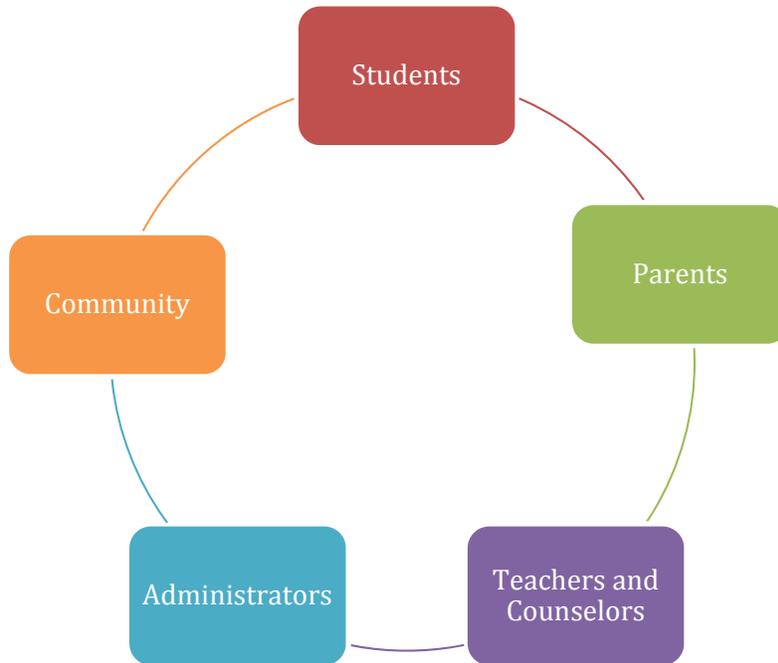


# Narrowing Achievement Gaps in Lexington Public Schools



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## Introduction

Between 2008 and 2015, Lexington Public Schools carried out a far-reaching plan to close the achievement gap between white and Asian students, and black and Latino students, many of whom attend Lexington schools as part of the METCO program. METCO brings students from Boston to study in Lexington and other suburbs from kindergarten through high school. The change effort has targeted instruction, professional development, and METCO support programs, spurring major changes in how Lexington's teachers teach and students learn.

By the spring of 2014, 96 percent of the district's African American tenth graders scored proficient or advanced on the math section--and 100 percent on the English Language Arts (ELA) section--of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam. Understanding this achievement for African American students is the inspiration for this report and is its major focus.

Superintendent Paul Ash approached the Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI) at Harvard University around 2007 as the work this report examines was just beginning. Not long afterward, Ash and his colleagues participated in a June 2008 conference that the AGI convened on successful school districts. Ash told the audience about the difficulties that he knew were ahead, saying "the toughest [challenge] of all is the human side. Because as soon as you begin to initiate change and try to transform an organization, there will be significant pushback. And so a year into this, you're going to have a whole lot of people who are angry at you." Montgomery County, Maryland was a featured district at that conference, and Ash would soon send a delegation from Lexington to visit. The impact of that visit is addressed in this report.

Almost eight years after first calling the AGI, Superintendent Ash called again with an invitation to take stock of what has been accomplished regarding African American achievement in particular and whole-district change more generally. The result is this report, conducted during the spring of 2015. AGI researchers analyzed MCAS and SAT data from 2007-2014. Structured questionnaires were used to conduct in-person and phone interviews with 40 teachers, administrators, METCO staffers, and parents, all of whom were actively involved in researching, planning, or implementing the transformation work. The questionnaires and interviews were tailored to reflect each person's role. An online open response survey was used to collect METCO students' perspectives on their experiences in the Lexington Public School System. Researchers also reviewed relevant documents.

This report documents the change process and assesses its effectiveness. **We find that Lexington has effectively raised achievement among African American students as well as in the district overall.** The gains appear to be the accumulation of gradual improvement. Students of color are making greater progress than before in elementary and middle school years, contributing to higher proficiency by tenth grade.

Lexington's reform efforts have spanned the whole district, touching every school. District-wide instructional changes have cultivated deep collaboration between teachers; targeted interventions through the effective use of student data; and built a home-grown, but exceptionally deep, professional learning program. Working closely with METCO staff, schools have also expanded learning time with innovative in-school scheduling and after-school programming. Committed leadership at all levels and resourceful funding strategies have sustained these efforts through budget cuts and organizational conflict.

This report is divided into five chapters. Chapter one, **The Impetus to Change**, recounts why Lexington decided to embark on this transformation, focusing on a leadership vision and the catalytic power of data widely shared. Chapter two, **Implementing the Call to Action**, tells the story of organizational change at Lexington Public Schools. Chapter three, **What the Data Show**, analyzes African American student performance data and whole-district data to determine whether the new programs and practices moved the dial on student achievement. Chapter four, **Investing in Supporting Achievement for All Students**, details specific initiatives at all grade levels and examines their effectiveness. Chapter five, **Developing Cultural Competence**, describes Lexington's ongoing efforts to better serve students and families from all backgrounds. We also include an appendix that contains a list of the people we interviewed, METCO middle and high school student survey responses, and reference material used as background.

# 1. The Impetus to Change

## The State of Play in 2005

Lexington has long enjoyed a reputation for being one of the strongest school districts in Massachusetts. But this reputation masked serious hidden achievement gaps for some student groups. In all grades, all subjects, and all schools, Lexington's African American and Hispanic students were performing at a significantly lower level than their white and Asian peers.

As Vito LaMura would later report, by the mid-2000s Lexington had persistent gaps between subgroups' Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) scores for English Language Arts (ELA) and math for students grades 3 through 8 and grade 10. District assessments suggested the pattern reached back to first and second grade, as well. Because of the demographics of Lexington-resident and METCO student populations, these disparities amounted to a district-wide achievement gap between METCO students, most of whom were African American or Hispanic, and Lexington-resident white and Asian students. And the bad news didn't stop there. METCO students were also overrepresented among SPED students and underrepresented in the high school's advanced classes of leveled courses.

Lexington's problem was not unique. Like many other suburban, high-performing school districts participating in the METCO program, Lexington served students who started school with very different levels of preparation. "There are extreme disparities in extra resources available to students," a longtime teacher observes. "Many [Lexington resident] students can get loads of resources, like private tutors working for more than \$100 an hour and evening or summer classes. At the other extreme, we have students who -- the only math learning they'll get is what they get from the school. We've tried our hardest as an institution to be most equalizing force we can be."

Yet at that time, many in the district did not understand the extent of the gap. Individual educators observed that some students were lagging behind their peers, but district leadership tended to look at data in the aggregate. "Before, they looked at the total student performance," remembers one teacher. "It wasn't obvious who or which groups were not doing well."

As a result, for the past decade or more efforts to achieve equity had not met with success. The high school's math department was a notable—but not well-known—exception. Dynamics inside the school district tended to exacerbate the problem. Academic practices like

leveling and weighting GPAs sometimes fostered negative beliefs among faculty and staff. According to one teacher, “We were explicitly telling students that we value honors work more than CP [College Preparatory] work.” Organizational flux also undermined the programs and policies Lexington did implement. “Actually, there [had been] a huge investment in anti-racist education,” a longtime teacher recalls. However, changing leadership weakened these investments. “We had a succession of interim and short-lived superintendents,” another teacher explains. “There were many shifts in direction.” Ironically, Lexington’s proximity to research powerhouses like Harvard may have contributed to programmatic instability. “For decades, new things were being tried out and people were trying to experiment,” a teacher and LHS graduate says. “We had an open campus 50 years ago, before anyone was doing that... There’s been lots of change and lots of friction.” As a result, many initiatives ran out of steam. “[They] simply went away over time.” Educators would ask each other, “Whatever came of all the work we did? I’m not quite sure.”

## **A New Direction**

Paul Ash arrived in Lexington as the new superintendent in 2005, committed to equity and excellence. “Not just talking about it, but really making it happen,” remembers a faculty member at LHS. With 26 years of central office experience, Ash had been hired to address a crisis in leadership created by years of instability in the district: a \$1 million budget deficit, high administrative staff turnover, and siloed teaching.

Ash entered his new role enthusiastic about collaborative teaching and raising all student achievement. But it was the SPED referrals that galvanized him. In 2007, he learned that METCO students were being referred to special education at three times the rate of their peers. The numbers shocked him, all the more because referral rates varied widely from school to school for no discernable reason. “It didn’t make sense,” remembers another faculty member at LHS. “Families have to be committed and make sacrifices to send a kid from Boston to Lexington every day.” Nor did the district entertain the idea that innate disparities were at work: whatever was going wrong, it was happening at school, in the classroom. Why was the program failing its students and families? Ash posed this question to Vito LaMura, a former Diamond Middle School teacher and the president of the Lexington Education Association. LaMura was just months away from his retirement, but in August 2007 he was tasked by Ash to look for some answers.

As LaMura researched Lexington's internal dynamics, external forces were also pushing the district towards change. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the ever-blowing winds of education reform were placing a growing emphasis on data; as a result, information about the gap had begun circulating in the district. A year or two before LaMura's report, a high school dean had also shared some research on student learning trends at LHS with the principal and with Ash. More urgently, in 2007 African American students in grades 3 through 5 did not make state or subgroup Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) ELA performance targets, raising concerns about school and district accountability status under NCLB. In 2008, low income and special education students also not making ELA and math AYP for those grades, added to the urgency.

Accountability under NCLB presented a powerful motivation to act. "The superintendents of the eighties and nineties did not have the advantages and pressures that superintendents have now," one faculty member explains. "Data and the focus on standards and assessment just weren't there." At the state level new education policies prompted change, too. The Common Core, in development nationally since 2008 and adopted by Massachusetts in 2010, offered the district an opportunity to retool teaching and testing in a concerted way. The same was true of public debate about a new teacher evaluation system. Although the new system, implemented in 2012, has been controversial in the state, in Lexington it would end up supporting new instructional strategies by "help[ing] teachers set and focus on goals," according to one Lexington principal.

One state policy was not so helpful. In 2008, Massachusetts started cutting METCO funding after several years of increases. With the Great Recession contracting budgets across the state, METCO saw its state-wide funding shrink from \$20.2 million to \$16.5 million. Lexington, like other participating districts, would have to find more money for the program within their school budget. If Lexington was going to put more resources towards METCO, it wanted assurance that the program was working as best it possibly could. (The METCO budget now stands at \$17.9 million, and Governor Baker has proposed a budget of \$19.1 million in 2016, as originally slated in 2015.)

Yet despite these cues for change, by the end of 2007 no broad movement had taken root in the Lexington schools. "It's hard to convince people in a high-performing district to change," says one principal. "There [was] no sense of urgency here, no sense of how much change we

need[ed].” Like the rest of Lexington and even METCO parents, faculty and staff took comfort in the belief that “we’re a great district and we do great things.”

## The LaMura report

The public release of LaMura’s findings was a turning point for the district. LaMura had approached the research “in an open-ended way,” looking at student assessments and talking to METCO parents and students, faculty, and administrators. In January 2008, he submitted a 60-page report that documented large and pervasive disparities and gave voice to deep frustrations.

It was a lot to take in. “In general, people have a sense here that kids are high performing,” one administrator remembers. The information LaMura presented provoked consternation and doubt. “When Vito’s initial report came out, that might have been a bit shocking,” remembers one teacher. “People’s reaction, as usual in such cases, was some denial and outrage—*How could that be?*—and some *What are we going to do about it?*”

Ash and LaMura were ready with responses to both questions. The report opened with extensive analysis of student achievement data, “a credible presentation of the problem,” one interviewee remembered. The data proved far more compelling to readers than a simple litany of “innovations, solutions, and reforms” and disarmed natural, defensive reactions. “Massive reports like that...can sound to teachers like, *You’re not doing your job,*” one person remarks. “But this one crystallized tangible information, data on test scores and such, in an honest and real way that made it easier for educators to wrap their heads around it. It was presented in a palatable way and helped us focus on baby steps we could take.”

The LaMura report documented just such “baby steps”—and some adult ones, too. LaMura synthesized extensive research on successful gap-closing measures and put forth a cogent set of 19 recommendations, three of which were immediately actionable. Now the LaMura report stands as “a pivotal point” in district memory. “Building a sense of urgency...is different from a sense of panic,” another observes. The LaMura report represented an opportunity to generate urgency across the entire district. But what change this urgency would bring about still remained to be seen.

## 2. Implementing the Call to Action

### The Timeline for Change

Lexington now faced two questions. What needed to change in order to close the district's achievement gap, and how could that change be effected?

Ash believed that Lexington could not raise achievement without changing instruction. Influenced by research about collaborative teaching, the new superintendent had already introduced two PD initiatives that had not yet lived up to his hopes. Action Research, launched in 2006, discomfited many teachers because it departed sharply from existing PD norms and was not backed up by adequate training and resources. Professional learning communities (PLCs) were launched in 2007, and it remained to be seen whether they would take root. How could this time be different?

### *Forming the Achievement Gap Task Force / Equity and Excellence Committee*

One of Ash's first actions was to form an Achievement Gap Task Force (AGTF) that would research and propose a multi-year plan to close the gap. LaMura had recommended this action, and he now agreed to serve as co-chair with Steve Flynn, former principal of Clarke Middle School. The task force brought together teachers, administrators, and counselors from all 9 schools and METCO parents and staff. "The focus was taking stock of what initiatives were even going on in the district," one participant recalls. They talked about what they were noticing in the classroom, "ideas, successes, and failures."

Forming the task force was not painless. One AGTF member did not know she was on the committee at first, and others were frustrated to be left off. Participants with lower positional authority sometimes held back ("I wasn't vocal, though I was very interested," one such person remembers). Even the name was controversial. It was later changed to the Equity and Excellence Committee or EEC, positioning its mission for the benefit *all* Lexington students.

But these were only growing pains. As an entity staffed by people from all over the district, the EEC gave reality to Lexington's new-found urgency. Here was a platform for real work, to which everyone with his or her different experiences and perspectives could contribute.

### *Visiting Montgomery County*

The LaMura report felt like a tipping point to many people. The phrase “tipping point” suggests one moment in time that fundamentally shifts the action, but this is not how things happened in Lexington. Instead, the district experienced a series of pivotal moments, experiences of surprise, discovery, excitement, or conflict that reenergized people and lent them a new sense of purpose.

For the EEC, the next such moment was a visit to Montgomery County, Maryland in 2009. District leaders had heard of Montgomery County’s success in closing their achievement gaps at the Harvard Achievement Gap Initiative 2008 Conference, and Ash sent a team of 30 teachers and administrators on a three day tour. Montgomery County was using PLCs and data to improve instruction in ways that Lexington’s teachers had not seen before. Teachers were using real-time data to drive instruction in exciting new ways, like online assessments with instant feedback for students and teachers. It was “exciting,” “astounding,” “overwhelming.” “Montgomery County could look at kids over time,” one visitor marveled. “The data teams were talking the same language across 25 schools. They were using the same assessments. Fifty-five thousand kids, and the language was consistent across the board. It blew us away.”

