



Remarks of Jon Mitchell, Mayor of New Bedford

Joint Committee on Education State House, Boston Tuesday, September 5, 2017 [remarks as prepared]

Thank you, Madame Chairwoman, for this opportunity to appear before the Committee. My name is Jon Mitchell, and I am the Mayor of New Bedford.

I am here today to express my support for House Bill 304, An Act To Promote Autonomy and Success in Schools, otherwise known as the PASS Act, as I believe the bill would strengthen the hand of those who like me are charged with the responsibility of turning around struggling urban school districts with all deliberate speed.

In doing so I wish to applaud your leadership, Madame Chairwoman, along with Chairwoman Peisch and Senator Lesser on the important issues we're discussing today. All of you deserve enormous credit for recognizing that despite the Commonwealth's overall success in raising student achievement, we must do more together to ensure that every student, in every part of the Commonwealth, has an opportunity to thrive in school.

You've already heard a good deal about how education leaders in Springfield have implemented an innovation zone to accelerate improvement in that city's middle schools. The launching of the Springfield zone could not have happened without the dedication and vision of Mayor Sarno, Superintendent Warrick, and the city's teachers. They recognized that the status quo in their middle schools was unacceptable, and they had the courage to move forward with an innovative and bold idea. But as they and others in Springfield would freely

acknowledge, the state's designation of their middle schools as chronically underperforming "Level 4" schools, and the threat of state takeover that comes with that designation, helped to force the discussion.

My goal in testifying today is to relate an object lesson in how, under current state law, it is effectively impossible to create an innovation zone with schools that could benefit from the approach but lack the Level 4 label, and how the legislation you are considering would rectify the problem.

In New Bedford, school reform has been proceeding in earnest for a few years now. When I arrived in office in 2012, the school district was already under state monitoring and had been threatened with state takeover. A district that just twenty years earlier had been regarded by many as the best in Southeastern Massachusetts had declined to the bottom of the state MCAS rankings and had a four year graduation rate of approximately 55%. What was worse perhaps was that district leadership did little to confront the core problem, which was a complete lack of accountability throughout the organization.

I believed that the children of New Bedford deserved much better from their schools, and that the prospect of a state takeover was something to be assiduously avoided. So we launched the turnaround by removing the incumbent school leadership and brought in a reform minded superintendent, whose marching orders were to improve instruction in every classroom and change a culture that all too often elevated the needs of the adults in the district over those of the children.

This was a tall task in that it involved not only structural changes to the organization and a modernizing of its systems, but also a greater financial commitment on the part of a city that didn't exactly have money growing on trees. In a district where administrators and teachers alike were effectively guaranteed permanent employment regardless of performance, everyone now would have to answer for their performance, from the school committee on down to the classroom teacher. And we knew it would not be for the politically faint of heart, as the reform effort would require direct challenges to entrenched interests, inside and outside the district.

Nearly five years into the effort, it has indeed proven itself to be trying, with countless protests, demonstrations, public recriminations, and budget battles. But significant progress has been made. Scores are rising across the district, the four year graduation rate has been risen to 70% and is climbing; several schools have moved out of Level 3; and at New Bedford High School, the city's main comprehensive high school, Advanced Placement tests scores are rising and the top students consistently matriculate to elite colleges. Earlier this summer, DESE recognized this progress when it decided to end its monitoring of the district, noting publicly that it is "a completely different district than it was in 2011."

While we take some measure of pride in having slammed the brakes on the district's decline, and draw confidence from the unmistakable improvement, the reality is that the task has hardly been completed. We're still in turnaround mode some five years into the effort, as much work remains.

One of our biggest challenges has been at our three middle schools, where scores have not jumped as much as they have at many of our elementaries. As officials in Springfield understood, the middle school experience is obviously a pivotal point for students. Many won't succeed in high school if a solid foundation has not been laid in middle school.

So it was in the middle schools where we, like Springfield, sought to establish an innovation zone. In my view, the concept offered a promising opportunity to accelerate school improvement. As you heard from the last panel, a zone could create the conditions that empower teachers to make decisions and exercise authority to determine what is in the best interest of their students. They enable schools to remain a part of the district for the purposes of accountability, student assignment, and union membership while also having autonomy to make decisions on the key educational levers including staffing, curriculum, schedule and allocation of resources. They provide for schools a structure to customize their own educational approach— an alternative to “one size fits all” in public education. I also believe that districts that choose this path become more attractive for philanthropic investment and other external resources.

Innovation zones also are a viable alternative to charter schools. There is no reason charter schools should be the only schools given the advantage of full

autonomy to meet the needs of students. And because the zone schools remain an extension of the school district, they don't come with the financial burden of charter schools.

Moreover, with an innovation zone, local districts own the solution. State takeovers are blunt instruments. They can usher in overdue changes in practice, but they lack the democratic legitimacy of locally based reform. The problem with state intervention is that when people feel like something is being forced on them, it's hard to get the level of buy-in necessary to sustain the effort in the long run. Because they are locally-rooted, innovation zones are likely to be more effective in keeping stakeholders on board.

With this understanding in mind, we undertook a serious process last year to set up a middle school innovation zone. Working with Empower Schools, the same group that helped to launch the Springfield zone, we spent the better part of a year developing a plan that would be based primarily on the input of our middle school teachers. The planning team consisted of administrators and teachers from each of the schools who held numerous meetings with their colleagues, and traveled to Springfield to observe the great work that was going on there. The meetings were productive and teachers were enthusiastic about being empowered to shape the future of their schools.

But here was the catch: all of our middle schools were Level 3 schools. They urgently needed to improve, but they hadn't hit rock bottom. In the absence of the statutory leverage that comes with the Level 4 designation, the teacher's union could simply say no. And that's exactly what it did. The union objected to what it perceived as a potential loss of autonomy, despite our attempts to persuade its members that the zone actually would offer them more autonomy. So we lost a key opportunity to accelerate improvement in our middle schools.

Herein lies the reason for this legislation. The bill enables districts to initiate the establishment of innovation zones involving Level 3 schools, which are by definition in the bottom twenty percent of schools in the state in terms of student achievement. Had this legislation been in place, it would have paved the way for a process to set up a zone collaboratively with our teachers and unions. We wouldn't have had to accept no for an answer. Without the legislation, districts with

Level 3 schools realistically won't be able to proceed down this path. The statutory tools for serious reform don't kick in until a Level 3 school slides so far that the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education declares it to be "chronically under-performing," making it a Level 4 school. In other words, under current state law, you can't get down to serious reform until a school hits bottom -- neither in New Bedford, nor in any of the communities that are home to the state's 265 Level 3 schools. As we have learned the hard way, it is much easier to rebuild a school that hasn't entirely fallen apart.

We in New Bedford will persist in the hard work of improving our schools. They are heading in the right direction. But the problem is that it isn't fast enough. And that's the point of the legislation. It can help to hasten the *pace* of school improvement.

And that matters a whole lot. Turning around an urban school district is indeed difficult work. But saying that you're working hard at it and that it will take time is hardly consolation to a parent whose child doesn't have five years to wait for her elementary school to get better. For those local officials who are willing to roll up their sleeves and engage in the heady work of school reform, this legislation removes the speed bumps. I urge your support of the bill so that more communities in our Commonwealth can deliver the kind of education our students deserve.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to you today.