

Making Boston the “Opportunity City”

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Throughout the world, perceptions of America have been inextricably tied to the idea of the “American Dream” — the ability for every American, regardless of racial or socioeconomic background, with hard work and ingenuity to ascend a ladder of opportunity to a more productive and fulfilling life. However, recent inquiries into the state of the American Dream have underscored a widespread pessimism about upward mobility in the United States— income gaps have widened, poverty has grown, and high school graduation rates have dipped.

What will it take to move the needle on socioeconomic equity in our communities today?

In Boston, during the 1990s, the incomes of the bottom quintile eroded by 2% while those in the middle saw stagnant incomes and those already at the top saw their incomes rise by 22%. Despite this widening income gap, I believe that the conditions exist in the Boston region to test whether social mobility can be unleashed through a set of smart interventions. Boston could become the “opportunity city” by strategically building and securing assets- the income, human capital and financial wealth- of its residents and businesses.

Acute labor shortages threaten to stifle the economic prospects of the Boston region. Young families and college graduates are leaving the area due to high housing costs while immigrants and local youth face long waits for English language classes and uneven educational quality and access. To address these acute labor shortages, the region must utilize and develop every able body in the region, bringing the traditionally disadvantaged up a ladder of opportunity to be productive contributors to the local economy. In short, the fates of the region and the disadvantaged are intertwined.

The Boston Foundation has invested in a powerful set of interlocking levers to build assets in three areas that will have an outsized role in whether Boston can be the “opportunity city.” education, workforce development, and housing.

- In the education arena, the Foundation is committed to ensuring a high-quality, accessible continuum of learning from pre-Kindergarten to college completion. The Foundation has supported the Early Education for All Campaign’s policy advocacy and JumpStart’s innovative university-community partnerships to increase access to high-quality early education for all children. The Foundation has also supported K-12 structural reform efforts like the Great Schools Campaign and pilot and charter schools to remove barriers to meaningful school choice for parents and promote student academic achievement. Finally, the Foundation is also

exploring work to increase access to public higher education as the attainment of an Associates or Bachelors degree has become a key milestone for individual economic success in many fields.

- In the workforce development arena, the Foundation focuses its work on increasing access to jobs that provide an income for family self-sufficiency. To rebuild missing bottom rungs on the ladder of opportunity, the foundation is a partner in the English for New Bostonians funding collaborative, which expands English literacy program slots in the city of Boston. In addition, to address the skilled worker shortage, the foundation was a founding partner of SkillWorks, a \$15 million public-private, job-training partnership to meet the labor force needs of regional employers in growth industries where career ladders exist for low-wage workers.
- In the housing arena, the Foundation works to create decent, affordable housing for all Boston residents as a foundation for individual security and to maintain the economic health of the region. The Commonwealth Housing Task Force, a Boston Foundation-convened coalition of business and civic leaders, recently pushed landmark legislation through the State House to increase affordable housing production near transit nodes for middle-income families. Simultaneously, the foundation has been an engaged partner in the Homelessness Prevention Initiative and the HomeFunders partnership to provide services to those at-risk of being homeless and to build more units affordable to the very-low income.

An asset-building framework must incorporate both the development of human capacities (as through education and workforce development) and the removal of barriers (as through lowering the basic costs of living like housing) to enable individuals to enter into and stay in the economic mainstream. Boston will be an interesting test case to watch as the Boston Foundation, with its many civic partners, continues to promote this alignment between improving the economic prospects of the city and region and moving the disadvantaged up a ladder of opportunity.