

White students more likely to finish college than Black, Latino peers, study finds

By **James Vaznis** Globe Staff, Updated June 18, 2020, 12:46 p.m.



A graduate walked the campus at Harvard University. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Even when Black and Latino graduates from Massachusetts public high schools have similar MCAS scores as their white peers, they are less likely to earn college degrees and make as much money, according to a report released Thursday that highlights the need to improve the state's education system.

Similar achievement gaps were found for high school graduates who grew up in poverty or who lacked English fluency, according to the report, “Lifting All Boats?”

Accomplishments and Challenges from 20 Years of Education Reform in Massachusetts.”

The disparities are occurring even as more high school graduates of all backgrounds are earning college degrees. But the gaps in who finishes college are widening as white students earn degrees at increasingly higher rates than their peers.

“Taken together, our findings suggest that the public education system in the Commonwealth has made substantial progress over the past two decades but has a long way to go in equalizing opportunities for students from key subgroups,” wrote the researchers from Brown University. “We find inequalities at all points in the Commonwealth’s educational pipeline. Closing gaps in high-school performance and postsecondary educational attainments could dramatically reduce current levels of income inequality.”

On one measure — comparing students who took the 10th-grade MCAS in 2003 to those in 2011 — the gap in college completion between Black and white students grew from 23 percent to 26 percent, the gap between Latino and white students grew from 28 percent to 33 percent, and the gap between graduates learning English and those who were fluent grew from 21 percent to 29 percent.

Overall, just 42 percent of all 10th-graders who took the MCAS in 2011 eventually graduated from a four-year college, an increase of 10 percentage points from the 2003 test-takers.

There are large gaps in four-year college graduation across most lines of difference

Percentage point gaps in educational attainments for students scoring at the median on the 2011 10th grade MCAS tests in ELA and mathematics

	4-Year College Enrollment	4-Year College Graduation
Low-income/Higher income	21%	23%
Black/White	-2%*	11%
Hispanic/White	15%	20%
Asian/White	-4%*	0
EL/Non-EL	5%	6%

 A Flourish data visualization

For years, Massachusetts has been struggling to address one of the biggest paradoxes in public education: While the Commonwealth has among the highest standardized test scores in the nation, it also has among the widest achievement gaps across the 50 states. Addressing the gaps has become increasingly more urgent as public schools teach a more diverse student population, and failing to fix the problem can have lifelong consequences for those students and the state's economy.

In response, Beacon Hill and Governor Charlie Baker shepherded through a [landmark school funding law](#) last fall that should yield more than \$1.4 billion in extra aid for local school districts. But now, as the coronavirus pandemic has wreaked economic havoc on the state, educators and school advocates are increasingly worried lawmakers will break their funding promise when students need it the most.

With nearly a million students barred from attending their schools since mid-March, educators and advocates say achievement gaps are widening more quickly, fueled by the immense inequities among family households from Boston to the Berkshires.

The report's findings immediately raised alarms among civil rights advocates. Iván Espinoza-Madrugal, executive director for the Lawyers for Civil Rights, said the data provide further evidence of how gaps in graduation, achievement, and opportunity are deepening along racial lines.

"It's very distressing," he said. "Far too many students of color, English language learners, and first generation college students simply don't have the privileges, resources, or networks of their peers. . . . Without reliable and meaningful support structures, the gaps will continue to widen."

The report makes clear that the state's more affluent high school graduates are finding greater success in college and in securing higher paying jobs afterward. Among high school graduates with similar MCAS scores, those from low-income families ended up earning about 16 percent, or \$8,000, less annually than those from higher-income families.

Remove MCAS performance from the equation — low-income students typically score lower on those exams — and the disparity in future earnings is even greater. The median public high school graduate who grew up in a higher-income family and took MCAS exams in the early 2000s went on to earn \$50,000 in 2019, while the median low-income student earned about 30 percent less.

John Papay, one of the report's authors, who is an associate professor of education and economics at Brown University, said the gaps in college completion and earnings among students of different backgrounds with similar MCAS scores were among the most striking and troubling findings. He said there were likely many factors creating the gaps, including a lack of resources in college counseling at public high schools serving large

portions of disadvantage students and a lack of academic and financial support once students reached college campuses.

Chris Gabrieli, chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, said colleges bear a lot of responsibility for the plight of disadvantaged students who have similar MCAS scores as their white peers but less success in earning degrees and securing good-paying jobs. College campuses need to move more swiftly in adapting to a more diverse student population, he said.

“We need to double down our efforts,” Gabrieli said. “The data is showing us we can’t keep doing what we are doing and narrow the gaps. We have to do new and different things.”

Gabrieli said state colleges have bolstered efforts in recent years to help disadvantaged students. One promising endeavor, he said, is an “early college” program, in which high school students can take courses at public colleges.

The report, done in partnership with state education officials, was paid for with grants from the Spencer Foundation, a nonprofit in Chicago that funds education research, and the Institute of Education Sciences at the US Department of Education.

Researchers tracked the outcomes for thousands of public high school students, starting in the early 2000s, from the time they took their MCAS exams and as they progressed through college and the workforce.

The Rev. Willie Bodrick II of the Boston Network of Black Student Achievement called the findings disheartening.

“We need to have a serious conversation about what these inequities mean and how we weed out bias,” Bodrick said. “Many of our young people feel that in predominantly white institutions there is not enough support.”

Bodrick recalled the hard social adjustments he made when he enrolled at Georgetown

University in 2006 after graduating from Atlanta public schools. It was the first time he had white classmates and also very few teachers who looked like him.

“I remember very clearly in a philosophy class questioning if I should raise my hand,” he said. “That was something I never felt before. . . . There is this weight that Black students carry around because there is not always a presumption of intelligence.”

Even some professors made incorrect assumptions about his background and experiences, as did police officers who questioned if he was in the right neighborhood. Bodrick said he gradually acclimated, forging friendships with his football teammates and joining groups, such as a Black student alliance and a gospel choir. He also received support, he said, from his parents who held college degrees and could share advice on navigating college life and interacting with white people — a resource that many Black and Latino students don’t have because they are the first in their families to attend college.

“Without those communities, I would have felt like I was in the wilderness,” said Bodrick, who went on to earn degrees at Harvard Divinity School and Northeastern University Law School. “Our colleges and universities are not looking critically enough at other factors that are at play that can impact Black and Latino students’ success in college.”

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