



Education

Working Group
Transition Team Report

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Photo: Richard Howard and the Boston Foundation

Photos: Erin Murphy



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“What can Boston city government do—whether by itself or in partnership with others—to help make Boston a national leader in closing the achievement gap?”

INTRODUCTION

Boston’s continued prosperity and quality of life is dependent on the vitality and viability of its public education system. Boston Public Schools (BPS) is a national leader among urban school districts, and continues to make progress in reducing its number of dropouts and in graduating students prepared for success in college and careers. Still, too many students are not successful and not every Boston school is a quality school that serves students and their families.

Mayor Walsh asked, “What can Boston city government do—whether by itself or in partnership with others—to help make Boston a national leader in closing the achievement gap? The Boston Public Schools is likely at the heart of this discussion, but feel free to interpret the question broadly to include other parts of

city government and partnerships between the city and private or institutional entities.”

THE PROCESS

Mayor Walsh’s Education Working Group listened to the opinions of hundreds of participants in the Open Town Hall Meeting and Public Hearing. It received testimonies and discussed ways that Boston city government, working with BPS, can help make Boston a national leader in closing achievement gaps among groups of students.

BPS’s intention to close achievement gaps is well established and clear. In 2006, the Boston School Committee adopted an achievement gap policy that, in part, states that all its “... policies and practices will reflect the goals of eliminating achievement gaps and achieving academic proficiency, explicitly, and emphatically. By purpose and design, the district will advance these goals by developing cultural competence, ensuring uniformly high expectations, promoting rigorous curricula, differentiating instruction, and maximizing access for all students to high-level educational opportunities. Given the urgency of this mission, the district is committed to developing a diverse cadre of educators and administrators, ensuring proper emphasis on culturally responsive service delivery, and rigorously examining and monitoring policies, programs, practices, and written documents to ensure that these goals are implemented.”

THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Mayor’s Education Working Group offers

the following recommendations to the mayor to strengthen the achievement gap policy implementation:

- Review all policies and recommendations to determine whether they close or eliminate the achievement gap. An Achievement/Opportunity Gap statement should accompany every policy and operational proposal.
- Review and implement the achievement gap policy plan, which addresses many important areas, including hiring and cultural competency. Hire with an emphasis on diversity, seeking to hire and recruit more educators of color. Teachers and administrators should receive cultural proficiency trainings.
- Provide senior level leadership and resources for the implementation of the Achievement Gap Policy Plan. Teachers and administrators should receive cultural proficiency training.
- Revise the district’s zero tolerance policies with the goal of keeping students in school.

BPS cannot close achievement gaps alone. Mayor Walsh has identified five priority areas that require intergovernmental, community, foundation, nonprofit, and business collaboration to achieve short- and long-term strategic initiatives. The five priority areas—early childhood education, high school reform, special education, facilities planning, and charter schools—require citywide attention and responses. For each area, the Education Working Group offers recommendations to Mayor Walsh about practices and initiatives to keep in place, to implement in the short-term and to guide vision for the future. Citywide support on each will contribute to closing achievement gaps.

Photo: Erin Murphy



FOCUS 1: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Recent studies show the achievement gap is clearly evident for disadvantaged children as early as age 18 months. The key to closing in on this gap is to start with our youngest children. One way to do this is to close

the experience, opportunity, and readiness gaps that lead to the achievement gap in the earliest years.

The research is overwhelmingly clear that high-quality early childhood education programs provide a strong return on investment—they are valuable for children, families, and the prosperity of the city. Over the years, the BPS and community-based programs and providers have worked together to raise the quality of all the city’s early childhood programs serving children from birth to kindergarten. With the recent spotlight on universal pre-k and the specific needs of serving 4-year-olds, more work needs to be done to ensure that every child has access to a high-quality, affordable, accessible K1 seat in a public/private mixed delivery system. In addition, the plan should meet families’ needs for such affordable programs, before and after school care, and accessible care choices. Toward that goal, our recommendations are as follows:

KEEP

- 1) Expand and bolster Thrive in 5 so it can become a citywide model for catalyzing partners across sectors and neighborhoods into a school readiness movement that will ensure Boston’s future prosperity for generations to come.
- 2) Keep and expand early learning centers, Play-to-Learn groups, and other projects and programs, like Smart From the Start, which is showing a positive impact on school readiness.

