



# **Inclusion and Racial Equity in the Boston Public Schools**

A Boston Teachers Union Report

**SPRING 2020**

All children are entitled to an education in an inclusive setting and benefit when provided the necessary supports, resources and trained educators. Students in the Boston Public Schools (BPS) deserve the same opportunity and access to high quality inclusion programs as students in wealthier, whiter communities across our Commonwealth. Since 2014, the Boston Teachers Union has actively supported BPS to provide more and better inclusion opportunities to students, as well as pushed for more input into how inclusion is implemented.

In the current COVID-19 pandemic, students with significant disabilities are having a harder time than ever accessing the education they deserve. The gaps for many students with special needs will grow even wider as teaching and service delivery are forced to operate online and human interactions are extremely limited. Our most vulnerable students must have access to excellent educational opportunities when they return to school.

Under pre-COVID circumstances, many Boston students in inclusion classrooms had sub-par educational experiences due to insufficient staffing, lack of material resources, and the absence of meaningfully engaged representative inclusion teams that build and sustain a school culture that embraces inclusion. Research shows that in BPS, students of color with disabilities are more likely to be placed in a substantially separate classroom than white students with disabilities. Our research has also uncovered that students of color have less access to better-staffed models of inclusion programming than white students.

The District Review Report issued by the MA State Department of Education (DESE) in March 2020 confirms the findings that BPS fails to provide adequate opportunities for students with disabilities to be educated in high-quality inclusion classrooms. The section on special education begins, “The district’s special education services are in systematic disarray, do not provide appropriate learning opportunities in the least restrictive environment for all students with disabilities, and contribute to a pattern of inequitable access to learning opportunities.” DESE also calls on Boston’s Superintendent to “urgently prioritize developing and implementing a district policy on inclusion that incorporates specific models for high quality inclusive education and guidelines for appropriate staffing and professional development.”

**DESE also found:**

- 30% of the BPS students with disabilities were designated as needing substantially separate classrooms in 2018-19, compared with 13% of students statewide.
- Boys of color are disproportionately placed in the Emotional Impairment strand.
- There is no consistent definition of inclusion in the district, and there are a wide variety of models with different levels of staffing and instructional programming.

Sub separate classrooms do not provide the same access to grade level instruction and courses that prepare students for higher education, and are known in the district to be pathways for the school to prison pipeline. <https://www.ncd.gov/publications/2015/06182015>

The chart below from DESE’s report shows that white students with disabilities are far less likely to be placed in Substantially Separate programs than students of color, English Learners, and economically disadvantaged students with disabilities.

