

The Achievement Gap in the Lexington Public Schools: Documentation, Research, and Recommendations

Vito A. LaMura – January 2008

Executive Summary

During the 2006-2007 school year, the Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Paul Ash, learned of the significant over-representation of METCO students in special education programs. Alarmed, he asked two important questions: How well and how appropriately are the Lexington Public Schools meeting the needs of Boston students? Are METCO students achieving at levels comparable to the general population of Lexington students? In order to answer these questions, he commissioned a research study. For almost three months, from late August 2007 to his retirement in mid-November 2007, Vito LaMura, former Diamond Middle School teacher and Lexington Education Association President, sought the answers to the Superintendent's questions. This task involved surveying and interviewing scores of school community members from administrators to students, gathering and analyzing all available student achievement data, comprehensively examining the best available national research into closing achievement gaps, and finally making both short and long-term recommendations for decision-makers to consider. Mr. LaMura submitted a 60-page report of his findings to the Superintendent in January 2008.

The full report includes the following sections:

- I. ***Documenting the Extent of the Achievement Gaps among the Racial Subgroups in the Lexington Public Schools***
 - II. ***Conversations with the Lexington School Community*** (parents, students, faculty, and administrators)
 - III. ***An Examination of Current Research***
 - IV. ***Recommendations***
 - V. ***Appendix***
- I. **DATA COLLECTION:** All available assessment data - from MCAS results at 7 different grade levels, to local assessments of literacy and mathematics skills in grades 1-2, to under-representation in secondary school higher level courses, to high school grade point averages, to over-representation in special education – all data confirm a large achievement gap between Lexington's METCO students (Over 93% African American and Hispanic) and the Lexington-resident White and Asian students. The full report has the extensive, detailed assessment data referenced above.
- II. **SURVEY INFORMATION:** On October 16, 2007, at the Lexington School Committee Meeting in Boston, METCO parents and Lexington staff in attendance were given the opportunity to complete a survey after hearing presentations which included some startling MCAS data to illustrate the significant achievement gap between White/Asian students and African American/Hispanic students. That survey data and the specific information gathered in the conversations that took place in the breakout group after the presentations were carefully analyzed for the frequency of similar responses. Each respondent was asked to identify his/her role (METCO parent, teacher, administrator, student, etc.) to allow for more discriminating analysis of the responses. Teachers and other education professionals who were not able to attend the Boston meeting were also given the opportunity to respond to the

same questions. In addition during September and October, METCO Director, Cheryl Prescott-Walden, and Vito LaMura were able to meet with three small groups of high school METCO students. Middle School METCO Counselor, Gail Cody, and Mr. LaMura also met with two groups of middle school METCO students. The students completed surveys and then participated in guided discussions. Their written and oral responses were also carefully analyzed. Mr. LaMura also interviewed 22 administrators and curriculum leaders at all levels of the Lexington Public Schools.

The two key questions asked of all stakeholders were these: (1) What do you think are the reasons for these achievement gaps? (2) What can/should be done to close these gaps and ensure high achievement for all students? The full report contains the responses of the various groups and an analysis of response frequency.

III. **RESEARCH:** Below is a list of the books, research studies, professional articles, and interviews included in the full report. In sum, the research is clear and convincing: there are many schools and school districts across the country where gap-closing work is highly successful, and there are a set of common characteristics and universal best practices within gap-closing schools.

- Chenoweth, Karin. It's Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools. Cambridge: MA: Harvard Education Press, 2007.
- Carter, Prudence. Keepin' It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Tatum, Alfred. Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2005.
- High Performance in High Poverty Schools: 90/90/90 and Beyond by Douglas B. Reeves
- After the Test: Closing the Achievement Gaps With Data by Kiley Walsh Symonds
- Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students by the Staff of the EDUCATION TRUST
- ALL STUDENTS REACHING THE TOP: Strategies for Closing Academic Achievement Gaps by the National Study Group for the Affirmative Development of Academic Ability
- What Doesn't Meet the Eye: Understanding and Addressing Racial Disparities in High-Achieving Suburban Schools by Ronald F. Ferguson, Ph. D., November 2002
- "Untracking Earth Science" by Sherry King, Seth Weitzman, and Larry Keane in the November 2004 edition of Educational Leadership
- "Teachers Step Up" by Douglas Reeves In the September 2007 issue of Educational Leadership
- "Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships" by Raymond McNulty and Russell Quaglia in the September 2007 edition of The School Administrator
- Interviews with Dr. Laura Cooper, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, Evanston Township High School in Illinois; Dr. Douglas Reeves, CEO and founder of the Center for Performance Assessment; Mr. David Ingham, Principal of the Adams Middle School in Westland, Michigan; Mr. Gary Simon, Mathematics Department Head, Lexington High School; Ms. Barbara Manfredi, recently retired Principal of the Bridge School in Lexington.

