reform’ as “planned efforts to change schools in order to correct perceived social and educational problems.”<sup>3</sup> The literature includes both historical and contemporary efforts to change the system of public schools through federal and state policy making and through localized, grass-roots, community-based efforts.

The history of educational reform includes broad based movements such as the secularized movement which favored the nineteenth century common school, as well as the more modern 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts to fulfill the egalitarian promise of public school education (Mann, 1899, Dewey, 1915). In the 1950’s the progressive education movement never moved beyond John Dewey’s model school; in the 1960’s community control as redress to a racialized bureaucratic administration was ultimately ineffectual and in the 1970’s court directed efforts to equalize funding across districts led to mixed results. The 1980’s movements of ‘School Excellence’ and ‘Back to the Basics’ and other less ambitious efforts which sought to change standards of teacher certification and institutional credibility would ultimately be swept up in the wave of standards and

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<sup>3</sup> Tyack, David and Cuban, Larry (2000) *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform*, p.4 I agree with the authors that the ‘problems’ assigned to public schools are often conflated with larger problems in society, such as unemployment, a lagging global competitiveness and societal violence. Problems typically include school –specific problems, such as school governance issues, how to implement effective classroom instruction, student discipline and retention, and standards. That schools are perceived as central to the larger societal problems speaks both to the permeability of the institution and the tendency to assign institutional responsibility to schools for these larger problems.



testing. Thus MCAS enters the stage after a history of reforms with great promise and disappointing results.

The reach of public school reform initiatives takes us into the areas of curriculum and teacher pedagogy, and the politics of school governance. The movement for the community control and decentralization of public schools in New York City in the 1960's was a grassroots movement by parents in minority communities who advocated for increased participation and control in the education of their children. Studies of this and other reform efforts typically describe the reform, the politics of mobilization and the politics of the reform's implementation; the account in *110 Livingston Street* (Rogers, 1969, and *110 Livingston Street Revisited* (1971) are often pointed to as the most comprehensive review of the community control reform movement. Berube and Gittell (1969) also made an important contribution to understanding the neighborhood politics and challenges to the implementation of a community's control over its public schools. Cohen (1975, 1976) examines the successes and failures of large scale government programs and in so doing, explains how the belief that public education will lead to the redress of poverty has in turn influenced education policy. Cohen (1991, 1995), Cuban (1998) and Elmore (1995) focus upon the role of curriculum reform, and specifically the standards reform, the gradualness of change despite the numerous efforts to improve pedagogy in schools, the difficulties in the implementation of large scale curriculum reforms and finally, the reform's impact upon schools and teachers. Moses (1989) offers an example of curriculum reform in mathematics which is based upon the cognitive mapping of students, and is successfully implemented in selected school districts in

Massachusetts. Elmore, Peterson and McCarthy (1995) study teachers' pedagogy in three schools, through classroom observation and qualitative interview, where efforts to implement curriculum reforms differ from one another, and are hindered by teachers' prior conceptions of teaching. Changes in school structure have variable influence upon classroom teaching in this study.

Scholars have examined institutional strategies for change, as well as the structural impediments which have hindered the successful implementation of a wide range of reforms. Sarason (1971) examines the institutional barriers to change which arise in the process of organizational efforts to reform a single school. Hochschild and Scovronick (1988) examine the relationship between residential patterns and the racial segregation of schools, and maintain that housing segregation leads to school segregation. These same authors expand their commentary on public school reform in *The American Dream and the Public Schools* (2003). Hochschild and Scovronick posit the public school as a central institution in America's ideology and promise of the American Dream. Their review of major education reforms, including desegregation, the equalization of school finance through the courts, and the standards reform relate the successes and failures of these efforts to aspects of American society and its class structure, the nation's meritocratic value system and its promise for success.<sup>4</sup> My study, while concerned with these broad, contextual factors, is directed at understanding the institutional structure of the school and the social and political processes which animate the organizational behavior of schools. This study thereby probes what happens *inside* the school.

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<sup>4</sup> Brint and Karabel (1989) in *The Diverted Dream, Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985* discuss the system of meritocracy in academia as it unfolded with the creation of the community college system. Furthermore, the authors discuss the structure of opportunity for graduates in advanced industrialized nations.

I include Tyack and Cuban's (1995) *Tinkering with Utopia* in this strand of *Public School Reform: Strategies for Change*, because this book is a reflection upon the intransigence of schools to a long line of reform initiatives, or what the authors describe as a 'gradualness of changes in educational practices' by public schools. This 'tinkering' or incrementalism is framed by the authors as a way of preserving what is valuable, and reworking what is not. Their analysis is a blend of institutional and political analysis. Cuban (1998) also speaks to this gradualness of change, and characterizes schools as autonomous, buffered institutions capable of 'changing reforms, and redefining their success or failure'. Despite these cautionary lessons from history, the MCAS and the *No Child Left Behind Act* are meant to bring quick results. The federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation requires improved standardized test scores within three years, with punitive measures for non-performance which include the withholding of federal funds, and the closing of schools which do not meet the required performance standard as measured by test scores.

Cohen (1988) and Elmore, McCarthy and Peterson (1995), two of the studies mentioned above, examine the structural and political constraints to changing instruction and pedagogy in schools. The studies are part of a vast literature on the relationship between educational processes and classroom pedagogy. This research employs aspects of case study methodology; classroom observation and in-depth interviews allow the researchers to investigate aspects of the 'black box' of the public school. However, the focus tends to be upon teacher pedagogy and classroom dynamics. The findings of these particular studies, in the first instance, identify difficulties teachers confront in changing

their own cognitive maps in order to meet the demands of teaching ‘new math’, or in the second instance, discuss teachers’ difficulties in moving from a pedagogy of transmission to inculcating among students a self-directed learning process. As recounted in these case studies, despite efforts to fundamentally change to a pedagogy that creates among students self-directed ‘learning by understanding’, practices of rote learning and transmission models of instruction persisted.

In terms of developing an understanding of the social processes of institutional reform, these studies fall short; an understanding of the constraints to systemic change still requires a larger palate for analysis, such as placing classroom dilemmas in the broader institutional context of the school and its organizational structure. My study of the MCAS reform is undertaken at this level of analysis, where the *school as an institution* is the subject of analysis. The social and political processes which underlie the daily practices within the school, its instructional agenda and socialization of students, as well as the school members’ efforts to interpret and implement a state mandated reform requires an institutional analysis which takes place from inside the ‘black box’ of the school.

The third strand of inquiry, which I name *School Restructuring: Structure and Pedagogy*, includes literature of early efforts to understand the structure of the public school system, as well as current efforts to understand the efforts and apparent failure to restructure schools. These studies are multitudinous; many of them were borne of the restructuring movement of the 1980’s and 1990’s, many are reflective of current alternative reform proposals such as charter reform and school vouchers, and finally,

there is a voluminous literature on the standards reform and standardized testing (Finn, 1996, 1997, American Federation of Teachers, 1996, Lowe, 1998, Newman, King and Rigdon, 1997, Negroni, 1997, Wiggins, 1997, Sacks, 1999).

What is distinctive in these strands of the literature is the thinking about the difficulties in bringing institutional change to scale. The performance of Community School #32 in New York City, which successfully matriculates low-income minority students with a long history of academic failure and sends them on to college became a focus of study by scholars (Elmore and Burny, 1997, 1997a, Meier, 1995, 1999). The failure to replicate this model brought about new reflections upon the failures of bringing broad based reform to the public school system. This literature focused upon the problems of mobilizing constituents as well as collectively moving beyond the 'umbrella' term of *restructuring* to a shared agreement of the meaning, and consequently, the implementation of *restructuring*. The failure to do so left change, once again, in the hands of an individual school. (Meyer, Scott and Strang, 1986, Meyer, 1979, Cohen and Barnes, 1992, Elmore, 1995, 1996, 1998, Darling-Hammond, 1997, 1997a)

The education literature *leaves almost untouched* the social and political processes within a school, and ways in which these processes interact with the greater environment. This chasm in the intellectual study of school reform leaves to be answered several important questions germane to understanding the process of institutional reform and change: *when faced with the mandate of school reform, how do agents make sense of this mandate? How do agents within the school conceive of strategic, organizational*

*responses to reform agendas? How do they imagine the possibilities or potentials to improve upon the delivery of education to their students? Finally, how can we understand the social processes at work within the school so as to improve the theoretical understanding of institutional reform as well as the policy making process?*

### ***Useful Concepts in Organizational Studies***

These limitations of scope of study in the field of education reform led me to the disciplinary field of organizational studies. Within this field, studies of public schools by a group of institutional sociologists in the 1970's and 1980's generated theoretical concepts that endure to this day.<sup>5</sup> These early studies identified 'societal sectors' (Scott and Meyer, 1982) and 'organizational fields' (Powell and DiMaggio, 1983) as a way to propose boundary definitions for organizational environments of different levels and scope. Schools and school systems qualified as an organizational field in that they constitute a recognized area of institutional life, share an institutional purpose and produce similar services. This line of thinking came to portray schools as having an organizational structure and uniform logic, which led to a paradigmatic view of schools that inevitably left out the social processes within.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the key research studies from this era are as follows: Powell and DiMaggio, 1983, Meyer and Rowan, 1977, Scott and Meyer, 1982, Zucker, 1983, Meyer, Scott and Deal, 1981, Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978, 1979)

<sup>6</sup> Research on the "Centralization of Funding and Control in Educational Governance" by John Meyer, 1980, is an example of a study of school systems 'from on high', that is, it is an examination of the decentralized nature and governance structures of public schools in the United States. This research, by design, does not enter into the social processes within a school in order to understand variance or similarity across schools, nor does it attempt to understand the individualized institutional logic of a particular school.

Other conceptual frames in the field of organizational studies came closer to examining the social and organizational processes in response to reform efforts *within* the school. The theoretical construct of ‘loose coupling’, identified by the sociologists studying schools in the 1980’s, has endured through time and has been a key concept used by present day educational researchers in their explanations of the intransigence of public schools to reform over time. The concept refers to the variable strength of organizational connections and relationships within schools. Theorists often point to this organizational capacity to buffer change (due to institutionalized gaps between formal structure and day-to-day operations) in their explanation of schools’ historical resistance to externally mandated reforms. (Weick, 1978, 1979, Benson, 1983, Glassman, 1973, Elmore, 1988, Tyack, 2000)

I was drawn to the concept of loose and tight coupling as potentially having a great deal of explanatory power. Institutional sociologists who pioneered organizational research in public schools in the early 1980’s found, in the course of several studies, that schools buffer change and termed the institutionalized process by which this takes place ‘*loose coupling*’. To best understand this theoretic construct, it is helpful to think of organizations as systems, but systems which are segmented. A school, for example, can be understood as a federation of dissimilar segments among which academic departments are individual, coherent structures which relate to one another and to the school administration, by a series of organizational connections of variable strength.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In conversation with Professor Elmore, he reiterates a view of high schools typically found in the education literature. As he stated, High schools, for example, are often described as a collection of academic departments, each with their own culture, academic content and cultures rather than a system or single organizational entity.

“Schools have taken what is basically a two person interaction between a teacher and a learner, and have added all kinds of tasks, responsibilities and activities onto this basic core relationship. Each item that is added represents a segment rather than an integrated part. Thus, there is no such thing as *the* school or *a* school. What the additions do is loosen the basic teacher-learner relationship. The basic relationship becomes complicated to the point where segments have only modest dependence on one another. To treat the school as a single organization is to miss most of how it functions.”<sup>8</sup>

The concept of loose and tight coupling refers to the variable strength of these connections. Findings, to date, demonstrate that public schools are loosely coupled organizations (Weick, 1978, 1979, 2002, Benson, 1983). Theorists often point to this organizational capacity to buffer change (due to institutionalized gaps between formal structure and day-to-day operations) in explanations of schools’ historical resistance to externally mandated reforms (Elmore, 1996, Tyack, 1995). These concepts of *sense making* and *organizational identity* are theoretical concepts in the field of organizational theory which guide this dissertation research.

### ***Case Based Research and Theories of the Middle Range***

My research question began as a generalized inquiry into the organizational responses of public schools to the MCAS reform. This question was motivated by my interest in institutional change processes, and as discussed in the introductory chapter, by the unique features and intellectual puzzles presented by the standards reform. I grounded my principal research question, “*What are the organizational responses of the public schools to the MCAS reform?*” with more specific questions to guide the empirical inquiry, “*How does each school as an organization adapt or change in response to the*

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<sup>8</sup> Weick, K (2001) *Sources of Order in Underorganized Systems: Themes in Recent Organizational Theory*, in *Making Sense of the Organization*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 42



*reform? Which practices do they adopt, or adapt, as the case may be? Asked simply, what happens inside the school when it is mandated to change?"*

I sought a research design that would allow me to operate at the level of middle range theory. It is at this level that empirical research and observation take place, addressing delimited aspects of social phenomena. I would argue that it is at this level as well, that a space is created to recast theory in response to empirical findings.<sup>9</sup> For example, I bring currency to the general theory of social class, making it relevant at this intermediate level of analysis: it becomes a concept which explains not simply a school's location in the class order, but other structural and cultural aspects of its organizational identity and organizational performance as well.

It (Middle range theory) is intermediate to general theories of social systems which are too remote from particular cases of social behavior, organization and change to account for what is observed and to those detailed orderly descriptions of particulars that are not generalized at all.<sup>10</sup>

A case study strategy finds its home at the level of middle range theory.<sup>11</sup> Case study research is a 'grounded approach' which focuses on dynamics at play in a single setting. Early writings on case study research date to the late 1960's where scholars established the merits of empirically based data collection and the iterative, analytic process between empirical data and theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Glaser, 1978). These scholars argued for a central inductive approach as

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<sup>10</sup> Merton, Robert (1946) *Social Theory and Social Structure*, pp 7-12, Sztompka, Piotr in (1996), *Robert K Merton On Social Structure and Science*, pp34-51

<sup>11</sup> See Pinder and Moore, Editors, *Middle Range Theory and the Study of Organizations*, as well Merton's writings on theories of the middle range, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 1949, and a perspective on purposive action which takes place in case study research, "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Action", in the *American Sociological Review*, 1936.

well as a role for literature. More systematic approaches to case study research and further development of the case study's role in the development of new theory have followed. There is a research literature which both codifies case study methodology (Yin, 1981, 1984, Miles and Huberman, 1988, Pettigrew, 1988, Ragin, 1994) and explores its potential for theory formation and development (Piore, 1979, Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg (1991), Ragin and Becker (1992) Miles and Huberman (1994), Eisenhardt, (1999), Peattie (2000).

In this middle range, there is a great range of motion available to the researcher to move from the view 'on the ground' to the literature and back; to re-conceptualize the empirical data, to make broad generalizations and ultimately to develop theoretic constructs which make the more *particular* actions understandable. For example, in the course of this dissertation research, my early findings led me to change my research question, and to *re-conceptualize* the research question as "*When reacting to the same reform, why do organizations respond differently? Why are schools as organizations responding differently to MCAS?*", thereby re-focusing my inquiry and my gathering of data.

Qualitative research tools include focused and open-ended research interviews, on-site observation and surveys which allow the researcher to identify key informants and gather data. Variables are contextualized and the story to be uncovered from a case study lies in the researcher's observation and interpretation of the ways in which social relations are constituted on a day-to-day basis. With

the establishment of the case study, the use of comparative case studies and multiple investigators was introduced, and the collection, coding and analysis of data – a central feature of case study research – was advocated for as either a joint process or as within the domain of a single investigator. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Peattie, 2000)

For purposes of this dissertation study, I draw primarily from an unpublished manuscript entitled *The Case Based Research Strategy* (Peattie, 2000) and I will appropriate the term, case based research when I refer to this dissertation research. This paper is a study of local economic development in India; its applicability to this dissertation underscores one of Peattie's points, which is the generalizability of the single case study.<sup>12</sup> I choose this as the main referent in my research design, as it both emphasizes what have historically been the key features of case study research while offering additional insights to the generalizability of the single, unique case study.

Peattie contributes to and argues convincingly for the important qualities of thick description, the contribution of the *unique* case study to social science research and for the establishment of the researcher's point of view in the research design.<sup>13</sup> The uniqueness of context and patterns of institutional, economic and individual behaviors make the case study useful as a basis for practical

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<sup>12</sup> Burawoy makes a similar point, using the nth case.

<sup>13</sup> Thick description contributes to explaining causality by providing as much detail as possible in explaining events and phenomena. See Clifford Geertz's, (1983) *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* and (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

understanding. Here begins the process of the conceptual articulation and re-conceptualization of the data, advancing from an early rudimentary, particularized and unexplained idea to a genuine concept.<sup>14</sup> Herein lies the potential for theory to progress as the data is interpreted and connected to larger, more abstract concepts and principles.

With this conceptual step, which brings an analytic perspective from the particular circumstance to the general principle or theory, it becomes possible to cross over into the realm of policy. The uniqueness of the particular case provides concrete examples of conduct and then generalized principles from which recommendations to policy, or the creation of policy can follow. The case study is distinguished as a robust methodological tool in both *theory building* and *policy making* – presenting the case as a study of particular circumstances from which lessons are generalizable for the next set of particular circumstances.

I adopted this case based methodology not simply because of the potential it holds to understand the complexity of social processes. I chose to engage ‘on the ground’ to gain a point of view that would allow me to discern and explain the social processes set into motion when schools are mandated by law to reform their curriculum, to accept state mandated standards for graduation from high school, and to conform to the state’s system of accountability. Inside the school there is

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<sup>14</sup> This process of data analysis and coding, and the movement between empirical findings and theory is closely related to the analytic process described by Merton in his views on theory building. (Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 1949, pp. 83-97)

social complexity – of organizational structures, diverse stakeholder interests, resource constraints and opportunities to take action.

### *Comparative Case Study*

I chose to undertake a comparative case study of two public high schools, choosing high schools because it is these students who face high stakes and must pass the MCAS test to matriculate. I selected very different schools, for several reasons. First, case variance was needed to test the claims of policy reformers, and secondly, to push the organizational theories conventionally used to explain institutional change, for relevance. In the case of policy, MCAS was a state mandated, centralized ‘one size fits all policy’ which assumed isomorphism (convergence) across schools. There was an expectation that disparities between schools in achievement and equity would be greatly reduced as a result of the MCAS reform. Policy makers expected to close the gap in achievement between high and low performing schools, and to affect greater equity in the delivery of education to poor, under-performing schools. This raised policy questions, such as ‘Can a reform ‘iron out the differences?’ and more to the point, “ Can a *one size fits all* reform really fit all?

The concept of isomorphism is useful in understanding the policy goals of reformers who had turned to testing as the means for raising the academic standards and performance of schools, thus bringing schools into compliance. Isomorphism was conceived by institutional scholars in their observations of organizational behavior

(DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). Isomorphism explains organizational convergence, or stated another way, the process of homogenization which was discovered to take place when organizations within a sector were faced with the same set of environmental conditions.<sup>15</sup> This research found that resemblance across organizations was a result of increasing compatibility with the environment.

This convergence could be the result of organizational leaders 'learning appropriate responses and adjusting their decisions accordingly, but the process of isomorphism is more aptly described by type. Three mechanisms were identified in explaining isomorphic change. The first, *coercive isomorphism*, includes informal and formal pressures exerted upon organizations by other organizations or authorities. A legal mandate such as the MCAS reform is such an example, as are government mandates, in general. At stake is the organization's legitimacy and often, funding promised in conjunction with the mandated organizational changes. The second mechanism, *mimetic isomorphism* refers to environmental uncertainties which encourage organizations to model themselves on successful organizations. This diffusion could take place any number of ways, unintentionally through employee transfer, or by more explicit methods such as hiring expert advice or as is common, seeking out successful organizational models as a way to insure one's legitimacy. Normative pressures are a third source of isomorphic organizational change and stem primarily from professionalization. The struggle to define conditions and methods of work is subject to compromise among the different stakeholders of the organization, as well as to external influences of regulation and to professional counterparts in other organizations.

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The expectations that follow from *coercive isomorphism* explain (in part) the expectations of policy makers in their design of the standards reform. There was the expectation that schools *would* adapt to be compatible with the standards based environment.<sup>16</sup> An organization's concern for legitimacy is key to an organization's survival, and a concern which will drive an organization to meet a law's requirements, as in the case of the Education Reform Act, 1993.<sup>17</sup> It is a driving force in the case of normative and mimetic isomorphism as well. However, some of this apparent isomorphism will be superficial. The question remains as to when real change at the 'technical core' takes place (Meyer and Rowan, 1991).

Case variance is also needed to reflect differences 'on the ground'. This grounded view differs from a more conventional view of institutions within institutional theory, one which formalizes institutions at a level of abstraction and attributes a status to institutions as mythical and regulatory forces in society. In this view, institutions incorporate externally legitimated formal structures by designing a formal structure that adheres to the prescription of myths in the institutional environment. This may take the form of an organizational language (as in an organizational chart), a professional language (as in job practices), legitimated procedures (as in hiring procedures), all of which makes possible a

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<sup>16</sup> DiMaggio and Powell (1983) *The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields*, pp71-76

<sup>17</sup> Legitimacy is well documented in the institutional literature as fundamental to organization's drive to survive (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991, Meyer and Rowan, 1983, Oliver, 1991, 1992)

legitimated account of an organization's activities and collective purpose. It also provides for the accounting of rational accountings after failures occur.<sup>18</sup>

This paradigmatic view would present high schools as institutions which share formalized organizational, procedural and legitimation structures.<sup>19</sup> For example, they have in common grade levels, teacher and administrative certification requirements, the teaching of academic disciplines and the institutional purpose of the matriculation of students from the public school system. However, a case based approach allows the researcher to consider factors that also account for dissimilarities between schools. Socio-economic status, local community values, the size of the school, student demographics and the tenure of the teaching staff are some of the factors which a case based approach can include in its analysis.<sup>20</sup> These types of institutional factors are aspects which contribute to an understanding of the organizational response of schools to the state mandated MCAS reform. For these reasons, I elected to do an in-depth, comparative case study and I selected two Massachusetts high schools at opposing ends of the socio-economic scale as my case study sites.

One case study school, Lowell High School, is located in the City of Lowell, a low income urban community which was once the site of a vibrant textile manufacturing industry. Lowell High School is the second largest high

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<sup>18</sup> According to Meyer and Rowan, rationalized formal structures arise in two contexts. The demands of local, relational networks encourage the development of structures that coordinate and control activities.

<sup>19</sup> There is a ubiquity in the structure of schools and high schools in particular that is the result of formalized professional and bureaucratic processes that have become institutionalized over time. As explained by Powell and DiMaggio (1991), organizations tend to model themselves after similar organizations which they perceive to be more legitimate or successful.



school in the state, educating nearly 4,000 students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and learning styles, the majority of whom come from low income families. The high school is a member of a large urban school district numbering twenty-nine schools, all of which meet the poverty level requirements of federal Title I funding.<sup>21</sup> The student population is 54 percent minority and 33% of the students are second language speakers. Eighty percent of Lowell High School's students go on to some form of higher education, primarily two year colleges. The school, however, is overwhelmed by the remedial needs of the majority of their students who enter the school in need of basic math and English literary skills. The median income of residents in Lowell is approximately \$29,000 and the city's poverty rate at 15% is higher than the state of Massachusetts.<sup>22</sup>

The second case study school, Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School is a wealthy, suburban school which serves approximately 1,200 students, the majority of whom come from white, upper income families. Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School is a four year high school and a 'single school district', which means that the school is the only school in the district. The school offers a well-developed liberal arts curriculum, inclusive of the dramatic arts. Ninety-eight percent of students matriculate to four year colleges, the majority of which are considered to be among the elite universities.

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<sup>21</sup> Lowell Public Schools, *Unified School Improvement Plan for 1999-2000, Lowell High School Student Handbook, 2000-2001, Lowell High School Course of Studies Catalogue, 2001-2002*

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Census Data

The towns of Lincoln and Sudbury are composed primarily of white, English speaking middle class professionals, the income levels and educational achievement levels of the parents of Lincoln-Sudbury students are fairly high: the professions and technical occupations, combined, employ 75% of fathers and 62% of the mothers, contributing to median family incomes of \$79, 092 in Sudbury and \$57,512 in Lincoln. The poverty levels, which are 1.6% and 2.6% are well below the state average of 11%. The towns have recently passed a bond issue to finance a new building for the high school, illustrative of residents' commitment to public education and to the regional high school.

I selected these high schools for their differences in areas that hold significance for the MCAS policy goals of equity and achievement, and to use differences between the schools to develop a greater understanding of the social processes which take place within each school in response to the *same* mandate to reform. The value of comparative case study research is that it allows for exploration of difference, and the uniqueness of each case offers real possibility to develop 'theories of social causation from the ground up'.

### ***The Conceptual Framework of Organizational Identity and Sense making***

My efforts to explain the social processes of educational reform led me to expand my framework beyond traditional educational theory. Also, early in my research I

discovered that the differences in the schools' responses were so significant that any theory which required an assumption of isomorphism would be inadequate to the task. In an attempt to understand the nature of these differences, I studied the historical and cultural backgrounds of these schools, and came to suspect that long standing processes of institutional patterning were at work. I turned to field of institutionalism and organizational studies and borrowed two theoretical concepts: *organizational identity* and *sense making*. These concepts allowed me to explain the significant differences between the schools that my field research had begun to uncover, and became the guiding force in the writing of this dissertation.

Organizations have collective identities, consisting of the beliefs members share as distinctive, central and enduring.<sup>23</sup> Organizational identity refers to how members perceive and understand who they are and what they stand for as an organization.<sup>24</sup> Organizations are like individuals whose fundamental question "Who am I?" motivates a search for self and the search for relational meaning.<sup>25</sup> Like individuals, organizational identities are also shaped by the past, and institutional memory becomes inscribed in institutionalized patterns of discourse, self image, and behavior.

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<sup>23</sup>These ideas are found in the article, *Organizational Identity*, authored by Albert and Whetten, and published in *Research in Organizational Behavior, Volume Seven*, in 1985. This article is considered foundational article in the study of organizational identity. Published in 1985, this field is a relatively new area of research and study.

<sup>24</sup> As explained by Gioia in "From Individual to Organizational Identity", in the edited volume by Whetten and Godfrey, *Identity in Organizations*, identity captured the essential (in the phenomenological sense) features of an organization. The three dimensions were seen as directly parallel to those noted for individuals, differing mainly in their collectively-shared character. Pp.20-21

<sup>25</sup>Gioia , Dennis (1991) "*From Individual to Organizational Identity*",, This progression from individual/social identity to the level of organization has been described as natural, "a straightforward leap upward in analysis." Pp435-436

Organizational identities are complex and multi-faceted. It is the role of the organization's leadership to articulate the organization's identity, however, identity can be less than unitary; there can be different factions in the membership based upon profession or rank, as well as individual views that are not perfectly socialized by the organization. Furthermore, three different images are at play in the development of organizational identity. There is the individual's view of the organization, members shared perception of their organization, and the external view of the organization, which is the way members think they are being perceived by outsiders. Furthermore, there are two other aspects of organizational identity. The '*identity of*' the organization focuses on the organization itself; and the idea of '*identity with*' focuses on the relationship between the individual and organization. In this latter case, as the object of belonging and commitment, organizational identity provides a cognitive and emotional foundation on which organizational members build attachment and with which they create meaningful relationships with the organization.

If organizational identity is the being of an organization, sense making is the doing. Sense making is an interpretive process whose core activity is the assignment of meaning to actions and events.<sup>26</sup> The process of sense making is based in both individual and social activities, which are forces in permanent tension. In making sense, there is discovery, interpretation, problem-solving, and reflection. Enactment (taking action) is a driving force in this model. The boundary between the organization and the environment is blurred; that is, people have a role in creating the environment to which they respond.

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<sup>26</sup> The foundational development of *sense making* as a theoretical construct dates to Karl Weick (1976, 1979, 2001, 2002), with its practical and theoretical development evidenced through case studies in organizational crisis and organizational behavior.<sup>26</sup>

Sense making often involves individuals reflecting upon their own actions in order to discover what they have done and what the meaning of those actions is. Sense making explains an organization's adaptations to environmental pressures - such as the MCAS reform. Members engage in a process to *make meaning* of an intended change. (Ranson, Hinings and Greenwood, 1980, Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, Dutton and Dukerich, 1994, Dutton and Dukleritch, 2001, Dorado, 2001, Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, Sewell, 1992)

To fully understand the schools' organizational responses, the concept of organizational identity, by itself, would not suffice. Sense making allowed me to 'reach down' to the ground level where teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other stakeholders were making sense of the reform. To understand the social processes taking place within the school, I could not simply be guided by the mission statement or other documents which profiled some aspect of the high school. To understand the motivations and actions of school members, I needed both the concepts of *organizational identity* and *sense making*. Therefore I fuse these two concepts into one which I name *Organizational Sense Making*.

*Organizational Sense Making* involves three inter-related activities in which the schools engage: discernment, enactment, and strategizing. I use the term *discernment* to indicate an aspect of the sense making process where there is a choice to be made about what one must do. *Enactment* is a continuation of discernment in the form of action. Strategies devolve from the *discernment stage* of sense making and involve an assemblage of enactments that are goal oriented.

Through the lens of organizational sense making, individuals and organizations have the capacity to work with resources, schema, symbols, and routines in their organizations to operate in different ways than what has been commanded and prescribed. Their actions are a part of an identity-constructivist project – they do not choose actions one at a time but rather their actions are necessarily integrated into larger assemblages or *strategies*. This *enactment* is complex, and school members have the potential to manipulate and challenge routinized, institutional patterns or to conform, or some of both.

Deep within the organizational sense making process of each school was a central question ‘Who are we anyway?’ In the field, open ended interviews, followed up by more focused, issue oriented interviews indicated that teachers, individually and as members of academic departments and school governing bodies, were engaged in a sense making process around this fundamental, self-reflective question. A quite simple answer to this question of identity which was not ‘foreseen’ by policy makers was that these two schools shared a mission to educate young adults, yet were divergent from one another along key dimensions of organization and philosophy. This observation that the schools are different is, in fact, not a simple answer at all.<sup>27</sup> These differences led to dramatically different organizational responses and strategies of enactment.

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<sup>27</sup> This refers to the theoretical perspective of choice. In a paradigmatic institutional view of schools, as discussed earlier, they are institutional members of the same sector and

Each school adopts a distinct strategy in response to the MCAS reform. As we will see, Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School discerns and adopts a strategy of *Antagonistic Compliance*. In their enactment, the school's members selectively organize resistance to the MCAS, and they confront a divide within the school over degrees of freedom and discipline within the school's culture that is exacerbated by the MCAS reform. In contrast, Lowell High School discerns and adopts a strategy of *Compliant Engagement*. In their enactment, the schools' members comply with the reform but they find ways to assert authorship, set limits to the meaning and import of MCAS in delineating the school's goals. In its call for systemic change and an MCAS culture, the school confronts deeply institutionalized patterns of bureaucracy, some of which are reinforced by the MCAS reform. They engage, they do not merely comply.

To illustrate the power of the concept of institutional sense making, I am going to discuss more concretely how this process takes shape in a school. The sense making process of a school is structured and motivated by its organizational identity. A school's organizational identity has four key features: (1) educational philosophy/mission, (2) governance structure, (3) organizational structure, and (4) socio-economic class position. These four structuring elements, all of which are historically determined, are at the root of the school's sense making.

These four features of organizational identity are inter-related; each feature has the capacity to influence one or several of the other structural features of the organization, as organizational members engage in making sense of their environment.

The feature *mission/educational philosophy* motivates the organization to perform in order to achieve a central, agreed upon purpose. An individual or a cohort's sense making is expressed through the articulation of the mission, and subsequently through its organizational enactment.<sup>28</sup> The mission/philosophy finds organizational expression through an organization's *governance structure* and *organizational structure* and *socio-economic class position*.

These structural features can in turn shape the organizational mission/philosophy; or the mission can lead to new formations in the governance and organizational structures of the school. As an organization enacts its sense making process, its organizational identity evolves and takes on a new, often nuanced form. The features of mission/philosophy, governance structure and organizational structure are contextualized by the fourth structural feature named above, *socio-economic class position*.

The structural feature of socio-economic class is also a key aspect of an organization's identity. In the case of these two public high schools, their respective socio-economic class is captured by the per pupil spending amounts, or annual school budget. However, there are other, more subtle dimensions of class privilege. Along with socio-economic class comes cultural capital, in the form of access to information and expertise; capacity to organize politically; openness versus parochialism, and 'conformity to external authority' values as evidenced in low income communities and 'values of self-direction' as evidenced in upper income communities. These attitudes,

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<sup>28</sup> Cohort may refer to a sub group within the organization, formally or informally constituted, such as an academic department, or group of teachers with seniority



which are the basis for the exercise of power, derive from class position ( Kohn,1977). I have identified a fifth type of cultural capital, related to this class stratified structure of autonomy and conformity, which I call *organizational self esteem*. Organizational self esteem has proven to be crucial in differentiating the responses of the two case study schools to the reform.

### ***Research Design and the Process of Inquiry***

My research began in September, 1999 and concluded in March, 2002. In total, I conducted one hundred eighty interviews, observed a total of thirty-three school related meetings, and participated in twenty classroom observations. I conducted sixty-five interviews at Lowell High School, conducted ten classroom observations in the subjects of math, English and science, and attended twenty six meetings of different school and district level governing bodies and task committees. I conducted fifty-six interviews at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, participated in ten classroom observations and attended six school meetings, five of which were MCAS Committee meetings. The remaining interviews were conducted with education professionals, scholars and political leaders.<sup>29</sup> These interviews provided me with important background information on the MCAS in this first stage of inquiry, and provided perspectives from a vantage point outside of the schools over the course of the reform's implementation.

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<sup>29</sup> Professor Dick Elmore encouraged me to research both schools simultaneously for this reason. Issues that arose at each school were in some way, a reflection of the other school. I found this approach somewhat difficult to co-ordinate, as meetings might conflict, but well worth the effort.

I began my research by interviewing exclusively at Lowell High School due to the size and complexity of the school. I began a research agenda at Lincoln-Sudbury High School in November, 2000. I found that my questions and insights were sharpened in the process of this comparative research, moving back and forth between schools. School interviews averaged 1 ½ hours and were open ended in the first round of data collection. Interviews became more focused as I identified key informants within each school, and discovered organizational issues and strategies which required consistent follow through.

My process of inquiry was a dynamic, iterative process, where my research design within each school evolved in response to my empirical findings. The two settings required different modes of entrée. At Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, in addition to interviews with the school's administrative staff, I focused my interview strategy within two departments – the History/Social Science Department and the Mathematics Department. My original plan had been to focus on the English and Math departments as these are the two high stakes subjects on the MCAS exam. However, due to the autonomy of academic departments at Lincoln Sudbury Regional High School and the different interests at stake for each subject area, I discovered the History/Social Science Department to have taken a leading role in organizing and articulating a response to the MCAS which was having an impact upon the entire school.

I saw this departmental activism as an opportunity to study different departmental responses within the same school, across disciplines. Math is a paradigmatic discipline where content, while subject to some controversy, finds a national broad-based

consensus. History/Social Science is subject to qualitative interpretation and remains a subject of national, contentious debate. Issues of ‘whose history’, and ‘what approach to classroom pedagogy’ arose as the H/SS curriculum frameworks came under construction. Debates over an accepted canon, and rote factual learning versus investigative, critical thinking in classrooms resurfaced as issues in the development of MCAS H/SS frameworks, motivating Lincoln-Sudbury History teachers to respond. Additional interviews with English and Science teachers allowed me to seek out breadth as well as depth in views.<sup>30</sup>

### *Structure and Design of Qualitative Interviews*

At Lowell High School I identified key informants and as a result of these early interviews, amended my original research design as well. I discovered and followed the issues that emerged from these in-depth conversations, which led to a further shift in my data collection strategy. I discovered that systemic solutions at this school were defined organizationally, in keeping with the school’s bureaucratic traditions. I shifted my strategy to include consistent attendance and observation in a range of district level and high school level meetings. I then focused my interview strategy with teachers and class observations at the ninth grade level, as I had discovered that the school would focus a majority of the school’s resources at this level in preparation for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade MCAS exam. However, as my intent was to understand the organizational response of the school (as an organization) to the MCAS reform, I interviewed teachers and observed classes at other grade levels as well.

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<sup>30</sup> These interviews have not been included in this dissertation study. They will be used as the basis of articles which compare the sense making of each school around key educational issues.

Significant differences between schools became evident in the early phase of arranging the field research, requiring a different research approach at each school. Lincoln-Sudbury teachers were proficient with computer technology and email, with routinized ways of communicating with each other and the entire staff on e-mail. I found this technical infrastructure, if you will, to be related to aspects of cultural capital (an openness to information, a willingness to express opinions and teaching staff). This contributed to aspects of the school's organizational design that were tightly coupled. E-mail made certain kinds of communication possible and routinized among all staff members. The spatial concentration of departments (including teachers' offices and classrooms) in building wings contributed to a cohesiveness within departments, and made it fairly straightforward to arrange interviews, find teachers and observe them in collegial settings.

At Lowell High School, overcrowded conditions did not allow the Assistant Headmaster to assign classrooms so that departments would be spatially concentrated within the school. In fact, a significant number of teachers were 'floaters' without a home classroom, forced to change venues for different class periods of the day. The school was housed in two very large buildings, spreading members of the same department across corridors and floors between buildings, adding to the difficulties in communication. It was only in June, 2001 as I was ending my research at the school that teachers were developing some sophistication and affinity for e-mail technology as a form of communication. To schedule interviews with teachers, I often had to appear at

their classroom, or homeroom, to arrange an interview time. The Teacher Center was another option for finding teachers; copy machines, large work tables and some kitchen facilities drew teachers here to prepare for classes. Department chairpersons were allocated office cubicle space, however, privacy for teachers was not possible in the current space. In general, by following the schedule of class modules I was able to track the teachers I wished to speak with. Scheduling tended to require a face-to-face contact with the teacher.

