

# A Broken Mirror: Exam School Admissions Fail to Reflect Boston's Diversity

*Boston's exam schools collectively do not reflect the diversity of our city, especially Boston Latin School, whose disparities are both large and persistent.*

**Admissions data from this Spring show that the troubling trend of under-enrollment of African Americans and Latinos continues in Boston's exam schools, particularly at Boston Latin School (BLS).** Despite slight increases in incoming classes, the percentages of Black and Latino 6th and 8th graders invited to BLS for next school year are **more than two-and-a-half times below** their district-wide enrollment rates in Boston Public Schools (BPS). Schoolwide, African American enrollment at BLS is at its lowest rate since desegregation, and BLS' Latino enrollment rate remains what it was in the 1990s, despite a doubling in Latinos' application rate since then.<sup>1</sup>

While both of Boston's other exam schools, Boston Latin Academy and the O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science, enroll more Black and Latino students, no exam school enrolls Latino students, and only one exam schools enrolls Black students, at a rate proportionate to the district.

**Exam school invitations show disparities in race and class by our neighborhoods and public schools.** Majority White neighborhoods all have exam school admission rates above 50%, while majority Black neighborhoods and majority Latino neighborhoods all have admission rates below 50%. Grove Hall and Roxbury, two neighborhoods in which a third of all residents live below the poverty line, have exam school admission rates below 40%. Similarly, every majority White BPS school has an exam school admission rate greater than 50%.

**Private school students have far better odds of exam school admission, especially at BLS.** Half the private school students who applied to exam schools got into BLS – more than twice the rate of BPS students.

**Exam school admission is determined by only two factors: students' grades and an entrance exam. Neither factor reliably or fairly measures the knowledge or capacity of the students. Neither guarantees readiness for exam school rigor or success.** There is tremendous grading variation between and among Boston's district, charter, and private schools. While Boston reinvigorated its Exam School Initiative to provide free test preparation for more residents this year, it has yet to yield significant improvements in racial diversity. Meanwhile, many families with means continue to pay for expensive test preparation programs with high success rates.

**Boston worked to value diversity in admissions before, and it can do so again.** Boston previously succeeded in encouraging racial diversity in exam schools. While these efforts were undone by a lawsuit 20 years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court has since made clear how schools can value racial, geographic, and socioeconomic diversity in structuring admissions policies. Boston's future is brightest when our next leaders from across the city can learn with and from each other.

**This is a call for citywide review of our exam school admissions policy and ways we can value Boston's race, class, and neighborhood diversity in admissions.**

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Ebbert, *At Boston Latin, Little Outreach to City's Black, Latino Students*, Boston Globe (Apr. 23, 2016).



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# Introduction

Boston's exam schools, the top schools in our city, have long been held out as the merit-based means of upward mobility for the children of Boston's working class families. In the wake of a federal civil rights violation at Boston Latin School (BLS) last year, many questioned when and how Boston's exam schools, particularly BLS, came to look so different from the rest of Boston Public Schools (BPS) in terms of the students they serve. Our organizations requested data on the incoming classes to Boston's exam schools from BPS. This paper reviews the admissions data by race, class, neighborhood, and school type, comparing it to prior years' enrollment<sup>2</sup> as well as U.S. Census data.<sup>3</sup> *As a city, it is time to consider how we can better value and evaluate our students for admission to our top schools.*

## BY RACE:

**The percentages of Black and Latino 7th and 9th graders invited to Boston Latin School (BLS) for next school year are more than two-and-a-half times below their district-wide enrollment rates in Boston Public Schools (BPS).**

- Black students comprise 11% of BLS invitees for next year. This is a slightly higher percentage of Black students than in the BLS student body for this (8%) or last school year (8.5%). Black students comprise 31.8% of current, district-wide BPS enrollment.
- Latino students comprise 16% of BLS invitees for next year. This is a slightly higher percentage of Latino students than in the BLS student body for this (12%) or last school year (11.6%). Latino students comprise 41.8% of current, district-wide BPS enrollment.
- White students comprise 43% of BLS invitees for next year. This is a slightly lower percentage of White students than in the BLS student body for this (46.9%) or last school year (47.4%). White students comprise 14.2% of current, district-wide BPS enrollment.
- Asian students comprise 26% of BLS invitees for next year. This is a lower percentage of Asian students than in the BLS student body for this (29%) or last school year (29%). Asian students comprise 8.8% of current, district-wide BPS enrollment.

