

# BOOSTING PERFORMANCE & CONTAINING COSTS THROUGH MAYORAL ACADEMIES

A Nationally Unique Model  
for Public Education

*Prepared by Public Impact for  
Mayor Daniel McKee,  
Cumberland, Rhode Island*

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## Introduction

In 2007, Mayor Daniel McKee of Cumberland, Rhode Island approached Public Impact with a challenge. From his perspective as mayor of a diverse town on the edge of Rhode Island's urban concentration, an area known as "the Blackstone Valley," dramatic change was needed in how public education operated and was funded. Student test scores, especially for economically disadvantaged students, had stagnated at unacceptably low levels despite steadily increasing spending on local public schools. Meanwhile, high local property tax rates threatened to undermine the region's economic vitality by making it hard to attract both businesses and residents. Mayors across the state had similar concerns, and several (including McKee) had joined a coalition of mayors to press for change. But what kind of change could truly boost performance and contain costs?

To help Mayor McKee answer that question, Public Impact prepared this report. The document begins by analyzing the current status of public education in Rhode Island and the Blackstone Valley. Working with researchers from Brown University, we scoured available data about the state's education performance. How well are students performing in RI as a whole and in the five-town region that includes Cumberland and its neighbors: Central Falls, Lincoln, Pawtucket, and Woonsocket? The report then explores one commonly suggested remedy for lagging performance: spending more money on public schools. How much does RI currently spend on its schools, and what kind of return does it receive on that investment? Looking ahead, what are the prospects for spending more in the future? And is there any reason to expect that spending more would raise student performance to desired levels?

The report then turns to a proposal for achieving dramatic performance gains while containing costs. It outlines a concept called "Mayoral Academies" – diverse, regional public schools designed from the beginning to achieve great results for students at a reasonable cost to taxpayers. The report details the rationale for such an approach and explains how it would work in practice. It concludes with an action plan setting forth how amendments to Rhode Island's current charter school law could make Mayoral Academies possible.

If pursued in the Blackstone Valley, Mayoral Academies would be a nationally unique model for public education. While mayors elsewhere have become more active in public education in recent years, Mayoral Academies would be the first example of a mayor-led regional network of public schools running parallel to the existing system. If successful, it would serve as a model that could be adopted throughout Rhode Island, but also imitated nationally by the many mayors across the country eager to find ways to improve public education dramatically with the resources they have.

# Rhode Island and the Blackstone Valley: Falling Short in Education

## Overall Performance in Rhode Island Lags the Nation and its Neighbors

Rhode Island enjoys many blessings relative to other states. Nearly 67% of its children, for example, live in families earning at least 200% of the poverty level, compared to 60% nationwide. Over 54% of adults earn more than the national median, versus (by definition) 50% of adults across the country. Over 48% of children have a parent with a post-secondary degree, versus 43% nationally. Based on these and other advantages, the magazine *Education Week* recently ranked Rhode Island 20th nationally on its measure of the “chance for success” its children enjoy.<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to students’ actual success, however, Rhode Island looks much worse in the national rankings. The same *Education Week* review ranked the Ocean State 10th to last in K-12 achievement, assigning a grade of “D.”<sup>2</sup> On every test-score measure the analysis examined, Rhode Island fell below the national average, and even farther below its immediate neighbors, Connecticut and Massachusetts. Consider the state’s performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as NAEP or “the nation’s report card.” As Figure 1 displays, Rhode Island’s 4th graders did worse than their peers nationally and in neighboring states on both reading and math. And Figure 2 tells much the same story for 8th graders.

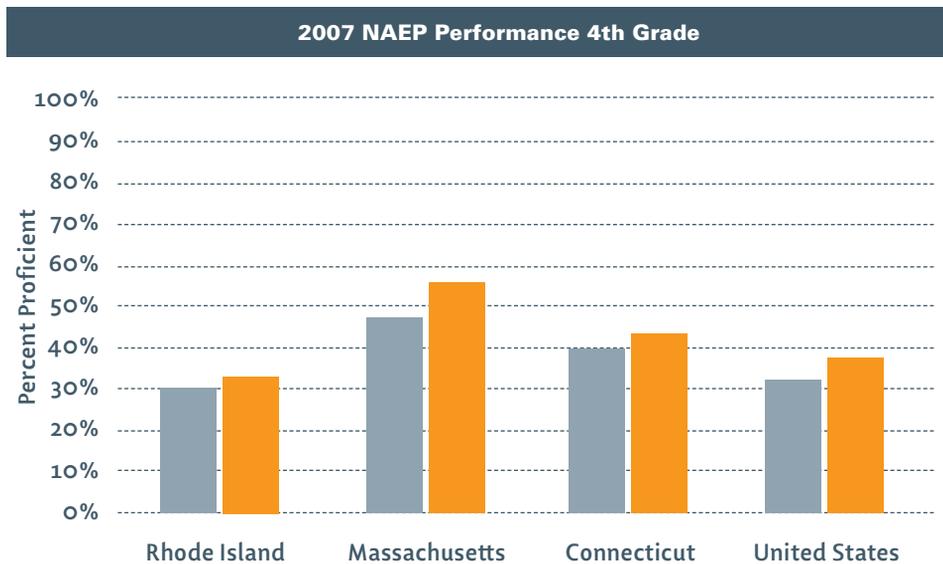


FIGURE 1.  
RHODE ISLAND’S  
COMPARATIVE  
PERFORMANCE ON 4TH  
GRADE EXAMS<sup>3</sup>

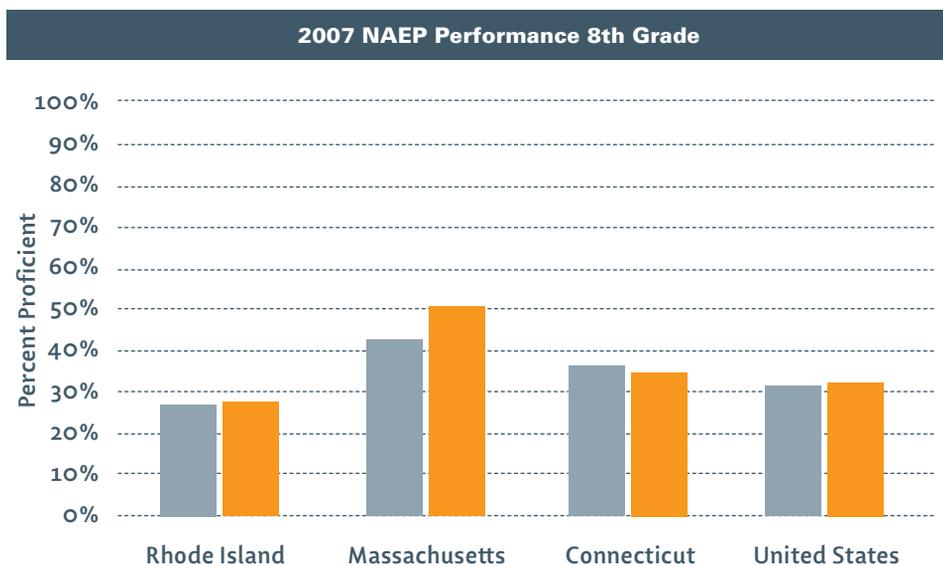
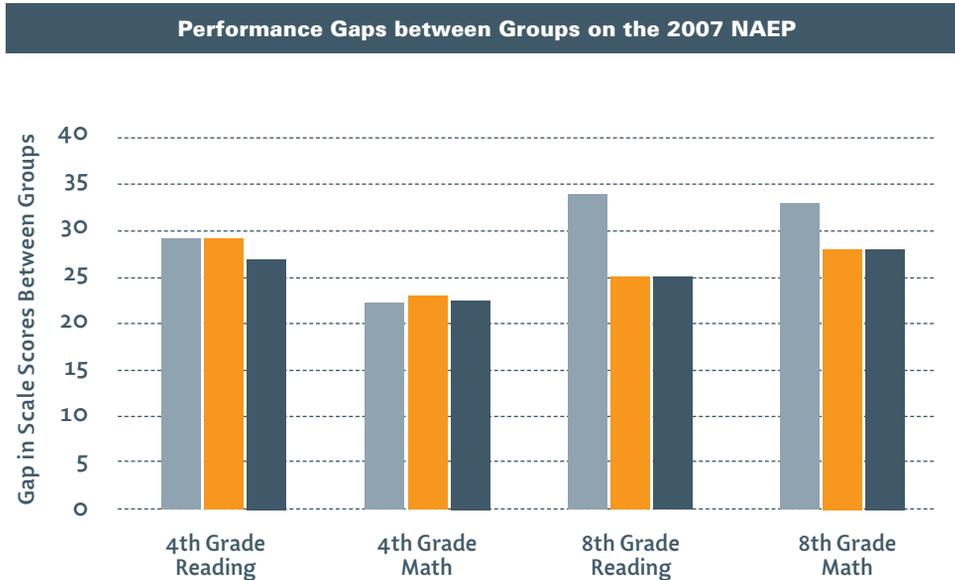


