

Coming Together

How a Half Century of Segregation and Desegregation Continues to Shape New England's Future

BLENDA J. WILSON

If you were an African-American student in a large Northern city 50 years ago, your public school, very likely, would have been segregated—even in New England. Only one year earlier, in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled that legally sanctioned school segregation violated the 14th Amendment to the Constitution.

Following the Supreme Court decision, Massachusetts took legislative action, recognizing that segregation in housing had restricted certain racial and ethnic groups, including African-Americans and Latinos, to neighborhoods whose schools were inferior to schools in predominately white communities. In 1965, Massachusetts Gov. John A. Volpe proposed and the state Legislature approved the Racial Imbalance Act, which prohibited racial imbalance and discouraged schools from having enrollments that are more than 50 percent minority. The state Board of Education required written desegregation plans from school committees in segregated cities, including Boston, Springfield and New Bedford.

Sadly, the Racial Imbalance Law ran into staunch resistance in many parts of the state. The Boston School Committee immediately challenged the law

in U.S. District Court, but the court ruled against the school board. Nevertheless, decades of political activism in opposition to the law took extreme forms, including violent protest and boycotts that will forever stain Boston's reputation on matters of race.

In 1972, a group of African-American parents in Boston filed a class action suit charging that the city's public schools were intentionally segregated. Two years later, U.S. District Court Judge W. Arthur Garrity ordered the School Committee to produce and implement a racially balanced student assignment plan as a temporary remedy and to create a permanent plan. Over the next 15 years of active court involvement, the judge issued a series of remedial orders on a range of issues, including assigning students to schools, busing students to schools beyond walking distance, closing and opening facilities and recruiting and assigning faculty and staff.

Boston was not alone in refusing to comply with the law. The Springfield schools were not fully desegregated until after the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education filed four separate lawsuits against that city's School Committee.

One of the striking successes of Massachusetts legislative action was the creation of the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO Inc.). This state-funded, voluntary education desegregation

1976 Congress approves demonstration program to promote delivery of health, education and public service information via telecommunications.

U.S. college enrollment stands at 11,012,137.

1977 First wave of New England colleges and universities begin divesting endowment funds from companies that do business in South Africa. Within a decade, more than 30 New England institutions would have divested more than \$200 million. Most would reverse the policy with the dismantling of apartheid in 1991.



Credit: Sahn Doherty.

Massachusetts Democratic Congressman Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. becomes speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, a position he would hold for 10 years.

Biogen is founded in Massachusetts. By 1990, the state would host more than 100 biotechnology companies.

Rhode Island state Sen. John C. Revens Jr., assumes NEBHE chairmanship.

1978 In response to budgetary concerns, a 25 percent tuition surcharge on RSP students is initiated.

Caucus of New England State Legislatures is established.

John C. Hoy, former vice chancellor for university and student affairs at the University of California, Irvine, and Wesleyan University admissions dean, becomes NEBHE president and CEO—a post he would hold for 23 years until his retirement.

Price of postage stamp rises to 15 cents.

program helped eliminate racial imbalance by enabling children from Boston, and later from Springfield, to attend participating suburban public schools. METCO has been a key player in the regional battle for equal educational opportunity. Today, more than 3,000 METCO students attend schools in one of 38 participating districts, including Braintree, Brookline, Cohasset, Framingham, Hampden, Lexington, Longmeadow, Newton and Reading. Since the organization was established in 1965, nearly nine out of 10 METCO graduates have gone on to college.

During the era of desegregation, the number of minority students who graduated from high school increased sharply and racial test score gaps narrowed. Despite the evidence of METCO and other successful educational interventions that quality education can enable all students to achieve at high levels, however, the promise of equal education in New England remains elusive. Even today, residential housing patterns in many of New England's low-income, multicultural cities mimic earlier patterns of segregation and produce inferior schools and unequal education for poor, immigrant and minority children.

Because immigrant and minority children represent the fastest growing segment of the population in New England, redressing modern-day segregation is particularly challenging. A good example may be seen in Hartford, Conn., where the student population is 95 percent minority. The Connecticut Supreme Court found the state of Connecticut in violation of a mandate to reduce racial, ethnic and economic segregation in Hartford regional schools. To achieve diversity, Hartford plans to develop inter-district magnet schools to bring together students from the city and from the suburbs. Hartford's goal is to significantly expand the

number of African-American and Latino students in desegregated educational settings within four years.

Legal challenges to the intent of the law have also undermined educational advances on behalf of minority students. In 1996, for example, two lawsuits were filed by Michael C. McLaughlin, a white Boston attorney whose daughter had been denied admission to the prestigious Boston Latin School. At the time, Boston's "exam schools" reserved 35 percent of the student slots for African-American and Latino students. McLaughlin's claim was that his daughter's grades and entrance exam scores were higher than those of many minority candidates who were granted admission. The lawsuit was dismissed when the schools agreed to reserve half the seats in the district's three exam schools for students with the highest scores and to fill the remaining slots through a system that permitted consideration of test scores and race. In a later case, the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that compromise unconstitutional. As a result, fewer African-American and Hispanic students attend Boston Latin School and Boston Latin Academy today than during the years of court-ordered school desegregation.