**While both of Boston's other exam schools, Boston Latin Academy and the John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science, enroll more Black and Latino students, no exam school enrolls Latinos at a rate proportionate to their district-wide enrollment.**

- Boston Latin Academy's (BLA) incoming students are more reflective of the racial diversity of BPS than BLS' incoming students are. Of BLA's incoming students, 23% are Black, 26% are Latino, 31% are White, and 17% are Asian.
- The O'Bryant School of Mathematics & Science is most reflective of BPS' racial diversity. Of the O'Bryant's incoming students, 35% are Black, 35% are Latino, 13% are White, and 15% are Asian.
- No exam school enrolls Latino students at a rate proportional to their enrollment in BPS (41.8%).
- Only the O'Bryant enrolls Black students at a rate proportional to their BPS enrollment (31.8%).

<sup>2</sup> Mass. Dep't. of Educ., 2016-17 Enrollment By Race Gender Report (2017), at [http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state\\_report/enrollmentbyracegender.aspx](http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/enrollmentbyracegender.aspx)

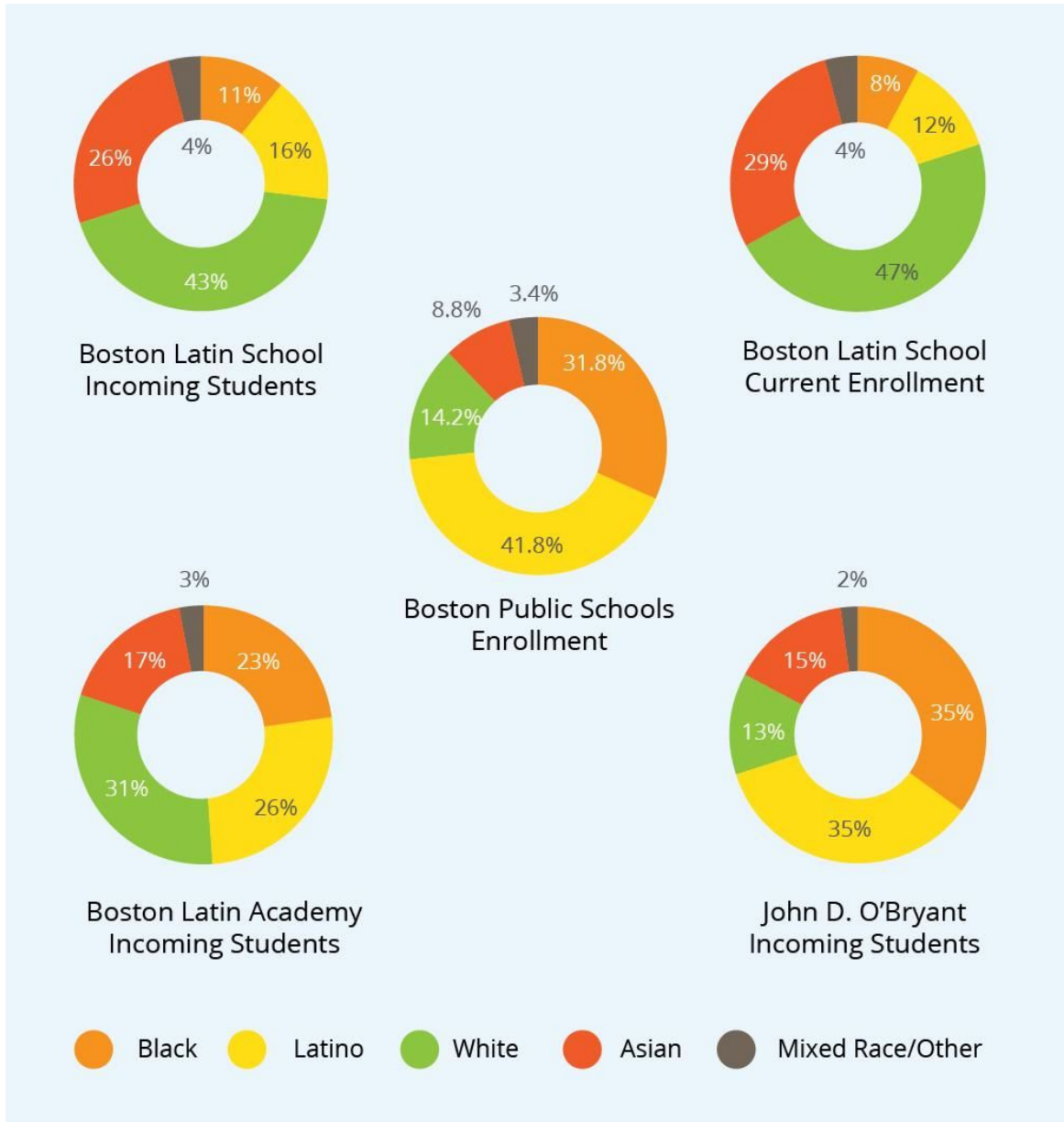
<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey (2017), at [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml)



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# Comparing Exam School and District Demographics



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## BY NEIGHBORHOOD:

Majority White neighborhoods all have exam school admission rates above 50%.<sup>4</sup>

Neighborhood	Zip Code	Percentage White	Exam School Admission Rate
North End	02113	91%	> 67%
Fort Point	02210	89%	100%
Inner Harbor	02109	86%	100%
Prudential	02199	85%	100%
Beacon Hill	02108	84%	100%
West Roxbury	02132	79%	74%
South Boston	02127	78%	55%
Back Bay	02116	71%	80%
Charlestown	02129	70%	67%
Brighton	02135	67%	67%
Fenway	02115	62%	55%
Jamaica Plain	02130	57%	72%
Allston	02134	57%	64%

Majority Black neighborhoods and majority Latino neighborhoods all have admission rates below 50%.

