

Breaking down barriers since 1966.

Few programs can claim a history like METCO's.

The **Metropolitan Council of Educational Opportunity** is a coalition of local school districts, state government, and a non-profit organization...

Joining together voluntarily...

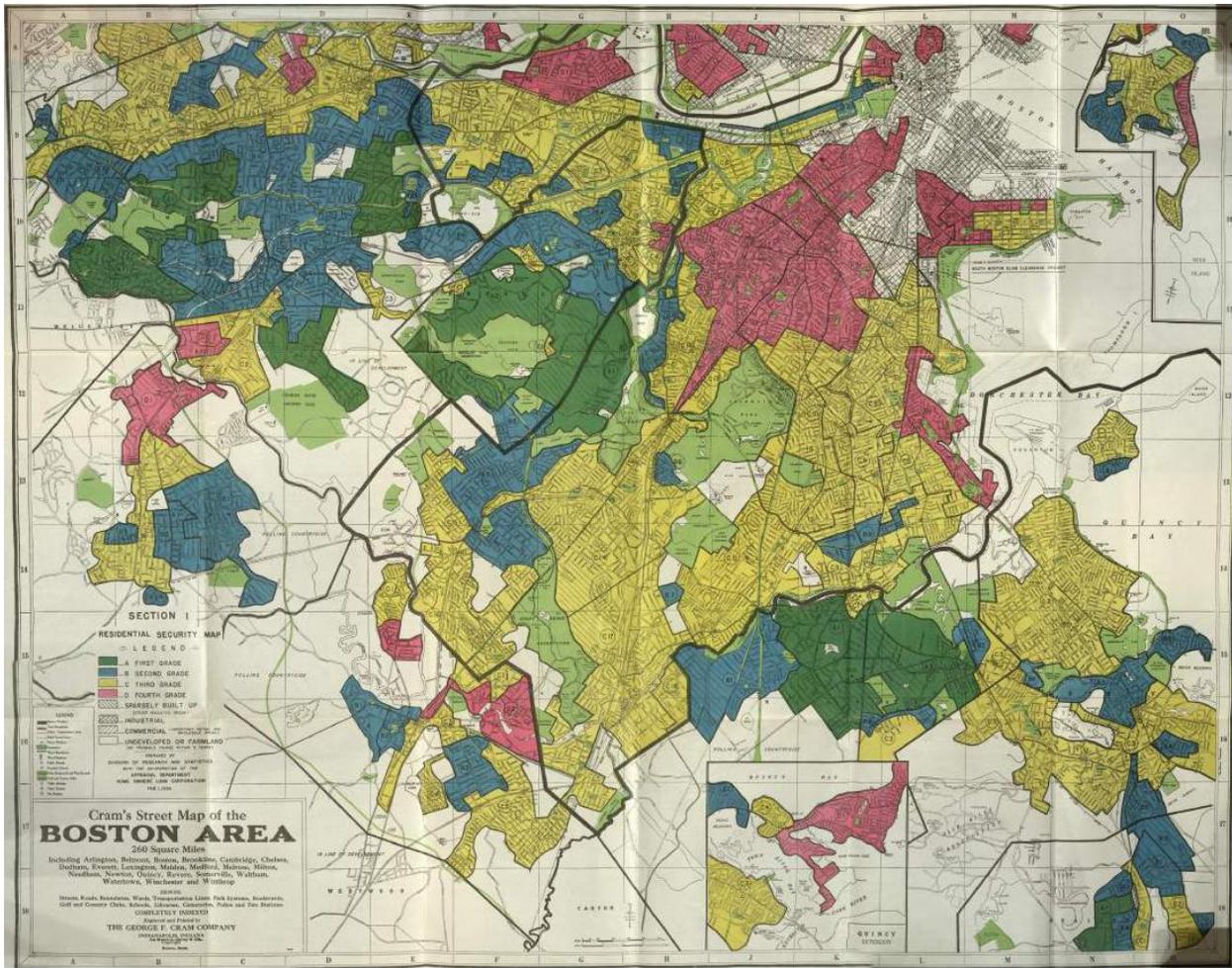
Founded by diverse parents through grass-roots organizing...

With a track record of transformative impact going back decades.

