

## Framing The Debate: The Case for Studying School Vouchers



BY **KIT J. NICHOLS**

schoolchoice

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## **Pioneer's Scholarship Voucher Mission**

Since its founding in 1988, Pioneer Institute has publicly advocated the introduction and expansion of competition and choice into public education not only because it is the most effective means to the long-term reform of grades K–12 education in Massachusetts, but also because it offers immediate relief to children trapped in chronically underperforming schools. As part of its Scholarship Voucher Research Initiative, a multi-year, \$200,000 effort, Pioneer will examine critical questions surrounding the use of scholarship vouchers and tax credits in Massachusetts, including the dynamics of parental choice, private school capacity, legal barriers, and methods for ensuring accountability as steps to improve educational outcomes.

## Abstract

*The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 has had uneven success, bringing significant improvements to many districts, but having little impact on others. School accountability has increased, test scores have risen, and innovative programs have been introduced. However, urban students are still lagging, high achievers are not being challenged, and student dropout rates have yet to fall. These stubborn deficiencies demonstrate the limits of what can be achieved with the tools currently available and the incentives now in place. While public charter schools continue to bring competition and innovation into the public school system, the continuing failure of many urban schools to improve despite infusions of funding suggest that it is time to consider what role scholarship vouchers could play in improving educational outcomes for the Commonwealth's schoolchildren.*

## Introduction

Before the passage of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, there was broad acknowledgement that public education in the Commonwealth was in crisis. A November 1992 article in the *Boston Herald* lamented that “Two-thirds of Massachusetts students in grades four, eight, and twelve performed poorly this year on a statewide examination [the Massachusetts Educational Assessment Test] and were unable to apply what they learn in the classroom to the outside world . . . ‘Students cannot connect their learning to the outside world,’ reported one Department of Education official.”<sup>1</sup> SAT scores were dropping across the state, and Boston students had recently returned such abysmal results on the Metropolitan Achievement Test that Robert Consalvo, then executive secretary of the Boston School Committee, lamented, “Those students are essentially functional illiterates and cannot read.”<sup>2</sup>

There was a widely held view that a lack of adequate funding in some school districts contributed to poor student achievement. The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court (SJC) ultimately embraced this view in 1993. In the landmark case of *McDuffy v. Robertson* the SJC ruled that funding disparities among the Commonwealth's school districts harmed the quality of education for some students, denying them the education to which they were constitutionally entitled, and ordered the Massachusetts Legislature to find a remedy.

The 1993 Education Reform Act was the legislature's response. The act calculated the minimum level of spending required in each district, stipulated that all districts had received funding in a minimum amount referred to as the “foundation budget,” and

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Mangan, “Students Sagging in Vital Skill Report: Bay State Kids Have Trouble Putting Their Knowledge to use,” *Boston Herald*, November 24, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Mangan, “Test Shows Hub Students Weak in Reading Skills: Reading Scores for Hub Students Decline,” *Boston Herald*, October 29, 1992.

determined the share to be contributed by the state and local government. As the new spending requirements were phased in, education spending in the Commonwealth increased from \$4.3 billion in 1993 to \$7.3 billion in 2001, the year that all districts reached foundation.<sup>3</sup> The flow of funds dramatically reduced the gap in spending between rich and poor communities.

Passage of the Education Reform Act was a seminal point for public education in the Commonwealth. With it, the state accepted responsibility for improving educational outcomes for all children, not just those fortunate enough to live in affluent districts.

In addition to increasing funding to the districts, the Education Reform Act also prepared the way for a number of sweeping changes intended to bolster academic achievement in the public schools. In particular, it required that the state develop a standard test to be administered to all public school students in the Commonwealth at regular intervals in their schooling and specified that passage of the test be a graduation requirement. It also allowed the creation of a small number of public charter schools, privately managed public schools free of many of the regulations governing traditional public schools.

#### Highlights of the 1993 Education Reform Act

Established the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), a standardized test system that all Massachusetts public school students must pass to receive a diploma.

Established state curriculum frameworks to structure what students should learn.

Subjected schools and districts that failed to perform adequately to state receivership.

Tightened teacher certification rules.

Established public charter schools.

