

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Chairperson and Members  
Boston School Committee

FROM: Carol R. Johnson  
Superintendent

DATE: January 30, 2008

RE: Proficiency, Opportunity and Efficiency: Superintendent's Acceleration Agenda for the  
Boston Public Schools

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### INTRODUCTION

On January 18<sup>th</sup>, I completed the first 100 days of listening and learning in the Boston community. I present to the School Committee highlights of what I have heard and recommendations for building on the Boston Public Schools' strengths, accelerating our efforts, and in some cases, changing direction.

Since I arrived, our Community Forums have helped the School Committee and me hear the voices of hundreds of students and parents, community leaders, and interested citizens from all corners of this city. I have spoken with teachers, support staff, and principals and headmasters. I have visited classrooms in almost half of our schools and reviewed documents, books, and assessment data that offer reflective insights about the past decade of intentional focus on children and instruction, as well as perspectives about the challenges ahead. Listening and learning are never one-time events. Rather, the work we must undertake will require a feedback system that promotes continuous improvement and responds to the ever-changing demands and needs that our students and our nation present.

Let me begin the presentation of these recommendations by offering three core, underlying principles that are foundational to the challenges and work ahead:

1. Today, Boston Public Schools, the birthplace of public education in this nation, offers the best education possible for some of its students. *Boston Public Schools has the capacity to offer the best education possible for all of its students.*

2. Change is never easy, and while specific actions may seem instant and quick, sustained/transformational change requires a reshaping of our cultural frame of reference and a shift in how we leverage limited resources with other partners, parents, parks, libraries, faith-based groups, businesses, and community and neighborhood associations to achieve the outcomes we want for children. *Adult issues in our schools, in the political arena, or throughout our city must take a back seat to our efforts to develop, educate, and in some cases, rescue the youth of our city.*
3. Our core business is academic achievement; thus, what happens inside and outside our classrooms and in our schools on an hour-by-hour basis matters – and it matters a lot. Our investments both inside and outside of the classroom matter. Our partnerships with parents matter. Our efforts to develop character and help students make good and healthy choices – our capacity to inspire and engage students to own their success and to put in the extra effort – all matter. *This means making sure our students have early exposure to experiences that enhance school learning – enriching experiences in the arts, safe and structured after-school learning programs, numerous athletic opportunities, and robust health and social support systems.* These ingredients, when combined together, offer our students the best and most powerful prescription for lifelong well-being and lifelong success.

These three underlying principles are the cornerstone of my recommendations. They will guide everything that we will accomplish.

In this presentation, I will provide an initial assessment of challenges that confront the system, followed by recommendations for going forward, presented in two phases. Because the business of school improvement and operating schools effectively and efficiently involves academic, operational, fiscal, and community dimensions, this report addresses the following:

***Phase I*** gives primary emphasis to academic achievement, organizational structures for supporting schools, and the FY 2009 fiscal challenges. This includes investment priorities for interventions to accelerate the performance of low-performing students, dropout prevention and recovery efforts, and enrichment experiences that enhance learning for students already on track for success.

***Phase II*** will focus on operational, family and community outreach efforts, and the long-term fiscal and facilities needs of the schools. Some aspects of *Phase II* are still under review and will be brought to the School Committee in April 2008. This includes processes for building constituent confidence and strengthening the engagement of parents, partners, and the broader, more diverse community in a youth development and education advocacy agenda. My report tonight will simply identify key issues and areas of focus for Phase II.

We must be mindful of our fiscal situation, and I am working to incorporate my agenda into the FY 2009 budget development process. I am also in the midst of assembling a leadership team with whom I will work to carry out these recommendations in both *Phase I* and *Phase II*.

## HEARING FROM THE COMMUNITY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

After being introduced at a press conference in June, I stated that I would “hit the ground listening.” Since then, I have met with, talked to, and engaged individuals, community organizations and foundations, higher education institutions, faith-based groups, and business partners. I have visited almost half of our

144 schools and spoken with students, school faculty, families, district employees, and a host of interested and involved citizens about their experiences, observations, and hopes for the children of Boston. Since November, we have hosted a series of Community Forums to listen to the public's ideas for improving our graduation rate. In addition, a plethora of documents and reports offered an historical perspective on the district's efforts and accomplishments, as well as challenges yet to be addressed. (A list of these documents is found in the appendix.)

