

**THE IMPACT OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY ON  
EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES:  
LYNN, MA SCHOOL DISTRICT**

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## **THE IMPACT OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES: LYNN SCHOOL DISTRICT**

The Lynn public schools are quite racially and ethnically diverse and have been integrated at the primary school level by the district's voluntary desegregation plans since 1988. This city, with a population of more than 81,000, has three high schools, most of which have students who attended primary schools desegregated by the district's plan. As the nation's public schools are being forced by court decisions to consider the future of integration in their communities, it is appropriate to ask students who have experienced desegregated schooling about its impacts. Although neighboring Boston has abandoned its desegregation efforts under pressure from conservative federal courts, the Lynn schools are attempting to preserve racial and ethnic diversity in a time when policies based solely on race are under attack.

This memorandum addresses the impact of racial and ethnic diversity on the eleventh grade student population in the Lynn School District. It provides information about students' thoughts and feelings about people of other racial and ethnic groups, as well as about how students believe their schooling has been affected by the presence of a diverse student body. It is part of a series of studies by The Civil Rights Project on what students in diverse and more segregated schools learn both in specific content areas and in preparation for adult life and work. Our findings are based on the Diversity Assessment Questionnaire (DAQ), a survey instrument developed with the help of leading experts on school desegregation research across the country. We administered the DAQ to all juniors attending Lynn's three high schools in the Spring of 2000 and received responses from 634 students (a response rate of roughly 78%). The survey includes 73 question items, which were created to test several distinct dimensions of experiences and attitudes (four of these dimensions are highlighted in this report).<sup>1</sup> Since our results on these grouped items were quite consistent, we have compelling evidence that the data in this report represents the actual experiences of the responding juniors, and that our findings are not simply byproducts of question wording, instead we believe these responses reflect a broad and consistent pattern.

These data allow us to examine—in the aggregate—how school level desegregation can affect educational outcomes. School level desegregation, of course, does not guarantee the presence of a curriculum that recognizes diversity, fair treatment of all groups of students, or deep and positive interactions between different racial or ethnic groups—all important factors that contribute to positive educational outcomes associated with diversity. It does, however, create a situation within which such interactions may occur, depending on many factors within the school and among the groups of students. Although we have not studied all the factors that can maximize the benefits of diversity, we have examined a number of very important educational outcomes. In this memo we provide basic responses, by race, to a number of questions from the survey.<sup>2</sup> Four distinct areas are explored, (1) future educational aspirations and goals; (2)

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<sup>1</sup> On any given survey question between 0-7.0% of all students did not respond, these non-responses were not included in the calculations of these tables.

<sup>2</sup> The racial/ethnic categories that we use are all self-identified, that is the students choose how they wish to describe themselves from an established list. Our categories are: African American, Asian, Latino, White, and Other.

perceptions of support by the school; (3) student learning and peer interaction; and (4) citizenship and democratic principles. These areas are all well established as important goals of education, and build essential skills that students need in order to achieve academic and professional success, and to become responsible citizens.

Students responded to the survey anonymously and were assured that their teachers and school officials would not see it, so there was no pressure to give answers officials might want to hear. The Civil Rights Project made the survey available and prepared this study without cost to the Lynn public schools and this report is totally independent of district control or direction. The DAQ results indicate many positive attitudes about diverse educational experiences; in addition, these results also pointed to areas of possible future improvement.

Preliminary results from the DAQ survey indicate positive educational impacts of diversity for students in the district. Overall, a majority of students report a strong level of comfort with members of racial and ethnic groups different than their own. Students also report high level of educational aspirations across the board and there is strong evidence that perceived opportunities to meet these aspirations are equalized across all racial/ethnic groups. The survey data also suggests several areas for improvement. While minority students indicate that their school experiences have increased their level of understanding of diverse points of view, and increased their desire to interact with people of different backgrounds in the future, White students, overall, do not. In addition, there is some work that needs to be done in facilitating the kind of learning environments that promote rich understanding of different points of view.

As stated earlier, we received surveys from 78 percent of the entire Junior class. This high response rate means that the responses should provide a good overall representation of the class. The students responding to the survey identified themselves as 41.5 percent White, 11.2 percent African American, 17.7 percent Latino, 0.7 percent Native American, 8.7 percent reported they were “other”, and 3.6 percent declined to answer. Only 0.7 percent of the respondents identified themselves as Native America. This group is so small that calculations involving Native American students were omitted from the analysis since the responses of just one student could produce a big change in the percentages.