## Where Are We a Decade After Education Reform?

Has education reform worked? On the financial side, it has largely eliminated disparities in spending. On the more important question of student performance, the evidence is mixed: test scores have increased and a number of public charter schools have introduced exciting and successful innovation, but student achievement still lags, particularly for urban and minority students.

### *The Good News: Some Signs of Progress*

The decade since the passage of the Education Reform Act has seen substantial improvements in the state of grades K–12 education in the Commonwealth, including increased accountability; improved MCAS, SAT, and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores; and an encouraging degree of innovation, in particular through public charter schools.

<sup>3</sup> Massachusetts Department of Education, “Chapter 70 Trends: FY93 Through FY05,” [finance1.doe.mass.edu/chapter70](http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/chapter70).

*INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MCAS TEST*

Despite the controversy its introduction stirred, the MCAS test has focused attention on shortcomings in school systems. While the MCAS test is usually thought of as a test for students, student performance can be used to evaluate schools and districts. The state Department of Education (DOE) uses MCAS test scores to inform its school and district review and assistance programs.

Student results on the MCAS test have improved steadily since its implementation in 1998. These gains have been the result of hard work on the part of students, educators, and administrators. According to one report, “Only 48 percent of students passed the math portion of the MCAS [test] in 1998. By providing extensive extra assistance and sparking substantial reforms in urban high schools, Massachusetts dramatically raised student performance over time. Five years later, 95 percent of the class of 2003, the first students to face the MCAS [test] graduation requirement, were able to pass. While the passing rates for black and Hispanic students remained lower than that of whites, the achievement gap closed dramatically—from 48 percentage points to 12 in the case of Hispanics.”<sup>4</sup>

Since 2003, the passing rate has stayed relatively constant at approximately 95 percent. However, the number of students passing both MCAS examinations on their first try has increased from 63 percent for the class of 2003 to 82 percent for the class of 2006.<sup>5</sup>

*IMPROVED SCORES: THE SAT AND NAEP TESTS*

The last decade has also seen a steady increase in mean SAT scores in Massachusetts. In 1994, the combined verbal and math score for Massachusetts students was 1002, just below the national mean of 1003.<sup>6</sup> Since then, Massachusetts scores have improved steadily, up 45 points to 1047 in 2005, while the national mean only increased 25 points to 1028.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the NAEP scores of students in Massachusetts have improved faster than those in the rest of the country, particularly in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. In 1992, 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in Massachusetts scored 6 points higher than students nationwide on the NAEP math test. By 2005, Massachusetts 8<sup>th</sup> graders scored 14 points higher than the nationwide average. The share of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students scoring at or above ‘Proficient’ also increased faster in Massachusetts, from 3 percentage points above the national average to 15 percentage points higher. Massachusetts 8<sup>th</sup> grade students also improved in reading while the rest of the country’s test scores were unchanged. Massachusetts went from 8 points above the national average in 1998 to 14 points above in 2005, and the share at or above ‘Proficient’ increased from 8 points above the national average to 15 points above it.<sup>8</sup>

*INNOVATION: PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS AND PILOT SCHOOLS*

The original public charter legislation in 1993 capped the number of public charter schools at 25. Because of high parental demand as well as the schools’ successes and

<sup>4</sup> The American Diploma Projects, “Do Graduation Tests Measure Up? A Closer Look at State High School Exit Exams,” an initiative of Achieve, Inc., 2004, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Massachusetts Department of Education, “Progress Report on Students Attaining the Competency Determination Statewide and by School and District: Classes of 2005 and 2006,” June 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Massachusetts Department of Education, “A Decade of Progress: Education Reform in Massachusetts,” June 20, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> The College Board, “2005 College-Bound Seniors: State Profile Report Massachusetts,” 2005.

<sup>8</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, [nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/profile.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/profile.asp).

potential, the Massachusetts Legislature has twice raised the limit on the number of public charters available. In 1997, it raised the statutory cap from 25 to 50, and in July 2000 from 50 to 72 Commonwealth public charter schools (as originally enacted) and 48 Horace Mann charters, which are public charters that are endorsed by local school districts and teachers' unions.

