

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JULY 2026

LAND OF OPPORTUNITY?

Immigrant Newcomers in
Massachusetts High Schools

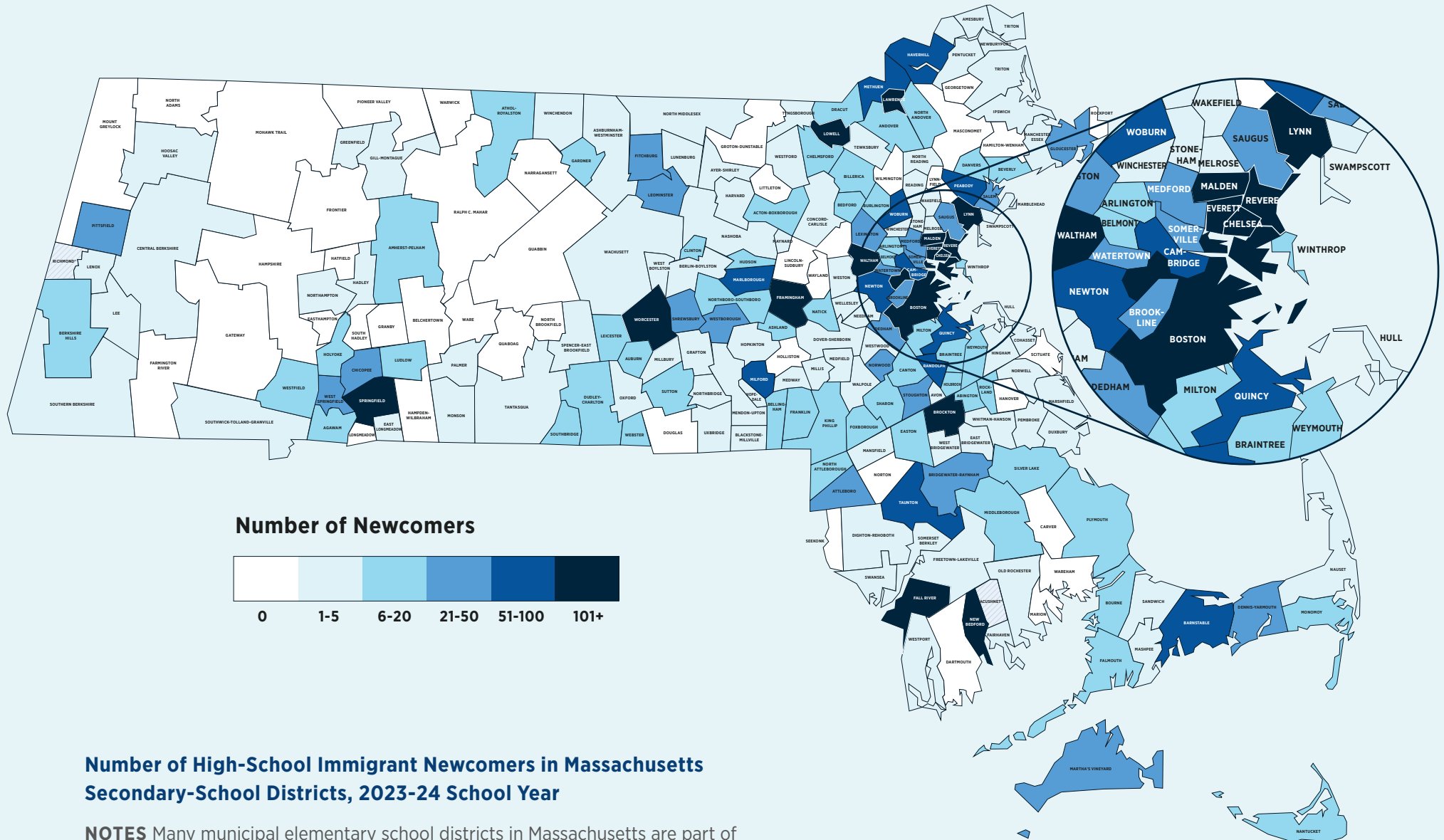


Annenberg Institute
BROWN UNIVERSITY

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY
IN MASSACHUSETTS

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While high-school immigrant newcomers remain concentrated in urban areas, about half of Massachusetts districts enroll more than five of these students.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In our 2023 report, *Rising Numbers, Unmet Needs*, we described the rapid growth in the number of immigrant newcomers to Massachusetts high schools and the heterogeneity within this population, both in terms of demographic characteristics like home language and country of origin and in their educational outcomes.

Since then, sweeping changes continue to affect these newcomers — here defined as English learners (ELs) in their first 12 months of schooling in the United States — and the districts that serve them. Newcomers remain largely concentrated in urban areas like Boston, Lynn, and Lawrence. However, a growing number of Massachusetts districts serve more than five high-school newcomers; 102 did so by the spring of 2024. Starting in 2025, travel bans, increased entry restrictions, and other measures designed to curtail immigration again shifted the landscape; 1,000 fewer newcomers arriving in Massachusetts public high schools that year, a decrease driven entirely by a decline in students arriving in the spring.