FIGURE 2. RHODE  
ISLAND’S COMPARATIVE  
PERFORMANCE ON 8TH  
GRADE EXAMS<sup>4</sup>



If one continues to compare Rhode Island at different grade levels and subjects, and within different groups of students (such as low-income youth or African-Americans), a clear pattern emerges: Rhode Island ranks below Connecticut, Massachusetts and the U.S. average. Not all of these differences are statistically significant, but the overall picture is one of Rhode Island lagging behind its neighbors and the nation as a whole. Some comparisons are particularly stunning. Among Latino students, for example, Rhode Island scores below Alabama – a state where 51% of public school students are low-income, compared to 35% in Rhode Island.<sup>5</sup> The gaps between whites and Latinos, whites and African-Americans, and higher and lower-income children are all substantial, as illustrated in Figure 3.

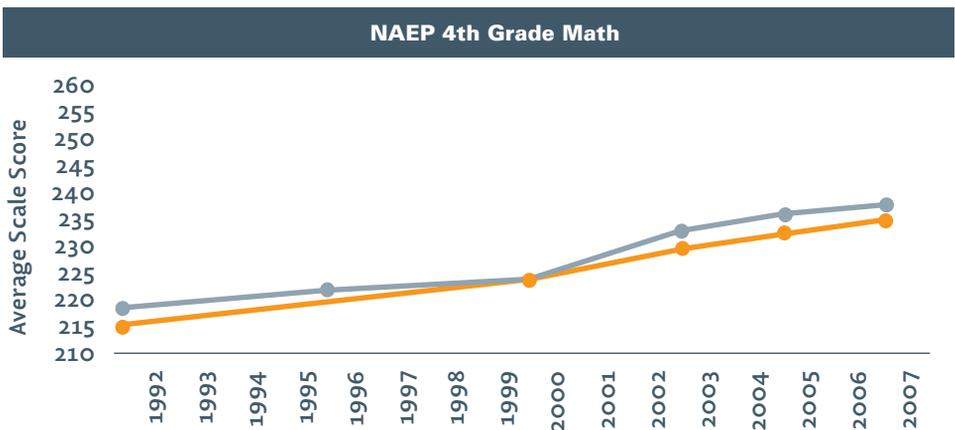
**FIGURE 3. TEST SCORE GAPS BETWEEN RHODE ISLAND GROUPS**



Rhode Island's scores have improved over the past decade and a half, but so have those of other states. As Figure 4 displays, even with some progress, Rhode Island's students have generally not been catching up with their peers around the country.

One indicator where Rhode Island beats the national average is its high school graduation rate, where the Ocean State edges the national average 70.6% to 69.9%. But while the nation's rate went up 3.1 points between 2000 and 2004, Rhode Island's actually dropped two points. In addition, a 70.6 graduation rate means that nearly 30% of 9th graders did not make it to graduation.<sup>6</sup>

**FIGURE 4. CHANGES IN NAEP MATH PERFORMANCE, 1992-2007<sup>7</sup>**



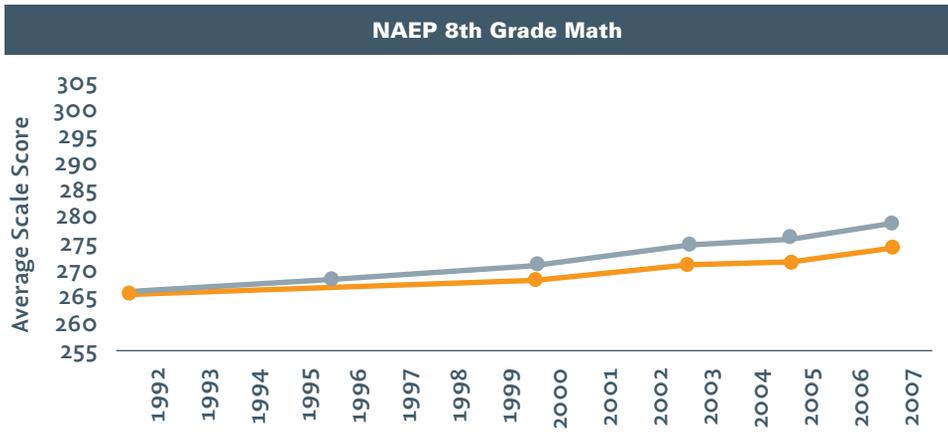


FIGURE 4. (CONTINUED)  
CHANGES IN NAEP MATH  
PERFORMANCE, 1992-2007<sup>7</sup>



### Performance Lags: A Blackstone Valley Problem Too

Many people assume that Rhode Island's performance problems are largely an issue that plagues the state's urban core, in particular the city of Providence. Yet the data suggest otherwise. As Figure 5 indicates, even in the schools deemed "suburban" by the state department of education, large percentages of students were not mastering state standards in the most recent testing year, 2006-07. Over 25% of suburban students fell short in reading, over 30% fell short in math, and over 40% lagged behind state standards in writing.

As a result, it is not surprising that significant performance challenges exist within the Blackstone Valley. Mayor McKee asked us to examine a five-town area comprising the Valley, which includes Central Falls, Cumberland, Lincoln, Pawtucket, and Woonsocket. Across the five towns, 27,955 students attend public schools. Some 45% of them are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. About 12% are African-American, and about 24% Latino. Taken as a region, the five-town area is thus a microcosm of much of Rhode Island, a blend of urban and suburban communities.