**Table 1: Distribution of Student Respondents to the Survey by Race and Ethnicity**

	African American	Asian	Latino	White	Native	Other	Missing	Total
Frequency	71	105	112	263	5	55	23	634
Percent	11.2	16.6	17.7	41.5	0.7	8.7	3.6	100

We also omitted those students who did not respond to individual items, this percentage ranged from 0 to 7 percent of all respondents. Therefore the numbers on the table presented in this report, are the percent of those people who 1) listed a race category, and 2) answered the question. The highest non-response reported – including both race non-responses and question non-responses – was 8 percent, the lowest 4 percent, therefore on any given question we list the responses from 92 to 96 percent of the people who returned surveys.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This does not include those who “validly” skipped a question, such as “In your social studies class...” if they were not in social studies that year.

## Part 1: Educational Aspirations

Providing access to college is an important goal for most high schools. Students who do not receive post-secondary education have little chance for mobility in the job market and are likely to face a life of low and uncertain incomes. Overwhelming majorities of U.S. students want to go to college and a large majority of recent high school graduates actually enroll in college.<sup>4</sup> Being qualified and prepared for a good college are central goals for students and their families. If one indicator of successful desegregation is defined as equalizing opportunity among different racial/ethnic groups, then raising aspirations of all students to similar levels is a first step. We would hope that students, regardless of their racial or ethnic background, would have similar higher education aspirations. In fact, a remarkably high proportion of every group of students report an interest in attending a four-year college, including 81 percent of Latinos, 82 percent of African Americans, and 72 percent of Whites (Table 2).

**Table 2.**

How interested are you in going to a 4-year college? (% indicating “interested” or “very interested”)				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
82	78	81	72	76

Counselors and college admissions staff know, of course, that there is often a big difference between saying that you want to go to college and actually getting ready for admissions. In the category of advanced courses necessary for competitive college admissions, the Lynn results show more racial differences and suggest areas for future improvement. For instance, there are important differences between racial groups on the level of interest in taking honors or AP mathematics or English courses. These differences indicate that perceived opportunity may not yet have been totally equalized. For example, Latino and Asian students report being interested in taking a Honors/AP English course to a greater degree than do African American or White students (Table 3a). These trends are similar when students are asked about Honors/AP math courses (Table 3b).

**Table 3a.**

How interested are you in taking an honors or AP English course? (% indicating “interested” or “very interested”)				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
34	45	58	36	42

**Table 3b.**

How interested are you in taking an honors or AP math course? (% indicating “interested” or “very interested”)				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
28	50	56	25	37

<sup>4</sup> Digest of Education Statistics 1997, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, (Table 184—College enrollment rates of high school graduates).

Despite the fact that disparities exist in advance course taking interest, students’ perceptions of institutional support for taking such courses are similar across racial/ethnic groups. This encouragement is a vital component of any attempt to equalize the opportunity for educational attainment across different groups, since policy can have little control over what students will do, but can have significant control over how the school applies it’s mission to all students. As such, it is important that students in Lynn high school report encouragement from teachers and counselors at roughly the same degree across all racial groups, particularly on the question of taking demanding classes (honors or AP level), which provide excellent preparation for college, and have, in the past, been less easily reached by minority students.

In fact, African American students report the most encouragement (55%) while White and Latino students report the least amounts of encouragement to take Honors and AP classes (47%) and (46%) respectively (Table 4). Yet, overall, students’ perception of encouragement by teachers and other school officials to take Honors or AP classes are quite similar across all racial/ethnic groups.