The full report has summaries and internet links to the above-mentioned research studies as well as summaries/annotations of the above-mentioned books, articles, and interviews.

IV. **RECOMMENDATIONS:** The intent in making the following recommendations is to stimulate professional conversation and to jump start the decision-making process.

1. The Lexington School Committee should adopt a specific, gap-closing action plan, which includes a time frame (no longer than a 5-year plan) and appropriate, annual benchmarks by which to measure success.
2. An Achievement Gap Task Force should be constituted to develop and continually assess/revise the action plan as needed, to provide research and best-practice support, and to oversee its implementation
3. It is vital that the work begun in Lexington to institute and institutionalize formalized Professional Learning Committees continue.
4. The LPS should institute full-day kindergarten, and METCO students, ideally, should enter the LPS in kindergarten.
5. All elementary students should receive two hours of high quality literacy instruction and one hour of high quality mathematics instruction every day. Elementary schedules should also be flexible enough to permit additional intervention time for struggling students.
6. Provide bus monitors on all METCO late buses, and provide an elementary METCO late bus on Thursday afternoons with an accompanying Thursday afternoon plan that would provide additional support services/tutorial sessions.
7. Develop a METCO mentor program for those who need an adult advocate in the schools..
8. Every school must develop a set of tiered intervention strategies that is directly linked to individual student assessment. Tools must also be developed to assess METCO student engagement in school (the extent to which students are motivated and committed to learning, have a sense of belonging and accomplishment, and have relationships with adults, peers, and parents who support learning).
9. Counselors and METCO social workers should collaborate in developing action research projects around the tracking of student achievement and their role in monitoring and/or activating the academic intervention process.
10. More staff (custodians, cafeteria workers, instructional assistants, teachers, administrators) of color must be hired and then supported for success.
11. Specific goals must be set at each school with regard to secondary METCO students enrolling and succeeding in higher-level courses. Therefore, substantial support services must be a part of this effort.
12. Increase tutoring support during school (e.g., drop-in centers or pre-qualified student sign up's or mandated, directed studies), after school in both Boston and Lexington (e.g., mandated homework sessions), and before school (e.g., mandated help sessions during X block at LHS) by qualified educators for regular-ed underachievers
13. Develop effective, comprehensive assessments for students in grades 5 and 8 to determine who will need semester or yearlong special courses (also to be developed) in basic literacy, non-fiction composition, and/or mathematics in grades 6 and 9.
14. METCO students and their parents must be actively engaged, not only in individual achievement, but also as members of a group in the gap closing efforts of that group. This will require the sharing of assessment data from year to year to determine goals and assess progress, representation on the Task Force, and increased support for Lexington's efforts in this regard. METCO Lexington, in conjunction with LPS leadership and the

Task Force, ought to develop a comprehensive plan to address several of the student, parent, and staff survey findings, namely:

- Insufficient or lack of parental involvement and communication with the schools
- Students' lack of confidence and effort in academic pursuits
- Students' and parents' expectations, attitudes, and values with regard to education

15. The LPS, in conjunction with METCO and the Task Force, ought to develop a comprehensive plan to address several of the student, parent, and staff survey findings, namely:

- Teachers' communication, conscious and unconscious, of low expectations
- Over-referral to special education
- Insufficient communication with parents
- Insufficient cultural awareness and its effect on student learning

16. Mandatory, Lexington-supported and staffed, rigorous, summer school should be provided for significantly underachieving students in both Boston and Lexington.

17. METCO parents have asked for and should receive the opportunity to learn more about effective strategies parents can employ to help their children manage their schoolwork more efficiently and effectively.

18. Increasingly relying on data to drive instruction and instructional interventions necessitates that the Task Force investigate (1) the significant obstacles and difficulties created by our current technology and software systems, and (2) how to improve our ability to gather, analyze, access, and distribute data.

19. In keeping with the truism, "We won't fix what we will not recognize," I recommend that this report be disseminated, in whole or in part, in hard copy or in presentation form, to all members of the Lexington school community, and that meaningful discussions focus on acknowledging, understanding, and collaboratively working toward reducing and then eliminating the achievement gap throughout the district.