METCO's success is no accident. Generations of families, staff, and advocates have fought vigilantly, educated patiently, and persevered through countless struggles to get to this moment.

Today, we owe it to them—and to the people in Boston, suburban towns, and the state of Massachusetts who stand unified in support of METCO's daring vision—to study this legacy, and honor it with our actions.

We invite you to relive the courage, creativity, and dedication of the activists in this exhibit...and to imagine a future of METCO even more extraordinary than its past.



ABOVE: A 1938 map of the Boston area created by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, designating risk for mortgage lenders in different neighborhoods, with race among the criteria (as in, "Negro heavily concentrated north of Ruggles St. on the west side of Washington")

RIGHT: Detail of a deed for a lot on Great Plain Avenue on the line between Needham and Wellesley, signed in March 1925

shall not prevent the building or placing of a private garage on said premises to be used in connection with said dwelling. No flat roof building shall be erected or placed on said premises. The premises shall not be sold or leased to or occupied by any one of the black or negro race. The premises shall not be used for any mercantile or manufacturing or other

Why are schools segregated in the first place?

Inequality is not a question of accident or personal preference. School segregation exists because of **residential segregation**—which was built into the maps of American cities in the 1930s.

Through government policies, bank agreements, and real estate practices, the land in Boston was divided and labeled in order to separate African Americans and certain ethnic and religious groups into prescribed areas. The spaces where they funneled Black residents were shaded red on financing guides ("**redlining**"), labeled "Declining" or "Hazardous," and denied social services like sanitation, public safety, and economic development.

Meanwhile, white people were given favorable rates to buy homes in green zones, which would then receive the best city services, including public schools. Their property values would be inflated by claims of their exclusivity. This is how segregation allowed white families to build generational wealth at the expense of their neighbors of color.

These systems were unknown to most of the people living in the wealthier neighborhoods and suburbs. But residents of redlined Roxbury were outraged at the state their neighborhood had reached by the 1950s.



Children from the Boardman School in Roxbury walking along Monroe Street, c. 1960

“Separate but equal” schools were declared unconstitutional in 1954—but in Boston, they were a fact of life.



Comins Terrace (off Bower Street), Roxbury, c. 1960



Ruth Batson at the office of METCO, Inc. on Humboldt Ave.

When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on ***Brown vs. Board of Education***, the Black community in Roxbury had been organizing for equality for years. One community leader was **Ruth Batson**, a mother of three with a nursing degree from Boston University. She got involved when she began asking why her children’s schools didn’t have stocked libraries, gyms, or lunchrooms. She joined a federation of parents to get the mayor to improve schools, and was soon helping to set its agenda. Soon the Boston office of the NAACP invited her to chair their education committee. Politics suited her: she worked on Democratic campaigns, including John F. Kennedy’s, and was the first Black candidate for the Boston School Committee.

“When we fight about education, we’re fighting for our lives.

RUTH BATSON

“ The Boston schools are not *de facto* segregated or otherwise... Any child throughout our system will receive equal treatment.

LOUISE DAY HICKS
BOSTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE



Pickers protesting segregation in front of the Boston School Committee building, August 11, 1963

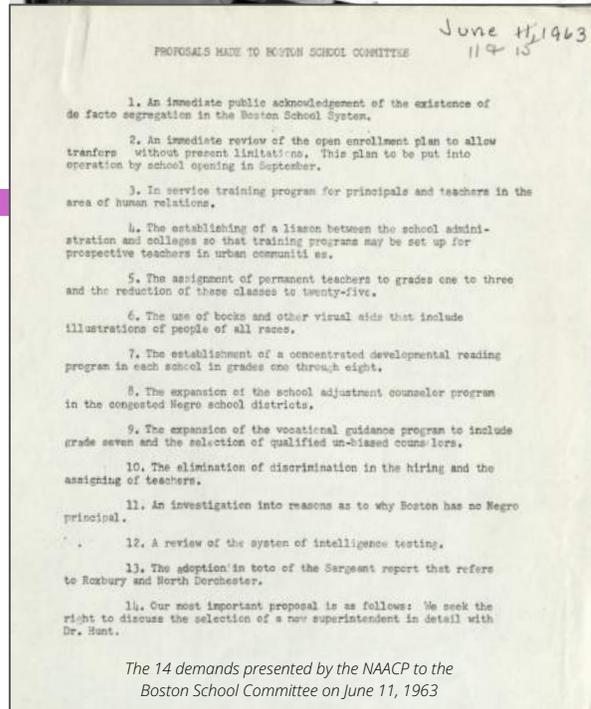


Ruth Batson and Paul Parks of the Boston Branch of the NAACP with Louise Day Hicks, chair of the Boston School Committee, June 17, 1963