**Table 4.**

How strongly have your teachers, counselors, or other adults in this school encouraged you to take honors and/or AP classes? (% indicating “somewhat strongly” or “very strongly”)				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
55	50	46	47	48

## **Part 2: Institutional Support**

The previous results point out the importance of the school’s role in supporting important outcomes like high educational aspirations. In this section we will more explicitly examine the role of the institution in guiding students towards important academic and democratic outcomes. We are defining institutional support for diversity as schools providing students with the conditions and skills necessary for diverse groups to live, work, and function together in workplace and civic environments. These may include:

- Encouraging students of all races/ethnic groups to take advanced classes or attend college
- Providing information to help students pursue higher education
- Providing students will the skills to be comfortable living, working, and interacting with members of different racial/ethnic groups
- Providing an environment where all students feel supported and fairly treated

This type of institutional support is critically important for two key reasons. First, equal levels of institutional support for educational aspirations between racial groups ensures that all students have the same opportunities to strive to reach a high level of academic achievement and ultimately enter higher education. If schools do not provide this level of support then any of the benefits that accrue from diversity cannot occur, and ultimately the school would be participating in creating inequitable educational conditions based on race. Second, if students do not have the

skills to interact across racial groups then the work of democratic institutions, or businesses that serve diverse communities cannot be realized. Therefore, schools that support and achieve equitable levels of support and comfort between racial groups are reaching the goals for which they may be held accountable—the goals of providing the skills and experiences necessary for democratic discourse.

***Academic Support***

Do students in Lynn report adequate access to information about college? More importantly, where there is such racial uniformity in interest to pursue college, is the access to information equally uniform for all racial and ethnic groups? The answer appears to be yes. Students from all racial/ethnic groups report encouragement to attend college, with African American and Latino students reporting such encouragement at higher rates than Whites and Asians (Table 5).

**Table 5.**

How strongly have teachers, counselors, or other adults in this school encouraged you to attend college? (% indicating “somewhat encouraged” or “strongly encouraged”)				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
80	77	84	76	78

However, there are important differences in students’ perceptions of how much information they receive about college. Latino students report receiving information about college admissions from their teachers or counselors to a larger degree than do their Asian, African American, and White counterparts. Seventy-five percent of Latino students report receiving “some” or “a lot” of information from teachers and counselors compared to 62, 69, 56 percent for African American, Asian, and White students respectively. It is important to note that White students report receiving college information to a much lesser degree than do students from all other racial/ethnic groups.

**Table 6.**

How much information about college admissions have your teachers, counselors, or other adults in the school given you? (Such as SAT, ACT, financial aid, college fairs, college applications) (% indicating “some” or “a lot” of information)				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
62	69	75	56	63

Although we can not draw specific conclusions from the apparent “information gap” between White students and their African American, Asian, and Latino counterparts, it is possible that this may be due to an assumption on the part of the school faculty, that White students will find the information from other sources, and are thus, less in need of specific types of institutional supports.

### ***Supporting Interaction between different Racial/Ethnic groups***

One basic theory concerning the educational impact of diversity is that interaction with peers from diverse racial backgrounds—both in the classroom and informally—has major educational importance, particularly when the interaction is done in positive ways. By exposing students to multiple perspectives, students learn to think more critically and to understand more complex issues. This is a basic finding, for example, in recent longitudinal studies of students at the University of Michigan.<sup>5</sup> This was, for instance, the basic educational justification for affirmative action upheld by the Supreme Court as a compelling educational interest in the 1978 *Bakke* decision, which has governed affirmative action in higher education ever since.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the ability to live, work, and interact with people of different ethnic and racial groups is an essential workforce and life skill as the rapid demographic changes show a diverse nation becoming ever more diverse. Without these skills—the ability to work with supervisors, or to think complexly about controversial racial or political issues—the democratic and economic life of the country would be severely compromised. Thus, given the importance of these skills, the results from Lynn are very encouraging. Students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds report being “comfortable” or “very comfortable” working for a supervisor who was of a different racial or ethnic background than their own, and at extremely high levels with 87 to 94 percent of all racial groups stating that they feel “somewhat” or “very prepared” to work with people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds (Table 7).

**Table 7.**

How comfortable would you be with a work supervisor who was of a different racial or ethnic background than you are? (% indicating “comfortable” or “very comfortable”)				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
94	95	92	87	91

In addition, students across all racial groups also feel prepared to work in job settings where people are of a different racial or ethnic background than their own (Table 8).