### ***Primary and Secondary Sources***

Primary and secondary sources were gathered and reviewed over the course of this research study. Organized by research stage and issue area, this information inspired new interview questions as well as adding breadth and depth to the coding and analysis of data. These sources can be organized by category, as follows:

#### ***Review of the history of the national standards reform and the collection and analysis***

*National publications and newspapers:* Publications included reports by the National Education Goals Panel, the National Center on Education and the Economy, New Standards, the federal government and other professional academic and citizen groups involved in the standards reform. Articles from leading education journals and newspapers follow national efforts and events taking place in other states and include: Education Week, New York Times, Atlantic Monthly, New Yorker,

#### ***Review of the history of the MCAS reform and the collection and analysis of secondary information***

*Massachusetts legislative and state agency sources:* this includes a review of transcripts from Board of Education meetings between years 1997 to present day, MCAS curriculum frameworks, the Common Core of Curriculum, MCAS sample tests, MCAS sample questions, DOE directives to the schools directing implementation, DOE website, www.doe.org, , MCAS legislation, opposition legislation and State House hearings held in 2001. *Newspaper Coverage includes:* Boston Globe, Lowell Sun, Lincoln Gazette, Sudbury Town Crier

*Stakeholder Group Publications:* Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education reports, “Every Child a Winner”, ‘No Child Left Behind’ which outline the vision of school reform and change promoted by the business community. The organization ‘Achieve’ which is a collaboration between IBM and the National Governor’s Association offers a website and publications which describe efforts of education departments in forty nine participating states. This group has also introduced the term and practice of establishing ‘benchmarks’ in educational standards – borrowing from industry practice. Massachusetts Teacher Association newsletters and website [www.goodschools.org](http://www.goodschools.org)

*Opposition Group Publications:* FairTest website, CARE website, POWER conference materials

*Primary Sources:* Lowell High School course catalogue, rules and regulations, meeting agendas, website, MCAS curriculum guides by discipline; Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School course catalogue, rules and regulations, school newspaper, fortieth birthday historical biography of the school, meeting agendas, course schedules, websites: [www.lowellhigh.edu](http://www.lowellhigh.edu), [www.l-s.edu](http://www.l-s.edu).

### ***What I Expected To Find***

I framed my empirical inquiry with a set of expectations, or hunches if you will, of what I expected to find. I expected to find Lowell High School opposed to the reform and Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School in favor of the reform. This was not a hypothesis that I was seeking to prove or disprove, but rather, an expectation that would guide my understanding of the social processes taking place in each school. I drew from several theories, or multiple lenses, in identifying the possible responses of each school to the MCAS reform. The sets of possible responses, in each school, are expressed in the table below.

The lenses are redistribution (resource dependence) and achievement (meritocracy). At Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School I expected that the MCAS would be viewed as a test on which their students would perform well, maintaining their

rank in the meritocracy without disturbing the flow of resources. “Our Kids are Winners”. This view draws additional support from the theories of institutionalism and resource dependence, which converge around certain assumptions: (1) organizational survival depends on response to external demands; (2) organizations seek stability and predictability; (3) organizations seek legitimacy and are driven by interests. (Oliver, 1991, 1992, McKay, 1998).

**Table 1:  
Possible Responses to the MCAS Reform by  
Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School**

<b>Love</b>	<b>Hate</b>
<b>L-S</b> Our Kids Are Winners	Our Kids Become Automatons
<b>Lowell</b> Our Kids Finally Get Resources	Our Kids are Losers (Punished)

With this lens, compliance with the law would lead to a winning situation for the students and the school. As indicated by the next square, however, “*Our Kids Become Automatons*”, critical theories of schooling allows for a different perspective. With this lens, resistance to the reform is based in concerns related to culture, power and organizational identity. My hunch was that Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School would favor the reform, given the benefits that would accrue to compliance with a Massachusetts state law, the Education Reform Act, 1993.

These same lenses bring a different set of possibilities to Lowell High School. The redistribution of resources to Lowell High School could lead the school to comply and adapt to the reform in order to receive the promised (and needed) resources, as would

be predicted by resource dependence theory. *“Our Kids Finally Get Resources”* If this theory were again to converge with an institutionalist view, compliance with the reform should bring both resources and legitimacy to the school. Along with resources is the expectation of change in performance.

However, there is another view which regards the reform as threatening. Through the lens of achievement, and implicit in this square *“Our Kids are Losers”*, is the expectation that Lowell’s students will fail the MCAS exam, the state will retaliate and place the school in receivership, and the school will lose its legitimacy. The Winner and Loser squares indicate strategies to insure organizational legitimacy and survival. My ‘hunch’ in the case of Lowell High School was that the school would oppose the reform for reasons related to its organizational survival.

### ***What I Found***

In the early stages of my research, having spent several intense months conducting interviews and classroom observations in each school, I discovered the reverse of what I expected to find. Each school responded in the opposite way, proving my original expectations to be wrong. Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School was opposed to the reform, and Lowell High School expressed compliance, both schools responding with an organizational ambivalence as well as vehemence.<sup>31</sup> At Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School opposition took the form of pockets of organized and

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<sup>31</sup> This finding led me to think about organizational expressiveness, a term used by Schultz, Hatch and Larsen (2000) *The Expressive Organization: Linking Identity, reputation and the Corporate Brand* which has been used in relation to organizational identity and its symbolic expressions, such as corporate brand names.



generalized resistance, and at Lowell High School compliance took the form of a call for systemic change, fueled by a mantra to ‘Build an MCAS culture’ within the school.

The second surprise found that the organizational responses of resistance and compliance were co-existent in each school, which differs from empirical studies which have found both resistance and compliance strategies to be present, but alternating as part of an overall strategy of action. Both Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School enact both strategies simultaneously, however, (1) they comply and they resist to different degrees, and (2) one response dominates and defines the school’s prominent strategy, while the other response co-exists in a subordinate way. (Martin, 1999, McKay, 1998)<sup>32</sup> I name the organizational strategies undertaken by each school to reflect this duality: *Compliant Engagement* in the case of Lowell High School and *Antagonistic Compliance* in the case of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School. In the latter case, the elements of compliance and resistance are clearly reflected in the terminology. The strategy of ‘Compliant Engagement’ indicates a level of enthusiastic cooperation; the element of resistance is contained in the term ‘Engagement’. I will argue later in this dissertation that resistance to the MCAS at Lowell High School operates as a subordinate strategy and subtext, most evident in the school administration’s efforts to exert authorship over its strategic organizational response to the MCAS reform.

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<sup>32</sup> Studies have generally found that organizations may adopt different strategies at different times, in responding organizationally to the same environmental pressure. I reached out to Martin (1992) who on the other hand, recognizes fractures in organizational culture, and offers a typology that is more closely allied with organizational and cultural identity. In this typology, there is either a unity or dominance story (all white) there is a dissidence, oppositional story – black and white and there is ambivalence and ambiguity, all three of which co-exist.

These findings led me to refine my study in two significant ways. I amended my research question to more accurately reflect the phenomena in the field. The question became: *When reacting to the same reform, why do organizations respond differently? Why do schools as organizations respond differently to the MCAS?* Secondly, I was dissatisfied with the understandings that institutional theory, resource dependence theory and even the versatile concept of loose coupling brought to these new findings. In tracing the strategic responses back through interviews and the respective institutional histories of each of the two schools, the enactment strategies of each school seemed to emanate from a deep sense of ‘self-identity’. There emerged a ‘world view’ and patterns of interacting with the environment that appeared to be motivated by members’ commitment to core aspects of the school, such as educational philosophies, cultural practices and its relationship to important stakeholders. This concern about public perceptions and image was magnified by the MCAS reform itself, which published annual state-wide school rankings on the MCAS exam. However, the institutional patterning of each school was core to its identity, and therefore I argue that it was core to each school’s organizational responses to MCAS.

At Lowell High School they asked, “How can we manage these new opportunities/ constraints?” This was a strategy of adaptation. At Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, members expressed outrage at the top down, centralized nature of the curriculum decisions and sought a conversation with the state, employing tactics that evolved to a collective resistance. This was a strategy of co-creation with the environment.

These afore-mentioned conventional institutional theories helped to explain the presence of resistance and compliance strategies and actions, and predicted accurately that each school would enact strategies to assure its legitimacy and survival. The discovery or surprise uncovered by my field work was that the schools' organizational responses were more complicated than simply survival strategies. The organizational strategies at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School reflected broader concerns of self-identity and public perception. The centralized requirements of the MCAS reform challenged each school to define its priorities, to allocate resources and ultimately, to settle upon a narrative for the school that would guide its actions. While these requirements were uniform and regulatory in nature, the challenges to each school in meeting these requirements and incorporating them into its school structure did not follow a linear process. School differences, which were attributable to its respective organizational identities, in effect served to create different optical lenses through which each school made sense of the MCAS reform.

## ***Chapter Three: Political Background to the MCAS Reform***

### ***Introduction***

Educational policy in the United States has at its center the policy of standards-based reform. It is a nation-wide policy, which over the last two decades has diffused across states, most often crafted by coalition politics and approved by the state legislatures. This policy approach has both influenced and been influenced by federal standards legislation and a rather consistent vision across several administrations for the reform of public schools. Forty-nine of fifty states have developed, or are in the process of developing, new academic standards that specify what students are expected to know at each grade level; standardized tests that measure progress against those standards; and an accountability system that, at minimum, provides annual public reports on individual school and school district performance. Within states which have experimented with choice, charter schools and vouchers, these alternate strategies are contextualized by the dominant state policy of standards-based reform.<sup>33</sup>

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts came on board mid-way through this reform period, passing the omnibus Education Reform Act of 1993. This legislation called for dramatic changes in public education to be enacted over a seven year period. Among the major provisions of the Act is the creation of MCAS, the Massachusetts

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<sup>33</sup> See Ravitch (1995) *National Standards in American Education: A Citizen's Guide*, and Smith, Marshall (1995) "Education Reform in America's Public Schools: The Clinton Agenda in Ravitch, Diane (Ed.) *Debating the Future of American Education: Do We Need National Standards and Assessments*, Working Dialogues for a discussion of the political context of the standards reform, the questions raised at the political center of the nation, as well as the literature that was published by relevant foundations and 'think tanks'.

Comprehensive Assessment System which is the state's approach to standards based reform, and provisions for greater and more equitable funding for schools.<sup>34</sup>

This chapter will discuss the politics which foretell the passage of the MCAS reform in Massachusetts while placing it within the broader, national context of education reform. The efforts in Massachusetts were distinctive, while at the same time very much a part of a national diffusion of variations of standards-based policies across states. In examining the states' movements toward a reform of standards, accountability and standardized testing, however, one must also take into account political influences at the federal level of government. Extending across six consecutive presidential terms, both Democratic and Republican, there has been an unbroken line of rhetoric fostering high stakes testing.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The Education Reform Act is described as an omnibus, far-reaching legislative act in education reform. As such, the act also establishes provisions for school site councils, re-certification requirements for teachers, funding for technology, provisions for charter schools, and increased learning time in the schools.

<sup>35</sup> The presidencies of Bush, Clinton, and W. Bush, as well as Vice President Al Gore's candidacy for president held forth standardized tests as the main policy tool for the reform of public schools. Former president George Bush's term as Education president' included a program of eight national educational goals to be achieved by the millennium. A key objective was to develop much tougher tests that were to set world class standards. *"These were seen as a means of producing citizens who could hold their own in a competitive world marketplace."*

The Clinton-Gore administration affirmed education goals similar to those of the outgoing Bush administration. They pledged to achieve America 2000 goals, with world class standards and high stakes tests as basic components. The Democrats promised 'tough standards' and pledged to work for a national examination system that embraced these standards.

"In the 2000 presidential campaign, Vice President Al Gore called for all states to create *high school graduation tests*. Then -Governor George W. Bush faulted the Clinton administration for not linking test results to federal aid, promising to take aid away from schools whose test scores did not rise. In the first week of his administration, President George W. Bush called for changes to Title I that would require states to test students in grades three through eight each year in reading and math. This policy line is now represented in the No Child Left Behind Act passed by a bi-partisan majority in 1992.

## *The Evolution of Standards Based Reform*

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, 1983, efforts to redesign public schools have been multitudinous.<sup>36</sup> Scholars tend to periodize the policies that ensued into three distinct waves of reform. In the ‘first wave’, states legislated reforms to improve or expand educational inputs, such as stricter graduation requirements, more rigorous standards for teacher certification, longer school days, stricter disciplinary policies and a greater reliance on standardized tests (Chubb and Moe, 1990, Smith & O’Day, 1990). These requirements did not change the nature of instruction but rather served to intensify current practices in education.<sup>37</sup> A ‘second wave’ argued for improvements in teaching and teacher education (Holmes Group, 1986, Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986, National Governors Association, 1986) and accounted for individual school-site reform where successful ‘restructuring’ had occurred, but lacked a concrete strategy for broad based transformation (Elmore, 1998, Fuhrman, O’Day, 1996). A ‘third wave’ is now focused on defining more challenging standards for learning while restructuring schools so they can produce dramatically better outcomes (Smith & O’Day, 1990, Darling-Hammond, 1997, 1997a, Negroni, 1997, Tucker and Coddling, 1998, Grissmer and Flanagan, 1998). Thus, national leaders of both parties, and state leaders have embraced the idea that our schools have deteriorated and can be saved by high stakes tests. (Orfield and Kornhaber (2001) pp. 3-5

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<sup>36</sup> *A Nation at Risk* was the published report of a committee, the National Commission on Excellence in Education, in 1983

<sup>37</sup> In 1983 alone, fifty-four state level commissions had been formed, twenty-six states raised graduation requirements and numerous measures were enacted place higher demands (i.e. additional homework, course credits) on the existing system.. Within three years thirty-five states had enacted comprehensive reforms. These reforms emphasized increased course taking and testing. Polls showed a majority in support of testing as a way to impose standards upon schools and students and to hold them accountable. Gallup Poll, Education Week.

This ‘third wave’ of standards based reform is the current policy in forty-nine states. It has become the dominant education policy in states as a result of the joint initiatives of government, business and educational policy-makers. The origins of this policy date back to 1983, when the state of California experimented with the realignment of its school system under the leadership of Superintendent Bill Honig. In that same year, the report, *A Nation at Risk*, is credited with establishing the performance of public schools as a national concern, although the Reagan administration restricted the federal government from adopting additional financial or oversight commitments in response to the alleged crisis in education.<sup>38</sup>

*A Nation at Risk* presented a negative assessment of public schools’ performance and emphasized the public school system’s mediocrity and imminent decline. The rhetoric pointed to an educational crisis so severe as to undermine the nation’s economic competitiveness. The state of our public schools, then, was presented as crucial to our national security and assured place in the global economy. The Reagan administration called for higher goals and tougher standards for matriculation, and in so doing laid the foundation, in political rhetoric and its proposed solutions to the widespread adoption of high stakes testing as a policy corrective.

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<sup>38</sup> The federal role transformed under the subsequent Bush and Clinton administrations. Bush became the nation’s first, self-declared, ‘education president’. He convened the first Education Summit for governors in 1989, circumventing legislation to make additional funds available to states and professional educational organizations to develop curriculum standards. The Clinton administration further advanced the case of national standards and took a pro-active stance toward school reform. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act provided funds to states who undertook some form of standards-based reform, an embattled piece of legislation and bellwether for partisan disagreement, which ultimately achieved passage through the Senate.

The report *A Nation at Risk* mobilized constituencies across states, resulting in waves of school reforms as described above. There were a few anomalous states which, in the early 1980's, undertook to realign the instructional activities of their schools to state standards. California in 1983, and Texas, Florida and North Carolina in the years to follow were early experimenters in the standards-based reform. However, the founding moment most often pointed to is the Charlottesville Summit convened by then-president Bush.

The 1989 National Education Summit in Charlottesville, North Carolina brought together the nation's governors to formalize a bi-partisan national position on education. The governors agreed to advance a set of six national goals for education, several of which spoke specifically to the creation of national standards. According to Schwartz and Robinson (1999), these goals were to be used principally as guideposts for state action rather than as a stimulus for new federal initiatives.

Prior to this summit in 1989, a more fundamental bi-partisan consensus on the state's role in education reform had been reached by the nation's governors. According to the 1986 publication, *A Time for Results*, the National Governors Association proposed a new relationship with the public education sector, shifting state power from the regulation of inputs to accountability for results, granting local governments greater flexibility and control over resources in return.<sup>39</sup> With the acceptance of this shift in

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<sup>39</sup> *A Time for Results*, National Governors Association, 1996. Many sectors in the public sphere were already subject to accountability standards, such as environmental safety and health. Public education had been held accountable to numerous, piecemeal state regulations, but never to a set of systemic state standards. There were numerous forces acting on state governments at this time, including: (1) pressure to



state and local power, systemic reform was underway. Concurrent with this states-wide movement, the Bush administration proposed legislation, *America 2000*, which included a provision for voluntary achievement tests at grades 4, 8 and 12 based on world class standards. A filibuster in the Senate killed the legislation, but the idea of national standards and tests was legitimized as a public policy issue.

The issue carried forth into the Clinton administration, as did continued resistance to a federal oversight role in the creation of voluntary standards and assessment criteria.<sup>40</sup> Efforts to fashion a federally created council to provide national coordination and quality control on standards and assessment proved politically impossible - blocked by the Republican party's resistance to an enlarged federal role in education, and a contentious debate between the two parties over Opportunity to Learn standards (OTL).

Opportunity to Learn standards define a set of conditions that schools, districts and states must meet in order to ensure students an equal opportunity to meet expectations for their performance. (Elmore and Fuhrman, 1995) As argued by these authors, states have been concerned over issues raised by OTL standards for more than a

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justify the increasing percentage of state funds absorbed by the public schools to other stakeholder interests demanding additional resources, (2) pressures to attract employment generating businesses and keep them in the state to sustain economic growth, as well as (3) a more generalized (cultural) public accounting - a call for accountability. Education, which had been sacrosanct, was no longer. (Interviews, Elmore, Reville, Schwartz, June, July, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> The National Council on Education Standards and Testing was a blue ribbon group initiated by then secretary Alexander, authorized by Congress and co-chaired by Governors Romer of Colorado and Campbell of South Carolina. Its charge was to advise the federal government on the feasibility of establishing national standards and tests. It recommended moving forward with national standards and a national system of assessments. However, reconciling a national system of standards with a decentralized system of assessments proved impossible. Proposals for bi-partisan councils, representing a cross-section of interests and empowered to guide states in the creation of standards and assessments never found a legislative consensus. The National Education Goals Panel is a fact finding body which reports on states' efforts and distributes research publications which promote the reform.

century, but have had little success in addressing these issues with state policy. The ensuing debates sparked by federal legislation have to do, in part, with the difficulties of reconciling a policy more focused on performance with the problems of assuring equitable opportunities to learn.

An assumption of standards based reform is that holding ambitious expectations for all students should promote equity by providing a clear message to teachers, parents and students about what constitutes successful performance in schools. At present, schools and districts vary considerably in the opportunities they are able to provide to students to meet the newly created performance expectations. When the Bush administration attempted to pass the federal legislation, *America 2000*, Democratic lawmakers attempted to elevate service delivery standards to the same level of importance as content standards. A demand for federally certified OTL standards drew a swift and negative response from conservative congressmen, who claimed that such measures would lead to the federal control of schools and encourage lawsuits from civil rights groups. This debate became more heated with Clinton's *Goals 2000* legislation. Ultimately, any federal oversight authority of OTL standards was made voluntary and the state requirement to develop OTL standards was dropped.

An assumption of the standards policy is that the creation of the expectation of high performance outcomes for all students, and introducing greater flexibility for districts to meet performance outcomes will ensure high levels of educational

achievement *and* equitable opportunities for all students.<sup>41</sup> However, an equity provision to which states could be held accountable was excluded from legislation while accountability for academic standards and performance was emphasized, and funded. The federal government devolved responsibility for this to state government. The responsibility for achieving high standards of performance established by the state was devolved to local schools and school districts.

The Clinton Administration's *Goals 2000* sought to use federal funds to leverage reform at the state level, intended to guide states toward a national strategy. The law designated a broad use of funds for co-ordinated school improvement and realignment activities (in the form of multi-level planning grants provided to states and local school districts), which has furthered the standards agenda in many jurisdictions. Since most states had begun their state education reform strategy prior to 1994, the \$2 billion since received by states has provided an additional, flexible resource for promoting coordinated improvements in state and local education systems. Lowell High School and the Lowell School District, for example, took advantage of these available funds and submitted proposals to align its curriculum as part of a broader standards and testing strategy.

Faced with insurmountable obstacles to legislating a nationally coordinated standards reform, *Goals 2000* was essentially designed to 'catch the wave' of a predominantly state based movement. It supports states as the locus of standard-setting, and promotes a view that without a coherent state policy grounded in high expectations

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<sup>41</sup> This is stated in the federal legislation, *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, 1996. I also found this view articulated by the proponents and supporters of the MCAS reform in my research interviews, as well as in public forums aired on the radio and held in local communities.

for all students, the nation would be unlikely to make much progress in improving student performance.<sup>42</sup>

This debate over Opportunity to Learn standards, unresolved at the federal level of government, raises longstanding issues about the capacity of states to influence the equal provision of education.<sup>43</sup> Most recently, the state of Massachusetts passed an omnibus education reform bill which reconfigured the school finance formula to provide a more equitable distribution of funds *and* established its version of standards reform, with the view that *both* resources and performance standards were the building blocks to school reform.

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<sup>42</sup> Issues of control, as well as the equity issue discussed above, are problematic to this reform. Tensions and disagreements over power and control between the federal and state levels of government became apparent in the policy-making process. When the policy agenda shifted to greater academic achievement for all students, (as opposed to the protection of an under-represented group of students) an underlying ambivalence about the federal role in education became the basis for struggle. The distinction between federal and national took on a greater significance, and states effectively asserted the power constitutionally attributed to them under federalism. Issues of state-local control around the degree of power states should have in assessing school districts have emerged at the local level and have yet to be resolved. For example, many educators question whether states have the right or the capacity to assess schools beyond the delivery of a minimum competency for their students. The specific division of powers between the state and local school district is not clearly articulated in the Constitution, and has become a politically contentious issue, particularly in Massachusetts.

<sup>43</sup> Historically, 'district supremacy' which accompanied the founding of common schools in the United States in the 1840's and 1850's, along with the unequal distribution of wealth in the United States led to great inequalities in schools, teachers and the distribution of education. Historically, states have adopted numerous approaches to correct this inequity, including the establishment of minimum standards at the turn of the century; funding approaches which focused on school equalization in the early 1900's (the use of minimum funding programs to establish per pupil expenditures); the school refinance movement in the 1960's (a corrective to the earlier system of foundation level funding); and finally, increasing the numbers of statutes and regulations to which schools must comply. (Elmore and Fuhrman, 1995)

## ***The Politics Leading to Passage of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System: MCAS***

While Massachusetts lawmakers and crafters of the legislation insist that its reform policy is ‘homegrown’<sup>44</sup>, it has many parallels to legislation in other states and embodies the goals and impetus of the current federal education legislation. Most state versions of standards reform call for systemic reform, and seek to consolidate powers of governance in the state, while devolving responsibility for implementing the reform to localities. At the state level, the legislatures craft the law and policy-makers on Boards of Education bring definition to the broad language found in the law. Oversight is shared with the implementing agency, most often a state Department of Education. Power is then devolved to the school districts and local schools to implement the policy. This division of labor is fairly consistent across states, and is not unlike the private sector’s approach to corporate governance. Such was the case in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.<sup>45</sup>

The Education Reform Act of 1993 called for dramatic changes in the state’s public education system.<sup>46</sup> In Massachusetts, the driving forces behind the reform were two: a concern for equity in education and secondly, a concern that schools were not preparing their students with adequate skills. While the latter issue galvanized business to undertake public school reform, equity was indispensable to their platform. Unlike the partisan politics which surrounded the issue of equity at the federal level, Massachusetts’

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<sup>44</sup> Interview, Reville, former Co-Director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, July 7, 2000

<sup>45</sup> Elmore and Fuhrman (1995) See the article, *Takeover and Deregulation: Working Models of New State and Local Regulatory Relationships* for a broader discussion of regulatory models, nation-wide.

<sup>46</sup> The state system serves 8,500 students in 1,800 schools, administered by approximately 400 local school committees and supervised by the Board of Education and the Department of Education. Private and parochial schools, and home schooling are exempt from the Act.

reformers saw no conflict between the dual goals of equity and high student performance. As will be discussed in the schools chapters which follow, this broad set of commands has been found difficult to accomplish on the ground.

Education reform was propelled to the forefront as a priority issue in Massachusetts in the 1980's; a system of inequitable public education in Massachusetts had come to adversely impact members of the business, political and civic communities across the state. These concerns were voiced publicly by several stakeholder groups, as follows: A class action suit initiated in 1984 by parents from low-income communities alleging the inequitable delivery of education was pending in the State Supreme Court . While reform activists disagree over the extent of the case's influence, there is general consensus that the court case "served to keep the legislature's feet to the fire" forcing consensus around a new funding formula and an increased state commitment to the public schools.<sup>47</sup> Research undertaken by the state's Department of Education reported large disparities in both curriculum offerings and resources across districts that discriminated against poor and non-white communities, supporting the plaintiff's claims.<sup>48</sup> A shortage of qualified, entry level workers for Massachusetts firms served to mobilize members of the business community to become deeply involved in the passage of an education reform policy in Massachusetts.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview, Paul Reville, former Co-director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, August, 2000

<sup>48</sup> Interview, Paul Reville, former Co-director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, August, 2000

With the business community taking the lead, educational and political communities signed on to the Education Reform Act of 1993. The state followed the national trend and created its own version of the standards reform, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, the MCAS. Central to this reform legislation was the development of state-mandated curriculum standards and frameworks, as well as a system of assessment and accountability for the Massachusetts public schools.

Representatives of eleven leading companies in the state founded the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) in 1988, whose mission - to bring about the systemic improvement of the Massachusetts elementary and secondary public education system - was based upon the group's belief that "education should be the central focus in America's resurgence to meet the needs of increased productivity, to relieve pressures on other social support institutions and to help sectors of the economy cope with change and international competition."<sup>49</sup>

According to leaders in the business community, their involvement in Massachusetts public education began in the 1980's with business compacts and school partnerships. Certain leaders were dissatisfied with the results, however,

".....these structures fell short of making the kinds of changes that needed to happen if schools were really to be 21<sup>st</sup> century entities.... So

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<sup>49</sup> *Every Child A Winner*, p 5. The founding members of the MBAE included the New England Telephone Company, Polaroid, Pacer Systems, Lotus Corporation, Digital Corporation, and the Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company. This core group of firms represents a cross-section of the manufacturing, software, defense, banking and insurance sectors. Additional publications by the MBAE trace the process of the MCAS reform, from conceptualization through the process of community outreach and lobbying and negotiation with the Massachusetts State Legislature.

reform really grew out of a local sense of dissatisfaction with what schools were producing in the late 80's, that happened to correspond with what a lot of other people in other states around the country were saying about what their schools were producing and the two primary consumers of people coming out of schools are colleges and businesses and those entities had real issues. Colleges were doing more and more remedial work and complaining more and more loudly about the preparation of high school graduates and businesses were having the same kinds of problems. Companies like New England Telephone were flunking 9 out of 10 people on their entrance exams in the mid 80's of people trying to come in at the basic entry level positions, so there was concern among the business community about what to do about this.

Jack Renny (then-president of MBAE) is a defense, high tech electronics contractor. So, a group of us who all had the partnership experience and interest all came together and said that we want to do something that addresses the state structure and framework of public schools, the financing, the governance, the expectations, the operations and the incentives because that state framework is very important to shaping operations at the local level. And anything that we do locally is going to be constrained to some degree by the state circumstances, so we went to work....<sup>50</sup>

The MBAE operates as an independent, statewide privately funded business coalition and sees itself as a catalyst for education reform. To support its initiative, the group solicited the support of twenty-eight additional companies and associations, including the Associated Industries of Massachusetts which represents over 5,000 companies. A two and a half year outreach process extended beyond the business community to reach major civic associations, to build support and gather input on its platform for school reform. A consultant interviewed stakeholders across the state on eight substantive topics related to the operation of schools. Discussions in the field narrowed the reform agenda to four issue areas - (1) the future of the teacher workforce; (2) the financing of the education system; (3) youth at risk/childhood education and

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<sup>50</sup> Interview, Reville, July 7, 2000. Also see Rennie (1994) *A Thoughtful Approach to Public Education Reform* for his views on this issue.



(4) school organization and restructuring. These four areas became a set of policy proposals under the heading “Every Child Can Learn”.<sup>51</sup> This draft document was presented to the newly elected Weld Administration (1990) and text from the MBAE document appeared in the Republican governor’s first speech on education, signaling an endorsement of the general platform.<sup>52</sup>

“Weld wanted to do something on education. He didn’t know the details himself in terms of what he actually wanted to do, he believed in, he believed in a set of changes, he was willing to make an investment there, we got to him early in the term, there was solid business backing to do it, he didn’t want to be known as just a pure management, tax cutter kind of guy, you know, he had an interest in it.

Again, we weren’t the typical education constituency coming forward. We were business people saying as a matter of good economic development policy we need to reinvest, restructure, reorganize and re-incentivize public education. The people were very concerned with economic development there. You had the business community coming forward with one voice saying this is what we ought to do...it was hard for them to ignore that .....of course you have a lot of traditional pressure from the teachers union, etc. on the legislature – you’ve got to do something for us financially. No one wanted to do a pure payout to the school systems without some real reform and you know that gave rise to the bill. If you just talk to union people about it, the union was interested in...just back us up...we are like a sick patient, we are in the hospital, we need an infusion. Give us the money and we’ll make the changes later. We’ll get back on our feet and talk about changing our life style afterwards.

There are some in the business community, particularly some of the Boston business leaders (of State Street Bank for example) and Bill would say, have them make the changes first, because if you give them the money they are going to take it and run with it and you are never going to see any change because that has been our experience in Boston. And we tried and what we did is try to split the difference and say we are going to have some change and we will allocate some money each year as we move along those changes will build and if we don’t see the changes we are

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<sup>51</sup> The issue areas included the teacher workforce, management of cultural diversity, organizational restructuring, use of technology, educational financing, use of physical plant, parent and community involvement, choice, youth at risk, accountability, legislative mandates, curriculum and early childhood education, *Every Child A Winner*, 1991, p.13

<sup>52</sup> Interview, Paul Reville, 7.7.00

going to stop the money. So that was kind of how we compromised on that.”<sup>53</sup>

While individual state’s adoption of assessment and accountability systems had taken on the character of a national movement, Massachusetts was one of the few states which included fiscal reform - to reverse a regressive taxation policy - in its systemic reform package. While details of the fiscal negotiation are not public information, it is known that leaders negotiated over the amount of total funding allocated to schools as well as the specifics of the tax formula.<sup>54</sup> Ultimately a \$3.8 billion commitment in state funds was negotiated, to be paid out over a seven year period to equalize resources available to public schools. For a poor urban district such as the Lowell School District, whose high school is a case study selected for this paper, it has meant an award of \$70 million dollars. Lowell and other under-resourced districts achieved a ‘foundation level’ of funding in year 2000, and spend \$5,400 in per pupil spending. Districts whose property tax base can support higher spending levels are not prevented from doing so. The second case study, Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, falls in this category and spends \$9,500 per pupil.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Interview, Reville, 7.7.00

<sup>54</sup> According to Paul Reville, who participated in these negotiations, at stake was satisfying the multiple constituencies each politician was accountable to. This commitment of funds was also a long term commitment to public schools and this had to be negotiated with other interest group constituents. Reville’s participation was also unusual. This reform, and in particular this fiscal measure was facilitated by the role of consultants hired by the business sector coalition pushing for the MCAS reform.

<sup>55</sup> The finance formula established a higher, minimum level of funding for schools. Funds came from a combination of state and local sources. The source of local funds was a school property tax levy in the district, capped at \$10 per \$1,000 equalized valuation. If a poor community could not raise the foundation funding with a \$10 school property tax levy state funds would make up the shortfall. Communities which can raise the required funding for less than the \$10 school tax will continue to receive state aid but at gradually reduced levels.

### ***The MCAS Reform: Reformers' Ideals and the Reform's Political Realities***

MCAS, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System is a system established by law to evaluate the performance of public schools and districts and the academic achievement of individual students. The Act requires competency determination for high school graduation<sup>1</sup>, the development of curriculum frameworks that would serve as guides for classroom instruction at all grade levels, state testing of 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students on the basis of these new academic standards, and the use of multiple instruments in the assessment of students. It also establishes an accountability system to be designed and monitored by the state, empowering the state to identify chronically under-performing schools and hold schools in receivership.

To hold schools and districts accountable, the state system evaluates the extent to which schools succeed in improving or failing to improve student performance, and the degree to which they reference the state's curriculum frameworks. The MCAS test scores are used to identify under-performing schools and school districts and are made public via newspaper announcements and internet listings.<sup>56</sup>

Recently, the passage of the *No Child Left Behind* Act has required testing for reading in math in grades three through eighth. The Massachusetts Department of Education is in the process of adding MCAS tests for these grades, which will be

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<sup>56</sup> The publication of the scores has been criticized as one of the many punitive aspects of the system, part of a 'learning by the stick' mentality rather than motivating participant schools and students. MCAS scores are reported as taken seriously by political bodies and realtors. An interview with a parent in Lincoln-Sudbury revealed that when the school scored 46<sup>th</sup> in the state, there were calls made to the school committee and superintendent that such scores could adversely affect property values.

submitted in fulfillment of this federal requirement.<sup>57</sup> Overall, however, the implementation of MCAS tests has been uneven. The Board of Education has yet to approve a high stakes test in the disciplines of Science and History/Social Studies, although a trial MCAS H/SS test is forthcoming this year. With more than ten years since the passage of the MCAS reform, in year 2004 nearly all grade levels have experience with either the English Language Arts or the math MCAS test, however the Board of Education has not reached a consensus on the teaching of either Science or History/Social Studies as mandated by the reform.<sup>58</sup>

There were three profound *political* changes for Massachusetts public schools as a result of the MCAS reform. Schools and school districts in Massachusetts are accustomed to exercising local control over its school curriculum as well as setting the academic standards for their students' graduation from high school. Prior to the MCAS, accountability was required by the local school committee and governance structures, except for fulfillment of the state's requirement to teach U.S. history. These powers were either removed from the local school districts, as in the case of competency determination, or greatly compromised, as in the case of curriculum, and accountability was moved to the state.

The introduction of *high stakes* testing and the creation of a centralized set of curriculum frameworks removed these traditionally held powers from the local schools

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<sup>57</sup> The Massachusetts DOE will receive \$7.5 million from the federal government to implement these additional tests. A total of \$30 million was spent on the MCAS test this year.

<sup>58</sup> Frameworks were required in the subjects of math, science and technology, history and social studies, English, world languages (renamed foreign languages under the current Board of Education) and the arts.

and districts. The provisions of the MCAS reform assigned these powers to the executive branch of the state. The gains to the Governor's office as a result of this reform are three-fold: the competency determination of Massachusetts public school students, the imposition of a centralized curriculum which schools must integrate into their curriculum, and as will be discussed in the following section, the appointment of members to the Board of Education, formerly a *mix* of at-large positions and political appointments.

In the course of the implementation of the MCAS reform, a change in the leadership of the Board of Education would have significant consequences for the direction of the MCAS reform. Of great consequence to the stewardship of public schools in the state, the Board of Education is reduced in size and narrowed down from a broad representation of stakeholder groups to politically appointed members. A model of 'good governance'<sup>59</sup> which characterizes the early years of the reform's implementation becomes derailed by this politicized change in the leadership of the Board of Education.

The coalition of stakeholders which brought the Education Reform Act, 1993 to passage was spearheaded by business leaders, and included legislators and to a lesser degree educational leaders, such as teacher unions, superintendent associations and the like. The outreach to this membership tended to be regionalized, as MBE was based in the western part of the state. It could be argued that there was inadequate outreach to the

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<sup>59</sup> The term 'good governance' is in reference to Judith Tendler's book 'Good Governance in the Tropics', which is a selection of case studies where the mobilization of grass roots participants and a high degree of transparency between the government and the public contribute to the successful health, safety and economic development campaigns undertaken by the national government. Dan French, former Director of Curriculum for the Massachusetts Department of Education reflects upon this process in an article entitled "The State's Role in Shaping a Progressive View of Public Education, as well as its dissolution under the newly appointed leadership of John Silber. Dan French, along with the majority of DOE staff involved from the beginning in shaping the MCAS reform left the Department of Education.

minority communities in Boston and the state.<sup>60</sup> Stakeholder groups were solicited in a systematic way, however, and although there was a power differential within the coalition, all groups were unified by the goal of bringing equity, or what was referred to by framers as a ‘level playing field’ to Massachusetts schools.

The governing bodies in place to implement the reform were the Massachusetts Board of Education (the policy making body) and the Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE), the state’s agency designated to implement Board of Education (Board) policies and legislative directives. Both of these governing bodies come under the purview of the Education Committee of the Massachusetts State Legislature. At the time the MCAS was passed, both the Board and the DOE shared similar beliefs about what could be accomplished by the MCAS reform. The optimism across all of the involved groups was almost breathtaking. The business sector had negotiated with the legislature the allocation of a sizeable proportion of the state’s budget, which would target low performing, low income schools. There was an expectation that this strategy of common, high standards and resource allocation would successfully ameliorate the most dogged problems faced by the Massachusetts public school system: below grade-level achievement levels, social promotion of undeserving students, student attrition, high absenteeism and a bias (in expectations and resources) with respect to low income schools.

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<sup>60</sup> My analysis of the groups that were solicited for comments by the MBAE is marked by either zero or minimal participation by these stakeholder groups.