The visitors were also impressed by Montgomery County’s curricular coordination. “The district was ahead of the curve in terms of standardizing and uniformity,” a teacher recalls. “They were proud to say, *Go into any 7<sup>th</sup> grade math class on a Tuesday, and the same thing is happening across the district.*” Another admired that “they were clear on goals and consistent on messages.”

The Montgomery County team came home energized and reported out to each school about what they had seen. Their presentations made a major impact. “After Montgomery County there was a real shift to use data to drive instruction,” one remembers. “There were some wonderful outcomes on a departmental level,” another says, like “forcing the issue of how all students should be learning more or less the same content, though teachers should have autonomy and flexibility in how they get students to experience that content.”

These ideas did not all go down easy. Many teachers were concerned about losing their autonomy, or about letting data collection distort instruction. But the trip to Montgomery County had created a core group of evangelists, people who were motivated by a transformational experience and who could be credible to their more skeptical colleagues.

### *Repositioning METCO Lexington*

The visit to Montgomery County would prove pivotal in Lexington's efforts to improve instruction, efforts we explore in chapter four of this report. But as the schools intensified their work, METCO Lexington was planning its own reinvention.

For a long time, METCO and the Lexington schools had enjoyed a clear division of labor. The schools were responsible for students' academic progress, and METCO was responsible for their social and emotional support. In part, this separation was intrinsic to the program: METCO staff were social workers and counselors, not teachers. But it was also a matter of attitude. "We weren't fully integrated into the school," one METCO employee says. "There would be a school wide PD program, and we wouldn't be invited. It was just an oversight, but what did that mean?"

Hiring new leadership for METCO was another tipping point. When Paul Ash promoted Barbara Nobles to head the program in 2010, they agreed the relationship between METCO and the schools needed to change. It was a meeting of the minds. "Dr. Ash wanted more emphasis on the academics," and that was Nobles's "personal mission." Her title was amended to METCO *Academic* Director, a "change in title [that] lent itself to...holding people accountable." Nobles and her staff started monitoring student academic progress more aggressively and working with principals, professional staff, and parents to advocate for education supports. Years later, teachers, parents, and school administrators speak glowingly of her leadership.

A key part of this program was the relationship between METCO families and the Lexington schools. "So many people think METCO is about what the Boston students get from the program. That is part of it, but I wanted people to understand that we bring a lot to any school district that we are part of." Nobles and her staff worked to change this attitude from both ends. With parents, METCO led workshops about "what they were contributing to the education of their children" and in Lexington, "moving [beliefs] from a deficit model to a strength model." METCO's monthly meetings used to draw around 30 parents but now regularly draw 85.

### *Confronting Conflict*

By 2011, Lexington had initiated several major new programs and completely overhauled professional development. These changes affected instruction in every classroom, and many teachers resented the loss of autonomy. "Morale exploded," one administrator remembers. According to a longtime teacher, "the more senior teachers felt [the change] was an assault on

their professionalism. There was a real divide between the old guard [and those pushing the new approach].”

Compounding these frustrations was a clash of personalities. Ash’s “relentless” leadership was rubbing some people the wrong way. Some in the district felt disrespected by the way reforms had been carried out. “It was really top-down.” In addition, with all of the focus on improving instruction, some support staff felt shut out by the district’s leadership.

As tensions rose, the district decided to address the problem head on. With the help of project consultant Bruce Wellman, a committee of teachers and administrators conducted an extensive climate study of the schools “to identify areas of concern and propose appropriate actions to improve professional relationships.” The result was a 23-page public report examining employees’ complaints and potential responses. Following the report, the district created a climate wellness committee to administer a school climate survey to all district employees, with results reported to the school committee annually. In addition, district leadership and the Lexington Education Association did trainings separately and together to rebuild their working relationship.

The Wellman report marked another tipping point for Lexington. Teachers who were dissatisfied with district leadership now say that climate and communication have improved. Some teachers did leave. But “we have developed a critical mass of teachers willing to make changes,” a department head says. “Not every teacher is 100 percent even to this day, but all departmental momentum is pushing in that direction.”

Asking more than 700 employees to air their grievances, as the Wellman report did, can never feel like a safe move. Bad morale is an existential threat to any program of change. But the Wellman report did more than neutralize that threat: it turned the conflict into an opportunity for professional growth.

### **Doubling Down: 2011 and On**

By 2011, most parts of the EEC’s original action plan had been implemented or were underway, and the district had begun to see some movement in student achievement. Although the district was still working to address morale issues, Ash and others felt that a basic “mind shift” had taken place. Now the question on everyone’s mind was: How do we keep this going?

“There’s a fine line between continuous improvement and initiative fatigue,” one administrator observes. Even teachers who were excited about the changes and people who had

served on the EEC worried that the district had too many irons in the fire. The issue came to a head during “a very candid meeting” in 2011 when an educator voiced the opinion “that they were doing too many things and lacked focus.” Ash agreed that it was time to go deeper into existing programs and avoid adding new ones. On a whiteboard, he wrote down all the district’s initiatives and then grouped and prioritized them. As a result of this meeting, PLCs emerged as an overriding priority for improving instruction.

Deepening investments in PLCs and other initiatives required resources, and the district worked diligently to provide them amid recession-driven budget cuts. “[Ash] is a wonderful administrator in the commercial sense of the word,” one teacher says. When professional development funding was cut, faculty and the LEA found grant money to keep it going. Securing adequate resources remains an ongoing challenge: this past year, for example, a METCO funding cut resulted in the cancellation of Lexington’s late bus. Students couldn’t participate in after school academic programs, like the homework club at LHS, or attend sports practices. “[Losing the late bus] affected my academics because I didn’t have enough time with my teachers,” one student says. “My learning process was slowed down a lot, in some cases getting me behind.” Another student reports taking a two-hour MBTA ride home every day, which created a financial burden because “I don’t have a job, so money became an issue.” After seeing METCO high school students’ grades decline, the district recently found the money to bring back the late bus.

Leadership’s commitment to funding has had a waterfall effect. “The district puts money behind its initiatives,” one administrator says approvingly. This money not only keeps the programs running but also communicates to everyone involved a set of values and sense of purpose. “This is what translates big initiatives into budget requests and day-to-day changes for children,” one faculty member says. “Day-to-day changes could only happen with everyone up the food chain saying *This is important, and we’re going to devote resources to giving students what they need.*”

## Lessons on Organizational Change

### *Division of labor*

“The key to success is that the superintendent has brought all the necessary people together and then dispersed them to the nine schools,” one administrator says. “Even though we each do things in our own way, we all do the same things.”

The division of labor for implementing change was motivated by two leadership principles. First, the overarching commitment to collaboration and coordination. From the EEC to data teams, “there’s been huge push from administration for people to get on same page.” At the same time, Ash established himself as an effective delegator and encouraged others in the district to do the same.

Teachers did not always wait for permission to act, but pushed for change on their own. For example, a special education teacher at the high school observed that the homework club was focusing too narrowly on completing homework. Drawing in part on the LaMura report as a common reference across the district, she presented a report to LHS and METCO leadership, proposing a new direction for the club. They tasked her with carrying out her own recommendations.

### *Leadership at all levels*

There is no level at which good leadership is not important. Ash himself recognized this fact and made “Leadership at all levels” one of his organizational goals. As superintendent, he pursued it aggressively, hiring 70 of the district’s 72 current administration staff, including all nine principals. By themselves, a crack team of administrators would not be able to effect meaningful change. Lexington’s efforts have been successful because teachers and support staff have also stepped up as leaders, beginning with Vito LaMura. Afterwards, even as the district was looking outwards to places like Montgomery County for inspiration, it also looked inwards to people like Gary Simon, head of LHS’s math department, to elevate innovative instruction that was already closing Lexington’s gaps.

This blended leadership has been partly a matter of culture—the story of the high school special education teacher is one example. But where possible, teachers and administrators have worked to structure their partnership. For example, several times teams of teachers have gone to study promising methods in other districts. If they think it is a good idea, then it happens.

Within the district, Lexington faculty now also develop and teach major components of their own professional learning curriculum.

### *Longevity*

Organizational change on the scale Lexington sought is tremendously difficult, and one of the hallmarks of Paul Ash's leadership has simply been his longevity. Before he arrived, all four central office staff had just resigned. With a natural annual attrition rate of between 7.5 % and 8.25%, Ash had the opportunity over his ten years to replace almost the entire administrative staff.

He was "a leader willing to go down this road." Along the way the district has overcome many challenges, but it has also simply outlasted them. "It takes time," one longtime teacher says. According to another, "Paul's initial couple of years, he met with lots of pushback and had to learn how to be successful. This is because he's talented, but also because he stayed long enough. Others have equal ability but had not endured the misery of the first few years."

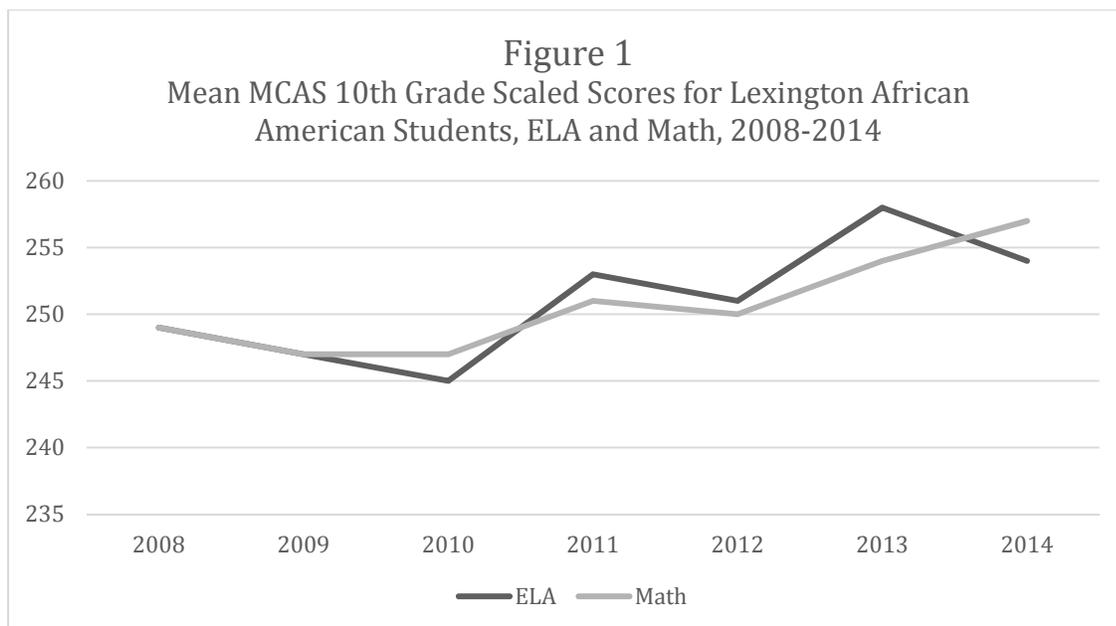
Ash isn't the only person who endured. Many, many teachers and administrators tried things that didn't work and felt like they were losing ground—but kept on going anyway. "The tough thing is, you need to be willing to get egg on your face," one teacher says. For all that resources have mattered to Lexington's success, the district's resilience has been "priceless."

### 3. What the Data Show

In the spring of 2014, 96 percent of African American tenth graders in the Lexington Public Schools were proficient in math and 100 percent were proficient in English Language Arts (ELA). Our focus in this chapter is on the following question: *How plausible is it that these high proficiency rates for tenth grade African American students is due to the plan that Lexington began implementing to close achievement gaps when these tenth graders were still in elementary school?*

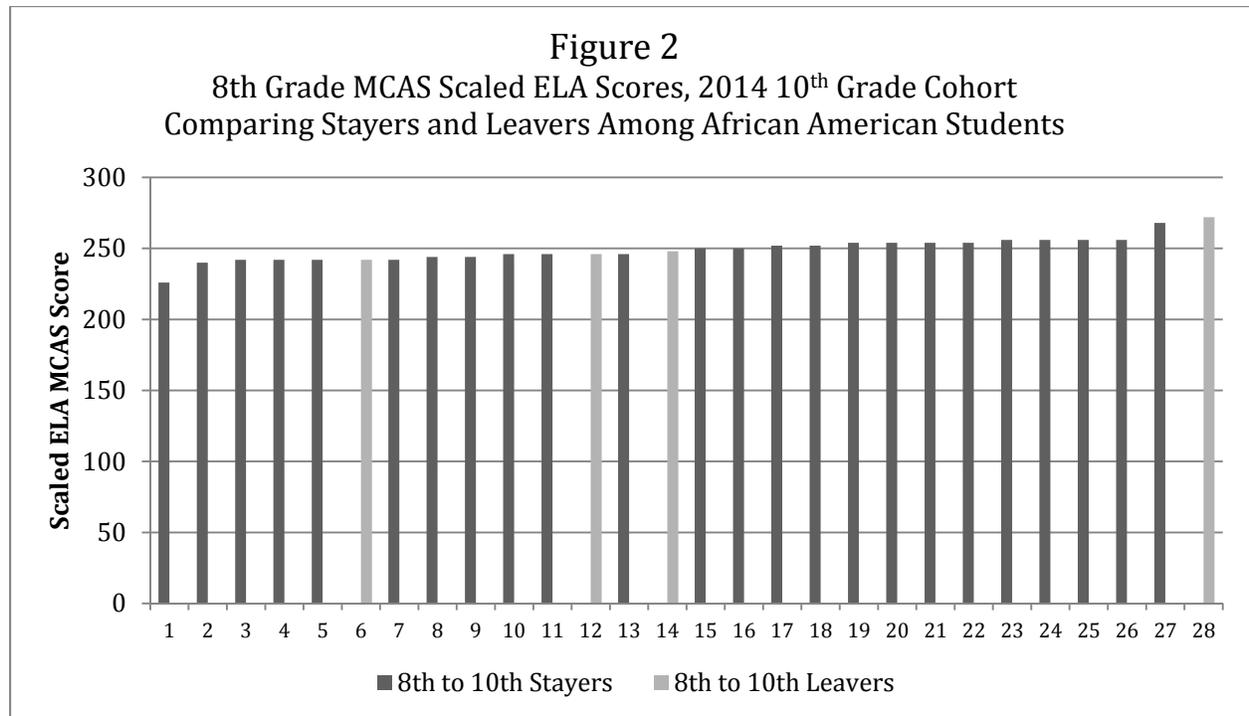
#### Scaled Scores and Proficiency Rates

Let us begin by asking whether there was a positive trend in MCAS performance in Lexington across recent cohorts of African American 10th graders. Using scaled MCAS scores, Figure 1 shows that indeed, the trends for ELA and math were both positive. For both subjects, 10th grade scores for African Americans began trending upward around 2009, as implementation of the plan began. We will assume in what follows that changes in performance were not the result of changing demographics. We are unaware of any changes in the student body composition of African Americans that would account for the trend in performance.