1963

In the 1960s, the **Boston School Committee** was a stubborn opponent to Black community activists.

In the face of growing protest, the elected group chaired by **Louise Day Hicks** denied that Boston Public Schools were segregated at all. On June 14, 1963, Ruth Batson testified before the Committee as the chair of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination. Batson and other experts shared research and examples showing stark disparities between schools attended exclusively by Black and white children. Their fourteen demands began with “a public acknowledgement of the existence of *de facto* school segregation in the Boston Public Schools.” The grueling seven-hour hearing failed to persuade the Committee. It was a worst-case scenario. But the NAACP, under the leadership of president **Melnea Cass**, had prepared for it with a bold plan.



The 14 demands presented by the NAACP to the Boston School Committee on June 11, 1963

School Board Faces All-Night Sit-In N.A.A.C.P. Delegation Stages Siege at Hub Offices

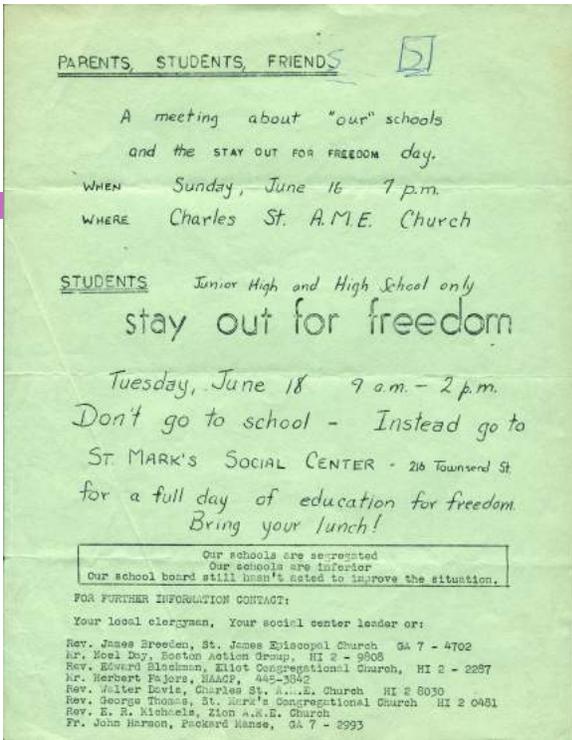




Rev. John Harman, Rev. Vernon Carter, Rev. James Breeden, Noel Day, and Peggy Dammond prepare for Freedom Day at St. Marks Social Center in Roxbury, June 1963



Paul Parks speaks to students participating in the Freedom Stayout in front of St. Marks Social Center, February 26, 1964



Students register for the Freedom School at Tremont Street Methodist Church in the South End



High school students sing at the Freedom School at St. Marks Social Center in Roxbury

Roxbury residents of all ages staged creative acts of **civil disobedience** to affect change.

In the days after the School Committee refused to discuss their demands, the NAACP and other community groups sprang into action. Demonstrators like **Rev. Vernon Carter** picketed and held sit-ins at the School Committee building. The following week, a much larger mobilization began: a school boycott involving 30% of Boston high school students.

This **Stay Out for Freedom**, led by former Dartmouth roommates **Noel Day** and **Rev. James Breeden**, was more than a walkout: parents, grandparents, teachers, and church leaders put together dozens of pop-up Freedom Schools all over Roxbury, providing lessons on Black history, citizenship, non-violence, and civil rights. They mounted an even larger Freedom Stay Out in February 1964, with 10,000 Black students and 1,000 white students from Wellesley, Weston, and other suburbs. These strategies did not lead directly to change, but the relationships they forged laid the groundwork for future breakthroughs.

