

THE GREAT DIVIDE

Vocational schools become the latest front in the battle for educational equity

By [Malcolm Gay](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 7, 2020, 3:13 p.m.



Priscilla Sanchez applied to Worcester Technical High School, but she did not get in. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

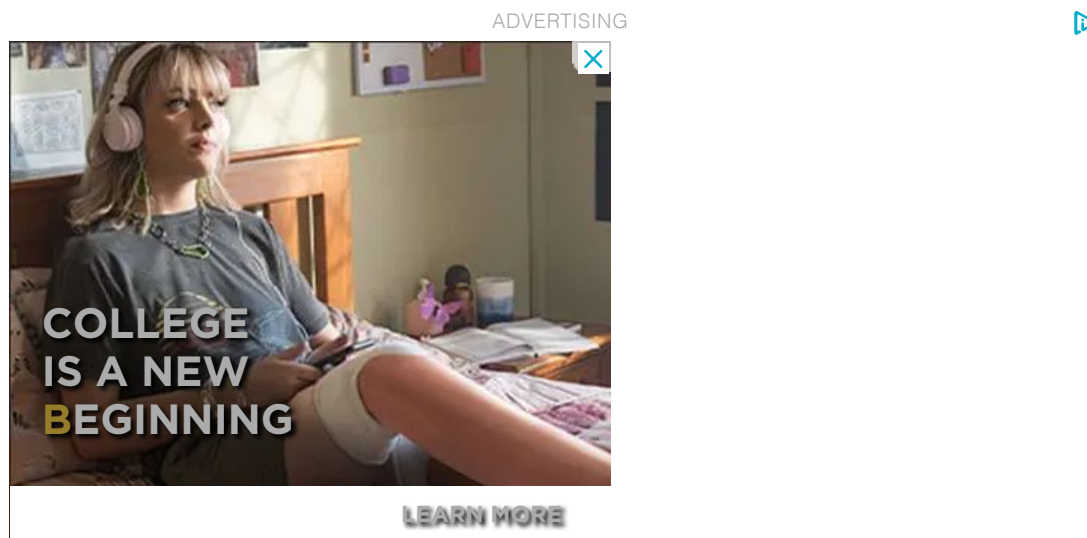
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The logo for 'The Great Divide' is centered on a background split horizontally into a yellow top half and a dark blue bottom half. The word 'THE' is in a small, dark blue, sans-serif font at the top. Below it, 'GREAT' is written in a large, bold, dark blue, sans-serif font. At the bottom, 'DIVIDE' is written in a large, bold, yellow, sans-serif font.

As a middle schooler in Worcester, Priscilla Sanchez had typically fuzzy notions about the sort of career she might one day pursue; options ranging from forensics to cosmetology appealed to her. Either way, Sanchez dreamed of going to the city's vocational high school, where she knew she could build a career without going to college.

Sanchez was a bright student, but her record wasn't perfect: A fight in middle school had led to a suspension. But teachers had told her she was smart and encouraged her to apply to the highly sought after Worcester Technical High School.

When Sanchez didn't hear back, she blamed herself.



“I thought maybe I wasn't smart enough,” said Sanchez, now 20. “[Tech] was known as a school for smart kids with a good record.”

The problem wasn't with her, but with how vocational education has changed and — some would say — lost its way.

Many of the state's 37 vocational schools have come under fire recently for using their admissions criteria to screen out struggling students like Sanchez — exactly the sort of non-college-bound striver they were built to serve. Over the past two decades, the schools have been transformed from their blue-collar roots into high-tech training centers that

prepare students equally for college or for well-paying jobs in the trades. Today, some are better funded than nearby public schools, and they have become increasingly selective in who they admit.

But enrollment figures indicate — and a growing number of activists and officials contend — that schools such as Worcester Tech are shutting out more challenging and disadvantaged students, taking advantage of the autonomy the state grants in admissions to cherry-pick more academically prepared students with better discipline records. They are behaving a lot like exam schools, with similar invidious effects, and mayors from across Massachusetts want the state to intervene, dictating more closely how the admissions process should work.

A Globe review of state data shows that some of these schools have become whiter and wealthier, enrolling fewer students with special needs or who are still learning English than many of the largest school districts that direct students their way. Meanwhile, students like Sanchez are being turned away.

At Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School, for example, only about a quarter of students come from low-income families, even though two of the largest cities in the area served by the school — Gardner and Fitchburg — have student poverty rates over 50 percent.

The gap is particularly stark when it comes to students who are still learning English. The vast majority of the state's regional voc-techs enroll English learners at significantly lower rates than many of the largest districts they serve.

For example, nearly a quarter of students in Lowell Public Schools are still learning English. But fewer than 10 percent of students are English learners at the Greater Lowell Technical High School, which also accepts students from the much smaller towns of Dracut, Dunstable, and Tyngsborough.

“It’s really a civil rights issue,” said Mark Hawke, town administrator for Westminster, which sends students to Montachusett Tech. “So many kids are getting left out.”

In late January, Hawke joined nearly two dozen mayors who signed a letter urging state education officials to require some vocational schools to abolish their selective admissions processes and adopt a lottery system instead. Currently, Massachusetts permits vocational schools “to determine which applicants have an ability to benefit” from a voc-tech education using admissions criteria that include student grades, counselor recommendations, discipline and attendance records, and perhaps a student interview. The state leaves it to individual schools to assign value to each category.

“These schools have used their selective admissions authority to admit students largely on [the] basis of their academic performance,” the mayors wrote in the Jan. 30 letter, addressed to Massachusetts education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley and Secretary of Education James Peyser. “The lack of fundamental fairness in regional vocational admissions has persisted for far too long.”