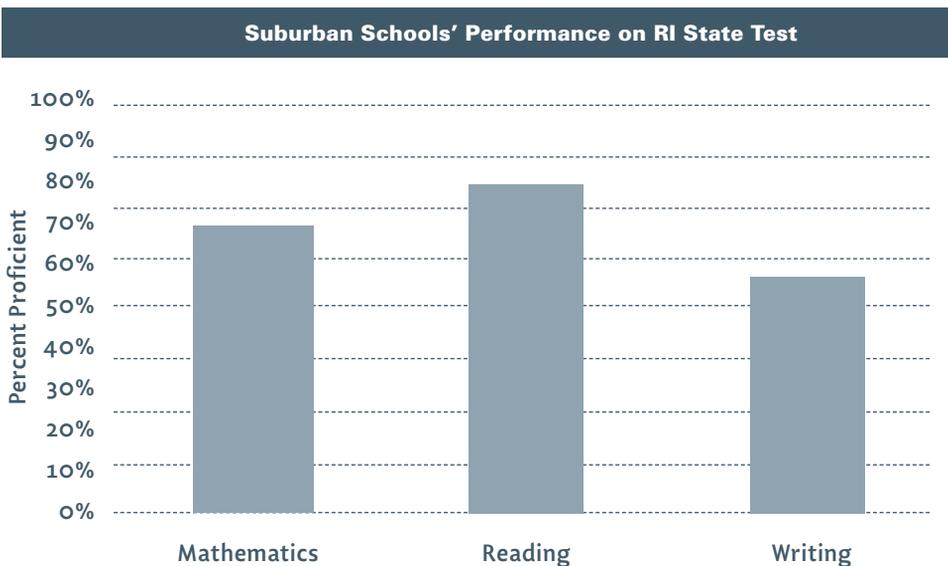


FIGURE 5. PERCENTAGE OF  
RI SUBURBAN STUDENTS  
PASSING STATE TESTS,  
2006-07<sup>8</sup>

Overall student performance in this region is, as one would expect, higher than that of a purely urban community like Providence. But how do the Blackstone Valley's low-income children specifically do on state tests? Figures 6 and 7 display some answers to that question. Economically disadvantaged fifth graders, for example, do about as well as poor children statewide on both reading and math, and somewhat better than Providence's low-income youth. But the differences are much less significant than the overall picture, which is one of very low performance across the board. Just over 45% of the Blackstone Valley's economically disadvantaged 5th grade students

are at grade level in reading, and just over 40% are in math (Figure 6). The 8th grade results are even more striking. Overall performance levels are abysmally low, with reading proficiency rates below 35% and math rates just over 20% for economically disadvantaged Blackstone Valley pupils. These math proficiency rates are even lower than in Providence, where just over a quarter of 8th graders make the grade in math (Figure 7).

As these charts make clear, the problems of low and unequal student performance in Rhode Island are not a “Providence issue.” They are an issue for a range of communities, including those of the Blackstone Valley. The next sections of the report turn to possible remedies.

## More Money? Not Likely...and Not the Solution

One common response to performance problems in education is to suggest devoting more resources to the task. Yet Rhode Island already spends a great deal on public education, and receives the relatively low returns noted above. In addition, even if more money were a remedy for lagging performance, Rhode Island’s current and long-term fiscal situation make significant increases in spending very unlikely.

FIGURE 6. COMPARATIVE PERFORMANCE OF ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED 5TH GRADERS, 2006-07

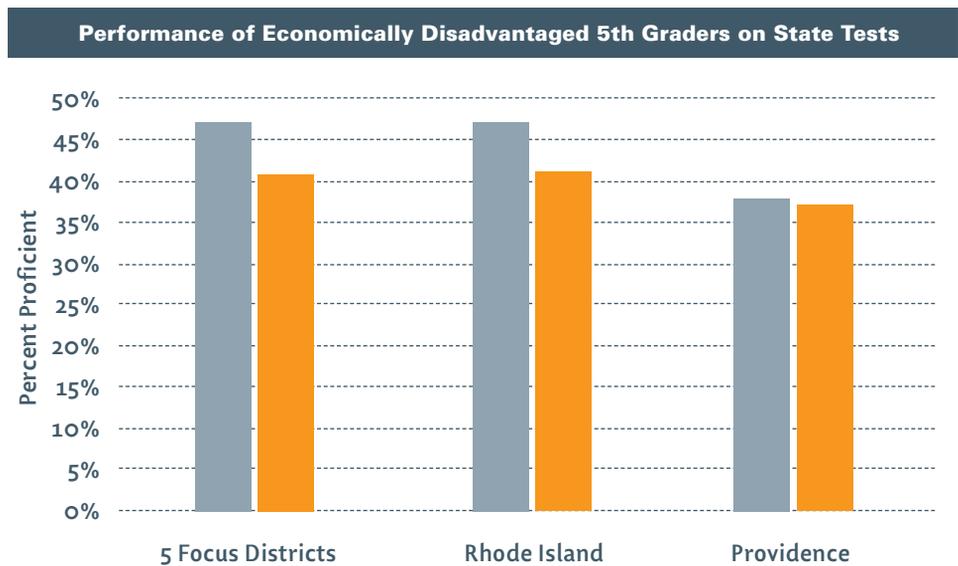
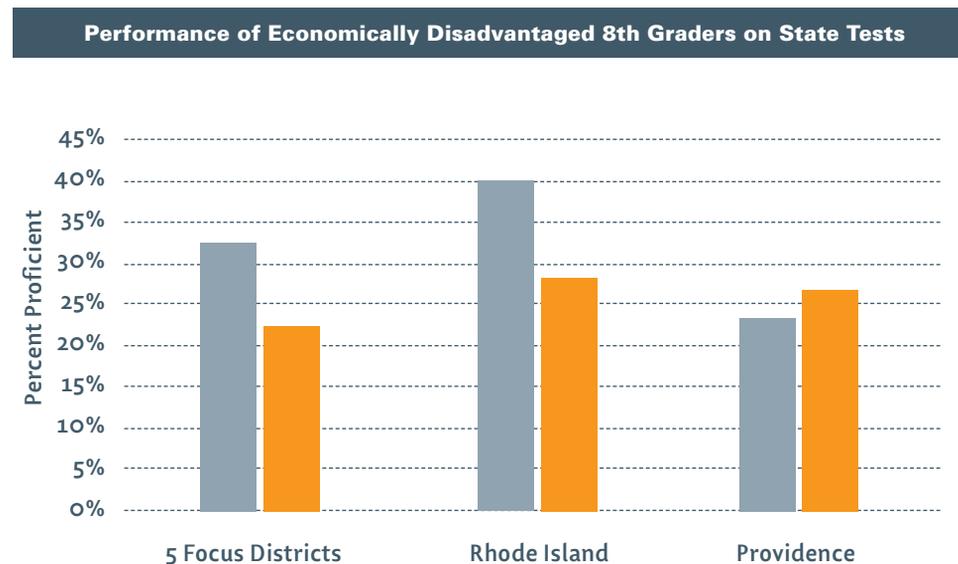


FIGURE 7. COMPARATIVE PERFORMANCE OF ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED 8TH GRADERS, 2006-07



## Rhode Island Already Outspends Other States

In Education Week's *Quality Counts 2008* report, Rhode Island scores very high on education spending. Per-pupil spending, adjusted for regional cost differences, was \$10,581 in 2005, compared with the national average of \$8,973. This level of spending ranked Rhode Island 7th among states in per-pupil outlays. Nearly 85% of Rhode Island students attend school in districts that outspend the national average.<sup>9</sup>

What is particularly striking about Rhode Island's education spending is the low return that this high level of spending generates for the citizens. Figure 8 shows where every state falls on spending and performance. Dots above the horizontal line were relatively high-performing states on the 8th grade NAEP math exam; dots to the left of the vertical line were relatively high-spending. States in the upper-left quadrant are those achieving relatively high performance levels while spending relatively little; that is, states getting a high return on their educational investments. Rhode Island is one of just a few states to fall in the opposite lower-right quadrant, which represents high-spending but low-performing states – the states getting the lowest return on their investment. While Figure 8 only examines 8th grade math, charts of other grades and subjects included on the NAEP tell much the same story. In light of this evidence, it is very difficult to make the argument that Rhode Island should increase its education spending. If anything, these charts make a strong case for the need to change how education is delivered while containing costs.

