



Students at Southeastern Regional Vocational Technical School in South Easton. (Courtesy photo)

EDUCATION / OPINION

Vocational and exam school admission changes a good start

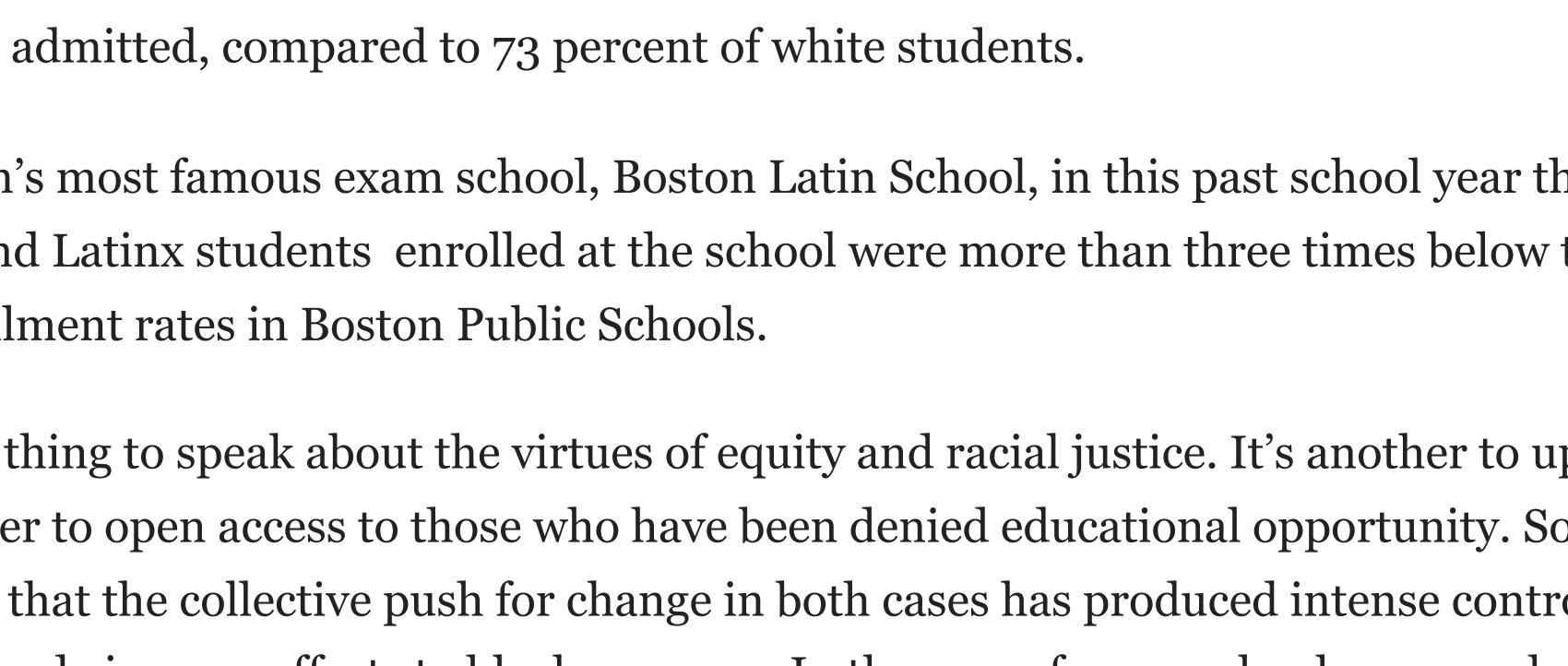
Let's continue the effort to reduce the role of high-stakes testing in schools

LISA GUISBOND and DAN FRENCH Jul 30, 2021

SHARE

THIS YEAR, two broad-based coalitions worked to successfully push for new admissions policies in Massachusetts vocational schools and Boston's three public "exam schools." In both cases, the goal was to remove unnecessary barriers to access that disproportionately affect students of color, low-income students, English learners and students with learning disabilities.

And in both cases, there is much more to be done.



For both vocational and exam schools, the data are striking. They show huge disparities in acceptance rates between more privileged students and students who have been historically marginalized. A state analysis showed vocational-technical schools admitted just half of English learners who applied, but 70 percent of fluent English speakers. Just 60 percent of applicants of color were admitted, compared to 73 percent of white students.