IMPLEMENT

- 1) Create and convene an Early Ed/K1 Expansion Task Force that includes the BPS, Thrive in 5, funders, universities, and other concerned community partners to develop a concrete plan and timeline for K1 expansion that supports a strong public/private mixed delivery system providing quality early education, well trained teachers, and meets families' needs.
- 2) Continue to observe and monitor the impact of the Boston K1ds and Ready Educator demonstration projects.
- 3) Create an inventory of all existing city-supported early childhood programs supporting children 0-5 that are not in BPS, to quantify the City's existing support to this age group, and engage families in their children's early learning.
- 4) Advocate for federal, state, and local funding to expand children's access to programs and support program quality.

DREAM

- 1) Create a sustainable model of early education and a comprehensive plan, starting with 4-year olds, but eventually for all children birth to kindergarten entry, that meets family needs for consistent and affordable wrap-around services.

FOCUS 2: FACILITIES

The BPS's facility problem is growing and impacting its ability to close achievement gaps. K-2 enrollment is projected to

increase by 19% in four years, and overall enrollment is projected to increase by 7%. BPS does not have adequate seats for the projected enrollment of pre-k and elementary students. The population of students with disabilities has increased nearly 8% in the last four years. The population of English language learners has increased more than 8 % in the last four years.

Boston needs more classrooms to accommodate more options for inclusion classes and dual language opportunities in schools closer to home for students with disabilities.

KEEP

- 1) Maintain a high level of attention and scrutiny on any new building proposals until a facilities plan is implemented.
- 2) Ensure that new, planned construction fully utilizes funding from the Massachusetts School Building Authority.

IMPLEMENT

- 1) Begin the process to create a strategic long-term facilities plan that identifies the City's needs in terms of schools, facilities, and athletic facilities district-wide, and takes into account current and projected populations to identify where empty seats are and where additional



seats are needed.

- 2) Plan for short-term and long-term maintenance of current buildings.

DREAM

- 1) Have a ten-year facilities plan that invests in school construction and renovation, utilizing state funding to the maximum extent possible.
- 2) All facilities decisions regarding construction or closing of schools should be made with community input and through the lens of equity (using data from an equity impact study), to ensure that all students have access

to quality facilities.

- 3) New buildings can be funded or financed by selling or leasing underutilized facilities and businesses.
- 4) All students should have access to rich reading resources and libraries.
- 5) The city should find an adequate space for an adult learning center.

FOCUS 3: HIGH SCHOOL REFORM

BPS continues to reduce the dropout rate and increase the number of students prepared for success in college and careers.

Nevertheless, there are significant achievement gaps. Sixteen percent of incoming ninth graders drop out of school before graduation. The dropout rate is 21% for English language learners and students with disabilities. Graduation rates are lowest for African American and Latino students; specifically, 35% of entering African American ninth graders and 41% of entering Latino students do not complete high school in four years. Only 75% of graduating students enroll in a two- or four-year college, and of these, only 33% graduate with a two- or four-year degree within six years. On average, 40% of 10th graders at our large district high schools scored needs improvement/warning/failure in English language arts, as did 51% in mathematics. Too many students graduate high school not prepared for high paying, high demand jobs. We can and must do better.

KEEP

- 1) Continue Success Boston, a partnership focused on helping BPS students persist through college graduation.
- 2) Expand partnerships with community-based organizations, some which are now funded under Weighted Student Funding.
- 3) Continue BPS's reengagement and dropout recovery efforts and programs.
- 4) Increase school to work connections/jobs programs during the year and summer.
- 5) Expand programs that embed college transition programs into the colleges while strengthening the programs to offer services for college readiness directly in high schools.
- 6) Expand GED to college programs.
- 7) Continue targeted preparation classes for the Accuplacer college placement test.