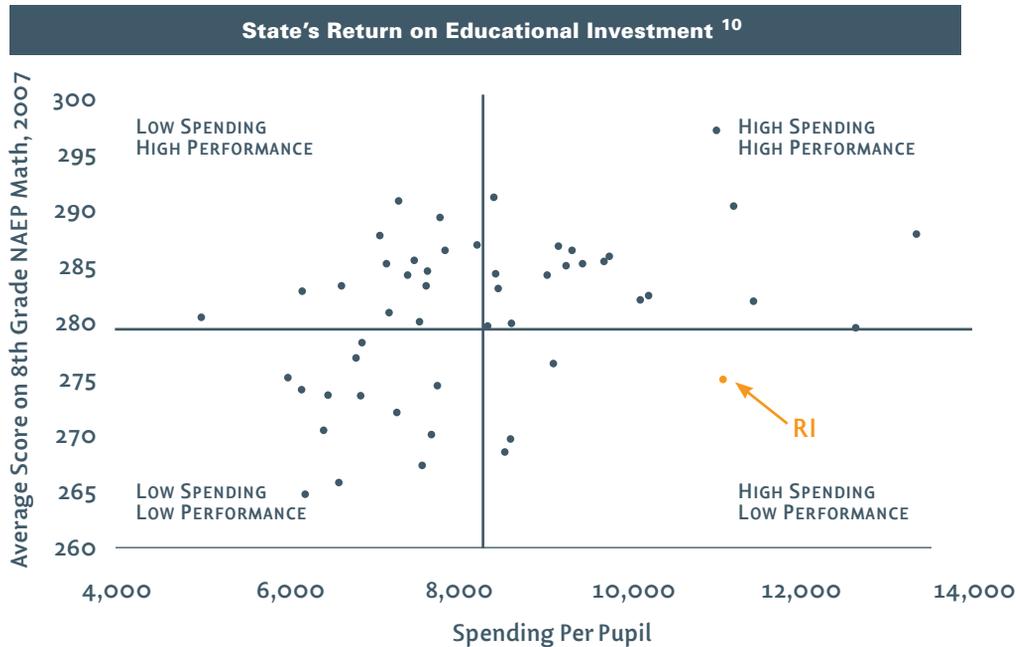


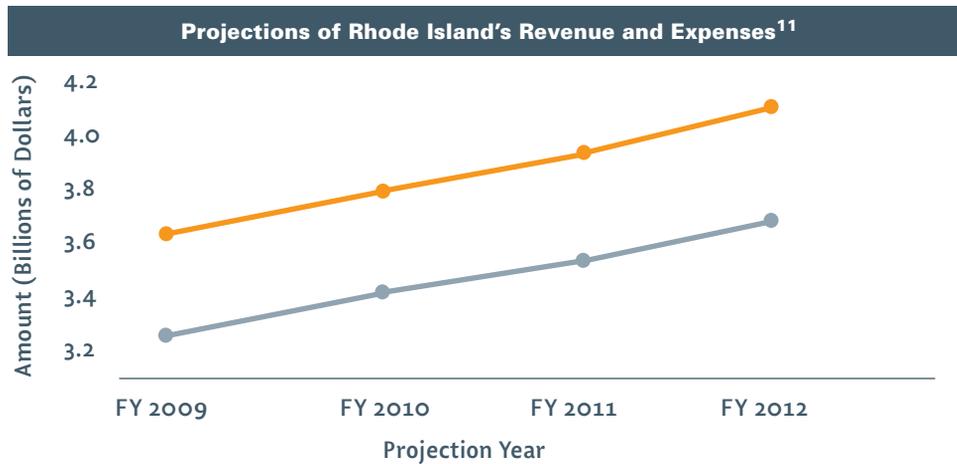
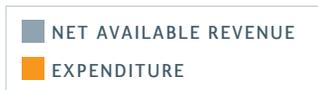
FIGURE 8.  
STATE'S RETURN  
ON EDUCATIONAL  
INVESTMENT<sup>10</sup>

## Fiscal Realities Make Additional Spending Unlikely

During the months in 2007 and 2008 during which this report was being drafted, Rhode Island's newspapers routinely ran stories about the state's large and growing budget deficit. With each report, the deficit appeared likely to be larger than in previous reports. The projection in Figure 9, for example, shows a dire fiscal situation, but it is already out of date. New spending of any kind, including on education, appears exceedingly unlikely in Rhode Island's short term.

The long-term also appears bleak. Population growth in Rhode Island is lower than the national average. One critical earning (and thus tax-paying) segment of the population – 34 to 49 year-olds – is actually projected to decrease in size between 2000 and 2010 (see Figure 10). This kind of trend inevitably has an impact on the level of resources available for priorities like public education.

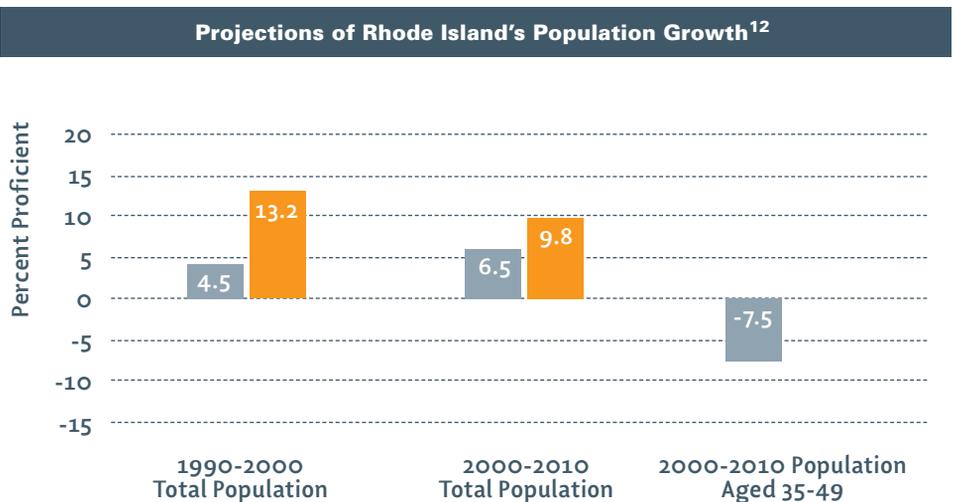
FIGURE 9.  
PROJECTIONS OF RHODE ISLAND'S REVENUE AND EXPENSES, 2009-2012<sup>11</sup>



In addition, Rhode Islanders already impose fairly high taxes on themselves, making additional revenue more difficult to generate. As Figure 11 shows, Rhode Island already had high state and local income taxes in fiscal year 1995, when it ranked 14th among states. By 2005, Rhode Island's ranking had risen to 7th nationally.

In this fiscal and demographic climate, substantial increases in public education revenue are unlikely. Given the low return on investment achieved with current funding, such increases would appear unwise in any case. What Rhode Island needs is not more spending, but new ways of allocating educational resources that produce better results. The following section turns to a proposal to achieve that aim.