While there is still much more to learn and many more voices to hear, the challenges identified in this report represent the themes from these conversations and documents. These perspectives, combined with the district's own accountability and assessment information, are the source for this section of the report. The challenges identified in this section focus primarily on our agenda for academic achievement. However, as part of our efforts to better align all of the district's efforts with an overarching focus on teaching and learning, I have also identified specific operational and community-building needs that surfaced during our listening campaign and contribute or detract from our focus on student success.

### *Phase I – Academics*

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- **Achieving Excellence for All:** While the district has made progress, there continues to be significant achievement gaps among student groups, with insufficient academic growth particularly among African American/Black and Latino students, low-income students, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners.
- **Off-Track and Dropout Youth/Graduation Rates:** Despite significant strides in high schools, BPS continues to face an ongoing dropout crisis. About 1,900 dropouts in 2005-2006 represent an increase over previous years, and underscore a persistent achievement gap across race, gender, and special needs populations. Our current four-year graduation rate of nearly 60 percent has remained relatively unchanged over the last six years, and the graduation rates for Latino and African-American males are both below 50% (45% and 48% respectively), according to a report from the Parthenon Group commissioned by the Boston Public Schools.
- **Growing Needs of Special Education:** BPS serves some 11,000 students identified in special education, representing nearly 20 percent of the district's student population. This is far higher than districts of similar size, such as Atlanta (9 percent students with disabilities) and San Francisco (10 percent students with disabilities). Students with disabilities are among the lowest-performing subgroups in nearly all grades on MCAS tests, and students placed in substantially separate classrooms are more likely to drop out. Educators seeking help for students who may exhibit emotional and behavioral difficulties (but who may or may not be eligible for special education) choose a special education assessment as a default position because they are often unsure where else within the school district they can get assistance. This has resulted in the over-referral of students of color, boys in particular, and a disproportionate number of students being placed in L/AB (Learning/Adaptive Behavior) clusters and more restrictive environments. Some schools have significantly higher populations of L/AB cluster students, limiting their ability to develop quality inclusive settings.

A sometimes adversarial relationship has existed among parents of special needs students, their advocates, and the special education staff, resulting in a greater focus on legal compliance and significant parent and staff time being consumed with communications that are not necessarily productive for student learning. Parents report feeling left out or uninformed about their rights. Late-arriving students feel they have few options. BPS continues to struggle, as districts do nationally, with maintaining a cadre of professional special education staff (including speech

clinicians, occupational therapists, physical therapists, etc.). Many more teachers are licensed and qualified to teach special education than choose to work in the field. Teachers report feeling overwhelmed with paperwork or frustrated by some parent demands. These shortages, combined with the challenge of having dual certification staff, work against the efforts to create effective inclusive classroom models.

These students need stable, predictable learning environments and staff. Transitions from elementary to middle to high school and the lack of a district-wide coherent, aligned instructional strategy in particular for literacy and targeted interventions for special needs students at the secondary level, continue to stand in the way of a high school diploma for these students.

*Special education is a regular education issue.* Too often, the responsibility for special education students is assumed to be the work only of special education staff. Missing is a professional development strategy that identifies exemplary inclusive practice models and integrates both regular and special education professional development.

- **School Choice ... Excellence for All:** Families of all incomes, races, languages, or backgrounds want the best for their children. There exists in the district a growing demand for K-8 schools to ensure continuity and stability, and schools that offer not just basic skills, but as was articulated in the Student Assignment Task Force report, parents want “quality schools.” Unless BPS is perceived as offering a broader array of exemplary schools and programs of choice, parents have and will make choices outside of BPS (METCO, charter schools, home schooling, private/parochial schools). Some school staff report working very hard to build a strong program, only to see their efforts diminished as students elect to attend Advanced Work Classes located in other schools throughout the district. Wait lists are compiled, but it is not always clear how or when students on those lists are offered seats. In some cases, staff believe that this results in some students leaving the district, and in other cases, very small schools cannot offer the array of enriching programs that parents demand. Parents believe progress has been made and value choice, but they are concerned that siblings are still unable consistently to get into their schools of choice. Boston offers K-8 and 6-8 schools; however, in some neighborhoods, there is simply an insufficient number of seats for the school-age population, and not all of our schools are easily transformed into the K-8 schools parents want.