In addition, it does not appear that the trend was the result of a policy to “counsel out” weak eighth-graders before they reached high school. For example, there were four African

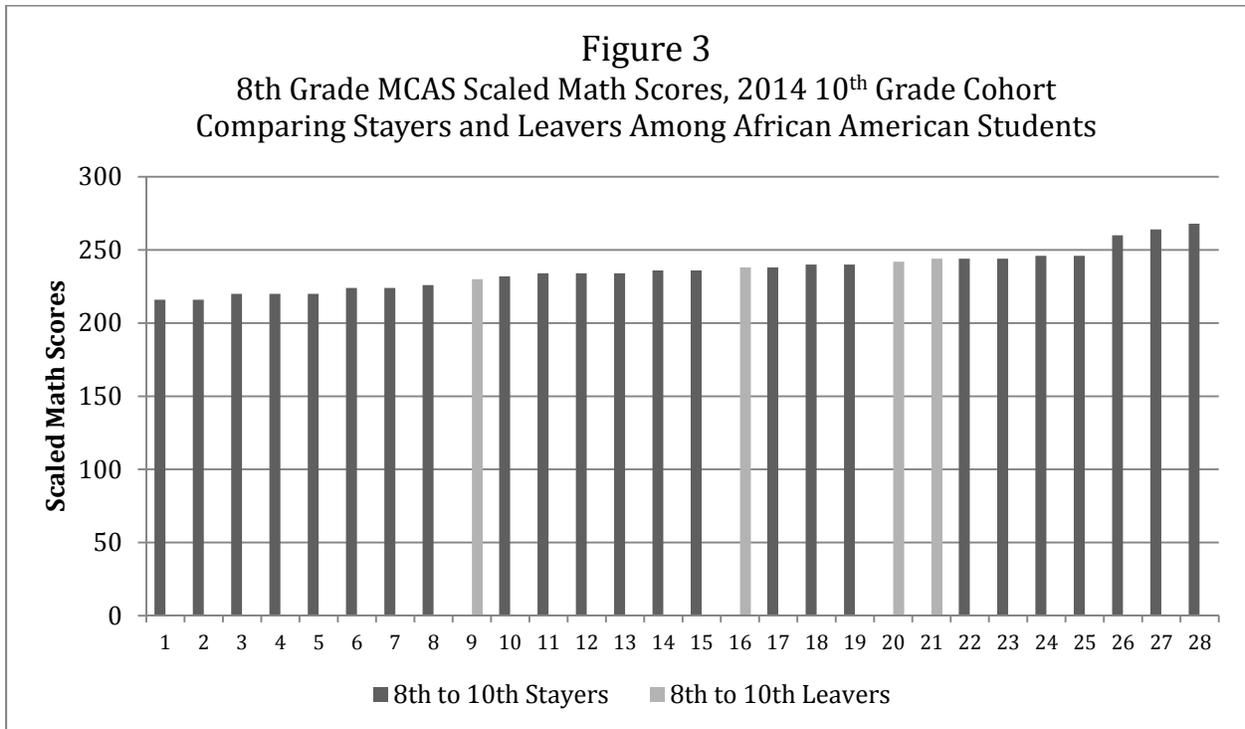
American students in the 2012 cohort of eighth graders who left Lexington before becoming 10th graders in 2014. Figures 2 and 3 show for ELA and math, respectively, that compared to their African American peers, those who left Lexington before 10th grade were not concentrated at the bottom of the score distributions. Instead, they were spread though the distribution, and typical of their peers.



Tenth graders in 2014 were fifth graders in 2009, at about the time that Lexington began implementing the plan. Therefore, progress for this and younger cohorts should be evident from 2009 forward.

We look for two types of evidence. First, if the plan helped improve instruction and supports for African American students, then we should expect to see that African American students who were fifth through eighth graders in 2014 have higher proficiency rates than 10th graders in 2014 achieved when they were in fifth through eighth grades. And second, if Lexington’s efforts during this period were more effective than efforts in other districts, we should expect that Lexington’s average proficiency ranking for African Americans in the 2014 10th grade cohort improved. In other words, in going from fifth to tenth grade, the 2014 cohort

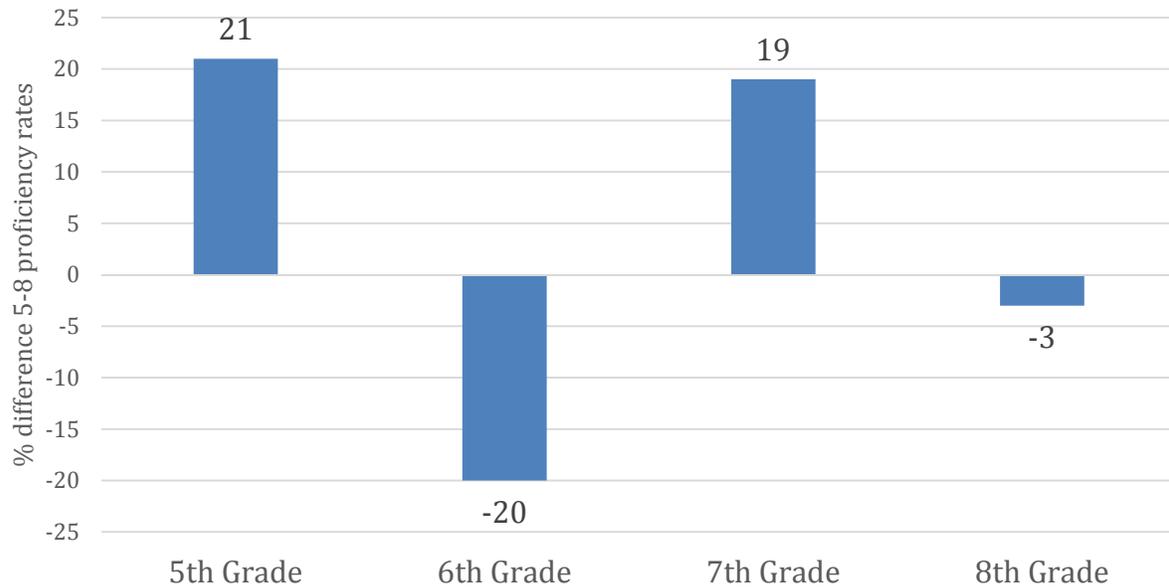
of 10th graders should have moved up in the between-district ranking of proficiency rates for African American students in Massachusetts.



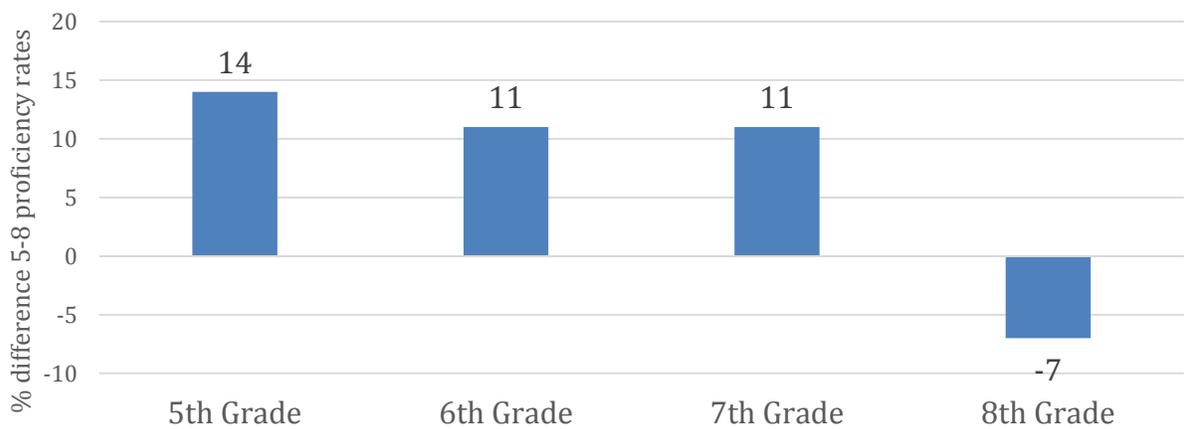
We find evidence for both types of improvement, albeit with some caveats. Figure 4 shows that fifth, sixth, and seventh grade ELA proficiency rates for African American students in 2014 are an average of 12 percentage points higher than for the 2014 cohort of 10th graders when they were in those grades. For math, Figure 5 shows that fifth and seventh grade proficiency rates are 21 and 19 percentage points higher, respectively, for the younger cohorts.

Sixth grade math is a notable exception to the pattern. During the 2013-2014 school year, Lexington tested a new (and unsuccessful) approach to sixth grade math instruction in some of its classes. Officials believe that this is why, as Figure 4 shows, sixth graders in 2014 scored an average of 20 percentage points lower on math proficiency than the 2014 cohort achieved when they were in sixth grade. Otherwise, for math and ELA together, five of the six comparisons for fifth, sixth, and seventh grades show that younger cohorts of African American students in Lexington scored better.

**Figure 4**  
 Spring 2014 Math Proficiency Rates for 5th through 8th Graders minus Proficiency Rates for 2014 10th Graders when they were in 5th to 8th Grades. For African American students in Lexington Public Schools



**Figure 5**  
 Spring 2014 ELA Proficiency Rates for 5th through 8th Graders minus Proficiency Rates for 2014 10th Graders when they were in 5th to 8th Grades. For African American students in Lexington Public Schools



At the same time, Figures 4 and 5 show that the younger cohort scored 3 percentage points lower on proficiency for math and 7 percentage points lower for ELA than the 2014 10th

graders did when in that grade. While negative, these differences are smaller in absolute value than the differences in the other direction for the earlier grades. One possibility is that the district-level effects of instructional improvements for African Americans were mostly in place by the time that recent cohorts reached the eighth grade. There may have been little if any difference between the learning experiences of students who were eighth graders in 2012 as opposed to 2014. And, both cohorts may have benefited prior to eighth grade from the gap closing efforts.

African American students in Lexington also improved compared to African Americans in other Massachusetts districts. Tables 1 through 4 show the rankings. Districts listed are those that had African American students in all four grade levels and that were not charter schools. On all four tables, there is a general tendency for Lexington students at higher grade levels to rank higher among Massachusetts districts. Tables 1 and 2, for math and ELA, respectively, show where the 2014 10th grade cohort ranked when they were in each listed grade. Tables 3 and 4 show where current students in 2014 ranked. Table 5 summarizes the rankings on the four prior tables and tabulates the progress. By progress, we mean changes in the rankings from when 2014 10th graders were in each grade, until the current crop of 2014 students were in the same grades. Similar to Figures 4 and 5, more recent cohorts rank higher.

Also similar to above, is that the main blip in the pattern is for sixth grade math scores in 2014, when a new approach to math instruction in some classrooms produced poor results. In addition, we see again in Table 5 that improvement between cohorts happened mostly before eighth grade.

**Table 1: Moving up in the Math Ranking, 2014 10th Graders**

*District Rankings of Math Proficiency Rates for African American Students in the 2014 10th Grade Cohort, when the cohort was in each listed grade. Districts not listed were charter schools, ranked lower, or did not have African Americans in all grades*

10th Grade	8th Grade	7th Grade	6th Grade	5th Grade
<b>Lexington(1)</b>	Canton	Braintree	Attleboro	Avon
	Attleboro	Brookline	Holbrook	Melrose
	Arlington	Avon	Braintree	Sharon
	Revere	<b>Lexington(4)</b>	Burlington	Arlington
	Avon		Canton	Framingham
	Salem		Avon	Stoughton
	Brookline		Stoughton	Brookline
	<b>Lexington(8)</b>		Brookline	Canton
			<b>Lexington(9)</b>	Easton
				Newton
				New Bedford
				Holbrook
				<b>Lexington(13)</b>

**Table 2: Moving up in the ELA Ranking, 2014 10th Graders**

*District Rankings of ELA Proficiency Rates for African American Students in the 2014 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Cohort, when the cohort was in each listed grade. Districts not listed were charter schools, ranked lower, or did not have African Americans in all grades.*

10th Grade	8th Grade	7th Grade	6th Grade	5th Grade
<b>Lexington(1)</b>	Weston	Arlington	Weston	Braintree
Tied with Weston and Melrose	<b>Lexington(2)</b>	Melrose	Holbrook	Canton
		Weston	Arlington	Weston
		Wachusett	Brookline	Avon
		Braintree	Burlington	Sharon
		Brookline	Braintree	Burlington
		Walpole	Wachusett	Melrose
		Canton	Melrose	Walpole
		<b>Lexington(9)</b>	Canton	Brookline
			Avon	Milton
			Waltham	Wachusett
			Framingham	Attleboro
			Stoughton	Framingham
			Sharon	Easton
			Walpole	Arlington
			West Springfield	West Springfield
			Worcester	Bridgewater
			Norwood	Bedford
			Salem	Haverhill
			Dedham	Stoughton
			Fitchburg	Fitchburg
			Attleboro	<b>Lexington(22)</b>
			Milton	
			Taunton	
			Easton	
			<b>Lexington(26)</b>	

Table 3: Current 2014 Math Proficiency Rankings

*District Rankings for African American Students. Districts not listed were charter schools, ranked lower, or did not have African Americans in all grades*

10th Grade	8th Grade	7th Grade	6th Grade	5th Grade
Weston	Belmont	Weston	Avon	Sharon
<b>Lexington(2)</b>	Sharon	<b>Lexington(2)</b>	Belmont	Avon
	Easton		Malden	Arlington
	Walpole		Easton	Belmont
	Bridgewater		Methuen	<b>Lexington(5)</b>
	Norwood		Sharon	
	Leominster		Chicopee	
	Arlington		Nantucket	
	Stoughton		Bridgewater	
	Woburn		Braintree	
	Brookline		Milton	
	Canton		Walpole	
	Revere		Arlington	
	<b>Lexington(14)</b>		Leominster	
			Waltham	
			Fitchburg	
			Weston	
			Everett	
			Haverhill	
			Pittsfield	
			Attleboro	
			Brookline	
			Newton	
			Canton	
			Chelsea	
			Woburn	
			Dedham	
			Worcester	
			New Bedford	
			Wareham	
			Weymouth	
			Lowell	
			Lynn	
			Cambridge	
			<b>Lexington(35)</b>	

Table 4

Current 2014 ELA Proficiency Rankings

*District Rankings for African American Students. Districts not listed were charter schools, ranked lower, or did not have African Americans in all grades.*

10th Grade	8th Grade	7th Grade	6th Grade	5th Grade
<b>Lexington(1)</b>	Sharon	Wellesley	Walpole	Weston
Tied with Melrose and Weston	<b>Lexington(2)</b>	Walpole	Stoughton	Woburn
		Weston	Easton	Braintree
		<b>Lexington(4)</b>	Braintree	Sharon
			Chicopee	Canton
			Belmont	Avon
			Methuen	Arlington
			Waltham	Revere
			Avon	Milton
			Dedham	Belmont
			Milton	Attleboro
			Leominster	<b>Lexington(12)</b>
			<b>Lexington(13)</b>	