For the 2005–06 school year, there are 50 public charter schools in operation across the Commonwealth, serving approximately 19,100 students, or two percent of the roughly 975,000 public school children in the Commonwealth.<sup>9</sup> Many of the students in these public charter schools are turning out impressive results compared to their district counterparts:<sup>10</sup>

At the MATCH Charter School in Boston, 88 percent of the 10<sup>th</sup> graders scored 'Advanced' or 'Proficient' on the English Language Arts (ELA) portion of the MCAS test in 2005, compared to 38 percent of the Boston Public Schools 10<sup>th</sup> graders. In mathematics, 93 percent of MATCH students scored 'Advanced' or 'Proficient' compared to 39 percent of their peers in Boston. One hundred percent of the classes of both 2005 and 2006 passed the MCAS test.

Seventy-three percent of the 10<sup>th</sup> graders at Boston Collegiate Charter scored 'Advanced' or 'Proficient' on the MCAS test in ELA and 86 percent did so in mathematics in 2005. It was also one of only three schools in the state to have no 10<sup>th</sup> graders score in the 'Warning/Failing' category in either 2004 or 2005 (along with Boston Latin and the Massachusetts Academy of Math and Science).

In Springfield, 80 percent of 10<sup>th</sup> graders at the SABIS International Charter School were in the 'Advanced' or 'Proficient' range in ELA on the 2005 MCAS test, and 68 percent scored 'Proficient' or above in mathematics. In the Springfield Public School district, only 31 percent of 10<sup>th</sup> graders were 'Proficient' or above in ELA, and only 23 percent in mathematics.

The introduction of public charter schools led directly to innovation in the public school system: in order to stem the loss of students to public charter schools, the Boston Public Schools created pilot schools. Born of a collaboration between the Mayor of Boston, the Boston School Committee, the superintendent of the Boston Public Schools, and the teachers' union, pilot schools are more autonomous and smaller than traditional public school counterparts. Pilot school administrators have control over budget, staffing, curriculum, governance, and time.

The enthusiasm for public charter schools among parents is apparent in the rapid growth in public charter school enrollment. Even after the initial growth spurt slowed, public charter enrollment has been growing at an annual rate of 9.1 percent since 2001 and would have grown faster if not for enrollment caps.

### ***The Bad News: Significant Challenges Remain***

Despite the gains, however, those who follow the progress of public education in the Commonwealth realize that there is much more to be done before all Massachusetts children have access to the quality education to which they are constitutionally entitled.

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<sup>9</sup> Massachusetts Department of Education, [finance1.doe.mass.edu/charter](http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/charter).

<sup>10</sup> Massachusetts Department of Education, [www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/2005/results/data/files.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/2005/results/data/files.html).

A closer look at educational outcomes in the state reveals that while we have indeed made significant progress, we still have a long way to go.

*CHALLENGE ONE: LACK OF PROGRESS AMONG HIGH ACHIEVERS*

The top tier of students has yet to demonstrate significant improvement despite the increases in state funding since the 1993 Education Reform Act. Only 11 percent of Massachusetts 8<sup>th</sup> grade students scored 'Advanced' on the NAEP in 2005 in mathematics and only 5 percent in English. This is an area of great concern to regional businesses, and therefore to the maintenance of the high standard of living in the Commonwealth, as Massachusetts may not be able to compete with other areas of the country or the globe in the knowledge-based economy.

*CHALLENGE TWO: URBAN STUDENTS AND OTHERS ARE STILL STRUGGLING*

As of June 2005, 94 percent of the suburban and rural students, but only 77 percent of the urban students, in the class of 2006 had passed both the ELA and mathematics MCAS test (the threshold for meeting Competency Determination). In both 2004 and 2005, urban students in all grades were almost three times as likely to score in the 'Warning/Failing' category on the ELA or mathematics tests as non-urban students, and only one-third as likely to score 'Advanced.'

In the 22 districts classified by the DOE as urban, 19 were identified for improvement in 2005 for not making 'Adequate Yearly Progress' (AYP) under *No Child Left Behind* in both ELA and mathematics. Only seven other districts in the rest of the state were identified for improvement in both ELA and mathematics. If schools or districts that have been identified for improvement fail to make progress, they are designated for corrective action and then restructuring. Of the 66 schools identified for restructuring or corrective action because of their failure to make AYP, 55 are in urban areas.

