COMMONWEALTH

FAULT LINES

District Boundaries, Public Perception, and School Segregation in Massachusetts
Introduction

In 2016, the Fault Lines report on America’s most segregating school district boundaries added to vital conversations on historical and current inequities in our society. In providing this data on Massachusetts in the form of an interactive map, combined with public opinion surveys and the following context, we hope this report can add a small way to such conversations in the Commonwealth.

Massachusetts’ public schools are often hailed as America’s finest. While that is true, they are also engines of inequality. Decades after Brown v. Board sought to end racial discrimination as a formal feature of public education, the Commonwealth’s schools remain starkly segregated. While reforms since 1993 have improved academic outcomes for all racial subgroups, they have not dismantled the racist exclusion undergirding Massachusetts’ public education system.

This report aims to elucidate the starkness of Massachusetts’ school segregation and the lack of public understanding of segregation’s continued impact. This report shines a light on the problems of school segregation, which our polling shows are not clearly understood by Massachusetts voters.

The goal is to bring this issue to light to pave the way for effective solutions, for which policymakers should look to Black and Latino communities throughout Massachusetts; historians and practitioners; and model districts nationwide.

This report was produced for
Policy For Progress in partnership with EdBuild

Policy for Progress (PFP) is a startup ideas and action lab to create a future Massachusetts that all Americans look to as a model of effective, equitable government. We identify and incubate emerging leaders and policy solutions by activating our network, gauging public opinion, and analyzing pathways to change. Motivated by progressive ideals, animated by evidence showing what works, and clear-eyed about the public will for change, we believe the best ideas should win.

EdBuild was a nonprofit think tank that analyzed school funding issues. Over six years, it produced a series of reports highlighting disparities in school funding nationwide, with extensive national coverage in outlets such as the New York Times and NPR. Its finding that districts with predominantly white student bodies receive $23 billion more in funding than other districts garnered both press attention and reference in presidential candidates’ policy plans.

This project was made possible with support from the Barr Foundation to Education Reform Now, a national education research and advocacy nonprofit sponsoring this project.
Summary

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The report begins with a brief overview of the history of segregation in Massachusetts’ public schools. We also review the action and inaction that has resulted in some of the most segregated school districts in the country.

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Public opinion on school segregation

We then analyze public opinion data to illustrate a dissonance between the reality and the public’s understanding of school segregation in Massachusetts. The results of two polls of Massachusetts voters that we conducted in the summers of 2019 and 2020 show substantial and growing public willingness to take action for racial equity—but a deep misunderstanding about Massachusetts’ continued struggles with segregation. Voters think segregation is more a national problem than one affecting Massachusetts. This mismatch of public will and misunderstanding creates space for a new public conversation oriented toward solutions.

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Neighboring districts showcase the problem

We look specifically at the continued impact of racial segregation on Massachusetts students by comparing demographics and academic outcomes in five pairs of neighboring municipalities: Boston and Needham, Brockton and Abington, Lawrence and Andover, Springfield and Longmeadow, and Worcester and Shrewsbury. Each pair includes one large, diverse city and one whiter, wealthier suburb—and in each, a shared border serves as a stark dividing line that sometimes sends next door neighbors to vastly different schools.

According to publicly available state data, Black and Latino students are concentrated in school districts with lower levels of opportunity, and those attending schools in majority-white suburbs also experience opportunity gaps relative to their white peers. While troubling disparities exist within districts, this report focuses specifically on the impact of inter-district segregation and how the structural inequities it describes/displays intersect with multiple forms of systemic racism. Any attempt to address racism in the Commonwealth’s public schools must address these systemic failings.

The vast majority of students are zoned to a school based on their town or municipality where they reside.

Do you think MA schools have become more or less segregated over the last 50 years?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Less</th>
<th>The Same</th>
<th>More</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Voters in 2020 think that school segregation in the Commonwealth has lessened over time—counter to reality.

Comparisons of these pairs of cities and suburbs show continued, de facto racial segregation in Massachusetts public schools.
1 | HOW WE GOT HERE

Historical path to segregation

The roots of racial segregation in Massachusetts go back to one of its oldest and most fundamental features: its patchwork of highly independent municipalities. The local town meeting has been an institution in New England since the 17th century, and writers from de Tocqueville forward have praised the region’s sense of local civic duty for advancing democratic norms. The Commonwealth accordingly affords great powers to its towns, which are smaller and politically stronger than their counterparts in other states.

