

Study finds Massachusetts school desegregation program benefits K-12 students

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A new study has found that a long-standing voluntary school desegregation program in Massachusetts has a significant positive impact

on the urban students who take part in it.

METCO, which facilitates students of color from Boston studying in some 33 [suburban communities](#) that surround the city, improved [test scores](#) in math and English, [attendance rates](#), and college aspiration and graduation rates of its students over a three-decade period.

Elizabeth Setren, an assistant professor of economics, examined the effects of the METCO program by comparing test scores and other data of students who took part in the program and that of their peers who applied for the program but weren't chosen. Participation in METCO was originally on a first-come, first-served basis, and now is determined by lottery.

METCO was founded in 1966 by Black activists who developed partnerships with suburban school districts, says Setren, who holds the Gunnar Myrdal Professorship in economics. The majority of METCO students are Black, with the rest mainly Latinx, and some are Asian Americans.

For the study, Setren gathered data from the 1990–91 through the 2019–20 school years—a mammoth project in which she was assisted by Tufts undergraduate and graduate students, who helped digitize vast volumes of paper records.

Ways METCO improved student outcomes

Setren found that METCO students' test scores were "dramatically higher" than their peers who stayed in Boston. "We saw large gains in math and English for the state standardized test," she says.

Attendance rates were slightly better for the METCO students, too, which is striking because their commutes to schools in the suburbs are

often much longer and more difficult than their peers in Boston.

One of the biggest impacts was about college, she says. "Students are 17 percentage points more likely to aspire to go to a four-year college if they participate in the METCO program. To put that in perspective, that's going from about 55% of Boston public school students of color wanting to go to four-year college and having that jump to closer to 75%."

And not only do students aspire to go to college, they follow through, and there is a similar boost in four-year college enrollment and graduation rates. "That translates into earnings, because people who get a [college degree](#) can earn more in the labor market," says Setren.

The gains were not evenly distributed, though. Boys achieved greater benefits than girls, and students whose parents did not attend college demonstrated a bigger rise in interest in attending college than those whose parents had attended college. In both cases, Setren says, the higher gains probably had to do more with the starting levels of performance being somewhat lower in both cases.

The number of METCO students taking the SAT was 30% higher than their cohort who stayed in Boston schools, and the likelihood of scoring a 1000 or higher grew by 38%. But METCO students are no more likely to score above 1200 on the SAT than their Boston-educated peers, and METCO participation had no impact on AP exam taking or scores.

How the study informs policy

Though the findings are new, METCO is already starting to make changes based on the study results. Setren says. For instance, one of the findings is that METCO students are more likely to take the SAT and get better scores than their Boston-based peers, but their scores are not high

enough to get into more competitive schools or qualify for better scholarships. "So METCO has now started a partnership to offer SAT prep to their students," she says.

And "although there were impressive gains in college attendance and college graduation, not everyone who starts college finishes, which was concerning to the METCO staff," she says. Previously METCO didn't provide support to students after they graduated from [high school](#), but now the organization "is thinking of it more as a K-16 model, working on providing supports for persisting through to college graduation."

And even though METCO students are less likely to be suspended, they're still suspended on average at a higher rate than their suburban peers. With the district specific information, Setren says, school administrators can examine underlying issues to support the students and school systems in this area.

Sometimes those opposed to integrating suburban schools with urban students argue that those students will have a disruptive effect, but that's clearly not the case, says Setren. The study found that having METCO students in their classes did not affect suburban students' state test scores, attendance rates, or suspension rates.

Setren plans to publish the full study in several articles in a peer-reviewed journal, and in the meantime is studying the longer-term impact of METCO on its participants.

The key takeaway, she notes, is that the study shows "really large differences in students' academic outcomes throughout a variety of ways."

More information: Elizabeth Setren, The impacts of the METCO. media.wbur.org/wp/2024/01/TBF_METCO_1_16_2024.pdf

Provided by Tufts University

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