

NORTH READING

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Per-pupil cost: \$5,300; MCAS scores: priceless

Test success outstrips income, school funds

By Erica Noonan, Globe Staff, 10/30/2003

In the 2003 MCAS results released a month ago, North Reading stood out.

The towns with the highest percentages of students earning proficient or advanced scores on the MCAS test -- Wellesley, Westford, Winchester, and Harvard -- are among the state's wealthiest communities. But at Number 8 was North Reading, which ranked 48th in median household income, at \$76,962, in the 2000 US Census.

Moreover, North Reading has historically spent less per pupil than many of its wealthier neighbors. The district's regular per-pupil spending was approximately \$5,300 in 2001, significantly less than equivalent spending that year in Harvard (\$6,100), Arlington (\$6,660), Winchester (\$6,840), Lexington (\$7,290), and Bedford (\$8,410), according to state Department of Education statistics.

Of those northwestern suburbs, only Harvard and Winchester outscored North Reading in the Boston Globe's 2003 overall district rankings for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System.

So how has a town that was once a suburban dream destination for blue-collar residents from Medford and Everett, and even today lacks the cachet of towns like Andover, emerged as an MCAS powerhouse?

"I attribute the success first and foremost to our very competent teaching staff. There is a lot of time spent supporting the teachers in professional development," said North Reading School Superintendent David Troughton. It's the in-house work that makes the difference -- organizing curriculum teams, appointing teachers to work with a curriculum director responsible for monitoring the state's expectations, he said.

"We say to the teacher, 'Your job is to do the best with the kids that you can every day.' A lot of our time is spent thinking about how [teachers] can use their time to

develop rich and solid lessons, and open up the curriculum to all the kids in the class."

North Reading High School's shift in the past few years to a block schedule -- where students attend four 78-minute-long classes each day -- has provided more intensive learning sessions, and new graduation requirements requiring four years of math instead of two have also provided more academic rigor, Troughton said.

Parents are also an important factor in high MCAS scores, said Troughton. North Reading families have historically been enthusiastic fund-raisers and back-to-school-night attendees. But in recent years, the district has asked parents to think more critically about how and what their children are learning, he said. The town's elementary schools are dumping a traditional grading system in favor of a descriptive system designed to generate more dialogue between teachers and parents about how each child is progressing, he said.

What about cynics who suggest that North Reading's MCAS success is a factor of simply "teaching to the test"?

"I could see how that might be a criticism [of high scoring schools], but we are not focusing all our energies on getting kids good MCAS scores. Many parts of our curriculum aren't even in the tests," said Troughton, describing arts and foreign language programs.

The idea that student proficiency on MCAS isn't necessarily connected with how much money their parents have, or even how much a school district spends, has intrigued education officials across the state.

Dr. Robert Gaudet, a senior research analyst with the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts, has monitored districts that "overperform" on standardized school tests.

Neighboring Reading has been full of young urban professionals for decades, while North Reading was traditionally more blue-collar, Gaudet said.

"But over the past 10 or 15 years, people are moving in with money, and that generally correlates to higher education levels." That, he said has translated into intense parental interest in school quality, but North Reading has raced ahead of other up-and-coming suburbs in terms of 2003 MCAS achievement.

"North Reading is now a solid middle- to upper-middle-class place, but hardly the gold

coast, not like Wellesley or Weston," he said.

Gaudet, who has studied how indicators of wealth -- such as the average age of cars owned by residents -- is indicative of standardized test performance, said that the high number of North Reading residents involved with the school system is another important factor.

Of the town's approximately 13,800 residents, 2,600 are students in the public schools. That means a critical mass of North Reading's households have a direct interest in public school quality.

Troughton has done a skillful job of "leveraging the demand for education" in town, Gaudet said. "He understands the civic cortex. There is a demand for services that people want."

Why some other towns did not perform as well on the most recent round of MCAS tests as income levels or parental involvement might indicate is not clear, except that some well-regarded school districts can grow "complacent" over time, Gaudet said.

North Reading officials said they are mindful of how the high MCAS scores have changed public perception of their town in just the past three years. The median sales price of a single-family home rose steadily throughout the 1990s, climbing from \$196,500 in January-July of 1998 to \$399,000 in January-July of this year, according to statistics compiled by The Warren Group. During the same period, the median price of a single-family home in Reading rose from \$235,000 to \$375,000.

Town Administrator Thomas Younger said the school system has been a major draw for new residents, although the community's one-acre lots and convenience to major highways leading to Boston and New Hampshire are also important factors. MCAS preparation has been left in Troughton's hands, Younger said, although education is a major priority in town.

Two of North Reading's three elementary schools have been renovated in recent years, and a \$15 million debt exclusion proposal to refurbish the third passed 141-27 at Town Meeting, and is expected to win a majority on the upcoming Nov. 18 ballot.

The district has done so well that the DOE recently yanked more than \$10,000 in grant money to pay for after-school MCAS tutoring. "We were disappointed," Troughton said. "We used that funding to support kids. We do have kids who aren't performing as well as we'd like."

Although Troughton sees the MCAS as a useful measurement and accountability tool, he says he worries greatly about stressing out young children with tests, and believes there should be better options for students who cannot pass the MCAS.

"We have a moral imperative to find a way to help kids [with learning problems] demonstrate their successes in some way," Troughton said. "We have to ask ourselves, 'Are there other ways that allow kids to demonstrate what they have accomplished?'"

Erica Noonan can be reached at enoonan@globe.com.

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