Neighborhood	Zip Code	Percentage Black or Latino	Exam School Admission Rate
Mattapan	02126	77% Black	40%
Grove Hall	02101	65% Black	37%
Codman Square	02124	58% Black	49%
Roxbury	02119	55% Black	39%
East Boston	02128	58% Latino	47%

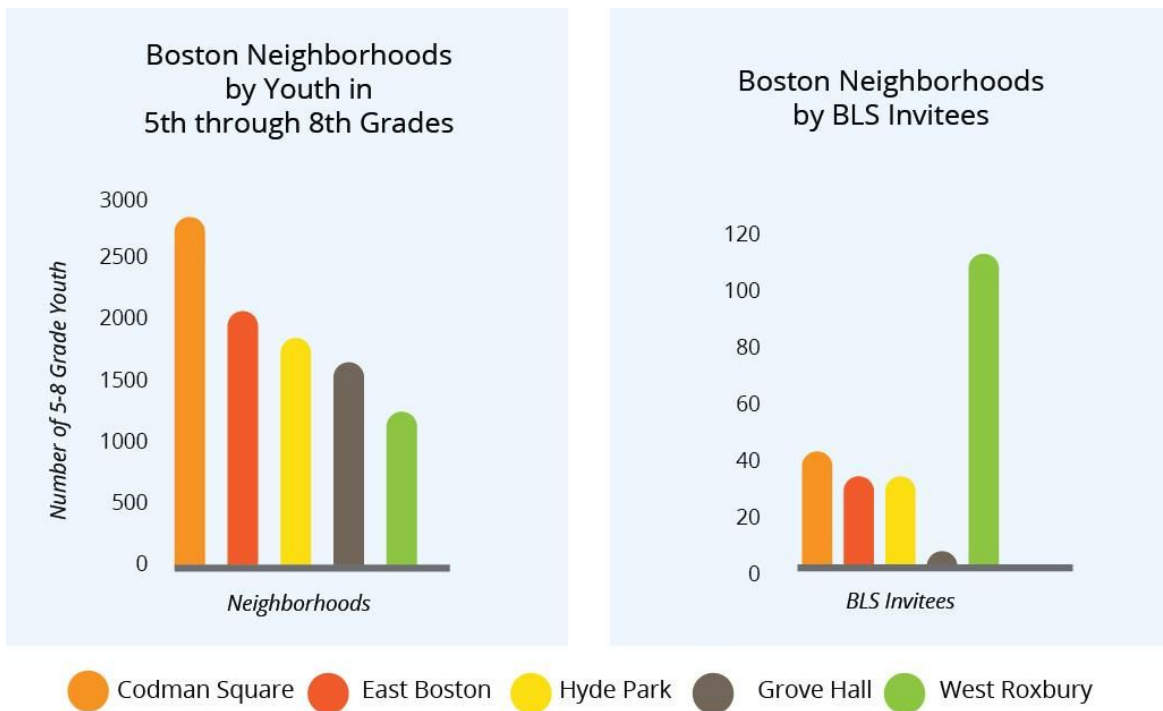
Grove Hall and Roxbury, two neighborhoods in which a third of all residents live below the poverty line, have exam school admission rates below 40%. These two neighborhoods, each with a sizeable number of school-age children, account for only 17 of Boston Latin School's 610 incoming students.

<sup>4</sup> Some majority White neighborhoods do not appear on this list as the number of exam school applicants was too small for Boston Public Schools to reveal without raising state or federal privacy concerns. Only some of the data groups for the North End were large enough for BPS to reveal, but one can infer from the data the lowest possible exam school admission rate for the neighborhood.



**Neighborhoods with the most middle school-age youth are under-enrolled in exam schools.**

Codman Square, Hyde Park, East Boston, and Grove Hall have six times more middle school-age youth than West Roxbury, yet invited students from West Roxbury comprise almost as many BLS seats (111) as students from these neighborhoods combined (113).



Codman Square, Hyde Park, and East Boston are home to twice the number of middle school age children as West Roxbury, Roslindale, and Jamaica Plain, yet more students were invited to exam schools from the latter three neighborhoods (489) than the others (460).