The Board of Education and the Department of Education undertook a grassroots approach in its implementation of the MCAS reform. Nearly 20,000 teachers, practitioners, university educators and citizens were involved in committee work to create centralized curriculum *guides* for teachers at all grade levels. The approach of the DOE was to respect the long-standing tradition of local school governance, and to create MCAS curriculum frameworks that were not prescriptive, but allowed teachers to engage in ‘a constructivist education project’ in their classrooms, while adhering to a set of agreed upon academic standards for each academic discipline. The product of this effort was the creation of a “Common Core of Learning”, which was considered the *foundation framework* for all academic disciplines. The Common Core of Learning focused upon cognitive strategies of learning and pedagogy considered crucial to teaching higher level thinking and analytic skills. In this development process, teachers felt valued as educators and were directly involved in setting the direction of this reform. There was a high degree of transparency and trust that developed between the state and the teachers, as well as with the public citizenry. The framers were also pleased with the process, apprised of the direction standard setting and classroom curriculum development was taking.

At this three year juncture, then-Governor Weld intervened in the reform process and replaced the presiding chairman of the Board of Education, Stanley Kaplan with John Silber, president of Boston University. There have been many conjectures about why Weld chose to introduce this abrupt change in the stewardship of the public school system and its reform process. Many of these ‘guesses’ spoke to the perverse incentive

structure of the political system which often requires results in the interests of re-election, “the process was not moving quickly enough to demonstrate achievements to the political electorate.”<sup>61</sup> Regardless of the reasons, the consequences were profound. Silber chose to dismantle the participatory process in place, and disregard the *Common Core of Learning* completely. In fact, the Boston Globe reported Silber’s press conference which included a public dismissal of this document, accompanied by his literally tossing the Common Core of Learning into a trash can. The transparency surrounding this reform process and the broad participation of grassroots practitioners, teachers and citizens came to an unceremonious end. Input from the field was discounted from this point forward.

The broad representation that had been a part of the Board’s composition was then changed under Silber’s leadership. Silber introduced legislation passed by the Massachusetts legislature which reduced membership of the Board of Education by half, to number eight positions all of which were to be politically appointed by the Governor. Six of the eight remaining members were affiliated with conservative foundations and think tanks, such as the Manhattan Institute and the Pioneer Institute for Public Policy. There came to be a generalized perception in the field, that this reform is ‘politicized’. While schools might construct different meanings about the ‘politics’ of the reform, my interviews revealed that such perceptions played a role in the reform’s acceptance and successful implementation.

This shadow to the reform, that is, its perceived politicization was subject to public purview in the resumes of the Board of Education members. It was noted that at

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<sup>61</sup> Interview, Robert Schwartz, *Director of Achieve*, August, 2000



the helm of the Massachusetts public education system were individuals who were in fact 'outside' critics of that very system, as denoted by their organizational affiliates. The Pioneer Institute, for example, advocates free market solutions to public policy, with an emphasis on individual rights and responsibilities. Pioneer Institute board members held positions in the Weld, Celucci and Swift administrations, as well as on the Board of Education and were able to advocate for school choice, school entrepreneurship and the defense of for-profit charter schools. They had a direct influence upon policy as well as upon the rhetoric of these administrations.

The approval of charter schools continued throughout Silber's administration. Other polarizing issues would surface in the course of the development of the MCAS frameworks, first under John Silber's helm, and then under the leadership of the current Chairman of the Board of Education, James Peyser. The approval of state curriculum frameworks, which is stipulated in the Education Reform Act as a process which must *adhere to certain standards of public input*, became a highly contentious process. Frameworks in the core disciplines of English Language Arts, Math, Science and History/Social Studies, nearly completed by the working committees of the Kaplan Board of Education were either disregarded or sent to newly appointed committees for revision. The new framework committees tended to be small in size; in the case of History/Social Studies the committee numbered three persons, all of whom were Board of Education members appointed by Silber. Substantive issues of content, i.e. rote learning versus higher order skills, issues of multiculturalism and depth versus breadth became politicized debates which impeded the final approval of these frameworks. These

‘shifting frameworks’<sup>62</sup> sent mixed messages to schools and to teachers, hampering the process of state-wide standard setting in the schools.

Concerns about the changed direction of the MCAS reform were made public by some of the reform’s framers. In April, 2001 Paul Reville, one of the original framers of this reform wrote an op ed piece in the Boston Globe entitled ‘Mid-Course Corrections for the MCAS Reform.’ This reflection upon the MCAS reform reaffirmed the original motivations of the framers in undertaking the passage of standards reform in Massachusetts. In response to the Silber Board of Education and the reconstitution of the Board, he voices in a single statement his concern about the reform’s direction, as a ‘*one size fits all*’ reform. Absent the input of professional educators and Massachusetts citizens, and absent a political transparency in the decision-making process of the Board of Education, three key problems appear to reverse the gains made by the reform’s original participants - the passage of prescriptive curriculum frameworks, the lag in the creation of a state accountability system and the inadequate support for the professional development of teachers. Reville takes this opportunity to reaffirm the original strategy of common standards and resource re-allocation. He voices concern over the current directions of the reform, and still, he retains some of his original optimism in the efficacy of a few ‘mid-course corrections.’

“.....Our strategy has been a policy of *common standards* and *resource allocation* to address this. There is a new finance system which is much more equity driven. The money is going into the most needy districts, It still may not be adequate, but the legislation has been followed through.

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<sup>62</sup> This term was used by members of the Lincoln-Sudbury School Committee in a letter to the Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Education, David Driscoll, in January, 2000.

“What constitutes a fair *opportunity to learn* bargain? Before any student can be held accountable, there needs to be the opportunity to learn. There needs to be an accountability system in place. There needs to be the professional development of teachers. The business community held this view. *In our view, this was not a one size fits all reform.* The notion of building the capacity for the delivery of high quality instruction is the most prodigious challenge.”<sup>63</sup>

### ***A New Federalism: The No Child Left Behind Act***

Federal involvement in education, made explicit with the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* in 1992, has further complicated the educational policy arena and the schools’ environment. According to this law, states are required to test children in grades three to grade eight annually for proficiency in English and math. Furthermore, states are required to set a gradient of performance by which all students will reach a standard of proficiency by year 2014. To meet these federal requirements in Massachusetts, this year the DOE added six tests in these lower grades that had not yet been included in the MCAS testing regimen. (In this past year alone, the cost of the MCAS test and the six new tests was \$30 million dollars.) To comply with the federal law in the assessment of schools, Massachusetts, like the majority of states in the country, has drawn a straight line projection and assigned schools annual improvement rates in order to fulfill this federal goal.<sup>64</sup> This new level of federal requirements has produced a profound shift in the incentive structure which surrounds testing, making certain features of the MCAS reform even more problematic.

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<sup>63</sup> Excerpt from a presentation at Simmons College on “Mid-Course Corrections of the MCAS Reform” delivered on 4.24.01. The framers were troubled by the direction the MCAS reform had taken under the Silber Board of Education. I include this here because it underscores the framers commitment to equity.

<sup>64</sup> Interview, Associate Commissioner of Testing Jeff Nellhaus, 10.4.04

The annual testing, now required by the federal government further undermines the potential usefulness of testing as a diagnostic instrument. Test professionals argue for variability in testing as the 'best source' of information and view the emphasis on standardized testing, now to be administered annually, as having an homogenizing effect on education. In addition, the cost of testing each year will be difficult for states to maintain, most likely driving down the quality of the test administered. The MCAS test is a high level test with high costs. It is difficult to imagine the state of Massachusetts carrying these costs forward for the design and implementation of the tests, when resource needs elsewhere in the education system are so great. Mediocrity in testing will most certainly lead to mediocrity in results.

It also raises questions about the use of resources. The MCAS reform, from its inception, was under-invested on the capacity side. The Massachusetts Department of Education has very little funding to assist schools, and in the course of the legislative process, both funding and staff for the Department of Education were reduced.<sup>65</sup> Since the passage of the MCAS reform, there has been no technical capacity at the state level to assist schools, nor to understand the variability in performance, as reflected in the MCAS scores. To assign average yearly performance measures (AYP) to schools without understanding what is happening inside the school, makes assessment a rote mathematical exercise. In effect, states including Massachusetts are drawing the line to reach proficiency between now and 2004, and dividing by years to arrive at the annual performance levels to assign to schools. Despite the disconnect between the AYP and knowledge of what is taking place within the school, its 'production functions, if you

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<sup>65</sup> Interview Jeff Nellhaus, 10.4.04, Interview Professor Richard Elmore, 10.25.04

will, the sanctions are quite serious if a state cannot meet its AYP for three consecutive years. Underperformance as measured by test scores and the state requirements for improvement can and will result in the school being closed.<sup>66</sup>

Test professionals advocate for variability in testing and are concerned that this federal requirement wipes out the variation which gives us information. Prior to this, there was a variability in testing (timing, students) that produced useful information. Due to the state's under-investment on the capacity side, the MCAS test scores, even with the qualifications that I have discussed, were never studied or investigated in order to assist schools, or improve policy. The *No Child Left Behind Act* exacerbates the weakest design features of the MCAS reform, and represents yet another level of homogenization of education, where education has become heavily regulated, compliance oriented, and test oriented.

I will argue further on in this dissertation that the MCAS test scores, in and of themselves, are inconclusive. However, the finding of difference and variability within schools and between schools is an important finding. Rather than placing value on uniformity of response, I believe that there are lessons to be gained from the variability, that can only be answered by examining what has taken place inside the school and its classrooms.

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<sup>66</sup> "This is like setting emission standards with no model of the combustion function" was a comment made by Professor Richard Elmore in reflecting upon this process. 10.25.04

## ***Chapter Four: The Case Studies: Schools as Historical and Cultural Institutions***

### ***Introduction***

In this chapter I discuss Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School from a different perspective, one guided by the powerful idea that schools are illustrative of historical processes that shape regional and local economies. In each of these case study communities, the creation of a civic culture and its institutions, but in particular the institution of the public school, was inextricably tied to the economic transformations taking place in the nation's economy. In examining these earlier economic and social transformations, one is able to capture the formative institutional patterns that were foundational to the public school systems of Lowell, Massachusetts and the suburban communities of Lincoln and Sudbury, Massachusetts.

This chapter returns us to the 'creation stories' of each of these schools. As each school has evolved through time, each has had the resource of institutional memory to draw upon in negotiating its environment. As the following sections trace the history and character of each school, patterns that have been consistent across time become recognizable. I argue that these organizational patterns, or cultural dispositions, shape the political and organizational responses of the schools to external shocks. The current shock, the MCAS reform, presents a dramatic shift in the political and social context of education in the state.

The political debate that produced the MCAS reform characterized the problems that beset schools in general terms, as problems of standards and achievement, and a

disparity in resources available to schools. This conceptualization of the problem resulted in a 'one size fits all' solution, and assumed that the assignment of a single set of performance standards would remedy both concerns.<sup>67</sup> In fact, I argue that one's conceptualization of schools and their problems changes dramatically when one explores schools 'from the ground'. The reality of schools is far more complex than is captured by the terms, achievement and equity. I discovered that the problems and concerns of schools are determined in large part by where schools are positioned in a shifting regional economy, and I would argue national economy as well. The complexity of institutional ties which surround schools have come to be reflected in the social environment of the school.

### ***Three Dimensions of Historical Patterning: Class Position, Insularity/Openness and Access to Resources***

In the course of my research, I discovered three significant dimensions along which these schools differ, all of which can be traced backwards, to the organizational imprint of the schools' founding.<sup>68</sup> I would argue that these are dimensions which have shaped their respective organizational and political responses to the MCAS reform. I identify these dimensions as *class position, insularity/openness and access to resources*. These dimensions operate in relation to each other. That is, access to resources and openness to outside influence are affected by socio-economic class, as well as historically based cultural and organizational factors. Public education, which is primarily financed

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<sup>67</sup> The circumstances surrounding the passage of the MCAS reform is discussed in greater detail in *Chapter Three, Political Background to the MCAS Reform*

<sup>68</sup> These dimensions surfaced in interviews with teachers and administrators in both schools, as well as in observations of day-to-day life in the two schools.

by local property tax collection is unequal across communities because of differences in the wealth of communities and their respective property tax coffers.

The first dimension, class position, has not been adequately explored. Research and studies of academic achievement have demonstrated a direct relationship between a child's socioeconomic position and academic achievement. It is accepted knowledge that performance on standardized tests, for example, is directly tied to a child's socioeconomic status and background. The research of this dissertation goes beyond these more traditional findings and brings to light the relationship between socio-economic class and its influence upon an organization's identity and sense making. As such, socio-economic class becomes an integral part of an institution's life, instead of its more typical portrayal as an independent variable with a direct, causal relationship to performance, or as an economic indicator of poverty or material wealth.

The second dimension of Insularity/Openness is a more ambiguous attribute, however, I became convinced of its relevance over the course of my research. When I reviewed the thematic consistencies in my interviews and observations, and then placed this data in an historical context, I discovered that a world view, or an understanding of 'us' and 'them' was implicit in the accounts of teachers, administrators and other professionals that I spoke with, and had roots in the 'creation stories' of each of the schools. In using the term 'world view', I refer to the articulation of cultural references, breadth of information sources, a conception of trust, and a characterization of who might be considered an outsider. *Access to resources* is related to both socio-economic class



and insularity/openness, and brings in the aspect of material resources available to institutional development. Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School are two schools borne of different centuries and of different circumstance, but each in its own way is the outcome of a single regional economy and its evolution.

*An Historical Account of the City of Lowell, its Economy and Institutions*

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the state of Massachusetts was the most thoroughly industrialized part of the globe apart from England, with cotton textile manufactures the leading sector on both sides of the Atlantic. A group of capitalist entrepreneurs from New England labeled the Boston Associates by historians (Dalzell, 1991), undertook the establishment of mill manufacturing in Massachusetts, building the first textile mills in the towns of Waltham and Chelmsford. These early mills capitalized on the innovation of a wealthy Boston merchant, Francis C. Lowell, whose design of the first American power loom integrated yarn and cloth production within one mill to produce a coarse grade of durable cotton cloth for the domestic market. Seeking to expand production, in 1826, a section of Chelmsford was partitioned off as a separate town, incorporated as the town of Lowell, Massachusetts, and became the site of the first planned industrial urban community in the United States.

Lowell was born amidst the forces of innovation, new technologies and rationalized production and distribution. These early capitalists chartered a development corporation, the Merrimack Manufacturing Corporation, and designed a city plan, widened and deepened the Pawtucket Canal, and invested in a built environment of mills,

machine shops, housing for workers and an infrastructure of urban amenities. The motivations behind the establishment of Lowell, while primarily economic, also held out the vision of rational planning, social harmony and community. Young, single women were recruited from rural New England towns to work in the mills, and were provided with boarding, oversight and a set of rules and requirements strictly enforced to protect the moral propriety of these young workers.

The boarding houses, mills, the residential homes for the agents and mill supervisors were built in attractive blocks that allowed for proximity to work and church, access to park amenities and, ultimately, presented an urbanscape quite unlike that of Lancashire; Lowell's streets offered a sense of order, efficiency and cleanliness. There was an effort to create a balance between urban and rural, and although the purpose driving this development was cotton, production and profit, "the image of Lowell as a novel and noble enterprise took firm hold in the minds of those who lived there and directly affected the direction of development for perhaps the first generation of Lowell's existence." The Boston Associates lived elsewhere and viewed Lowell as an abstraction, an investment and a worthy social and economic experiment.<sup>69</sup> In practice, for the mill owners, all profit became dividends. For those who lived there, quality of life was the key measure of success.

The number of residents and ethnic make-up of citizens in Lowell continued to increase and diversify throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As textile production increased,

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<sup>69</sup> The original investors had formed a second company, the Merrimack Manufacturing Company, through which they sold blocks of mills in adjoining towns as well as rights to water power.

export markets grew to include the southern United States, South America, Mexico and China (Dalzell, 2000), and this economic growth attracted middle class professionals such as doctors, lawyers and other civil servants, as well as waves of new immigrants. While a more nuanced set of class distinctions developed among small shop owners, skilled and unskilled labor, and immigrant labor, the majority of workers through the mid-1900's were wage-earners employed by the Lowell Mills.<sup>70</sup>

In the 1820's, the first waves of Irish found ample work digging canals and constructing new mills. New waves of Irish arrived after 1845, bringing their families and fleeing to escape starvation. In this post Civil War period, Lowell's appeal as a destination for immigrants extended beyond Ireland, to French Canada, Portugal, Poland, Greece, and Lithuania. In general, these immigrants were hard pressed to survive, living in tenements with barely enough to eat. Cycles of immigration varied throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, a striking statistic registers the percentage of foreign born at 75% in 1905.

Textile manufacturing dominated the New England economy through the 1920's and the first World War; after this, it experienced a slow decline, surviving sustained periods of slowed demand through the end of World War II. The most dramatic drop came after 1924, when mill owners moved production to the south and phased out the

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<sup>70</sup> A community consciousness had developed in Lowell, whereby the city gradually developed an identity separate from the mills. Alongside the growing estrangement between mill and community interests, the middle class and small business entrepreneurs found more in common with the immigrant workers. Lowell's middle class interest lay with an adequately paid working class; the class of small business owners and the wage earners also found more in common culturally. By 1912, Lowell's citizens had come to realize that resident immigrants were not outsiders as much as were the mill owners. (Richards, 1991)

older plants in the north. Rationalized production allowed for capital mobility and the employment of a less skilled, less militant and less expensive workforce. Lowell and its neighboring industrial cities were hit hard by this exodus, which was compounded by the depression a few years later. The eventual decline of manufacturing was made inevitable by other structural economic factors.<sup>71</sup> In addition, the claim has been made that Lowell's and Lawrence's heavy reliance on the textile industry and failure to broaden their economic bases were partly the result of mill owners' using their economic and political power to deter the entry of new industries that might compete for the same labor force."<sup>72</sup>

The decline of the textile and other non-durable manufacturing created conditions for restructuring the state's economy. Lowell, however, fell into and remained in decline as its niche in the regional and national economy disappeared. Non-manufacturing industries such as trade, finance, transportation and services became prominent in the 1970's, as Massachusetts embarked upon a growth strategy of job creation and low unemployment which would last several decades. Lowell's social and economic well-being, and identity as an innovative manufacturing center had reached its end; the few remaining family-owned mills no longer had a toehold. The economic sectors on the rise offered opportunities for a very high skilled, technical workforce, and at the opposite end, created service jobs in conjunction with the professional growth sectors of Finance, Trade

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<sup>71</sup> As explained by Bennett Harrison (1984), manufacturing and other maturing industries were lured south by lower labor costs, tax advantages, and lower rates of unionization. Market changes, such as the demand for cheaper labor, mass produced cotton apparel, and synthetics helped to bring advantage to other regions. Also, the introduction of centralized heating reduced the demand for heavy woolen clothing.

<sup>72</sup> This claim is reported in Bluestone and Stevenson's, *The Boston Renaissance: Race, Space and Economic Change in an American Metropolis* based on two studies of Lowell's economic history, the books, *The Irony of Victory: World War II and Lowell, Massachusetts*, Miller, 1988 and *Huddle Fever: Living in the Immigrant City*, Schinto, 1995.

and Health. The low to mid range, blue collar skills at which Lowell's residents excelled had lost their usefulness.

“Within manufacturing, durable goods industry – primarily the making of various kinds of machinery – took precedence over non-durables. The occupational mix within the growing sectors of manufacturing, including office machinery and transportation equipment, became less blue collar, with rising proportions of professional, managerial and technical employment. The skill level of blue-collar jobs in these fields rose as well, with a corresponding drop in low-skilled manufacturing jobs. Very low-skilled (and low-paying) work mushroomed in other fields, however, servicing the new professional-based economy.”

Lowell's depressed economy continued into the 1970's, finding some reprieve when Wang Laboratories relocated its corporate headquarters to Lowell. The bankruptcy and departure of Wang industries in the 1990's, however, triggered significant job losses and stands as a failed effort to anchor the city in this new economy.<sup>73</sup> Without a niche to replace its manufacturing base, an increasing number of residents were employed in low skilled jobs. Despite the presence of a solid professional and middle class, Lowell found itself with poverty levels higher than the state's average, and once again, as a destination for impoverished immigrants from other parts of the world. In the 1970's and 1980's, Lowell became identified as a 'new immigrant enclave', a destination for immigrants from South and East Asia, Latin and South America and the Caribbean. Many of these immigrants, although not all, were low income, and transient, and did not settle as part of a family unit.

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<sup>73</sup> In this period, Wang Laboratories was an anchor industry in Lowell and at its height employed 2,200 people. When Wang departed from Lowell in 1995 it took 1,000 jobs away from the city, *Lowell Works to Replace Lost Jobs*, Boston Herald, September 21, 1994, by Marie Gendron

Lowell has since renewed its efforts to transform its industrial base in an effort to generate new businesses in place of manufacturing. The canals and locks that once controlled the water flow into the Lowell Mills, and were central to a thriving export base of textiles manufacture is today a central feature of the historic preservation of downtown Lowell, and a successful tourist destination. Tourism has spun off related services but has not fueled a significant economic comeback.

### ***The Founding and Evolution of Lowell High School***

Lowell High School began in a small building in downtown Lowell, not far from its present location. The class of forty-seven students was supervised by a headmaster of nineteen years of age, and the school was the first co-ed public high school in the country. Founded in 1831, it was profoundly influenced by the social and economic forces of industrialization and patterns of urbanization that were transforming the life styles and demographics of the country. As industrialization had progressed in Lowell, so too had the development of its civic institutions and civic culture. Historical narratives describe Lowell's citizens taking an active role in its civic development and directing its public institutions. (Richards, 1991, Dalzell, 1991, Mitchell, 1991).

Lowell's residents supported the creation of a range of religious, social and charitable organizations to nurture and improve the quality of life in the community. Residents also formed a town government, created a local school board and served as overseers to the poor, through organizations that were friendly but independent from the

mill agents. “Whatever the institution, all were formed around the principle which held Lowell as enlightened, hospitable, serious-minded and progressive.” (Mitchell, p.117)

The Lowell school system, while born of republican virtue and progressive ideals, was deeply influenced by the forces of industrialization and its principles of rationality, efficiency and impartiality. Bureaucratic rationality (Tyack, 1971) became the dominant approach of civil servants seeking to order and control public sector institutions such as the public school. Enamored by the efficiencies of the new industrial technologies, the school adopted hierarchical systems of control and command, regularized its procedures, and allocated powers and functions to individuals in the school, by order of rank. In these ways, the public school became bureaucratized in the image of the industrial corporation. The Lowell school district and its high school exemplify the legacy of bureaucratic rationality today. It is the organizational basis from which the school district will negotiate the political, social and economic demands of this century for its students.

The Lowell School Committee was one of several civic organizations formed at this time. It was influential in the incorporation of Irish immigrants into the public education system, taking a stand against both sectarian education as well as the denial of education to any child. Public schools in 19<sup>th</sup> century Lowell were just being institutionalized, and the issue of who was to have access to public school, the laws governing its operation and the pedagogical nature of schooling had come to be subject to the complex pressures of an urbanizing and industrializing society.

“... Whosoever refuses to educate his children is a foe to the community, for a single generation of ignorant children would endanger all our future history. For its own safety society is bound to educate its youth, and if children refuse to be educated, the law comes in to enforce the claims of society.”<sup>74</sup>

Lowell High School became directly linked to the factory through a certification offered by the school to immigrants who had completed a basic course of education. By the early 1900's, this certification had become a threshold for employment in the mills, a proposal of the Lowell School Committee that was sanctioned by the mill agents. Managers had come to view an educated worker as an asset to the firm, capable of greater productivity.

***An Historical Account of the Towns of Lincoln and Sudbury and their Ties to the emergent High Tech Economy***

The towns of Lincoln and Sudbury were first settled by Europeans in the seventeenth century. Sudbury became a political entity in 1639, but over the years lost territory as other towns were ‘set off’ from it. Lincoln incorporated in 1746, created from portions of the towns of Concord, Weston, and Lexington. For several centuries the communities of Lincoln and Sudbury remained small farm towns, relatively stable in population growth and productivity, and sheltered from the economic and social forces which led the nation to industrialize and urbanize. Both remained middle income, agricultural towns of Yankee character through 1946.

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<sup>74</sup> Annual Report of the School Committee of the City of Lowell, for the Municipal Year 1853, pp.42-43 as cited in “Good Citizens at the Least Cost per Pound: The History of the Development of Public Education in Antebellum Lowell, 1825-1855”, in *The Continuing Revolution, A History of Lowell, Massachusetts*, Edited by Robert Weible



Influences upon the growth and development of these two communities were two fold. The introduction of roads and eventually highways in the period 1900-1945 would engender patterns of suburbanization in the post war period. Although neither town was strikingly different from the other, Sudbury did have the Post Road routed through it, running from Boston, west to Worcester and Albany, and south to Hartford. This early mail route gradually developed and expanded over the years, inviting residential development and suburbanization after World War II.

Regional economic shifts also contributed to the transformation of these two communities. The growth and development of Lincoln and Sudbury was propelled by the restructuring of the Massachusetts economy, whose economic base underwent a profound shift from its blue collar industry to the growing dominance of high technology, financial services and business consulting. Routes 128 and 495, nearby to both of these towns became known as the 'high tech' belt of Massachusetts and it was this incoming group of high skilled manager and technicians, recruited by the region's emergent entrepreneurial firms and professional sectors, who would settle in Lincoln and Sudbury.

Lincoln, which was comprised of estates, along the lines of city planning changed little over time except to become a residential enclave for these high tech and other entrepreneurial businesses. Sudbury's accessibility by highway and accessorial roads opened the community to a different set of development pressures. The potential to attract these incoming families of the professional class became a lucrative development opportunity to the resident farmers whose children were not interested in carrying on the

family business of farming, and to the local real estate industry. The development of Sudbury's farm lands by residential developers and real estate conglomerates began in the 1950's, and continued onward into the following decades. The income levels and occupational status of both communities shifted upward.

Both towns grew rapidly in the next decade; Lincoln had grown by 48% to 2,949, while Sudbury had increased 107% to 4,251. With suburbanization both towns became more populous. Lincoln reached a population of 4,493 in 1986, with Sudbury at 14,561 in the same year. Thus in thirty--five years Sudbury's population had grown to be thrice the size of Lincoln's. The towns' decision to combine resources and form a regional high school proved to be prescient.

### ***The Founding and Evolution of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School***

Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School is a 'modern-day' creation story, founded in 1956 by school committee members of these two communities who were deeply concerned about the provision of quality education for the residents of their towns, and their own children. Lincoln had never had a high school of its own, and by the 1950's, Sudbury's rapidly expanding school population had overwhelmed the old school building in use. The Lincoln-Sudbury Regional School District was created in 1954, and two years later the high school opened its doors to 247 students from the two towns.

The school was built on land that was once home to a commercial chicken farm. From its inception, community members were deeply involved in the design and the early

operation of the school. The school committee members of Lincoln and Sudbury were steadfastly committed to the importance of education at all costs, aware that the towns' residents were recipients of advanced degrees and in their life experience, occupational status was directly tied to educational achievement. The residents of Lincoln and Sudbury had a deep commitment to education and high expectations for their children, and were outward looking and well financed in the process of creating a high school for their children.

The Lincoln-Sudbury School Committee used powers of fiscal autonomy granted to them to generously fund the school in its founding years. School committee members traveled to the best colleges to recruit faculty, and offered salaries higher than the average, with merit pay increases tied to annual assessments by department heads of the school.

From its inception, the founders and students of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School had a sense of authorship about its school, and welcomed the challenge to be recognized by the surrounding communities and colleges.<sup>75</sup> At Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, the school's philosophy and mission statement place great value upon freedom of expression, of thought and of action. It has been argued, among teachers within the school, and at certain times in the school's history by members of the community, that the school takes its cultural and academic openness to an extreme. For

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<sup>75</sup> Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, ".....a different kind of place", *A History of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School 1954-1994*, ECHOES, The History Journal of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School

example, students are encouraged to be self-directed in all aspects of high school life, navigating their academic program, free time and even punctuality to classes without the traditional bell system. There are some who question the ‘degrees of freedom’ in the school’s culture.<sup>76</sup> However, there is an openness at Lincoln-Sudbury that is related to class position, espousing attitudes and capacities that are prevalent among the elite schools of the U.S. meritocracy. There are resources to support an extensive effort to recruit teachers at competitive salaries, academic inquiry beyond a core curriculum of literacy, writing and mathematics, to include drama, the arts and fully equipped laboratories for science and math classes. The school newspaper has won first prize for several consecutive years in national competition – another indicator of a sophistication with the use and deployment of rhetoric

The changes in the Massachusetts economy and as a consequence of these shifts, the regional development of high tech and other knowledge-driven firms provided the towns of Lincoln and Sudbury with clear ties to its regional economy. It also delivered to these professional communities the ‘mandate’ to produce well-educated, college bound high school graduates, which in a sense has become the ‘industry’ of these two towns. Knowledge production is valued by the residents of these communities; it essential to their continued employment and has become institutionalized most particularly in the regional high school founded and funded by residents of these communities. The

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<sup>76</sup> I found in interviews and in the observation of faculty meetings, a resistance to new ideas - I suppose a form of parochialism - among the senior teaching staff who have grown up with the school. These teachers have taken a position valuing diverse and critical thinking, and supporting a curriculum and school culture which does so. Yet these same teachers face a challenge from a group of less senior teachers, who are interested in exploring a more conventional schedule, and greater restrictions on students’ time. This is a paradox of the school’s culture, and will be discussed in greater depth later in the chapter.

academic performance of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School has become tied to the identity of these communities, and factors directly in to the high real estate values commanded by properties in these towns. As both towns developed due to the immigration of white collar professionals, the curriculum at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School followed suit, with the elimination of shop and business courses. The liberal arts curriculum of the school is geared toward the graduation of future managers, entrepreneurs and high level technicians.

Lincoln and Sudbury had severed their ties to agriculture, and in its place established new and enduring ties to the region's emergent professional, business and high tech sectors. As the state's economy would again come upon hard times, these niche sectors which supported Lincoln and Sudbury would remain secure. Unlike Lowell, Massachusetts, which has been challenged by its loss of an economic base, and has thereby lost its niche in the regional and state economy, Lincoln and Sudbury have enjoyed secure ties to these sectors, which provide a stability and a clarity of purpose to both communities.

The history of the two schools as presented in this chapter illustrates profound differences between the schools of Lincoln Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School. In tracing the economic history of their respective foundings, this class story and the access to resources and information which are intrinsic to one's socio-economic status, assume a structural importance. This history, together with the school's

self- identity and governance structure combine to shape the ways in which each school will ‘make sense’ of the MCAS reform and choose to respond.

## **Chapter Five: A Story of Antagonistic Compliance: The History and Social Sciences Department at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School Makes Sense of the MCAS Reform**

### ***Introduction***

The strategy of '*antagonistic compliance*' adopted by Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School covers a range of individual and collective actions, which include letter writing campaigns, a petition campaign, community outreach, a teacher boycott of the exam and coalition building among History/Social Science (H/SS) departments. The strategy is an aggregation of different forms of protest, organizational action, dialogue, negotiation and ultimately, compromise. The Department of History and Social Sciences is the most directly affected by the MCAS reform, and assumes a lead position in articulating its response to the reform. Its antipathy and protest of the MCAS, while having some influence on the other departments, does not prevent the other departments from developing their independent positions toward the MCAS curriculum and framework. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, the antagonistic position of the History and Social Sciences Department contributes to a deep ambivalence in the school toward the reform. The school faculty and governing bodies support the department's cause; however, the aspects of the reform which teachers and administrators find most objectionable are: (1) the *high stakes* aspect of the MCAS test, and (2) the imposition of a prescriptive curriculum upon the school's curriculum.

The term '*antagonistic compliance*' encompasses the actions and strategies that are adopted by the other core academic departments in the school as well: specifically, the departments of English, Mathematics and Science. It encompasses activities which

*comply* with the legal mandates of the reform, while at the same time *resisting* aspects which teachers regard as threatening to the quality and substance of their curriculum. All four academic departments coalesce in their antagonism toward two of the reform's mandates. They regard the use of a single instrument, the MCAS test, to assess four years of a student's work in high school as unfair, on the basis that a single test is too narrow in its definition of competency. Secondly, each department stands firmly behind its curriculum, and in general, refuses to allocate class time to MCAS preparation. The departments vary in their respective evaluations of the MCAS Curriculum Framework and the MCAS test which is relevant to its area of study. These differences lead to variance across departments, in attitudes and actions.

I will also show in this chapter that the responses of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, and in particular the Department of History and the Social Sciences, can be understood as an outgrowth of its institutional sense-making, which in turn is determined by the school's *history*, as recounted in the prior chapter, its *organizational structure*, *form of governance* and its sense of self as reflected in its *philosophy/mission*, that is, its organizational identity.

### ***Governance at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School***

Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School is a single school district that serves the two communities of Lincoln and Sudbury. The traditional position of Superintendent and Headmaster is combined in a single position, referred to as Superintendent/ Headmaster. This position holds the ultimate decision-making power in the school (and district), with



major policy decisions subject to review by the Lincoln-Sudbury School Committee. Because of the simplicity of single school governance, Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School has been able to avoid the layers of bureaucracy found in school districts such as Lowell, and in place of hierarchy and bureaucracy, the school has adopted a governance structure based upon consensual decision-making. In this model, the Superintendent/Headmaster, John Ritchie, seeks consensus from teachers and administrators whenever possible, respecting the long-standing exercise of professional autonomy granted to teachers.

The horizontal consensus building structure at L-S, determined in large part by the teachers, is a two committee structure which allows teachers to express their ideas and engage in the life of the school from a secure sense of their own empowerment. The prominent role of teachers in setting the tone and direction in the school is evident in the strategic influence of two committees, the *Faculty Advisory Committee* and the *Academic Council*, in the school's decision-making process. The Academic Council is composed of the entire faculty and meets every two weeks. Academic issues are reviewed by this body. For example, discussion on the use of short answer responses (as deployed on the MCAS test) was raised in this forum because this style of instruction differs from the school's 'multiple draft' approach to writing. Dr. Ritchie chairs the Academic Council and consults regularly with the Faculty Advisory Committee.

Working Committees are groups with a short-term focus and are generally formed by consensus. Two committees were recently created in response to the MCAS reform:

(1) the MCAS Committee, created in 1997, and the Standardized Testing and Assessment Committee (STAC), created in 1999. The MCAS committees were established by Headmaster/Superintendent John Ritchie independently of consultation with teachers, the Academic Council or the Faculty Advisory Committee. The creation of the STAC was initiated by Ritchie, and discussed in the Academic Council. Rarely does the Superintendent act outside of the school's familiar and sacrosanct consensus structure, which includes consultation with both the Faculty Advisory Committee and the Academic Council. Also unusual is the source of this initiative, by the Headmaster/Superintendent instead of the classroom teachers, more typically and traditionally the point of origin.

Ritchie created the MCAS Committee, composed of departmental chairs, guidance staff, and administrators to respond to the bureaucratic mandates of the reform. He also intended that it address the ambivalence expressed by departments toward the MCAS. With the majority of teachers ambivalent about the reform, against high stakes testing and fairly uniform (although there are exceptions) in their stand against MCAS preparation in the classroom, Ritchie created the committee to fulfill the school's obligation in carrying out the state's education law. Responsibilities would include the administration of the MCAS test, and other administrative requirements such as the creation of after-school MCAS remediation programs and the design of the state mandated Student Success Plans (SSP) for failing students.

The STAC was proposed by Ritchie and discussed in the Academic Council. It was, in sum, Ritchie's solution for investigating several concerns: a dip in the SAT and AP scores of L-S students in recent years; questions regarding the allocation of 'seated class time' versus 'free time' for students (which had surfaced as a cultural tension in the school), and an ongoing concern about the low test scores of METCO students were begging for explanation and correctives. The committee was mandated to look at six comparable schools and report back to the entire faculty. Its creation, and its mission, was perceived as a challenge to the school's culture, at least to some of the faculty:

"These are both controversial, as much due to their content as to the bureaucratic procedure which created them. The STAC has become a central administration re-organization committee, run by Dr. Ritchie....David Gotthelf and Rosemary are in charge of this committee, they are administrators not coordinators. They are identified with a certain school culture position."<sup>77</sup>

This cultural position, which is referred to in the quote above, attributed to a few administrators and teachers who are questioning the freedoms granted students, including off-campus privileges and unstructured time built into the schedule, unlike any other Massachusetts public high school. The MCAS reform is bringing these concerns to the surface, revealing signs of a potential cultural divide. A veteran teacher who has been deeply involved in the school and believes strongly in its identity "...as a different kind of place" had this comment:

"There is a strong feeling about the culture of the school, it is unique among public schools, but it is becoming harder to maintain. There are now unsubtle challenges to the culture (MCAS is one of them). We have been accused of being close-minded about change versus passionate about education."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Interview, Jim Newton, Co-ordinator of the History and Social Sciences Department, 8.20.00

<sup>78</sup> Interview, Seth Weiss, Math Teacher, 11.28.00

### ***Organizational Structure at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School***

Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School is organized into four houses, each of which is assigned a Housemaster and guidance counselors to assist the students.

*Housemasters* oversee student discipline issues in their House, and they are assigned to specific departments, English and Drama, for example, as support staff around issues of curriculum and teaching. There is a Head Housemaster, Scott Carpenter, who is fairly new to the school, hired one year ago to a position which in many respects is key to the operation of the school. The Head Housemaster is a bridge between academic, discipline and operational issues, and a central communicator among houses and departments.

Carpenter is a member of the MCAS Committee and STAC, and over the course of the MCAS reform, assumed many responsibilities related to MCAS in the school. Per direction of the MCAS committee, he conducted a student survey of all tenth grade students who took the exam in 1999 when the scores fell sharply from the prior year and L-S ranked 42<sup>nd</sup> in the Commonwealth. He was also instrumental in organizing the after-school MCAS remediation program, which took place outside of departmental purview due to teachers' resistance.