FIGURE 10.  
PROJECTIONS OF RHODE ISLAND'S POPULATION GROWTH, 2000-2010<sup>12</sup>



**Change in National Ranking of State and Local Tax Collection**

	Fiscal Year 1995	Fiscal Year 2005
1	Alaska	Wyoming
2	New York	New York
3	Wisconsin	Hawaii
4	Minnesota	Maine
5	Maine	Alaska
6	Hawaii	Vermont
7	Connecticut	Rhode Island
8	Vermont	Wisconsin
9	New Mexico	West Virginia
10	Iowa	New Mexico
11	Washington	Connecticut
12	Arizona	Ohio
13	New Jersey	Nebraska
14	Rhode Island	Louisiana
15	Utah	New Jersey

FIGURE 11. CHANGE IN NATIONAL RANKING OF STATE AND LOCAL TAX COLLECTION PER \$1000 OF PERSONAL INCOME, 1995-2005<sup>13</sup>

**Mayoral Involvement and New Public Schools: High-Potential Trends**

This report outlines a proposal for a new network of regional public schools called Mayoral Academies. By starting new schools, built from the beginning to perform well while containing costs, the Mayoral Academy approach can model out a new strategy for delivering the public schools that Rhode Island’s children deserve and that its taxpayers can afford.

The Mayoral Academy idea combines two promising trends in public education: greater mayoral involvement in public education, and the creation of new, break-the-mold public schools that are achieving extraordinary results for children. Before detailing the idea of Mayoral Academies, the next subsection explains those two trends and the promise they hold for Rhode Island.

**Mayoral Leadership in Education**

Nationwide, mayors have become increasingly involved in public education. As Brown professor Kenneth Wong had noted, this involvement has taken many forms.<sup>14</sup> Some mayors, such as in New York City and Chicago, have assumed control of the city schools, ending decades of separation between school and municipal governance. Many other mayors have become involved in less dramatic ways, such as supporting school bond issues or mobilizing city service agencies to benefit schools. Many mayors believe their involvement has great potential to lift school performance, for several reasons. First, mayors are uniquely accountable to the public. While school boards and school committees are also typically elected, the multi-member structure of such boards makes it difficult for the voters to assign credit or blame to specific individuals. Mayors, by contrast, stand alone as their cities’ or towns’ highest elected officials. If they assume control of or influence over the schools, voters can hold them directly accountable in ways that they cannot do with school committees.



Second, mayors have unique access to resources that can be helpful to a public school system. These include city services such as police, parks and recreation, and transportation, all of which can potentially be mobilized and directed in ways that contribute to public education. Mayors can also galvanize other resources less directly, such as corporate and philanthropic support for schools. As a result, when mayors become involved in public education – whether by assuming control of school systems or in less drastic fashion – they can bring resources to bear that might otherwise go missing.

### ***Break-the-Mold New Public Schools***

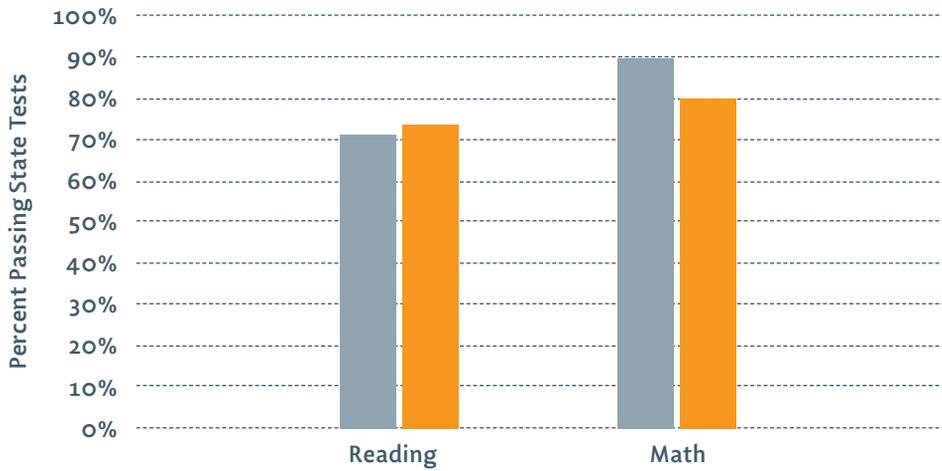
As mayors have ramped up their involvement, a second trend has become evident in public education: the emergence of new public schools that are achieving dramatically improved results for students. Most, though not all, of these break-the-mold schools are charter schools. This is not to say that charter schools in general or on average have always distinguished themselves. Charter schools in some states, including Rhode Island, have performed comparably well; in other states their performance lags. The idea here is not that all charter schools are somehow “better,” but that the charter vehicle, and other new school approaches, have made it possible for enterprising educators and citizens to create schools that perform extraordinarily well.

Figures 12 through 14 show examples of these top-notch schools from the elementary, middle, and high school levels. In all cases the schools serve populations where most or nearly all of the children are poor and/or children of color, and they beat the odds by achieving very high levels of performance. Elm City College Prep, for example, an elementary school in New Haven, Connecticut beats the state average in reading and approaches it in math with a population that is 79% low-income and 98% children of color.

These schools, and the perhaps 200-300 like them around the country, are not all alike, but they do share some features that set them apart from the more typical, and less successful, schools that surround them:

- **Very high expectations for all students.** These schools are relentlessly committed to helping their students get to college and be successful there. Though they tend to serve neighborhoods where less than half of students even graduate from high school, much less go on to college, they try to motivate and support every one of their students to aspire for higher education. This obsession starts early: even the elementary school example above, Elm City, has “College Prep” in its name. In addition, the relentless college focus is more than just school names and other symbols of commitment. The schools adopt a “do whatever it takes” approach to helping students meet the goal, which generally means longer school days and years; bounteous one-on-one support for students who are struggling; staff available to help students beyond the bounds of the school day; strong links to social service organizations that can help solve students’ out-of-school problems, and so on. “No excuses” has become a cliché, but these schools take this approach very seriously.
- **Energetic, talented leadership and staff.** These schools are almost always launched by one or a small group of visionary leaders who carry the school vision forward in the critical start-up period. These leaders in turn attract waves of talented, committed teachers to their teams. In cities where there is constant talk of “teacher shortages” and hand-wringing over how to attract more high-quality teachers to “high-need schools,” these schools tend to generate hundreds of applications for every teaching position, as they become known as magnets for driven educators who want to make a difference. Their staffs are often young, sprinkled with more veteran educators to help channel youthful energy in the right direction.
- **Freedom to start from scratch and adjust over time.** Whether or not they are charter schools, these beat-the-odds schools generally operate with a great deal of freedom that is critical to their success. Perhaps the most important component of their freedom is the ability to start from scratch. They do not have to transform a dysfunctional school into a good one; instead, they can build the culture and strategies that work from the outset. But other aspects of their freedom are also vital, especially the opportunity to staff the school with a team of people who are wholly committed to the school’s vision and approach; the ability to change

