

THE GREAT DIVIDE

In exploring the history of educational inequity, METCO students find echos of the present

By [Gal Tziperman Lotan](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 13, 2021, 3:58 p.m.



Jabari Murphy is a student in the METCO program who lives in Roslindale and goes to Natick High School. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

[Sign up](#) to receive a newsletter for *The Great Divide*, an investigative series that explores educational inequality in Boston and statewide. And please reach out to us at thegreatdivide@globe.com with story ideas and tips

Samone Lumley has been a part of the METCO program since she was in kindergarten, traveling from her home in Dorchester every morning to attend school in Boston's suburbs. Her father was also in METCO, as were three of her four siblings. It has always been a part of her life.

But Lumley, who attends Wellesley High School, never knew the full history behind the school integration program. That changed last spring, when through a paid internship she and seven other METCO students started working on a project about the program's history and the struggle for equitable education in Boston.

"A lot of this information I didn't really know about," Lumley said. "A program that I've been in my whole life, and I didn't really know how it started."

METCO, the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity, a voluntary school integration program, has been enrolling K-12 students from Boston in predominantly white suburban school districts since 1966 — a history that now spans multiple generations of students, about 3,200 of them enrolled each year. The project's goal was to educate and empower METCO students, foster conversations about inequality in the suburban communities where they go to school, and disprove stigmas suburbanites may have about the neighborhoods METCO students live in.

The internship was called BEAT, or Boston Equity Action Teams, originally imagined as a physical tour of historical sites that shaped Boston's education landscape, which METCO students could lead people through. Milly Arbaje-Thomas, president and chief executive of METCO, originally imagined yellow school buses of parents and students coming in from the suburbs and being lead on historical tours of Boston neighborhoods by METCO students who live in them, inspired by Mytown tours Karilyn Crockett, the city of Boston's first chief of equity, ran in the 1990s. The coronavirus pandemic forced students to change their plans, instead developing a 25-minute documentary about the history of

the METCO program and the broader history of educational inequities in Boston. Two cohorts of students are now embarking on a new round of BEAT, one that will focus on topics in Boston and another on issues in the suburbs where they go to school.

Through black and white photos, newspaper clippings, documents and archival footage, students told the story of the unequal educational landscape around greater Boston, from discriminatory federal mortgage programs to violence around court-ordered busing, parent-founded freedom schools that taught Black history, and how the way cities and towns fund public schools today can exacerbate inequalities.

After the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked a wave of Black Lives Matter protests around the country, Arbaje-Thomas noted a few suburban METCO districts put the BEAT documentary on their websites and incorporated it in discussions. She also heard from school districts who are not in the program but expressed interest in taking METCO students in the future, a bump in interest she likened to the program's expansion from about seven suburban school districts in its first year to 33 in the years after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination.

Knowing how and why the program began — with heavy influence from parents and activists — is key to fostering necessary conversations, Arbaje-Thomas said.

METCO “was not meant to be something this long-term, but here we are 55 years later and segregation is actually worse,” she said. “Because the program has been around for so long, people have lost the sense of its purpose. People don't know why it started, what it was intended to do.”

Before pandemic lockdowns began last March, Lumley and her BEAT cohort went into city and local university archives to dig through bins of old records, take careful notes, and snap photo after photo of letters and papers that shed light on their areas of research.

Lumley began researching freedom schools, a grassroots educational movement in the 1960s and '70s in which Black parents, frustrated that their children's schools were being underfunded and the school committee was not listening to their calls for change, opened

understand and the school committee was not listening to their calls for change, opened their own schools across the city.

History started popping up all around her, she said. Her father recalled arriving in Belmont as a METCO student for his first day of school decades ago and seeing a sign with a racial slur telling him and other students from Boston to go back home. She read letters from suburban parents who did not want students of color from Boston attending their mostly white schools, and talked to other members of her BEAT cohort about microaggressions they experienced.

Those echoes of history, of redlining and de-facto segregation, were there in existing systems of school funding. And they were up the street from her family's home in Grove Hall, at a building she had passed countless times and never realized used to be a freedom school.

"I felt excited learning about new things, and the program I've been in my whole life, but it was also overwhelming," Lumley said. "Because it's a lot of new information, and it's a lot of old ties."

Jabari Murphy, who lives in Roslindale and attends Natick High School, took interest in the violence around court-ordered busing in the 1970s. In school, he had mostly learned about struggles for civil rights in southern states, not in Massachusetts.

But as he read through records, watched documentaries, and reviewed newspaper clippings, he learned more about what Black students experienced in Boston. Nobody had ever talked to him about it in depth.

"I didn't expect to learn what I learned," Murphy said. "I learned about the struggle people really went through to just get a proper education. I came to have more respect for the people who lived during that time period."

Through the research, he felt gratitude for the people who fought for better educational opportunities before him. He also felt empowered to keep working toward their goals.

“I feel like the BEAT program is the portion of the work, because it’s educating not only Boston people but also the cities that have METCO programs in their schools,” Murphy said. “I feel like that’s important to continue to see progress, because if nobody knows the history and nobody knows what’s going on, they just might not understand it.”

METCO B.E.A.T. - Boston Educational Activism Tour



Gal Tziperman Lotan can be reached at gal.lotan@globe.com or at 617-929-2043.

[Show 55 comments](#)