The school has a Director of Student Services, who oversees the development of Individual Education Plans (IEP), as well as the numerous special education programs which operate within Lincoln-Sudbury. Rosemary Colson, the Director of Curriculum, among her other duties oversees the administration of the MCAS exam. The Guidance Department's primary concern is providing personal support for students, in the areas of

college admittance and psychological health. The co-ordinator Muriel Riseman, does not feel guidance should be directly involved; the counselors regard MCAS as a curriculum issue. She believes that the academic departmental coordinators have an essential role in guiding students to pass the test. She offered this perspective, in trying to explain the ambivalence at the school,

“But at L-S – the roles are so unclear – it has become – let the counselors do that. There is a lot of tension in the school, an anti-MCAS stance – the question is, who is going to dig in their heels and pick up the pace to get the school moving... The test creates different kinds of tensions. This is our (L-S) tension. It was suggested to Guidance (by Scott Carpenter, head housemaster) that we (the guidance counselors) call the teachers of students who have specific needs to be addressed for MCAS. Some counselors called teachers regarding the identified students and were not welcomed

David (Head of Student Services), Scott and the housemasters – their roles in the MCAS are not defined.....As professionals (guidance) we are really not part of the curriculum. We are not going to enable others from not doing it. That is not professional. Every department was called in to talk with John Ritchie and the housemasters. They met to discuss their feelings on the MCAS. Guidance – never had that discussion. That is not our ‘bread and butter’, the MCAS. We deal with suicide, depression, violence, college admissions. We never had this discussion about MCAS as a group, not even under the former guidance departmental co-ordinator.

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### ***The Teachers Association and Union Issues***

The teachers at LS make a clear distinction between the issues taken up by their union, the Lincoln-Sudbury Teacher Association<sup>80</sup>, which is primarily responsible for the teachers’ contract negotiations, and the issues assumed by the governance committees.

As noted by a history teacher, the issue of MCAS is *not* taken up by the union.

“The whole thing about MCAS was handled by the Faculty Advisory Committee because we don’t want people seeing it as a union initiative....

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<sup>79</sup> Interview, Muriel Riseman, Director of Guidance, 3/8/2001

<sup>80</sup> The Lincoln-Sudbury Teachers Association is an affiliate of the Massachusetts Teachers Association

If you have a union speaking out on MCAS, and the union is carrying the ball then people suspect that you are afraid of accountability, that you are not speaking as a professional educator. They assume you have this narrow, self-interested reason for your position. So, the union is not the representative in school discussions.....We want to say that at certain times we are acting unabashedly as people who want higher pay and better working conditions and that is our narrow self-interest. See, there are several parallel structures here, *there is the administration, there is the faculty as faculty, there is the union.*"<sup>81</sup>

Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School teachers' characterization of their union is indicative of the power teachers have within the school, and within the school's consensus governance structure. They have power and freedom to express their views, and they value it greatly. Contract negotiations are circumscribed, and focused in their purpose. Described as 'generally friendly negotiations' between the Teachers Association and the Lincoln-Sudbury School Committee, teachers' salary levels are commensurate with teachers' commitments, and higher than most other school districts. However, while appreciative of their salaries, teachers place an even greater value placed upon their freedom to be creative in the classroom and within the school,

"We probably get paid \$20,000 more than a typical school system, that's the top of the scale, though I can tell you, freedom is more important than pay. If I got \$20,000 less, but I could create what I have created at Lincoln-Sudbury, I would definitely choose L-S." <sup>82</sup>

### ***Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School Educational Philosophy and Mission***

In my review of the school's actions prior to the passage of the MCAS reform, there was sufficient evidence that the teachers and administrators at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School were wary of the state's reform before its passage into law in

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<sup>81</sup> Interview, Bill Schecter, 8.22.2000

<sup>82</sup> Interview, Bill Schecter, 8.22.00The salary range at Lincoln-Sudbury begins at \$54,000 and ends at \$80,000.

1993. The teachers undertook a school-wide initiative in 1992 which they called LS-21. It was an effort to reflect upon the school's academic and assessment goals for the new millennium, to explore and define what an outcomes-based education might look like at L-S, and to review, by department, the skills, philosophy and curriculum offered. "We undertook our own process to review what the school is doing, and needs to be doing to prepare their kids for the 21<sup>st</sup> century."<sup>83</sup> This process of self-reflection was undertaken with the expectation that a state version of education reform would most likely come to pass. Regardless, the school pursued this investigation.<sup>84</sup>

The discussion which took place among faculty of all departments over the two years of the LS-21 project is illustrative of issues that have filtered down from the public debate – and its sites of contest – on standards reform. One 'site of contest' which is referred to in an earlier chapter is related to teachers' perceptions of the MCAS as an attack on both their professional autonomy and competence. For LS teachers, protecting their professional autonomy was the same as protecting the heart and soul of the school. Teachers perceived the state's political leaders as unappreciative of teachers' professional

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<sup>83</sup> Interview, Bill Rae, English teacher. Over the course of the year (1992) background preparation included the following: members attended a variety of conferences, including a three day conference co-sponsored by EDCO, Newton Public Schools and Boston College on 'Diversifying Student Assessment'; members met with the Coalition for Essential Schools, and reviewed doctoral research on how school policy and individual teacher practice on assessment connect. Memorandum of the Outcomes and Assessment Committee

<sup>84</sup> A comment made by Bill Schecter in a 'Teacher News' e-mail dated January 14, 1997 captures the idea that while LS-21 was an initiative of prospective planning and thinking, it was, at the same time consciously self protective – an effort to both preserve their autonomy and express an antagonism toward the impending State education reform. The context of the e-mail is the History/SS frameworks now under review. His comment, "I think of the hundreds of hours spent on L-S 21, itself predicated on a determined, wishful denial that state education reform had anything to do with us. I think of hundreds of hours yet to be spent on the ten year evaluation ritual (a reference to the New England Association of Colleges, Commission on Public Secondary Schools, *Report of the Visiting Committee* which was completed in 1998). I think of us writing our school philosophy statement even while its foundations are being washed out by a reality – busy as we truly have been – never really had time to engage. Our day-to-day dedication may prove to be our undoing."

work and capabilities. This view was reinforced by actions taken by the Massachusetts Board of Education to exclude teachers from contributing to the state curriculum frameworks.

“I think there’s an assumption that we need to fix something. I think this underlying suspicion that teachers *are not capable* of determining whether students have attained the skills or goals set out for them is insulting. To revamp the system entirely might be necessary in a school that is failing, but I have yet to see evidence that we are failing.”<sup>85</sup>

The second ‘site of contest’, which is presented in the Introduction, is what I name a ‘competing logics’ between equity/opportunity and skills/accountability, drawing on the literature.<sup>86</sup> At Lincoln-Sudbury, the issue of equity is not addressed directly; the teachers undertook this discussion of outcomes assessment knowing that their resource base was secure, and they make little reference to schools less well off. The issues of accountability and autonomy drove the discussion and were illustrative of teachers’ concerns about the state’s role vis-a-vis the school once an education reform law was passed. The passion for teaching, long the school’s legacy, is evident. These comments are taken from two different committee discussions on outcomes and assessments in April, and May, 1994:

Three questions proposed by math teacher Jim Williams, “What are the school’s educational goals? How do we know whether our students are reaching those goals? Who is going to judge?”<sup>87</sup> spoke directly to the teachers’ concerns about accountability

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<sup>85</sup> The teachers participating in these two meetings of the Outcomes and Assessment Committee were from the disciplines of math, English, history, drama, language and science.

<sup>86</sup> Friedland and Alford (1991), *Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices and Institutional Contradictions*, in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

<sup>87</sup> LS-21 minutes, Outcomes and Assessment Committee, 4.27.94



and autonomy, and elicited a dialogue from several teachers in the process of examining the system in place at L-S.

In the first set of comments, there is some resistance to quantifying all knowledge, while acknowledging certain outcomes such as course completion and course credits.

“In the last meeting it seemed we were unclear about our definition of outcomes. Can we clarify?” .....“Is what you’re proposing any different from what we are doing now? In other words, by passing the course, haven’t I done my outcomes?” “We seem to be talking about two things: first, education as more than what is quantifiable and second, certain outcomes which are clearly defined. To me, it seems antithetical to what education is all about. If we’re teaching only what we can anticipate ahead of time..., then I don’t see the point of education....at least for me.....”<sup>88</sup>

The sentiment here is echoed in a criticism the math teachers, in particular, have toward the MCAS test. That is the standard that all students need to know all things at the same time. Particularly in algebra, students learn at very different rates and it is tied to an individual’s maturity as well as motivation and aptitude.

“All students should achieve these outcomes but there would be varying degrees of outcomes. For instance, some students might take longer than others to achieve those outcomes. That degree would be decided by the departments, the school as a whole, the advisor. So, no, the standards are not rigid and absolute.” “I think there’s an assumption that outcomes are for kids that are at the bottom of the barrel.”

The school’s teachers and administrators made several important decisions that are in keeping with their philosophy and organizational culture, regarding outcomes, assessment, and school structure. Teachers adopted a block scheduling arrangement which increased blocks of class time to seventy-five minutes, alternating with shorter

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<sup>88</sup> L-S21 Minutes, 1994

blocks on alternate days and overall, reducing the number of classes per day.<sup>89</sup> Four general areas of student performance were adopted and would become a part of the Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School's statement of philosophy. Students would be expected to *express simple and complex ideas clearly* in written, oral, mathematical, artistic, and kinesthetic modes; *problem solve* and think critically; have the ability to *participate in the democratic process*; and *assess their own progress* in learning.

During 1996-97, Lincoln-Sudbury teachers, distressed by the direction of education reform, and in preparation for their ten-year evaluation in 1998, reviewed their statement of purpose and in so doing, engaged in a process of self-reflection. This process asked questions like - How did they see themselves, and what values do they wish to represent to their students and to the world? The dominant themes which emerged, creativity versus standardization, difference versus homogeneity, skills *and* civic concern are manifest in their Statement of Purpose; the antithesis to what has come to be defined as a standards and accountability culture.<sup>90</sup>

In tone and theme, there is a clarity in the school's philosophy about their self-identity. The *freedom* teachers have to create their courses, and students have to choose their course of study, the primacy of *creativity* and individual expression, and a view that respectful *relationships* between teachers and students are foundational to the school community differs from a vision of education that is data driven, and evolves as a result

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<sup>89</sup> This block structure has remained a controversial subject and is under study again as part of the mandate of the Standardized Testing and Assessment Committee. This committee, comprised primarily of administrators, was created in 1999 to investigate dipping student SAT and AP scores at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School.

<sup>90</sup> During this year, a working draft of the document was submitted to the faculty, the school councils, the student senate and school committee for review, revision and ultimately for approval by Faculty and School Committee in October, 1997.

standardized test score assessments as is envisioned by the Massachusetts Department of Education.<sup>91</sup>

“Since its founding in 1954, Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School has viewed itself as a “.....*different kind of place*” – a place that not only tolerates but truly values diversity in style and substance. This quality manifests itself in the academic program and in the general atmosphere of the school, and may best be seen in the respectful and warm relationships between students and adults, the high degree of autonomy for and participation by faculty in decisions, and a school culture marked by commitment to innovation and experimentation.

.....students are expected to make choices and to have a degree of power over their own education. The ability to make good choices requires the development of a sense of responsibility and an understanding of the ethical implications of their actions. Formality and standardization have, in the life of the school, been less important than creativity, originality, and critical thinking skills. The school culture also seeks to join academic skills to an active civic concern for the L-S community, American society and the worlds beyond.”<sup>92</sup>

In this section, I have argued that a school’s identity and sense of mission, as well as its governance structure are important factors in this sense-making process. The issues most dear to the teachers, such as the school curriculum and the freedom to express their artistry in the classroom, and the school’s sense of autonomy from the state, become the basis for adopting an antagonistic posture toward the State’s mandate, MCAS.

“If students do not have the opportunity to engage the past by doing more than consuming names, dates and other inert facts they come away impoverished. Some even become hopelessly confused by the information load they are meant to carry.....Unless the study of history is mixed with authentic opportunities for investigation and the serious historical analysis

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<sup>91</sup> The view of DOE officials toward education envisions a data driven model of education, where there is continuous feedback between the school and the state, and the classroom teacher and the school, to develop the curriculum and pedagogy students need to advance.

<sup>92</sup> Excerpt from the Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School Mission Statement in “a different kind of place, *A History of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School 1954-1994*, ECHOES, The History Journal of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School

of the evidence employed to construct that record, students will struggle to make sense of the myriad details they are asked to learn.<sup>93</sup>

The autonomy inherent in the L-S governance structure itself, beginning with the School Committee and its working relationship with the school, and tracing this downward and across, to the consensual politics sought after between the Superintendent/Headmaster and the teachers, and so on, explains in part, the open canvas that school and its departments and teachers saw before them, upon which to make known their antagonistic position.

Furthermore, the high self-esteem of the school is expressed in their confidence in Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School's purpose, capacity, resources, and support from residents of Lincoln and Sudbury. Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School has enjoyed a privileged position, which derives from both its secure niche in the regional economy's knowledge driven industries of high tech, as well as the upper class status of the towns of Lincoln and Sudbury, both of which are securely tied to the strong professional sectors of the regional economy. Class position takes on a depth and breadth which is expressed in attributes such as high self-esteem, access to information and entitlements that extend beyond its conventional usage as a measure of income and material wealth. Teachers are empowered, confident, and feel entitled to exert an influence upon public policy. As a result, Lincoln-Sudbury's response to the MCAS reform is distinct from any other school in the Commonwealth.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p.1

### ***The School's Response to the MCAS Reform***

The History and Social Sciences Department took a lead role in the crafting of the school's response to the MCAS reform. Each of the core academic departments, English, Math, Science and History/Social Studies assessed the reform on 'its own terms', that is, each department evaluated the state's curriculum framework and the MCAS test designed for its academic subject area against its own departmental curriculum and educational philosophy. Science was not yet a high stakes subject and the state was changing requirements from year to year, leaving the Science department some latitude in continuing its curriculum. The English department engaged in conversations about the MCAS reform, with English teachers making some changes in order to acquaint students with the types of questions on the test. Teachers and administrators in the department expressed criticisms of both the MCAS English test and the frameworks, however, they felt able to pursue their curriculum and educational philosophy and did not take their complaints public. In general, teachers refused to use classroom time for MCAS preparation.

The Math Department's assessment found the MCAS Math test to be acceptable, and an *earlier* version of the Math frameworks to be in alignment with the professional NCTM curriculum.<sup>94</sup> However, the department was highly critical of the changes made under the Silber Board of Education, which approved a Math curriculum framework

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<sup>94</sup> The MCAS Mathematics Framework became a site of public controversy and protest. The MCAS Math Frameworks Committee assembled under the former Kaplan Board of Education, resigned in protest of the revised frameworks approved by the Silber Board of Education. There were several public hearing where math teachers organized their constituency to protest the changes. These public protests did not prevent the approval of the traditional math curriculum framework. The acronym NCTM stands for the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, refers to the largest professional math organization in the United States, and includes international memberships.

which shifted the emphasis of earlier frameworks from nationally accepted, critical approaches to learning math to the more traditional, rote approaches to learning. Math teachers also were critical of the levels of mastery tenth grade students were expected to have attained given the uneven pace of learning math due to an individual's maturity and cognitive development. Teachers in this department refused to allocate classroom time to MCAS preparation, based on their assessment that the department's curriculum was superior to that of the state's.

The teachers at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School were unified in their criticism of the high stakes aspect of the exam, as well as the amount of class time lost to test-taking. The most dramatic resistance to the MCAS reform was found in the H/SS department. The H/SS teachers, alarmed by both the MCAS H/SS frameworks and MCAS test undertook public actions to challenge the MCAS reform. In so doing, they formalized the criticisms shared by all teachers and administrators in the school toward the MCAS reform, leading teachers in a petition drive which protested the high stakes aspect of the MCAS reform. The majority of actions undertaken by the H/SS department were specific to the H/SS curriculum and test proposed by the state. However, the department, in effect, brought the entire school's thoughtful protests into the public arena. Antagonism as well as compliance in attitudes and actions were both at play, across departments, and formed what I have named a strategy of '*Antagonistic Compliance*' at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School. The distinctive role played by the History and Social Sciences Department in Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School's sense making of the MCAS reform is presented in the following sections.

## *The Department of History and Social Sciences as Protagonist*

### *Department Profile*

The Department of History and Social Sciences (H/SS) is composed of twenty-one teachers, the majority of whom began their teaching at L-S during the decade of the 1970's. This period in the school's history is recounted as a time both rich and chaotic in its pedagogy and in its cultural identity. The philosophical values and academic courses offered in the H/SS department are rooted in this earlier time period – thus teachers bring to the department which they have collectively shaped, a strong sense of commitment and shared experience.

The position of department chair was renamed 'department coordinator', in keeping with the school's commitment to consensual decision-making and a democratic governance structure. As explained to me by one of the teachers in the department, "To be a coordinator means that you co-ordinate the workings of the department with the teachers in the department. We really work together; the coordinator cannot decide much on his own. Often Jim will use the term 'chairman of the department' in a Letter to the Editor, or in meetings that take place outside of the school, because people do not understand what coordinator means."<sup>95</sup>

Jim Newton, the coordinator of the department is a highly respected teacher within the school, and a leading (albeit surprising) protagonist in the Department's campaign to challenge the state's imposition of the MCAS H/SS framework and test. He

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<sup>95</sup> Interview, Bill Schecter, History and Social Sciences Teacher, 8.15.00

began teaching at Lincoln-Sudbury in 1967 and he is a trained art historian who, in addition to his administrative duties, teaches two courses per semester.

“Currently I teach one course which is called Western Civilization, the Arts & History, which is really an art history course, in fact I am an art historian by training and then I teach something else, depending on what is left over in the department, usually it is some U.S. history course, in recent years I have been teaching the lowest level US history course we offer, which has students with pretty heavy duty ed plans and I have three down syndrome children this year, so that is what in recent years I have been teaching. Over my career I can’t tell you how many different courses I have taught. A lot.”<sup>96</sup>

Newton has been a key supporter of drama and the arts in the school, involved in their production of plays and the display and review of students’ artwork. Newton’s innovative contributions to the school have typically come about in this way, as a trespasser of boundaries between the disciplines. Under his direction, the H/SS Department has worked work closely with the English Department, both of which share responsibility for the development of writing skills in the school. His influence school-wide comes primarily as an elected member of the Faculty Advisory Council, where he is privy to shaping the issues which come before the school.

Newton became Department Chair in 1987 (a position which was later renamed Department Coordinator) and as such he has remained abreast of current research in the teaching of history, following shifts in the national debate regarding curriculum standards. Still, it was unexpected that Newton would become a public critic of the MCAS reform, deeply involved in organizing the MCAS campaign within his department, and beyond. As noted by a history colleague,

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<sup>96</sup> Interview, Newton, Coordinator of the History and Social Sciences Department 11.21.00



“Well, to his credit, he really got on board..... And he became involved in more than a pro forma way, I was very impressed with that because he is not a real political person, generally speaking. He is political in terms of the inner workings of the school, but in the larger picture you know, his thing is art, not politics. He is not going to become involved in political struggles in Sudbury, if there are any. I don’t know. He got involved. I think everybody in the department got involved.”<sup>97</sup>

In Newton’s view, and in the view of the history teachers, the MCAS H/SS frameworks represented a profound setback in the teaching and learning of history, based upon the most current research in the field.<sup>98</sup>

A second key actor who has been vocal in his opposition to the MCAS is veteran teacher Bill Schecter, a history teacher at L-S for twenty-eight years, whose passion is U.S. history, particularly the decades of the 1950’s and 1960’s. His courses in Fall semester 2000 include Twentieth Century American History and Post War America: The Fifties and Sixties.

He has initiated extra curricular projects which have enhanced classroom teaching at the high school. School-wide projects include unusual initiatives, such as organizing students to paint murals on the hallways of the history wing of the school, depicting historical events and social movements and literary trends. He also taught a special course on Henry David Thoreau which included building of a replica of Thoreau’s cabin

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<sup>97</sup> Interview, Bill Schecter, 8/22/2000

<sup>98</sup> Newton, in the course of our interview, shares an extensive bibliography with me which discusses in great detail the research on the pedagogies and most effective practices for teaching history in the classroom. Much of this data was pulled from a summary of research compiled by VanSledright, 1999, “*How Research can help to Arbitrate the competing claims in the Classroom Culture Wars*,” OAH Newsletter

on school grounds. Schechter is a mentor to the Metco Program, advisor to the school newspaper, The Forum, and advisor to Echoes, the history literary group whose final project was the research and writing of “...*a different kind of place*”, a historical biography of Lincoln-Sudbury High School in honor of its forty year history. Annual class trips to New York to study the beat generation, and to the ‘Deep South Trip’ to trace the civil rights struggles of the 1960’s are part of his course curricula.

Schechter could be described as both a community activist and a school leader. He has distinguished himself in the classroom, in the numerous extra-curricular projects he has mentored, and finally, in his focused efforts to stimulate a larger debate on education reform. More than any other teacher in the school, Schechter has registered his opinion about the MCAS reform. Beginning in 1996, as the reform changed direction, he began what would become a seven year letter-writing campaign in protest of the reform and its debilitating impact on his school, to Massachusetts political leaders, newspapers, and legislators. He is forthright in his views and is a constant voice on teacher e-mail, “Teacher News”, sharing opinions and concerns about the school and about the impact of MCAS reform upon the culture of the school.

### ***Teaching History***

The H/SS Department is a (vanguard) front-line department; within Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School it enjoys the highest participation of students in its courses, and in national reputation it is highly respected for its History and Social

Sciences curriculum.<sup>99</sup> The department espouses liberal values and encourages an active citizenship for the next century. The latest edition of the H/SS catalogue which describes the department's philosophy, includes some pointed comments that are intended to delineate their approach to teaching history from the approach imposed by the MCAS reform:

“ We believe they (our students) need to know the basic structure of our form of government and the history of our evolution as a people. But we do not share the view that high school history should be taught in courses which try to *cover everything*. Such courses produce only superficial learning, placing an emphasis on the retention of disconnected arbitrary facts just long enough to get by a test....Nor do we believe that history has an absolute sequence. Thus our courses are restricted in scope, and we provide no absolute sequence of courses.”

“The emerging frameworks of the State Department of Education may require the modification of some or all of our courses, potentially causing some to be dropped altogether, or even forcing us to implement an *antithetical curriculum imposed by the state.*”<sup>100</sup> (*italics mine*)

Thus, the H/SS department includes a series of statements which challenge the mandate of the State education reform, MCAS. In support of their position toward the study and teaching of history, the department refers specifically to three of the twelve nationally recognized organizations and panels which have published K-12 history frameworks. More to the point, the department's curriculum is renowned in educational circles and is an important part of the current research on the teaching of History and the Social Sciences. It is this particular question raised by the MCAS - What is a good history/social science education? - which motivates an entire department to take a stand

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<sup>99</sup> This factor makes the H/SS department *either* (1) most likely to dissent as a creative renegade *or* (2) least likely to dissent as it is secure in the meritocracy.

<sup>100</sup> Curriculum, Department of History and Social Sciences, Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, 1998, p.1

contrary to the State's policy. This particular question about history, which deserves consideration, is in fact related to two larger questions, What is good education as we enter this next millennium, and what then, is good education policy.<sup>101</sup>

It is this serious disagreement with the State about what is good History/Social Science education which becomes grounds for the actions taken by the department, and the school, in response to the MCAS H/SS Curriculum Framework and test, and the broader mandate of the reform itself.

Current research in the teaching and learning of history has focused on this key question – *How do students learn history and how do they become historical thinkers?* Numerous studies find that students have significant difficulty acquiring knowledge about the past if it is presented to them as a diet of historical facts, names, details and events. Furthermore, studies which have followed students through their K-12 education and even through to college graduation, find they lack the inquiry-based capabilities that historical investigators use, which are inferred in the national education goal of 'high standards'. The research points to the importance of students immersing themselves in the processes that historians employ to construct an understanding of historical events.

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<sup>101</sup> According to Landman (2000), there are at least twelve nationally influential standards documents which he surveyed for similarities and differences. On the curricular issues that are relevant in this case, which include: should all students be exposed to a common core of knowledge, should that core contain a balance of western and non-western, canonical and non-canonical materials, should the curriculum leave room for deep topical exploration, should the curriculum leave room for flexibility and discretion on the part of local districts and individual teachers, should higher-order thinking skills be emphasized in the curriculum, should varied teaching materials presenting multiple perspectives on topics/issues be employed there is an affirmative national consensus. The History/SS Department is in alignment with the current national consensus. It distinguishes itself in the area of service learning, by assigning academic credit for community internships as part of its educational commitment toward enhancing its students' capacity to exercise the qualities of democratic citizenship. On this point there is no national consensus, although it finds support among several of the frameworks.

The research supports what Schecter defined as the department's 'own discovery'.

He described their pedagogical approach to history as one which has evolved over time,

"I think the single most important discovery we have made, and I can't remember it starting out as a principle we then worked from, but rather as something that just bubbled up to the surface, is that kids turn on to history when it is taught in depth. And that means that, well every teacher has to wrestle with the question of depth versus breadth, depth, I would say, is a very important variable that we tend to emphasize. Because when you can engage students in analysis and interpretation and call upon their conceptual skills and their affective involvement, they get very involved in what is a great story."<sup>102</sup>

This comment refers not only to the department's philosophy of teaching, but also to the professional identity of the H/SS teachers.

### ***The Structure and Content of the MCAS H/SS Framework***

The general principles and skills which the Massachusetts MCAS H/SS framework discusses in its opening pages reflect the national consensus as well as current research in the field. Specific skills mentioned in the MCAS framework include the use and understanding of maps; how to write and speak clearly and accurately; how to gather, interpret and assess evidence from multiple and sometimes conflicting sources; how to enter in thought and imagination the point of view of others; how to memorize with understanding rather than merely by rote....<sup>103</sup>

However, the Framework goes on to undermine its stated intent, for this is followed by forty-one pages which are devoted to a chronological list of 52 major

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<sup>102</sup> Interview, Schecter, History and Social Sciences Teacher, 8.15.00

<sup>103</sup> MCAS History and Social Sciences Curriculum Frameworks, Massachusetts Department of Education, pp 1-8

historical topics, which are further sub-divided into sub-topics. The number of subtopics for World History total 258. The number of topics for U.S. History totals 31, with related sub-topics. The scope of study and breadth of material that is suggested by these topics is limitless, and they are presented without a structure other than chronology, and without a prioritization of any kind. The single direction offered to teachers can be found on page 13 of the History and Social Sciences framework, where the study of topics and sub-topics is left to the discretion of the school and individual teacher.

“As a required common core of essentials around which study of history and social science is to be organized, these topics are to be offered to all students. Which of them are studied in depth, and which are more briefly considered in their larger historical and geographical context, is left for schools and teachers to determine.”<sup>104</sup>

The Framework also presents four study strands in history, geography, economics, and civics and government. Within each *study strand* are several *learning strands* for which the teacher is responsible. There is no real direction as to how these conceptual skills are to be integrated with the amount of information to be covered.

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<sup>104</sup> Two examples of Topics and sub-topics to be covered in World History below follow. The scope of material to be covered begins with Prehistory to 1,000 BC and continues through to present day.

Growth of Agricultural and Commercial civilization (c. 500 A.D. to 1500)

*The Byzantine Empire; institutions, religions, culture*

- \*Empire shifts to the East; Constantinople; Code of Justinian
- \*Preservation of heritage and antiquity
- \*Establishment of Eastern Orthodox Church; conversion of the Slavs
- \*The arts: Hagia Sophia, mosaics, icons
- \* Weaknesses; ultimate fall of Constantinople to the Turks

*Africa; cities and states; gold, salt and slave trade; Muslim expansion*

- \*Varied geography; varied societies: village, city, states and empires
- \*Economics factors: trans-Saharan camel trade; gold, salt and slaves
- \*Spread of Islamic religion into Africa: Christianity in Ethiopia
- \*Empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai
- \*Great Zimbabwe; Bantu settlement and languages; Swahili

Learning strands for history include Chronology and Cause; Historical Understanding; Interdisciplinary Learning: Religion, Ethics, Philosophy and Literature; and so on.

### *The Critique*

There are three widespread critiques of the MCAS H/SS frameworks and test:

(1) the exclusive emphasis on information and the excessive amount of information in the Framework are forcing a return to the kind of rote learning that replaces higher order thinking with simple memorization, (2) the design of the test including the open-ended questions, does not assess students' thinking but only their retention of disconnected information; and (3) the Framework is insufficiently world-focused and places too much emphasis on political narrative history to the exclusion of other important facets of civic, history and social science education. One can anticipate how this framework would not be acceptable to the Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School's Department of H/SS.

Regarding the MCAS test, the state has left open the possibility that any one of the 258 *sub-topics* might be assessed on the MCAS test. The 1998 10<sup>th</sup> grade MCAS pilot test included questions from many of the 51 topics and a wide variety of sub-topics. In 1999, the state's memorandum to H/SS departments regarding preparation for the test gave no indication as to which topics would be tested. In 1999 and in 2000, while 70 percent of questions focused on Western Europe, there were numerous questions drawn from a wide range of sub-topics.

“The state had not made clear which topics teachers may treat superficially, in order to focus on others, in depth. Any topic may appear on the test. If students have not been exposed to particular topics, they will not be able to answer questions pertaining to those topics.”<sup>105</sup>

In the view of the L-S H/SS Department, the breadth and chronological depth of World History as required by the MCAS is too great for students to learn effectively, without either historical narrative or thematic coherence. The amount of information prescribed by the MCAS framework, to be tested by the MCAS test, precludes the kind of learning advocated in academic research, and in the classroom experience of L-S history teachers.

“We teach students to look for different kinds of causation, different factors that can make a historian biased, all these are important things but all liberated from the material, or can be applied to any material, now that’s important. That stays with a student, when you teach them about historiography. What is a fact? Is a fact the same as truth? What’s the difference between an opinion and an interpretation? What are the factors that make it difficult to do history? What are the factors that shape an historian’s interpretation? How can you tell?, What are the different things you look for in order to discern an historian’s interpretation?” They are encouraged to solicit the broader view.”<sup>106</sup>

The surfeit of information makes it impossible to explore topics in depth, draw connections between the past and present, figure out, rather than simply recite, cause and effect, distinguish between apparent and underlying causes, reflect upon the significance of historical events, analyze how and why ideas and events have impacted each other, develop historical imagination, engage in student-centered projects that allow the students to apply their learning to new situations, write research papers, write drafts of

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<sup>105</sup> Landman, Johnathan A. (2000) “*A State Mandated Curriculum, a High Stakes Test: Four Varied High School Departments’ Responses to a Very New Policy Context*”, A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Education of Harvard University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

<sup>106</sup> Interview, Bill Schecter, History and Social Sciences Teacher, 8.22.2000



research papers, explicate primary source documents, debate, give presentations, engage in controversy. These are the very elements of pedagogy that are valued in the L-S curriculum.

Primarily it is Lincoln-Sudbury H/SS department chair and teachers who are outspoken about the disconnect between current research and pedagogy in the field. They are joined by a few others, such as the Brookline High School department chair, in questioning who should have authority on this topic, and taking a firm stand on how best to encourage critical thinking and learning.

“History, according to the MCAS Framework, is simply a body of knowledge to pass on to students, not a realm for them to explore; its study is a process of absorption, not an opportunity for them to cut their intellectual teeth.”<sup>107</sup>

Schecter elaborates on this point, articulating a deep frustration and antipathy for the MCAS Framework and test.

“When you do what MCAS does, and this goes beyond we have to stop teaching this and this...when you say to kids you have to learn 1,200 years of history in two years, it necessarily becomes an exercise in memorization (leaving aside the fact that it is totally unfair). What exactly are the skills that are represented by trying to master 1,200 years? They would have you teach this impossible amount of material – which only succeeds in making you alienated from it – then they give you a test on two years worth of it and ask you thirty questions.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> This critique of the framework was made by the Chairman of the Brookline Social Studies Department, John Sills, in February, 1999. Two years after the Framework was accepted, there was sufficient dissatisfaction with the H/SS Framework to merit an investigation by a member of the Education Committee, Representative Alice Wolf. This e-mail was written in response to a request for information on the impact of the social studies MCAS on the ability to teach in depth. John Sills gave permission for this e-mail to be circulated. This e-mail was in Jim Newton’s files on the MCAS.

<sup>108</sup> Interview, Schecter, 8/15/00

While this indicates a growing consensus among H/SS departments, it is only Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School which directly confronts the Massachusetts Department of Education and the Board of Education, as well as state politicians with its criticisms.

### ***Impact of the MCAS H/SS Curriculum Framework***

The curriculum in the History/SS Department of Lincoln-Sudbury differs in sequence and in content from the curriculum of many other Massachusetts high schools, in that it provides freshmen students with a choice of history subject in their first year, a selection of U.S. history courses in tenth grade and a substantive elective program to junior and senior students.<sup>109</sup> The thirteen elective courses and five U.S. history courses that have evolved are a result of a teacher's passion and particular expertise, the needs of students and current curriculum developments. Table 2, on the following page, is a chart which compares the curriculum selections offered by the Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School's H/SS department at each grade level, and the curriculum proposed by the State, as a part of the MCAS reform. Most of the history and social science electives would be eliminated at Lincoln-Sudbury if the state's proposal comes to pass.

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<sup>109</sup> According to a 2001 DOE survey, most high schools in Massachusetts offer U.S. history in 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

**Table 2**  
***L-S History Curriculum Compared to the State Frameworks***

<b>STATE Recommendations</b>	<b>LSRHS Curriculum</b>
9 <sup>th</sup> World History	9 <sup>th</sup> Modern Europe 1600-1990 or Contemporary World Cultures
10 <sup>th</sup> World History	10 <sup>th</sup> US History in 5 Courses, 1760-1945+ Trends in Twentieth Century History 20th Century American History Great Trials& Issues in US History Current American Issues
11 <sup>th</sup> grade US History, 1865-present	<b><i>Electives in Grades 11 and 12</i></b>
12 <sup>th</sup> grade Civics class, an elective	Post War America Current American Issues Ancient Greece and Rome Philosophy & History in Western Europe Western Civilization- the Arts &History Medieval & Renaissance History Asian Studies A History of Africa & Its People Psychology Global Issues Economics & Finance <b>Minor Electives</b> Law and Society Facing History and Ourselves Archaeology

The Lincoln-Sudbury H/SS department offers twenty-two courses which are organized into four subject areas: American History; European History; Area Studies and the Social Sciences. The sequence of courses offered follows a logic of skill development; rather than an historical sequence of topics to be covered. In 9<sup>th</sup> grade, students are required to take either *Modern European History* or *Contemporary World Cultures*. L-S continues to teach a comprehensive U.S. history course at the Advanced Placement level, and offers four other U.S. history courses to 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. A robust offering of course electives (see Chart above) are available to students during their junior and senior year.

Were the department to subscribe to the sequence, content and breadth of the MCAS frameworks – the two 9<sup>th</sup> grade courses would be replaced by two years of MCAS World History, U.S. History would move to 11<sup>th</sup> grade, which would then eliminate the elective program offered in grades 11 and 12.

At risk is the thoughtful sequencing of skills in the LS H/SS courses, the breadth and diversity offered in the electives, the highly valued professional autonomy of teachers and the freedom extended to students to study subjects of one's passion and interest. The rigidity of MCAS led teachers to take a stand against this eviscerated portrait of their department. A concern for students' preparedness for the H/SS MCAS test, and the realization that this MCAS framework could in fact destroy the department's curriculum led to serious departmental discussions, and ultimately, a course of action.

First, the H/SS teachers had to determine what to do about their freshman courses. The L-S courses offered to freshman students – *Modern European History* and *Contemporary World Cultures*, give students some preparation for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade MCAS exam but do not cover all of the material. An analysis of the 1998 pilot H/SS MCAS exam showed a distribution in questions, 80% of questions related to European history and 20% of questions related to World history, with few if any questions on U.S. history. Students who take the *Contemporary World Cultures* would be less prepared given the predominance of questions on European history. In Schecter's comment which follows, it becomes clear that the decision about what to do for freshman students forced L-S

teachers to confront several concerns. The MCAS Framework threatened values which are core to their professional ethos. Surprisingly, this comment by Schecter speaks to a willingness to compromise the L-S curriculum in the interest of student achievement.

“I personally thought it unwise to keep Contemporary World. If I was a parent of a kid who flunked and ascertained that my kid had taken a course that had not given him a fighting chance, I would be very upset. Uh, that at the very least you had to tell students, had to tell parents from the get go, this course will not prepare them – of course, then no parent would then put their kid in that course. So I think that is very irresponsible – this is one of the problems that we have, you know, there’s one or two teachers who love teaching Contemporary World and one of my kids goes to school here and took it and it was a very good course, it was the right course for him. But I thought this was the one concession to reality that you had to make, and *I think it would have happened* but then the DOE backed off and said history was not going to count, at least for the time being, because they realized they had taken on too much, so, now maybe they will change the standards completely and it is wise that we didn’t change.