Table 5

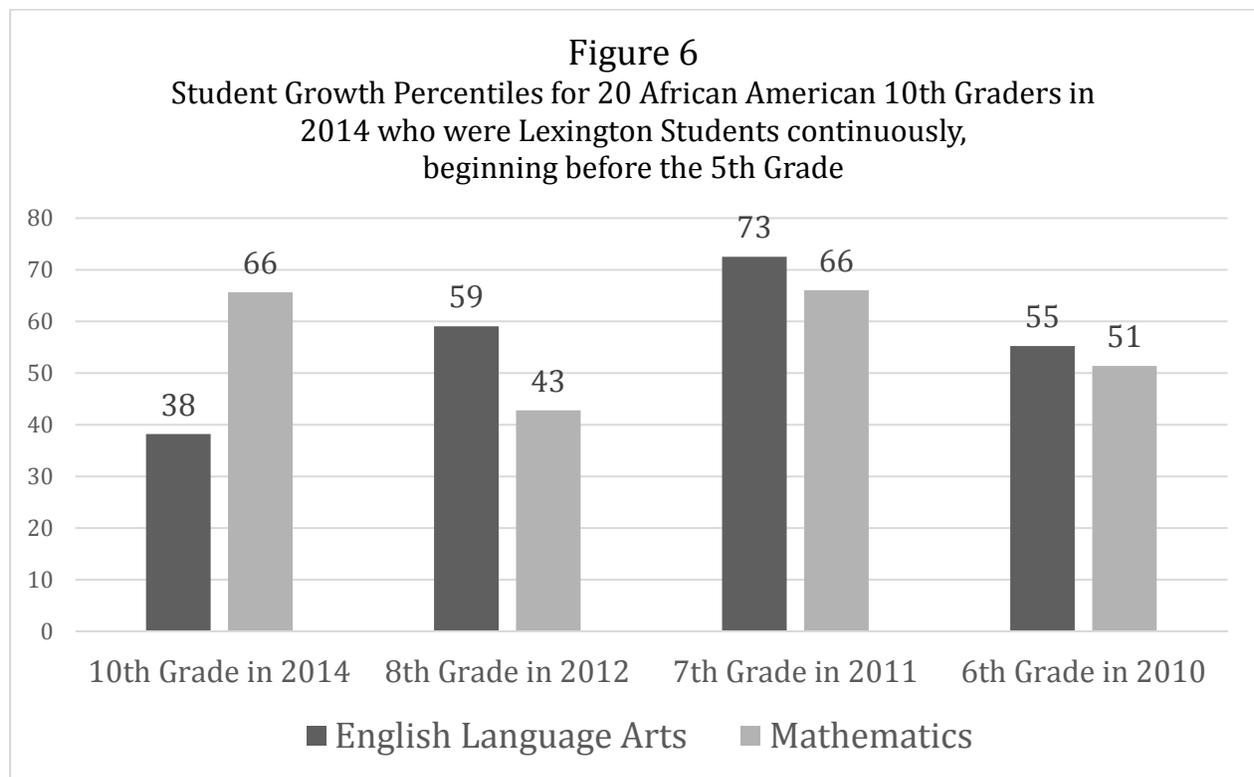
Lexington's Rank Position in Tables 1 through 4

		5th grade	6th grade	7th Grade	8th Grade
ELA	2014 Cohort of 10 <sup>th</sup> Graders	22	26	9	2
	Current 2014	12	13	4	2
	<b>Progress (Difference)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>
MATH	2014 Cohort of 10 <sup>th</sup> Graders	13	9	4	8
	Current 2014	5	35	2	14
	<b>Progress (Difference)</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>-26</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>-6</b>

## Student Growth Percentiles

The student growth percentile (SGP) is another way of comparing progress. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education uses the SGP as a measure of learning. Initially calculated at the student level and then sometimes aggregated, the SGP indicates how growth in a student's MCAS score from one grade to the next, compares to the growth achieved by peers with similar MCAS histories. It is a measure of learning.

Like any percentile ranking, SGPs have a statewide median of 50. There are twenty African American tenth graders in 2014 who have been Lexington students since before they were in the fifth grade. Figure 6 shows the mean SGP values for these students at grades six, seven, eight, and ten. Only two of the eight bars on the chart show below-average growth. The other six show SGPs ranging from 51 to 73. The seventh grade SGP values of 73 for ELA and 66 for math both exceed the analogous values for eighth grade (i.e., 59 for ELA, 43 for math) and sixth grade (55 for ELA, 43 for math). Apparently, as we speculated above, substantial growth for 2014 10th graders did indeed occur before they entered the eighth grade. Growth in ELA for this cohort slowed as they moved from seventh through tenth grades, while math growth recovered after the eighth grade dip.



It appears that ELA proficiency rates were high for the 2014 cohort of African American tenth graders in Lexington because the cohort experienced growth in sixth and seventh grades sufficient to make them mostly proficient by the eighth grade. Even though their SGP growth in ELA was below average from the end of eighth grade through the end of tenth grade, their foundation from gains achieved during middle school was sufficient to sustain their proficiency. In fact, all but three of the twenty students were proficient in ELA by the seventh grade and all but one were proficient by the eighth grade.

In contrast, the majority of the 20 *did not* score proficient in math at the end of eighth grade. This low eighth-grade proficiency rate is partly reflective of strict Massachusetts standards for proficiency in middle school math for eighth graders. The fact that the cohort's proficiency rate was so much higher in tenth than in eighth grade is partly reflective of more lenient state standards for tenth grade than for eighth grade proficiency. We say this because statewide math proficiency rates are much higher in tenth than in eighth grade—a difference greater than could plausibly be accounted for by statewide growth in skill. However, the high proficiency rate for Lexington's 2014 cohort of African American tenth graders also reflects the fact the cohort achieved above average growth in math achievement—i.e., an SGP of 66—from end of eighth grade through the end of 10th grade.

### **Whole District MCAS Data**

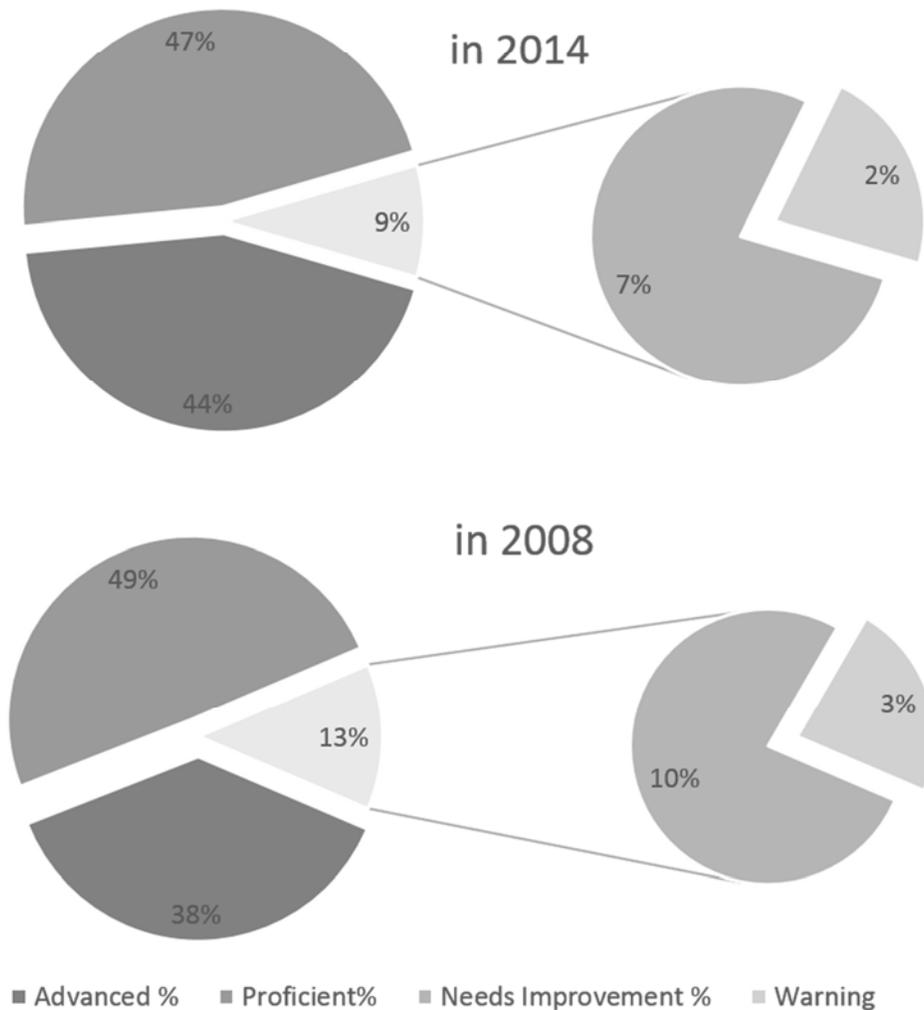
Lexington proficiency ratings have placed the whole district among the top five Massachusetts districts in ELA and the top three in Math through the entire period that we examine. During this period, there has not been a clear trend in where the overall district ranks among these top few districts. At the same time, there has been improvement in overall performance.

One of Lexington's core beliefs during the change process was that raising achievement among African American students and other subgroups would improve the educational experience of all students. Figure 7a shows for ELA that the percentage of all Lexington students scoring below proficient on the MCAS dropped four percentage points over the period (from 13% down to 9%), while the percentage scoring in the advanced range rose six percentage points (from 38% up to 44%). For the district as a whole, there was above-average annual growth. The SGP remained between 60 and 65 through the entire period, indicating that the

average student in the district was learning more each year than most of counterparts across the state.

Figure 7a

Lexington's whole-district performance profile improved for ELA

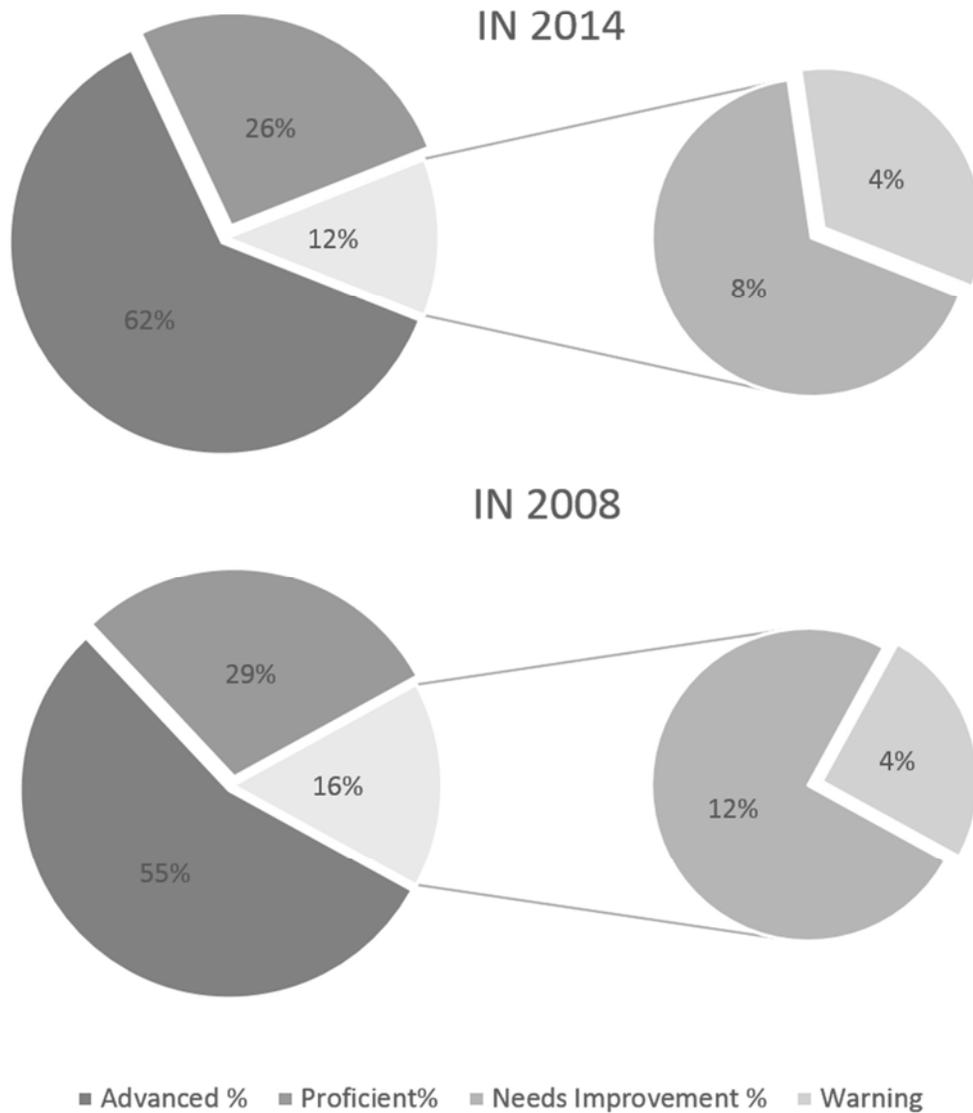


Similar to ELA, Figure 7b shows for math that the percentage of all Lexington students scoring below proficient on the MCAS dropped four percentage points over the period (from 16% down to 12%), while the percentage scoring in the advanced range rose six percentage

points (from 55% up to 62%). Also similar to ELA, the SGP for math through the entire period ranged from 60 to 65.

**Figure 7b**

**Lexington’s whole-district performance profile improved for Math**



Figures 8 and 9 show whole-school proficiency rates (i.e., proficient plus advanced) for 2007 through 2014, by school. Figures 10 and 11 show the percentages scoring advanced. All

four figures show evidence of progress. Notably, the greatest progress has been at the schools that had the lowest scores at the beginning of the period. These are also the schools that tell the most detailed stories about their paths to improvement.