High-school newcomers differ from other vulnerable student groups in key respects. More than half are not present when the school year begins. Some arrive without their parents, scarred by exposure to trauma and violence and perilous journeys to the U.S. Half are 16 years or older when they first set foot in a Massachusetts high school; for many, financial insecurity and debt result in work obligations that make school attendance and engagement even more challenging.

In this report, we focus on districts and how they serve this group of students. Across the state, districts are struggling to accomplish the dual goals of helping newcomers make progress towards English language proficiency and master the academic content in the state's curriculum frameworks. Particularly for those newcomers who arrive in high school with very limited English language skills and/or gaps in their prior learning, the path to high-school graduation is extremely demanding, and many do not complete it. Furthermore, uncertainty about their futures in the U.S. may lower newcomers' academic expectations and aspirations.



If you ask them to explain their journey of how they got here, you would be mesmerized, if you knew what it took for them to be sitting in this chair right now. I think just remembering all the things they can do and all the things they had [to do] to be where they are right now — you know, no 14-, 15-, 16-year-old should have to experience or go through what a lot of them have had to go through to be here.

CHLOE ARDON

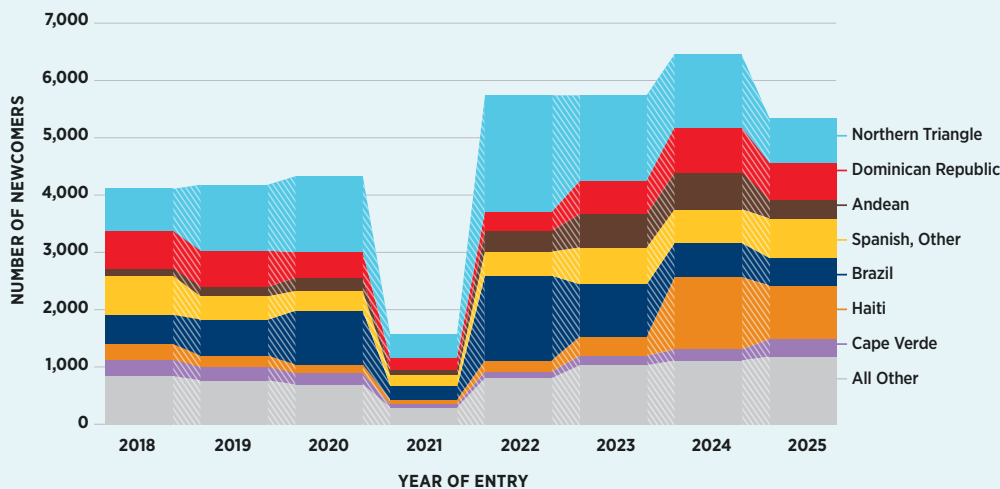
Former ESL Teacher,
Woburn High School

WE HIGHLIGHT FIVE KEY FINDINGS:

1

Until very recently, many Massachusetts districts have experienced large growth in their newcomer populations and rapid changes in newcomers' backgrounds and needs.

Most urban areas (and many suburbs and towns) saw big increases in the number of new arrivals after the pandemic. Moreover, the home languages and countries of origin of newcomers continue to shift rapidly from one year to the next. Critically, on average, newcomers' level of English proficiency upon arrival in the U.S. has fallen since before the pandemic. The number of newcomers was substantially lower in the 2024-25 school year, a result stemming from the federal government's changes in immigration policies and enforcement.



Newcomers' countries of origin are quite dynamic, shifting rapidly from year to year.

Total Newcomers by Country Group Over Time

NOTES Northern Triangle = El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras; Andean = Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela. 2025 refers to the 2024-25 school year.

2

Half of high-school newcomers are 16 years or older when they arrive, and districts vary widely in how they serve these older newcomers.

Massachusetts high schools have substantially different practices to determine the grade in which newcomers should start. For example, even after adjusting for demographic differences, older newcomers in Springfield are a startling 38 percentage points more likely to be placed in 9th grade when they arrive than are similar newcomers in Boston. Some districts have developed specialized programming to accommodate the work obligations and family responsibilities of older newcomers, including year-round schedules, flexible attendance policies, and credits awarded for students' on-the-job knowledge and skills.

3

District differences in policies and practices for newcomers reflect the state's long tradition of local control and differences in newcomer populations — but also the degree to which educators are adapting programs and structures in response to newcomers' needs.

Once high-school newcomers enroll in a Massachusetts school district, staff make a series of decisions about how to educate them. For example, transitional bilingual education programs in

Framingham and Brockton ground content instruction for ELs in their home languages, with the goal of effectively transitioning to English over time. In many high schools, newcomers are enrolled primarily in core courses with fellow ELs, while in others, their peer group is more heterogeneous. Districts differ in their capacity and commitment to innovate in meeting the unique needs of their newcomer students.

4

Allowing newcomers to access rigorous courses and specialized programs, such as Career and Technical Education (CTE), is necessary but not sufficient for equity.

