



Margaret McKenna
Member of the Massachusetts
Board of Elementary and
Secondary Education

the NASBE Interview

Margaret McKenna comes to her role as member of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education with a deep background as an educator and lawyer advocating for social justice. McKenna began her career as a civil rights attorney for the US Department of Justice, served as the White House deputy counsel, as undersecretary of the US Department of Education, and led the education transition team for President Clinton. She was vice president of Radcliffe College, president of Lesley University, a fellow at Harvard's Institute of Politics, and led the Walmart Foundation. She is acting director and visiting professor of the Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy, the Heller School, Brandeis University. She speaks here with NASBE about her longtime interest in equality of educational opportunity.

Educators and policymakers have worried about achievement gaps in public schools for a long time. Is it possible to close gaps in achievement? What signs of hope do you see?

We can close the gap if we make it a priority. Recently, as a result of the increase of data collection and analysis, the achievement gap has become more visible. That visibility has led to initiatives in many states, and I hope we will continue to learn what works to close what is more accurately defined as an opportunity gap. We need to acknowledge the role poverty plays in educational achievement.

What are the challenges your state faces regarding achievement gaps? What has your state done to address those challenges?

Massachusetts has a significant achievement gap and has instituted a number of programs to close it, including a student early warning system, revision of discipline regulations, early college, and credit recovery programs. The state has also invested in support for struggling districts and schools.

What are the most important policies for state education policymakers to focus on?

Let's concentrate on what works and increase support for early childhood education and early intervention

programs. Summer learning for low-income kids is essential in order to stop the two- to three-month "summer slide." Every child eligible for free or reduced-price lunch should have not just lunch but breakfast and an afterschool snack. Well-educated, caring teachers are essential to success. Teacher certification programs should reflect what research has found, and compensation should reflect the importance of their role.

There are clearly many drivers of these gaps that lie outside the classroom. Given they can't address all the societal factors involved, how should state education policymakers think about their roles in achieving educational equity?

We should ensure that children are prepared to enter school having all essential health screenings. A short summer learning experience to introduce a child who has not had a school-like experience has proven helpful. Schools can do much to alleviate hunger through healthy meals. Schools should support the whole child, and understanding that socioemotional development is essential. The myriad state agencies dealing with children need to be coordinated and programs designed from the child's needs up. Parents should be able to understand the range of services available and schools should be sources of information and access.