**Elm City College Prep | New Haven, Connecticut, 2005-06**

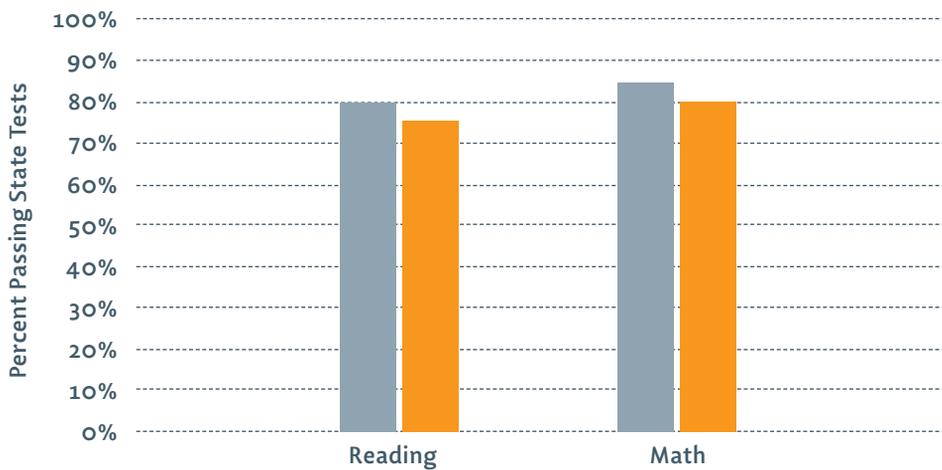


**FIGURE 12. ELM CITY COLLEGE PREP**

- Grades K-6
- 256 Students
- 79% Low Income
- 98% Minority

■ ELM CITY  
■ STATE

**Amistad Academy | New Haven, Connecticut, 2005-06**

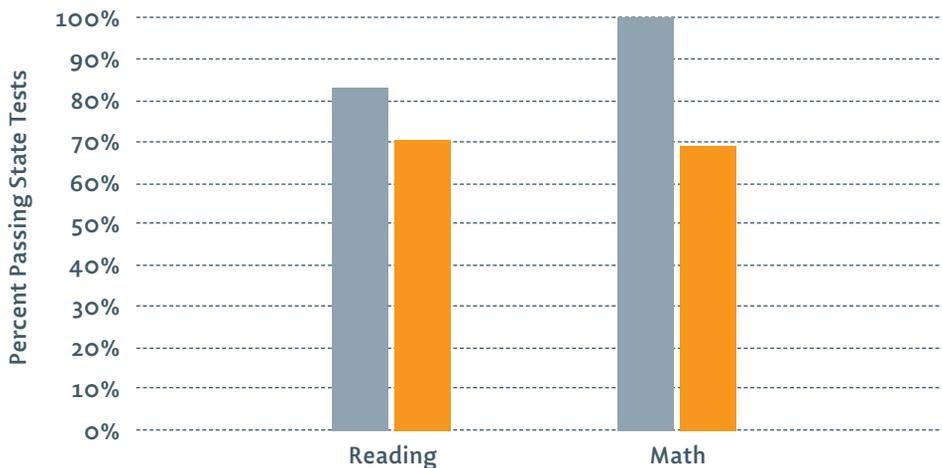


**FIGURE 13. AMISTAD ACADEMY**

- Grades 5-8
- 270 Students
- 84% Low Income
- 98% Minority

■ AMISTAD  
■ STATE

**MATCH Charter Public High School | Boston, Massachusetts, 2006-07**



**FIGURE 14. MATCH CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL**

- Grades 9-12
- 207 Students
- 69% Low Income
- 97% Minority
- Near 0% Dropouts
- 99% of Grads Accepted to College

■ MATCH  
■ STATE



staff over time as it becomes clear what teachers are a good fit for the school; the latitude to allocate resources in ways that get results (such as the longer school days and years) rather than according to rules or traditions; and the chance to adjust what they do over time as they try approaches, build on what works, and discard what does not.

## The Mayoral Academy Model

The Mayoral Academy strategy outlined below aims to bring together these two powerful trends – mayoral leadership in education and building great new schools from scratch – into one model for public education in the Blackstone Valley of Rhode Island: Mayoral Academies. The idea is to establish a **network of new, regional public schools governed by a mayor-led board of trustees**.

Several points are central to the Mayoral Academy concept:

- Mayoral Academies are **public schools**. They should be open to all students in the region, tuition-free. If they are over-subscribed, they should hold a lottery to decide whom to admit. They should be non-religious, and they should adhere to basic safety and civil rights laws that apply to all public schools.
- Mayoral Academies are **new, autonomous schools**. The intent of Mayoral Academies is not to try and change existing public schools, though if they are successful they will be able to influence them indirectly. Instead, Mayoral Academies should be newly formed, outside of existing school districts, operating parallel to existing public schools. This newness and the flexibility Mayoral Academies receive from rules and regulations will allow them to build high-performing programs from the outset.
- Mayoral Academies are **regional schools**. While most public schools draw from a single district, Mayoral Academies should have regional attendance areas; in the case of the Blackstone Valley, the five-town area includes both distressed urban communities and other communities: Central Falls, Cumberland, Lincoln, Pawtucket and Woonsocket. Students from all five towns should be invited to enroll and, as described in detail below, a regional board of trustees should oversee the schools.
- Mayoral Academies are **operated by nonprofits with the track record or potential for success**. The governing board of the Mayoral Academies should seek out, through requests for proposals that go out across the state, region, and nation, the most highly qualified nonprofit operators of public schools to run Mayoral Academies. The board should contract with only top-notch operators with the potential to achieve extraordinary results with students – those with track records of running successful schools and those with compelling proposals and the capacity to deliver on them.
- Mayoral Academies are **accountable schools**. Mayoral Academies should be held accountable by contract to the governing board, which should be chaired by a mayor or town administrator. That mayor is in turn accountable to the voters, and the board as a whole is accountable to the state of Rhode Island, which should have the ultimate authority over the future of Mayoral Academies. Finally, since no family should be required to send their children to Mayoral Academies, the schools will be accountable to parents.

The following sections explain how Mayoral Academies would work under four headings: governance, school operations, accountability, and funding.

## **Governance**

The network of Mayoral Academies for the five-town Blackstone Valley region should be governed by a board of trustees comprised of not less than five individuals. This board should then apply to the State Board of Regents for a charter to operate Mayoral Academies.

The following guiding principles explain how this board should operate:

- **Representation:** membership should include individuals residing in each of the five towns.
- **Municipal Leadership:** a mayor or town administrator should serve as chair of the board.
- **Expertise:** the board collectively should have the expertise needed to serve as stewards of the network.
- **Sustainability:** the network's future should not depend on any one person or town's involvement.

To put these broad guiding principles into action, Mayor Daniel McKee of Cumberland should appoint the initial board. To ensure that the initial board is representative of the five towns, Mayor McKee should seek nominations from municipal leaders in the five towns for the initial appointments. In addition, Mayor McKee should seek to ensure an appropriate mix of expertise on the initial board, including areas such as education, finance, law, management, fundraising, and the perspective of parents of school-age children likely to attend the academies.

Once the board exists, it should elect its own new members as members leave the board. At all times, the chair of the board should be the mayor or town administrator of one of the towns in the network. The board should endeavor to maintain the necessary mix of expertise among its members through subsequent appointments including, ideally, multiple elected municipal leaders.

To help the board move initially in the right direction, Mayor McKee should serve as its initial chair. Annually thereafter, the board should elect its chair from among its members who are mayors or town administrators. This municipal leadership is vital to maintain the accountability that attaches to elected officials who represent their towns. To ensure that the board (and the Mayoral Academies they oversee) is not overly reliant on elected officials who can lose their posts, initial board members should be assigned one, two and three year terms in order to create a "staggered" membership. Members appointed subsequently should have three-year terms, with the possibility of re-appointment. These longer, staggered terms will help build longevity and continuity into governance of the network.

