

AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE IN BELMONT

By:

**Roger Colton
Belmont Fair Housing Committee
34 Warwick Road, Belmont, MA 02178
617-484-0597 *** 617-484-0594 (FAX)
rcolton101@aol.com**

April 1998

The Town of Belmont has a substantial shortage of affordable housing today. Making a commitment to fill that shortage will not only meet a critical shelter need within Belmont, but will generate positive benefits for the Belmont schools as well. The purpose of the discussion below is to briefly review why the Belmont School Committee should endorse an affordable housing policy for the Town of Belmont, not merely because it is good public policy generally, but because it is sound and appropriate *education* policy as well.^{1\}

THE NEED FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN BELMONT

The critical need for affordable housing in Belmont has been documented time and again by and for Town officials. Consider the following:

- o The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has legislatively established a ten percent affordable housing goal for all Massachusetts communities. In November, 1997, however, officials of the Belmont Fair Housing Committee reported to the Belmont Planning Board that the town has less than one third of this amount. Indeed, Belmont's three percent (3%) supply of such housing is one of the lowest compliance rates in the Commonwealth.^{2\}
- o In 1994, the Town Selectmen asked the Belmont Fair Housing Committee to prepare an *Affordable Housing Plan*. That Plan, released in May 1995, found that "housing affordability is an issue even in a community perceived to be

^{1\} While most of the empirical research that exists examines post-secondary education, the reasoning and findings apply to the lower grades as well.

^{2\} Presentation of Ann Verrilli (Belmont Fair Housing Committee) to Belmont Planning Board (November 1997).

well-off, such as Belmont. . .[T]he cost of housing in Belmont has been, and will certainly continue to be, very high. The median contract rent in Belmont in 1990 was \$792, compared to a state median of \$506. . .Median house value in 1990 was \$307,800. . .To afford a mortgage for a house, [annual] household income would need to be in excess of \$90,000."^{3\}

- o A 1996 report for the Fair Housing Committee found even further that "because of the distribution of housing units amongst income groups, the *total* supply of housing which is affordable to low-income households might be quite different from the *accessible* supply of housing which is affordable to low-income households."^{4\} Not surprisingly, in other words, many units that would be affordable to low- and moderate-income households are not occupied by such households but rather by higher income households.
- o Finally, a 1997 presentation to the Belmont McLean Land Use Task Force reported that neither Belmont teachers nor the average Belmont municipal employee have incomes that put Belmont housing within reach. Moreover, the Task Force was told, the average worker in a Belmont business earned less than one-third the income necessary to buy a home in Belmont.^{5\} By 1994, the Task Force was told, the average monthly housing cost in Belmont was almost \$2,300 and a typical downpayment was nearly \$30,000.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

Despite the critical need for increased affordable housing in Belmont in its own right, this discussion focuses not exclusively on the need for housing, but rather on how increasing diversity through increased affordable housing will improve the education of Belmont's children. There is little dispute today but that school diversity and educational excellence go hand-in-hand.^{6\} The educational benefits of a diverse student population can be categorized

^{3\} Barbara Ryther (May 1995). *Town of Belmont Affordable Housing Plan*, Belmont Fair Housing Committee: Belmont, MA.

^{4\} Roger Colton (1996). *Fair Housing and Affordable Housing in Belmont, Massachusetts: Data on Availability, Distribution and Quality*, Fisher, Sheehan and Colton, Public Finance and General Economics: Belmont, MA.

^{5\} Belmont Fair Housing Committee (1997). *McLean Property and Affordable Housing*.

^{6\} The notion of diversity includes a variety of characteristics and traits, such as race, gender, class, culture, physical disability, and age. *See*, Joan P. Shapiro, Trevor E. Sewell & Joseph P. DuCette, *Reframing Diversity in Education* (William J. Bailey ed., 1995).

in several ways: (1) increased academic learning; (2) improved skills in reasoning and inquiry; and (3) improved education in values and behavioral standards. Each of these is briefly examined below.⁷⁷

Increased Academic Learning

Diversity in our classrooms helps schools to pursue their goal of intellectual development. James Freedman, president of Dartmouth College, defined educational "diversity" as bringing together "a richness of people coming together from a variety of backgrounds . . . [presenting] points of view that necessarily are different because of the differences in the backgrounds of the members of the student body." Dr. Freedman called for a "greater variety of people" from a "greater variety of backgrounds" in educational institutions, "coming together from their differences in order to help each of them to educate others."⁸¹

Similarly, Harvard University's President, Neil Rudenstine, recently issued a report tracing the history of diversity at Harvard and discussing the contribution of diversity to learning. He found that the ability "to learn from each other [is] the real beginning of learning, both intellectually and emotionally." Dr. Rudenstine concluded that a diverse student body "is an educational resource of coordinate importance with our faculty and our library, laboratory and housing arrangements."