**Table 8.**

After high school how prepared do you feel to work in a job setting where people are of a different racial or ethnic background than you are? (% indicating “somewhat prepared” or “very prepared”)				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
89	91	91	88	89

<sup>5</sup> See Patricia Gurin, “The Compelling Need for Diversity in Higher Education,” expert testimony in *Gratz et al. v. Bollinger et al.* (No. 97-75231 E.D. Mich., filed 1997) and *Grutter et al. v. Bollinger et al.* (No. 97-75928 E.D. Mich., filed 1997), 1999.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the current status of research on this question see *Diversity Challenged*, ed. Gary Orfield., Cambridge: Harvard Educational Publishing Group, 2001.

These encouraging numbers extend to comfort levels discussing racial or political issues, which is essential to the work of a functioning democracy. These numbers show slightly larger differences between racial/ethnic groups than the previous numbers, but are still at extremely high levels with no less than 87 percent of students feeling comfortable or very comfortable discussing issues related to race (Table 9), and no less than 78 percent of students feeling comfortable debating social or political issues (Table 10).

**Table 9.**

How comfortable are you discussing controversial issues related to race? (% indicating “comfortable” or “very comfortable”)				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
85	86	91	87	87

**Table 10.**

How comfortable are you debating current social and political issues? (% indicating “comfortable” or “very comfortable”)				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
86	85	78	80	81

***Creating an Equitable Learning Environment***

Another important aspect of institutional support are the perceptions by students that the school is creating an environment where everyone is treated fairly regardless of their race or ethnicity. One indication of how well the school is performing on that task is student opinions across racial groups. Thus if, on average, students across different racial/ethnic groups report that the school is doing a good or poor job on an issue, then there is little evidence of racial bias on the part of the schools. In general, we might like to see high levels of perceptions of fairness or support, but if instead we are looking for fairness across racial groups, we will settle for equal levels.

Despite the relatively low levels of perception of teacher interest in students, there is no indication of disparities among students of different racial/ethnic groups. Roughly 40 percent of all students report that at least one of their teachers takes a special interest in them, although Asians are slightly lower at 36 percent and African Americans are considerably higher at 48 percent (Table 11).

**Table 11.**

Do you believe that at least one of your teachers takes a special interest in you? (% indicating “most of the time” or “all of the time”)				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
48	36	46	41	42



Again, despite low levels of perception of teachers' fair administering of punishment, there is no indication of disparities among students of different racial/ethnic groups (Table 12). In addition, it is unclear whether ANY school would receive high levels of support on this measure, regardless of the location, or context.

**Table 12.**

Do you think that your teachers administer punishment fairly? (% indicating "most of the time" or "all of the time")				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
23	28	28	22	24

These measures of equitable environments are encouraging insofar as they show little evidence of differential treatment by race or ethnicity, however, they point to important areas where the Lynn public schools could focus improvement efforts, either through professional development, or simply awareness of these low levels. These questions point to vital areas for improvement because a consistent finding in the research on resilience suggests that one supportive relationship with an adult in a child's life can increase their chances of being successful in overcoming obstacles.<sup>7</sup> In addition, adolescence is also a key period in moral developmental issues of fairness become more prominent.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the responses to these questions should be taken seriously by the district, and improvement in the levels of these responses could improve the overall experience of school in Lynn for all students.

### Part 3: Student Choices and Attitudes

Even the most supportive districts cannot force students to actually be interested in or to choose to live and work with students of other racial groups, nor should they. But one could expect that greater exposure to, and comfort with students of different racial and ethnic groups would lead to a greater desire to live and work in diverse settings. In Lynn, this would appear to be true for minority students with 64 percent of Latino, 69 percent of Asian and 70 percent of African American students indicating that they are "interested" or "very interested" in living in a racially diverse neighborhood as an adult. However, White students seem to be much less interested than minority students in living in diverse areas with only 37 percent indicating being "interested" or "very interested" to do so (Table 13).

**Table 13.**

How interested are you in living in a racially/ethnically diverse neighborhood when you are an adult? (% indicating "interested" or "very interested")				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
70	69	64	37	53

<sup>7</sup> See Michial Rutter (1987). "Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 57(3), pp. 316-331.

<sup>8</sup> See Gilligan, C., Ward, J., Taylor J. M., and Bardige, B. (Eds.)(1989). *Mapping the Moral Domain: A Contribution of Women's Thinking to Psychological Theory and Education*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and Galotti, K. M., Kozberg, S. F. and Farmer, M. C. (1991). Gender and developmental differences in adolescents' conceptions of moral reasoning. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 20(1)

This trend seems to continue when students were asked how interested they were in working in a diverse workplace when they were adults with about 70 percent of minority students indicating they were “interested” or “very interested” and a low 42 percent of White students indicating similar sentiments (Table 14).