## **School Operations**

**Contracts with competent providers.** While the board of trustees described in the previous section should govern Mayoral Academies and be accountable to the state and parents for their performance, the board should not operate the schools directly. Instead, it should seek out the most competent operators it can find from sources in Rhode Island, New England, and beyond. In this search, the board should look for operators that present (a) a compelling plan for achieving extraordinary results with students; and (b) a convincing account of their capacity to deliver on that plan. Several potential sources for such operators are worth considering:

- *Established charter management organizations.* As the number of highly successful schools like those described above has grown, many of the most effective schools have formed organizations to help them "scale up" their models to other campuses. The Elm City and Amistad schools described above, for example, are part of a charter management organization (CMO) known as Achievement First. Other CMOs include Uncommon Schools, Aspire Public Schools, Green Dot Public Schools, regional clusters of Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) schools, and the Rhode Island based Big Picture Company. The advantage of contracting with CMOs is

Operators should present a compelling plan for achieving extraordinary results with students and should have a convincing account of their capacity to deliver that plan.



that they bring to the table both of the elements listed above: a model or school design that has been put into action elsewhere, and the capacity – through the CMO’s “central office” – to do the work needed to launch and operate the school, work such as hiring leaders and teachers, getting facilities into shape, deploying data and assessment systems, complying with state and federal regulations, and evaluating results over time.

- *Successful Rhode Island charter schools.* Rhode Island is home to several successful stand alone charter schools, some of which may be interested in scaling up by opening Mayoral Academies. While these schools would not have the central-office capacity of a CMO, it is worth noting that CMOs typically begin as single schools, forming their central offices and scaling up only after field testing and refining their models.
- *Talented, visionary leaders of start-ups.* Contracting with a proven CMO or school has clear advantages: namely, the confidence that the planned approach to schooling has been effective elsewhere. That said, successful CMOs and schools began as ideas germinated by talented, innovative leaders. If the board were willing to set a very high bar, considering only extraordinarily talented people with very compelling ideas, this start-up route could be effective as well.

**Wide latitude to get results.** For the Mayoral Academy idea to achieve its full potential, the schools need wide authority to implement their school designs, build and adjust their teams, allocate resources, and make other critical management decisions. To create that kind of latitude, the Mayoral Academy board should seek the full range of waivers available to charter schools from the state commissioner. In addition, Mayor McKee should ask the General Assembly to make additional flexibility available to Mayoral Academies in a few key areas, described fully in the “Action Plan” section below.

**Strong links to municipal services outside of school.** One powerful aspect of municipal involvement in public education is the potential to bring the full range of city and town services to bear in improving educational outcomes. Mayor McKee is already a leader in this respect. In February, 2007, Mayor McKee and his Town Council passed an ordinance creating the Office of Children Youth and Learning (OCYL). The first of its kind in Rhode Island, this department has built an extensive network of after-school and summer programs, all focused on learning, from the municipal side of government. After only one year, Cumberland students now have access to over a dozen enrichment programs built around 8-week sessions; they have pre-K to 12th grade programs providing extra help with basic skills such as literacy and math; and high school students have a nationally recognized Youth Civic Engagement program.

Most high-performing schools around the nation have well organized after-school models that they view as vital to their success. Since Mayoral Academy providers are likely to be especially receptive to such approaches, Cumberland’s OCYL could work in partnership with the providers to build such a model while continuing its mission to serve every young resident of Cumberland regardless of what school they attend. The potential for both a regionalization of the OCYL model and a seamless connect with Mayoral Academies would appear to be high. Leaders of the five towns should apply all of their municipal resources to ensure that students and families receive all of the services they need outside of school in order to succeed in school.

### **Accountability**

The Mayoral Academy model represents a highly accountable form of public schooling, featuring multiple levels of accountability to maximize the chances that the schools are high performing:

- *School operators to board of trustees.* The Mayoral Academy board should enter into clear, performance-based contracts with all operators. The contracts should spell out explicitly the performance targets that operators are expected to meet over time. Contractors’ continuing ability to operate Mayoral Academies should hinge on their successful achievement of these targets.

- *Board of trustees to town citizens.* Because the board of trustees will always be chaired by a mayor or town administrator, and because its membership will always represent the five towns in the region, the board will also be accountable to the citizens of the region's towns. Voters, for example, will have the opportunity to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with any elected officials who are members of the board. And because of mayoral involvement, Mayoral Academies will be highly visible in the media, creating a form of transparency that adds further accountability.
- *Board of trustees accountable to State Board of Regents under charter law.* As the holder of a charter from the State Board of Regents, the board will be accountable to the state for whatever performance objectives are part of the charter. At the very least, these will include full participation in the state's testing and accountability system and full applicability of the federal No Child Left Behind Act's provisions.
- *Board and school operators accountable to families.* Because Mayoral Academies will be schools of choice, with no families obligated to enroll their children, they will have to prove their value to families over time in order to maintain enrollment. Parents' ability to "vote with their feet" creates an additional element of accountability for Mayoral Academies.

## **Funding**

Rhode Island's state charter law includes formulaic funding provisions that determine how much funding the Mayoral Academies board will receive and from what sources. The board should, in turn, negotiate funding levels with school operators, retaining only what funding is needed to manage a lean oversight function and to operate any shared services that school operators ask the board to offer (such as transportation). Since almost all decision-making and day-to-day management should be placed at the school level, almost all of the resources should flow to that level as well.

The Mayoral Academy concept has considerable potential to bring new resources into public education. By serving as an exciting new model for how public education is delivered, it can be a magnet for philanthropic donors who might otherwise shy away from investments in the existing system due to skepticism about its ability to reform. Federal funding as well could flow to the initiative, just as federal funds have flowed to Mayor McKee's Office of Children, Youth, and Learning.

Rhode Island's charter formula is designed to minimize adverse fiscal impact on districts whose students choose to enroll in charter schools. The state calculates a per-pupil cost for each district. For each student from a district who attends a charter school, the district retains 5% of the per-pupil cost for its own administrative functions. The other 95% goes to the charter school, with the district paying a fraction and the state picking up the rest of the tab. Since the amount of state money flowing to districts does not change when a student moves to a charter school, districts typically end up with more money per pupil as a result of a student's exit. In Cumberland's case, for example, the state calculates the per pupil cost at \$9,763. When a student attends a charter school \$5,632 stays behind in the district, even though the student is gone. As a result, if 50 Cumberland students moved to a Mayoral Academy, the district would retain nearly \$300,000 per year to handle any transition costs associated with the move.

Though this formula works fairly well for districts, there is no doubt that fiscal adjustments will be necessary if Mayoral Academies become a reality. Experience elsewhere suggests that this kind of fiscal impact can undermine local and political support for school options, which otherwise might be widely endorsed. As a result, Mayor McKee should ask the General Assembly to cushion the financial impact on districts – in a limited and temporary fashion – when students move to Mayoral Academies. The existing charter school law in Massachusetts provides one example of how such a cushion could work. In the first year a student chooses to attend a Mayoral Academy, the state would reimburse the district for 100% of the local tax dollars that flow to the charter school from the district. In the second year, the state would reimburse 60%, and in the third, 40%. In subsequent years, the district receives no reimbursement, but by that time the

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district will have been able to adjust its finances in response to the shifted enrollment. This kind of cushion, while not expensive to the state, could go a long way to creating a supportive local environment for Mayoral Academies. The Academy model could, in turn, provide a pathway for increased political support for high-quality public schools.