1964

“ We will learn some Negro history today to remind us of our heritage... We will learn freedom songs to remind us of what is going on now and what we’re working for. And we can also learn an attitude...of non-violence... Many of us have suffered many things, but we must always try to see the other man’s side. And this is what the essence of non-violence means.

PEGGY DAMMOND DAY
FREEDOM SCHOOLS

With **Operation Exodus**, Boston parents created their own pathways to better education.

As lawsuits made their way through the courts, activists were not waiting for the system to change to integrate schools. **Ellen Jackson** and **Elizabeth Johnson** discovered that Boston parents could enroll their children in any city school with open seats—as long as they provided their own transportation. So they put together **Operation Exodus**, organizing a fleet of carpools and donated buses to transport hundreds of Black children to the well-resourced schools in Boston's white neighborhoods. The program ran for three and a half years on grassroots funds, growing to 900 students and 25 schools, and offered summer programs, tutorials, book drives, field trips, job training, a sports league, and a student newspaper.



Ellen Jackson speaks on the Busing Task Force before mandated desegregation begins, September 5, 1974

Children prepare to board the bus to Operation Exodus' summer camp in Orchard Beach, Maine, July 30, 1968



Ellen Jackson addresses parents on the first day of Operation Exodus, September 9, 1965



1965



ABOVE LEFT: People sign up for Operation Exodus at a rally at the Jeremiah Burke School, September 8, 1965



ABOVE MIDDLE: Volunteer Viola McLeod labels a chartered bus for Operation Exodus, September 15, 1965



ABOVE RIGHT: Students pack a small bus to school as part of Operation Exodus, November 30, 1965

BELOW RIGHT: Nine-year-old Gwendalin Franks sits in class at the Parkman School after riding the Operation Exodus bus from Roxbury, September 9, 1965



Rally in the Boston Common during the Stayout for Freedom, February 26, 1964



Rev. Vernon E. Carter leads a protest outside of School Committee headquarters as part of his 114-day vigil, May 17, 1965



The landmark **Racial Imbalance Act** signaled that the state might pressure the city of Boston to integrate.

Roxbury's State Representative **Royal Bolling** originally proposed a law enforcing school desegregation in 1963, and **Governor Endicott Peabody** formed a commission to study the issue. The resulting report was damning, concluding that "racial imbalance represents a serious conflict with the American creed of equal opportunity."

With support from Boston African Americans and white suburban groups, the Massachusetts Legislature passed the Racial Imbalance Act in 1965, which promised to withhold funding from school districts that were "racially imbalanced" (defined as having a student body in which white children were in the minority), and provide support for cross-district enrollment to integrate schools. This legislation created a pathway for state support of inter-district enrollment for the purpose of integration. It remains a law today.

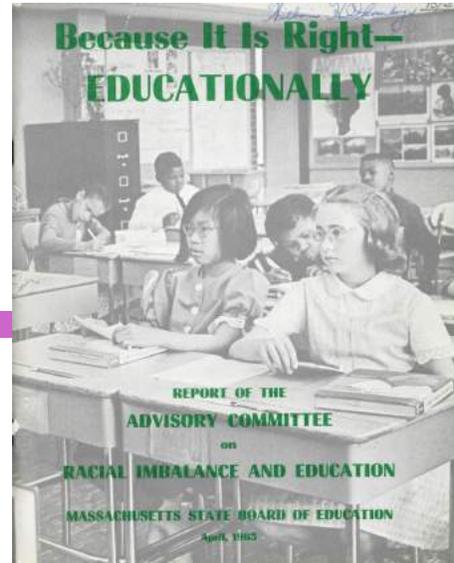


FAR LEFT: Rep. Royal Bolling, Sr., who proposed what would become the Racial Imbalance Act

LEFT: Massachusetts Governor Endicott Peabody looks at a photo of his mother after she was arrested for attempting to desegregate a Florida motel, March 31, 1964

“ It is imperative that we end this harmful system of separation... Each day of delay is a day of damage to the children of our Commonwealth.

KIERNAN COMMISSION REPORT



A NATIONAL STAGE

When Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Boston to march from Roxbury to Boston Common in 1965, Ruth Batson sat on the bandstand with the Southern civil rights leaders.