**Table 14.**

How interested are you in working in a racially/ethnically diverse setting when you are an adult? ? (% indicating “interested” or “very interested”)				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
70	70	68	42	56

In addition, when students were asked whether classroom or extracurricular activities offered in their high schools increased their desire to live in racially or ethnically diverse settings, student responses were again mixed, with African American, Asian, and Latino students reporting uniformly high numbers (62, 65 and 74 percent), and White students reporting only 36 percent, nearly half that of the other racial groups (Table 15).

**Table 15.**

Have classroom or extracurricular activities offered through your high school increased your interest in living in a racially/ethnically diverse setting when you are an adult? (% indicating “somewhat increased” or “greatly increased”)				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
62	65	74	36	53

Finally, when student’s were asked whether school experiences had helped them work more effectively and to get along better with members of other races and ethnic groups? Student responses were again mixed, but much closer among African American, Asian, and Latino students, which report uniformly high numbers (76, 82 and 85 percent), and White students reporting 69 percent (Table 16).

**Table 16.**

Do you believe your school experiences have helped you, or will help you in the future, to work more effectively and to get along better with members of other races and ethnic groups? (% indicating “somewhat increased” or “greatly increased”)				
African American	Asian	Latino	White	Total
76	82	85	69	76

These results suggest a number of different interpretations. First, one could conclude that White students simply don’t want to live and work with people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Which is a possible interpretation, however, it must be noted that very few students of all racial and ethnic groups stated that they were NOT interested in living and working with members of different racial/ethnic groups. These results imply that non-White respondents were simply more interested.

Alternately we can look at the dominant housing patterns in Lynn for an explanation. In Lynn, housing patterns are quite segregated along racial and socioeconomic lines. Therefore, poor and minority students tend to live together, thus many of the racially diverse neighborhoods in Lynn are the poor neighborhoods.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is possible that White students in this survey associate diverse neighborhoods with poor neighborhoods, and their reluctance to live in a “racially/ ethnically diverse neighborhood” reflects an aversion not to diversity, but to poverty.

Regardless of the actual reasons why White students have lower scores on these questions, what is clear is that schooling has increased students’ desire to live and work with members of different racial and ethnic groups, for 36 percent of the White students surveyed and twice that percentage for the other racial/ethnic groups. In addition, relatively low numbers of all students (African American 5.7%, Asian 2.7%, Latino 0.0%, White 12.6%) responded that their school experiences “decreased” their interest in living and working with people of different racial or ethnic groups, and (African American 2.8%, Asian 1.0%, Latino 1.0%, White 7.6%) responded that their school experiences “Hurt” their ability work more effectively and to get along better with members of other races and ethnic groups. So, by and large, schooling experiences have been a positive factor for all students, but a more positive factor for minority students, when compared to White students.

## **Conclusion**

Several important conclusions can be made based on these results. First, based on students’ reported levels of educational aspirations, we see that all students—regardless of their racial/ethnic background—have high educational aspirations, and that they perceive the levels of encouragement by the school for promoting these aspirations fairly similarly. Second, students across the board are reporting that they are comfortable and prepared to work with members of racial/ethnic groups different from their own. Third, students’ sense of the fairness of their learning environment is also similar across all groups, with students from each racial and ethnic group reporting, at similar percentage levels, favorably to questions regarding the perception of teacher interest in students and to the fairness in administration of punishment.

From these data the Lynn school district appears to be doing a good job fostering supportive working environments for students of all racial and ethnic groups. In doing so, they are creating the conditions necessary for democratic interactions to occur in diverse environments. This support appears to be working especially well for the minority students in Lynn who show very high levels of desire to live and work in diverse environments, and confidence in their skills to do so. However, many White students report lower levels of interest in living and working with people of different racial and ethnic groups, while at the same time reporting the competency to do so if they chose. These data show that the schools are doing their jobs by teaching the skills necessary to live and work in diverse environments, but that merely possessing these skills does not mean that students will seek to use them.

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<sup>9</sup>Nancy McArdle, personal communication, February, 2002.