Parents perceive that the K-8 offerings are not evenly distributed throughout the school zones, and indeed, other districts have designed and offered public Montessori pre-K and elementary programs, early/middle colleges/dual enrollment, International Baccalaureate, gender-specific programming, and school/business partnership schools to ensure a more rigorous and broader portfolio of school offerings to attract, maintain, and grow their student population.

Despite improvements in recent years, student enrollment and registration processes often focus more on residency requirements than creating a welcoming and accommodating, family-friendly feeling. Technology is not fully used to expedite placements or help families update addresses without taking time off work to re-register, and the waiting lists for siblings starts over annually, providing no benefit for those who have waited for multiple years on multiple lists. None of this supports welcoming, attracting, and retaining families and students.

- **Growing Needs of English Language Learners:** More than 10,000 students, or about 18 percent of our student population, are classified as English Language Learners. With the passage of Question 2 five years ago, which generally replaced bilingual education classes with English Immersion, ELL students in Boston have struggled to keep pace with their English-speaking peers. There is not an adequate range of programs for ELL students, and there is not enough

support for these students in their schools. Exacerbating the problem is a shortage of qualified, certified English as a Second Language teachers. Finally, families are often confused or uninformed about the choices available to them, resulting in their children not receiving appropriate language services.

Like special education, the issue of English Language Learners carries over into regular education. Students will transition out of language programs, so we must better prepare teachers who receive them to provide support as necessary. This will require providing some level of ESL support in every school with ELL students through dual-certification programs, expanded recruitment of ESL teachers, and ongoing training for ESL and non-ESL teachers. On the front end, in order to better serve these children and their families, our existing Newcomers Center must be expanded into a Newcomers Assessment and Counseling Center that screens, places, and supports these students during their transition into the Boston Public Schools.

- **Student Support – Eliminating Non-Academic Barriers to Success:** Too often, the City’s youth and educational programs and services are not aligned to complement the school calendar, cultural holidays and events, or parents’ needs. Programming among the schools, parks, community centers, libraries, and recreation departments are disjointed. The current efforts, while individually significant, fail to maximize our collective efforts to give students safe, structured, and supportive leadership development and recreational activities that are age- and gender-appropriate and culturally sensitive.

The data from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey point to a growing population of students more likely to engage in risky behaviors, to experience or be exposed to violence, to be depressed, to watch three or more hours of television daily, and less likely to participate in physical education activities.

Teachers report feeling ill-equipped to respond both to the academic needs of students and to students whose life experiences have damaged their spirits and sense of purpose and resilience. BPS lacks the human and program resources to adequately respond to the needs of students whose mental health and social-emotional needs must be resolved to impact their learning and may indeed, at specific times in the schooling process, supersede their academic needs. Individual school efforts to partner with community providers and resources focused on the most extreme behaviors of students fail to create a systemic safety net or prevent the downward spiral that destroys students’ hope and aspirations. Few schools have full-time or part-time social workers and external social service partners, except for schools with significant special education populations. In addition, 31 schools have Family and Community Outreach Coordinators, although there is great demand citywide. This situation is further exacerbated with newly arriving students whose language, legal status, and culturally specific experiences discourage them from gaining access to these services, even when they are available in neighborhood clinics.

In some cases, providing translated materials or language interpreters is an insufficient response to the problems faced by these students and their families. Many students live in one neighborhood, go to school in another, and access other family services, including places of worship, in yet another community. Creating a safety net that accommodates these choices has been difficult and challenges the cross-functional teamwork that might naturally occur among organizations and schools.

Student mobility is extremely high in some neighborhoods. This constant entry and re-entry process, as well as the inconsistency of curriculum and instructional strategies, present

significant barriers to learning and to collecting accurate data to support a systematic process for re-entry.

- **Alignment and Teamwork:** A series of interviews with individual staff at the school and district level suggests that there is a lack of shared responsibility, coherence, and alignment for improvement across central departments and between schools and the district office. This is nowhere more evident than in the link between the Triad Deputy Superintendents' Offices and the Teaching & Learning, Curriculum & Instruction, High School Renewal, and Professional Development offices of the district. Schools report a sense of fragmentation and separate silos.

In summer 2007, efforts were made to align and connect the principals/assistant principals' professional development across the district; however, the perception persists that historically only a few key staff are involved in making decisions, prioritizing resources, or setting and directing the theory of action and strategic implementation process. On a positive note, across schools K-12, there appears to be a centralized and coherent focus in math and science, and Reader's and Writer's Workshop is pervasively used throughout the K-8 grades.