Program from the Congress of Racial Equality's Freedom Rally, April 23, 1965

“ Having come as a Polish Jew to the United States in 1940, I was given every opportunity... When I came to realize somewhat later in life that the good fortune I had had was not shared by all Americans... I thought it was necessary to try to do something about it.

DR. LEON TRILLING
BROOKLINE SCHOOL COMMITTEE



Dr. Leon Trilling and Ruth Batson testify about METCO at Faneuil Hall, October 5, 1966

Busing Top Topic in the Suburbs
Quincy, Braintree Urged To Join Busing Program

Busing to Wellesley Challenged

To Bus or Not to Bus . . .

Arlington to Bus Negroes

Newton to Accept 60 Hub Students

Lincoln To School 10 in Kindergarten

Vote Is Unanimous

Concord-Carlisle to Accept 25 Boston Pupils in Fall

Wellesley Spurns Poll, OKs Busing

Brookline School Board Votes to Let 100 Boston Negro Pupils Into System

1966

Suburban activists reached out with an idea to cross district lines.

A range of alliances began to form between suburban organizers, white and Black, and Boston leaders. In December of 1965, Brookline's School Committee Chair **Dr. Leon Trilling**, an MIT professor, invited Ruth Batson to Brookline High School to consider a scheme to enroll Boston black children in open suburban seats. Batson was skeptical. But when she saw the enthusiasm from School Committee members, administrators, parents, and even students, she warmed to the idea.

The two of them hit the road for the next six months alongside NAACP leaders like **Paul Parks**, securing commitments from six other towns: Arlington and Lexington to the north, Braintree to the south, and Lincoln and Wellesley joining Newton and Brookline on the west.

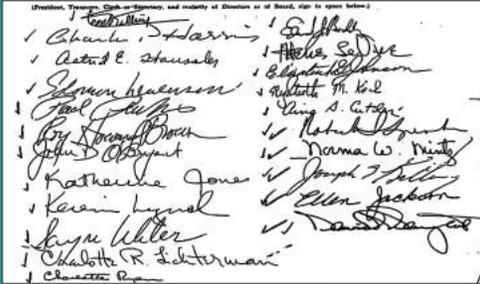


Hubert Jones holding his son before boarding the Freedom Bus from Newton to a Freedom School in Boston, February 26, 1964

BEYOND BOSTON'S BORDERS

Many liberal white residents of Boston's suburbs followed the Southern Civil Rights Movement on the news. Observing the fight against segregation in their own urban backyard, some joined the Freedom Stayouts, lobbied for the Racial Imbalance Act, or began their own campaigns. **Dr. Katherine Butler Jones** and **Hubie Jones**, Black residents of Newton, led efforts to enroll Black Boston students in their public schools. Fair housing groups in Lincoln and Brookline explored integration programs as well. Activists like **Laya Weisner** began to connect with each other, and formulate an idea for a "metropolitan" school district that could work around the intransigent Boston School Committee.

The founding Board of Directors of METCO, Inc. included Boston activists Thomas Atkins, Ellen Jackson, Elizabeth Johnson, Mel King, Elma Lewis, John D. O'Bryant, and Paul Parks; suburban activists Astrid Haussler, Katherine Jones, Elizabeth Keil, and Laya Weisner; child psychiatrist Robert Coles; and many more Boston parents and suburban school leaders.



FOUNDERS AND FUNDING

Newton superintendent **Charles Brown** secured a grant from the Carnegie Corporation for METCO's central administration, and the U.S. Department of Education funded transportation. Dr. Trilling chaired the board, **Joseph Killory** stepped down from a state education job to serve as the first director, while Ruth Batson took the Associate Director title.



Within months, a complex program called **METCO** was designed and launched.

METCO, which was shorthand for the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity, came together with a small staff and hundreds of volunteers in Boston and the participating suburbs. Ruth Batson led the effort to recruit Boston students for the inaugural class. She interviewed hundreds of prospective students in her home and took families on tours of the unfamiliar towns. Meanwhile, residents and administrators in the partner districts organized support committees and recruited "host families" to help orient their new classmates.



