

Challengers Hope To School Menino On Education

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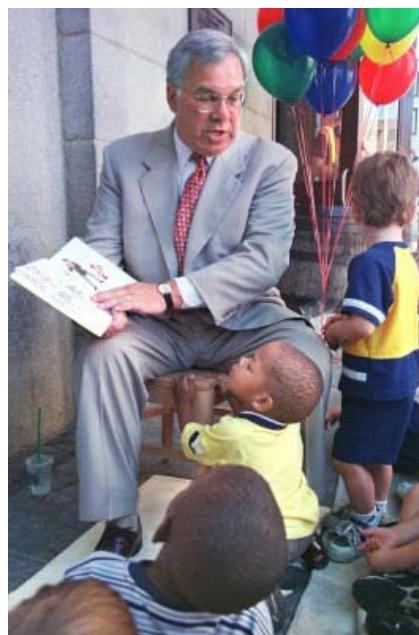
By **BIANCA VAZQUEZ TONESS**
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BOSTON — Sue Bright lives in Dorchester with her daughter and wife. She has always voted for Mayor Thomas Menino. But that was before she tried to get her daughter into a public kindergarten through the lottery system.

“We applied to our top five schools,” Bright said. “And we didn’t get any of them.” Bright said they were given a school that they had never considered and, after visiting, didn’t care for.

So she did something she never expected. She sent her daughter to private school. She’s still shocked that there aren’t better public schools in Boston.



Mayor Thomas Menino reads to Boston elementary-school children in August 1999. (AP)

“I suppose if I had to blame somebody, I would blame the mayor,” Bright said. “Our daughter’s education is certainly primary to us. This particular mayor has been in office for a long time and I don’t see any great change taking place.”

But school-reform activist John Mudd disagrees. “I think there has been progress. I think there has been change in classrooms and schools,” Mudd said.

Mudd leads the school reform team at Massachusetts Advocates for Children, a Boston non-profit. He attends every school committee meeting and complains and pleads for the system to improve. So you’d expect him to be down on the mayor. But, instead, he says Menino hasn’t actually been that bad for schools.

“There’s less achievement gap at the fundamental failing level,” he said.

That means fewer black and Latino kids are failing standardized tests. Mudd also thinks it’s very important that Menino has added more pre-kindergarten classes

and K-8 schools.

But, then again, he said, “We still have a core of the system that needs more radical transformation than we have seen in the last 16 years.”

And it’s this criticism that competitor and City Councilor Michael Flaherty has seized on to hammer on the mayor.

“Nothing bothers me more than hearing of another young family leaving our city in search of a quality education,” he said at a recent Fox News debate.

Flaherty and challenger Sam Yoon talk a lot about expanding charter schools. Yoon, who is also a city councilor, wants voters to elect some of the school committee members and for universities to help out in classrooms.

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“Here’s the goal,” Yoon said in the same Fox debate. “That in every neighborhood in the city of Boston, that there can be a quality school with enough seats for every parent in that neighborhood to be able to send their child to.”

Menino’s other challenger, businessman Kevin McCrea, said the city should add more exam schools.

“I will not cut the education budget the way it has been this year,” he said. “I will visit each and every school in the school system over a period of two years. And I will find out what’s going right and I will find out what’s going wrong.”

All of this may sound good, but analysts like Robert Gaudet from the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy say that none of the challengers offer a lot of substance. And none of them sound ready to fix big problems like high drop-out rates, chronically failing schools and thousands of students fleeing the district.

“I don’t think the opponents have really articulated dramatic change-type things,” Gaudet said.

Gaudet wants the two city councilors in the race to explain how they’ll take on the unions to get things like longer school days. He said Boston politicians are too cozy with labor unions.

“Boston teachers are the highest paid in the state,” he said. “Their average salary is like \$71,000. It’s pretty good. Is it high enough? Maybe not. But I do think there’s room to negotiate when you’re paying the highest in the state.”

Others, such as Samuel Hurtado, are also dissatisfied with the candidates challenging Menino. Hurtado organizes Latino parents in Boston for the Latino Education Action Network. He said no one’s talking enough about the growing number of kids learning English, called ELL’s.

“I think when you look at the populations in the Boston public schools, ELL’s should be a priority,” Hurtado said. “Special education should be a priority. I think a candidate should be delivering specific plans on each of those populations.”

School-reform activist John Mudd thinks the challengers need to do more.

“I believe the mayor is ready to support change,” Mudd said. “I don’t know that the other candidates aren’t. I just haven’t heard a lot of innovative ideas that would really bring about systemic change for all children in the school system.”

As for Sue Bright in Dorchester, she’s voting for Sam Yoon. She doesn’t think any of Yoon’s ideas on education are earth-shattering. But she’s hoping a change of leadership will be enough.

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