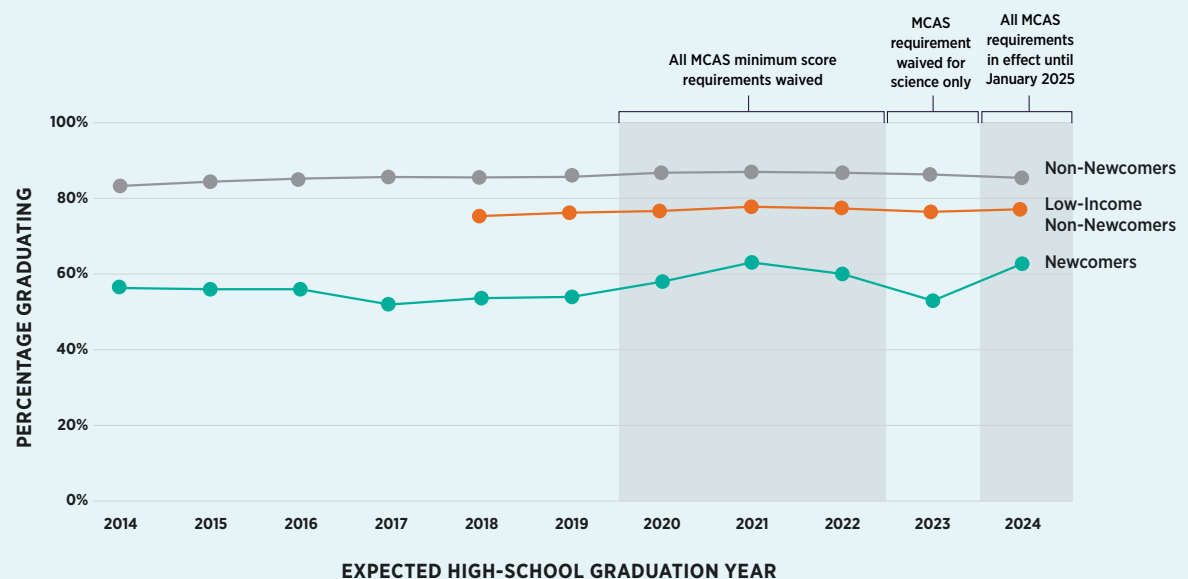
Newcomers appear to have less access than their peers to the rigorous coursework in the state's recommended MassCore program of study. Similarly, in nearly all districts, newcomers' rate of participation in CTE programs lags well behind that of other students. While access to these opportunities is critical, an equally important question is how to enable newcomers to be successful in these courses and programs, given their emerging English proficiency and the lack of experience many content-area teachers and CTE instructors have with this population.

5

Across districts, newcomers' graduation rates remain low, and many who do graduate have not attained English language proficiency.

Only 15% of newcomers in the cohort expected to graduate in 2024 reached English proficiency by the time they left high school. Indeed, among newcomers who arrived with low English skills, just 6% of *graduates* were proficient by the time they received their diplomas. Interestingly, we find that districts where newcomers are making the most progress in English language acquisition are generally not those where high-school graduation rates are above the state average for observationally similar newcomers, with Boston as an important exception.

State-level graduation requirements appear to have affected newcomers more than other students.



High-School Graduation Rates Over Time

NOTES Graduation defined as receiving a high-school diploma within one year after the student's expected graduation year, including over the following summer. Trend line reported for low-income non-newcomers begins with the 2018 cohort due to a major change in the state's definition of low-income that occurred in 2015. For the graduating classes of 2020-22, the requirement to exceed a minimum score on all three high-school MCAS tests was waived; students could instead graduate by completing a minimum set of high-school courses. MCAS requirements were reinstated in math and ELA for the class of 2023 and in all three subjects for the class of 2024; the requirements were permanently eliminated in January 2025.

IMPLICATIONS

Immigrant youth contribute important linguistic and multicultural diversity to Massachusetts public schools. Many have risked and suffered a great deal to access educational opportunities in the U.S. Their arrival in the Commonwealth offers great potential for enriching the education of their peers and for building a strong labor force for the decades ahead. However, whether these potential benefits are realized will depend to a large extent on the success of the state's public schools in welcoming and educating these newcomers well.

Massachusetts high schools face the challenge of helping newcomers build *both* English language proficiency and content-area academic skills. Many newcomers attend school with the primary goal of learning English, which is important for their future economic success. However, English proficiency is not enough — if newcomers do not build strong skills in core academic content areas, opportunities in post-secondary education and the labor market are foreclosed. We find that very few districts are currently succeeding at both of these objectives. While we lack the evidence necessary to make specific practice-based recommendations, a commitment to academic rigor married with instructional and socio-emotional supports seems critical to serve newcomers in the state's high schools effectively.

A second and related challenge is how best to support newcomers' educational attainments. Many employers and colleges require applicants to have a high-school diploma. Current debates over new graduation requirements center on the argument that all students deserve a rigorous education. However, the state's graduation requirements have been a disproportionate barrier in the past for newcomers, and the equity implications of any new policy warrant concerted attention.

READ THE FULL REPORT: [**ANNENBERG.BROWN.EDU/EDOPPORTUNITY**](https://annenberg.brown.edu/edopportunity)

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