

Want to buy a home near a Mass. 'best' public high school? Look to spend \$1M

By [Chris McLaughlin | cmclaughlin@masslive.com](mailto:cmclaughlin@masslive.com)



The Dover-Sherborn High School building

Looking to buy a house near a “top-ranked” public school? You’ll likely need at least \$1 million to afford the median home there.

[Niche](#), a school rating website, recently issued rankings for the “[best public high schools](#)” in Massachusetts for this school year. The communities in which they’re located are among the most expensive in the state, with the vast majority of the ones that have a top 20 school having median single-family home prices above \$1 million over the six-month period of March to August this year, according to data from the [Massachusetts Association of Realtors](#).

In the most extreme examples — Weston and Brookline, which host the fourth-best and fifth-best high schools in Massachusetts, according to Niche — median single-family home prices were \$2.28 million and \$2.52 million respectively over the past six months.

- **Read more:** [Weston Public Schools ranked as top Mass. school district, top 25 in US, Niche says](#)

Belmont, Boxborough, Dover, Sherborn, Newton, Lexington, Wellesley, Lincoln, Sudbury, Wayland, Concord, Carlisle, Westwood and Needham, all with top 20 schools, all have median single-family home values above \$1 million. Other communities on the top schools list, like Hopkinton and Acton, have median single-family home prices above \$900,000.

Data for condominiums, while slightly lower than single-family homes, was similarly high.

Jack Schneider, Ph.D., an associate professor in UMass Lowell's School of Education who specializes in measurements of school quality and education policy, said what school ranking lists often purport to be the "best schools," actually do a better job of finding "the most advantaged kids."

How does he find these rankings? "Absolutely worthless," he said.

- **Read more:** [These are the best public high schools in Mass., according to Niche](#)

"I think about this for a living, but there are lots of us who can, if prompted, begin to name lots of things that we want schools to do for young people and standardized test scores don't measure any of those things," Schneider said. "And that's the chief data point for most of these websites."

One school, two rankings

In an interview with MassLive, Schneider gave personal examples through his daughter's educational experiences to highlight this point.

His daughter attends a K-8 school in Somerville, which Schneider said according to one school rating site ranked the K-5 portion of the school fairly low, but that the grades 6-8 portion was ranked as "one of the top schools in

the state."

Schneider pointed out there are not two separate schools for grades K-5 and 6-8, but rather one school, with one principal, the same staff, the same school culture, in the same building.

The only difference, according to Schneider, is that a separate K-5 school exists in the district that does not offer middle school level classes. "And so most of those students, once they reach grade 6, come on over to her school and they happen to be the most economically privileged students in the city," he said.

Those students bring with them their test scores, "and suddenly the school becomes a quote-unquote 'top' school," Schneider said.

- **Read more:** [Amid buying boom, these are most expensive places to buy a home near Boston](#)

Schneider has worked since 2016 to build data systems to track school quality in Massachusetts through the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment, or [MCIEA](#).

MCIEA has eight state public school districts that it partners with, in order to offer "a fair and effective accountability system that offers a more dynamic picture of student learning and school quality than a single standardized test," according to its website.

MCIEA aims to measure school quality in a framework of [indicators](#) such as the culture of the school, its resources, academic learning, a school's teachers and leadership and community and wellbeing factors for students. MCIEA does not rank schools against one another, but rather uses data as a "starting point for understanding school strengths and areas for growth."

Schneider said MCIEA is trying to provide its School Quality Framework dashboard free to any school district in Massachusetts that wishes to use it,

in order to not just help families find good schools, but also help teachers and leaders reexamine the metrics by which they are often evaluated by.

- **Read more:** [These are the 10 best private high schools in Mass. this year, Niche writes](#)

Niche, in its rankings and assessments, measures qualities such as proficiency in reading and math, average test scores, enrollment in Advanced Placement courses and does add in other factors such as the local median rent, median household income and the median home value.

It also examines each school's student-teacher ratio, the average teacher salary, extracurricular club and activity engagement, popular colleges and universities for the school, as well as polls results and reviews by students and parents about attitudes toward the school.

School rankings and segregation

David Houston, Ph.D., an associate professor in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University in Virginia, agreed with Schneider school rankings tend to do a better job capturing the average socioeconomic status of students these schools serve, rather than being a reliable measurement of the "best schools."

Houston said he does not critique families turning to tool like school rankings to find the best schools for their children — nor that the schools listed among "the best" are not inherently good schools — but rather does critique the information typically used to rank them, which he said can lead to incentives where parents seek out ever more exclusive and segregated learning environments.

"[Parents] want the best education for their kids, but they're not getting good data to do that, and in doing so, they end up exacerbating these large social problems," Houston said.

Schneider added the consequences of ranking lists which purport to name the “best schools” with narrow ranges of data points are “pretty concerning.”

Schneider said if taken for granted that most of the communities with the “best schools” are “going to be whiter and more affluent than a typical community in Massachusetts,” an issue then arises where buyers who can afford to live there will compete with one another for housing supply in the district, raising real estate prices in “already highly valued markets.”

This also has the effect of pricing out families who can’t afford to live there, particularly low-income parents, racial minorities, immigrants and those who did not complete their formal education, Schneider said. The ratings also have a negative effect of “stigmatizing” schools near the bottom of the lists, he added.

Houston has also recommended reevaluating the ways school quality is measured, such as by achievement growth over time, something he discussed earlier this year in an article in [The Conversation](#), about how the way parents can pick the best school for their child.

He added that, “Massachusetts is already a leader among states in estimating student level growth over time and aggregating it up to the school and the district level,” and that these measurements over time, while imperfect, are a “notable improvement,” to school rankings.

The state’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education puts out [annual report cards](#) of each school and school district in the state, with DESE saying just as students receive a report card to indicate how they are doing in different classes that “school and district report cards are designed to show parents and community members how a school or district is doing in different areas.”

These report cards measure a school or a district’s strengths as well as the challenges that need to be addressed, according to DESE.

An integration program

Students who reside in Boston are also eligible for an over 50-year-old voluntary school integration program known as the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity, or METCO.

- **Read more:** [This Mass. school district made Niche's list of top places to teach in the US](#)

According to its [admissions policy](#), the state-funded METCO program is meant to “expand educational opportunities, increase diversity, and reduce racial isolation by permitting students from Boston to attend schools in other communities that have agreed to participate.”

The program added that since its founding it has enrolled “tens of thousands of Boston students of color in participating school districts” — many of which are districts Niche ranked among the top rated public high schools in the state.

For example, listed among METCO's [partner districts](#), where it sends anywhere from about 60 to several hundred students, include towns such as Belmont, Brookline, Concord, Lexington, Lincoln, Needham, Newton, Sharon, Sudbury, Wayland, Wellesley and Weston, according to a map of METCO student enrollment for the 2021-2022 school year.

About 15 Boston area suburbs outside of the top 20 ranked public high schools in the state also work with METCO. So too do other towns with top ranked districts such as Dover, Sherborn and Westwood, albeit with fewer total METCO students than some of their counterparts.

According to [enrollment data](#) from METCO, the program sends more than 3,000 students from Boston to over 30 suburban school districts, many of whom — per 2019-2020 data — are overwhelmingly Black, at about two-thirds, and Hispanic, at about a quarter, and of whom 37% are considered

economically disadvantaged.

Data from [U.S. News & World Report](#) indicated that there are about 48,000 students enrolled across Boston Public Schools' network of 115 schools across all grade levels.