For Boston's most famous exam school, Boston Latin School, in this past school year the percentages of Black and Latinx students enrolled at the school were more than three times below their district-wide enrollment rates in Boston Public Schools.

It's one thing to speak about the virtues of equity and racial justice. It's another to upset the status quo in order to open access to those who have been denied educational opportunity. So it's not surprising that the collective push for change in both cases has produced intense controversy, acrimony and vigorous efforts to block progress. In the case of exam schools, some who pushed back most strenuously expressed the view that test scores are the only "objective" way to determine merit. Relying on that premise, they argued that the recommended changes would lead to a watering down or lowering of standards.

Our state's (and nation's) decades of experience with high-stakes testing, however, has made it crystal clear that test scores are much better at measuring family wealth and privilege than academic achievement.

Tests can be useful to gather information, or take a snapshot, of certain kinds of student learning. But the evidence is clear that when test results are used to make high-stakes decisions – such as admission to selective high schools or colleges or to determine who graduates from high school – they become a punishing barrier to opportunity that disproportionately affects talented students of color, low-income students, English learners and students with disabilities.

A common thread in both the vocational school admissions regulations and "exam school" changes was a recognition that increasing access, opportunity and diversity could be achieved by decreasing the emphasis on test scores in high-stakes decisions.

In vocational schools, for example, the onset of using MCAS as a high stakes graduation test resulted in vocational schools successfully pressuring the state board of education to approve selective admissions regulations that resulted in vocational schools excluding many worthy students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities. The Vocational Education Justice Coalition and a group of nearly two dozen mayors argued that this state policy resulted in a sharp increase in enrollment of white, middle class students who use vocational schools as a stepping stone to four-year colleges and a loss of opportunity for historically marginalized students to obtain well-paying jobs in the trades.

High-stakes testing is promoted as a way to help Black and brown children, but these are clear cases – among many – in which high-stakes testing hurt the prospects of thousands of Black and brown children who could otherwise have started successful and productive careers.

We are hopeful that the newly won changes in exam and vocational school admissions will result in reducing intentional barriers to equitable enrollment and open the doors of opportunity for many talented students.

The state board of education voted in June to change vocational admissions regulations so they now require vocational schools to create admissions policies which lead to more equitable representation of students from protected classes, while banning the inclusion of minor disciplinary offenses (that do not result in suspension) and excused absences.

The Vocational Education Justice Coalition favored a lottery admissions process as the most equitable approach, but still saw this change as a step in the right direction. Unfortunately, the Department of Education's failure to ban admissions policies that exclude students from protected classes from applying to and being accepted to vocational schools means it will be essential to keep a close watch on how the new state policy is carried out.

In July, the Boston School Committee voted unanimously to adopt the recommendations of an Exam School Task Force. The result is that seats at the three "exam" schools will be divided among eight socioeconomic "tiers" in which students will be ranked by a combination of grades and test scores. Thus, students will compete with others of roughly comparable socioeconomic circumstances, so that children living in poverty aren't competing against students with access to pricey tutoring and other advantages. As with the vocational school decision, this is far from ideal in terms of equitable access for all Boston students – a lottery would be better – but it is a step toward equity.

Citizens for Public Schools is elated to see progress on both fronts. We'll be monitoring the impact of the changes with our coalition partners and continuing to push for more progress in these areas.

More broadly, we believe a logical next step is to take down the barriers to equity and opportunity created by the state's high-stakes MCAS-based assessment and accountability system. Two bills would help move in that direction, including Joint Education Committee co-chair Sen. Jason Lewis's bill to form a commission to reimagine our state's school assessment and accountability system. Another bill, sponsored by state Sen. Jo Comerford, would eliminate the high-stakes nature of the MCAS and promote alternative assessment methods.

Everyone, it seems, wants to reimagine education these days. A good place to start is to reassess assessment.

Lisa Guisbond is executive director and **Dan French** is president of the board of directors of Citizens for Public Schools.

SHARE

Meet the Author

Lisa Guisbond

FairTest, National Center for Fair & Open Testing

Bio » Latest Stories »

Meet the Author

Dan French

President, Citizens for Public Schools

Bio » Latest Stories »

SHARE

SHARE</p