In public education, the legacy of Massachusetts’ small town governance is more complex. The preservation of municipal control over schools means that the vast majority of students are zoned to a school based on their town or municipality. Districts overwhelmingly correspond to municipalities, from urban centers to suburbs and smaller, rural communities. The result is a patchwork of over 300 districts with an average enrollment of just 2,354 students. Similarly, towns have significant local control of housing policy which have reinforced a history of overt residential segregation into the present day.

This patchwork maps onto a state with high levels of racial and socioeconomic segregation. A 2015 analysis showed the Boston-Cambridge-Newton metro area was the 7th most segregated in the nation, and a Brown University study after the last census showed Greater Boston has the 4th, 5th, and 11th most extreme Hispanic*, Asian, and Black/white segregation in the country.

This situation is especially pernicious because research shows that all students benefit from learning in a diverse environment. By maintaining high levels of segregation in its schools, the Commonwealth is not only reinforcing a societal ill but neglecting a key strategy to improve educational outcomes and close achievement gaps. At a statewide level, Massachusetts schools have grown more segregated over the past several decades, and the Commonwealth contains several highly segregating school district borders.

*Here and throughout this report, we follow the demographic terminology of individual reports or state data when discussing that data. We generally use “Latino” when not referencing specific datasets, for example, but here follow the study’s terminology in using “Hispanic.”
An Inconsistent History

Timeline of public education in Massachusetts through the lens of racial segregation

Historically, Massachusetts has often been a leader in breaking down educational barriers and expanding educational opportunity. At the same time, the state’s history—like the country’s—has been one of systemic racism. The historical advancement of education rights is belied by continued disparities in opportunity and historical opposition to efforts toward racial justice.

1635  First Public School in the U.S. Founded in Massachusetts
The country’s first public school was founded in Boston in 1635.2

1647  State law requires public education
Massachusetts Bay Colony passes the first law in the Americas requiring municipalities to provide public education—though in practice this guarantee applied only to white, male children.

1780  The Massachusetts Constitution includes education
The Massachusetts Constitution, drafted by John Adams, enjoins the Commonwealth “to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them; especially the university at Cambridge [and] public schools and grammar schools in the towns.”3 This language remains in force to this day.

1837  Horace Mann named Secretary of Massachusetts’ Board of Education
In the mid-nineteenth century, Horace Mann became Massachusetts’ first Secretary of Education and was America’s leading proponent of universal public education in the 19th century.4

1852  Compulsory Education for ages 8–14 in Massachusetts
Massachusetts becomes the first state to make education compulsory for students aged 8-14 years.

1954  Brown v. Board of Education
The U.S. Supreme Court decided Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, ruling that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” and thereby barring discrimination by race in public education.

1965  Elementary and Secondary Education Act
Congress passes, and President Lyndon B. Johnson signs, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, establishing federal funding and accountability measures in public education. The Massachusetts legislature passes the Racial Imbalance Act, requiring the integration of the Commonwealth’s schools.

Continued on next page
1966 Voluntary Integration Program begins
Beginning of METCO (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity), a voluntary integration program in which suburban towns enroll students from Boston (and later Springfield). Thirty three suburban districts participate as of 2020, with enrollment ranging from 26 to 435 students.5

1966 Legislature passes “home rule” that allows localities control over zoning6
This law allows a high degree of independence to municipalities in determining housing and school assignment patterns within their borders.

1969 Legislature passes the “40B” law
Intended to address shortages of affordable housing in Massachusetts, the law stipulates that local Zoning Boards of Appeals may, per the Citizens’ Housing and Planning Association, “approve affordable housing developments under flexible rules if at least 20-25% of the units have long-term affordability restrictions.”

1974 U.S. Supreme Court rules against integration across district boundaries
The U.S. Supreme Court rules in *Milliken v. Bradley* that busing for the purpose of integration cannot be required between district boundaries. Nor can district boundaries be redrawn by court order for the purpose of integration.