**These under-enrollment rates are not necessarily for lack of applications.** The three Boston neighborhoods with the most middle school age children were also three with the most exam school applications this year: Codman Square (401), East Boston (264), and Hyde Park (264) - all higher than Roslindale (250), West Roxbury (232), and Jamaica Plain (140).



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## BY BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOL

Every majority White BPS school has an exam school admission rate greater than 50%. A majority of eligible (6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade) students applied, and a majority of applicants were accepted, to an exam school at each of the following schools. These schools each enroll a significantly smaller percentage of high needs students than the district average (74%).<sup>5</sup>

School	Percentage White	Percentage High Needs	Percentage Applied	Exam School Admission Rate
Eliot K-8	58%	39%	56%	74%
Kilmer K-8	55%	48%	79%	78%
Lyndon K-8	53%	55%	66%	52%
Perry K-8	59%	58%	67%	54%
Warren Prescott K-8	51%	54%	55%	59%

At the King K-8, which enrolls 85% high needs students, only one student was admitted to an exam school (the O'Bryant), and less than a quarter of the King's 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders applied to an exam school. By comparison, at the Kilmer K-8 School, three out of four eligible students applied for an exam school, and 58% of them were admitted to one.

## BY SCHOOL TYPE (BPS OR PRIVATE)

While current BPS students comprise a majority of invitees at each exam school, students applying from private schools have much better odds of being accepted to an exam school than their peers in BPS, especially at Boston Latin School.

Current BPS students account for roughly two-thirds of incoming students to Boston's exam schools, and they account for 60% of the incoming class at Boston Latin School.

52% of current BPS students who applied (1,160) were admitted (2,237) to an exam school. By comparison, 80% of private school students who applied (335) were admitted (269) to an exam school.

While not all BPS students who applied for exam school admission applied to Boston Latin School, only 22% of BPS students who applied for exam school admission got into Boston Latin School. However, half of the private school students who applied for exam school admission (335) were admitted to Boston Latin School (163).

<sup>5</sup> A student is considered high needs if she is economically disadvantaged, an English language learner, or a student with disabilities. Mass. Dep't. of Educ., 2016-17 Enrollment By Selected Populations Report (2017) at: <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/help/data.aspx?section=students#selectedpop>



# Constitutional Alternatives to Valuing Diversity in Exam School Admissions

**Exam school admission is determined by two factors: students' grades and an entrance exam. Neither factor reliably or fairly measures the knowledge or capacity of the students. Neither guarantees readiness for exam school rigor or success.** There is tremendous grading variation between and among Boston's district, charter, and private schools, and concern that some students outside BPS benefit from this variation. Moreover, Boston does not design its entrance exam around the content taught in its middle schools, practically necessitating that BPS students take a test preparation program for success. While Boston reinvigorated its Exam School Initiative to provide free test preparation for more residents this year, it has yet to yield significant improvements in diversity. Meanwhile, many families continue to pay for expensive test preparation programs with high success rates.

Reconsidering the factors that determine exam school admission need not "water down the rigor" of exam schools. Very few colleges to which exam school students apply use test scores and grades as the only criteria for admission; there is no reason our exam schools should be any different. An exam school degree is held in no more or less esteem today than when BPS valued racial diversity in admissions. All that has changed is the commitment to racial diversity.

**Boston worked to value diversity in admissions before, and it can do so again.** Boston previously succeeded in encouraging racial diversity in exam schools. While these efforts were undone by a lawsuit 20 years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court has since made clear how schools can value racial, geographic, and socioeconomic diversity in structuring admissions policies. Here are some examples that steps Boston could take based on those provided by the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education.<sup>6</sup> **If it helped to improve diversity, BPS could:**

- Guarantee a top percentage of each BPS school's students a seat at the school of their choice;
- Guarantee a top percentage of each zip code's students a seat at the school of their choice;
- Give greater weight to the applications of students based on socioeconomic status, whether they attend underperforming feeder schools, their parents' level of education, or the average income level of the neighborhood from which the student comes; or,
- Combine these ideas or others, in addition to using grades and exams towards admissions.

## Conclusion

Over the next few months, together with our partner organizations, we will be hosting a series of open forums to review these data, determine what questions about admissions we have as a city, and what alternatives hold the most promise to ensure that our future leaders of every race, neighborhood, and background have the opportunity to learn with and from each other at our top schools. We ask you to join us in this dialog. We further call upon BPS to immediately intensify its review of exam school admissions so that we can properly value racial diversity in the next class.

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Dep't. of Justice, U.S. Dep't. of Educ., *Guidance on the Voluntary Use of Race to Achieve Diversity and Avoid Racial Isolation in Elementary and Secondary Schools* (2011).



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