So how far have we come? Neither the country at large nor New England has succeeded in eliminating segregation, whatever its cause. The familiar phenomenon of "white flight," where white families migrate out of the region's cities or send their children to parochial or private schools, has created "majority minority" student populations in many urban public schools. Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island now rank among the U.S. states in which white exposure to blacks is the lowest, and Latino segregation continues to increase in every region of the country. So, if you are an African-American or Latino student in a large

A Half Century of New England Higher Education and Economic Development, continued

1979 NEBHE creates Commission on Higher Education and the Economy of New England, comprised of bank executives, college presidents, labor officials, professors, publishers and business leaders.

U.S. Department of Education is established as cabinet-level agency, with Shirley M. Hufstедler as first secretary.

For the first time, women outnumber men on U.S. college campuses.

Number of high school graduates begins to decline.

1980 High-technology executives in Massachusetts help push through Proposition 2½, a sweeping referendum capping property taxes.

Ronald Reagan is elected president, ushering in era of administration calls for cuts in federal spending on higher education and scientific research.

1981 NEBHE publishes *Business and Academia: Partners in New England's Economic Renewal*, the first in a series of three books on New England higher education and the regional economy. *New England's Vital Resource: The Labor Force* and

Financing Higher Education: The Public Investment are published a year later.

A NEBHE survey finds that fewer than half of New England leaders of government, higher education, business and labor view higher education as "above average" or "outstanding" in meeting the labor force needs of the region's industries.

Reagan administration cuts funding of New England



Northern city today, or even in parts of New England, there is still a good chance that your school is racially unbalanced.

Moreover, the Harvard Civil Rights Project, in a recent study titled, *A Multiracial Society with Segregated Schools: Are We Losing the Dream?*, found that the progress in reducing educational disparities that had been achieved during the era of desegregation has been eroding in the 1990s.

The good news, however, is that, despite continued housing segregation and stubborn resistance to compensatory strategies, schools have made progress over the past 50 years in reducing educational inequities based on race. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), performance gaps between white and minority students in reading and math have closed to the narrowest point in 30 years. NAEP assessments in 4th grade writing also show a narrowing in the black-white gap in average scores. African-American and Latino students have gained at an even faster rate than white students on these measures, according to a recent report of the Center for Education Policy. And while students of color still account for only 20 percent of enrollments on the region's college campuses, they are making progress. Between 1993 and 2003, African-American enrollment increased by 31 percent, Latino enrollment by 51 percent and Native American enrollment by 21 percent. Progress is slow, but encouraging.

Brown v. Board of Education set in motion a half century of fits and starts toward equal educational opportunity for citizens of color. The federal government played an important role by providing grants and loan guarantees to make college affordable to students

from low-income families and sponsoring college access programs such as Upward Bound, TRIO and GEAR UP to increase the college readiness of students from underperforming schools. Similarly, state support of public colleges and universities was designed to enable all students who were capable of pursuing post-secondary education, regardless of income, to enroll in college—opening the doors of opportunity to historically disadvantaged groups.

The major policy advances of this new century contain a commitment to educate all children for a competitive world. In addition to historically underrepresented populations—African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans—New England is experiencing a large influx of immigrants from all over the world, including large numbers of school-age children from Brazil, Portugal, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic and India. While these groups may live in relatively homogeneous neighborhoods more as a result of choice than discrimination, the educational challenge remains the same as the struggle of the past 50 years—to provide a high-quality education for all.

The rapid increase of immigrant populations in New England should give new urgency to the region's commitment to education reform and enhancing achievement of underserved groups. Adlai Stevenson once said, "The most American thing about America is the free common school system." We must hold those schools accountable not only for advancing educational equity, but for sustaining an inclusive democracy.

Blenda J. Wilson is president and chief operating officer of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation in Quincy, Mass.

Regional Commission and New England River Basins Commission.

Yale University, the city of New Haven, the state of Connecticut and Olin Corp., establish Science Park Development Corp. in an effort to lure high-tech and biotech firms to New Haven.

Tuition and mandatory fees at New England's private four-year colleges average \$4,874, compared with \$3,709 nationally. Tuition and mandatory fees at the region's public four-year colleges average \$1,019, compared with \$819 nationally.

Quinebaug Valley Community College President Robert E. Miller assumes NEBHE chairmanship.

1982 NEBHE's Commission on Higher Education and the Economy issues *A Threat to Excellence*, calling for a variety of partnerships among New England colleges, secondary schools and businesses.

New England Education Loan Marketing Corp. (Nellie Mae) is chartered as first regional secondary market in the United States.

Congress passes Small Business Innovation Development Act of 1982, setting aside a small portion of federal research funds for small businesses.

New England unemployment averages 7.8 percent, as recession pushes U.S. jobless rate to 40-year high of 9.7 percent.

Mitchell Kapor launches Lotus Development Corp.

1983 NEBHE publishes *Higher Education Telecommunications: A New England Policy Imperative*, urging that New England adopt a regional policy to coordinate educational telecommunications.

National Commission on Excellence in Education publishes *A Nation at Risk*, warning of mediocrity in public schools and leading to stepped-up school reform efforts across the country.