

February 6, 2012

Secretary Paul Reville  
Executive Office of Education  
One Ashburton Place, Suite 1405  
Boston, MA 02108

Dear Secretary Reville:

I am writing to you as a citizen who has had the privilege of serving as the Mayor of the City of New Bedford for the past six years. During this period I have had numerous meetings and conversations with you. While I know we have differences of opinion regarding MCAS as a public high school graduation requirement, on the issue of local public education funding for Charter schools, and issues regarding the DESE 2011 New Bedford District Evaluation and my written reply to the same, I also know we are both dedicated to providing the finest public education to all of the children in Massachusetts. I regard our relationship as cordial, respectful, and professional. It is in this spirit that I write you this letter.

At this time, there is a national debate taking place regarding the past decade of “Education Reform,” a review of “Standardized Testing” and its appropriate place within the educational system, and a key focus on how to close the “educational achievement gap.” I am aware that you and Commissioner Chester recently applied to the U.S. Department of Education for a waiver from the “No Child Left Behind” standards. Ironically, Massachusetts is the state with the highest achieving public school system under the law, yet two-thirds of our schools are “underperforming” and over 80% do not meet A.Y.P. Clearly, there are difficult challenges in meeting the Federal matrix for educational success.

With this backdrop, the City of New Bedford is in the process of drafting a “district-wide turnaround plan” as we have two elementary schools which have been designated Level 4

schools. It was my understanding that the drafting and the implementation of the “turnaround plan” was a cooperative and collaborative effort between the school district and DESE. In New Bedford, through today, this has not been the case. The following are my observations regarding this matter, which I offer in the hope that they may be constructive.

It is undeniable that the New Bedford public school system needs significant improvement at all levels, and there is no doubt that New Bedford’s public school system needs the ongoing assistance of DESE, both through in-kind guidance and through competitive grant awards. During my administration, and I am sure in the future with Mayor Jon Mitchell, and mayors to come, New Bedford has, and will continue to collaborate with DESE to improve the quality of the educational opportunities for every child in our urban school district.

Over the past several years, New Bedford has been engaged in attempting to improve the educational system. These efforts have been made with the assistance of the DESE staff and with various DESE recommended consultants. These multiple efforts are showing improvement as our City is attempting to make inroads in the decades old national issue of “the educational achievement gap” between the children who live above and below the poverty line. It is clear that the “educational achievement gap” is linked to socio-economic obstacles that plague the New Bedford and most areas throughout the United States. Examples of incremental gains being made in our school system are New Bedford’s MCAS scores in spring of 2011, which showed signs of improvement at many grade levels, and the newly-released dropout rate which has been steadily declining over the past several years. Attendance at New Bedford public schools is improving and in a City with less than 14% of our population college educated, 85% of our 2011 New Bedford High School graduates were college bound. Furthermore, I am pleased to report to you that another 32 New Bedford High School students graduated in January 2012 as a result of the “four year/plus one semester program” conducted at the High School. In addition, our Middle College (free high school regardless of age) program at Bristol Community College is off to a very strong start.

I firmly believe that the new Mayor, the publicly elected New Bedford School Committee, the Superintendent, the Administrators, the Principals, the Teachers, the parents, and all school staff, as well as the community and various educational stakeholders, are energetically engaged and committed to improving our schools. I am confident that collectively they have taken the challenge of providing the highest quality educational opportunity for all of our children very seriously, and with a determined sense of urgency for each grade level in each school throughout our City.

For these reasons, and with this genuine commitment to education excellence evolving in our community, I am unable to explain, or understand Commissioner Mitchell Chester’s highly negative public statements over the past few months regarding the intensity or quality of the effort being made to improve our City’s public school system. Commissioner Chester’s public statements made from a remote vantage point reflect a highly inaccurate impression of what is happening each day in our schools. In early

December of 2011, during the discussion regarding the “takeover” of the Lawrence school system, the Commissioner, in a public statement, gratuitously indicated that New Bedford was a candidate for a possible state “takeover” of the public school system as well. This statement was totally unwarranted, without merit, and quite frankly, reckless. It was reckless in regard to DESE’s mission, and completely unrealistic regarding DESE’s practical and functional capabilities. It was also disturbingly reckless in regard to the impact that such a statement has on an urban area and on the citizens who are dedicated to improving the City and its public school system. Everyone in Massachusetts agrees that local control of school districts is paramount to building great school systems throughout the Commonwealth. Yet the completely inappropriate named “nuclear” option regarding the “takeover” of the school district by the state is rattled around by the Commissioner. I have no doubt that you understand the damage done to the educational stakeholders and the City, any city, when such irresponsible threats, of whatever nature, are made by the Commissioner of DESE.