While 90 percent of all students in the class of 2006 had earned the competency determination by June of 2005, the figures for some student subgroups were much lower. Only 50 percent of limited English proficient (LEP) students, 70 percent of students with disabilities, 73 percent of African-American and Hispanic students, and 77 percent of students receiving free or reduced price lunches (FRL/Y) earned a competency determination by June 2005.<sup>11</sup>

Minority students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade also lag behind: 73 percent of African-American and 78 percent of Hispanic 4<sup>th</sup> graders were in the 'Needs Improvement' or 'Warning/Failing' categories in ELA, while in mathematics 83 percent of African-American and Hispanic students fell in the 'Needs Improvement' or 'Warning/Failing' categories.

Despite reports of increasing MCAS test scores (based primarily on the number of students passing the 10<sup>th</sup> grade tests), a close examination of the latest results is still troubling. The MCAS test scores from 2005 reveal that 51 percent of the Commonwealth's 4<sup>th</sup> graders scored below 'Proficient' in ELA, and 59 percent scored below 'Proficient' in mathematics.

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<sup>11</sup> Massachusetts Department of Education, "Progress Report on Students Attaining the Competency Determination Statewide and by School and District: Classes of 2005 and 2006," June 2005.

In more than one out of every three school districts in Massachusetts (including every major city) more than half of the students scored in the ‘Needs Improvement’ or ‘Warning/Failing’ categories on the 2005 MCAS test. In total, 70 percent of the tests taken in urban districts resulted in scores of ‘Needs Improvement’ or ‘Warning/Failing’ in 2005.

*CHALLENGE THREE: THE MCAS TEST ONLY ESTABLISHES A BARE MINIMUM*

Just as troubling as the lack of progress in some student sub-groups is how low the passing bar for the MCAS test is set. According to an independent report analyzing high school exit exams in six states including Massachusetts, the bar should be raised: “To pass the math tests, students in these states need to successfully answer questions that, on average, cover materials students in most other countries study in 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. To pass the ELA tests, students need to successfully answer questions that ACT considers more appropriate for the test it gives to 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders than its college admissions test.”<sup>12</sup> According to Mike Cohen, the president of Achieve, Inc., the non-profit organization that authored the report, “They’re passing a test that enables them to earn a diploma, but that doesn’t really mean they are ready to move on.”<sup>13</sup>

Although 95 percent of 10<sup>th</sup> graders are passing, approximately 30 percent of the students who passed have scored in the ‘Needs Improvement’ category. In a state with an economy that depends on highly skilled workers, that is far too many.

Comparing our students to those in the rest of the country can lull us into the same false sense of complacency as a superficial look at the high pass rates on the MCAS test. In this age of globalization, job seekers must be prepared to compete with challenges from around the world. Unfortunately, students in the United States consistently score below their peers in many other countries. In the 2003 Trends in International Science and Mathematics Study, U.S. 4<sup>th</sup> graders scored 12<sup>th</sup> out of 25 countries in mathematics and 6<sup>th</sup> in science. Eighth-grade students in the United States scored 15<sup>th</sup> out of 45 countries in mathematics and 9<sup>th</sup> in science.<sup>14</sup> The fact that Massachusetts students score above the national average is less remarkable when considering that they still trail Singapore, Korea, and Hungary.

*CHALLENGE FOUR: DROP-OUT RATES REMAIN HIGH*

While 95 percent of high school seniors have passed the MCAS test, we cannot ignore the thousands of students who leave school before graduating and taking the examination. The dropout rate is slightly above 3.5 percent per year, so that approximately 10,000 students drop out of high school each year. Over four years of high school, this means that roughly 13 percent of students do not graduate. Over the past decade, despite the increased resources made available by the growth in state aid and local spending, the dropout rate has remained virtually unchanged, with an increase project-

<sup>12</sup> The American Diploma Projects, “Do Graduation Tests Measure Up? A Closer Look at State High School Exit Exams,” an initiative of Achieve, Inc., 2004, 30.

<sup>13</sup> “Raise MCAS Bar Now,” *Boston Herald*, June 14, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> “Trends in International Math and Science Study,” [nces.ed.gov/timss](http://nces.ed.gov/timss).

<sup>15</sup> “Dropouts in Massachusetts Public Schools: 2003–04,” Massachusetts Department of Education, October 2005, [www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/dropout](http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/dropout).

ed for the classes of 2006 and 2007.<sup>15</sup> These students leave school without a diploma and without the tools to participate in Massachusetts' knowledge-based economy.