But I thought it was wrong to send kids out there, first of all it’s going to make it seem, even if it doesn’t count, its going to make it seem like we have much more of a problem. And I am afraid that community pressure will build to make that change (*in our curriculum*), and I wanted to do something, I don’t want to see American History bumped into junior year and eviscerate our elective program. I think the middle approach is to teach all kids European History and if that would be our MCAS loss it would be a fairly modest one.”<sup>110</sup>

The department decides to stand by its curriculum and offer its freshman courses to ninth graders. As they state in a leaflet addressed to L-S parents, in explanation of their position toward the H/SS Framework, “This year’s exam, which also does not count, will give us a sense of the degree to which our current courses are synchronous with the framework”<sup>111</sup> Instead of upsetting the skill sequence and diversity of their courses by

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<sup>110</sup> Interview, Schecter, 8.30.00

<sup>111</sup> L-S Leaflet, “Why the L-S History Department is Circulating a Petition”, Some Frequently Asked Questions with Responses by the Department, 1999

eliminating the L-S freshman courses, the department will closely follow their students' performance and the direction the H/SS exam will take. In many respects, this act was a serious act of non-compliance. The department did not seriously consider, at this point, conforming to the Framework and teaching World History as prescribed. Their compromise solution was to eliminate the 'Cultures' course and teach two sections of Modern European History. There were teachers who felt, in the interest of student's best performance on the exam, this was the appropriate course to take. However, the State's decision to postpone the high stakes aspect, indefinitely, (and in all likelihood the Framework would come under another revision) created circumstances whereby the department felt empowered and justified to stand its ground. Since the test would not affect a student's graduation, in the department's view, the teachers were able to act in the best interests of students and continue to offer what they consider to be a superior curriculum. This position is notwithstanding the need to monitor the tests, and as alluded to above, pay attention to test performance.

The L-S history teachers, having made the decision to 'stay the course' and teach their curriculum, determined to gather support from the communities to which they feel the greatest accountability – the school's faculty and administration, and the parents of their students, residents of the towns of Lincoln and Sudbury. This decision led the H/SS department to assume a leadership voice and role in shaping the larger debate around the MCAS H/SS Framework and test.

***Organizing the School, Faculty and Administration and the Public against the History/SS Frameworks***

***Letter to the Editor***

Anti-MCAS activities at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School were well underway at the time I began my research in 1999. Certain earlier initiatives are important to recount in order to adequately describe the sense making that I discovered at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School. In 1997 the History/SS Department became more active and outspoken, expressing its views on the H/SS frameworks to colleagues and school administrators, and publicly as well. As the department's teachers begin to consolidate their position on the frameworks, Schecter and Newton, both, emerged as the dominant voices moved to take a stand against the frameworks. This year, in the e-mail to LS faculty, Schecter asks for teachers' support in the department's opposition and refusal to conform to the State's curriculum. Newton wrote a 'Letter to the Editor' which is published in the Boston Globe on October 17, 1997, bringing to public attention the school's antagonism toward the H/SS Curriculum Frameworks. This was published as the first revision of the MCAS H/SS frameworks is underway, and Silber had made comments in the public realm which invited this response:

***Letter to the Editor: "Dumbing Down the Bay State Schools"***

"Conformity to the prescribed curriculum, enforced through compulsory exams, leaves no room for advanced placement courses in many subjects such as psychology, economics and art history. Also his (Dr. Silber's) assumption seems to be that courses for the gifted must have the blessing of the advanced placement program of the College Board. ....There are, and should be, many courses designed and created by talented teachers that challenge academically able students.....As chairman of a department with several such courses, I believe that Silber and the Board of Education are the ones 'dumbing down' the curriculum of the public schools."<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Chair Jim Newton Globe Letter to the Editor, 10/17/1997. *Look who's dumbing down Bay State Schools*

### *Mobilizing Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School Teachers*

Public school teachers across the State were following the progress of this revision, and the word circulating among history departments across the State reflected a deep concern for the direction in which their discipline seemed headed. The draft was due out on December 13, 1997, just prior to school's Christmas vacation and a public meeting was scheduled at the Board of Education on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1998. Prior to the frameworks disclosure date, its contents had been made available to the public and there had been some movement among history teachers and other interested stakeholders to oppose this revised version of the MCAS H/SS frameworks. A letter was circulating, written by members of the special program, 'Facing History and Ourselves'<sup>113</sup> which called for a return to the original H/SS curriculum frameworks proposal and a reasonable process for public input and review. On Monday, January 6, 1997 Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School was placed on 'Silber Alert' – that is, history teacher Bill Schecter sent an email entitled 'Silber Alert' to all of the teachers in the school. In this e-mail, he brings the faculty up to date,

“As some of you may know, the State Board of Education released its History Frameworks proposal on December 13, just as we are preparing to go on vacation – a carefully timed affair....The Board jettisoned the proposal which had been formulated over a period of two years (with considerable input from teachers) and substituted a plan which (the Board) borrowed from Virginia, where it has not even won approval yet. The Virginia Plan was borrowed and reworked by three members of the Silber-slimmed down Board, all of whom have BU connections and all of whom are affiliated with the Pioneer Institute, a Boston-area rightwing think tank.....The document is rigid in proscribing what must be taught.....The idea was to sneak this through without discussion, but the Globe ran an excellent column last Friday. Silber-like, the deadline for the official reaction is TODAY! I have placed on Maryellen's counter:

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<sup>113</sup> This program, Facing History and Ourselves is a special program on the Holocaust. They offer a course at LSRHS.



1. copy of the column, copy of the frameworks
2. copies of the official reaction sheets
3. copy of a letter (written by a staff member of Facing History, Facing Ourselves, being circulated among social studies teachers which I must send out in THREE DAYS!!! So it can be presented at the quick draw hearing on January 15. Everyone is invited to sign. The letter calls for a return to the original proposal and some reasonable process.

PLEASE SIGN The effects of these frameworks for the L-S History program would be devastating. It's all a part of the 'Back to the 50's Campaign. Please do what you can to stop it. Bill Schecter.<sup>114</sup>

The Lincoln-Sudbury teachers did sign this letter of protest. During these years of controversy four different revisions of the H/SS frameworks were passed by the Massachusetts Board of Education. After all of these negotiations and revisions, the Lincoln-Sudbury teachers were not satisfied. They were even more determined to prevent the intrusion of the MCAS curriculum upon their own.

“Let's put it this way, I have thought of a new metaphor to describe this, let's see if I can. The framework sets one on a journey where one is only allowed to drive at or above the speed limit on interstate highways and all you get to see at say 70 miles an hour is whatever is on the interstate highway which isn't much, right, and if one were to try to get to understand any nation by simply driving on its huge roads, whatever it is, wherever you are, you get a very skewed image and one that isn't very interesting and what the framework doesn't permit is getting off that superhighway and wandering down some interesting country road or into some part of an inner city and taking some time to really getting to know that, and the position that, not just I have taken but the entire department has taken, basically, is that that is the problem of the framework.

We also believe that it is unconscionable that if there is going to be an exam at all at the secondary level that it is in the history of the United States which is the only history where there is any agreement that the kids ought to know something about. Instead it's this world history thing and by golly in two years there are so many topics you can't be sure you have covered them all. So there is a huge, in terms of the test, a huge crapshoot element there, you know, did you blink when you went by some road sign

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<sup>114</sup> Schecter, "Silber Alert", in *Letters and Memorandum in opposition to the MCAS Reform, 1994-2002*

that you were supposed to memorize? Today is Thursday, it's the Byzantine Empire, sorry you missed that, there was an essay on that so you aren't going to know it unless you are clever enough to see that it is really a very simple geography question and if you just stop panicking about the Byzantine Empire and think for two minutes you can get at least a decent score on it without knowing a damn thing about the Byzantine Empire."<sup>115</sup>

This perspective, as articulated by the department's coordinator, captures the essence of the department's critique of the MCAS H/SS curriculum and test, as well as a defense of the department's pedagogy, which focuses upon the critical study of historical events, documents and personages.

### *The Boycott*

In this first year (1998) of the MCAS exam, Bill Schechter not only illustrates the extent to which an individual's actions, be they idiosyncratic or testing the edges are tolerated, as he boycotts the MCAS exam for one day, citing intentions that are moral and civic-minded, in the hopes that his individual act of non-compliance will spark a dialogue about the direction of education reform. To effect this teacher boycott, Schechter will absent himself from school on the first day of the MCAS exam. Instead he will make himself available to speak with parents about the MCAS reform and public education at the towns' public libraries. Schechter reached out to the school and parent communities to inform them and (hopefully) involve them in his one day boycott.

The month before his intended boycott, Schechter writes two letters to the school – one to teachers explaining his actions to them, and one to his students. These letters are sent, by e-mail to the teachers and as a journal entry to his students in April, allowing

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<sup>115</sup> Interview, Jim Newton, Co-ordinator of History and Social Sciences Department, 5.30.2000

time for the school community to reflect, to join in, to or to respond. He also meets with the local newspaper, the *Sudbury Town Crier*, and the Lincoln-Sudbury school newspaper *The Forum*, both of which cover this story. He explains to his colleagues that, in ‘his own little universe’, the controversy over state education reform has become a moral issue. After describing his objections to education reform – including the loss of 16 hours of instructional time to the test, and the high stakes aspect of ‘this flawed assessment’, he describes his efforts to work and resist from within the system which has led him to enact a symbolic protest outside of it:

“My symbolic protest follows five years of trying to work “within the system”. I served on a teacher advisory committee at the Department of Education, until the Committee was simply abolished by Silber....I have, with others, written many unanswered letters to legislators. I have, in vain, invited many public officials to the school to “see for themselves.” I have sent a book’s worth of letters and articles to the *Globe* (as have others) only to find a media blackout on all dissent or even attempts at dialogue regarding the direction of education reform.”<sup>116</sup>

Schechter writes that he will talk to the local newspaper, in the hope that the issue becomes a point of discussion among parents at home, over the dinner table. He refers to a comment made by another teacher over the teacher e-mail ‘Teacher News’ a week prior, who thought it best if parents lead the resistance to the exams. Schechter agrees with this, but believes that parents are ‘too harried these days’. He states that he is unsure of the disciplinary consequences of his action.<sup>117</sup>

The *Sudbury Town Crier* headline is “Teacher Says Conformity isn’t Good”. The article reports that Schechter will boycott the MCAS on May 5<sup>th</sup> and declare it a day of

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<sup>116</sup> Bill Schechter as quoted in *The Sudbury Town Crier*, “Teacher Says Conformity isn’t Good”

<sup>117</sup> Schechter was docked a day of pay, and when the Lincoln-Sudbury School Committee does take a public position on the MCAS in April, 2000, they state that they do not condone boycotts of the exam

historical study, spending his time at the libraries in Lincoln and Sudbury, available to any parents who wish to discuss the reform or his decision. The core of his position –

“L-S has had the courage to be different, eccentric, yet our students still get into the best schools and are still very highly rated. Why should we become standardized? To me, no school reform can be justified if it makes a better school less good, and a different school less interesting..... “This change does not make any sense to me and I feel like I have to stand up and say that.”<sup>118</sup>

### *Journal Entry to Students*

Schechter’s students receive a journal entry entitled – “State Education Reform, A Classroom Teachers’ Notebook.” He begins by making an analogy between his decision and that of Henry David Thoreau, who was once hired as a public school teacher by the Town of Concord. “When the Superintendent of Schools demanded that he keep good order by beating his students, Thoreau obliged. He lined up his class, picked a few students for the requisite punishment, and then promptly quit.”<sup>119</sup> Schechter explains that he is not going to this same extreme in his own response, and builds a case that this one day boycott is a constructive, personal expression of his disaffection with MCAS and the direction of education reform.

Interestingly, one of the issues he elaborates upon, to his students, is the content of the curriculum frameworks. He explains that the proposed curriculum frameworks (and test) were originally designed to ensure that every student learned skills essential to the discipline. “Content exams were to be avoided so that the scope and sequence of courses in all schools would *not be standardized* and so a semblance of *local control*

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<sup>118</sup> Erin Walsh, Sudbury Town Crier, 4/30/98

<sup>119</sup> Schechter, Bill, excerpt from *State Education Reform, A Classroom Teacher’s Notebook*, p.1, Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School

could be preserved. *Hundreds of teachers put in thousands of hours into shaping these first curriculum framework proposals*". This work was dismissed by the Silber Board of Education leadership, and ....the H/SS framework offers particular problems because it raises the specter of an 'official' version of our past. Schecter concludes his letter by supporting the students who are required to take the test, writing "I advise all those who must take the exam to try as hard as they can."

### ***Mixed Responses***

The responses to this boycott come from 'the dinner table' and from L-S school alumnae, who have begun their college studies. The Sudbury Town Crier published these comments over a period of three weeks. The following is a response from a parent whose three children were educated at Lincoln-Sudbury.

*"Why is LSRHS so opposed to the new standardized state tests? After all, aren't such tests merely designed to test basic knowledge of math, science and language arts (and optionally history and social science)? What on earth could educators find to object to in something so innocuous and so basic as to be taken for granted in other advanced countries. Unless, of course, they expect their students to fail in large numbers.....*

Lincoln-Sudbury has a reputation for good teaching, which may or may not be deserved, but the appropriateness and adequacy of its curriculum have been controversial for years. Twenty-five years ago the school was embroiled in controversy over its laissez-faire operating style and avant-garde curriculum that seemed to many people more appropriate to a university than a high school campus. The Superintendent at that time was fired and changes were imposed: nevertheless the old philosophy remains, to this day visibly in place if somewhat muted. This philosophy is the one now being articulated by Mr. Schecter.

According to this philosophy, it is sufficient to acquaint students with ways to find information without actually teaching them anything, or in Schecter's words to teach them a "love of learning." That may be fine for

the brightest and the best but for the majority of students it is an unmitigated disaster. In all cases, the student who fails to learn the basic curriculum in school is doomed to cover the ground later as a freshman in college through remedial courses.

The notion that any student aspiring to a place in a university in Europe would not have the basics in hand as demonstrated by proficiency in public examinations is unthinkable. It is a purely American concept, one that is heading this country down the primrose path to economic disaster.”<sup>120</sup>

This letter sparked several letters in response, including letters from student alumnae who are currently in college. The letters challenged this parent’s point of view, attesting to the high quality of education they received and the value of giving students the skills of “learning to think and problem-solve on their own by giving them the freedom to choose. The teachers don’t merely set the foundation, they give the students the tools with which to construct the building.” There was a general dismissal of standardized tests as a weak substitute for classroom learning, and as a poor measure of ability, “The ability to take a test has very little to do with how successful a student will be in the ‘real world’ and more to do with how well they are able to take tests under pressure.”...and finally, among these alumnae there was a resounding, retrospective appreciation for the love of learning they took with them to college.<sup>121</sup>

It is difficult to state with certainty just what impact this individual act of non-compliance did have upon the school. One L-S student, a student intern at the *Lincoln Journal* during the semester of the boycott wrote an article in the newspaper reflecting

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<sup>120</sup> Sudbury Parent, Letter to the Editor, Excerpts of letter, Sudbury Town Crier, May 7, 1998

<sup>121</sup> Excerpts from the letters to the editor of five Lincoln Sudbury alumnae, currently undergraduates. These letters were published in response to the letter of the Sudbury parent in the Sudbury Town Crier on May 7, 1998. These letters were carried in the same paper, on May 21, 1998

upon Mr. Schecter's boycott. She wrote that student responses were mixed, the general tone, however was one of apathy, that one student commented – Will we have a substitute (teacher)? She applauded her teacher for taking this stand, and as a senior and exempt from the test, discussed the impact the MCAS would have had on her high school experience.

“One of the things I have always loved about Lincoln-Sudbury is the room it gives its students to become individuals. Junior year, I took Latin instead of Chemistry because I knew that exposure to the ideas of Ancient Greeks would mean more to me than exposure to the periodic table. The more power we give to standardized tests, the less students are going to be allowed to make choices like that. If I had to pass a standardized science exam in order to graduate, there is no way I could have skipped Chemistry. Given the other restrictions on students' schedules, I would also have had to forgo Latin.”<sup>122</sup>

This teacher's boycott was yet one more activity that ultimately contributed to an ambivalence in students attitudes toward the exam. Despite the direction to do well on the test, there were enough mixed messages at Lincoln Sudbury to cause test rankings to widely fluctuate in years 1998 to 2000, ranking as low as 42<sup>nd</sup> and 72<sup>nd</sup> in the state. In year 2001, when high stakes took effect, the school motivated their sophomore students to make their best effort. Still resistant, the administration was looking to have all students *pass*, and not necessarily excel as measured by the MCAS metric. In years 2000 and 2001, criticism of the MCAS was less evident in the actions and commentaries of the school's staff. By year 2001, active, organized protests of the MCAS had transformed. The History/SS department became engaged in a more substantive dialogue with the Massachusetts Department of Education.

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<sup>122</sup> Excerpt form Student Comment in *The Lincoln Journal*

### ***The Waiver Campaign***

The department had made the decision to keep its curriculum intact. Freshman students would take either Modern European History or Contemporary World Cultures in the ninth grade, and U.S. History in tenth grade. This would be their course preparation for the MCAS. This decision took on real significance in 1999, when the students would for the first time be required to take the MCAS H/SS test.<sup>123</sup> The department decided that they needed to take this decision to the parents and explain their point of view, solicit their support and input. In reaching out to the parents, the H/SS department made a choice that set them apart from every other H/SS department in the state. As recounted by Newton, the department organized a petition drive requesting an *exemption* from the State from taking the MCAS H/SS test.

“What have we done? Well, we have been making noise about this ever since it started and I have a full file drawer about MCAS. Last year we held 8 public meetings, announced in the local press and through the parents’ organization. And the public was invited. Some of the sessions were in Lincoln, some were held at the school, one was in Boston because we have Metco and what we did was to present our curriculum and the state’s framework and the impact we saw it was going to have and we got very strong, positive public response. We collected over 300 signatures on a petition, which was sent to Mr. Driscoll who responded as if it was a letter from the history department, as if 300 citizens hadn’t signed it, which I thought was....What did he say to you? Basically he said get on the band wagon. We are not getting on the bandwagon.”<sup>124</sup>

The department’s outreach to parents took place between the months of January and April, 1999. The history teachers were unified behind this campaign to save its program and shared responsibility for the ‘teach-ins’. The sessions were conducted in a

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<sup>123</sup>The State excused Lincoln-Sudbury from participating in the 1998 MCAS H/SS Pilot test. The Framework had not been approved in time for a properly designed H/SS test to be administered. Schools whose curriculum were not in alignment with the new Framework were excused. All schools would be required to take the test in 1999.

<sup>124</sup> Interview, Jim Newton, 2.13.01



question and answer format, following a presentation by the department which explained the differences between the MCAS H/SS curriculum and that of the department.

Teachers explained their serious objections to the H/SS frameworks. They had written materials which explained their position, including a three page question and answer summary entitled: *Why the L-S History Department is Circulating A Petition, Some Frequently Asked Questions, With Responses by the Department, the Petition* and other leaflets which explained the issue.

The Petition asked for a substantial revision of the H/SS framework and that “a waiver be extended to Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and other schools applying for one until the state curriculum framework for the Social Studies is revised to provide greater flexibility and until the state develops more diverse and suitable forms of assessment.” Parents were asked to sign the waiver, and an effort was made to garner more support from parents who could not attend, through a mailing and leaflets.

A leaflet entitled *How Parents & Residents Can Help the L-S History Department’s Campaign to Save its Program* was a sophisticated lesson in political action. The leaflet encouraged parents, in addition to signing the petition in support of the teachers, to organize their neighbors and to lobby legislators in support of the L-S Waiver campaign. This included contacting legislators and the department provided names and phone numbers of the local representatives as well as key members of the Education Committee. Parents were also encouraged to take local action – to circulate a petition in their neighborhood, organize a tea or coffee for neighbors to which

representatives of the department would be pleased to come and answer questions; to help organize a “Friends of the History Department” group that can work with the department in preparing and distributing literature and in doing petition outreach; and to write letters expressing their viewpoint to the local newspaper. Parents were encouraged to call upon the department coordinator, Jim Newton, if in need more information.<sup>125</sup>

### ***Reaching the Point of Compliance: Accountability to Parents***

The department’s outreach to the community took place between January and April, 1999. Eight ‘teach-ins’ were organized in Lincoln, Sudbury, and one in Boston for METCO parents, some of which were covered by the local press. An editorial in the *Sudbury Town Crier* encouraged parents to participate in these open forums, and questioned the validity of the department’s request for a waiver. The editorial raises the issue of what is good education, who judges, and who demands? What role does meritocracy play? :

“The history faculty’s complaints have merit. The rush to implement high-stakes standardized testing shouldn’t run roughshod over useful debate about what is being taught in the classrooms and how. And in no subject is the debate more spirited than in history, which prickles our core values, our beliefs and our world view.

But the history teachers will have to make a more compelling case than they have so far – especially since Lincoln-Sudbury’s lower than expected scores in math, English and science MCAS exams.

It is elitist to simply declare that ‘good’ schools shouldn’t have to condescend to the rigors of MCAS. Who decides who the ‘good’ schools are? Should schools be allowed to simply anoint themselves among the chosen few? It would defeat the goal of the statewide assessment system – which of course is the point.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Leaflet, 1999, ‘How Parents and Residents Can Help the L-S History Department’s Campaign to Save its Program, *What You Can Do*

<sup>126</sup> Lincoln-Sudbury Town Crier, Editorial, Burden of Proof on L-S Faculty, February 8, 1999

The L-S school, as noted by Ritchie, is committed to creating an alternative assessment system, as has been proposed by groups like CARE and FairTest. Nor is it opposed to a minimum standards test that is administered by the State. However, the editorial speaks to an issue that underlies the reform, which is the intent of the reform to level the playing field between rich and poor schools. Wealthy, high performing schools such as Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School have been criticized by the advocates of standards for acting as elitist – and undermining an important effort to achieve equity in the delivery of education.

Several hundred parents attended these open meetings. Members of the department would present the differences between the two curricula, focusing in particular on breadth versus depth. The greater sentiment among parents was one of support for the faculty and quality of education offered by the department, although a few parents did challenge aspects of the L-S courses, and wanted to understand why the department could not simply comply in grades nine and ten, and pursue its curriculum for the remaining two years. In response, the department explained the impact of the Framework, imposing upon the school an inflexibility narrowness of focus, as well as objecting to the State’s method of assessment.

Many parents were skeptical about the department’s chances for success, and questioned the benefit of rejecting state standards. They expressed their primary concern that their child may not be prepared for the MCAS and fail the test. This failure could lead to being held back from high school and admittance to the best universities. In

response Newton answered, “In two to three years, if we are at the point where the History/SS portion of the exam counts, *we will do what we have to do* to get ready for it. This is the department’s position, and that of the school.” Here was Lincoln Sudbury Regional High School’s point of compliance to the MCAS. Should the H/SS exam become high stakes, or should a consistently poor performance on the exam hurt a student’s scholastic credibility, the department would “*do what it had to do*”. Not all parents agreed with this position, where resistance must give way to compliance. As stated by one parent, “I would rather prepare myself that my child is not going to do well on the MCAS by virtue of the wonderful experience that they had here.”<sup>127</sup>

The teachers were direct in their solicitation of support feel directly and ultimately accountable to the parents:

“Teachers can’t do it. We are politically neuter. They are afraid of one thing: Parents. Parents who vote. Not teachers that are hacks. We need parents as allies because teachers have very little credibility in the public arena.”

“I think ultimately we are accountable to the parents. It’s very simple. When the kids stop getting into good schools, you will hear a scream that you can hear at MIT all the way from Sudbury. You know, parents are particularly busy people out there. So, what do they pick up about their school? Their kid seems to be happy, kid, how’s your history class, good, how’s your English class, good, oh good, the kid is getting decent grades and the kid is able to apply to some good schools. As long as that is happening, the parents are happy, and that is who we are accountable to, the taxpayers, which may not be the law but given the tradition of locally controlled schools is not particularly an unhappy thing. Plus, there’s the School Committee who are the guardians.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> “Is MCAS Right for Lincoln-Sudbury?”, Sudbury Town Crier, March 4, 1999

<sup>128</sup> Interview, Bill Schechter, 8/22/04

### *Other Voices*

Key to the history teachers' strategy was their continued effort to bring this issue to the attention of the public through the news media. As explained by Newton in the Boston Sunday Globe newspaper article, "Modern Day Tea Party Brewing, MCAS Value Challenged"<sup>129</sup>,

"Our basic goal here is to attract attention to an issue and get the state Board of Education to do something about a framework that is unworkable. The basic problem is the framework for history is an impossibility. It's really a curriculum, not a framework. It's a completely furnished mansion chockfull of bric-a-brac. The history and social studies framework for 10<sup>th</sup> graders includes 259 topics, and more than 900 subtopics. One of the topics is Chinese porcelain; another is US involvement in Vietnam. There's no indication which is more important."<sup>130</sup>

According to Newton, his department is not alone in this point of view, although his is the only H/SS department petitioning the State for an exemption from the test. This is borne out by the responses of three other suburban school history departments. As reported in this same article, the chairwoman of the History and Social Sciences Department at Framingham High School said the 10<sup>th</sup> grade framework is a good guide, but she agreed that it covers too much material. Teachers in the department have decided which themes to focus on, and run the risk that students may face MCAS questions on topics not covered. In her opinion, "It is far better to cover less than more." She would rather have students understand fewer topics in depth than learn a series of "disconnected

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<sup>129</sup> I found it quite interesting that the Boston Globe reporter would choose a title for her article which calls forth an historical analogy where the British (oppressors from another land) are oppressing the American colonists (seeking their freedom and sovereignty). This must have pleased the L-S faculty immensely.

<sup>130</sup> Jim Newton as quoted in the Boston Sunday Globe, "Modern Day Tea Party Brewing, MCAS Value Challenged", March 14, 1999

facts.” *“Ignoring the frameworks is not an option for us”*, she states. But she does add that the DOE needs to narrow the frameworks.

At Watertown High School, freshman and sophomores have long taken a World History course, as is called for in the frameworks. However, the Director of Social Studies Richard Najarian reports that his department has had to restructure its courses. “There is too much in the frameworks. You’ve got to grind it out all the time to, quote, cover it. It really becomes like a race.”<sup>131</sup>

The Boston Globe article extends its sources to include a legislator and the Director of Assessment at the DOE, Jeff Nelhaus. State Representative Alice Wolf (D-Cambridge, House Education Committee) reported that she has heard similar informal complaints from educators. Nelhaus also is reported as having heard concerns similar to those raised by LS and states in the article that, “It is hard for some people who have developed good programs. But ed reform is trying to set standards that would apply to everyone. There are some consequences to that.”<sup>132</sup>

In February, 2000, Commissioner Driscoll responded by letter and denies the H/SS department’s Petition. In this letter, Driscoll affirmed that the 1997 frameworks would be the basis for the test in Spring 2000, but a review and revision of these frameworks would also be underway.

“I know from my review of materials you sent me last spring that Lincoln-Sudbury has a fine history program. Although I respect the sincerity of

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<sup>131</sup> Najarian as as quoted in the Boston Sunday Globe, “Modern Day Tea Party Brewing, MCAS Value Challenged”, March 14, 1999

<sup>132</sup> Nelhaus as quoted in the Boston Sunday Globe, “Modern Day Tea Party Brewing, MCAS Value Challenged”, March 14, 1999

your request for a waiver, I will not grant your request because such school-wide exemptions are contrary to education reform law. The Education Reform Act of 1993 directed the Department of Education to assess the performance of public school students at grade 10 in history and social science; this provision applies to *all* public school districts in the Commonwealth. I trust that teachers and administrators at Lincoln-Sudbury will help students understand their responsibilities to participate in the assessment this spring.”<sup>133</sup>

### *Conclusion*

When I undertook this research at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, I expected to find a high school that would adjust easily to the MCAS reform and draw upon its known skills in test-taking, which are evidenced in the school’s standardized test scores and college admittances. Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School is a high achieving school and I expected that the MCAS exam would be just one more test in which their students would excel. I was greatly surprised to find widespread resistance to the reform at the school, and I was even more surprised to discover the extent of the passion behind this resistance.

Looking at the sense-making process in which they engaged, and their own sense of who they are, it becomes easy to understand this response. Historically, as discussed in the prior chapter, L-S brings to this current story specific legacies that shape their responses. For example, their founding in 1956, by parents and residents of the towns of Lincoln and Sudbury, and the early conception of a private/public school makes understandable the value they place upon local control and local governance. These early actions took place independent of a central authority.

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<sup>133</sup> Letter, The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Education, David Driscoll, Commissioner of Education, February 1, 2000

At that time teachers were given the freedom to innovate in the classroom, and they set standards that have endured to the present day. The L-S teachers are highly committed to their profession, to good pedagogy and to expressing their creative license in the classroom. They are secure in their purpose of educating students, the majority of whom continue on to attend four year colleges. Lincoln Sudbury Regional High School embraces, among its core values and identity, freedom for its teachers, students and administrators to express themselves as individuals. They focus on the individual's development and stand firmly behind tolerance for diversity of ideas. They value creativity over standardization, and believe that skills and civic-mindedness can co-exist. While they dissociate themselves from school rankings and standardized tests, they also have two feet in this system of meritocracy, concerned that their students perform well on such tests for acceptance to college.

Teachers speak with impunity, within the school and in public, and are granted a wide degree of freedom in the design of their curriculum. They are not afraid to take on the authority of the state, and cite the support of the school, from School Committee to teachers, in their articulation of grievances. The school's governance structure supports the centrality of teachers' influence within the school. The H/SS teachers, as discussed in this chapter, identify a cause, which is resistance to the MCAS H/SS Framework and test, and they rally parents, administrators, professional colleagues and the public to this cause.



In so doing, I argue that the school becomes a 'site of enactment' in the policy-making process. For example, as discussed in this chapter, history teacher Schecter sends an e-mail to the L-S faculty which describes the politics surrounding the H/SS Framework. He speaks to an absence of transparency in the review process, and the disaffection the L-S H/SS department has for this reform. As it turns out, this same view is shared by the Joint Committee on Education in the State legislature, and by individual members of the Board of Education. Schecter mobilizes the school faculty to sign a letter in protest. As the school makes sense of the politics of the reform, and takes action, this action has an impact in the policy-making arena. The Silber Board is forced to open the process, and amend the existing framework.

The school acts a 'site of enactment' in the larger debate as well. It is difficult to say what impact Newton's Letter to the Editor, regarding the 'Dumbing Down of Curriculum' had upon the public. However, it is significant that a high school teacher's voice about a reform that directly affects him and his profession was aired publicly. This public expression takes on a legitimacy and joins the rhetoric of the public debate. This also serves to energize the Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School by introducing a perspective that is no longer simply internal to the school. Again, it is difficult to measure the impact of any single act. However, the 'cause' of the H/SS department in its resistance to the MCAS Framework and test is regarded, within the school, as a 'noble cause'.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> There is a general support and sympathy for the position of the H/SS department. This particular phrase, 'the noble cause' was used by Lisa Weiss, a math teacher. She also made a distinction between her department's view of the MCAS Math Framework and Test, and that of History and Social Sciences.

There is, throughout the evolution of this reform, evidence of a ‘policy-making loop’ between the public schools and the policy-making arena, whereby actions taken by one or several public schools have some impact upon both the Massachusetts Board of Education and its implementing agency, the Massachusetts Department of Education. Once the politics of the MCAS reform changed, and teachers and other grass-roots activists were prevented the access to policy-makers that had been built into the reform process, a loop evolved whereby schools and policy-makers were forced to respond to one another as they fought over their divergent interpretations of the Education Reform Act.

With regard to the process of sense-making, it must be understood that schools are deeply embedded institutions, influenced by their ‘deep ties’ to the larger culture. Even a school as secure as Lincoln-Sudbury is, in its mission, resource base and institutional support, is influenced by the pressures of the larger culture. The advent of a standards and assessment environment moved the school to undergo its own re-assessment of its values, standards and outcome measures. Here again, there is a sense-making process at work. Projects such as LS-21 are defensive in the sense that the school is wary of the impending education reform and wishes to hold on to its purview of local control (over curriculum and student graduation), and at the same time is moved to reconsider its identity and culture, in light of these new institutional pressures. Then, the process of sense-making becomes influenced and structured by the school’s governance and organizational structures, as well as the actions of individual actors. Individuals assume an important role in this process, particularly in this school where great value is placed

upon the individual's freedom. Teachers who are senior (in years of teaching) have great influence in the school's culture and politics, regarded as core to the school. This is because these teachers identify closely with their courses and their teaching, which is the 'structural core' of the school and lies at the heart of its organizational identity.

It then becomes understandable that the Department of H/SS resisted this reform, because in their view of the world, the MCAS is a challenge to the school and the H/SS department, on issues that are core to their organizational identity and self-esteem. The imposition of centralized control, what they and others consider bad pedagogy, and a prescribed curriculum has the effect of stifling individuality and therefore, creativity, and becomes a threat to the survival of the school as it has come to define itself.

Central to Lincoln-Sudbury's H/SS department's sense-making process is their view of history as socially constructed. There is a congruence between teaching history and making history that underlies their sense-making process, and their adoption of the strategy which I believe is aptly described as '*antagonistic compliance*'. The history teachers organize and develop a narrative story about the MCAS which they intentionally project into the public domain and the school's culture. There is a congruence in their actions between how they teach history, and how they themselves, enact it.

This strategy of resistance takes on even greater significance because there was a national debate about K-12 history curriculum (classroom culture wars, 1991-1994) and the voices of K-12 teachers were absent from this public debate. It was reported in the mainstream media and carried out among the political and academic elites. Who has

access is a question that arises in the teaching of history. History is a discipline which speaks to our identity as a nation. In the case of this departmental struggle, against this reform, the views of the Lincoln-Sudbury History and Social Science teachers become a voice that speaks to this larger question of national identity, and what stories we will pass on to our children.

In closing, a few words must be said about the strategy of '*antagonistic compliance*'. The Lincoln-Sudbury School Committee and Superintendent/Headmaster Ritchie comply with the state law and agree to administer the exam and enact other directives mandated by the State, such as after-school remediation, the identification of failing students, and the design of Student Success Plans for these students. However, they grant autonomy to teachers and academic departments, in deciding how to implement the curriculum frameworks, and where to draw the line as far as incorporating MCAS 'pedagogy' in the classroom. In effect, such a strategy is finding a way to comply with the letter of the law, without really following the law.

There is a downside, however, to this approach. There is a great ambivalence in the school toward the reform, and given the autonomy of teachers and departments to pursue their own ends, responsibility for implementing the above-mentioned legal aspects of MCAS and making sure that students are prepared for the exam nearly falls into an abyss in the governance and organizational structures of the school. As the 2000 exam approaches, which is the first high stakes exam of the MCAS, students know to take it seriously, as does the administration. Having lost their Petition campaign, History/SS

teachers tone down their activities to resist the exam and encourage students in the classroom to take the exam seriously.

The school does not retreat in its evaluation of the MCAS; they encourage students to do well on the exam because their graduation from high school is dependent upon this, and so that the school may continue to have credibility as a critic. The MCAS committee gears up, spending time discussing different scenarios for test conditions. Teachers are nervous for their students as this exam, whose content and design they challenge - is outside of their purview. The school complies and takes the test, with the caveat that they will closely watch over the scores of their students. They will assess if this strategy of *antagonistic compliance* is also in the short term interests of their students, as they certainly believe it to be in the long term interest of quality public education.

## ***Chapter VI: A Story of Compliant Engagement: The Call for Systemic Change at Lowell High School***

### ***Introduction***

Lowell High School continues on as the city's only public high school, however, shifts in the regional and state economy have eliminated city's industrial base, leaving it in search of new types of economic ties to the region. This dramatic change, which has reconfigured the demographics and labor skills of Lowell's residents finds Lowell High School, many years later, to be a very different school in a new state of play. It began as a school for workers, providing certification for work in the city's textile mills. As such, the school had a secure place in the industrial bureaucracy of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which required a labor force to perform a set of skills for factory production. For the community, it was the portal through which its citizens passed on, to reinforce the class system in Lowell and fill the occupational rungs which fueled its economy. The school offered some higher education to members of Lowell's small professional class; but primarily, Lowell High School was a working class school and non-durable factory production defined Lowell's place in the economy.

### ***Governance Structure at Lowell High School***

Today one might describe Lowell High School as a fairly closed and control-based environment. A school district bureaucracy had long been in place, along with a system of reporting and accountability institutionalized by the Superintendent, whose direct line of authority extends over the 29 schools in this urban system.<sup>135</sup> Elements of

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<sup>135</sup> The former Superintendent Tsapasaris had overseen district affairs for twenty-five years; with his retirement in August 2000 a system of micro-management would be replaced by a more decentralized and

bureaucracy in place at the district level are replicated at the high school: teachers punch in and punch out, union contracts are assiduously consulted when new demands arise, and lines of authority between administrators and teachers have been demarcated, allocating significant power to the administration in shaping day-to-day activities in the school.

The newly established Administrative Cabinet (Cabinet) is central to Lowell's decision-making and leadership structure. Bill Samaris, the school's instructional and administrative leader is ultimately responsible for the safety and security of the school. He holds the power to expel students, oversees the distribution of professional development funds to departments and he is the organizational link to the District Administration and the Lowell School Committee. The Cabinet is a decision-making body composed of administrators and representatives of the school's stakeholders.<sup>136</sup> The Administrative Cabinet also serves as a clearinghouse for the complex issues involved in running the school; such as issues of administration, security and discipline, instruction, and the MCAS. The intent of Samaris in assembling this Cabinet was to share information and perspectives so as to enhance the decision-making, development and implementation of school-wide efforts to improve Lowell High School. The Cabinet is his 'team', to assist him and at the same time, it is his attempt to develop leadership and improved communication among his ranks.

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transparent leadership style, as practiced by the new incoming Superintendent from the Wellesley public school system, Karla Brooks Baehr. The hiring of a female superintendent from a suburban public school system represented a significant departure from standard practice on the part of the Lowell School Committee, and a district-wide commitment to the improvement of instructional practice.

<sup>136</sup> This includes a community police representative, a parent representative, a teacher representative, UTL president, Director of Sports and Intramural Competition, members of school security, and members of the computer technology team charged with creating an integrated data base for the school.