On September 8, 1966, 220 students aged 5-16 rode the first METCO buses to their new schools in seven towns, greeted by nervous smiles and abundant resources. The cultural gap was clear, but the access to educational opportunities made the journey worth it for most families. The suburbs raved. At the end of the year, another seven school districts were approved to join the program.



Joan McLarin says goodbye to her eighth-grade son, Milton, 13, as his bus leaves from Seaver and Harold streets in Boston for Braintree Junior High School as part of the inaugural day of the METCO program.

Jean McGuire led METCO, Inc. for 43 years, becoming a voice for Black youth and a Boston icon.



Jean McGuire and Ruth Batson interviewed for "Black News," 1976



Jean McGuire in her office at METCO, Inc., October 23, 1974

A pioneer and pathbreaker dedicated to Boston's children, Jean was one of only a handful of Black teachers hired by Boston Public Schools following the Supreme Court's desegregation order. She went on to serve as the first Black guidance counselor in the district, supporting students and families from all backgrounds and neighborhoods in the city. She assumed leadership of METCO in 1971, and advocated relentlessly for Black political and economic empowerment, civic engagement, and community cohesion.

In 1981, McGuire successfully ran for the Boston School Committee, and became the first Black woman to serve in that body.

Jean's vivid and forward-looking commentary was front and center in any discussion about Black Boston. Fierce and eloquent, Jean used the METCO and School Committee platforms to push for diversifying teachers, running for office, being an engaged parent, and above all the unrecognized brilliance of Black and brown children.

“METCO is basically a way to prepare kids for the real world. The real world isn't all Black or all white. It's everybody working together to make this world a better place when you leave it.

JEAN MCGUIRE

1971



Jean McGuire and others during the swearing-in ceremony for the Boston School Committee, January 4, 1982



A legal victory triggered a system-wide integration mandate—and a **violent backlash** that still haunts the city.

Twenty years after *Brown vs. Board*, the NAACP of Boston won its longstanding lawsuit against the Boston School Committee. The city was ordered by the U.S. District Court to desegregate its public schools. McGuire, Batson, and many other Black leaders worked to provide community input and leadership of the plans to implement the order. The system authorized by **Judge Arthur Garrity** required students from white and Black neighborhoods to travel to each other's communities to attend school.

Thousands of white families simply boycotted schools in the Black neighborhoods, and white mobs attacked the Black children as their buses arrived in Charlestown and South Boston. For ten years, Boston's black children risked verbal and physical attack just for going to school. Once there, however, they seized the opportunities to learn and grow.



Police stand guard at South Boston High School on the second day of school, September 13, 1974

1974

White groups like Louise Day Hicks' ROAR and best-selling books like Anthony Lukas' *Common Ground* cemented a narrative of "forced busing," which suggests that resistance was based not on refusal to racially integrate but on the form of transportation required. This popular narrative was both misleading and emotionally charged, burying the memory of decades of activism by Black Bostonians that built toward this radical effort.

Meanwhile, METCO buses continued to ride to the suburbs.

Police wait at Bayside Mall to escort buses on the morning of September 18, 1974



Students wait inside the bus at Columbia Point before heading to South Boston High School, September 18, 1974



“ It’s not the bus. It’s us.

JULIAN BOND

RIGHT: After a Black student stabbed a white student at South Boston High School, a woman watches white parents barricade the school, December 11, 1974



BELOW: Students head home at the end of the day at the Lewenberg School under police watch, September 19, 1974



BELOW RIGHT: A woman shouts “Go home and stay home” to Black students riding the bus from Gavin Middle School to Roxbury, September 17, 1974



Students get off their damaged school bus after police escorted them from South Boston High School, where white parents rioted following a stabbing of a white student by a Black classmate, December 11, 1974



Students set fire to a dummy in front of public housing in Columbia Park, South Boston

METCO is still adapting, evolving, and breaking barriers under the leadership of Milly Arbaje-Thomas.

In 2018, a new generation took the helm of METCO, Inc. with social worker, community leader, and METCO parent Milly Arbaje-Thomas. Having immigrated from the Dominican Republic as a child, Milly knew the challenges and possibilities of a multi-cultural, multilingual world. With her operational expertise and optimistic vision, Milly worked to modernize the program for its participants and envision its role in the 21st century. Above all, she drew inspiration from METCO's origins: parents and children, working across differences, to create the learning opportunities they need to live in a diverse society. With tens of thousands of METCO alumni reconnecting, the movement for racial integration has a bright future.