**Table One:**  
**Dropout Rates in Massachusetts, Classes of 2002–2007**

High School Class	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
DROPOUT RATE	14%	13%	13%	12%	13% (projected)	14.3% (projected)

Students who do not complete high school face a lifetime of difficulties in the labor market. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average income for high school graduates with full-time jobs in 2001 was 20 percent higher than for those who did not finish high school. Students who complete college had incomes more than two and a half times as high, a wage premium that has been increasing in recent years.<sup>16</sup>

**Table Two:**  
**Mean Earnings for Full Time Workers, by Educational Attainment, 2001**

	Less than 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	9 <sup>th</sup> –12 <sup>th</sup> grade	High School Graduate	Some College	Bachelor's or more
Earnings	\$22,495	\$27,340	\$32,906	\$38,809	\$67,823

## Solutions

Lessons from other states show that increased choice and accountability can drive system-wide reform.<sup>17</sup> If parents are allowed to vote with their feet and choose the educational setting they believe is best for their child, schools will compete to attract students. Massachusetts parents know that education is critically important to the success of their children, and despite the gains over the last decade, they continue to beat the drum for alternative choices to the traditional public school system. Unfortunately, there are few alternatives to the public education system, and those that do exist are narrowing.

### *Public Charter Schools*

Demand for public charter schools continues to rise: there were over 14,000 children on public charter school waiting lists for the 2004–05 school year. While every single public charter school in Massachusetts had more children applying than spaces available, the demand is especially strong in urban areas. In Boston, over 4,000 children attend public charter schools, while 6,100 remain on waiting lists.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics: [www.bls.census.gov/cps/ads/sdata.htm](http://www.bls.census.gov/cps/ads/sdata.htm).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Martin R. West and Paul E. Peterson, "The Efficacy of Choice Threats Within School Accountability Systems: Results From Legislatively Induced Experiments," Research Paper PEPG 05-01, The Program on Education Policy and Governance, The Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, March 23, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Marc Kenen, "Massachusetts Charter School Association, Charter School Update," March 15, 2004, [www.masscharterschools.org](http://www.masscharterschools.org).

Unfortunately, the likelihood that those on waiting lists will be able to attend a public charter school is small. Massachusetts legislators recently passed legislation freezing new public charters, including the opening of five public charters already approved by the Massachusetts Board of Education. Furthermore, existing schools would not have been allowed to expand their enrollment, regardless of prior expansion plans. While Governor Romney vetoed the bill, opposition to public charters is strong, particularly among teachers unions.

In addition, public charter legislation caps the number of public charters at 120, and allows no more than 4 percent of grades K–12 students statewide to attend public charters. No more than 9 percent of school spending from any district can go to public charter schools. Due to these statutory constraints, 152 school districts in the Commonwealth cannot add new public charter schools despite heavy demand from parents.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Pilot Schools***

During 2004–2005, 17 Boston Pilot Schools served approximately 5,900 children in grades K–12, or about 8 percent of the total Boston Public School enrollment.<sup>20</sup> Enrollment in pilot schools has grown rapidly in the past few years, and there is strong parental demand for more: pilot schools often have the longest student wait lists of any Boston Public Schools.

### ***Intra-district Choice***

In theory, allowing students to choose between schools within a district should introduce competition, moving students and funds away from bad schools to good schools, and creating incentives for schools to improve. In practice, however, many intra-district school choice programs fail to achieve these goals, often because their good schools are too few to satisfy student demand, or because they protect their bad schools from suffering the consequences of student flight.

For example, Boston offers a system of intra-district choice that allows parents to submit their three top schools to a lottery. However, because of the wide gap in performance between worse and better schools, and the shortage of the latter, many students are assigned to schools they did not select and with which they will not be satisfied. Moreover, while the lottery sends clear signals about the relative popularity of different schools and educational models, the city is slow to act on this information, shielding underperforming schools from funding cuts and closures. Boston closed a single school this year, and only after its enrollment had dropped from 750 to 350 students over the last five years.

