

GLOBE EDITORIAL

Reforms, not desegregation, will bring school advances

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THE CLOSING of the achievement gap between white and minority students in Massachusetts — or any other state, for that matter — is not going to come about through housing integration anytime soon. This battle will have to be won within individual urban school districts, like Boston's, where minorities often comprise 90 percent or more of the student body.

A new study from the Institute on Urban Health Research at Northeastern University cites public schools in the metropolitan Boston and Springfield areas as among the most segregated in the country. It's nothing to be proud of, surely. But residential segregation in Northeastern and Midwestern cities is a common phenomenon with no quick or easy fix. And in states like Massachusetts, which has a strong tradition of local autonomy, there are few regional school systems that link minority students, who are often concentrated in cities, with whites from nearby suburbs.

Parents, educators, and public officials have to decide which mountaintop to fight on when attacking the achievement gap. They can accept the recommendation of the Northeastern University authors and try to create a student-assignment plan that encompasses multiple school districts. Or they can immediately start applying the best lessons of education reform — a longer school day, on-site social services, greater flexibility in hiring and scheduling — in poorly performing urban schools.

The latter is the smart and realistic course. Suburban officials are struggling, in many cases, to keep their own schools and basic services at acceptable levels. They are not looking to import students from the city, especially poor ones with expensive needs. And courts, by and large, frown on plans that use race as a major factor in assigning students.

Urban schools are pretty much on their own, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. Massachusetts charter schools, which make maximum use of the education reform law, are closing the achievement gap with a vengeance. In percentage of students who scored advanced or proficient on the latest MCAS test, the Community Day Public Charter School in Lawrence, where 88 percent of students are Hispanic, ranked second in the state in Grade 8 math. By the same measure, the Boston Preparatory Charter School topped the state in the 10th grade math MCAS test. **And the Edward Brooke Charter School in Roslindale ranked first in the state in grade 7 math and English.** Each has a minority enrollment higher than 93 percent.

Families in urban areas can't afford to pick up en masse and move to the suburbs. And suburbs,

as a rule, aren't going to make accommodations that undermine local control. But minority students from urban areas can outperform their suburban peers if provided the right educational opportunities close to home. ■

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