“ Nobody should be educated in isolation.

MILLY ARBAJE-THOMAS, MSW



2018

MODERNIZING

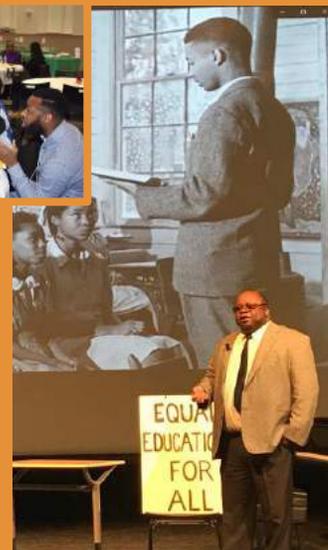
For decades, Boston parents in the know had been bringing newborns from the hospital to the METCO office to secure a spot on METCO's legendary waiting list, hoping to hear in five years that they were next in line. In the digital age, this process is obsolete and inequitable. So in 2019, METCO phased out the outdated list and launched an online application designed to be efficient, equitable, and transparent. Families could now upload their supporting documents with their phones or computers without leaving home, and be referred to a suburban district through an annual lottery rather than in order of submission. When the pandemic hit in March 2020, the online system allowed the application process to continue uninterrupted. Information sessions, like most interactions around the world, were held virtually.



CONVENING



METCO continues to connect with other organizations and foster cross-racial dialogue by bringing city and suburban communities together. METCO Presents evenings use professional plays and performances as a catalyst for cross-racial conversations that lead to overcoming bias, discovering common experiences, and celebrating differences.





Needham superintendent Dan Gutekanst speaks in Hyde Park alongside METCO Directors and other district leaders standing in solidarity with Black Lives Matter protests, June 5, 2020

Brookline High School students speak at a Black Lives Matter rally



Needham Public Schools students march with their banner



The renewed antiracism movement of 2020 prompted Boston's suburbs to reflect, mobilize, and more truly fulfill METCO's promise.

Over the decades, the Boston Public Schools have changed in significant ways. The city's population has become much more diverse, with immigrants from Central and South America, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, West Africa, and more, building vibrant communities in many neighborhoods. METCO's participants reflect this diversity. The city and state work more collaboratively today to develop equitable funding formulas and admissions criteria. And charter and independent pilot schools provide more up-to-date facilities and rigor than the district once did.

White families, however, have mostly abandoned the Boston Public Schools. Despite all the effort, schools are even more segregated now than they were in the 1950s.

2020

EDUCATING

Breaking down the barriers of racism requires learning beyond the suburban classroom, and METCO continues to provide access to information that is too often hard to find. METCO University offers workshops for parents (both Boston and suburban) led by experts, including many METCO alumni giving back to the program. Student leadership initiatives like BEAT (*Boston Equity Action Teams*) hire METCO high school students to research the historic and present-day movements of Boston's BIPOC residents and teach them to their classmates, teachers, and community members. And the story of METCO itself, briefly summarized in this exhibit, has many lessons to teach us today.



In the weeks following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, rallies and marches were organized from Brookline to Wellesley. Superintendents, METCO Directors, and School Committee members assembled in Hyde Park to make public statements of solidarity for the Black community, and commit to adopting anti-racism resolutions in their districts. Many conducted assessments of equity in their schools; invested in diversity, equity, and inclusion leadership and training; and fostered dialogue with their students.

METCO Headquarters, our suburban district partners, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts may be more united than ever in our commitment to anti-racism. Together we are a model for the nation. Every day, we prepare students—Black, brown, and white—to thrive in a diversifying world, and to lead it toward greater justice. That may be the ultimate goal of racial integration.

To make these efforts deep and lasting, METCO must become more than a program. It must be a pledge.

METCO was built by ordinary people who saw injustice and forged a path forward.

Now it's up to us to push through and create the world they envisioned.

“As long as the threat of racism exists in this country, there is still a need for METCO.”

MILLY ARBAJE-THOMAS



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