Needless to say the circumstances and facts between the events in Lawrence and New Bedford were completely different, but the Commissioner’s public imprudence caused significant consternation in our City. I believe his statements were a distraction to the good faith efforts being made by your staff and our community to move our school system forward, and I believe it was not unintentional as the Commissioner has routinely generated negative, sensational headlines throughout the state. In fact, it appears to me that Commissioner Chester spends more time generating sensational negative headlines which do real damage to the cities and towns that make up the Commonwealth than he can imagine. If his actions are unintentional, then he needs to meter his comments before he speaks. In addition, proudly holding aloft negative headlines in internal meetings at DESE, as if they were trophies in a “game” that involves the future of the students of our Commonwealth, is completely inappropriate, and shows a lack of understanding of the role of the Commissioner. This conduct is not acceptable under any scenario.

Unfortunately DESE’s actions of this past week further eroded the good faith work that has been done by New Bedford’s educational stakeholders working with DESE, when the Commissioner has again interjected himself in the daily operation of the New Bedford public school system with his comments from the “citadel.” His latest incursion was in the form of the DESE “Assessment of New Bedford’s Accelerated Improvement Plan”. Predictably the “assessment” was entirely negative even though DESE had a “plan manager” working with the City on the strategies and policy initiatives since early summer. I could go on regarding what appears to be a “gotcha” mentality by the Commissioner rather than a cooperative, collaborative relationship, however, it is obvious that the DESE made a decision not to work with the New Bedford public school system, superintendent and administrative staff to resolve issues with the plan. If DESE had worked to resolve any issues that it had with the plan, it certainly would be in an appropriate format at this time. Perhaps the same time and effort that went into the negative assessment of the plan, and creating a “Montezuma” type rubric, would have best been dedicated to working on curative measures.

I think it would be helpful if you read the review and explain to the citizens of New Bedford with specificity, exactly what the “assessment” requires from our school system in order to comply with DESE’s changing mandates. Please explain this, taking into account that your “plan manager” and DESE team were involved in the formulation of the New Bedford “accelerated turnaround plan.” Also, please take into account that on October 28, 2011, in a meeting with dozens in attendance, the DESE representative indicated that the plan was “acceptable” with fine tuning. The real question, however, at this time is, how could the New Bedford turnaround plan be so dramatically off-track, when DESE had a hand at the wheel. I further ask you to explain the Commissioner’s quotes that his “patience is wearing thin” and implying that New Bedford is closer to a state “takeover.” Explain by what measure and under what precedent or authority Commissioner Chester is making these threats to a duly elected local government. New Bedford is not the only city which has experienced the unprofessional, “bull in the china shop”, demeaning and disruptive conduct of the Commissioner and his staff. My feeling is that rather than work with a school district, he is personally interested in generating negative headlines, which has the effect of eroding the confidence of the citizens in whichever locality he comments on, and undermines the good faith efforts being made to bring vitality back to the urban districts of the Commonwealth. The Commissioner’s brinkmanship only fosters an atmosphere of a perpetual education “crisis” in each of the cities or towns that he threatens. This will not improve school systems, but rather leads to a destabilization of the very systems he seeks to improve.

As an aside, I am sure the Governor does not condone the Commissioner’s comments, tone, or lack of diplomacy.

I believe that the motives of the DESE have to be transparent, and the DESE has to be accountable to the school districts in a manner which provides all possible assistance to provide the best school systems possible. Bellicose threats combined with negative and condescending rhetoric will not work. A joint cooperative effort to resolve the issues of urban education involves mutual respect, trust, honesty and keeping the focus on the real issues at hand, educating our children in a rapidly changing society.

During my experience in working in my community, and during my three terms as Mayor, I have found that the local, state and federal governments routinely work cooperatively in resolving issues and/or problems at the local government level; in fact, it’s expected. Unfortunately I have not seen DESE adopt this most appropriate “rubric.” Whether in your district reviews throughout the state, or your specific problem solving techniques, DESE does not demonstrate that it wishes to be part of important local solutions. I think this is a mistake in that it penalizes the very students we all are committed to serve. I would suggest that a genuine partnership between the state government and local communities is the only way to build strong school systems.

Going forward, I would hope that we rebuild, in a positive manner, the relationship between the DESE and the New Bedford School Committee and City of New Bedford. In order to accomplish this, the best course of action would be for DESE Staff to work in conjunction with the Mayor and all of the School Committee members and the

Superintendent to develop a vigorous “Turn-Around Plan” for the New Bedford Public School System, in accordance with the new April deadline. As time is of the essence, the citizens of New Bedford would appreciate a combined state and local effort, directed towards educating our children in the most excellent manner. If this approach is adopted, I have no doubt that the New Bedford Public School System and DESE can move beyond the current strained relationship and usher in an era of genuine cooperation between the DESE and New Bedford.

If I can be of assistance to reaching this mutually beneficial goal, please don’t hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Scott W. Lang  
SWL/sfw

cc: Governor Deval Patrick  
Mayor Jon Mitchell  
Lt. Governor Timothy Murray  
Senator John Kerry  
Senator Scott Brown  
Congressman Barney Frank  
Senator Mark Montigny  
Representative Antonio Cabral  
Representative Christopher Markey  
Representative Robert Koczera  
Representative Keiko Orrall  
Secretary Arnie Duncan  
Massachusetts School Committee Association  
School Superintendent Association  
New Bedford School Committee