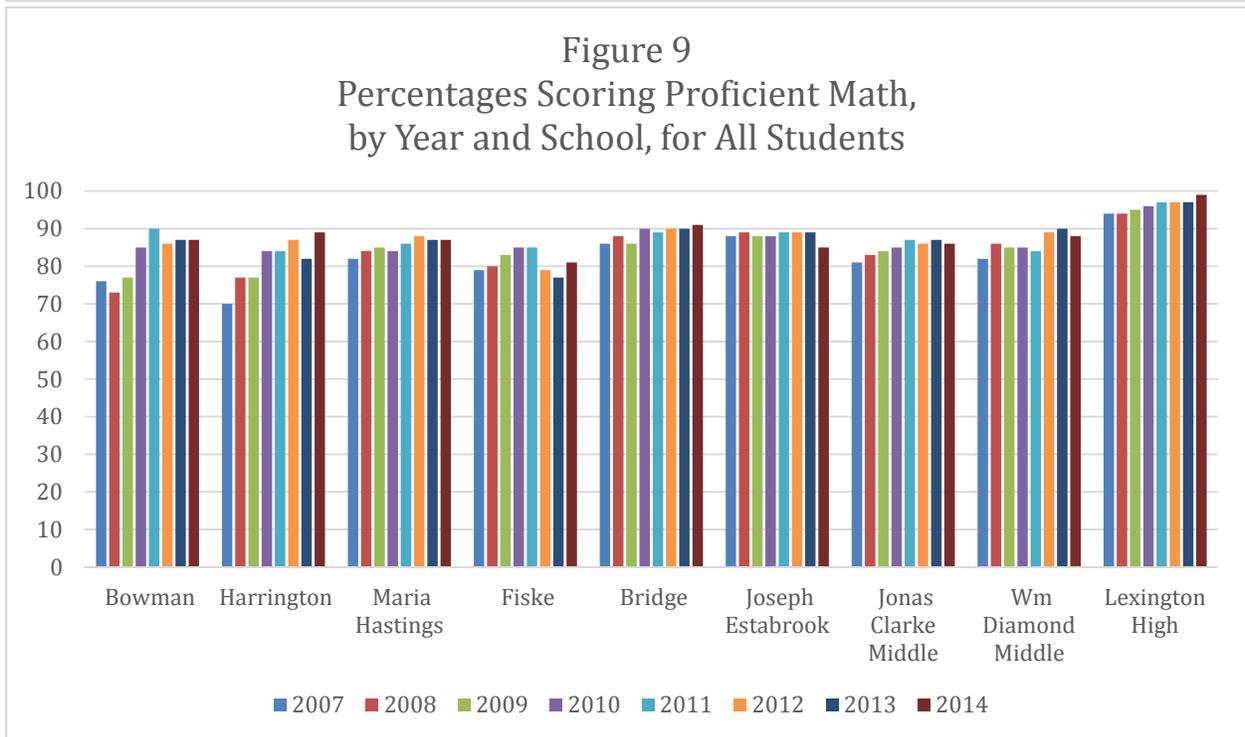
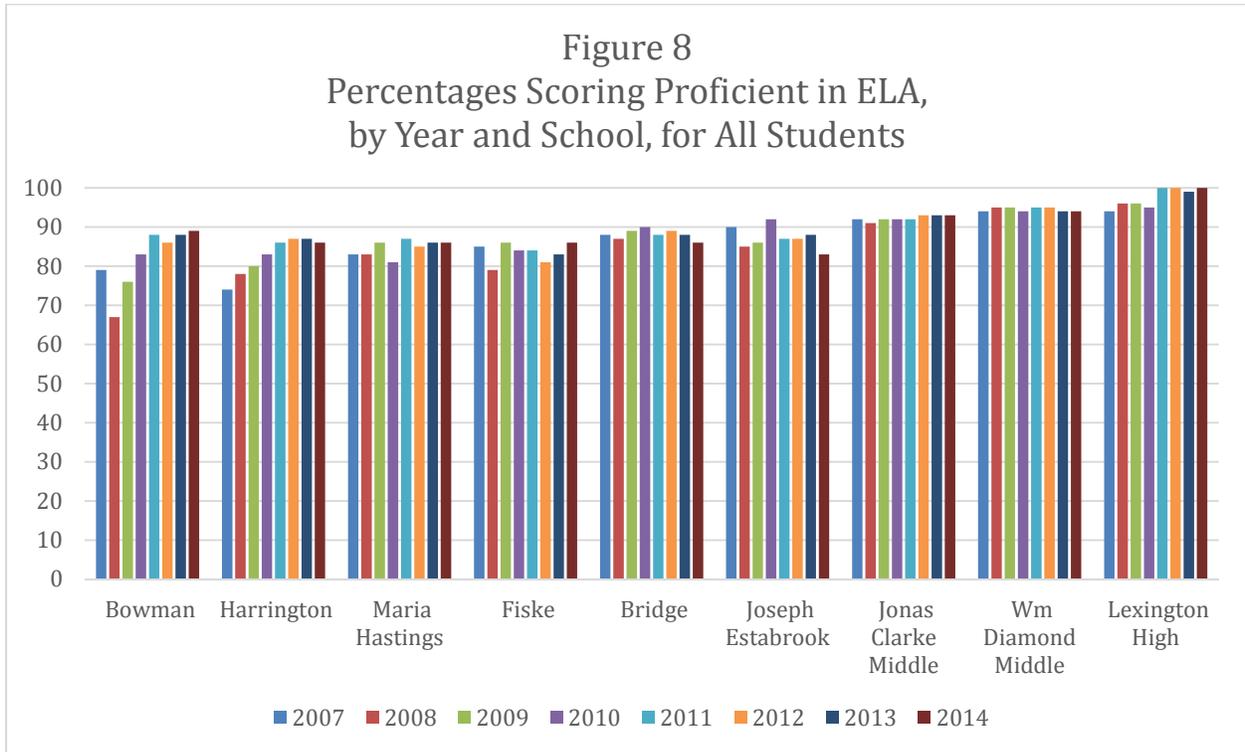


Figure 10  
 Percentages Scoring Advanced in ELA,  
 by Year and School, for All Students

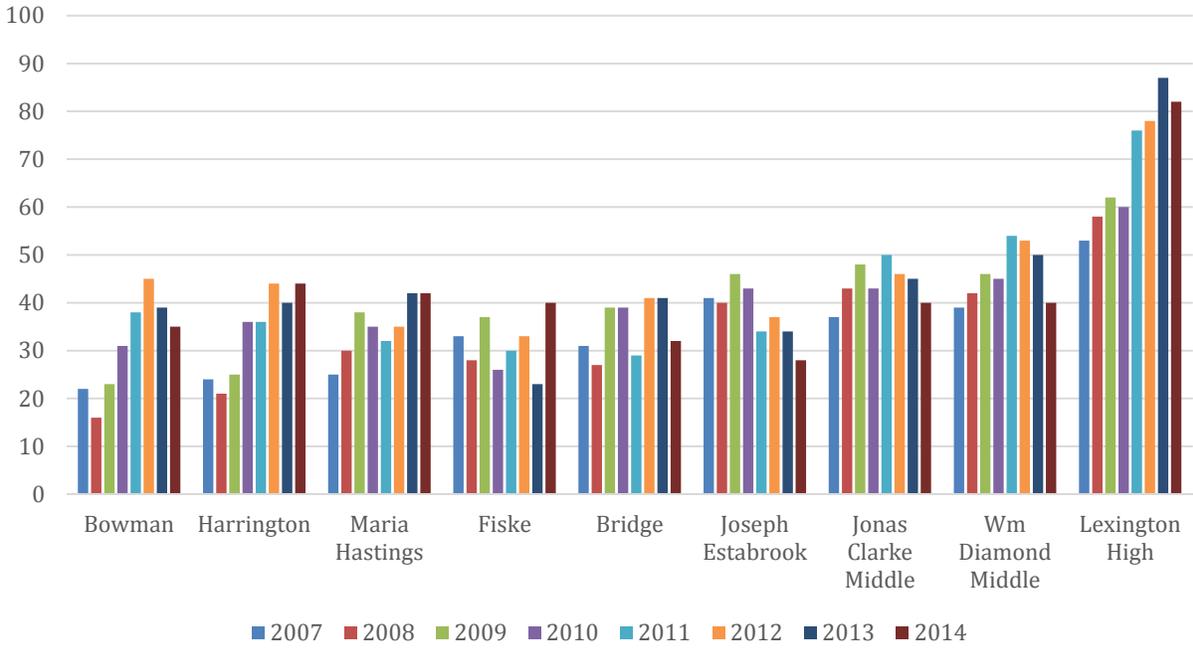
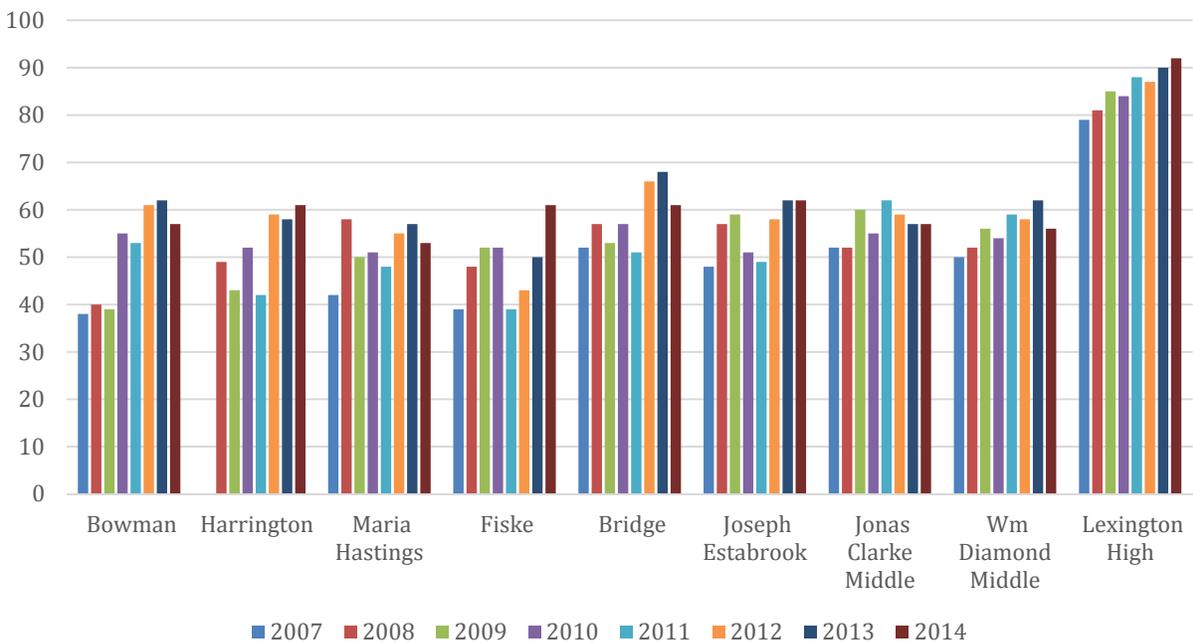
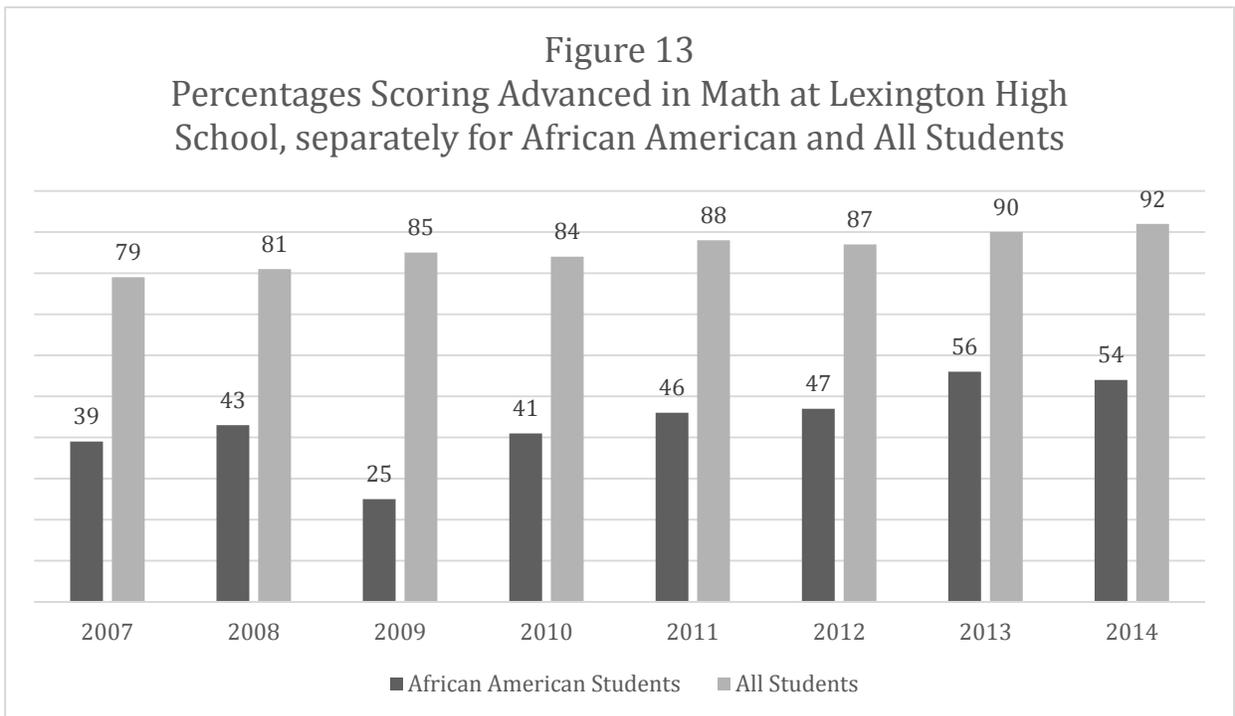
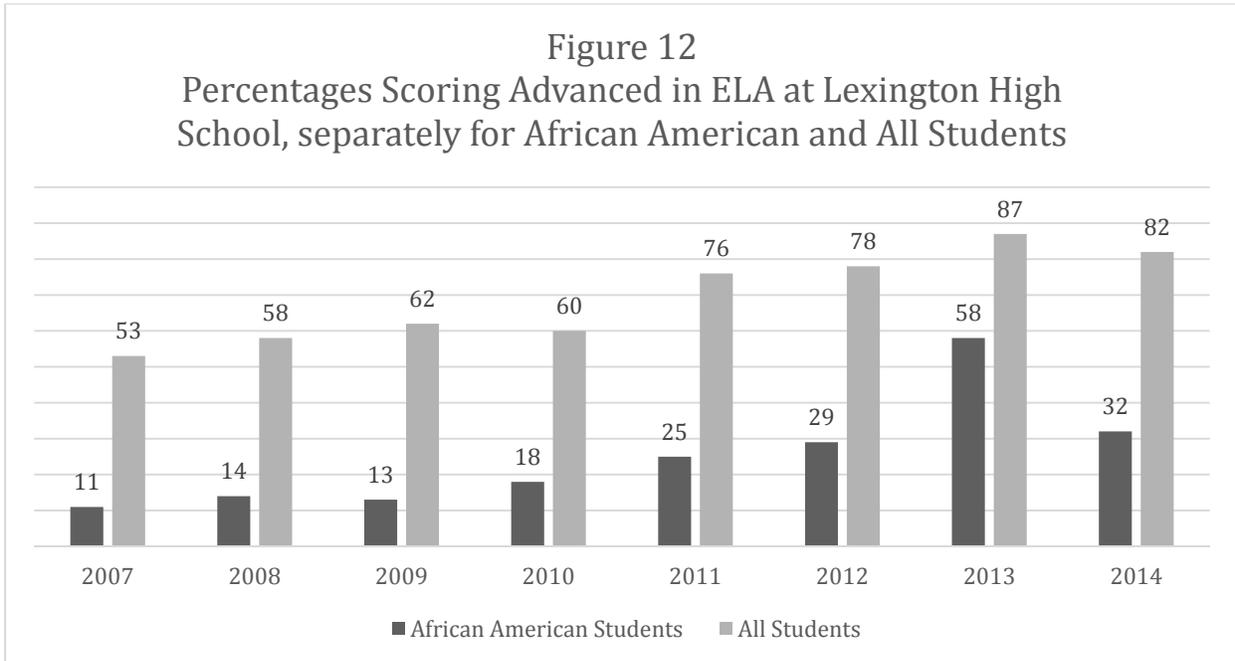


Figure 11  
 Percentages Scoring Advanced in Math,  
 by Year and School, for All Students



Finally, Figures 12 and 13 show rising performance for all students—as well as a tendency toward narrowing gaps between African American students and all Lexington students—in the percentages scoring advanced on the MCAS. Both excellence and equity have been increasing.