Dr. Rudenstine also explained that

[s]uch diversity is not an end in itself, or a pleasant but dispensable accessory. It is the substance from which much human learning, understanding, and wisdom derive. It offers one of the most powerful ways of creating the intellectual energy and robustness that lead to greater knowledge⁹¹

In addition to the impacts on student learning, diversity has been found to improve the teaching as well. As professors adapt to teaching diverse populations, increased instructional flexibility will provide more effective teaching, "increasing the likelihood of matching learning differences for all students."¹⁰¹ As institutions focus on maximizing performance for

⁷⁷ A great deal of this discussion is taken from the following article: Note, "An Evidentiary Framework for Diversity as a Compelling Interest in Higher Education," 109 *Harvard Law Review* 1357 (1996).

⁸¹ Again, while Dr. Freedman's references were to a college campus, his comments are equally applicable to the lower grades as well.

⁹¹ *Diversity in Higher Education*, *supra*, at 1372 - 1373.

¹⁰¹ Linda Marchesani & Maurianne Adams, Dynamics of Diversity in the Teaching-Learning Process: A Faculty Development Model for Analysis and Action, in *Promoting Diversity in College Classrooms:*

diverse students, both traditional and nontraditional students will benefit.^{\11\}

Improved Skills in Reasoning and Inquiry

Excellence in education, of course, involves more than simply teaching the "three R's." Excellence in education is largely directed toward inculcating students with the ability to reason, and the ability to inquire about the world in which one lives and operates. Increasing diversity improves that educational process.

In the classroom, professors can use the backgrounds and experiences of other students as a learning tool. Students come to "understand" primarily on the basis of their own reflecting experience, into which they seek to incorporate the new ideas they encounter in their courses. Because their experiences determine their frame of reference, minority students bring the influence of these experiences to assignments and discussions.

Student "encounter[s] with contemporaries [who have] different backgrounds . . . and values can . . . lead to challenge, self-questioning and informal learning which promotes moral and intellectual development." Although professors may not expect all students to reach the same conclusions, "[i]n any field, there is no other way to teach adjudicational reasoning than to confront students with dilemmas and predicaments, with diverse theories and perspectives, and ask them which should prevail, and why." Consequently, students become both recipients of an education and contributors to the education of their fellow students.^{\12\}

In sum, educators have found that individuals improve their thinking abilities when they consider possibilities beyond their own communities.^{\13\}

Improving the Learning of Values and Behavioral Standards

(. . .continued)

Innovative Responses for the Curriculum, Faculty and Institutions 9, 17 (Maurianne Adams ed., 1992).

^{\11\} James A. Anderson & Maurianne Adams, Acknowledging the Learning Styles of Diverse Student Populations: Implications for Instructional Design, in *Teaching for Diversity* 19, 31 (Laura L.B. Border & Nancy Van Note Chism eds., 1992).

^{\12\} *Diversity and Higher Education*, *supra*, at 1370 - 1371.

^{\13\} Elizabeth K. Minnich, American Commitments Nat'l Panel, *Liberal Learning and the Arts of Connection for the New Academy* 33 (1995).

While there is general agreement that the teaching of values begins at home, considerable work has examined how our public school systems impart values to our children as well. Increasing diversity advances this educational function.

In our school system, values are imparted both inside and outside the classroom setting. One researcher, for example, concluded that "individual students are influenced by the total body of their campus peers, which provides both standards for self-judgment and norms of "proper" attitudes and behavior."^{14\} Another found that "interpersonal encounters" were a key element in learning values. "New values grew through significant new associations with people who were different from ourselves in some way and who were willing to grant us access to their inner worlds."^{15\} Yet another found that student organizations may often have more influence on student values than the curriculum or professors.^{16\}

The reason why this values learning occurs makes sense. "The learning process. . . extends beyond the confines of the classroom."^{17\} A student "interacts with his fellow students, exerting influence upon them and they upon him. Through such interplay, a student subculture evolves that becomes an influential source of change for all the individuals who are inducted into it."^{18\}

The diverse experiences of students of different backgrounds contribute to this learning process because "all students stand to benefit from the chance to live and work with classmates. . . who can offer differing attitudes and experiences that will challenge and inform others. This type of interaction is one important means through which students learn and reorient their beliefs."^{19\}

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In sum, diversity in our school system serves broad educational goals, including "book" and

^{14\} Kenneth Feldman & Theodore Newcomb, *The Impact of College on Students* (1994).

