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Cambridge Day, January 27, 2014 (www.cambridgeday.com)

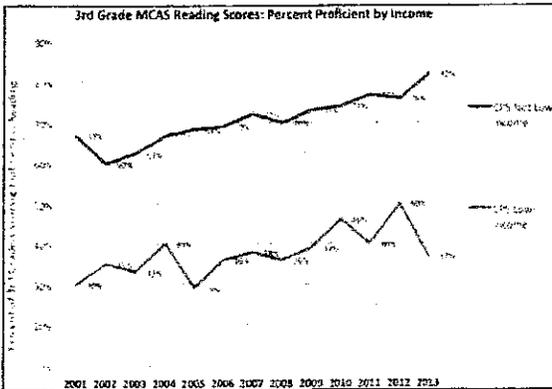
# Can Cambridge close the third-grade achievement gap? We'll need a plan

By Emily Dexter

Closing the third-grade achievement gap in Cambridge's public schools is critical if we want to provide equal opportunities for all students to learn in grades 4-12 and beyond. But can it be done? The answer, for two reasons, is: "We don't know." First, no diverse urban school district in this country has been able to teach 80 percent to 90 percent of its low-income children to read, write and do math on grade level, as measured by a test as difficult as the third-grade MCAS or fourth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress test. Cambridge, in fact, already has better achievement outcomes for low-income students than most cities in Massachusetts and the U.S., but we're nowhere near closing the gap.

Second, as a city, we haven't yet tried to close the third-grade achievement gap. This has never been an explicit citywide goal. Many groups and sectors in Cambridge are trying to close gaps at all age and grade levels – teachers, parents, students, the school department and other city departments, elected officials, community groups, the universities, denominational groups, philanthropies, local businesses. But there is no strategic plan for all the sectors to work together to ensure that all Cambridge children are reading, writing and doing math on grade level and learning at least one additional language by the end of third grade. Our efforts have had positive effects, which is why our student outcomes are better than in most cities, but the third-grade achievement gap has not substantially narrowed over the past dozen years. In fact, because of growing wealth disparities in Cambridge, it is getting wider. We do, however, know what we need to do:

- Focus on early childhood education (ages 0-5) and early elementary education (grades K-3); on children and their families; and on children's cognitive development and socio-emotional development.
- Build on our extensive multi-sector infrastructure of high-quality programs, preschools and elementary schools.
- Honor our history being the go-to school district and go-to city for progressive thinking about how to support families and educate children.



Our dozen elementary schools already use common frameworks for literacy and math instruction and have shown steady progress in increasing MCAS scores over the past decade for all groups of students. (All boats have lifted, but the gaps remain just as large.) Three of our elementary schools already offer the opportunity to learn an additional language starting in kindergarten. There is a lot to build on.

But closing the third-grade achievement gap in Cambridge will require more than focused intention and common frameworks. It will require additional private and public resources in the form of people, materials and physical space.

We need to expand, strengthen and fill in the gaps in our early childhood, pre-kindergarten, family support, mental health, summer and afterschool programs so they serve every child who is at risk of not reaching grade level in reading and math by the end of third-grade. We need to ensure small enough class sizes and adequate intervention staffing in grades JK-3. We need to reduce absences in these grades. We need to offer JK-5 world language instruction in the nine remaining English-only schools. And we need to attract and retain more of those lucky families whose parents have extra time and energy to give to the schools.

We don't know if we can close our third-grade achievement gaps in language, literacy and numeracy because it has never been done before in any comparable school district. But 2014 would be a very good year to start trying. Remember this idea: third grade and beyond.

> *Emily Dexter, Ed.D., is a Cambridge Public School Parent and member of the steering committee of the Cambridge Citywide School Advisory Group (CSAG).*

*See my blog: [www.publicschoolnotes.wordpress.com](http://www.publicschoolnotes.wordpress.com)*

# COLUMN: Cambridge's reduced investment in schools

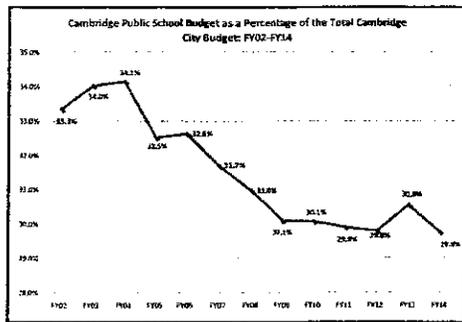
By Emily Dexter/GUEST COMMENTARY

Cambridge Chronicle

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Cambridge —

Cambridge is booming, designer restaurants appear magically on every corner. Emerald-Kendall City rises before our eyes, replacing our factory-slaughterhouse past with our glass-and-digital future. Tax revenues have increased so much we can no longer spend it all and are drowning in free cash. Over the past decade, as the buildings went up and the money flowed in, Cambridge increased its non-school spending by a whopping 72 percent.



Courtesy image/Emily Dexter

Not so for the public school system, the best hope for the thousands of poor and low-income children and their families who live in Cambridge. From 2004 to 2014, the School Department budget increased by only 34 percent, with half of that eaten up by increases in health insurance, retirement, administrative salaries, energy and maintenance costs for our poorly maintained school buildings, and increases in the cost of busing, a necessity in a racially diverse city with so much income inequality. Expenditures that directly affect students attending Cambridge schools — salaries, benefits and ongoing professional development for teachers, classroom aides and specialists who work with children — increased by far less.

What has been the result of that selective austerity in the midst of an economic boom? A black-white achievement gap that has remained stubbornly huge. Last year was one of the worst years: 81 percent of white third-grade students scored Proficient or Advanced versus only 34 percent of African American/black students.

That's not because Cambridge schools are uniquely mediocre: the Newton black-white third-gap is almost as large. In fact, there is no urban district in Massachusetts that has substantially narrowed the achievement gap. Cambridge could be the first district to do so, if we were willing to spend the money. What we do spend, though, has given us black and Latino MCAS results far better than some of our urban neighbors, a low-income dropout rate of almost zero, and has kept middle-class families in the system, three accomplishments grossly under valued by the people of Cambridge, including its civic leaders.

Cambridge obsesses over its high "per-pupil expenditure," as if that is the only or best measure of the educational resources it devotes to students. A more authentic measure of how much we care about our public education system is the percentage of the total city budget we devote to the schools, how much we spend relative to our capacity. This year it is less than 30 percent, down from 34 percent in 2003. By this measure, we are not even maintaining a stable level of commitment. Across the river, Boston devotes 36 percent of its municipal budget to its public schools, and in 2006 they won the Broad Prize for the most improved urban school system in the U.S.

Unfortunately, the city has a "maintenance of effort" philosophy when it comes to school budgeting: Every year, the School Department gets only enough to maintain the current level of services, even if that level is insufficient. Like a hamster on a wheel, the schools have to cut out one good program if they want to add services that might get us even better results. The mantra is always, "Other schools spend less." Yes they do. And if they are urban districts with large numbers of poor students, they typically have substantial dropout rates, lower MCAS scores, and fewer middle-class students.

Every year, the Cambridge public schools are asked to do more and more with less and less. That's how much Cambridge cares about its low-income children, though they are our brightest hope for the future.

Emily Dexter, Ed.D., is a Cambridge resident and public school parent

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