

SCHOOLS | KEVIN M. CARRAGEE

The logo for The Boston Globe, featuring the words "The Boston Globe" in a black, serif font.

Collective effort needed

By Kevin M. Carragee | January 2, 2006

MAYOR THOMAS M. MENINO begins his fourth term at a time of opportunity and challenge for Boston. The city's future depends not only on the mayor's leadership, but also on the actions of corporate and nonprofit institutions and residents who care deeply about their city.

The integrated actions of city government, the corporate and nonprofit sectors, and committed citizens can produce a more compassionate city, particularly for families and children. Boston needs to retain and attract families. Only 23 percent of households in Boston have children under 18, and far too many of these children live in poverty. Roughly three-fourths of public school children come from low-income families; many are children of color. The failure to address problems confronting families will produce a city of increasing racial and economic inequality.

Improvements in public schools and in adult education represent the best means to ensure that Boston remains a city where the dreams of working- and middle-class families for their children can be realized. This demands widespread community involvement. As the chair of a community-based foundation that relies on volunteers, I have seen the deep commitment of residents to the educational needs of families.

Menino has demonstrated a sustained commitment to Boston's public schools. Progress has been made: MCAS and SAT scores have improved; the percentage of students enrolling in four-year colleges increased to 74 percent in 2003; the number of students taking advanced placement courses in district high schools has significantly increased. Boston parents now benefit from the innovations of pilot and charter schools.

Many challenges remain, including underperforming schools and a troubling achievement gap between white students and students of color. More dramatic improvements will depend on increasing parental involvement and in forging closer connections between schools, Boston's neighborhoods, and the corporate and nonprofit sectors. The uses of our school buildings should reflect the challenges confronting families, including the need for quality preschool and after-school programs and an increasing demand for adult education, with expanded access to English as a second language classes.

The Boston public schools system has recognized the importance of parental and community involvement in enhancing the quality of schools by creating a family and community engagement division. Efforts to expand family and community involvement would benefit from a systematic evaluation of what programs have proven effective and what others need to be discarded.

Given the need to provide additional support for Boston's families and children, corporations, universities, and foundations need to expand their support for public education. This expanded support needs to be connected with broader community efforts to improve schools.

The efforts of the Presentation School Foundation show the potential benefits of community and parent-based initiatives for urban education. Formed in June 2004 in response to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston's decision to close Our Lady of the Presentation School in Brighton, the foundation engaged in a communitywide process that shaped a proposal to purchase the Presentation School building and transform it into a multiservice community center, with an affordable preschool, a grammar school, after-school programs, and adult education services. Menino, the Boston City Council, and 25 community organizations, including the YMCA, WGBH, and the Allston-Brighton Community Development Corporation, supported the proposal.

The archdiocese initially rejected the proposal, sparking a conflict that led to a lockout of Presentation school students. An agreement was reached in late June committing the Archdiocese to a good faith effort to sell the Presentation School building to the Presentation School Foundation. That effort continues. Supported by the Boston Foundation, the Presentation School Foundation is developing a proposal focusing on teacher development and student enhancement programs to benefit public schools and the remaining Roman Catholic school in Allston-Brighton.

The foundation's experience demonstrates that engaged citizens, supported by businesses, nonprofit institutions and government officials, can develop a vision for schools that responds to the pressing needs of Boston's families.

Boston's future depends on a collective effort to improve education. This effort needs to combine the resources of the public, private, and nonprofit sectors with the energy of Boston residents who care deeply about their city's future. In his fourth term, Menino confronts the challenge and opportunity of coordinating and enhancing the efforts of a broad-based coalition committed to revitalizing Boston by improving urban education.

Kevin M. Carragee is chairman of the Presentation School Foundation. ■

© [Copyright](#) 2005 The New York Times Company