^{15\} Kenneth Benne, The Idea of a University in 1965, in *The University in the American Future*, 38 (Thomas B. Stroup ed., 1966).

^{16\} Philip Altbach, Students: Interests, Culture and Activism, in *Higher Learning in America: 1980-2000*, 203, 212-13 (Arthur Levine ed., 1993).

^{17\} *Diversity in Higher Education*, *supra*, at 1372.

^{18\} *Id.*

^{19\} *Id.*

"non-book" learning. Indeed, the "increased learning that occurs through diversity is rooted in the overall interaction of individuals across differences."^{20\} Research has repeatedly found that, when graduating classes are surveyed, seniors believe that they have benefitted as much from contact with one another as they have from their readings and lectures.^{21\}

As the Belmont Fair Housing Committee promotes policies to increase the supply of affordable housing in our Town, the goal of attaining and maintaining educational excellence in our school system will be advanced as well.

^{20\} *Diversity in Higher Education, supra.*

^{21\} Derek Bok, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Social Responsibilities of the Modern University* 97 (1982).

REFERENCES

1. Philip Altbach, Students: Interests, Culture and Activism, in *Higher Learning in America: 1980-2000* (Arthur Levine ed., 1993).
2. James A. Anderson & Maurianne Adams, Acknowledging the Learning Styles of Diverse Student Populations: Implications for Instructional Design, in *Teaching for Diversity* (Laura L.B. Border & Nancy Van Note Chism eds., 1992).
3. Roland Benabou, "Heterogeneity, Stratification, and Growth: Macroeconomic Implications of Community Structure and School Finance," *The American Economic Review* 86(3): 584-609 (June 1996).
4. Roland Benabou, "Workings of a City: Location, Education, and Production," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 619-652 (August 1993).
5. Derek Bok, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Social Responsibilities of the Modern University* (1982).
6. Steven Durlauf, "A Theory of Persistent Income Inequality." *Journal of Economic Growth* 1:75-93 (March 1996).
7. Kenneth Feldman & Theodore Newcomb, *The Impact of College on Students* (1994).
8. Sheila Foster, Difference and Equality: A Critical Assessment of the Concept of 'Diversity', 1996 *Wisconsin Law Review* 105.
9. Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Rethinking America: The Practice and Politics of Multiculturalism in Higher Education, in *Beyond a Dream Deferred: Multicultural Education and the Politics of Excellence* (Becky W. Thompson & Sangeeta Tyagi eds., 1993).
10. Pat Hutchings & Allen Wutzdorff, Experiential Learning Across the Curriculum: Assumptions and Principles, in *Knowing and Doing: Learning Through Experience* (Pat Hutchings & Allen Wutzdorff eds., 1988).
11. Kenneth Keniston & Mark Gerzon, Human and Social Benefits, in *Universal Higher Education: Costs and Benefits* (American Council on Educ. ed., 1971) (noting that professors can teach students by 'expos[ing] students to multiple and conflicting perspectives on themselves and their society').

12. Linda S. Marchesani & Maurianne Adams, Dynamics of Diversity in the Teaching-Learning Process: A Faculty Development Model for Analysis and Action, in *Promoting Diversity in College Classrooms: Innovative Responses for the Curriculum, Faculty and Institutions* (Maurianne Adams ed., 1992).
13. Douglas Massey, "The Age of Extremes: Concentrated Affluence and Poverty in the Twenty-First Century." *Demography* 33(4):395-412 (November 1996).
14. Elizabeth K. Minnich, American Commitments Nat'l Panel, *Liberal Learning and the Arts of Connection for the New Academy* (1995).
15. Joan Shapiro, Trevor E. Sewell & Joseph P. DuCette, *Reframing Diversity in Education* (William J. Bailey ed., 1995).
16. Daryl G. Smith, Lisa Wolf & Thomas Levitan, Introduction to Studying Diversity: Lessons From the Field, in *Studying Diversity in Higher Education* (Daryl G. Smith, Lisa E. Wolf & Thomas Levitan eds., 1994)
17. Daryl G. Smith, Organizational Implications of Diversity in Higher Education, in *Diversity in Organizations: New Perspectives for a Changing Workplace* (Martin M. Chemers, Stuart Oskamp & Mark A. Costanzo eds., 1995).
18. John D. Wilson, *Student Learning in Higher Education* (1981).