The Boston approach contrasts with the experience of the Edmonton (Canada) school system, which implemented a robust approach to school choice during the 1990s. Edmonton's program encompassed all types of schools (including private and parochial), emphasized data transparency, de-centralized management (of both budg-

<sup>19</sup> Commonwealth of Massachusetts Executive Department, "Romney Vows Charter School Moratorium Veto," press release, May 5, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Boston Public School website: [boston.k12.ma.us/bps/budget05/pilot.asp](http://boston.k12.ma.us/bps/budget05/pilot.asp).

ets and teacher development), and attached the funding to students rather than to schools. Outcomes included the closure of many less popular schools but also included increased enrollment in public schools and improved academic performance.

### **METCO**

For a tiny percentage of Massachusetts schoolchildren, the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) provides educational choice. Through METCO, created in 1966 by a group of urban and suburban parents, about 3,300 minority students from Boston and Springfield are bused to 38 schools in the surrounding suburbs.<sup>21</sup> The program was originally intended to promote racial balance in public schools. A 1997 study by the Harvard Civil Rights Project, however, found that 73 percent of the METCO families surveyed said that an opportunity for a quality education, not racial balance, was the number one reason they chose METCO for their children.<sup>22</sup> METCO, like public charter schools, is full to capacity. Most children who participate in METCO are placed on a waiting list before they are a year old, and there are currently 15,000 children on waiting lists.

### **Private Schools**

Nationwide, 11.3 percent of students attended private school in 2004–05. Private school enrollment was higher among high-income families; families with incomes greater than \$50,000 were two and a half times as likely to send their children to private school.<sup>23</sup> Among lower-income families, white students were significantly more likely to attend private school.

**Table Three:**  
Private school enrollment by family income and race, October 2004

	All Students			White Students		
	All Students	Income < \$50,000	Income > \$50,000	All Students	Income < \$50,000	Income > \$50,000
K–8	12.4%	8.7%	23.7%	14.1%	10.3%	23.8%
High school	8.5%	5.8%	13.3%	9.9%	6.6%	14.6%
Total K–12	11.3%	7.9%	20.2%	12.8%	9.2%	20.7%

In Massachusetts, approximately 12 percent of the roughly 1.1 million students enrolled in school attend private schools, slightly above the national average. Private school enrollment increased during the late 1990s, from 125,768 in 1995 to 133,572 in 2000, but has since declined to 130,473 in 2005.

Although many private schools draw students primarily from wealthy families, the private school population in Massachusetts is actually quite diverse, particularly in

<sup>21</sup> Massachusetts Department of Education, [www.doe.mass.edu/metco](http://www.doe.mass.edu/metco).

<sup>22</sup> Gary Orfield et al., “City-Suburban Desegregation: Parent and Student Perspectives in Metropolitan Boston,” The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, September 1997, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Current Population Survey, October supplement, [www.bls.census.gov](http://www.bls.census.gov).

urban schools. According to the Catholic Schools Foundation of Massachusetts, during the 2003–04 school year, 47 percent of the 16,124 students in Catholic schools were minority students, with 40 different first-languages amongst them. In addition, 75 percent of the families who responded to a survey taken in 25 inner-city Catholic schools in 2002 qualified for federal assistance programs based on income. Of the 4,600 children who received scholarships, 47 percent were minority and 22 percent were non-Catholic. The Catholic Schools Foundation could accommodate less than 28 percent of the 16,300 inner-city students who applied for scholarship assistance.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Residential Choice***

Choosing to live in a town with a good school system is, of course, the most direct and perhaps most common way that parents exercise school choice for their children. With the average price for a single-family home in Massachusetts reaching \$370,000,<sup>25</sup> this clearly is not an option for many low-income parents. In districts such as Wellesley, with some of the highest MCAS test scores in the state, home prices often exceed \$1 million.

## **Is it Time to Consider Scholarship Vouchers?**

Since 1993, Massachusetts has spent approximately \$40 billion dollars on state Chapter 70 aid to improve public education, especially for the largest, poorest urban school districts. Nevertheless, in Boston, Worcester, Springfield, Lawrence, Lowell, and Fall River, nearly 75 percent of the students score in the ‘Needs Improvement’ and ‘Warning/Failing’ categories on the MCAS test. Meanwhile, 12 years into state education reform, many of these urban districts lack even the fundamental elements of educational reform: a district-wide curriculum, a curriculum that is aligned with the state curriculum, annual reviews of staff and faculty, and data-driven systems to inform policy and budget making.

