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Letters to the Editor

### Concentrate on Learning, Not Schools' Racial Mix

It's interesting that Jonathan Kozol (Letter to the Editor, Oct. 17) thinks that I am opposed to the voluntary Boston-to-suburbs busing program. Not true, as he should know. Unlike Mr. Kozol, I am a school choice proponent, and for 40 years Metco (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity) has been offering some Boston students limited choice.

But the program has never been properly evaluated for its impact on the academic development of the children it serves. Mr. Kozol says "virtually every black child in the program whom I came to know" went on to college. That tells us nothing. Metco students are not a random sample of the Boston school population. Indeed, they tend to be relatively privileged.

In 1997, Gary Orfield, professor of education at Harvard and a man whose work Mr. Kozol deeply admires, looked at Metco, although not at its academic effect. He found that most of the parents had at least some college education, and a third had incomes above the national median. Twenty percent said they would move to the suburbs if the program folded, and only half thought they would definitely remain in Boston.

Unfortunately, there are no data that would allow a rigorous comparison of Metco students and those educated in the Boston schools -- for good reason. The program's director has never been interested in keeping the necessary records. Metco, she once told me, was not designed primarily to serve minority children; its aim has been to expose suburban whites to black culture.

The participants' level of academic achievement, in other words, has been quite irrelevant. And yet surely the first question about any educational strategy should be: Will the children learn more?

Mr. Kozol wonders what I call schools attended mainly by black and Hispanic students, since I object to the term "segregated." Such schools are certainly racially identifiable, but I assume he does not want to suggest that a black child needs to sit next to one who is Asian or white in order to learn math.

Moreover, what would he like to do to create racial balance in Detroit, for instance, where whites are down to less than 4%? The minority families who have escaped to nearby suburbs surely do not want to be bused back to their old neighborhoods.

But here's the good news: What matters in a school is not the racial mix, but the academic culture, and a culture that nurtures learning can be created in all-minority schools. Take a look around Boston, Mr. Kozol; start with a visit to the Match, a fine charter school, which has stunning academic results.

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