This effort to create a structure that is based in collective rather than hierarchical decision-making is new to the school, and in retrospect, presaged the call for Systemic Change that would come in the wake of the MCAS reform. In this new venue, Lowell's classroom teachers have only a small formal role in shaping school policy.<sup>137</sup> There is a small *Faculty Council*, comprised of twelve teachers and three administrators (including Assistant Headmaster) which sends a teacher representative to the Administrative Cabinet. This teacher representative brings concerns to the Cabinet. Roxanne Howe, a member of the Council and a teacher of accounting and law in the Business department, describes the types of issues that come before the Faculty Council:

“only a small percentage of teachers participate in any formal arena. Our group serves as a sounding board because all teachers have issues to be addressed. We try to increase communication between the faculty and administration. The kinds of issues brought to our attention include air quality in the school, the temperature of rooms, enforcement issues, inconsistencies between houses and inconsistencies in disciplinary penalties.”<sup>138</sup>

Teachers also participate in regular meetings called by their department chairperson. Department chairpersons participate in the Cabinet. In addition, Department heads meet together on a weekly basis, in meetings that are led by the Director of Curriculum. The meeting of Department Heads has its place in the hierarchical chain of governance at Lowell High School. The Administration's policies and concerns relayed to the Department Heads via the Director of Curriculum. This

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<sup>137</sup> Unlike Lincoln-Sudbury High School where the governance structure was teacher-led and teacher-driven, policies at Lowell High School are made by the school administrators and follow the successive posts in the chain of command. In some cases, as illustrated above, the chain of command moves from the District level to the Cabinet, via the Headmaster, Samaris, and from Cabinet to the department heads via the Coordinator of Curriculum, Wendy Jack. The lines of policy-making can also extend in the other direction, from Cabinet to the Superintendent, as in the case where the Superintendent incorporated several of the high school's goals as part of the Five Year Plan for the district.

<sup>138</sup> Interview, Roxanne Howe, 12.7.00



allows the Headmaster and Cabinet to coordinate administrative and academic activities across departments. There is opportunity for departmental concerns to be aired. In the twelve Department Head meetings I attended, I did not observe challenges to school policy. There was a general compliance with policy, and a routinization to the work which all department heads shared in their reporting to the school and district leadership.

In the hierarchical structure of governance at Lowell High School, the Headmaster, along with the three administrative deputies, Director of Curriculum, the Coordinator of Testing and the Director of Guidance set policy. Unlike Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, the Guidance Department chooses to be directly involved with the school's restructuring, and instructional goals. The Cabinet has input, and is instrumental in implementation of policy.

The Department Head meetings serve as a conduit between the administration and the teachers. The Faculty Council, although it does not appear to take on instructional issues, does have a teacher representative to the Cabinet. Major policy decisions are subject to the approval of the District Superintendent. The Lowell School District facilitates communication in the district through its Leadership Academy. Administrators from the twenty-nine schools attend these District Leadership meetings, which cover budgetary, instructional and administrative issues for the district and individual schools.

In general, the nature of Lowell teachers' involvement is the typical involvement of high school teachers, either as a member of a department, partaking in paid

professional development activities, or as an advisor/coach to student club activities and varsity and intramural sports. However, there is evidence that teachers are assuming a more prominent role in the school, at least in the implementation of *Systemic Change*. While teachers have only one representative to the Cabinet, the Cabinet has spun off a committee structure which has invited the participation and leadership of teachers in the restructuring of Lowell High School. A growing number of teachers are participating in committees which are concerned with ninth grade instruction, student retention and student placement in course levels. This participation led to a teacher initiative at Lowell High School, to design a 'Fifth Course' to assist failing students, in courses and on the MCAS exam. Teachers are submitting their own curriculum design and lobbying for its inclusion in the school schedule. This may be the first initiative by teachers which has also found support within the Administration.

### ***Organizational Structure at Lowell High School***

Today, the original class of 47 students in 1831 housed in one small building has grown to 3,900 students, with a student body whose ethnicity now extends to countries far beyond the European heritage (roots) of the school's first students. The City's connections to regional labor and immigration flows has delivered a new set of immigrants to Lowell, from south and East Asia, the countries of Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and India. This, along with shifts in the state's economy, has in turn delivered a new set of challenges to the City of Lowell's public school system.

These challenges bear the markings of a working class school in today's society. Every school in this district receives Title I funding, and 70 percent of the students attending Lowell High School qualify for the free lunch program. Income levels of the majority of families in the City of Lowell approach the federal standards of poverty, where the average per capita income is \$29,000. The racial and ethnic make-up of the students is diverse: 44% white, 30.3% Cambodian, 13% Hispanic, 4.3% black, 3% Laotian, 3% Vietnamese, and 2.2% other. The multiplicity of first languages spoken by these students underscores the importance of the Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) at the school, which reports, among its many difficulties, finding teachers and community liaisons who speak Khmer.

The students at Lowell High School are organized into five houses, A-E, for purposes of implementing necessary bureaucratic tasks to smaller groups of students. Houses are managed by housemasters, whose administrative responsibilities include: responding to teachers' creating smaller groups of students and administering disciplinary procedures, tracking attendance which allows the housemasters to track students' attendance and discipline records. Housemasters play an administrative role, responsible for responding to teachers'

With regard to socio-economic class, poverty in Lowell today is somewhat different from the past, due to the high levels of transience.<sup>139</sup> Lowell High School

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<sup>139</sup> The transience of students is an issue that public schools are complaining about, and this is not limited to Massachusetts. With regard to the MCAS, a complaint of administrators is that schools have to disaggregate data by students' length of stay, that is, who should be counted in the scores. The school separates out those who have been in the system for a certain number of years, versus those who have

reports great difficulties keeping track of the in and out-migration of its students, as many 'just leave' the school without warning or notification of future residence.<sup>140</sup> High absentee rates and a routinized daily tardiness among large numbers of students, as well as student involvement in gang activities (which the school successfully monitors and prohibits from school grounds) have impacted upon the organizational structure of the school. There is also some homelessness reported among students, which social service providers within the school are called upon to address.

### ***Educational Programs at Lowell High School***

Lowell High School's administrators have worked to develop educational programs which meet the diverse learning styles and backgrounds of the student population. Lowell High School continues to reflect the socio-economic variance that has historically characterized the City of Lowell. A small professional and middle class, still the backbone of the city's civic community continues to send its children to Lowell High School. Many of these students attend the '*Latin Lyceum*' program within the high school, established in 1999, which offers courses at the high honors level. This Lyceum cluster program was advocated for by parents, typically from the middle and upper class neighborhoods of the City of Lowell. Students must pass an entrance exam to participate. There is a Dual Enrollment Program offered with the University of Massachusetts/Lowell and Middlesex Community College for students that allows qualified high school students to take college courses and receive course credit. There are other such

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transferred in that year. While the school computes two different scores based upon this data, the state computes scores on the basis of the total population, regardless of tenure. Schools find themselves responsible for the scores of current transfers in.

arrangements in place with nearby, two year community colleges for students interested in occupational training programs. Efforts to create small learning communities within Lowell High School can be seen in the Academies program, designed for junior and senior students interested in careers such as communications, management and finance, engineering, technology, health and bioscience and the fine arts. All of these programs, combined, could be seen as a version of tracking of students, by attempting to reach students with different 'intelligences' and identifying niches in the economy for high school graduates.<sup>141</sup>

### ***The United Teachers of Lowell (UTL)***

As would be expected in a bureaucratic structure, there is a need for a centralized organization, such as a union, to represent its workers within another larger, more centralized, bureaucratic system. In such a case as this, the union offers some protections, as noted above. However, it also creates organizational inflexibility with which both school and teachers must contend. For example, Samaris discusses the potential organizational changes under consideration, noting that such changes often need to meet union approval before they can be implemented. He reflects upon this rigidity both as a part of the reality with which he must deal, and at the same time, as serving some function for teachers who are hard-pressed on many fronts; as pressures mount without recompense, teachers begin to count the minutes of overtime that accumulate

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<sup>141</sup> See Tom Loveless, (1999) *The Tracking Wars: State Reform Meets School Policy*, Washington DC: The Brookings Institute for a full discussion of the pros and cons of tracking.

beyond what is contracted.<sup>142</sup> Size, bureaucracy and a lack of sufficient resources can conspire against change that might be in the interest of all parties.

The UTL has taken a public position in opposition of the MCAS. This is the only openly oppositional position taken by any affiliate of Lowell High School. In explaining its position, the union states in the UTL Newsletter, November, 1999,

“Over the past six years of Education Reform, State aid to Lowell Public Schools has just about doubled....Regardless of the improved fiscal situation, the effects of decades of benign neglect of Lowell’s schools, by the city and the state, cannot and should not be diminished. ....All things being equal (UTL emphasis) MCAS can be a valuable diagnostic tool to those who would compare test scores from district to district, or school to school, in identifying promising practices and effective policies. However, in light of the fact that all things are not equal such comparisons would appeal to the simple-minded or those whose agenda is condemnation of public education. Even more ridiculous would be the assumption that poor test scores are the result of a diminished effort by teachers and paraprofessionals in those districts. Such a comparison is akin to condemnation of the skilled trauma surgeon as opposed to that of the cosmetic surgeon based solely on mortality rate. Without consideration of the degree of difficulty a true comparison should not and cannot be made.

The fact that our schools are as good as they are, is clear testimony to the continued efforts made by teachers and paraprofessionals day in and day out educating a diverse, challenging but rewarding population. And the fact that our students come to accept and appreciate the complexities, challenges and rewards of urban life, and the diverse ethnic backgrounds of other students with whom they are educated, adds another component to our students’ educational experience never assessed by MCAS or other standardized tests.”<sup>143</sup>

The argument put forward by the UTL is a fairness and equity argument, and Georges challenges the logic of a reform that contends that a high stakes test can fairly

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<sup>142</sup> Interview, Headmaster Bill Samaris, 6.01.01

<sup>143</sup> Georges, Paul, UTL Newsletter, United Teachers and Paraprofessionals of Lowell, MFT/AFT/AFL-CIO, Local 495, Volume 15, No.3, November, 1999

assess students when the *opportunity to learn* is not the same for Lowell students as it is for students in wealthier districts. He also makes a lesser point which has not been addressed in the public debate about MCAS. Georges refers to the potential usefulness of a diagnostic test to identify promising practices and effective policies. What the DOE has offered as the salve for student achievement is the remediation of students before and after school, along with in-school tutoring. However, there are real limits to this approach; at Lowell High School the remediation programs reach a very small percentage of students in need.

### ***Lowell High School's Educational Philosophy and Mission***

Lowell High School's sense of mission, its sense of itself as an organization, and its philosophy of education is a work-in-progress. The articulation of its mission and philosophy is core to the sense-making process underway at Lowell High School, and the Lowell School District, in the wake of MCAS. I came to understand the high school as an organization that was 'learning by doing' in its sense-making of the MCAS reform.

The *Lowell High School Course Catalogue* offers the following mission statement:

“Lowell High School challenges our students with sustaining knowledge, skills, and values and inspires them to compete and succeed in a multi-cultural society and global economy.....We strive to create a secure, cooperative and comfortable learning environment where the emphasis is on mutual respect, curiosity, risk-taking, the sharing of ideas, an appreciation of the learning process and better living through education.”  
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<sup>144</sup> *Lowell High School Course of Studies Catalogue*, p. 1, Lowell High School, 1999-2000

This general statement is followed by four points which speak to the school's practices of pedagogy, its instructional efforts to meet the diverse learning styles of its student body, and an affirmation of high expectations for students.<sup>145</sup> However, the mission statement lacks substance in its descriptions of - 'best practice', or 'teaching strategies', in its reference to 'traditional and contemporary instruction', and in its final point which frames the responsibility for student accomplishment as a shared responsibility undertaken by school, community, parents and school committee. It does speak directly to the racial and ethnic diversity of its student body, and the pride the school does take in the cooperative atmosphere among students in the school. Beyond the school's borders there is a recognition of a globally competitive economy for which the school must prepare its students, and to which the City of Lowell, and its public schools have been struggling to find sustainable ties.

The influence of the MCAS reform and the environment of standards and accountability is addressed separately. There is a half page devoted to the Education Reform Act of 1993 and an endorsement of the State's curriculum frameworks:

"Lowell High School has embraced the education reforms that allow us to teach and learn in a dynamic school community, and identifies its curriculum with the eight principles of learning which guide the curriculum frameworks.... the entire Lowell High School faculty

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<sup>145</sup> The points as they appear in the Lowell High School Mission Statement:

1. We are a school community that values a curriculum that incorporates the best practices of both traditional and contemporary instruction.
2. We are a school community that creates and supports an atmosphere in which both students and staff set and follow high expectations for achievement.
3. We strive to meet the needs of a variety of learning styles by expanding our repertoire of teaching strategies to reflect an awareness of current educational research.
4. We believe that student accomplishment is a shared responsibility of students, parents, staff, administration, school committee and community.



continues to review, study and integrate the curriculum Frameworks into the courses and programs that are offered at Lowell High School.”<sup>146</sup>

My observations at Lowell High School indicate that the school’s mission and philosophy is evolving, due to the confluence of the MCAS reform, a new District Superintendent, a new administrative team to support the headmaster at the high school, and perhaps most importantly, the school’s organizational maturity and readiness to confront deep-seated, structural problems. These formal statements of the school’s mission and philosophy seem to capture a point in time, reflecting a comment made by an English teacher, that “the MCAS shook us out of our complacency. Now, it is all that we hear about, MCAS, MCAS.”<sup>147</sup>

The recent policy-making processes of Lowell High School and the District administration complete the picture of school’s mission and philosophy. Headmaster Bill Samaris and the Cabinet, in academic years 1999 and 2000, identified several overarching goals for the school. The *change from a discipline and control focus to instruction*, and *the creation of smaller learning communities within the school* are the larger contextual goals. To bring this about, Lowell High School’s Administration calls for a ‘Systemic Change’ stratagem within the school. Ten major program areas are identified as in need of restructuring, with the emphasis on student achievement and MCAS preparation.

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<sup>146</sup> Lowell High School Course of Studies Catalogue, p.5, Lowell High School, 1999-2000

<sup>147</sup> Interview, English Teacher, Brian McDonough, 4. 2000

These goals were in alignment with, and were included as a part of the Superintendent's proposed *Five Year Goals and Indicators for the Lowell Public Schools* approved by the Lowell School Committee in November, 2000. The six district-wide goals developed to set the educational and organizational direction for all schools the district included the issue areas of : (1) High Level Student Learning; (2) Safe and Respectful Climate; (3) Excellence in Teaching; (4) Adequate Resources and Equitable Facilities; (5) Strong Community and Family Partnerships and (6) Collaborative Goal Setting, Planning and Problem-Solving.

The district has adopted a data driven approach to student achievement, assigning to each of these six general goals an indices of measurement.<sup>148</sup> For example, the goal of Higher Level Student Learning is described as “A challenging educational environment in each school that supports ALL students to learn high level skills, concepts and habits needed for successful life-long learning in a democratic, multi-cultural world.” There are four measures of this, which are to be achieved in a five year period, three of which are relevant to the high school: (1) Within five years of entering and regularly attending Lowell Public Schools, 90% of English Language Learners achieve proficiency in cognitive academic level English; (2) 90% of students – by language, race, gender, special need and level – improve their MCAS performance sub-category scores within two years in language arts and mathematics *or* demonstrate comparable growth using common district-wide assessment instruments; (3) There is a 50% reduction in the

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<sup>148</sup> MCAS was the driving force behind this approach. It was viewed by the Superintendent and other District Administrators as essential in a standards and accountability environment.

freshman failure rate.<sup>149</sup> This accountability by numbers drives the district to restructure and equip its central offices with the technical and organizational capacities for this extensive and large scale effort of record-keeping, for purposes of accountability and assessment.

### ***The School's Response to the MCAS Reform***

These initiatives tell only a part of the story and serve as a backdrop to the morale of the school. Even as innovation and an authentic, creative expression of teachers emerges, the overwhelming inverse ratio of need-to-resources fuels the bureaucratic and administrative functions of the school which are deeply and historically patterned. There is need for control, and an instinct for self-preservation, which could be referred to as a 'chip' carried on the shoulder of poor urban schools as protective guard against perceived injustice. These attitudes translate into patterns of organizational behaviors and contribute to the school's fundamental sense of itself. In a sense, this subtle rumbling is indeed a part of the school's culture, and I discovered that it can be heard in the subtext of the conversation about systemic change, which, despite newly conceptualized efforts to restructure the school, serve to push back against change and reinforce its basic bureaucratic design.

There is a dynamic at play at Lowell High School which leads to what I have named a low 'organizational self esteem', operating as subtext within the school's organizational culture. Lowell High School's self image is in large part influenced by

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<sup>149</sup> Lowell High School Leadership Academy, *Five Year Goals and Indicators*, 2001-2005, Adopted by the Lowell School Committee on November 8, 2000

how the school is seen by others. Teachers perceive that Lowell High School is viewed by the public as an urban, poor, underperforming school, despite its ranking by Newsweek (1999) as a top urban school. This low self image is disempowering, even as teachers understand the overwhelming challenges they face are not shared by their suburban counterparts. Among these challenges are low MCAS scores, urban poverty and educating students who have been marginalized by poverty and poor schooling.

This self perception, that they are weak vis-a-vis the state, is reinforced by Lowell High School's MCAS scores which have been several percentage points behind the state average in most categories. I include 'low MCAS scores' as an aspect of their self-identity, and how teachers and administrators believe they are perceived. At the time I began my research, in 1999, there had been two years of MCAS test scores published. Scores had already taken on a public function of *branding* a school, in a vein similar to corporate branding, which influences its public image and reputation, and thereby its self image.<sup>150</sup> Test scores also ranked schools in a hierarchy from 'low performing' to 'high performing'. Despite teachers' view that a comparison of schools such as Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School is akin to a comparison of apples and oranges, this 'branding' became yet another obstacle to be overcome.<sup>151</sup> Public image, inadequate resources, low class position and the remedial needs of their student body act in ways whereby each element reinforces the other. Low organizational self esteem is the result of this dynamic interplay of forces.

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<sup>150</sup> Schultz, Majken, Hatch, Mary Jo, and Larsen, Mogens Holten (2000) *The Expressive Organization, Linking Identity, Reputation and the Corporate Brand*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

<sup>151</sup> Interviews with teachers, across disciplines reflected this generally held view. Not only was the MCAS an unfair test for its students, it was also unfair to the school to assess its progress relative to wealthier, high achieving suburban schools. Interviews, (McDonough, Conrad, O'Neil)

### ***Sense Making at Lowell High School***

At the time the MCAS became state law in 1993, Lowell High School was primed to address problems of curriculum alignment and academic achievement. Lowell's school administrators had identified *student retention, a poorly aligned curriculum and high failure rates* high among its priority issues. It is understandable, then, that a Lowell school district administrator described the MCAS reform as 'synergistic' with the district's wish for fundamental change and renewed focus upon classroom instruction and academic achievement.

Unlike Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School the process of *discernment* at Lowell High School takes place within the Administrative Cabinet and other governance meetings, and not as part of a school-wide discourse. A discernment of how to make sense of the MCAS at Lowell High School is really a set of decisions and planning initiatives proposed by leadership in order to best meet what they perceive to be the needs of the school, while following the mandate of the MCAS reform. From the beginning it was a discernment which took place within a frame of compliance. Whether or not to adhere to the MCAS reform, the state approved standards and testing regimen was never questioned at the level of District Leadership or Lowell High School's leadership. Within this frame of compliance, however, a sense making took place which sought to meet the needs of Lowell High School's students while maintaining legitimacy as a school deserving of state funds and state approval.

I name the strategy that emerges from this sense making process '*Compliant Engagement*', to capture the school administrators' efforts to make fundamental changes in the school while at the same time meet the mandates of the MCAS reform. The Lowell School District was poised to restructure and align its curriculum at the time MCAS was passed. Having fulfilled a series of federal and state mandates in the 1970's and 1980's, including the submission of a district-wide desegregation plan, the district's focus could now turn to curriculum alignment and instruction.<sup>152</sup> The MCAS frameworks and test would prove to have a direct influence upon classroom instruction and pedagogy at Lowell High School. While the district and school administrators had been occupied with federally imposed regulations, Lowell High School teachers had been confronted with dramatic changes in the ethnic and racial make up of the school's student body. Teachers had made adjustments in the classroom to accommodate to the language barriers, special needs (SPED students) and more generally the lower levels of English and math competencies prevalent among second language students. That the MCAS introduced state-approved standards where there was no longer a consensus within the school explains, in part, the influence of the MCAS on the pedagogy of Lowell High School.

This influence is further explained by the reform's allocation of funds to poor schools, which in Lowell's case totaled nine million dollars over a period of seven years,

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<sup>152</sup> The legally mandated submission of a desegregation plan enabled the district to initiate two major policy initiatives. The first, which was the successful submission to the State of a financial plan for the new construction and rehabilitation of Lowell's nine middle schools was attached to the desegregation plan, and approved. The second initiative, allowed the district to begin efforts to train teachers in to teach classes which would include 2<sup>nd</sup> language students, and to begin recruitment for personnel who speak Khmer and Vietnamese. This long term initiative became folded in to the instructional strategies engendered by the MCAS reform.

and the state's power to hold a school in receivership for under-performance, as provided for in the Education Reform Act, 1993. These factors, both carrot and stick, combined with Lowell High School's strength in bureaucratic administration and its need to improve its instructional capacities led to the adoption of instructional programs which are illustrative, again, of a '*compliant engagement*' strategy at the school.

*'Engagement'* refers not only to compliance strategies but to patches of resistance that I discovered in Lowell's organizational strategies. These patches of resistance find expression in the attitudes of teachers and administrators. For example, there is a widely held criticism of the MCAS test which has identified test questions as showing cultural bias and inconsistency. This serious charge which is articulated by administrators and teachers never finds collective expression within the school, either as a formal position or in defiant acts related to administering or preparing for the test. Despite this variability in attitude, all Lowell's teachers and administrators commit to enacting the MCAS reform, and several staff refer to it as a 'driving force' to make systemic change. For some administrators this has a punitive ring, for others it is a motivational call.

One direct consequence of these varied activities upon the school is a sense of demoralization, expressed by teachers *and* students. Despite their focused efforts in the first years of the reform MCAS scores did not rise. The view of the MCAS reform as punitive toward the school, and ultimately a 'set-up for failure' is expressed by many teachers in Lowell High School who are disturbed by expectations which assume a level

playing field when one does not exist between the low income urban schools and the suburban schools.

‘Opportunity to Learn’ standards emerged as a controversial issue at the federal level of government. This issue, which remained unresolved by Congress and thereby absent from federal legislation such as Goals 2000, was passed along to the states and ultimately to the public schools where it takes on a slightly different meaning ‘on the ground.’<sup>153</sup> Absent true ‘opportunity to learn’ standards for Lowell High School, the resource gap between Lowell High School and wealthier, suburban schools remains wide (despite the additional funds provided by the state’s Education Reform Act.) Students, teachers and administrators alike regard the MCAS as punitive. They view the time frame for achieving better scores as unrealistic, meant to punish and humiliate the urban schools and take away their funding.

For example, Robert Murphy, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade physics teacher raises the sensitive issue of ‘opportunity to learn’ standards in the course of a discussion about the school’s responses to the MCAS reform. He touches directly upon the need for an institutional arrangement within the school that can provide instruction to students who require remedial courses so as to move into 9<sup>th</sup> grade and 10<sup>th</sup> grade level coursework. The MCAS reform and test leaves this very basic issue of remediation unaddressed. Lowell High School has just made the decision to eliminate its business level track of classes.

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<sup>153</sup> A full discussion of these partisan politics and the lack of a resolution around ‘opportunity to learn’ standards is discussed in Chapter Three, Political Background to the MCAS Reform.



As he reflects upon this, he presents the case of many hundreds of students at Lowell High School,

“Imagine a kid does not pass MCAS, no diploma.... lawsuits.... how *can* he pass if he is in the business level. The party line is there is no difference in course content, it is the way it is being taught... Opportunity to learn *is* in question.... The higher level test puts kids on a level playing field and they are not yet there – at this higher level playing field.”<sup>154</sup>

### *The Call for Systemic Change*

As Lowell High School undertakes an ambitious program of “*Systemic Change*’ within the school, two central strategies are employed by the school’s administrators as the means to improve academic achievement and MCAS test scores. The ambitious goal of ‘restructuring’ will take the form of several working committees led by administrators, each assigned the task of finding *organizational* solutions to problems related to achievement – which include student retention, student placement, student discipline, curriculum alignment and instructional practice. The second strategy, of ‘*testing and diagnosis*’ bears surprising similarity to the state’s approach to improving performance, as measured by MCAS test scores. These strategies, together, are intended to build an *MCAS culture* at Lowell High School. Organizational solutions, which are deeply familiar to this school, effectively drive Lowell High School’s restructuring effort. The school’s second strategy, *testing and diagnosis*, finds its home in this new bureaucracy of working committees.

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<sup>154</sup> In my interviews I did not find this party line. Certainly in math and English there were serious differences between honors and business level classes in terms of textbooks use, assignments and content to be covered. Teachers reported fewer differences between college and honors level, stating that in many cases it was the quality and consistency of student work that made the difference. However, in this latter case, the evidence is more variable and anecdotal.

Working committees, led by school administrators, were formed to address several of the Lowell High School's goals concurrently. The committees cover several issues, ranging from the integration of SPED and bilingual students into mainstream classrooms, to a review of school credits required for graduation, and the re-issue of an updated Lowell High School course catalogue. Lowell High School's central strategy, the placement of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students in the appropriate course level, i.e. honors, college I or college II was intended to curb the high drop out and failure rates of ninth grade students, as well as focus resources on this class in preparation for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade MCAS test.

The working committees formed to support this focus upon the 9<sup>th</sup> grade class include: (1) improved co-ordination with 8<sup>th</sup> grade middle schools for placement of incoming 9<sup>th</sup> grade students. (2) a new 9<sup>th</sup> grade cluster structure<sup>155</sup> (3) reconsideration and upgrade of the business level (vocational track) courses; and (4) *Quic testing*, assessment and placement of incoming ninth graders;<sup>156</sup> The strategy of *testing and diagnosis*, which is colloquially referred to as the '*Quic test*' is *both* an organizational and a testing and diagnosis strategy. The *Quic test* becomes pivotal to achieving

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<sup>155</sup> Restructuring focused upon the ninth grade, (comprising between 1000-1200 students) which is presently organized into nine cluster groups. 'Clusters' are based on the middle school model of a 'school within a school', offering students a small, cohesive group to be a part of, concomitant with slightly smaller class sizes and a closer relationship between teacher and student. Clusters are interdisciplinary teams of four teachers in the <sup>156</sup>. These are some of the organizational goals which relate most directly to the MCAS reform. Other goals included the mainstreaming of special education students, publication of a revised, updated course catalogue, institute higher credit requirements to graduate, reduce drop out rate, improve literacy skills and MCAS test scores and improve and administer the course selection process earlier in the academic year. In the past, teachers did not know what courses they would be teaching until they returned to school in late August. The Administration wished to inform teachers of their class assignments at the end of the current school year so they could prepare over the summer.

systemic change within the school, which necessitates changes to the school's bureaucratic structure and classroom instruction.

In the view of Lowell High School's administration, the Quic test is the tool which will facilitate the more accurate placement of eight grade students in appropriate course levels. In this scenario, it is likely that changes will be required in the cluster groups, leading to a restructuring of the clusters, and consequently, a shift in classroom instructional strategies. It is hoped that the Quic test will: (1) reduce the number of student who change course levels mid-semester; (2) more accurately place transient students who enter Lowell High School at various times throughout the school year; and (3) that classes will be representative of students whose skills reflect the course level they are in. It is also hoped that these factors will provide teachers with fewer disruptions, and the advantage of teaching to students with a more homogeneous level of skill development. Finally, this diagnostic screening and placement strategy is regarded as a tool to decrease the drop out rate of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students. These hoped for changes in 9<sup>th</sup> core disciplines of math, science, English and social studies, who have common planning time and are responsible for a cluster of approximately one hundred students. grade instruction are therefore fundamental to the Lowell High School's efforts to achieve '*Systemic Change*'.

This strategy of '*testing and diagnosis*' at Lowell High School introduces a set of tests for diagnostic purposes, to be given to incoming freshman in the first week of school. The most important test in this battery of assessment is the *Quic test*, a well-

known test published by the Scholastic Testing Service (STS) which measures the grade-level competencies of students using multiple choice questions.<sup>157</sup> The *Quic test* is easy to administer in the classroom, requires just a half hour to complete and is available in math and English. The other two assessment instruments, a learning styles questionnaire, CAPSOL (which would not, in the end, be implemented) and the MCAS ELA test essay question from the prior year were intended to round out the *school's* assessment of their students.<sup>158</sup> The Math department, which administered its own diagnostic test at the beginning of the semester, insisted on continuing this practice. It was a potential fourth source of information.

Within this last strategy, Lowell's leadership foresaw a value added to teachers. In addition to bringing teachers on board, the administration saw the *Quic test* returning to teachers some power over the evaluation of their students. This use of standardized testing, in fact, comes to foreshadow the types of instructional programs adopted by the school in response to the MCAS reform.

Lowell High School essentially adopted the state's approach to school reform and instituted a *second* set of tests. In response to these different problems, Lowell High School chooses as its pivotal strategy *to test and classify* its students. This additional encroachment upon classroom instruction time was justified as necessary, in order to

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<sup>157</sup> Quic stands for (1) quick, 30 minutes each for Math and Communicative Arts (English); (2) uncomplicated - easy and convenient to use; (3) immediate results - timely, accessible information; and (4) competency-based interpretation - focus is on representative skill areas at consecutive grade levels.

<sup>158</sup> English and history teachers were instructed to correct these essays, each providing comments. However, teachers were instructed "to grade as they did last year, and score the writing samples according to the MCAS rubrics." English Department Chair Wendy Jack, *In-Service Session I, Professional Development*, August 29, 2000

better place students in appropriate course levels.<sup>159</sup> On the surface, it appears that the school continues to conform with the state's approach to assessment and to *comply* with the MCAS reform.

However, despite such appearances, there is a well-disguised element of resistance lurking in this strategy. It was in this way, (fighting fire with fire, or test with test) that Lowell High School tried to reclaim ownership over the assessment of its students. The *Quic test* strategy was at the same time a defensive measure, which would allow the school to point to the levels of remediation required by their incoming students, in the case that consistently failing MCAS scores placed Lowell High School in state receivership.

Still, the parallel to the MCAS system of assessment is apparent in the comments of the Testing and Curriculum Specialist, who envisions the *Quic test* as the cornerstone to a new system of data collection which links assessment to instruction,

“ The *Quic test* can become a useful source of information in the creation of a more centralized and efficient data collection system, and part of a structured, systematic and on-going effort to collect data on students. This is meant to give you support to help failing students.”<sup>160</sup>

A more accurate description of what takes place is that the Lowell school district leadership re-organizes its central offices to process MCAS test data from the state, envisioning a data driven model (as do DOE policy makers) which will

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<sup>159</sup> This refers to Advanced, College I and College II Level tracks.

<sup>160</sup> Comments of Carolyn Richards at the In-Service Cluster Meeting, Lowell High School

drive classroom instruction.<sup>161</sup> However, the District Superintendent does accept the *Quic test* as an additional source of diagnostic information, which is part of a larger district strategy to delimit the MCAS score as the sole metric of assessment.<sup>162</sup>

The Superintendent also approves the *Quic test* as a 9<sup>th</sup> grade placement strategy and longer term instructional strategy for increasing the MCAS *pass rates* of 10th grade students.<sup>163</sup> The *Quic test*, then, is central to three objectives at Lowell High School: diagnosis, restructuring and teacher empowerment. In its implementation, however, standardized testing again becomes a costly distraction to the delivery of needed remedial instruction and the concomitant organizational changes this would require.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> The Associate Commissioner of Testing at the Massachusetts Department of Education sees a “world of evaluation and data in education. That is, data will inform instruction and identify the problems....before there were philosophical debates such as whole language versus phonics.....now we will have better data to support arguments.....the benchmarking for common information will make education like industry, more about measurements along the way to a continuous improvement process.”

<sup>162</sup> The district also adopts a strategy whereby they too select another set of tests to administer to students. The Terra Nova standardized test and the Iowa tests will be administered to all students. This, too, is a defensive measure in the case of consistently failing MCAS scores and the possible take-over by the state. Lowell students have scored within acceptable ranges on these mainstream, standardized tests. Nicholas Lemann, *The Big Test* provides background to understanding testing as an institution in this society, making its influence understandable, even in this context.

<sup>163</sup> The eventual goal is to relocate *Quic testing* from the high school to the eighteen middle schools in the Lowell school district, so that the *Quic test* data can be used to inform course selection decisions prior to entering high school, making student placement more efficacious.

<sup>164</sup> This is my observation. It is interesting that Lowell High School follows a strategy similar to that of the State. The math department already gives a diagnostic test to their students, and English now gives three MCAS essay question as a diagnostic tool. The administration of the *Quic test* requires classroom time, teachers’ time to grade additional tests and the administration’s time to organize the testing to this large number of students. The danger is that the school administration become distracted by the organization of testing – which requires a capacity for bureaucratic management which has, historically, been a strength of the high school. This activity takes time away from the training of teachers in teaching basic literacy skills, as training in Links (writing) and reading literacy would offer. The efforts to train teachers were suspended, as the resources to continue training and follow up with teachers were not available. The school’s focus upon testing preparations, both the *Quic test* and the MCAS test, absorbed the majority of available resources in terms of funds and personnel. Moving the administration of the *Quic test* to the eighth grade, to inform placement for high school would eliminate this problem.

The *Quic test* was central to the school's restructuring *and* diagnostic testing strategies undertaken to bring about 'Systemic Change' within the school. It was also intended as a tool to directly involve teachers in the process of systemic change engendered by the MCAS reform. In speaking to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade cluster teachers, the Testing and Assessment Specialist Carolyn Richards introduced the *Quic test* to teachers, framing it as a victory for Lowell High School in its effort to *create change*

"This is a real victory..... We all feel discouraged, we all want to change things. Change is in the air. We just cannot get everything when we want it.... *The value is in having accurate information about the student.* And our intent, in studying the MCAS essay assignment and the *Quic test* is to create approaches within the department to address common weaknesses."<sup>165</sup>

The school's leadership elaborated on the role of the *Quic test*, intended to improve the placement of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students and thereby, provide students with the level of instruction they need. Teachers seemed skeptical of this new strategy and questioned its far-reaching remedial effects. Their comments implied that such efforts were far removed from the daily realities which they confront in the classroom. One teacher reported,

"I had gone back to look at a student's 8<sup>th</sup> grade record. He was flunking my algebra class, and his record indicated that he had no preparation for algebra. The students here are desperate for pre-algebra classes."<sup>166</sup>

While acknowledging the widespread mis-placement of students into inappropriate classes, teachers were asserting that an equally pressing issue was the need for pre-algebra classes in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The leadership responded with a single statement

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<sup>165</sup> Comment, Carolyn Richards at the In-Service Cluster Meeting, Lowell High School

<sup>166</sup> Ninth grade cluster math teacher, In-Service Cluster Meeting, August 25, 2000

which placed responsibility for this problem elsewhere, “This is a departmental issue; issues of instruction reside in the department,” a dark foreshadowing of the structural issues that would prove insurmountable, at least in the short run. Teachers signaled their discontent, and remarked that the need for pre-algebra math classes was a longstanding issue. In the course of meetings on the *Quic test*, teachers would consistently raise this issue. The tension introduced above, between allocating resources for testing versus the resolution of classroom issues was raised by the cluster teachers. A 9<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher would later speak vehemently about this problem,

“I know what they don’t know, I know what they need to be taught. ...I taught for 19 years at eighth grade. I taught pre-algebra. The kids that had this course and go on to algebra do fine. There were also kids in 8<sup>th</sup> grade math who were not ready for pre-algebra then. Well, these students need a pre-algebra class. There is a flow to this and there is a *hole in the flow*.”<sup>167</sup>

Teachers, referring back to their classroom experience, continued to question the efficacy of this *Quic test* placement strategy. “If we determine a kid is misplaced, what then?”<sup>168</sup> Wendy Jack, Director of Curriculum responded honestly, saying that in fact they anticipate little change. Efforts to move honors students down to the college level are often met by parents’ objections, as many parents want their children placed at the higher course levels despite the student’s lack of motivation or skill. A less common occurrence is a parent’s demand to place his or her child “where the white kids are.”<sup>169</sup> While students appear to transcend racial and ethnic differences, evidenced in the cross-

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<sup>167</sup> Ninth grade cluster math teacher comment, Bette McSwiggin, In-Service Cluster Meeting, August 25, 2000

<sup>168</sup> Several teachers at the August meeting raised this issue.

<sup>169</sup> This request made by a parent in a phone call to the Head of the Guidance Department was raised by Guidance at this meeting. Comment, Raquel Bauman, 8.25.00



cultural socializing in the high school, race is an issue for many of the parents. There are a significant number of parents who associate the lower curriculum tracks with racial and ethnic minorities. Parents' control over the placement of their children in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade clusters is a structural constraint which both teachers and administrators must address.

Political constraints, then, are a part of the structural obstacles the school faces in the effort to bring about important organizational change.<sup>170</sup>

“All decisions have political implications. We can talk about revamping the school, placing kids where they need to be but the politics must lend themselves to this. If we moved to eliminate all levels, honors, college I, college II...and group everyone together there will be a public outcry. What if *these* kids bring down *other* kids. At Lowell High there is probably a 10% underclass, with no idea of what to do. The advanced placement kids here can match kids anywhere. But the middle kids, if we bring together business and college kids....we will get white flight.<sup>171</sup>

In this same meeting, the leadership solicited the 9<sup>th</sup> grade cluster teachers to make known their views of the present cluster structure and to prioritize the most serious problems which they confront in the classroom. Teachers were asked to fill out a small index card, with problems on one side of the card and possible solutions on the back.