Photo: Chris Supple

IMPLEMENT

- 1) Create a citywide high school reform task force to set a vision for excellent, community-based high schools that prepare all students for success in college and careers through support for rigorous academic programs as well as career and technical pathways.
- 2) Better engage the business community to link high school college/career pathways with workforce development.
- 3) Implement transition support for high school students after graduation so that they can get through college.
- 4) At Madison Park specifically, better align the academic and vocational education programs. Fully implement the plans to make Madison Park an Innovation School.
- 5) Make Advanced Placement classes available to as many high school students as possible.

DREAM

- 1) Redesign all high schools to become comprehensive and truly college-prep.
- 2) Make early enrollment at colleges and universities a possibility for more students. Reinstate dual enrollment funding for students.
- 3) Strengthen Career and Technical education, which may require changing some of the rules under which those schools operate.
- 4) Align curricula between middle and high schools, high schools, and colleges, to provide



a more seamless transition for students.

- 5) Engage colleges and universities in a focused conversation. Re-engage colleges and universities as partners with the BPS.
- 6) Begin college-prep programs before high school, as waiting until high school may be too late for many students.
- 7) Increase the number of guidance counselors to support students in identifying and accessing college and career opportunities.

FOCUS 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION

Recognizing that all students are capable of learning, and each student is capable of maximizing his or her potential within the school setting, it is essential that barriers that interfere with a student's success in school be removed.

In closing the achievement gap, all students, including students with disabilities and English language learners, should have the opportunity to participate within the general education curriculum with accommodations, modifications, and/or support services to support the student's learning style.

KEEP

- 1) Continue the Special Education Parents Advisory Council (SPED PAC) as an effective participant in BPS SPED decision-making and policy setting.
- 2) Support the Henderson/O'Hearn and other effective inclusion programs, and let them serve as replication models to expand inclusion district-wide.
- 3) Continue the Inclusion Task Force and encourage its important work to continue.

IMPLEMENT

- 1) Ensure that Individual Education Plans (IEP) are being fully implemented and that the IEP process becomes friendlier and easier for families to understand, access, and participate in effectively, especially for families who do not speak English, have limited education, or face other barriers.
- 2) Reduce the organizational complexity of BPS Special Education programs, services, and practices, and provide information to families regarding the range of available BPS Special Education resources and available placement options most suited to the needs of students with disabilities.

- 3) Look at alternative funding sources, for example health insurances, to ensure that Boston is collecting all of the money that it could to provide wrap-around services and services to students on the autism spectrum.

DREAM

- 1) Ensure that students with disabilities in inclusion classes and dual language students are able to transition smoothly to high school.
- 2) Seek every opportunity to ensure that students with disabilities should, to the maximum extent appropriate, be educated with and alongside their non-disabled peers.
- 3) Expand the use of successful team models, such as the Henderson/O’Hearn School and Neighborhood House Charter School, where specialists are able to intervene in a proactive way.
- 4) Expand the use of Applied Behavioral Analysis for students with autism spectrum disorders in one-on-one settings, but also generalized in the larger classroom.
- 5) Maintain services for students with disabilities over the summer at the same level offered during the school year.
- 6) Expand the scope of “Special Education” to include wrap-around services that meet the needs of all schoolchildren.
- 7) Tie in public health, clinical, and behavioral health models, so that all schools have nurses and school psychologists.

- 8) Improve transitional services for 14-22 year olds to adulthood.

FOCUS 5: CHARTER SCHOOLS

Mayor Walsh’s vision for Boston is that all of Boston’s schools are high quality schools. Ideally, it should not matter whether a quality education is provided in a traditional public, charter, or parochial school.