School choice has made a difference, whether in the form of charter schools, pilot schools, intra-district choice, or METCO, but not always where the need has been most urgent, urban schools with disproportionately low-income and minority students, and not enough to create a spirit of innovation across the public school culture. Moreover, with charter schools approaching their statutory caps, school choice will not be available on a broad enough basis to produce the kind of improvement that is necessary to ensure that all Massachusetts children leave school with the tools they need to succeed.

Of the 1,106,000 children in grades K–12 in Massachusetts, only 15 percent (167,000) exercise some form of school choice, public or private, and only 3 percent (37,000) of that choice takes place within the public school system (this does not include intra-district choice, for which statewide data are not readily available).

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<sup>24</sup> Catholic Schools Foundation, website: [www.csfboston.org](http://www.csfboston.org).

<sup>25</sup> Massachusetts Association of Realtors: [www.marealtors.com](http://www.marealtors.com).

**Table Four:**  
**School Choice in Massachusetts, 2004–2005 (approximate figures)**

	<b>Number of K–12 Students</b>	<b>Percent of all students</b>
<b>Total students Public and Private</b>	<b>1,106,000</b>	<b>100%</b>
Students enrolled in public schools	976,000	88%
Public Charter Schools	19,100	1.7%
Inter-district choice	9,300	0.8%
Intra-district choice	Data not available	
Pilot schools	5,300	0.5%
METCO (Boston & Springfield)	3,300	0.3%
<b>Public School Students With Choice</b>	<b>37,000</b>	<b>3.3%</b>
Private Schools <sup>a</sup>	130,000	11.8%
<b>Total School Choice</b>	<b>167,000</b>	<b>15.1%</b>

<sup>a</sup> Private school enrollment includes students who come from out of state to attend school in Massachusetts.

One way to begin providing that almost one million students a choice is to consider scholarship vouchers. While untried in Massachusetts, there are several ongoing scholarship voucher programs around the country. For example, the Opportunity Scholarship Program in Washington, D.C. serves 1,700 students as the first federally funded scholarship voucher initiative. Florida’s Opportunity Scholarship program served 763 students in 2004–2005, and Milwaukee’s Parental Choice Program, which began in 1990–91, has grown to more than 15,000 students. Cleveland’s Scholarship and Tutoring Program, which serves about 6,000 students, is being expanded next year across Ohio to serve the 14,000 students statewide who attend a school that has been rated in “academic emergency” for the last three years. These programs have given low-income families access to the private schools that have traditionally been open only to wealthier families. The test scores of these children indicate that there are tangible benefits to be realized.

Recent national developments make this the right time for the Commonwealth to reconsider scholarship vouchers:

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—Signed into law on January 8, 2002, *NCLB* introduced sweeping changes to the federal government’s role in education, emphasizing accountability and results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and a focus on proven teaching methods. Most importantly, *NCLB* permits students in underperforming schools to transfer to better public schools.

*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*—In June 2002, the Supreme Court ruled that a Cleveland scholarship voucher program, which gives low-income parents publicly-funded scholarship vouchers to send their child to the school of their choice does not violate the U.S. Constitution. This decision opens the door for more discussion of scholarship voucher programs all over the country.

Moreover, while the state's "Anti-Aid Amendment," which prohibits the use of state funds except in schools that are not under the exclusive control of the state or federal government, has been used to block vouchers and other measures to increase school choice such as tax credits, this provision of the Massachusetts Constitution is the subject of a legal challenge which may reach the U.S. Supreme Court in the fall of 2006.<sup>26</sup>

In the 12 years since the passage of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act, student achievement has improved. Nevertheless, with tens of thousands of children still lagging behind, no option for education should be discarded without thoughtful consideration. The ultimate goal should be to ensure that all children in the Commonwealth are equipped with the tools they need to succeed in the global economy, not just for themselves, but for the future of the Commonwealth as a whole.

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<sup>26</sup> Passed at a time when the Massachusetts political establishment feared that state aid would be diverted from Protestant-oriented schools to Catholic schools due to the influx of immigrants from Ireland and other heavily Catholic countries, the Massachusetts amendment specifically permits grants to private institutions of higher education and to parents or guardians of students who attend the same. It, in effect, allows college scholarship but prohibits such assistance in grades K-12 education.