## **An Action Plan to Make Mayoral Academies Happen**

To make Mayoral Academies a reality in Rhode Island, state policymakers will need to create new legislation or amend existing statutes. In other states, charter school laws create a vehicle to pursue ideas like Mayoral Academies. Rhode Island, too, has a charter school law on the books, but that law would need to change somewhat in order to realize the full potential of Mayoral Academies as described above. The following is a list of specific changes that would pave the way for Mayoral Academies:

- **Expand the list of eligible charter-seekers to include newly established regional, Mayor-led nonprofits.** The current charter law allows several different kinds of entities to seek charters, including “established” nonprofits. The law defines “established” as existing for two years and existing “for a substantial reason other than to operate a school.” To this provision could be added language that allowed another class of nonprofit to seek charters, regional municipal boards. These boards could be defined as nonprofits that:
  - Have boards of trustees that are chaired by a mayor or town administrator
  - Have boards of trustees that include representation from multiple districts (including both distressed urban and other districts)
  - Intend to govern schools that enroll a diverse student body, including students who reside in both distressed urban and other districts.

Schools governed by these boards would be known as Mayoral Academies.

- **Exempt Mayoral Academies from any current or future moratorium on new charters.** The current law contains a moratorium on the approval of schools planning to begin operations in 2007-08. The Board of Regents has already begun approving new charters for 2008-09. But it is possible that the legislature will elect to extend the moratorium. If they do, language could be added to the moratorium provision exempting Mayoral Academies, as defined in the previous bullet, from this prohibition.
- **Create a different student makeup provision for Mayoral Academies.** Under current law, charter schools in RI must enroll a student body that has at least as high a combined percentage of students with low incomes, limited English proficiency, and disabilities as the host district. This provision does not mesh well with the Mayoral Academy concept, because the schools by definition enroll students from multiple districts, including distressed urban districts. Comparing their enrollment to that of the “host” district, then, makes little sense. Instead, Mayoral Academies should be required (and allowed) to construct their lotteries in order to achieve a mix of distressed urban and other students as a condition of retaining the exemptions and hold harmless provisions described in the following two bullets.

- **Ensure that Mayoral Academies are free from a small number of provisions that currently constrain RI charter schools.** As explained above, for the Mayoral Academy concept to reach its full potential, Mayoral Academies need the flexibility to operate in ways that achieve the best results for students. Research on schools makes clear that one of the most important levers for improving school performance is the quality of teachers. As a result, it is essential that Mayoral Academies be empowered to recruit and retain the highest possible caliber of teaching professionals. Two kinds of flexibility are especially important:

- *The ability to create modern, portable retirement plans.* The highly talented teaching force that Mayoral Academies need is likely to be comprised of a mix of teachers: (a) veteran teachers who can mentor younger teachers and provide leadership; (b) young, energetic teachers who may or may not plan lifelong careers in the classroom; and (c) retired teachers who may be attracted back to the classroom by the possibility of innovative schooling. Mayoral Academies need to be able to offer benefits, including retirement benefits, that make sense for all three groups. For groups (b) and (c), the standard state retirement system is a poor fit. Young teachers will tend to want portable retirement plans that they can take with them whatever they decide to do with their careers, versus plans that require them to accumulate many years of experience in order to receive benefits. Retired teachers simply cannot take jobs that involve participating in the state retirement system. So for groups (b) and (c), Mayoral Academies need to be able to seek a waiver from the state's retirement statutes – waivers that are not generally available to RI charter schools. Individuals in group (a), by contrast, may well want to remain in the state retirement system to continue accumulating years of service. For these teachers, the current state retirement law that allows teachers to continue accumulating service while teaching in private schools should be extended to Mayoral Academies as well. These teachers should be able to serve in Mayoral Academies indefinitely and accumulate service credit, as long as they make the payments required. These provisions together would allow Mayoral Academies to create ideal retirement plans – flexible enough to attract young and retired teachers, but also those in between.
- *The ability to build a team over time that gets results.* Mayoral Academies need to be able to build a teaching force over time that achieves the kind of exceptional results that children deserve. To make that possible, Mayoral Academies also need to be able to request waivers from the state's tenure laws – again, exemptions that are currently unavailable to charter schools generally. With such waivers in hand, Mayoral Academies would be in a position to create performance-oriented cultures that benefit children.

With those changes in place, Mayoral Academies could be formed through the regular chartering mechanism. Mayor McKee could form a nonprofit, chairing the board and assembling a representative membership from the five towns in his region. That nonprofit could submit a charter application to the Board of Regents, requesting a charter to open multiple campuses over time, ultimately serving students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. If the Regents granted the charter, the nonprofit could get to work finding extraordinary operators to open and run the new schools.

The first Mayoral Academy could open in fall 2009, with more to come in the next few years. The exact scale-up plan should depend on parent demand, the availability of facilities and the initiative's success attracting excellent operators. That said, a sensible approach might be to begin with one or more elementary schools, opening a middle school within a few years to enroll children "graduating" from the primary Academies. A full-scale high school could be a later development, although rapidly developing virtual technology could make it feasible to offer high school options in the short term online, targeting students who have dropped out or who have not been successful in conventional schools. Within five years, thousands of students could be receiving a top-notch education in the new system, which could be the model for similar networks elsewhere in the state – and beyond.

The highly talented teaching force that Mayoral Academies need is likely to be comprised of a mix of teachers.



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## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Education Week, *Quality Counts 2008: Tapping into Teaching* (Bethesda, MD: Editorial Projects in Education, 2008), pp. 40-41.
- <sup>2</sup>Education Week, *Quality Counts 2008*, pp. 42-44.
- <sup>3</sup>National Assessment of Educational Progress, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.
- <sup>4</sup>National Assessment of Educational Progress, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.
- <sup>5</sup>National Assessment of Educational Progress, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>. As is customary in education, “low-income” here means eligible for the federal free and reduced price lunch program, which is made available to low-income families.
- <sup>6</sup>Education Week, *Quality Counts 2008*, p. 44. Many methods exist to calculate graduation rates. Education Week uses a method known as the Cumulative Promotion Index, which examines how the size of a state’s cohort of students changes between 9th grade and the cohort’s expected graduation year.
- <sup>7</sup>National Assessment of Educational Progress, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.
- <sup>8</sup>New England Common Assessment Program Results." October 2006. Rhode Island Dept. of Education summary.
- <sup>9</sup>Education Week, *Quality Counts 2008*, p 57.
- <sup>10</sup>National Assessment of Educational Progress, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.
- <sup>11</sup>Governor Donald L. Carcieri, *State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations: Executive Summary Fiscal Year 2008*. Retrieved December 9, 2007, from <http://www.budget.ri.gov>.
- <sup>12</sup>Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council, *Rhode Island 2010: Charting a new course: Demographic challenges to affordable public service* (Providence, RI: Author, 2005).
- <sup>13</sup>Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council, *How Rhode Island Taxes Compare* (Providence, RI: Author, 2007), p. 2.
- <sup>14</sup>Kenneth K. Wong and Francis X. Shen, *The Education Mayor: Improving America’s Schools* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007).

While mayors elsewhere have become more active in public education in recent years, Mayoral Academies would be the first example of a mayor-led regional network of public schools running parallel to the existing system.

## A Nationally Unique Model for Public Education

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Mayor Daniel McKee,  
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