In reality, however, there is a fierce debate over the proper place of charter schools within Boston’s educational framework. Strongly held beliefs among members of the Education Working Group at both ends of the spectrum kept the group from reaching consensus on a set of recommendations for Mayor Walsh. The same level of passion over



Photo: Richard Howard and the Boston Foundation



charter schools was also evident at the Public Hearing and Town Hall break-out sessions.

Members of the public shared many ideas on the subject, including: requiring more public reporting of charter school enrollment and performance data so that parents are better able to make informed decisions about where to send their children; implementing a charter school oversight committee to study what works and what doesn't work in charter schools; looking at the funding mechanism to ensure that resources are equitably allocated between charter and non-charter schools; and commissioning a study on how charter schools and other choice programs have impacted traditional public schools.

Ultimately, the Education Working Group was unable to devote the time necessary to come to a consensus on any of these suggestions. These were

the most contentious issues that the team faced, and it appears that the public is equally split on the question of charter schools.

The Education Working Group recommends continuing the dialogue on charter schools so that all voices can be heard while promoting opportunities for schools to learn from each other. Specifically, we recommend:

KEEP

- 1) Support and expand the Boston Compact so that traditional district, charter, parochial and private schools are encouraged to collaborate and share best practices to help all of Boston's students succeed.

IMPLEMENT

- 1) Develop a mechanism for expanding public dialogue on charter schools, whether through a single Town Hall or a series of meetings, in a way that is fair, deliberate, inclusive, and fact-based.
- 2) Develop a strategy to reduce animus between charter school supporters and opponents, evidenced at both the Public Hearing and Town Hall sessions.

DREAM

- 1) Analyze the ingredients of successful schools in Boston, whether charter or in-district traditional, and share best practices among schools.

OTHER COMMENTS

The Education Working Group identified four recommendations that appeared consistently across all five areas. They are:

- 1) In choosing a superintendent, it will be important for candidates to demonstrate their commitment and experience in closing achievement gaps and in each of the mayor's five priority areas.
- 2) Address equity among schools. All schools, whether exam, charter, or public, need to be quality schools.

- 3) Strengthen programs and instruction for English language learners at all grade levels, and expand dual language programs.
- 4) Expand resources and opportunities for working with and engaging parents as partners in their children's education.

In addition to the five priority areas, the Education Working Group identified several recommendations that emerged from written and oral testimony and team discussion. The following recommendations are worthy of consideration.

KEEP

- 1) Maintain strong leadership and innovation from the top.
- 2) Continue the Boston Schoolyard Initiative and outdoor teaching and learning, and invest in outdoor teaching and learning infrastructure.
- 3) Sustain stand-alone middle schools, rather than switching to K-8 or 6-12.
- 4) Increase social and behavioral health services in schools to deal with trauma and family issues.

IMPLEMENT

- 1) Increase communications among all city departments and agencies that deal with children to facilitate the best possible wrap-around services for all of Boston's students.
- 2) Increase support for robust arts education in schools, including the existing BPS Arts Expansion Initiative and partnership with Boston artists.

- 3) Establish mechanisms for greater parental and student involvement and engagement on a regular basis, perhaps in a Town Hall or other public setting.
- 4) Create partnerships with the Health and Human Services Department to use federal funding to expand behavioral health partnerships.
- 5) Bring together non-profits that work with children and families to figure out how to collaborate more with BPS.
- 6) Make health education resources available for all students, including ELL and LGBTQ.
- 7) Commission an equity study to look at the effects of the new assignment system.

DREAM

- 1) Consider creating a loan forgiveness program for teachers.
- 2) Extend the school day district-wide.
- 3) Provide opportunities for families to have a real voice in BPS decision-making. Examine other factors, including poverty and homelessness, across city agencies to truly address the achievement gap as it currently exists.
- 4) Establish a strong pipeline of school leaders and principals to make sure that we are constantly developing people.
- 5) Place more emphasis on teaching to the whole child to connect to arts education, sports, and other components of the curriculum that help keep students engaged.
- 6) Create a task force that oversees the impact of the new student assignment process using an equity lens.



Photo: Erin Murphy

Education Working Group

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