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Mogul: How public education changed

By Jerry Mogul/Guest columnist

GHS

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Forty years ago this month, the Task Force on Children out of School held its first meeting to investigate the on-the-street evidence of many children not attending the Boston Public Schools. The Task Force was a citizen-driven body, led by Hubie Jones (then executive director of the Roxbury Multi-Service Center) but it also had the blessing and participation of key city and state officials.

One year later, on Oct. 14, 1970, headlines blared throughout the city of a newly uncovered scandal. Ten thousand or more children were either being systematically excluded from Boston's public education system or warehoused in classrooms or schools that provided inferior or custodial care. The bulk of these children were Spanish-speaking, mainly from Puerto Rico. Thousands were misclassified as mentally retarded. Others had behavior problems too difficult to handle or had been branded as "unteachable" because of their physical handicaps or other disabilities. Some were girls who had been barred from school simply because they had become pregnant.

That report, "The Way We Go to School: Children Excluded in Boston," profoundly changed the landscape of education in Massachusetts, and ultimately the nation. The exclusion of children from the most fundamental right in our society to a public education struck a deep nerve and triggered a flurry of legislative activity. Led by Brighton state representative Michael Daly (a Task Force member) and Speaker David Bartley from Holyoke, the Legislature passed the nation's first bi-lingual education law in 1971. A year later it passed the nation's first special education law, Chapter 766, which, in turn, served as the model for the first federal special education law, passed in 1975.

The Task Force, meanwhile, became the Massachusetts Advocacy Center in 1973 with the receipt of a major Ford Foundation grant and went on to conduct hard-hitting legislative and administrative advocacy on both its core focus of education and a plethora of related issues, including children's mental health, state budget cuts, school breakfast, and juvenile justice. In 2002, MAC, as it had become known, changed its name to the present Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

Why is this historic anniversary still relevant today? Surely conditions have improved for the types of children so unfairly excluded 40 years ago. Surely those new laws established rights that have benefited thousands of children immeasurably. And isn't education reform - MCAS, 21st century skills, charter schools, turnaround schools - now the new challenge?

Precisely yes. But in this era of higher standards where children must achieve academic proficiency in order to succeed in school and compete in the global marketplace, it remains those very same types of children who face barriers because of their language, disabilities, poverty or ethnicity and who continue to be excluded, this time from educational opportunity. This failure remains a local, statewide and, indeed, national scandal.

A 2008 Boston Foundation report on the Boston schools dug into the achievement gap and drop out data and found children with disabilities and with limited English proficiency to be at greatest risk. Reports this year by the Mauricio Gaston Institute at UMass Boston and Multi-Cultural, Education, Training and Advocacy Inc. (META), show the lack of progress hindering limited English proficient students in Boston, across the state and in charter schools since the Question 2 referendum abolished the state's bilingual education law in 2002.

We have learned much in the past 40 years about the challenges of implementing the innovative solutions crafted in the wake of MAC's first report. Frustrations mount with public school systems' continued inability to effectively educate children with disabilities or with limited English proficiency, along with low-income children and children of color generally. One current impetus in the legislative and policy arena is to circumvent the current public school paradigm by creating new schools, like charter schools. No matter how promising these models are, however, only public school systems have the mandate to educate all children in a community. Our task may be difficult, but it is unavoidable. The clarion call 40 years ago to reform the public schools and bring educational opportunities to all still resounds today.

Jerry Mogul is the executive director of Massachusetts Advocates for Children, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary in November.

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