

Educational inequity's failing Hub youth

By Dominicke Lewis

Saturday, December 29, 2007 • Boston Herald • Op-Ed

From fourth grade through ninth grade, I attended Bedford Public Schools through the METCO program, which gives youth living in Boston a chance to attend schools in the suburbs. During my six years in Bedford schools, I got an excellent education. There were never more than 20 students in my classes. I always had great materials and books, the building was beautiful, the teachers were respectful and the classes were orderly. I really learned a lot.

In the ninth grade, I had to transfer to Hyde Park High. There were obvious differences between my old school and my new school. To begin with, I was learning the same material in ninth grade at Hyde Park that I had learned in seventh grade in Bedford. My classes had as many as 30 students in them. We had so few books that students weren't allowed to take them home to study. The building was old and run down.

Because the MBTA bus I now had to take to school made frequent stops, I had to wake up extra early in order to get there by the 7:20 a.m. start time. By the time I arrived, I was so exhausted and cranky that the last thing I wanted to do was start studying.

Doing well in school was a lot harder there because the classroom environment was chaotic. The disruptive behavior of some students took the teacher's attention away from helping the students who wanted to learn. Once, when I asked a teacher a question, she refused to answer and told me that I would never amount to anything. Many times when a student was being difficult, he or she would be asked to leave the classroom. Those students would end up hanging out in the hallway and picking fights or just leaving the school altogether.

As I struggled in my new school, my guidance counselor tried to help, but she had so many students to keep track of, she wasn't even able to remember who I was.

There was so much chaos that I began to feel I was wasting my time. So, at age 16, I decided that the best thing I could do was to drop out of school, join the Job Corps and get my GED.

Recently, there has been much discussion about how urban youth have trouble achieving academically. Urban students don't perform as well on MCAS as suburban students and have a higher dropout rate. But look at the difference in how we're being treated. One student gets a great building, new books, interesting curriculum and plenty of attention from teachers; the other gets old books, worn-out buildings, worn-out teachers and one overcrowded MCAS prep class after another. You tell me, which student do you think is going to do better?

When I went to school in Bedford, I knew I was being prepared for a successful future. When I went to Hyde Park, I knew I was wasting my time. No student should have to feel that school is a waste of time. And we are running out of time to fix the real problems that Boston students have to deal with every day.

So what are the governor, the Legislature and the mayor waiting for? The students of Boston deserve the same educational opportunity provided to the students of Bedford. We deserve a real chance.

Dominicke Lewis works at Teen Empowerment in Boston.