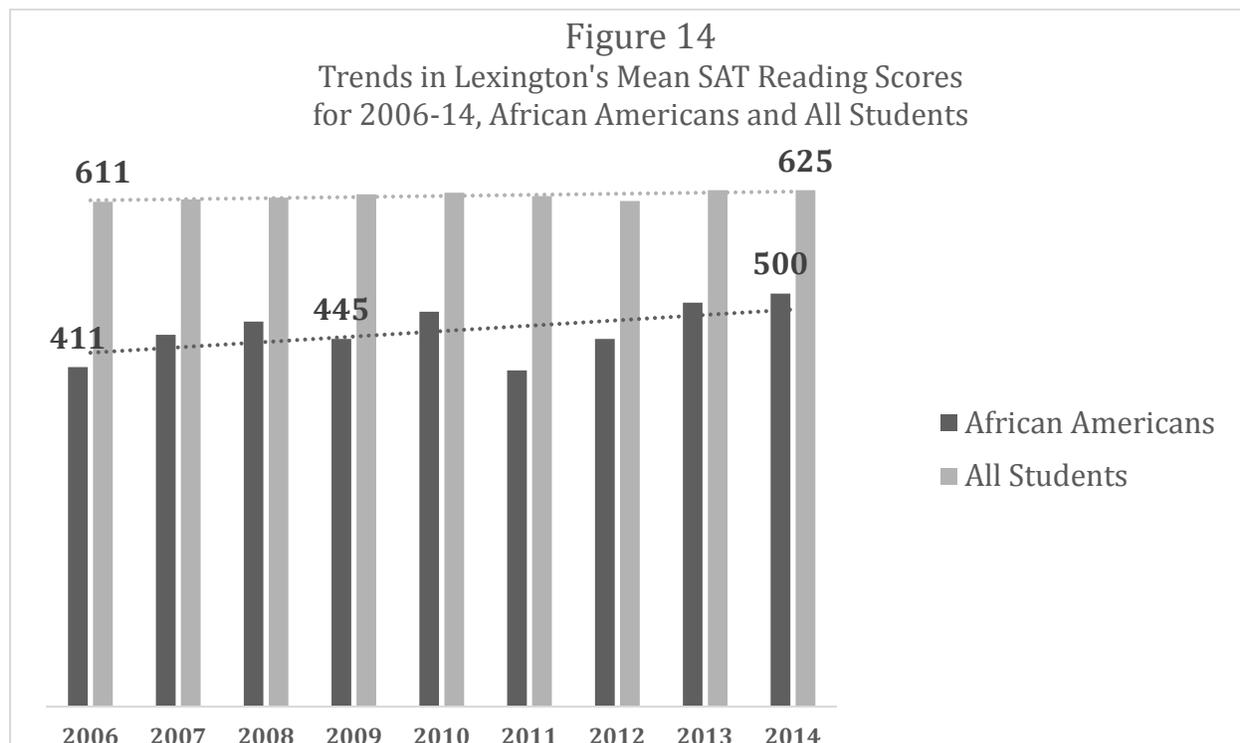
## SAT Scores

The SAT college entrance exam is an entirely different source of evidence. That source too, shows impressive progress.

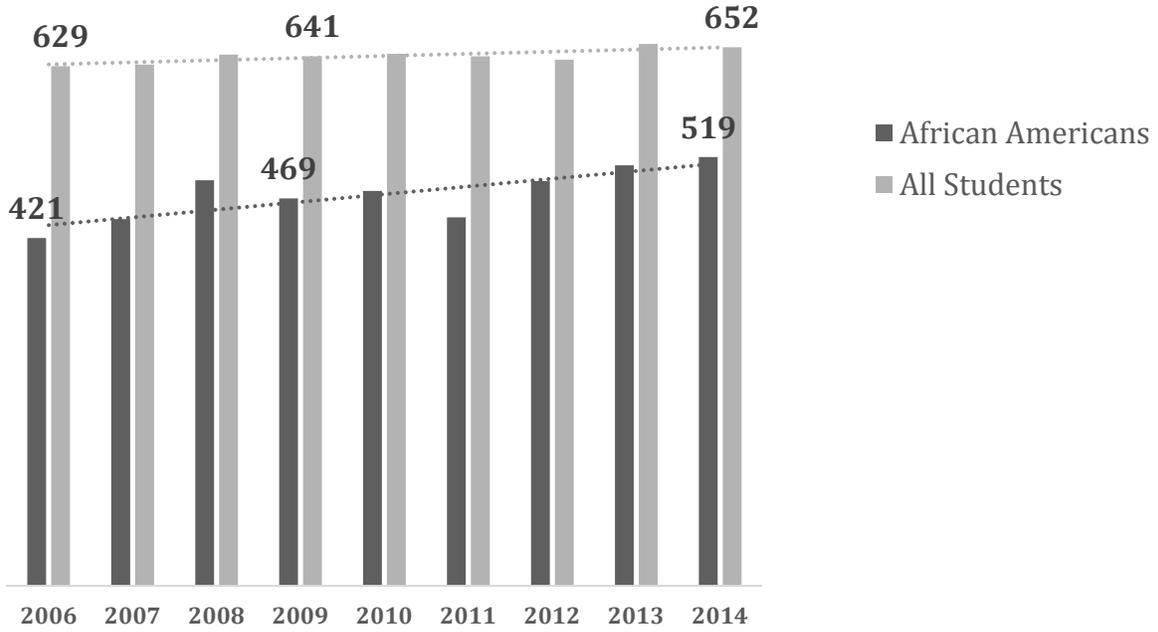
First, there is evidence of gap narrowing on SAT scores—i.e., African American’s scores rose faster than for all students—from 2006 through 2008, which were the years just before the work described in this report gained momentum. Then, there was a three or four year pause in progress, as the new work took hold. Progress in narrowing SAT gaps reignited after 2011. The most recent available data are for spring 2014. The 2014 data show the highest scores that African American students have achieved over the entire period. These most recent data also show the narrowest gaps compared to all students, even though scores for all students have similarly peaked in the most recent years. These statements are true for math, reading, and writing, as shown on Figures 14, 15 and 16, respectively.

Hence, the SAT patterns are very much like the patterns for advanced status on the tenth grade MCAS. Specifically, the mean performance for all students has improved, but African Americans have improved more rapidly.

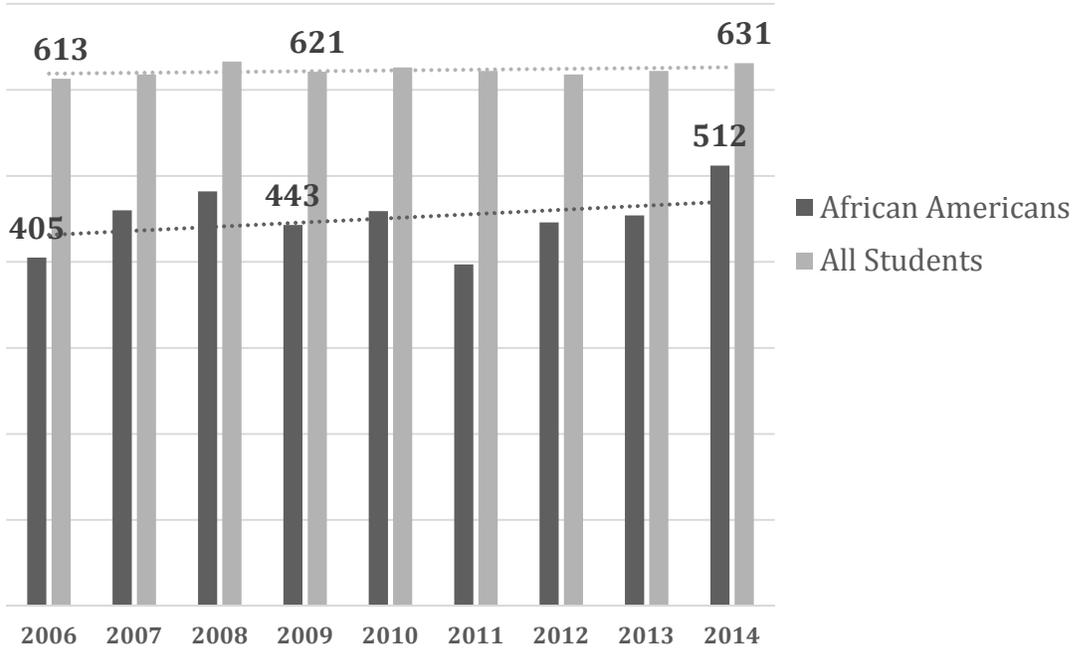
Both excellence and equity have been increasing.



**Figure 15**  
Trends in Lexington's Mean SAT Math Scores  
for 2006-14, African Americans and All Students



**Figure 16**  
Trends in Lexington's Mean SAT Writing Scores  
for 2006-14, African Americans and All Students



## 4. Investing in Supporting Achievement for All Students

### Theory of Change

Lexington took an omnivorous attitude towards reform, looking high and low for strategies that had already proved themselves in other districts. Research motivated some new approaches, district leadership identified others, and still more were the brainchildren of teachers, school administrators, and parents. Whatever its origin, every idea comported with a set of core principles about teaching and learning. These principles were repeated over and over again until they became mantras of change.

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*“All children can succeed.  
All children will succeed.”*

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Motivating Lexington’s instructional and programming changes is an explicit philosophy about ability and potential. Like all places, Lexington had harbored some limiting beliefs about student learning. When teachers weren’t able to help a child, without PLCs, professional learning, or RTI to support them, it could be difficult to resist the idea that some children simply could not be taught. “There were a lot of excuses for kids not learning,” one person remembers. “Some people said *We have a different kind of kid here.*”

New structures and strategies for instruction went a long way towards changing these beliefs. But the district also attacked them directly, relentlessly promulgating a common vision about the role of teachers and the capacity of students. “I told everyone, *All kids cross the finish line,*” one administrator remembers. “*All means all, and it is going to take all of us.*” This messaging has supported the cultural shift towards teacher transparency and collaboration, perhaps because it motivates people by focusing on student success and not teacher failure. Teachers can expose their own weaknesses to each other in service of a powerful shared goal. Teachers cite this philosophy as one of the most important changes they have witnessed.

From the outset of the change process, teacher and administrative leaders were committed to the belief that, whatever the origins of the gap, its fix was in the classroom. “I struggle when a teacher gives me all the external reasons kids can’t learn,” one person says. “We can’t use [parental support] as an excuse, we can’t use METCO or Boston as the excuse.”

Instead of tinkering around the margins, Lexington reengineered fundamental things about how teachers teach and students learn in the district.

The guiding idea was collaboration and tiered intervention. “We’re all making the same movements in classrooms, using the same language,” one faculty member says. Alignment across classes and from grade to grade helps students consolidate knowledge and navigate major transitions (from elementary to middle school, for example). To achieve this kind of alignment, Lexington put in place multiple structures and practices to encourage extensive collaboration between teachers and align curriculum and professional development resources.

### **“Raise All Boats”**

Lexington began this work focused narrowly on closing the achievement gap between white and Asian students, and black and Latino students. But that goal was quickly replaced by a broader, more inclusive vision of reform that would improve the educational experiences of all children. The reasons for this change were threefold. First, the district believed that what was good for black and Latino students would be good for *all* students: “a rising tide lifts all boats.” Low-performing students from every background benefit from the deep dive of the data teams and RTI, and every single student benefits from a curriculum aligned around common standards and teachers who collaborate to better their instructional practice.

Second, the district embraced the idea that the METCO program and METCO students and families make valuable contributions to the school community. The more these students are able to realize their abilities, contribute to school life, and build relationships with their peers, the better for every student and teacher.

Third, the district recognized that to create buy-in for its program of change, it needed to make the case that closing the achievement gap was integral to Lexington’s ability to serve all children. “What you do for struggling students is good for everyone,” one EEC member says. Focusing on all children helped mainstream the change movement within the district and in Lexington at large, placing equity at the core of Lexington’s educational mission.

### **Curriculum Reviews**

Prior to the curriculum review during the 2006-2007 school year, the curriculum had not been systematically evaluated for 10 years. It was loose and fractured, with content varying from one school to another and even classroom to classroom within grade level. There was no

vertical alignment across grade levels, and very little horizontal alignment between subjects within a grade level. As the Common Core movement was developing across the country, Lexington moved to create a standards-based curriculum. By facilitating greater horizontal and vertical alignment in instruction, this process has brought about “more equitable expectations” for students at different schools. LHS teachers can no longer identify which middle school a student came from based only on their proficiencies.

To coordinate teaching with this new curriculum, Lexington created district-wide department heads as new positions. Department heads oversee curriculum and lead teacher evaluations, and also do some teaching to stay in touch with what is going on in the classroom. They have made a “huge difference,” one middle school educator says. “Before, each middle school had its own department chairs, but now department meetings are joint, and heads evaluate teachers at both schools. It gives a consistent experience and has made a huge difference in making kids successful.”

Curriculum review and district-wide department heads have been especially important at the middle schools, where teachers have long struggled to manage the transitions from elementary school and to high school. “Before, sixth grade staff talked to fifth grade only on move-up day. Now they meet with fifth grade teachers about curriculum vertical alignment, and it’s the same with middle to high school transitions.” Transitions still present a serious challenge for teachers and students alike, but these new measures have softened up the problem.

### Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Professional learning has been the backbone of Lexington’s change movement and PLCs its core structure. First launched in Lexington in the 2006-2007 school year, PLCs vary from school to school. Whatever the particular conformation, they are a place where teachers sit down together regularly to look at student data and strategize.

