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Beyond Demographic Destiny: Some Districts Doing a Better Job at Addressing Minority Achievement Gaps

BOSTON – A new report released today by Pioneer Institute finds that some school districts are substantially more successful in reducing African-American and Hispanic student achievement gaps than other districts serving students with similar backgrounds. Using U.S. Census data and controlling for family poverty and community education levels, [*Beyond Demographic Destiny: An Analysis of Massachusetts Minority and White Student Achievement Gaps*](#) demonstrates that students’ demographic characteristics are not determinative even within Massachusetts district schools systems.

A year ago, the Patrick Administration established a [Board of Elementary and Secondary \(BESE\) Task Force](#) on proficiency gaps. Pioneer believes there needs to be great urgency on how the administration will address the nearly 100,000 poor and minority students who are not acquiring the academic knowledge they need to succeed in the world.

Beyond Demographic Destiny—authored by Dr. Richard Cross, Theodor Rebarber and Dr. Kathleen Madigan of AccountabilityWorks in Washington, D.C., and Dr. Bruce Bean of Community Partners Initiative in Lawrence, Massachusetts—is the second in a two-part series on student proficiency gaps in the Commonwealth. It follows Pioneer’s “micro” level report last fall entitled [Closing Springfield’s Achievement Gap: Innovative Ways to Use MCAS Data to Drive School Reform](#).

“With school accountability all but suspended and not one in-district school actually ‘turned around’ over the past few years, we’ve missed a real sense of urgency in closing proficiency gaps,” said James Stergios, Executive Director of Pioneer Institute. “Diagnosing which districts are and are not closing the gaps will, we hope, enabled the Task Force to finally move forward.”

Beyond Demographic Destiny focuses on and analyzes the achievement gaps for African-American, Hispanic and White students in selected Massachusetts school districts, examining the gaps in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics achievement on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) between each student group and state White students. It highlights clear differences in how school districts do in addressing academic achievement gaps between poor, minority, and white students; and the unacceptably large achievement gaps persist among historically under-achieving minority groups.

Key findings from the research include:

- Taunton and Cambridge stand out for *substantially smaller achievement gaps between their African-American students and state White students*, besting the predicted gap in ELA and in Mathematics.
- Several districts stand out for *significantly larger achievement gaps for African-American students* in ELA or Mathematics than students from similar backgrounds in other districts, including Randolph, Malden, Waltham, Lawrence, Springfield, and, to a slight extent, Boston.

- Chelsea and Boston attain *significantly smaller than predicted achievement gaps between their Hispanic students and state White students* in either ELA or Mathematics.
- Similarly, a number of districts have *significantly larger achievement gaps for Hispanic students* in ELA or Mathematics than other districts serving students from similar backgrounds, including Medford, Methuen, Quincy, Haverhill, Waltham, Holyoke, Lowell and, to a slight extent, Lawrence.
- Stoughton, Taunton, Holyoke, Newton, New Bedford, Lynn and, to a slight extent, Boston stand out for *significantly smaller than predicted achievement gaps between their district White students and state White students* in both ELA and in Mathematics.
- Several districts achieved *significantly larger than predicted achievement gaps between their district White students and state White students* in both ELA and Mathematics. These include Randolph, Haverhill, Lawrence, Malden, Lowell and Somerville.
- Several districts attained *larger than predicted achievement gaps between district White students and state White students* in either ELA or Mathematics, including Quincy, Northampton, Everett, Brockton, Chicopee and Worcester.

“In effect, this report compares each district’s success in reducing the achievement gaps with the success of other districts in the state serving students with similar background characteristics. It is thus based on actual results accomplished by Massachusetts school systems, not goals or aspirations,” write the authors. “Districts that manage to shrink their achievement gaps to a greater extent than predicted are reported positively, while districts that have larger achievement gaps than predicted are reported negatively.”

The report leads to one overwhelming conclusion – demography is *not* destiny. Higher poverty and lower educational attainment levels certainly pose additional challenges to educators. But some school districts are substantially more successful in reducing African-American and Hispanic student achievement gaps than other districts serving students with similar backgrounds. Similarly, some districts are also more successful in educating their White students than other districts in the state serving students from similar backgrounds. The results indicate that even relevant family and community characteristics need not be decisive in determining the future of Massachusetts students.



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