



## Metro Boston Equity Initiative Issue Summary No. 6

### Racial Segregation and Educational Outcomes in Metropolitan Boston

A report by Chungmei Lee (April, 2004)

#### The Issues at a Glance

Despite the fact that metro Boston is overwhelmingly white, its public schools are highly segregated by race and language.

- Of the approximately 770,000 students attending public schools across the region in 2001-2002, 76% were white, 10% were Latino, 9% were black, and 5% were Asian.
- The distribution of public school students of different racial backgrounds is extremely uneven across the region. About 83% of all white students in public schools attend schools in the suburbs, and only 2% attend schools in the city of Boston. In contrast, 44% of all Black students are enrolled in Boston and over half (55%) go to schools in just two cities: Boston and Brockton. Close to half of all Latino students (45%) attend schools in only three cities: Boston, Lawrence, and Worcester.
- Not only are students segregated by race, they are also highly segregated by language. The average Latino English Language Learner (ELL) attends a school that is 47% Latino, more than three times the Latino share (14%) in the school of the average English Language Speaker (defined as a student not otherwise classified as an ELL). Similarly, Asian ELL students

experience, on average, more than three times as much exposure to Asian students than do English Language Speakers (25% vs. 7%).

**Segregated minority schools in metro Boston are profoundly unequal, with high poverty levels, with lower shares of certified teachers, lower test scores, and lower high school completion rates.**

- Even more than the national average, segregated minority schools in metro Boston are also high-poverty schools. An overwhelming 97% of intensely-segregated minority schools (those over 90% minority) have a majority of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, compared to only 1% of schools that are over 90% white.
- Only 78% of teachers in high-poverty, majority minority schools are certified, versus 94% of teachers in low-poverty, low-minority schools.
- On average, only 61% of tenth-grade students in high-poverty, intensely-segregated minority high schools passed the English Language Arts MCAS test in 2002-03. In contrast, the passage rate for students at low-minority, low-poverty schools was 96%.
- Less than half of students in high schools with high concentrations of poverty and minority students graduate on time (45%), compared to more than

three quarters (79%) of their peers in low-poverty, low-minority schools.

**High segregation levels across metro Boston schools stem from decades of white flight to the suburbs, significant levels of residential segregation, and a highly fragmented system of school districts across the region.**

- In 1967, the average black student in Boston Public Schools attended a school that was 32% white, at a time when enrollment was 73% white. Today, the average black student in Boston attends a school that is 11% white in a district that is 15% white. White enrollment in the city began falling rapidly even before busing was ordered by the court in 1974.
- The high degree of fragmentation that characterizes the region, in which many independent incorporated cities and towns have their own separate school districts instead of large consolidated districts, leads to greater sorting among students and very little overlap between minority and white students in the schools they attend.

## **Policy Implications**

**While segregation in the late 1960s was still largely an urban issue, it is now, increasingly, a metropolitan one.**

- The history of school desegregation in the city of Boston suggests that attempts to desegregate within an urban center—with decreasing white enrollment in a fragmented metropolitan area—are limited at best. More stable desegregation efforts have been possible in the South, where both urban and suburban centers have been incorporated in the same school district. Any desegregation plan that purports to address segregation in large urban centers with low shares of white

enrollment must address the issue at a metropolitan-wide scale.

**Policymakers should recognize and support existing policies that promote both intra- and inter-district school diversity.**

- Some metro Boston communities, such as Cambridge and Lynn, have made long and successful commitments to district-wide school diversity. In surveys of high schools students from these desegregated districts, students of all races report positive interracial learning experiences and high confidence about their ability to live and work together as adults. Policymakers should recognize and support these districts' successful efforts.
- METCO, the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunities, is a city-suburban voluntary desegregation policy that has been in operation in the region for more than 30 years. The program is extremely popular among minority families in Boston, has strong support in many suburban communities, and yet is small-scale and underfunded. Policymakers should continue to support and build upon the successes of this program.

Despite intense educational reform efforts across the state, separate schools in metro Boston are still profoundly unequal. When reforms ignore these inequalities, they can unfairly punish those who were never offered an equal opportunity to learn. It is time for a region-wide discussion on ways in which these schools can be made more equal given the reality of inter-district segregation that characterizes our metropolitan areas nationwide.

*A full copy of the report can be found at:*  
[http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/metro/segregation\\_education.php](http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/metro/segregation_education.php)