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*“Not my student or your student, but our student”*

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Although PLCs are part of a larger philosophy about consistent and high quality instruction, they have individual character. This is because Lexington sees them, as it sees all professional learning, as an exercise in capacity-building and institutional learning. The goal is to help teachers develop the individual skills and collective relationships that make collaboration sustainable. “We’re constantly asking [teachers] to grow themselves,” one administrator puts it. “They’re all in different places with personality and experience. We want to keep them all going

at their own pace...One PLC might figure out something and share it, and so on. It's like driving, where you need to push the accelerator gently but also coast sometimes to see what's going on around you."

In addition to PLCs, many teachers are also members of data teams that identify struggling students or challenging material and plan accordingly. At Estabrook Elementary School, for example, PLCs meet weekly for sixty minutes in six week cycles, in addition to the informal conversations that teachers have with each other every day. PLCs look at student performance data to select students that the data teams will focus on during the last week in the cycle. The data teams use a spreadsheet of student performance data that the PLCs create directly from teacher materials.

While PLCs meet weekly, teachers who are teaching the same courses meet "almost daily" to discuss their work. This time is built into the schedule for teachers to collaborate on lesson design and troubleshoot exercises or assignments. When common planning time was introduced, "there was some push back: *You are taking away my prep time,*" one teacher remembers. That became "*our time*" for collaboration. In some schools, common planning is even built into the physical layout. "The principal before me reorganized the teacher work room by content groups," one principal says. "Teachers came in, and their desks were in different places. It was a giant *Oh my God*. And now, seven years later, people love it and wouldn't give it up."

The PLCs have been a positive experience for almost everyone. At first, the collaboration felt foreign and went forward in fits and starts. "We sort of went backward, starting with PLCs without knowing what we were doing," one teacher says, "but now we're getting better at looking at data and best practices and working in teams." Even now, some teachers feel that PLCs are not a natural fit for some teaching contexts. For example, at the secondary level where teachers are subject matter experts, others may dislike being in a position to review critically another teacher's practice.

Even so, PLCs are "very productive" for many teachers. One reports that PLCs have helped her department get "on the same pace with the math curriculum." "We're starting to look at kids' work as a whole," another says. "We look at what some teachers are doing and what some others may not be doing. What you do for struggling students is good for everyone."

### *Data Teams*

At the beginning of the change process, one administrator recalls, “we said, *Wouldn’t it be great if data lived in one place?*” Data teams are the fulfillment of this wish. Every six weeks at each school, large groups of teachers, counselors, and administrators meet to discuss collective grade-level performance and struggling, individual students. The teams number between 14 and 20 faculty members, and the school principal chairs the meeting. One elementary school, for example, has six different data teams that meet for two hours each.

The goal of these meetings is to use student data “to see where there might be gaps or where the student is making progress.” According to one administrator, “unmet need is the focus.” Teachers forward students who are “below benchmark” with respect to grade-level standards or their personalized learning plans. The data teams analyze data on student performance as well as teacher observations to put together a set of interventions or strategies. Sometimes these conversations “lead us to look more deeply at the student to see if there is an underlying causal factor” the school can help address.

Like PLCs and common planning time, data teams require a high level of trust between teachers in order to work. “It has to be a safe zone,” one administrator says, requiring strong facilitation skills from the principal chairing the meeting. The practice represented “a real culture change.” Teachers used to have a great deal of privacy and autonomy in the classroom, and while some might have consulted their colleagues for advice, they were never publically accountable to each other for their students’ work. But with so many forces aligning in the push towards transparent and data-driven instruction, the data teams have actually “enhanced school culture” for many skeptics.

### *Common Formative Assessments*

Lexington’s action plan proposed that elementary and middle schools adopt common formative assessments by 2010 and LHS by 2011. The schools use common formative assessments to track student growth throughout the school year. Pre- and post-assessments are designed collaboratively by teachers and used to evaluate learning, identify troublesome content or themes, and support consistent instruction from one classroom to another. Common formative assessments tie in with several of Lexington’s new instructional practices, including the curriculum review process. Teachers design and review the assessments in PLCs and on data teams. Lower grades also use assessments to create standards-based report cards.

Adopting common formative assessments has been a challenging process. “Teachers are not trained in making valid assessments—they’re not working for testing companies, of course,” one administrator acknowledges. “So now there’s training for how to facilitate that process in departments, we administrators learning with teachers.” Teachers have also had to work through some natural suspicions and fears about the process. “A growth mindset, believing we are all learners and we should be making mistakes and learning from them and sharing what we’ve learned—that allows teachers to feel safer and take risks,” an administrator says. There has been progress on this front: this administrator recounts a recent PLC meeting where one teacher realized that kids were struggling with a key concept because they had never mastered a prerequisite skill. “So then they all focused on that. Veteran staff working with twenty-somethings out of college.”

### **Response to Intervention (RTI)**

As Lexington sought a common classroom experience for all students, the district was also working to make itself more nimble in meeting individual student needs. Previously, SPED was the main tool teachers had to help struggling students and differentiate instruction. “Students who couldn’t read well were referred [to SPED] in first and second grade,” an administrator says. “They were referred to teachers who were trained for SPED, not reading instruction. People thought they were doing the right thing. Back then, they didn’t have many other resources.”

To limit inappropriate SPED referrals and provide students the help they need within ordinary instruction, Lexington adopted tiered response to intervention (RTI). RTI starts in the data team meetings, where teachers identify struggling students and collaborate on a set of interventions. RTI looks for opportunities to help students in every corner of the school day, whether that means asking a math teacher to collaborate on literacy strategies, or pairing a student up with a math coach for part of a math period. In the case of METCO students, if the team eventually decides to refer the student to SPED, the principal, superintendent, and METCO Academic Director must review the case.

Like so many other changes, RTI has pushed teachers to become comfortable sharing their own struggles publicly. “In the past, I as an individual classroom teacher might say, *Gee, my students didn’t do as well on that last assessment,*” one former teacher says. “But you’re not going to reveal that to your other fourth grade teachers,” another chimes in. “Because [you’re

thinking] *Oh my gosh, you did really well on measurement, I can tell, and I didn't do so well.* That shift is about trust.”

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*“empowering teachers to  
teach each other”*

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Solving student learning problems with RTI requires a robust professional learning program. “RTI is really where our professional learning program took on huge substance,” one administrator says.

“We were able to identify areas where teachers needed more skills. If we are going to say that you have to be responsible for 85-90% of your students and you need to shift adult actions to...make sure you are targeting the need, you need to know more about it. So it’s really about building your own professional toolkit to understand what it is that you have to do in the classroom.”

Teachers have taken the lead seeking out professional learning experiences that support RTI. For example, after reading new research on executive functioning in children, a group of teachers at Hastings Elementary School came to the conclusion that it was a key factor for some of their struggling students. They wrote a Lexington Education Foundation grant to run a summer workshop with an expert on executive functioning. For a five hour presentation, the district had to raise the enrollment limit twice, from 25 to 45 to 65 teachers. The workshop was so successful that the original grant writers created a graduate level course on executive functioning, which will be offered to Lexington teachers through the Professional Learning Program for the third time this summer.

Success with RTI requires major commitments from teachers, commitments many teachers still struggle to meet. “Paul’s mantra *All students get what they need when they need it* was scary to teachers, because it seemed like *If a kid wants ice cream, we give her ice cream,*” one administrator says. “But now it’s more understood and accepted as, *If we’re not meeting needs, we need to troubleshoot.*” Still, the pressure to make instruction responsive to so many individual needs and still cover all the curriculum is challenging. Having RTI on the schedule and putting structure on the expectation that all teachers will participate in the interventions has helped. But as one teacher says, “the balancing and juggling is difficult.”

## **Professional Development**

To help teachers take on such a broad array of new practices, Lexington has invested heavily in professional development and built a remarkable in-house program. “There is lots and lots of PD,” one teacher says. “Teachers here have very high expectations, and I’ve struggled

finding service providers that meet their needs.” Lexington has responded to this problem by developing a battery of professional learning opportunities taught by district staff. A Professional Learning Committee oversees the development of new courses, and the district holds “unconferences” with expert speakers and Lexington Learns Together, “a whole day of Lexington people teaching Lexington people.”

“The courses are far above what I’ve seen in any other district,” one administrator says. “We’ve all figured out, and the district has figured out, that we learn best from each other.” In this context, PD is less about beaming new ideas into teachers’ heads, and more about developing the relationships and resources in the district that will support each teacher’s personal growth. “It’s about meeting teachers where they are,” one person says. Another describes it as “almost contagious. Before we were begging people to offer courses, but now there are all kinds, and they’re not just subject-specific. Social studies teachers are taking math and science integration courses!”

Lexington has put effort and thought into making this model of professional development practically feasible for teachers. In 2009, the district created a PD committee funded by federal stimulus money and chaired by Joanne Hennessy, the retired principal of Diamond Middle School. Hennessy focused on a curriculum that would empower teachers to develop their skills and measure impact in the classroom. The Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Learning, Carol Pilarski, manages professional learning for the district, assisted by a full-time Coordinator of Professional Learning and Special Projects. In addition to aggressively funding PD, the district has been creative about finding time in the day for PD. Aside from full-day events like Lexington Learns, “PD is embedded in the day as well as after school.” A capacity-building recruitment strategy has brought in subject coaches to “support daily PD,” and new faculty are hired “for being reflective practitioners, committed to continuous improvement and changes in practice...[and with] a high interest in collaboration.”

### **Finding More Time for Student Learning**

In addition to all the innovations in instruction detailed thus far, Lexington also launched major, new programming for students outside of the classroom. The purpose to all of these programs was to find more time for students to learn. “Most things proposed involved time,” one administrator says. “We saw that to make any inroads, you need to increase time either in the day or in the year for students that need to be caught up.”

### *Elementary School Interventions*

Extra time initiatives spanned all grade levels but were most intense at the K-5 level, reflecting the district’s strategy to close gaps early on. **Full-day kindergarten** had been in the works for some time and “has made a big difference,” teachers say, because the district can now begin RTI for math and literacy in kindergarten instead of first grade. The district also started a **Jumpstart summer school** for all incoming METCO elementary students, with an academic curriculum run by district employees.

Elementary schools have also carved out extra time during the school day for math and literacy instruction. Students who have been identified by the data teams for RTI attend **intervention blocks** where they work intensively with teachers and coaches on literacy and math. Students can receive extra literacy instruction for up to two hours daily, and math instruction for up to one hour. “Every grade has intervention blocks at a different time, so we can use resources like literacy specialists in all of them,” one administrator says. Performance data and supports received by each student are systematically recorded and tracked, often using technology-based tools to work collaboratively and streamline the process. For example, several schools use Google Drive to share meeting notes and document supports and student performance over time. “If a child doesn’t respond to interventions and is referred for a possible learning disability diagnosis, we have a record of everything already tried, and we can say *We haven’t done enough yet* or *Okay, let’s move forward with the referral.*”

Equally successful is the **METCO After-School Extended Learning Program (MELP)**. Developed in response to the LaMura report and suggested by a METCO parent, MELP provides struggling students with 20 after school sessions divided between the fall and spring. On selected Thursday afternoons, when school gets out at noon, students are bused to the district’s central office after lunch to work with literacy and math teachers for one hour each. Licensed Lexington teachers and specialists participate in MELP on a paid and volunteer basis because they are passionate about closing the achievement gap.

MELP has evolved considerably since its inauguration. “It’s an amazing difference between when it started and now,” one teacher says. “At first we had good intentions but not an ideal structure or physical space, and not enough staff to provide everything.” Sessions were not scheduled for consecutive weeks, leaving multi-week-long gaps between meetings. “It made it impossible to follow up on student learning.” MELP staff were mostly specialists, not classroom

teachers, and there was not close alignment between MELP activities and the school curriculum. The district has since consolidated the schedule and facilitates to promote closer collaboration between students' classroom teachers and MELP tutors. Morale among MELP staff is high because "kids really enjoy it and get a lot out of it." METCO parents also believe the program has been helpful. One parent credits it with turning her very active child into an avid reader after years of trouble sitting and focusing to read a book.

### *Middle School Interventions*

Twenty-six (63%) of the 41 middle school METCO students filled out an online open response survey. Students were asked to share what they liked most about their school, teachers, classes, and other students. They were also asked if they participate in extra-curricular activities at school, which programs or people have really helped them academically, and whether they were personally affected by the cancellation of the late bus this year.

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*"I like how it is like a family.  
It is very open and everyone  
helps one another"*

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Most (77%) of the students who responded started in kindergarten or first grade. Over half (54%) participate in extra-curricular school activities. Almost all (92%) described other students as "nice", "friendly", "accepting", "diverse", "helpful", or "kind" suggesting a positive peer environment for most METCO middle school students who responded. Teachers were mentioned most often in response to the question, "What do you like the most about your school?" and "helpful" and "nice" were what most students said they liked most about their teachers.

The most popular academic program for METCO middle school students is the **extended day** or homework club. Both middle schools have extended days four times a week for METCO students, from 3:00 to 4:00. Unlike MELP, which targets struggling students, extended day is open to all METCO students. "It's not strictly mandatory, but de facto," an administrator says, since the METCO bus does not leave until 4:00. Stipended teachers in ELA, social studies and math staff the program, helping students start their homework and use computers.

"The vision was to give them access to more teachers and allow them to get extra help," says one administrator. Before Clarke Middle School started extended days, most teachers would arrive early to be available to students for extra help before school started. Because the METCO bus does not arrive until 7:30 or 7:45 in the morning, METCO students are not able to

take advantage of this routine. Extended day is a partial solution to this problem, but tacking on an extra hour of learning after school makes for a long day. “I feel bad for the kids,” one administrator says.

In fact, METCO middle schoolers are extremely positive about the program. In the METCO student survey, it was by far the most popular program for providing academic support. “The after school program helps me mentally,” one student says, “in that I complete difficult homework at school. It also helps my grades.” Students also mentioned being helped academically by their teachers and study halls.

**Mathpath summer school** is a more recent addition to the middle school arsenal. Starting in 2010, Lexington has run an intensive math camp for METCO students in the sixth and seventh grades. “It makes a difference because it is three concentrated weeks in July,” an administrator says. “It is essentially math immersion,” and it also offers METCO students an opportunity to build relationships with each other and strengthen the bonds of their cohort.

### *High School Interventions*

Forty-seven (55%) of the 85 high school METCO students also filled out the student survey. Most (68%) of the students who responded started in first grade. Over half (64%) participate in extra-curricular school activities. Teachers, academic rigor, diversity, and freedom were mentioned most often in response to the question, “What do you like the most about your school?” and

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*“What I like most about my teachers is their availability when I need them and their willingness to help me succeed.”*

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“helpful” and “caring” were what most students said they liked most about their teachers. Most (87%) described other students as “nice”, “friendly”, “accepting”, or “diverse” indicating a positive peer environment for most METCO students who responded at the high school as well. Most students (68%) reported that their regular teachers or METCO’s academic support teacher at LHS, Gretchen Segars, had really helped them academically.