The teachers identified problems which I have grouped into the following categories:

*Student Placement, Motivation/Homework, Discipline, Cluster Structure and Resources;*

the solutions did not vary much from what was stated in the meeting.

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<sup>170</sup> ‘Political constraints’ refers to the control that parents have in the schools operations and policies. It also refers to the influence of the Lowell School Committee. Parents have access to the school committee, and have influenced school committee policies such as the attendance policy, the creation of the Latin Lyceum and in certain cases, influence over cases of expulsion. In general, the professional class of parents living in Lowell are the most active and exert the most influence. Efforts to involve parents from the ethnic communities are ongoing. Thus far, these ethnic and racial groups have no representation on the Lowell School Committee.

<sup>171</sup> Cluster Teacher Interview, Bob Murphy, physics teacher, 10.5.00

Instructional concerns were related to the management of discipline problems and specifically, the ineffectiveness of the present system in supporting teachers. Teachers wrote that they were struggling with students who acted out in class, where they showed neither the motivation nor the skills required to do the work. Difficulties in motivating students seemed also to trouble teachers, especially the widespread resistance to doing homework. Finally, the very high failure rates in ninth grade were a concern, and tied to absenteeism. This problem of student absences had been discussed and acknowledged in the meeting, as both a serious problem at Lowell High School, and a source of poor grades. Leadership noted that last year the school was carrying many students with more than 60 absences and then offered a realistic perspective on this issue, stating, “If next year we have only 350 students failing, that is progress.”<sup>172</sup>

The district administration’s solution to the attendance problem has proven to be dysfunctional for both teachers and students. The Lowell School Committee following passage of the MCAS reform, imposed a policy upon Lowell High School which disallows a student from course credit if he/she has accrued more than 15 absences. The policy has proven ineffective on three counts. The policy has failed to curb the number of absences, it removes motivation for these students to return to school, since completing a class no longer awards this student with course credits, and it has further complicated the classroom environment faced by teachers, for students who return tend to act out. Public disagreement with the Lowell School Committee is a rare occurrence, however the Headmaster of Lowell High School has publicly stated his opposition to this approach to student retention and improved academic performance.

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<sup>172</sup> Comment, Wendy Jack, Director of Curriculum, In-Service Training, 8.25.00

The direct relationship between achievement and attendance, and the seriousness of this problem has led Lowell High School's administrators to develop new approaches to stemming the tide of student absenteeism. As part of the long term strategy to improve attendance the house-masters will begin using a system called code-a-phone, which calls a student's home with a warning, programmed to notify students who have accrued five absences. The students will be required to make up all assignments to date. A *stricter* attendance policy and strides to implement a better data management system are seen as part of the overall solution.

This invitation to teachers to express themselves (anonymously) had the potential of becoming an ongoing dialogue, and would have been important because it extended to all of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade cluster teachers. It is still valuable, however, as it underscores the multiplicity of problems and challenges at Lowell High School which are the foreground and the background to the work of the school's administrators and classroom teachers.

There was no administrative follow-through to this opening conversation. Instead, teachers' input was limited to their involvement in the working committees, which tended to include only the most pro-active teachers. The grading of *Quic tests* proved to be laborious for both teachers and administrators, again taking teachers' time from class preparation. When scheduling the next meeting, teachers' resistance to this task began to surface. While one teacher said, "oh, let's meet next week", another said,

“there is no way this would be possible. Fifty-eight of these exams to score would take hours and hours, in addition to scoring the MCAS writing sample and regular classwork.”<sup>173</sup>

Teachers asked whether or not they could be paid to grade these exams. “Perhaps schedule a professional development workshop for this purpose, after school. We could grade the exams together.”<sup>174</sup> Wendy Jack answered sympathetically and promised to check with the administration, but advised the teachers to not expect this to take place. “It is most likely that funds for this activity are not available.”<sup>175</sup>

However, the meetings held with the 9<sup>th</sup> grade teachers to evaluate the *Quic test* results in turn, guided the teachers and administrators on the working committee responsible for ‘cluster restructuring’. The *Quic test* findings showed that students often performed at different levels of ability in English and in math.

“If these scores are to be used to place a student in the appropriate cluster, it could not happen as the clusters are organized..... I found, many of the kids showed low comprehension. There were a lot of second language learners. The Math skills were fairly good. The first group of students – they had whole language in the early grades and this did not work. Reading level affects all curriculum. With word problems, there is no comprehension. *Quic* affirmed what we knew intuitively. It is now difficult to mix honors and college levels. *Now, how to use the results to change the system.*”<sup>176</sup> (italics mine)

This pointed to rigidities in the present 9<sup>th</sup> grade cluster structure which is organized around a single course level in math and English. A student is placed as either honors (that is the Lyceum cluster) college I, college II or at the business level track for all 9<sup>th</sup> grade subjects. Student transience placed additional burdens upon the business

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<sup>173</sup> Ninth grade cluster teacher comment, September 19, 2000

<sup>174</sup> Ninth grade cluster teacher comment, September 19, 2000

<sup>175</sup> Comment by Wendy Jack, September 19, 2000

<sup>176</sup> Interview, Cluster 1 Physics Teacher, Bill Murphy, November 9, 2000

level clusters. Students entering school mid-year were often placed in the business level cluster simply because of the timing of their admittance to Lowell High School, late into the school year. This was potentially unfair to both student and teacher, in the former case this may be below the skill level of the student, in the case of the teacher, the addition of a new student late in the school term introduces the need to integrate the student into a class where the learning styles and pace of learning tend to vary.

The findings also showed uneven skills within each discipline. For example, a student may have incorrectly answered questions at the lower grade levels, but scored perfectly on questions that were considered to be grade level, or even into the upper 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade levels. Here again, there is yet another parallel to the MCAS test and the fallibility of standardized test scores.

In evaluating the *Quic test* scores, called the 'GQE score, the grade/quotient level did not always match the students' performance on the test. Teachers were comparing two GQE core results and discovered a paradox - score sheets with 22 and 11 correct answers, respectively, scored the first student at 7<sup>th</sup> grade level and the second student at 9<sup>th</sup> grade level. This could happen because the student answered the majority of questions at the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade level incorrectly. The scoring protocol of the *Quic test* is such that the first wrong answer can preclude correct answers at the higher grade levels. This paradox surfaced several times. According to one teacher, reflecting upon

this information, “The point was raised, that many students performed unevenly, at times well on upper class levels while missing questions at the lower grade levels.”<sup>177</sup>

A teacher spoke to a concern of focusing on the Quic test, understanding it, why they scored what they scored - when we need to focus on remediation, not why this scoring. Another teacher stated that “ she gave her first in-class test one week after administering the Quic Test and it correlated with the low performance on the Quic. The test scores close to what we are seeing in classes. Students are grossly under-performing in the honors level classes. Another teacher spoke to the 2<sup>nd</sup> language learners. “They cannot write but they have intellect. They have the capacity, they should not drop out of honors. Maybe we can partner them with somebody.” Another teacher questions how they can not set them up for failure.<sup>178</sup>

The need for a pre-algebra class was borne out in the *Quic test* scores. Math teachers compared their math diagnostic test with the *Quic test* scores and the results were similar to this college level cluster teacher’s findings,

The ensuing discussion about restructuring the ninth grade underscored the basic problem with Lowell High School’s strategy. The testing and classification of students required a set of institutional arrangements that would accommodate the skill levels and placement of students in courses. The administration had raised the question as to whether the existing 9<sup>th</sup> grade cluster structure was adequate to meet the complexity

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<sup>177</sup> Ninth Grade Teacher Comment, Quic Meeting, October 3, 2000

<sup>178</sup> Ninth grade teacher comments, Quic Meeting, October 3, 2000

of remedial, instructional, and behavioral problems the school faced within its student population.

In this case of grade nine restructuring, one idealized scenario – to eliminate levels completely and respond to the skill needs of the students upon entering high school - did seem to have a short life span. The legitimacy sought by parents, parochial and private schools, School Committee members, and the difficult challenge of replacing the routinized and familiar with the unfamiliar were obstacles that seemed to eliminate this option early on.

Another observation by Headmaster Bill Samaris speaks to the need for more resources than the school would realistically be in a position to gather,

“If there are 70 kids below grade level per cluster we need to have an education plan. We need portfolios, a prescription for each child, we need time and resources. I am critical of MCAS, I do not believe in what the state is doing. I need you to help me to get the resources for you. I want to put us into solid programs.”<sup>179</sup>

Still, some probing questions were raised by teachers, who had been dissatisfied with the cluster structure for some time. When these issues were broken down into difficult questions, the teachers were asking the following questions: (1) How can we make it easier for SPED students to have access to a cluster?; (2) What shall we do about repeating students in a cluster? Do they return to the same cluster?; (3) Can we accommodate different levels in a cluster – business, college, and honors?; (4) Should English be a full year course, the other core subjects (math, science, social studies)

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<sup>179</sup> Comments of Headmaster Bill Samaris, October 3, 2000

remain as semester long courses?; (5) Should we shorten the modules again, and introduce five periods of classes instead of four?; (6) Should each cluster have a mission statement?; (7) Can we make it possible to rotate to a higher level cluster mid-year if a student is ready to do so?; (the experience in Lowell has been that students drop down a level, so this is an interesting, and hopeful question) ; (8) How can we accommodate common planning time for teachers?; (9) How prevent the in-breeding of disruptive behavior by a few students?

There were two models that emerged in a Cabinet Meeting on January 8, 2001. The first had to do primarily with ninth grade repeaters –

“There could be block scheduling for 9th grade repeaters. They would have 90 minutes of English early in the morning, followed by 90 minutes of Algebra I. End lunch, then there is social studies and science in the afternoon. This could involve *250-300 students*. The idea behind this model is to isolate failing students. Now, the failing students are getting English 9 (repeated) *and* an English support class. They are getting 90 minutes of English instruction, but it is not back-back.”

The second was a more general model for the ninth grade clusters:

“If the cluster model goes to five classes (from four) , for first semester English is the extra class, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester math is the extra class. What happens, if a student fails -they become immersed into the program. With the fifth class, an extra support class, we can begin immediately in September to reduce failures for next year. This fits with the MCAS. The students have to take that exam, they have to pass. The Student Success Plan will focus on the student succeeding. The FOCUS needs to be to reduce failures at grade nine”.<sup>180</sup>

The four class option that has been used in the ninth grade clusters allows the teachers some flexibility in scheduling their academic subjects. All clusters allocate

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<sup>180</sup> This was one of twenty Cabinet meetings I observed in the course of my research. The proposals which follow were raised in discussion by members of the Cabinet.



silent reading time for students, and the lighter course load of four courses instead of five has allowed for special projects and common planning time for teachers.

As is illustrated in the second comment, the school is greatly concerned with the high number of failing students and 9<sup>th</sup> grade repeaters. The state's requirement to develop 'Student Success Plans' for each student really requires an institutionalized solution in the case of Lowell High School, for repeaters can number from 250 to 300 students which is the approximate size of Lincoln-Sudbury's 9<sup>th</sup> grade class. What is both surprising and hopeful in this solution to cluster restructuring is the proposal for the *Fifth Course*. This class is a teacher-led, teacher-driven class to support students who need work in basic skills to pass the MCAS test. Forty teachers came forward in response to this idea, and worked with the Director of Curriculum over the summer to prepare these four courses in the four core subject areas – math, English, Social Studies and Science for failing ninth grade students. There was a sense of excitement and purposefulness among these teachers, who have in the past remained isolated, and unwilling or unable to initiate change into Lowell's bureaucratic system.

This movement among teachers to develop a remedial Fifth Course for students would change the present structure of the cluster groups, and did represent teachers' initiative and willingness to step forward in a collective action. However, the dominance of the administration in the making of school policy meant that efforts to create an MCAS culture within the school were primarily hierarchically driven. The administration conceived of several top-down, school wide initiatives (such as the use of MCAS

vocabulary words in classroom lessons) which directed and shifted the focus of classroom pedagogy across all academic departments, effectively imposing an 'MCAS pedagogy' upon classroom instruction. Contrary to prior research in schools, (Meyer and Rowan, 1982, Elmore, 1989) I discovered departments to be 'tightly coupled' in response to the directives of the administration, as all departments implemented the policy. The more positive aspects of this 'tight coupling' resulted in the adoption of 'writing across the curriculum' by all departments, whereby *all* teachers were required to either introduce or increase writing assignments in the classroom.

The successful implementation of such policies was due in great part to the school's hierarchical structure of governance. The chain of command, as described in an earlier section, began with the Headmaster and his Administrative Cabinet, with policies transmitted through Department Head Meetings and the Faculty Council. Meetings were held either weekly or bi-weekly, with the goal of consensus building and the organized implementation across departments. The tight coupling of academic departments at Lowell High School is unusual, and often difficult to achieve in high schools, as each academic department is a distinctive unit with regard to its curriculum, departmental culture, teacher cohort and class schedule. Lowell High School's control and command bureaucracy provided the administration with the tools to effect policy implementation, school-wide. This differs from the strategy of 'Compliant Engagement' adopted by the school, in that 'Compliant Engagement' refers to the administration's sense making of the MCAS reform. As departments and teachers respond to the administration's directives, the strategy of compliant engagement reaches the ground level of operations,

that is, teachers in the classroom. The tight coupling of departments is a means to this end.

In fulfillment of creating an MCAS culture, the MCAS test became mistaken for classroom pedagogy. Instruction at Lowell High School did shift, but fell short of fundamentally changing instruction practices as would be expected in a systemic change model. School-wide initiatives were focused on ‘teaching to the MCAS test’ so students would pass. The administration (Director of Curriculum, Testing Specialist and Department Chairpersons) organized and conducted professional development workshops in MCAS related procedures, such as rubrics, the MCAS test questions and short answer responses. These MCAS procedures, and the prescriptive nature of the MCAS curriculum frameworks became lists which administrators could check off – as indicative of compliance with the MCAS reform and the building of a school-wide MCAS culture. This is an example of ‘loose coupling’, which is the buffering of systemic change while appearing to adhere to a reform’s mandate. There is an appearance of change in this case, as the school staff incorporate training in MCAS rubrics and other MCAS procedures, without the hoped for deeper changes in instruction and pedagogy. Instead, instructional change came to look like rote learning, and rubrics for scoring followed MCAS rubrics and also became part of classroom practice.

A key element of teachers’ professional development in this reform were MCAS workshops on rubrics and workshops which focused upon questions on the MCAS test. Teachers were guided to look for an instructional template, and workshops were held to

transmit this template to teachers. These formulaic approaches to instruction were easier for Lowell High School to adopt, as bureaucratic practice lay deep within its institutional patterning.

The routinization of these MCAS procedures became part of the school's curriculum, hindering instead of promoting a paradigm shift from a transmission model of teaching to one of 'constructivist engagement'. MCAS procedures such as rubrics and open response questions became mistaken for pedagogy. Teachers spent time teaching to the test, drawing heavily upon questions from prior years. For example, ninth grade students were given the prior year's MCAS essay question as a test preparation exercise. Teachers in general used MCAS questions in the classroom in preparation for each of the MCAS tests, more intensively as the test period approached. This often meant leaving aside a year-end lesson plan in order to prepare students and focus attention and raise morale in anticipation of the MCAS test.

Testing strategies were also conveyed to students. Students were instructed to never leave a question blank, for an effort to write an answer would bring them at least a point. The acclimation to the test instructions, questions and strategies for accumulating points was intended to encourage students from giving up, particularly those who in the first test, were too intimidated to try to answer a question they did not know the answer to.

Lowell High School held two MCAS parent/student nights. The second night boasted a better attendance, numbering sixty people, including both parent and their child. This showing represents a very small percentage of the freshman and sophomore classes at Lowell High School, which when combined number close to 2,000 students. Two separate presentations were made to this group to familiarize the group with test taking strategies for the MCAS ELA and the MCAS math tests. The following is a selection from the Lowell math teacher's presentation to the group. The math teacher emphasized test taking strategies, as well as the ways in which Lowell High School is shaping its classes to prepare students for the MCAS test, and finally, the ways in which parents could be supportive to their children. She speaks first directly to the students who are present, and later on to their parents in the following remarks:

"I will introduce some MCAS test taking strategies, the types of questions to expect, and the numbers of opportunities you (students) will have to Pass.

We are here to allay anxiety. You get four chances to pass. MCAS is here to stay, you need to jump the hurdle and get mastery of the material. You need a positive attitude, to engage in your homework and in class. If you take an interest in your high school education you will have a probable return and pass your exam. If parents have the expectation their child will fail, it is more likely that child will close his or her book.

Points missed on the last test were in large part because the students just did not do it. You need to try every single question, go back to it, go slowly, you have the time. Open response are 35% of the questions, geometry is 30%. Do what you do well. There is no penalty for wrong guesses. Math classes are being formed to teach to the MCAS test. With the open response questions you are asked to show your math solutions step by step. There is a scoring guide of 1-4. If you get one or two points on 6 questions that can equal as many as 12 points. The first question is usually the easiest."<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Comments of math teacher at the MCAS Parents Night, Lowell High School, February 12, 2001

The MCAS high stakes test comes to overshadow basic curriculum concerns, as the school is focused on insuring that students pass the MCAS reform and graduate from high school. For low performing students who do not pass the test on the first try, the shadow of the exam follows students through subsequent re-tests, and shapes their course selection and academic program, which is geared toward their passage of the MCAS test. The large transitional population of students at Lowell High School (high numbers of in and out migration) leave teachers little choice but to focus on MCAS test preparation , often sacrificing broader curriculum objectives.

### ***Conclusion***

Administrators and teachers had a common sense making of the *problems* which beset Lowell High School, however in making sense of solutions to these problems each professional group, the administrators and the teachers, responded from their respective, frame of reference. The teachers in many cases disagreed, or at the very least expressed skepticism over the leadership's' solutions to these problems. The administrators, operating from outside of the classroom and from within Lowell High School's bureaucracy proposed a new battery of tests for teachers to grade as their central organizational strategy in response to the MCAS reform. The teachers found it difficult to build a bridge between this solution and their realities 'on the ground'. Although this was not directly articulated by either party, the chasm between the two had to do with the workability of the *testing and diagnosis* strategy. For the testing and classification of students to work, there needed to be a place for these students to go. The 9<sup>th</sup> grade cluster

groups, as presently organized, had not allowed teachers to adequately address the pressing problems of high failure and drop-out rates among 9<sup>th</sup> grade students.

There are many parallels between Lowell High School's strategy to assess its students for purposes of diagnosis and placement, and the state's MCAS high stakes testing strategy. First, in both cases there is the fallibility of test scores in representing the real capabilities of students. Secondly, the claims made upon teachers' time in the administration of the test and subsequent analysis of scores encroach upon teachers class preparation time. Thirdly, the Herculean administrative task of administering a test to 1,000 students, which includes scheduling make up tests, tracking students to make sure they are enrolled in the school, allocating classroom space (which disrupts the class schedule of the balance of Lowell High School students) in fact translates into a major bureaucratic and planning effort. This type of solution is one in which the school and its administrators have great capacity, as they are organized hierarchically and have the bureaucratic capacity and experience to execute such projects.

The parallel between the school and the state is that both institutions in the face of overwhelming conditions elect to test and classify students. The results, in both cases, is that the strategy serves as a distraction from the delivery of real services to the students. The creation of pre-algebra classes, and a large scale remediation solution for its students remains unaddressed. Solutions to the problems of classroom discipline and attendance

get bumped up to the administrative level, and become an administrative problem rather than a social problem.<sup>182</sup>

With regard to the remediation of failing students, the Fifth Course can serve only a limited number of students, just as the Title I after school tutoring program can handle only eighty students per term. While it represents teachers claiming voice and control over their classrooms, the four courses in math, English, science and social studies courses range in their pedagogical approaches, despite the singular goal to boost the basic literacy skills of students. The social studies curriculum that is developed encourages students to use critical thinking skills and analyze original letters written by historical figures. The other remedial fifth course subjects are variable in their use of rote learning approaches and teaching strategies which require higher level skills.

Thus, the predominant organizational response at Lowell High School is to adopt the MCAS test and its frameworks as classroom pedagogy. With their resources focused upon testing strategies, the majority of professional development workshops for teachers during the school year were focused upon MCAS testing, administration and procedures.<sup>183</sup> The pressures upon Lowell High School to increase the percentage of

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<sup>182</sup> The school has worked to computerize the tracking of students, including patterns of tardiness, absences and drop-outs, made more important with the demands of the MCAS reform. Schools are graded with a failure if a student does not show up to take the MCAS test, making it crucial for a school to keep track of who is enrolled at any given time, which students are prone to high absences and even, which students may not arrive at school in time to take the MCAS test.

<sup>183</sup> I attended a Department Head meeting where members of the Lowell School District Administration were invited to explain the use of professional development funds to the Department Heads. If the state allocated professional development funds were not used by the academic departments, they would be lost. The funds allocated for MCAS related professional development had been approved. Department Heads were limited, however, in ways they could use the remaining funds. Only local consultants or teachers from the district could be paid with these funds. Given the remaining time in the school year, departments



students who pass the MCAS test in fact skew the allocation of valuable and scarce resources into teaching to the MCAS test. The high stakes aspect of the MCAS test introduces another layer of complexity to the school. Prior to the MCAS, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade averaged a 30% repeater rate. The potential failures of 10<sup>th</sup> grade students on the MCAS test makes further overcrowding within the school more likely. Classrooms burdened with discouraged students who must repeat a grade becomes highly problematic, feeding the sense of low self esteem which operates within this urban school. An unintentional consequence of this flow of events is the worsening of inequity ('Opportunities to Learn' for students) within the school.

The hopeful call for systemic change issued by Lowell's administration does not lead to a fundamental change in the classroom pedagogy at Lowell High School. MCAS terms, scoring rubrics and test questions are allocated significant time in Lowell's classrooms. The sense making about the reform, then, loses coherence at the point of the conceptualization and implementation of solutions. Within this school environment, despite the stress of scarce resources, and producing environment and in which there is a remarkable degree of morale and unanimity and a common sense making of the problems and the way teachers and administrators make sense of the problem. The administration of the school relies upon its policy tools, and proposes a testing and placement strategy as the remedy for low academic achievement. Problems manifest

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leaned toward workshops in computer software programs relevant to the classroom. Reading literacy was also discussed, but not in place in a consistent manner, as programs such as this require follow up to be effective. A significant use of the professional funds, not solely related to the MCAS, was a professional development seminar for the English Department, offered in conjunction with the University of Massachusetts School of Education/Lowell, in the summer. Teachers looked forward to participating in this program at the end of the school year.

differently for teachers, and they respond with skepticism to the administration's organizational solutions. In addition, these solutions contribute to teachers' workload. Despite this lack of capacity at the top and bottom of the school, teachers work with the administration in the hopes of improving the learning environment for their students.

## Chapter Seven: Measuring Up: Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School and the MCAS Test Scores

### *Introduction*

In this chapter I examine the MCAS test scores as a measure of academic achievement. The Education Reform Act, 1993 introduced performance standards to public education and included language which called for “*multiple forms of student assessment, including high stakes testing*”.<sup>184</sup> Despite these options, Massachusetts followed the course taken by most states, and implemented a performance and accountability system which relies exclusively upon the MCAS *high stakes* test for its assessment of students, schools and competency determination.<sup>185</sup> MCAS test scores take measure of the reform’s success as well. With so much invested in a single testing instrument, it becomes important to consider both its inherent strengths and weaknesses, as well as the social factors which can compromise the seeming simplicity of the MCAS test scores. Furthermore, our growing reliance upon standardized testing technology, and in this case a “one size fits all” exam, deserves serious reflection.

The divergent effects of the MCAS policy upon these two public high schools far exceeded any anticipated by Massachusetts policy-makers and reformers. As stated

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<sup>184</sup> Education Reform Act of 1993 in the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, Selected Massachusetts General Laws for School Committees and School Personnel, including all statutory changes through January 1, 1999. Chapter 69 Section 1D establishes the Educational Goals and Academic Standards for the Public Schools, and includes language which allows for the demonstration of competency using instruments and assessments other than the state’s testing instrument.

<sup>185</sup> Class work and grades are considered in the case of appeals made on behalf of students who did not pass the MCAS test. Teachers submit grades and attendance records on behalf of the student in question, to be evaluated by the Appeals Committee. The student’s performance is assessed in the context of the class grades (average) in his/her math or English class. It has been described as a data driven procedure. Since its creation in 2002, there have been 4,000 appeals and 2,800 appeals granted. (Interview, Jeff Nellhaus, Associate Commissioner of Testing, Massachusetts Department of Education, 10.4.04)

earlier, the assumption of the framers was that of isomorphism across all schools. Policy makers predicted that the MCAS policy would lead to a convergence in curriculum standards, a reduced number of social promotions and result in a higher academic performance of students across all schools. These expectations were tempered with some realism, that is, while unrealistic to expect a high pass rate in the lowest performing schools in the first years of testing, improved performance for all schools was considered an inevitability – this was the promise of high standards and high expectations. I refer to this perspective as ‘the view from above’ , as it isolates the test scores from their institutional home.

In this chapter I pose two questions which explore the efficacy of the reform as measured by the MCAS scores. The first question “*Did students’ skills improve as reflected by the MCAS scores?*” is answered by examining the MCAS scores achieved by Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School, and state-wide scores where they are relevant.

The second question, “*What are the reservations with respect to test scores?*” is answered by discussing the limitations of standardized testing and particular issues of concern that have surrounded the MCAS test. In so doing, I argue that the MCAS test scores are neither a conclusive nor adequate measure for assessing this policy.

This leads us to the final question, “*What were the effects of the MCAS reform as reflected in the experience of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High*

*School?*” which I address in the concluding chapter. The answer to this last question draws from the qualitative findings of chapters five and six, which discuss Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School’s widely divergent responses to the same education policy, the MCAS reform.

**Question One: “Did students’ skills improve as reflected by the MCAS scores?”**

A review of the most recent state wide MCAS scores, years 2003 and 2004, and the MCAS scores for Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School show an improvement in test scores; the more dramatic gains realized in the reduced failing rates in both the English Language Arts and Mathematics. While the scores reflect gains in academic skills, it is fair to say that overall gains fall short of the framers’ expectations.

The MCAS test is structured to assess achievement by performance level. The Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE) calculates the percentage of students who achieve one of four performance levels -*Advanced, Proficient, Needs Improvement* and *Warning/Failing*: a scaled score of 220 is a passing score, the score which places a student out of *Failing* and into the *Needs Improvement* category.<sup>186</sup> These percentages

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<sup>186</sup> The MCAS test is structured so that students are scored based upon the number of correct answers obtained on each section of the MCAS ELA and Math tests. These ‘raw scores’ are converted to a scaled score, which places the student in a performance level category. The results are reported as a percentage of students who place in one of the performance level categories. The definition of these categories are explained below. The pass rate as calculated by the DOE is the summation of all categories above *Warning/Failing*. Chapter Three, *Political Background of the MCAS Reform* explains the structure of the MCAS test in detail.

***Advanced:*** Student work at this level demonstrates a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of rigorous subject matter and provides sophisticated solutions to complex problems.

are the state's metric for assessing skill improvement. In addition, the DOE calculates a pass rate figure for the state as well as for individual schools and school districts. The MCAS pass rate, a summary statistic, has acquired political meaning as well as presenting a rough snapshot of both students' and schools' performance.<sup>187</sup>

The Massachusetts Department of Education has reported improving pass rates for the graduating classes of 2003, 2004 and 2005. This upward trend is evidenced in both the scores on the standard MCAS test ('first try'), as well as on retest scores. The pass rates for the state on the standard MCAS test (first try) was 68% in 2001 (graduating class of 2003), 70% in 2002 (graduating class of 2004) and 75% in 2003, (graduating class of 2005).

According to the DOE figures, the graduating class of 2003 achieved a 95% pass rate, once all retests and appeals were administered.<sup>188</sup> In the DOE's reportage of 2004 test scores this past September, Massachusetts students achieved an 84% pass rate, which included one retest opportunity. Based on these scores, DOE Commissioner Driscoll publicly acclaimed the success of the MCAS reform in Massachusetts, and called upon

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**Proficient:** Student work at this level demonstrates a solid understanding of challenging subject matter and solves a wide variety of problems.

**Needs Improvement:** Student work at this level demonstrates a partial understanding of subject matter and solves some simple problems.

**Warning (Failing)** Student work at this level demonstrates a minimal understanding of subject matter and does not solve simple problems.<sup>186</sup>

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education, *MCAS: Spring 2004 MCAS Tests: Summary of State Results*, p.15

<sup>187</sup> The pass rate as calculated by the DOE is the sum of percentages in the three performance levels other than Warning/Failing, divided by the number of students in grade 12. This calculation is disputed by an independent monitoring board which has charged that the calculation inflates the pass rate by discounting students who have left the system. This dispute will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

<sup>188</sup> This 95% rate included five re-test opportunities made available to students who fail one or both portions of the MCAS test.

schools to turn their attention to increasing the percentage of students at the *Advanced* and *Proficient* levels of performance.<sup>189</sup> The pass rate for the class of 2004 is expected to exceed 90%, once MCAS retests and appeals are factored in.

The pass rates for Lowell High School and Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School in these years were as follows: 83% of Lowell's students passed the test in 2003, and 70% of students passed on their first try in 2004.<sup>190</sup> Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School surpassed the statewide performance; 96% of the students passed the test in 2003 and 94% of sophomore students passed the test on their first try in 2004.<sup>191</sup>

The pass rates are a summary statistic, and as such mask the variation in performance within schools. The following sub-sections examine students' performance at Lowell High School and Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School between years 1998-2004. At both schools, the most dramatic gains took place between years 2000 and 2001, the first year that the *high stakes* requirement of the MCAS test took effect.

At Lowell High School, there is a significant reduction in the *Failing* category in both tests. The gains show in the *Proficient* category for ELA and in the *Needs Improvement* category for math. Lowell High School reduced its percentage of failing students in ELA from 36% (in 1998) to 27% in 2001, dropping to 19% failing in 2004.

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<sup>189</sup> Boston Herald, p.B4, September 24, 2004, Boston Globe, p. A1, September 24, 2004

<sup>190</sup> *Progress Report on Students Attaining Competency Determination Statewide and by District: Classes of 2003 and 2004*, Massachusetts Department of Education, March 2003. The DOE chart from which these rates are taken reads Competency Determination Results by District: Class of 2003 and 2004 as of February, 2003

<sup>191</sup> Boston Herald, p.B4, September 24, 2004, Boston Globe, p. A1, September 24, 2004

In Math, the improvements were more dramatic. In 1998, 64% of students failed the Math MCAS, in 2001 the percentage of failures fell to 31% and by 2004, 27% of students failed the exam.

**TABLE 3: MCAS SCORES**

**LOWELL HIGH SCHOOL  
GRADE 10 ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS**

LEVEL	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
ADVANCED	1	0	2	8	10	8	8
PROFICIENT	22	20	20	28	34	35	35
NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	41	38	33	37	31	35	38
FAILING	36	42	46	27	25	22	19

**LOWELL HIGH SCHOOL  
GRADE 10 MATHEMATICS**

LEVEL	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
ADVANCED	3	5	7	11	11	12	18
PROFICIENT	11	11	17	22	17	22	21
NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	22	23	23	36	33	30	34
FAILING	64	61	54	31	39	36	27

There was significant improvement in math scores in 2004, as was true state-wide.<sup>192</sup> Students scoring in the *Advanced* category was 3% in 1998, increased to 11% in

<sup>192</sup> Boston Herald, p.B4, September 24, 2004, Boston Globe, p. A1, September 24, 2004



2001 and in 2004, 18% of students had attained an *Advanced* level of performance. In ELA, 8% of students placed in the *Advanced* level fairly consistently. While Lowell High School showed improvement, it was not to the extent hoped for by the framers. In the seven years of MCAS testing, between 50% and 80% of students performed at the bottom levels of performance, placing in either the *Failing* or *Needs Improvement* category. These percentages have placed Lowell High School among the bottom 20 high schools in MCAS performance.

Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School performed consistently well on the MCAS test once high stakes became effective in 2001. At Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, significant reductions in the *Failing* category are reflected in dramatic gains in the *Advanced* category for both MCAS tests. Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School reduced its percentage of failing students in ELA from 12%, in both 1998 and 2001, to 1% in 2004; in math the percentage of failures fell from 24% in 1998, to 3% in 2001 and to 2% in 2004.

More than 80% of sophomore students scored consistently in the top two performance levels of *Advanced* and *Proficient* between years 2001 and 2004, the years that high stakes were in effect. Since 2001, there has been incremental improvement in the MCAS scores.

**TABLE 4: MCAS SCORES**

**LINCOLN-SADBURY REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL  
GRADE 10 ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS**

LEVEL	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
ADVANCED	9	11	12	33	40	46	46
PROFICIENT	50	58	42	53	46	41	43
NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	29	20	23	12	10	11	10
FAILING	12	12	23	2	4	2	1

**LINCOLN-SADBURY REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL  
GRADE 10 MATHEMATICS**

LEVEL	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
ADVANCED	21	29	25	46	46	48	60
PROFICIENT	29	29	22	36	26	35	25
NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	26	21	24	15	17	12	13
FAILING	24	22	29	3	11	5	2

***Comparison of MCAS Test Scores Between Lowell High School and Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School***

A comparison of the MCAS scores between Lowell High School and Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School indicates the gap in academic achievement *between* the two schools remained significant. For example, in 2004 the difference between schools in *Advanced* level performance in ELA is 46% as compared to 8%, in Math it is 60% as compared to 18%. Those students performing at the bottom end of the scale, in the *Needs*

*Improvement* and *Failing* categories show a similar spread in the achievement of students between schools: 57% in ELA were low performing at Lowell High School compared to 12% at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School; in Math, 61% were low-performing at compared to 15%. This achievement gap *between* the two schools, and I would argue *within* the schools (although far more pronounced at Lowell High School) is significant: it does not achieve, to the extent hoped for, the gains in either equity or academic performance that were anticipated by policy makers. These results fall short of the original goals of the MCAS reform, which sought to equalize performance across schools.

***Question 2: What are the reservations with respect to the test scores?***

While the improvement in the MCAS pass rates is encouraging, there are at least three cautionary notes which must be heeded. The following ‘notes’ address a set of measurement issues which either dispute the state’s interpretation of the MCAS test scores, or present information which challenges the idea that scores are subject to a single interpretation.

*Did the Students Change? The Impact of Attrition Rates upon the MCAS scores and pass rates*

The DOE’s formula for the calculation of *pass rates* has been challenged by an independent monitoring group, the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy (NBETPP)<sup>193</sup>, which claims that DOE *pass rates* for the class of 2003 are inflated

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<sup>193</sup> The NBETPP is an independent monitoring system for assessment in America and provides research-based test information for policy decision-making, with special attention to groups historically underserved by the educational systems in the United States. The Board is located in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. Its publication series is supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

due to its omission of 16,991 students who left high school between 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Both formulas have in their calculation the summation of the *Advanced*, *Proficient* and *Needs Improvement* performance levels. The difference between the two calculations lies in its definition of a graduating class. The DOE calculation bases its *pass rates* on the number of students in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The NBETPP argues that a graduating class is defined by the number of incoming freshman, students beginning high school in 1999 with the intention to graduate in 2003. It is over the course of these four years that 22% of high school students were lost to the system.

When the two formulae are applied, the *difference* in pass rates is dramatic. State-wide, the pass rate drops from 90% to 70%.<sup>194</sup> For racial sub-groups and for individual schools and school districts there is a similar pattern: the pass rate for African-American students drops from 75% to 54%; for Latino students, it drops from 70% to 40%; for Asian students, from 91% to 79%; and for White students, from 94% to 76%. At Lowell High School, the DOE's calculated 83% pass rate drops to 56% when student attrition of 486 students (39.5% of the class) is factored in.<sup>195</sup> Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School's *pass rate* drops from 98% to 94%, when the loss of 6 students (1,9% of the class) is factored in.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> These rates are based on the standard MCAS test plus 3 re-tests. At this time, 90% of students passed, based upon the DOE calculation.

<sup>195</sup> Student enrollment at Lowell High School dropped from 1,228 students to 742 students between 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

<sup>196</sup> DOE Statistical Data, [www.doe.mass.edu](http://www.doe.mass.edu)

There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these formulas. The DOE formula has the advantage of being easily calculated, as it relates the number of passing students to the number of seniors. However, the calculation of total number of passing students relative to the number of seniors in grade 12 is a biased figure, as it eliminates those students lost to the system by attrition. The NBETPP formula has the advantage of trying to make an adjustment for the number of students who left the system, however this formula is imprecise as it does not identify those who dropped out, were retained in grade, transferred out of state or into private school, or simply disappeared from the rolls.<sup>197</sup> I would argue that the DOE formula is an over-estimate of passing students and the NBETPP formula an under estimate, however the latter is a much closer representation of the truth.

A strict causal relationship between the attrition rate and the MCAS is not clear, based upon these figures. According to Professor Richard Elmore, data in this area is weak, lacking “good school cohort measures” to draw a proven causal relationship

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<sup>197</sup> The GED, which was originally created more than 50 years ago to help World War II Veterans earn the equivalent of a high school diploma, has become a safety net for high school age students who drop out of high school. The New York Times, May 15, 2004 cited that one out of every seven high school diplomas granted in recent years is credited to passing the GED test. Nationally, teen-agers accounted for 49% of those earning GED's, up from 33% a decade earlier; and in Massachusetts in 2002 more than 50 percent of the recipients were students of high school age. According to the Urban Institute, the proportion of teen-agers earning GED's has doubled since 1989, while overall high school graduation rates have declined slightly. Most educators view the GED as a valuable option for people who do not make it through high school, but they do not consider it equivalent. According to a literacy expert cited in this New York Times article, the GED was intended to be a second chance for adults; it was never intended to replace a high school education. This rise in GED diplomas is attributed to the difficulty in finding a decent job without a diploma, and in part due to the increasing difficulty of earning a traditional high school diploma in certain states. With the passage of standards reforms by different states and the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, serious consequences have been linked to test scores for both students and schools, but there has been no accountability in place for students who drop out or go into GED programs. Some charge that this has created a perverse incentive system which encourages schools to push the low performing students out.

between drop out rates and the MCAS test.<sup>198</sup> However, anecdotal evidence suggests that some loss of students *is* related to the high stakes aspect of the MCAS test. Teachers and students report of demoralization and stigma attached to failure on the MCAS standard test, and of pressure and intimidation when faced with re-tests and the possibility of repeated failure, and ultimately not graduating from high school.