1988 End of court-controlled busing in Boston
End of court-controlled busing in Boston. While the Boston Public Schools was still required to pursue school desegregation, power over the implementation process devolved to the Boston School Committee.

1991 Massachusetts passes an inter-district school choice law
This law, while not exclusively or explicitly related to school integration efforts, allows students to attend schools in districts other than their home district—though districts may opt out of receiving students.

*Continued on next page*
Where we are now

Segregation is intense and increasing

Manifestations of this pattern continue to abound. A series of reports from The Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles (2004, 2013, 2019) have found that racial and socioeconomic segregation have increased both statewide and in metropolitan areas like Boston and Springfield over the past several decades. In 2018, a Boston Globe analysis found that 60% of schools in the Boston Public Schools (BPS) system were “intensely segregated,” serving over 90% students of color. Twenty years before the analysis, only 42% of BPS schools were “intensely segregated.” Similarly, a 2010 report from Northeastern University found that Springfield was the 9th most segregated city in the country for Black students, while Springfield and Boston are 2nd and 4th most segregated for Hispanic students.

This high level of segregation informs and correlates with broader inequities in educational opportunity: academically, a 2015 paper from Stanford’s Center for Education Policy Analysis (CEPA) found that segregation is a major contributor to racial and socioeconomic opportunity gaps, and that integration strategies offer significant potential to close those gaps.

Percentage of Boston Schools classified as “intensely segregated” has gone up.
Misperceptions & Missed Opportunity

Despite public opinion to the contrary, school segregation is acute in Massachusetts and has worsened over time. By increasing public understanding of segregation’s continued impacts in Massachusetts and its enduring legacy, we can create space for policy changes to increase educational equity.

In August 2019 and again in August 2020, Change Research conducted a statewide poll that asked Massachusetts registered voters about a range of issues related to school segregation. Nearly half of all Bay State voters believe that the Massachusetts government should do more to promote racial integration in schools while only 14% of them believe school segregation is a very big problem in Massachusetts. This suggests a crucial opportunity: if this level of support exists even in an environment of public misconception, it will likely rise alongside greater knowledge of the problem’s severity.

Bay staters incorrectly believe that school segregation is a bigger problem nationally than in MA

While Massachusetts exhibits some of the country’s largest measures of racial segregation, voters incorrectly believe that the problem is larger in the nation as a whole. However, people of color were nearly twice as likely as white voters to state that school segregation is a big problem.

Voters in 2020 think that school segregation in the Commonwealth has lessened over time—counter to reality.

Almost half of voters believe, incorrectly, that Massachusetts schools have become less segregated over the last 50 years. Fewer than 1 in 5 voters correctly think that there is more school segregation now.

Despite just 14% believing that school segregation is a very big problem, nearly half want the state government to do more.

As of 2020, this includes 65% of 18-34 year olds, and 71% of those who are registered or lean Democrat. Crucially, the percentage of voters who want the state to do more to support racial integration has risen by 6 points from 2019, when 42% agreed.

Voters increasingly view school segregation as a problem in Massachusetts.

Likely spurred by the greater attention to racial inequities around COVID-19 and police brutality throughout 2020, the public is increasingly aware of the scope of racial injustice. This appears to be reflected in the 7 percentage point growth in the proportion of voters believing school segregation is a very/somewhat big problem in 2020, as compared to the previous year.

How big of a problem is school segregation in...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Massachusetts</th>
<th>Not a problem</th>
<th>A big problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How big of a problem is racial segregation in schools in MA?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2019</th>
<th>Somewhat Small/Not</th>
<th>Very/Somewhat Big</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>48%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2020</th>
<th>Somewhat Small/Not</th>
<th>Very/Somewhat Big</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>45%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Continued Disparities in Five Pairs of Neighboring Cities