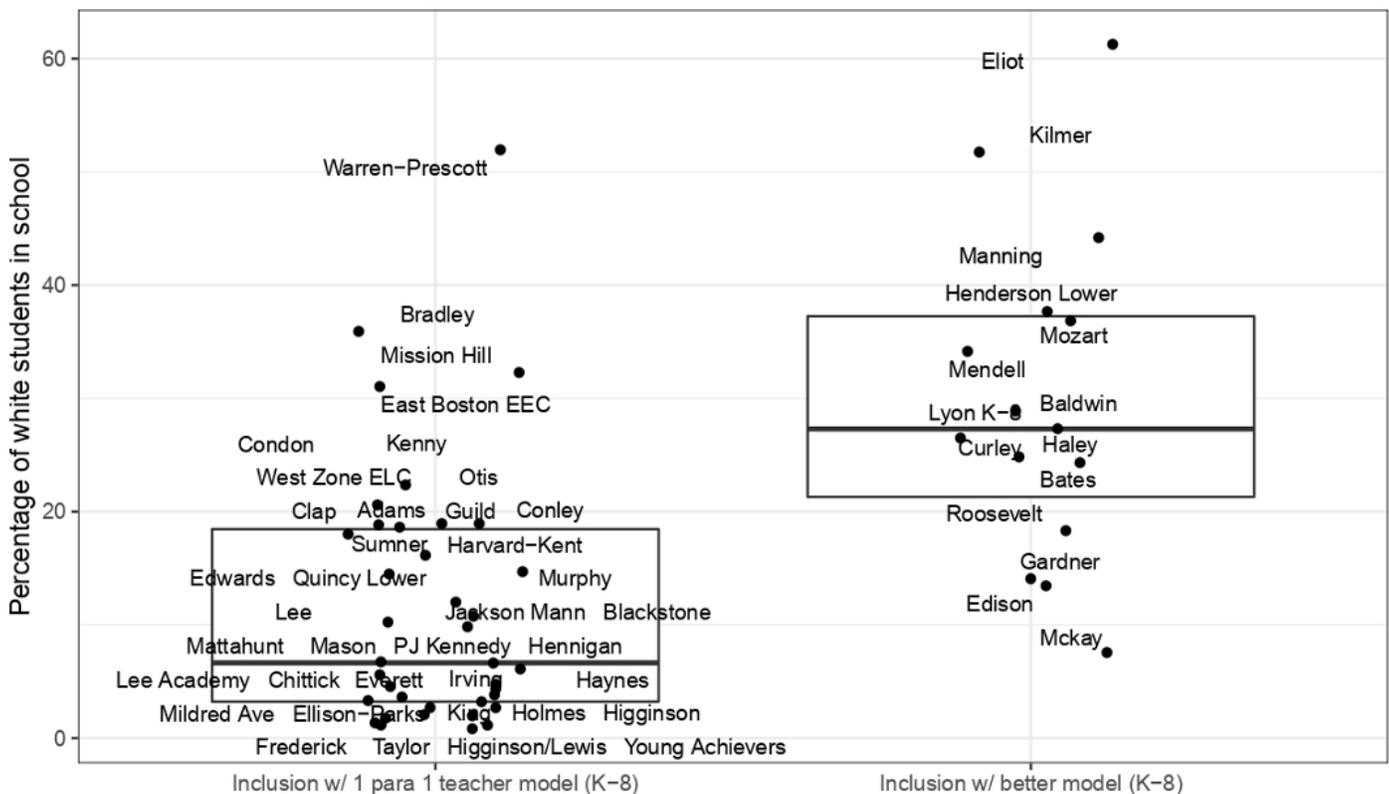
**Substantially Separate Placement of Students with Disabilities by Group, 2018–2019**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage of Students with Disabilities in Substantially Separate Placement</b>
All students	2,854	30%
Economically disadvantaged	2,127	34%
African American/Black	1,273	36%
Hispanic/Latino	1,219	29%
English learners	1,002	32%
White	195	17%
Asian	86	28%

Sources: DESE’s DART and EDWIN Analytics data. Data represents students ages 6 through 21.

Educators in inclusion settings, who believe deeply in educating students with and without disabilities together, feel frustrated and unsupported in meeting their students' needs. The standard inclusion staffing model in BPS is one teacher and one paraprofessional. (We don't know of ANY other inclusion models that rely on this dual licensure requirement.) In this model, teachers are required to have two licenses, a general education license and a special education license. (Teachers are also expected to hold an ESL license and/or SEI endorsement.) This allows compliance with special education law mandating that each inclusion student receives 240 or more minutes of specialized instruction, but can create an impossible task for one educator to meet all general education and special education students' needs, as well as English Learner needs. Simply put, multiple licenses does not equate to multiple educators.

The chart below compares the percentage of white students in K-8 schools with a standard 1 teacher/1 para model, versus a higher staffing model. 11 out of the 15 schools in Boston that have a better-than-standard educator-to-student ratio in inclusion classrooms have a higher proportion of white students than the district average (14.9%). Schools with a 1 teacher/1 para model have a mean of 11.7% white students, while schools with a better model have a mean of 30.1% white students. This difference is statistically significant. ( $P < .001$ )



The Boston Teachers Union calls on BPS to ensure that all students with disabilities, especially students of color, have access to the best learning conditions to grow academically and emotionally. As the celebrated birthplace of public education, BPS has an opportunity to be a model district for inclusion. BPS can boast several exemplary models of inclusion that can provide a blueprint for equitable and optimal programming throughout the district. Now more than ever, we need Inclusion Done Right for all of our students.

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