The figures are further complicated by the regular in-and-out migration of students which takes place at a school such as Lowell High School. The difficulties tracking students, as reported by school administrators<sup>199</sup>, might indeed mask the true number of students lost to the system if more students transfer in than drop out or transfer out. It also means that the students change, from year to year and over the course of any one year, making scores even more difficult to interpret. The high school becomes responsible for students whose instruction has been handled elsewhere, and the district estimates that less than 50% of students begin their education in the Lowell School System.<sup>200</sup> In addition, at Lowell High School, as described in Chapter VI, the majority of incoming freshmen in 1999 entered high school with below grade level skills in the English Language Arts and in Mathematics.<sup>201</sup> All in all, this suggests that the levels of performance are over-stated.

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<sup>198</sup> Interview, Professor Richard Elmore, 10.25.04

<sup>199</sup> As of 2001, administrators reported that there were many instances where they lost track of students. Students simply stopped coming to school. The day-to-day aspect of this was described by the Director of Curriculum and Testing, who spent a large percentage of her time updating the student rolls in order that the school not be charged with a failure for a student who no longer attended the school.

<sup>200</sup> Data reported at Lowell's Leadership Conference, August, 2000

<sup>201</sup> In response to the MCAS reform, Lowell High School adopted a policy to test incoming students for their ELA and math skills using an accepted Scholastic Aptitude Test, the Quic test. The majority of students scored at aptitude levels at 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, showing specific gaps in learning.

The *second note of caution* is related to understanding the dramatic gains in MCAS test scores between years 2000 and 2001, when high stakes took effect. In this year, the math curriculum frameworks were amended and the Board of Education approved the removal of trigonometry and matrix algebra as required subjects for the 2001 MCAS test. In addition, there was a marked shift in the types of ELA questions asked of students. The early years of the test questioned students on specific selections, such as short stories of James Joyce or Flannery O'Connor, which many teachers consider to be college level material.<sup>202</sup>

As of 2001, the types of questions asked on the MCAS ELA became broader in scope, which teachers at both high schools considered to be more appropriate to students, and more accessible. For example, the questions became more open ended, allowing students to answer a literary question based upon a novel of their choice. In both the ELA and Math tests, the questions changed and were perceived by teachers and students as easier and more appropriate.<sup>203</sup> This qualitative change coincided with the implementation of high stakes consequences; for the first time, a student might be prevented from graduating high school due to his/her test performance. Several factors, then, might explain the dramatic improvement between years 2000 and 2001. An

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<sup>202</sup> English teachers at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School stated this, although these authors are familiar to Lincoln-Sudbury students. Even at this high school, teachers took exception to certain passages from James Joyce used in the test, and the inclusion of such novels as *Love in the Time of Cholera* which they considered to be beyond the maturity level of fifteen year olds.

<sup>203</sup> Errors include instances where policy makers use tests to track achievement trends without any external confirmation of validity, making it impossible to tell whether the trend is due to actual differences in achievement or to some other factor, such as changes in the test (Rhoades and Madaus, 2003, "Right Answer, Wrong Score: Test Flaws Take Toll", *New York Times*, 5.20.2001, pp. 1 and 22)

interpretation that gains in MCAS scores are due solely to skill improvement is highly questionable.

The *third note of caution* relates to what researchers have noted as cycles of testing. As teachers and schools acclimate to the test, more class time is dedicated to teaching to the test and as a result test scores follow a predictable cycle.....” They start low, rise quickly for a couple of years, level off for a few more, and then gradually drop over time.”<sup>204</sup> In other words, the observed improvements in the *pass rates* during this early stage of MCAS testing may significantly over-estimate skill improvement.

### ***Standardized Tests as Technology and as Cultural Myth***

Today there is a general consensus that standardized testing is a technology and as such, has inherent fallibilities. Any consideration of the MCAS test scores must then be framed by this larger perspective, so that we have a better understanding of the policy tool and technology we have made so central to the reform of our public schools. The literature on standardized testing is vast, and new findings and reports are published which respond to its use in assessing our public schools. These reports and news articles offer their own cautionary notes to the *meaning* we assign to test scores . (Horn, Ramos,

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<sup>204</sup> As reported in Education Week article written by David Hoff, Professor Daniel Koretz, formerly of the Rand Corporation and Boston College, and presently at the Harvard School of Education, and Professor Robert Linn at the University of Boulder, Colorado agree that cycles of test scores is consistent regardless of the type of test. According to Linn, only systemic changes, like changes in the quality of instruction can prevent a leveling of test scores. Test researchers say that scores stagnate or fall because schools do the easy things first, and then do not address the other needs. Teachers start to tailor their instructions to the exams, and as they discover the types of questions they are asked – and sometimes even the precise question –they drill students on how to perform well on the tests. Education Week, Testing’s Ups and Downs Predictable, January 26, 2000.



Blumer and Madaus, 2000, Clarke, Haney and Madaus, 2000, Shore, Madaus, Clarke, 2000, Rhoades and Madaus, 2003).<sup>205</sup>

In this section, I outline the vulnerabilities of standardized tests, which run contrary to public perception that standardized tests are **objective** measures of achievement. Belief in test precision has led us to assign important consequences to scores, such as graduation from high school. High stakes has remained central in education policy despite a code of standards in the testing industry which cautions against any type of high stakes decision, be it graduation, summer school, grade retention or even job retention to be determined by a single test score.<sup>206</sup>

Errors in the scoring and in the framing of test questions are familiar to the public, often having large scale consequences. For example, in New York City in 1999, the reporting of incorrect test scores either sent students to summer school or resulted in grade retention.<sup>207</sup> Of greater concern in this dissertation, is the subjectivity that is inherent in any standardized test. This is most clearly seen in the setting of pass rates and threshold scores – the MCAS uses both to assess student performance levels, and the *No Child Left Behind* Act now requires that all states select tests and establish standards of proficiency. These standards are set by groups of professionals, or individuals, that are politically appointed. The MCAS has created a set of checks and balances to assure

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<sup>205</sup> These are recent publications of the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy

<sup>206</sup> This position was stated by a CTB testing official, as he commented on the errors due to software programming that had mis-stated thousands of students' test scores, *New York Times*, May, 21, 2001, also state in "Errors in Standardized Tests: A Systemic Problem", p. 6, May 2003

<sup>207</sup> The most memorable example of this occurred under the watch of Chancellor Rudy Crew in 1999. He was the first Chancellor to attach summer school consequences to reading test scores. The testing company, CBT, due to a software programming error misreported scores and 9,000 students were mistakenly sent to summer school. He eventually lost his own job, as the mistake was not uncovered

against bias, still, there remains a subjective, if not political element in the setting of these rates. Rothstein (2001) describes such differences as often political decisions, where the bar is set to avoid either state or federal sanctions.<sup>208</sup>

This ‘view from above’ sees MCAS test scores and interprets them as a proxy for students’ skills, school performance and the efficacy of the reform itself. The usefulness of this approach is clearly limited. In sum, there are great dangers in using the MCAS test scores to assess students’ skills or the degree of success of the MCAS reform. Test scores, and variability in test scores cannot be understood apart from context; in this case, apart from the complex realities of a public school, the viewpoint we gain from ‘on the ground’. It is to this I now turn.

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<sup>208</sup> Rothstein, Richard, “*In Standardized Tests, Standards Vary*”, New York Times, July 18, 2001

## ***Chapter Eight: Conclusion***

### ***Introduction***

In this concluding chapter I extend the analysis of earlier chapters and examine the MCAS test as viewed ‘from the ground’. The prior chapters which examine the organizational responses of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School find that each school, in the process of making sense of the reform, necessarily grapples with several core questions, such as ‘*What does good education mean? What does it look like?, and How do we make it happen?*’ in their respective sense making processes. From this grounded vantage point, looking at the MCAS test scores as proxy for student skills, schools’ performance or the efficacy of the reform loses its usefulness. The single metric of the MCAS test score is only one element which interacts with a more complex institutional story. This chapter accounts for the view ‘from the ground’ and asks the third and final question,

***Question Three: “What were the effects of the MCAS reform as reflected in the experience of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School?”***

As chapters five and six demonstrated, this renewed emphasis on testing as a measure of academic performance played out very differently in the two schools. The institutional story invites us to take larger measure of the deliberations, actions, and organizational processes undertaken by public schools when they are confronted with a legal mandate to change.

As this dissertation has argued, schools are ‘different’ from one another. In stating this, I refer to their essential and enduring qualities (unique organizational

identity), which creates a foundation for the dynamic social processes of ‘making sense’ of their environments. These distinctive identities, and organizational expressions of discernment and enactment become critical to understanding the process of reform and change, particularly when the reform mandate is imposed from without. The MCAS reform and test loses its ‘sameness’ when it interacts with each school’s environment. The reform acts as a stimulus, engendering a varied range of organizational responses at Lowell High School and Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School. It is clear that it is impossible to understand either the MCAS scores or the reform itself apart from the public schools as institutions.

The grounded research which is intrinsic to case based research grants the researcher access to the inner workings of the school. The MCAS test, the centralized curriculum frameworks, the system of public accountability become social factors which interface with each school’s institutional environment. Chapters Five and Six, each of which is devoted to a case study school provides a lens into this multi-dimensionality. These chapters discuss Lowell High School and Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School as historical and cultural institutions, with ties to community, and organizational identities which revolve around a unique set of social values, governance structures and organizational patterning. The sense making process which takes place within each school leads each to adopt contrasting organizational strategies. At Lowell High School the strategy is one of *Compliant Engagement*. At Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School the strategy is one of *Antagonistic Compliance*.

To answer the question, what really happened in the school as a result of the MCAS reform, I have gone inside each school in the search of answers to qualitative research questions. I argue that it is only when we open the ‘black box’ of the public school to understand its sense making processes, its ‘production function’, if you will, that we can begin to understand how education reform really works and contextualize the reported MCAS test scores to draw relevant conclusions.

### ***Organizational Identity of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School***

Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School was introduced in an earlier chapter as a high achieving, spirited public high school that values independent, critical thinking and encourages a pluralism in ideas and action. This is a school whose bearing is one of entitlement, rich in resources and secure in its position – of class privilege, community support and a track record of successful placements of the majority of its students in elite universities. While a respected member of an elite cohort of high achieving public and private high schools in the state, Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School sets itself apart from these schools as “...a different kind of place”.<sup>209</sup> It values difference, freedom of individual expression and even idiosyncrasy as rudiments of the creative process.

These values are in keeping with its class position; values of self-direction have long been associated with an upper social class position while conforming, rule bound behavior is associated with lower, working class communities.<sup>210</sup> This organizational confidence or sense of self-esteem, and independence in thought and action are key

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<sup>209</sup> This refers to the title of the school’s official biography, researched and written by students in the history department in honor of the school’s fortieth year.

<sup>210</sup> Melvyn L. Kohn (1977) *Class and Conformity, A Study in Values*

aspects of the school's organizational identity<sup>211</sup>. Thus it could be argued that Lincoln-Sudbury High School's organizational self-esteem is based in and sustained by the larger system of class and social stratification.

Teachers value their work and play a prominent role in creating curriculum and charting the academic agenda of this school. The administration's goal of reaching consensus on key decisions effectively places teachers in close dialogue with the administration around issues of governance, and empowers academic departments to act with a great degree of autonomy. The school's secure place in the meritocracy is assured by the community's tax base and the interests of parents, whose educational and professional accreditations set high expectations for achievement during and after graduation from high school. Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School's organizational identity places high value upon the individual, his or her freedom of choice and diversity of opinion, and academic achievement.

The school also places high value on the development of citizenship and the exercise of these values within the school. There is a strong commitment to democratic process and consensus building within the school. The headmaster/superintendent seeks consensus on important school issues, and teachers have the professional autonomy and power within the school's governance structure to raise issues as well as negotiate their resolution. This 'flat' rather than hierarchical system of communication and governance

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<sup>211</sup> Organizational self-esteem is dependent not only upon external structural conditions, but also on features of the organization itself such as leadership, membership and organizational design. The historical patterning of the organization, which is in large part a story of economic and social class interacts with these organizational features to produce an *organizational* process of sense making.

encourages a pluralism of ideas, and places a great deal of importance upon their democratic resolution. This is possible at a high achieving, well supported high school like Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, which enjoys relative comforts due to its class position.

### ***Sense making of MCAS at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School***

As discussed in the earlier chapter, one could argue that members of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School had been preparing a defense against the anticipated MCAS reform as early as 1991, wary of any substantive state role in their school's curriculum or democratic process of governance. This school considered whether or not to comply to the MCAS reform at all – an option that was quickly dismissed due to its legal mandate. A decision was made by the administration to administer the MCAS test; however, the sense making process of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School leads it to challenge the validity and relevance of this reform to its school.

I name the strategy which devolves from the sense making at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School '*Antagonistic Compliance*'. The school's sense making can be characterized as having three aspects - discernment, resistance, and compromise. Throughout, teachers are engaged publicly and openly in critical analysis, reflection, and action. This strategy of '*Antagonistic Compliance*' includes a range of activities of protest - reflecting the sense of entitlement and self confidence Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School has in its educational philosophy and culture, and its own sense of superiority vis-à-vis the state's capacity.

### *Discernment, Resistance and Compromise*

The staff at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School engaged in a sense making process which was discerning in its evaluation of the reform and compromising only where they deemed it appropriate to prepare students for the format and types of questions to be found in the MCAS test. I use the term *discernment* to describe a process of evaluation of the reform by teachers and administrators, and a serious consideration of its relevance to the school. Many teachers and some administrators would like to wish the reform away, but as a legally binding mandate this is not possible. Instead, individual teachers, academic departments and members of the administration consider the reform from their particular point of view – the classroom, the academic discipline and the school’s responsibility to its students and their parents. This freedom to disagree with one another, and to organize themselves differently in accord with their respective sense making leads to varied and nuanced responses to the MCAS within the school.

For example, each of the four core academic departments (Math, English, Science and History/Social Studies) undertakes a critical evaluation of the MCAS curriculum frameworks and the MCAS test for its subject area. The math department and the History/Social Studies Department arrive at differing assessments of their respective MCAS tests. While both departments share an ‘antagonism’ toward the MCAS reform, the math department, unlike the H/SS department, finds the MCAS *test* to be acceptable. Each department respects the position of the other, and from this point negotiates its classroom strategies and its MCAS position. At Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School it is this latter negotiation across departments which is challenging to the school, as they



ultimately must adopt a coherent outlook and strategy in order to prepare their students for the MCAS test in the spring.

*Resistance* took many forms, as discussed in the earlier chapter. There was school-wide resistance to the high stakes aspect of the reform and a rejection of the wholesale adoption of the curriculum frameworks into teachers' classrooms. There was also an initiative to develop an alternative assessment for students, one that is more in keeping with the multiple assessments called for in the state legislation which establishes the MCAS assessment system, and an outward looking view to organizations such as CARE and FairTest for a serious alternative to the MCAS. This effort lost steam, due in part to the school's ambivalence toward the MCAS reform which allowed other more immediate issues to dominate the school's political and academic agenda in its stead.

'*Antagonistic Compliance*' at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School refers to the high school's generalized response to the MCAS reform, capturing the varying degrees of compliance and resistance across departments, governance bodies and among individual teachers. Teachers in the History/Social Studies Department organize to publicly protest the MCAS reform and defy the state. They challenge the State of Massachusetts to re-examine (1) the MCAS curriculum frameworks, (2) the high stakes aspect of the MCAS test and (3) the reform's relevance to a high achieving school such as Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School<sup>212</sup>.

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<sup>212</sup> The disagreement with the State over the use and intent of the MCAS reform extends beyond these three issues. The administration and teachers have written letters to the Department of Education protesting the loss of power of the School Committee in determining who graduates, the unfairness of this reform to special education and 2<sup>nd</sup> language speaking students, the lack of clarity in the MCAS test around testing

This sense making is in keeping with the professional autonomy extended to its teachers, and a sense of entitlement to its resources and all that such resources can provide to Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School.

*Compromise* at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School is compliance, albeit expressed with antagonism and reluctance. For example, the school did comply with the state's mandate to offer after-school remediation in preparation for the MCAS test. The state provided grant funding for this, and required that schools identify and make this program available to failing students as part of a longer range plan for that student's remediation. At Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, this program was handled by the administrators, by default. Teachers believed strongly in their own courses, and for the most part shunned this tutoring program. Only some science teachers agreed to participate, joining three part-time tutors hired with the grant money to use the 'drill and grill' MCAS workbooks published by the standardized testing industry to prepare students for the MCAS questions.<sup>213</sup>

The strategies of other departments varied along a continuum of compliance and resistance. Two departments were discerning in their choice of strategy, both choosing different forms of *Compromise*. The H/SS department remained true to its defiant

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for basic learning skills versus critical thinking skills, the misuse of test to assess *both* a school system and its students and finally, the ever-changing character of the curriculum frameworks. Superintendent John Ritchie, letter to DOE, January, 2001; Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School teachers letter to DOE, December, 2000; School Committee letter to DOE, April, 2001

<sup>213</sup> Both the Science department and Lincoln-Sudbury High School administration viewed the MCAS science frameworks as a constantly shifting target, and therefore stood behind the school's curriculum, seeing making any changes at this time as irresponsible. The science teachers were interested in supporting the disciplines subject to high stakes, that is English and Mathematics.

position toward the state's intervention in their curriculum. The math department offered its own after school program, the English teachers offered extra help during extra class time, in keeping with the departmental culture, the teachers' sense of professionalism as well as their sense of the MCAS as a threat to their curriculum. The History/Social Science department offered no special assistance outside of its courses, especially since this test was not a high stakes test. There was a general lack of co-operation among the community as well. Administrators had a difficult time getting students to attend the program, and often found even less co-operation among the students' parents.

Sense making is not a linear process. Even as the school unifies in its opposition to the high stakes aspect of the MCAS test and academic departments refuse to allocate significant classroom time to MCAS preparation, the reform brings to the surface tensions in the school's culture. The MCAS re-introduces standardized test scores as a defining metric of success. The school, in its sense making, confronts tensions and differing views among teachers regarding the degrees and kinds of freedom the school should make available to its students. The standardized testing regime introduced by the MCAS reform brings the school to the crux of its democratic process, at a crossroads in choosing how far to conform to values of testing and assessment in the larger culture.

Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School perceived the MCAS reform to be a threat to its identity as a school, to the social values, academic programs and people that it holds dear. The school responded to the MCAS reform from a core sense of 'self', defending a school that members proudly describe as "a different kind of place." Their

sense making evolved in political stance and action, leading the school administration, individual teachers and departments to resist aspects of the reform for fear that Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School's academic and social programs would be reduced to a test-taking regimen, and educational achievement would come to be defined by standardized test scores and thereby, compliance.

The role of the state, in assessing schools by their MCAS test scores and assessing students as well, and assuming the power to determine a student's competency to graduate from high school was perceived by Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School as a serious infringement upon the school's political autonomy, and its renowned capacity to deliver 'good education.' The time required for the MCAS, eighteen days in 1998, took significant class time from teachers, undermining both the professional autonomy and high level curriculum offered by teachers.<sup>214</sup> Finally, the high stakes standardized test scores were perceived as a threat to the school's self-governance and teachers' professional autonomy to assess their students in accordance with the multiple criteria which make up a high school education. Despite the good intentions of this reform, in the course of its implementation the MCAS reform undermined the pedagogy and curriculum of this school - taking time and effort away from that which it does best.

### ***Organizational Identity of Lowell High School***

Perhaps what is most distinctive about Lowell High School is its steadfastness of spirit. Despite the structural and social challenges it confronts, the school is not resigned

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<sup>214</sup> This has since been reduced to nine days of testing, excluding retests, which is still a significant amount of time.

to these problems. If steadfastness is the heart of Lowell High School, bureaucracy is its backbone. At the core of Lowell's organizational identity is its bureaucratic capacity to administer education to its students – despite any contingency. This capacity to maintain order and control in the midst of overwhelming circumstances can be traced to its founding years when hierarchy in decision making, compartmentalization and the standardization of practice were the marks of an organization's efficiency. Lowell High School is a rule-bound, hierarchical school culture where a top-down authority structure has led to a passivity among teachers, and a disposition by the district and by Lowell High School to comply with external authorities.

The teachers and administrators at Lowell High School understand that their school is viewed as a failing school in terms of academic achievement. They also complain of a lack of public understanding of the discipline problems and gaps in the literacy skills of their students, made more challenging by the poverty and homelessness among many of their students. Class position is not simply about a lack of resources. Teachers in particular express feeling a sense of disempowerment and an inability to influence public policy. The school's dependence on external state and federal funding limits its independence and political capacity to advocate in the political arena.

There is a dynamic at play which leads to what I have named a low 'organizational self esteem', operating as subtext within the school's organizational culture. Lowell High School's self image is in large part influenced by how the school is seen by others. Teachers perceive that Lowell High School is viewed by the public as an

urban, poor, underperforming school, despite its ranking by Newsweek (1999) as a top urban school. This low self image is disempowering, even as teachers understand the overwhelming challenges they face are not shared by their suburban complement. Among these challenges are low MCAS scores, urban poverty and educating students who have been marginalized by poverty and poor schooling.<sup>215</sup> This self perception, that they are weak vis-a-vis the state, is reinforced by Lowell High School's MCAS scores which have been several percentage points behind the state average in most categories. Public image, inadequate resources, low class position and the remedial needs of their student body act in ways whereby each element reinforces the other. Low organizational self esteem is the result of this dynamic interplay of forces.

### ***Sense Making at Lowell High School***

At the time the MCAS became state law, Lowell High School was primed to address problems of curriculum alignment and academic achievement. In that same year, Lowell's school administrators had identified student retention, a poorly aligned curriculum and high failure rates among its priority issues. It was understandable, then, when a district administrator described the MCAS reform as 'synergistic' with the district's wish for fundamental change and renewed focus upon classroom instruction and academic achievement.

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<sup>215</sup> I include 'low MCAS scores' as an aspect of their self-identity, and how teachers and administrators believe they are perceived. At the time I began my research, in 1999, there had been two years of MCAS test scores published. Scores had already taken on a public function of *branding* a school, in a vein similar to corporate branding, which influences its public image and reputation, and thereby its self image. Test scores also ranked schools in a hierarchy from 'low performing' to 'high performing'. Despite teachers' position that a comparison of schools such as Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School is akin to a comparison of apples and oranges, this 'branding' became yet another obstacle to be overcome.

Unlike Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School the process of *discernment* at Lowell High School takes place within the Administrative Cabinet and other governance meetings, and not as part of a school-wide discourse. A discernment of how to make sense of the MCAS at Lowell High School is really a set of decisions and planning initiatives proposed by leadership in order to best meet what they perceive to be the needs of the school, while following the mandate of the MCAS reform. From the beginning it was a discernment which took place within a frame of compliance.

At the time MCAS was passed, both the Lowell School District and Lowell High School had prioritized classroom instruction as its focus, beginning with the district-wide and school-wide alignment of curriculum. This was the first organizational activity undertaken by Lowell High School in response to the MCAS reform, involving teachers in curriculum alignment as a part of their professional development. At Lowell High School, as the demographics of its student body changed, teachers had made adjustments in the classroom to accommodate to the language barriers, and more generally the lower levels of English and math competencies among many of these incoming second language students. That the MCAS introduced state-approved standards where there was no longer a consensus within the school explains, in part, the influence of the MCAS on the pedagogy of Lowell High School. The incentives in the Education Reform Act, 1993, both carrot and stick, further explain its influence within this school. The Education Reform Act provided for funds to poor schools, and Lowell High School received addition funding of nine million dollars over a seven year period. The reform also empowers the state to hold a school in receivership for under-performance, as measured

by MCAS test scores. These factors, combined with Lowell High School's strength in bureaucratic administration and its need to improve its instructional capacities, led to the adoption of instructional practices which are illustrative of a '*compliant engagement*' strategy at the school.

I name the strategy that emerges from the sense making process '*Compliant Engagement*', to capture the school administrators' efforts to make fundamental changes in the school while at the same time meet the mandates of the MCAS reform. Despite variability in attitude among administrators and teachers, all members commit to enacting the MCAS reform. This view of the MCAS reform as punitive toward the school, and ultimately a 'set-up for failure' is expressed by many in Lowell High School who are disturbed by expectations which assume a level playing field when one does not exist between the low income urban schools and the suburban schools. Absent a true 'Opportunity To Learn' for students, teachers and administrators alike regard the MCAS as a punitive. They view the time frame for achieving better scores as unrealistic, meant to punish and humiliate the urban schools and take away their funding. There is also a fairly widely held criticism of the test for cultural bias and inconsistency. Despite these antipathies toward the reform, there is no outward protest or organized resistance. The *resistance* lies in Lowell High School's authorship of strategies for change.

Lowell High School's sense making process, while guided by social concerns such as under-achievement, below grade level remediation, low attendance and classroom discipline led the school's leadership to solutions which took form in organization goals.



Working committees were created to study and plan for (1) a new 9<sup>th</sup> grade cluster structure; (2) Quic testing and assessment of incoming ninth graders; (3) reconsideration and upgrade of the business level (vocational track) of courses; and (4) improved coordination with 8<sup>th</sup> grade middle schools for placement of incoming 9<sup>th</sup> grade students.<sup>216</sup> Resistance to the reform was well disguised.

The Quic test, by all appearances conformed with the state's approach to assessment; it was a Scholastic Aptitude Test of multiple choice questions. The element of defiance, while disguised, is there as well. Lowell High School adopted its own version of standardized testing in order to reclaim power over the assessment of its students. As a defensive measure, it would serve as evidence of the low achievement levels of students upon entry to Lowell High School, should the case of state receivership for under-performance come to pass. It was defiant *and* pro-active, in that it did not leave assessment solely to the state. Fundamentally, however, Lowell High School sought to resolve its educational and instructional challenges by making changes in its organizational structure, which were in keeping with its routinized, bureaucratic strengths.

The creation of an MCAS culture in the school was such an initiative. In fulfillment of the latter, the MCAS became mistaken for classroom pedagogy.

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<sup>216</sup> These are some of the organizational goals which relate most directly to the MCAS reform. Other goals included the mainstreaming of special education students, publication of a revised, updated course catalogue, institute higher credit requirements to graduate, reduce drop out rate, improve literacy skills and MCAS test scores and improve and administer the course selection process earlier in the academic year. In the past, teachers did not know what courses they would be teaching until they returned to school in late August. The Administration wished to inform teachers of their class assignments at the end of the current school year so they could prepare over the summer. This is discussed in greater detail in the Chapter on Lowell High School.

Instruction at Lowell High School did shift, but fell short of fundamentally changing instructional practices as would be expected in a systemic change model. School-wide initiatives were focused on ‘teaching to the MCAS test’ so students would pass. The administration (department chairs and testing specialist) organized and conducted professional development workshops in MCAS related procedures, such as rubrics, the MCAS test questions, and short answer responses. These MCAS procedures, and the prescriptive nature of the MCAS curriculum frameworks became lists which administrators could check off – as indicative of compliance with the MCAS reform and the building of a school-wide MCAS culture. Instructional change came to look like rote learning, and rubrics for scoring followed MCAS rubrics and also became part of classroom practice. These formulaic approaches to instruction were easier for Lowell High School to adopt, as such bureaucratic principles lay deep within its institutional patterning.

Teachers spent time teaching to the test, drawing heavily upon questions from prior years.<sup>217</sup> Testing strategies were also conveyed to students. Students were instructed to never leave a question blank, for an effort to write an answer would bring them at least a point. The acclimation to the test instructions, questions and strategies for accumulating points was intended to encourage students from giving up, particularly

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<sup>217</sup> For example, ninth grade students were given the prior year’s MCAS essay question as a test preparation exercise. Teachers in general used MCAS questions in the classroom in preparation for each of the MCAS tests, more intensively as the test period approached. This often meant leaving aside a year-end lesson plan in order to prepare students and focus attention and raise morale in anticipation of the MCAS test.

those who in the first test, were too intimidated to try to answer a question they did not know the answer to.

There were several positive changes as a result of the MCAS reform, including aligning curricula, getting new text books and providing remedial instruction, especially in writing the five paragraph essay. The goals of the reform to improve equity and academic achievement supported the school's driving concern to provide remedial instruction to students in need. All in all, however, the MCAS reform, despite its intentions to bring high standards and additional resources to this school, undermines Lowell High School's efforts to implement its ambitious program of 'Systemic Change'. The administration of the MCAS test in a school this size demands huge personnel resources and logistical planning, which diverts scarce resources away from school wide efforts to improve basic literacy skills in math and the English Language Arts. It was easier for the school to perform the bureaucratic tasks required by the MCAS instead of making core changes to its instructional program.<sup>218</sup> The 'delivery of services' such as in-class remediation, teacher professional development and the resources to provide adequate support to students to stay in school were was disrupted by the more immediate and large scale tasks involved in administering the MCAS test. The high stakes test drove instruction in this school.

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<sup>218</sup> Elmore has written extensively about this organizational approach to reform. School administrators are more likely change school structures, inn the first instance because it appears that something significant has changed, and secondly because it is easier than changing pedagogy, or firing teachers. He gives the example of extending class periods form 45 minutes to one hour and half.....but many teachers accommodated by showing films in class instead of changing curriculum.

### ***Comparing the Schools***

In summary then, both Lowell High School and Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School each had its own *way of doing things*. The hierarchical, rule-bound organizational structure of Lowell High School, and the democratic, consensus driven organizational structure of Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School proved to be central features through which the school's identity was woven. The organizational/governance structure served as an entry point for the MCAS reform at each school. Unforeseen by the reform's framers, Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School had a difficult time implementing the MCAS reform; the school's *way of doing things* was antithetical to the uniform and centralized features of the MCAS reform. Teachers perceived the reform as encroaching upon their autonomy, offering conformity in exchange. This was a source of demoralization for teachers, and an important factor in the school's organized resistance against the state.

There were unintended consequences of a very different nature at Lowell High School. The MCAS reform moved rather easily through the front door of this school, finding affinity with its bureaucratic and rule bound culture. This reinforced the school's tendency to define instructional and other changes in terms of *structural* change. This type of 'reform model' where structure is intended to lead to changes in classroom pedagogy, is in keeping with the model of the MCAS reform itself, which centralizes curriculum, testing and accountability measures (i.e. legislates structural changes) with the expectation that teaching inside the classroom will also change.

Once beyond the doors of each school, however, the reform took divergent paths. The reform undermined the strengths of each school, and in the case of Lowell High School, undermined its efforts to introduce instructional change. Differences in each school's organizational identity, which is the key confluence of such factors as class position, governance, achievement, self-esteem and diversity, brought about a different set of processes and outcomes in each school.

To describe Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and Lowell High School both as public high schools is a cursory description at best, of each school. Nor is describing Lowell High School as urban and poor, and Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School as suburban and rich adequate to the task. As illustrated above, these schools are strikingly different in character, purpose and organization. There are at least five organizational dimensions across which they differ significantly. These dimensions are history, class position, governance structure, organizational structure and philosophy/mission. The different organizational identities of these two schools lead them to adopt divergent sense making processes and organizational strategies toward the centralized, uniform MCAS reform.

Most obvious is the fact that these two schools begin with different endowments – one is an elite, privileged school where resources are at hand and teachers describe their students with adjectives such as “engorged” and “advantaged”; the other is a blue collar, working class school whose students come from a variety of backgrounds, ranging from middle to lower class, many of whom live just below or just above the state poverty level.

In this system of class stratification, these case study schools, one rich school and one poor school find that each draws from its class background a sense of self which I have described as organizational self-esteem. This self-confidence, if you will, or sense of entitlement is either bolstered or flattened by several factors, including the school's track record of achievement and its political support in the local and in the broader community<sup>219</sup>.

Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School's high self-esteem results, sometimes, in a "we are better than" attitude which can blind its members to an alternative way of doing things; bolstered by a high organizational self-esteem and highly developed capacity to organize political resources, serves to empower the school to distinguish itself to directly challenge the state and protest the MCAS reform. In contrast, Lowell High School's low self-esteem results, sometimes, in a "we are victims" attitude, marginalized and under-resourced, which can hinder positive action; however, there are personnel and resources at this school, as well as a history of fighting for equity in public education which prevents resignation from taking up residence at Lowell High School. Lowell High School, despite a sense of low self esteem, seeks out innovative, organizational solutions to the profound challenge of raising its students' academic performance.

The differences in the sense making of the two schools is captured in their strategic responses to the MCAS reform. Differing strategies of 'Antagonistic Compliance' and 'Compliant Engagement' while divergent in their manifestations in

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<sup>219</sup> A more detailed description of the concept of 'organizational self-esteem' is explored in the Theory/Methodology Chapter

each school, offer mirror images to each other as the dominant response in one school is the subordinate response in the other school. While both high schools engage in forms of compliance or resistance to the MCAS reform, and at times both compliance and resistance co-exist – the expression of these strategies is a function of the organizational identity of each high school.

Unlike its suburban counterpart, Lowell High School issues no formal challenge or protest to the MCAS reform, well aware of the below grade level proficiencies of many of its students. The differences in each school's organizational expression is in accordance with its respective class position, which I have related to cultural resources of self-esteem, self-image and other forms of cultural capital. It would follow that Lowell High School, a working class, immigrant school in a low-income community, would comply with the state's authority, follow the rules, and follow the resources. Furthermore, the Lowell School District hierarchy, and Lowell High School's own top-down governance structure operate bureaucratically, which makes aspects of the MCAS reform and its implementation by the state acceptable and familiar. Long standing historical and cultural institutional practices of compliance with external authorities date to the city's founding.

This expression of resistance also finds echoes in the city's origins, beginning with the founders' ideals for the City of Lowell. As working conditions deteriorated, workers and citizens expressed resistance. The direct resistance of the textile strikers did not change the structures of power and control in Lowell. However, the citizenry did join

forces to claim ownership and authorship over public institutions, such as the public schools, libraries and historical societies. This organizational strategy of resistance continues on, often as subtext but at times as policy, at Lowell High School.<sup>220</sup>

The expression of resistance at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School also finds echoes – but in the school’s origins. The founders of this public ‘private’ high school acted as independent citizens, engaged, autonomous, resourced and empowered to create a school that would assure Lincoln and Sudbury’s niche in the regional economy. The entrepreneurial and knowledge based firms which had located to the towns’ adjacent beltways offered the enduring ties to the community, upon which the school would orient its instructional program. School became, in a sense, the industry of these towns, providing the future managerial and entrepreneurial workforce required.

### ***Conclusion***

I conclude that an understanding of organizational identity and sense making is critical to the design of successful school reform policies. How this concept can improve policy making will be discussed in greater detail in the last section of this concluding chapter. Regulatory policies can and will produce a wide-ranging distribution of responses, as was the case with the MCAS reform, but the key is to understand why schools responded so differently to the same reform. Herein lies the potential to develop

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<sup>220</sup> While rhetoric within the school promotes the MCAS test and standards, the district and school goals set limits to the state’s encroachment on the evaluation of the school and its students. For example, the leadership council, comprised of all 27 school administrators under the direction of the district superintendent worked together to delineate a 5 year plan. Goals where the power of MCAS and state oversight are circumscribed are as follows: “ goals of students by language, race, gender, special needs and level – improve their MCAS performance sub-category scores within two years in language arts and mathematics OR demonstrate comparable growth using common district-wide assessment instruments, *Five Year Goals and Indicators, Lowell Public Schools, 2001-2005*



real solutions to the problems of lagging academic achievement and disparities in the delivery of education. Herein are born new possibilities for efficacy in school reform.

I return to Healy (1999) who called for a less fragmented governance and new forms of institutional partnerships. Healy identifies the 'democratic deficit', which she defines as the need for more interactive relationships among governance, citizens and business and the creation of strategic linkages to build the capacity for local governance. I would argue that the standards reform brought together these new alliances, but has fallen short of expanding the capacity for democratic governance by failing the schools (under-investment in capacity building) and by failing in the policy process. The imposition of top down, standardized, external indices or thresholds has not proven to be successful in any convincing way.

An understanding of a school's organizational identity and sense making processes can lead to making strategic linkages to other kinds of institutional partnerships that extend beyond the state-school model. The state has demonstrated limited capacity for assisting schools to improve, and this is generally true throughout the county.<sup>221</sup> However, an understanding of the school, its organizational identity, its mission, local community and mores, its ways of governance and the potential is there to make best use of the school's identity and its existing institutional ties. New types of supportive networks can be developed, and partnerships between the school and non-profits, or parent groups or other stakeholder groups can come into play to help build capacity in

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<sup>221</sup> Clune, William H. (1991) *The Best Path to Systemic Educational Policy: Standard/Centralized or Differentiated/Decentralized?* in Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis

instruction, guidance and the professional development of teachers. In policy terms, you go after what creates this differential response and develop solutions based upon this.

With regard to the theories of institutionalism which help us to understand policy making and institutional behavior, I would suggest that we are at a point in the making of educational policy where a set of 'bad practices' may take hold. If we understand institutionalism to be the active processes by which individuals in social contexts construct their ways of thinking and acting, and organizations as established ways of addressing certain social issues, we are regulating our institutions, in this case our public schools, into compliance. How we think about making education, and doing education, is under transformation. We may indeed be institutionalizing our understanding of schools into the narrow frame of scores and numbers, rather than embrace the institutional complexity of schools, or the complexity of problems that lie before us.

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