To demonstrate the continued impact of segregation in Massachusetts’ public schools, we have highlighted five pairs of neighboring school districts. For each pair, the physical closeness between the two municipalities contrasts with major demographic differences and opportunity gaps in important educational indicators. Each pair consists of one larger city and one more affluent suburb; in each pair, the suburb has a substantially smaller share of economically disadvantaged students, Black and Latino students and also stronger indicators of educational opportunity. Viewed in light of the Commonwealth’s history of residential and educational segregation, these pairs demonstrate that segregating town boundaries harden segregation by doubling as school district boundaries, concentrating educational opportunity in patterns consistent with Massachusetts’ long history of residential segregation.
Boston and Needham are neighboring communities with very different student body demographics. In Boston, students of color make up the majority of students, as do economically disadvantaged students. In Needham, by contrast, white students make up a large majority, and the proportion of economically disadvantaged students is much smaller.
Cris-crossed by multiple residential streets, the Brockton-Abington boundary is longer and more porous than that between Boston and Needham. At the same time, Brockton and Abington feature even starker demographic contrasts.

For students living on one of the streets crossed by this boundary, educational opportunity varies greatly by which side of the street they live on. Students in Brockton are more likely than not to attend a school designated as underperforming by the state, while no such schools exist in Abington. Graduation rates and test scores vary accordingly, while Abington (like Needham) shows worrisome internal opportunity gaps.
Springfield is one of the Commonwealth’s highest-poverty communities, while Longmeadow is one of its wealthiest. In the Springfield Public Schools, Hispanic students comprise the majority, while Longmeadow is a majority-white community. Like Brockton and Abington, they are neighbors whose border dissects residential streets.

As in the other school district pairs described in this report, the district boundary here corresponds to stark educational inequities. Students in Springfield have diminished access to high-quality schools, lower test scores, and among the Commonwealth’s lowest graduation rates. The difference in graduation rates is especially large for students with disabilities.

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*First language not English
**English Language Learner
The Lawrence-Andover border sits just on the Lawrence side of Route 495, with some streets crossing Andover into South Lawrence where Lawrence High School sits. That border separates one of Massachusetts’ poorest cities, and one of its few majority-Hispanic cities, from one of its wealthiest communities, a majority-white suburb.

Lawrence has seen strong academic improvements since the beginning of state receivership in 2011, but the difference in opportunity between these communities remains large. The state still deems one third of Lawrence schools underperforming, while Andover has no such schools. Andover’s graduation rate is more than 20 percentage points higher than Lawrence’s, and the suburban community has much higher test scores.

*First language not English
**English Language Learner
Massachusetts’ second-largest city, Worcester, is the most diverse of the school districts featured in this report. Shrewsbury is also the most diverse suburb. Even here, though, we see stark divides. White and Asian students are Shrewsbury’s largest racial groups, while Hispanic students are the largest group in Worcester more than 40%.

As in many of our pairs, one key inequity is the number of underperforming schools. Worcester has 13 such schools, serving nearly a third of its students, while Shrewsbury has none. Only narrow Lake Quinsigamond separates these communities physically, but their indicators of educational quality suggests greater distance.

*First language not English
**English Language Learner
Conclusion

Unbeknownst to many in the state, school segregation has worsened in Massachusetts in recent decades. It is also more severe in Massachusetts than in much of the rest of the country, but many voters think the opposite is true. At the same time, Massachusetts has seen no new introduction of major integration programs in decades.

Despite these misconceptions and recent lack of progress, support for state action is strong and growing—and could increase further with an increase in knowledge of the problem.

This is only the start of a conversation, one that should be informed and led by those denied opportunities afforded to families in wealthy suburban districts. We hope this report is one small contribution to motivate a more robust civic conversation to address these fault lines in our Commonwealth. Such a conversation must center and be led by those communities for whom the system has been set up to deny opportunity.

Endnotes

1. Data from “School and District Profiles,” Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
3. Massachusetts Constitution. Chapter 5, Section II.
13. Ibid.
14. The 2019 poll was conducted online from August 23 through 25, 2019. Using its Bias Correct Engine to attain a sample reflective of registered voters, Change Research polled 1008 registered voters in Massachusetts. Post-stratification weights were made on age, gender, race, 2016 vote, and region to reflect the distribution of voters within the state. The 2020 poll surveyed 862 registered voters in Massachusetts from August 12-15, 2020. The survey was conducted online, using Change Research’s Dynamic Online Sampling Engine. Post-stratification was done on age, gender, race, region of the state, and 2016 presidential vote.