Without forceful state action, they added, some schools “will be unwilling to relinquish their ability to bolster school performance through selective admissions.”

For decades, the state’s vocational schools served as a critical bridge for non-college-bound students, providing a path to steady work in the trades for children from poor or working-class families, many of them minorities or immigrants. Vocational schools were a place that offered a chance for everyone, even if they weren’t high-achieving students.

The mayors argue that although vocational schools have used admissions criteria for decades, the state’s 1998 implementation of the MCAS prompted many voc-techs to prioritize student achievement and attendance.

Vocational school administrators quickly learned they could raise their school's MCAS scores — and by extension, its reputation — simply by choosing stronger students.

“It is hardly surprising that public schools with the authority to select their students would recognize it as a competitive advantage and give preference to applicants with stronger academic, attendance, or discipline records,” the mayors wrote.

Some of the state's most demographically imbalanced schools had already come to the attention of Riley, who sent letters last November to six of the schools, citing “enrollment discrepancies” with their surrounding student populations.

At the time, Riley said he planned to propose revisions to state regulations for voc-tech admissions this spring. In the meantime, he exhorted the superintendents to identify policies and practices “that may be impacting equitable student access ... and to voluntarily enact changes.”

But Kevin Farr, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators, said the schools are simply following state guidelines.

“It's all within the current regulations,” said Farr. “The criteria are fair.”

Lewis Finfer, co-director of the Massachusetts Communities Action Network, compared the problem at the more exclusive voc-techs to the controversy over Boston's exam schools, which critics have long charged use an admissions process that disadvantages low-income applicants and students of color.

“When you have a ranking system by grades, and attendance, and discipline, you end up favoring middle-class students, more so than kids who are from poor and working-class backgrounds,” said Finfer. “Public schools should be equally open to all students.”

At some schools, however, the picture is quite different. Minuteman Regional Vocational Technical High School, which serves affluent towns such as Belmont and Lexington, enrolls disproportionately higher rates of low-income and special-needs students. Meanwhile, at Belmont High, where only about 7 percent of students are poor, 80 percent of graduates earn a post-secondary degree within six years.

Another outlier is Boston’s Madison Park Vocational High School, which unlike many voc-techs does not use performance-based admissions criteria. The school has significantly higher numbers of low-income and special-needs students than the rest of the district. Not that it has served them particularly well: After years of decline, Madison Park was deemed “underperforming” by the state in 2015 and has yet to emerge from turnaround status.

But in many other communities, voc-techs have become highly sought after options, rivaling, or even surpassing nearby high schools in terms of the success of their graduates.

Officials at Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational Technical High School said they had about 275 kids on the waiting list last year. Statewide, the number is closer to 3,000, according to a spokesperson at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

The state funding formula also gives vocational schools a boost for staff and materials not found at other schools, and voc-techs frequently outspend their traditional counterparts by many thousands of dollars each year on a per-pupil basis.

Hawke said the schools can be so flush that Gardner once received textbook donations from Montachusett Technical, or Monty Tech.

“The stuff they were getting rid of was newer than the stuff we were still using,” said Hawke, who formerly served as Gardner’s mayor. “They really don’t want for anything.”

But Monty Tech, one of the schools flagged by Riley, arguably does not serve the students who could most benefit from its resources: Just 1 percent of students at the school are English learners, a rate dwarfed by that of the largest city sending students to the school, Fitchburg, where the rate is closer to 16 percent.

Sheila M. Harrity, Monty Tech’s superintendent-director, acknowledged that the school of roughly 1,400 students has lower English learner rates.

“We are trying to address that,” she said, adding that application materials are offered in Spanish and that she was proud of their progress so far. “Last year we had eight students [learning English], and this year we’ve almost doubled it to 15.”

Similarly, Greater New Bedford Regional Tech, another school identified by Riley, has much lower rates of poor students, students with special needs, and Latino students than its largest sending district, New Bedford Public Schools.

But the largest discrepancy lies with those still learning English: Whereas nearly 30 percent of New Bedford students are still learning English, the group makes up less than 4 percent of the voc-tech’s student body.

“There are enormous disparities,” said Mayor Jonathan Mitchell of New Bedford, who signed the letter. “They don’t have a legitimate educational basis to justify it.”

But James O'Brien, Greater New Bedford Tech's superintendent-director, blamed officials at the sending districts rather than the voc-tech's admission procedures. He said some area middle schools don't allow his school access to eighth graders to tell them about the technical high school.

"Those different subgroups are not applying to our school because they're not aware of what we have to offer," said O'Brien.

Mayor Mitchell countered that fully 75 percent of eighth-graders from New Bedford schools apply to the voc-tech, which he said accepts about 60 percent of them.

O'Brien said he'd be willing to expand the vocational school's enrollment if he had the funding.

"If the money's flowing our way, we can get very creative with a schedule," he said. "We'll accept them all. But at some point, when do the floodgates stop?"

Given the state's range of schools and student populations, there's no quick fix to the mayors' concerns, said Thomas Scott, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents.

"It is not a simple issue where we can just make some admissions policy changes and it's going to solve the problem," he said. "It varies a lot from one place to the next."

When she wasn't accepted at Worcester Tech, one of the schools flagged by Riley, Priscilla Sanchez wound up at the city's struggling North High School. False fire alarms were common, she said. There were a lot of fights. Many of her classmates were suspended, and she found the school chaotic and full of distractions.

Sanchez said she eventually got pregnant and dropped out of school altogether. She said she later earned her GED and is now studying criminal justice at North Shore Community College.

Even so, she thinks often of how things might have turned out differently if she'd gone to Tech.

“I think I'd be farther than I am now,” she said. “I just kind of stepped back a bit.”

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