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## **Expanding School Choice through METCO**

*Non-partisan Research Groups Urge Lawmakers to  
Expand Minority Students' Access to Proven Program*

BOSTON, MA – Pioneer Institute, in collaboration with the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice (CHHIRJ) at Harvard Law School, two research institutes that are often on opposite sides of public policy issues, today published a review of the nation's second longest running, voluntary, choice-driven, school desegregation program, the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity. METCO sends Boston and Springfield to public schools in the surrounding suburbs.

[\*METCO Merits More: The History and Status of METCO\*](#), co-authored by Susan Eaton, research director at CHHIRJ, and Gina Chirichigno, a post-doctoral researcher at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University, is the first comprehensive review of the program in nearly a decade. It includes data on student enrollment, performance, demographics, graduation and college attainment rates, waiting list, and funding.

The program serves over 3,300 students. Most live in Boston, though a much smaller program serves Springfield students. More than three-quarters are African American or Latino. Half of METCO's students come from low-income families and one in four has special needs.

State funding for METCO has declined from \$20.2 million in FY 2008 to \$16.5 million in FY 2011, despite growing waitlists that result in students waiting an average of five years to enter the program. MCAS data indicate that METCO students have outperformed their African-American and Latino peers in the school districts they come from, and enjoy graduation rates that exceed the state averages.

"In a context of vast, long-standing educational inequalities in the Boston and Springfield regions, METCO offers educational and life opportunities both to students who go from city to suburb and to the students in the suburban towns who participate in the program," said co-authors Susan Eaton and Gina Chirichigno. "Based on METCO's enduring popularity and its solid track record, educational leaders should seriously consider expanding METCO to students in other highly challenged districts and at the very least, provide adequate funding. Among national leaders concerned with educational equity, METCO is viewed as a model program. It deserves to be better recognized and more enthusiastically supported here at home."

The authors account for factors such as "self-selection" bias to avoid conclusively crediting METCO for increases in student achievement. Nonetheless, they find that between 2006 and 2010, METCO students out-performed their African-American and Latino counterparts on MCAS, and performed competitively in college preparatory settings.

METCO students had a 93 percent graduation rate in 2009, compared with 81.5 percent for students statewide and about 61 percent in both Boston and Springfield.

The 2009 dropout rate for METCO students was only 2.8 percent, compared to 9.3 percent statewide. The students thrive despite facing the logistical and cultural challenges such as early risings and late arrivals home.

“METCO successfully offers a high quality school choice option for urban students, which should compel lawmakers to clear its lengthy waitlists and expand the program to other Massachusetts cities,” said Jamie Gass, Director of the Center for School Reform at Pioneer Institute. “The METCO students’ experiences and their performance data are quite clear—METCO works.”

According to internal surveys reported by METCO Inc., 90 percent of METCO graduates enroll in post-secondary education.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Increase state funding** to incentivize educational leaders to expand the program, and provide more funding to participating suburban districts, to bring the METCO reimbursement in line with per pupil expenditures.
- **State leaders must provide incentives for suburban participation in METCO** through school building funds or grant programs. Approximately 40 districts currently take part in the program, 90 percent of which are in the greater Boston area.
- Use public awareness to **encourage suburban districts to enroll METCO students.**
- Data **like METCO student performance and improvement, educational attainment, attendance, graduation and suspension rates should be made public** by the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Pioneer has highlighted the need for expanded school choice for many years, advocating a menu of options that includes charter schools, private and parochial schooling, vocational-technical schools, and virtual learning. It has published a series of reports, opinion pieces, and events designed to build public awareness and a sense of urgency in ensuring that all students have access to excellent educational options.

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[Pioneer Institute](#) is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to improve the quality of life in Massachusetts through civic discourse and intellectually rigorous, data-driven public policy solutions based on free market principles, individual liberty and responsibility, and the ideal of effective, limited and accountable government.

[The Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice](#) at Harvard Law School honors and continues the work of one of the great civil rights lawyers of the twentieth century. Litigator, scholar and teacher, Charles Hamilton Houston dedicated his life to using the law as a tool to reverse the unjust consequences of racial discrimination. CHHIRJ is committed to marshalling the resources of Harvard and beyond to continue Houston’s unfinished work.