Lexington’s middle and high schools share several program concepts. The high school holds a summer school to acclimate incoming METCO freshmen to the LHS student expectations and to seed relationships between teachers and students. During the school year, a LHS tutoring program is staffed by more than 100 student volunteers who keep the program open for drop-ins seven blocks a day. METCO also runs a **learning center** that offers academic (all grades, all subjects) support all day long for drop-in or referred students, overseen by Ms.

Segars. Another popular program is a **homework club** for METCO students twice a week, also run by Segars. The homework club has existed for several years, although its focus has shifted, sometimes focusing more on academic performance and other times on executive functioning and self-efficacy.

Many students cite their time with Segars as a key factor in their academic success. “She is really helpful, and she does her best to keep everyone on top of their grades,” reports one high school student. She is also a safe figure from whom METCO students can seek help.

“Academic support with Ms. Segars is the only thing that I am comfortable with,” another student says. An LHS administrator acknowledges that the school is still figuring out how to encourage help-seeking behavior among METCO students. “We rely a lot at the high school level on kids coming in for extra help, so when they’re not willing or able to do that, what’s our response?”

One way LHS has worked to develop a stronger academic mindset among METCO students is the **African American and Latino (AAL) Scholars Program**. Developed by William Cole and based on a program from Shaker Heights, Ohio, the Scholars program is composed of high-performing African American and Latino students in tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades. This program was originally limited to METCO students, but as Lexington has grown more diverse it has expanded to include Lexington residents as well. “Each faculty member takes four or five students and is primary adviser to them,” an administrator says. “Students get a lot of support, and support each other, too.” AAL Scholars attend weekly meetings where they participate in workshops and round-tables, sometimes with outside guests. The program also runs one day-long workshop each year and gave a presentation to Lexington staff last year. LHS also arranges for Scholars to visit students in lower grades, “to meet with students of color there and talk about applying to college or whatever they’re going through, giving children connections with those who had similar experiences and have been successful.”

Like so many programs, the AAL Scholars program stumbled before finding its footing. “At first the best scholars we had still had low GPAs, and we couldn’t put anyone on a pedestal,” one former teacher remembers. “So much of this is perception. If we can help METCO kids become academic stars, that changes the whole ball game for students of color.” Responsibly managing the reputation of the program was difficult for students and teachers alike in early years. “We’d have tough moments in a room hashing it out, with me saying *You can’t do that*,

*you're reflecting on others. As a staff, we got in each other's faces plenty of times wondering, Are we doing the right thing? Are we moving forward fast enough?"*

The AAL Scholars program has become more stable as its composition has changed to include more high-achieving METCO and Lexington students. But the question of how fast to move remains. Finding more time in the day for learning has taken its toll, on students especially. The homework load can feel overwhelming, and the commute to school is grueling. "They get up as early as 4 and 5:30 to be at the bus stop by 6:30 AM," one parent says. "It is a very long bus ride—the late bus makes it a long day." With so many academic and extra-curricular opportunities, "the challenge is balancing time between exhaustion and participation."

## 5. Developing Cultural Competence

As Lexington's intensive focus on instruction has begun to show results, the district continues to explore the best ways to develop more cultural competence. "There's some urgency," one administrator says, since several Lexington schools now have a majority of minority students. Indeed, many METCO students at LHS say one of their favorite things about the school is its diversity. While the district is committed to working towards more diverse leadership and faculty, cultural competence recruiting efforts are presently in different stages at different schools.

### Recruiting Administrators and Teachers

A diverse faculty is critical to developing cultural competence, but thus far Lexington has had uneven success recruiting diverse candidates. Some people believe that the problem is that "there is not always a plethora of diverse candidates" and that people of color are not choosing to apply for positions in Lexington. (In general, recruitment in Lexington suffers because few teachers can afford to live in the community.)

Bowman Elementary School has made great strides in hiring people of color: 30 percent of Bowman's classroom teachers are nonwhite. One quarter of its classroom teachers are male. But there is not a shared understanding in the district about Bowman's recruitment practices. Some people working in other schools believe that Mary Anton, the Bowman principal, has recruited more diverse teachers because she "maybe has a better network from which to recruit."

Anton, who is a Latina, has not found it difficult to recruit highly qualified people of color for her staff, not just because of her network, but because her hiring requirements are different from the rest of the district's. While many candidates apply to Lexington with 3-5 years of experience and it can be helpful to hire teachers with a master's degree, Anton knows that there is great benefit in hiring smart, ambitious beginning teachers and providing them with strong training. This helps in recruitment of teachers because often the best candidates (white and non-white) will not be looking to move once they have made a commitment to a district. Although some less experienced teachers might need more training when they enter her school, Lexington's professional development apparatus is more than equal to the task.

## Training Administrators and Teachers

Cultural competence is a major category in Lexington’s professional learning program. In the past, Lexington teachers used to participate in EMI (now IDEAS) cultural proficiency trainings, which many found helpful, but Ash cancelled the program because there was no hard evidence that it was reducing achievement gaps. Barbara Nobles and Cheryl Crowder, METCO Elementary Social Worker, now teach an in-district training called “Cultural Aspects in Education.” They also conduct workshops for schools on request. The most recent Lexington Learns day featured the issue in two workshops: “Color Blind, Color Brave,” by METCO, and “Asian Youth and Their Well-Being,” by a high school guidance counselor who is Asian.

At Bowman, Anton and her staff have been working on cultural competence in a focused way for three years. Bowman teachers are heavily represented in district courses. Within the school, training is anchored around the concept of a growth mindset, and teachers lead and participate in workshops and collective book reads about expectations and “difficult conversations.” They provide their own PD tailored to their needs. As an example, one school administrator described how they were expanding trainings to include beliefs about math, mindsets, and gender.

A new thrust of the Bowman curriculum is exposing teachers to different cultural codes of communication from different communities of color. This enables teachers to be more aware of ways in which their meanings can be miscommunicated. “*Will you come over here to talk with me* to a white teacher and child may have a different meaning than for a Latino or black student,” an administrator explains. “In the first case, it might be interpreted as *You need to come here so I can talk to you*, which is not a choice. In the second, it might be interpreted as a choice. A teacher who can adapt his or her language is mastering code-switching, which is what culture minority children have to learn how to do.”

## Engaging Parents

Cultural competence extends to how schools interact with parents. Parents report that METCO Lexington is a very positive experience with high academic support and parent-friendly faculty, but they are aware of the cultural gap. Their children share awkward or embarrassing moments such as when students or teachers look to a METCO student to comment on a topic like slavery or when another student uses a racial insult.

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*“Lexington is great. The teachers are willing to stay after school to help students.”*

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Parents and teachers both want to improve communication. Many non-resident and resident parents from different backgrounds may not feel comfortable talking to faculty and staff about their children. Lexington teachers are not accustomed to having to proactively reach out to parents (echoing LHS's experiences with students' help-seeking behavior). "It shouldn't be just when something is wrong," one parent says. On the district end, teachers and administrators agree that they need to tailor their communication style. "School outreach has to be different, more personal," an administrator says. "You make phone calls." METCO staff can bridge the relationship, and parents are pleased with METCO's engagement work under Barbara Nobles. Many teachers and administrators feel that METCO has made it easier for them to engage parents.

There has been some progress on this front. Parents report that a single, central location for information like the Portal has helped, as well as METCO workshops on ways to engage with teachers and school staff. But cultural competence is a work in progress on both ends. "We're never going to be competent," one administrator says. "It's a journey. It's about giving people permission to say that I might not get this, helping people understand that they do have bias and it does impact their students. It's about awareness. We can talk about this and we can grow."

## Conclusion

Students, parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, and the community at large have embraced enormous changes since Paul Ash first saw the METCO SPED numbers. Teachers, administrators, and students have assimilated many of these changes into standard practice, but as a principal says, “It’s a journey.” In the years to come, leaders in Lexington will continue to refine their programs and hunt for promising new ideas. As Lexington’s quest to achieve both excellence and equity evolves in coming years, the following commitments seem worth keeping.

- Continue to:
  - Support teacher collaboration and professional development from the highest level of official authority in the district.
  - Expand and protect integrated, whole-district professional learning for all adults, not only teachers.
  - Protect extended learning time in elementary schools.
  - Design and implement an expanded array of supplemental supports for middle and high school students, offering an array of intervention strategies before, during, and after the school day, serving whatever students may need them.
  - Use school data teams to monitor student performance and identify students not meeting learning expectations. Stay committed to the design and delivery of classroom interventions for students who need them.
  - Build capacity for culturally competent communication among administrators, teachers, students, and parents.
- Work to diversify district leadership and faculty. Take up recruitment as an improvement priority, the way collaborative teaching has been a priority. Learn systematically from what is working inside the district and study successes in other places.
- Explore why improvements have been larger and more stable at some times, and in some subjects, more than in others. Consider whether there is balance in support across subjects. For example, literacy seems to be a higher priority at elementary level (e.g., students can get twice as much literacy help during intervention blocks as

math help). How can supports in all subjects be tracked and monitored and, if necessary, strengthened?

- While racial proficiency gaps in Lexington have been dramatically narrowed—even closed in some instances—there remain large racial gaps at the advanced level. Hence, the work is not done.

As we complete this report, we are aware that Superintendent Ash is departing and that new leadership will soon be in place. There is much in Lexington to build upon and much still remaining to do. We wish Paul Ash, the new superintendent, and the Lexington School Community the greatest success as this new phase begins.

## Appendices

References

The Research Team

List of Interviews

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## The Research Team

### Ronald Ferguson

Ronald Ferguson's teaching, consulting, and research over more than three decades have focused on reducing economic and educational disparities. He is the faculty co-chair and director of the Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI) at Harvard University and has also served as the faculty co-director of the Pathways to Prosperity Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Outside of Harvard, Ferguson participates in a variety of research and policy advisory roles. These have included committees at the National Research Council, the U.S. Department of Education, national civic and philanthropic institutions, and advising many states and localities. He is the creator of the Tripod Project for School Improvement and, most recently, co-founder of Tripod Education Partners, Inc. After 31 years on the full-time faculty at Harvard, he transitioned into an adjunct role beginning in the fall of 2014, while remaining a Research Fellow at the Kennedy School's Malcolm Wiener Center for Social Policy. Ferguson earned an undergraduate degree from Cornell University and PhD from MIT, both in economics.

### Ann Ballantine

Ann has over thirty years of experience in consulting and management roles including finance, strategic planning, research, communications, and technology. Since 2006, she has managed and contributed to diverse AGI projects including conferences, reports, website, and communications. She holds an MBA in finance from New York University's Stern School, an MA in Social Sciences from the University of Chicago, and a BA cum laude in History from Boston University.

### Rachel Bradshaw

Rachel recently completed doctoral coursework in education leadership and policy at Boston University, where she also earned Massachusetts licensure as a high school principal. Before returning to graduate school, she taught English, humanities, and debate classes and served as an after-school debate coach in Boston Public Schools. Rachel holds an undergraduate degree in English from Yale and a master's degree in teaching and curriculum from Harvard.

### Charlotte Krontiris

Charlotte is a researcher and writer working on topics in education, politics, and business in the US. She has conducted research for Google, Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Business School, and her writing has appeared in the Harvard Business Review and the Hypocrite Reader. Charlotte holds an AB and AM from the University of Chicago.

## List of Interviews

<b>Interview</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>Last Name</b>	<b>Current Position</b>	<b>Role (s)</b>
Phone	Berenice	Albino	Parent	Served on the PTO Board, METCO Executive Parent Board
In person	Mary	Anton	Bowman Principal	LLC, implementation
In person	Adrenna	Antreasian	Superintendent	Coordinated the Freshmen Achievers Program during
In person	Paul	Ash		AGTF
Phone	Mary	Barry	Department Head Diamond Teacher	
Phone	William	Cole	LHS Faculty	AGTF, EEC
Phone	Meg	Colella	Bridge Principal	EEC, MELP
Phone	Sheryl	Crawford	Parent	METCO Executive Parent Board Co- Chair 2010-2014
In person	Cheryl	Crowder	Elementary Social Worker	Staff METCO
Phone	Eddie	Davey	Clarke Teacher	EEC, Montgomery County Visit
Phone	Dane	Despres	Middle School Department Head	Montgomery County Visit
In Person	Robyn	Dowling Grant	ELL Coordinator	LLC, MLC
Phone	LaDawn	Dubose	Parent	AGTF, EEC, METCO
In Person	Sharon	FitzGerald	K-5 Math Specialist Bowman	AGTF
Skype	Steven	Flynn	Fromer Clarke Middle School Principal	AGTF Co-Chair, EEC, Implementation, Established the
Phone	Gail	Grimes	K-5 Math Specialist Hastings	EEC, Montgomery County Visit
In person	Joanne	Hennessy	Retired	2009 PD Committee (PDC) Chair
Phone	William	Huff	Parent	AGTF, EEC, METCO Parent Mentor
Phone	Kevin	Kelly	Head Math Dept LHS	Math
In Person	Vito A.	LaMura	Retired	former Diamond Middle School teacher, and Lexington Education Association President, Author
Phone	Laura	Lasa	LHS Principal	Montgomery County Visit
Phone	Louise	Lipsitz	Hastings Principal	Implementation
Phone	Thomas	Martellone	Fiske Principal	
Phone	Kathleen	Martin	Harrington Teacher	EEC
Phone	Kathleen	McCarthy	K-5 Literacy Department Head	AGTF, EEC, Curriculum, LLC, Implementation,
In person	Elaine	Mead	Harrington School Principal	AGTF, Implementation
In person	Anna	Monaco	Clarke Middle School Principal	AGTF, EEC

<b>Interview</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>Last Name</b>	<b>Current Position</b>	<b>Role (s)</b>
In person	Phyllis	Neufeld	LEA President	
In person	Barbara	Nobles	K-12 METCO Academic Director	AGTF, EEC, Montgomery County Visit METCO
In person	Carol	Pilarski	Assistant Superintendent	COA, PDC, Full Day K implementation (2009)
In person	Jesse	Richardson	Estabrook Teacher	EEC, Montgomery County Visit
In person	Gretchen	Segars	METCO staff	LHS Academic Support Teacher, students learning style,
Phone	Gary	Simon	retired LHS Faculty	Former the Math Dept. Chair
In person	Len	Swanton	Head of Professional Development	EEC, former Bowman teacher
Phone	June	Tabb	Parent	METCO Parent Education Program
Phone	Sandra	Trach	Estabrook principal	EEC, Implementation
Phone	Karen	Tripoli	K-5 Mathematics Department Head	Curriculum, MLC, Implementation, Kindergarten Task
Phone	Amanda	Turkanis	Fiske Teacher	EEC
Phone	Jennifer	Wolcott	LHS Faculty	AGTF
Phone	Kari	Zbikowski	Fiske Faculty	Montgomery County Visit