Professional Development is located in many places (both internally and externally) throughout the school community, and while there exists the Dimensions of Effective Teaching and the Seven Essentials of Whole School Improvement, staff seem less clear about how these elements are operationalized or included in performance reviews. Professional Development is offered by Curriculum & Instruction staff, Reading First coaches, the Triad Deputy Superintendents' Offices, High School Renewal, the Center for Leadership Development, Superintendent's Schools, Special Education, Coaches in Literacy, Math, and Science, New Teacher Developers, and external partners (such as the Boston Plan for Excellence) without always considering the alignment of outcomes. Schools and the district are investing in various programs, but there does not exist a consistent or regular program evaluation strategy so that teachers and schools might learn and share what is and is not working. There are instances where program evaluations are embedded within a specific grant; however, it is not clear that the data has helped staff determine what is not working and what should be discontinued.

Boston has been on the cutting edge of some innovative practices (i.e., small schools, pilot schools), but the advantages gained from these options are not regularly shared or integrated into the overall district improvement strategy. Individual principals and headmasters do willingly, yet informally, share, but no system-wide mechanism for the professional community of learners to collect data and share is in place. For example, what strategies did the Russell Elementary School use this year to make Adequate Yearly Progress and move to good standing, and how might other Superintendent's Schools learn from its experience? The district is to be commended for the extensive investments in instructional coaches, new teacher developers, and peer assistance staff; however, across these various teacher leadership roles, there is not a set of common expectations, leadership development, experiences, or accountability measures. These investments will, no doubt, produce differentiated returns unless there is clarity about the work and how these efforts are aligned with other principals' professional development and school improvement plans. External providers' efforts to enhance and support our professional development may also take the district in disparate directions unless aligned with the district's overall strategy for improvement.

## ***Phase II – Operations, Long-Term Fiscal Planning, and Community-Building***

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The previous sections of this report speak intentionally and primarily to the academic needs of Boston's children. While there clearly are areas of overlap, *Phase II* (to be presented in April 2008) will address the

need to align the academic agenda with the fiscal, operational, and internal/external community partnerships work. A preliminary list of topics to be addressed in each of these areas is below.

### **Operations and Long-Term Fiscal Planning**

1. Long-term fiscal concerns will require a thorough review of all sources of revenues and expenditures, and a consideration of what external funds can be mobilized to support the BPS. Current resources do not meet our students' growing needs.
2. Enrollment trends and patterns and spaces for new and innovative programs for students not on track to graduate
3. Escalating costs of transportation, utilities, and health benefits
4. Efforts to work with the City to better articulate and mobilize a legislative strategy for schools
5. Institutional advancement leadership to coordinate and increase the level of private, external support for targeted areas of work (i.e., school changes, arts, and athletics). Identification of new portfolio of supporters.
6. Operational efficiencies resulting from combined city government and BPS functions

### **Building Community and Strengthening Internal and External Communications**

1. Communication and branding strategies that integrate and promote high school graduation and college-bound messages
2. Special populations need unique outreach efforts, communications, and culturally specific training for staff and students.
3. A system for informing families of quality schools and programs within the school district
4. Organizing and promoting family-friendly, customer-service training system-wide
5. Growing demand for Family & Community Outreach Coordinators to respond to the need to better connect home and school
6. Joint labor-management discussions to offset and reduce the non-productive adversarial relationships that work against teamwork
7. Mobilizing student voice

## **THE AGENDA FOR ACCELERATION**

The Boston Public Schools will continue to enjoy the substantial progress and foundation left by former Superintendents Thomas W. Payzant and Michael G. Contompassis, and use these to respond strategically to the serious challenges we face. BPS must exercise its best educational, community, and operational efforts to set a new course that accelerates student achievement, aligns resources and strategies, and communicates and learns from its successes. I recommend the following action steps, tied to the Phase I challenges.

All of these recommendations serve the overall goal shared by the School Committee and me:  
*achieving excellence for every student.*

1. Ensure **“Graduation For All”** through innovative programs and new school models that serve students most at-risk of dropping out. Shift from a single, after-school “Credit Recovery” model to establishing 10 Credit Recovery After-School and Summer School Sites offering consistent opportunities for credit make-up in core courses.

2. Re-align the academic leadership structure so it is more responsive to the academic challenges identified and promotes and values teamwork. The changes would include:
  - a. Hire a **Chief Academic Officer** to oversee six specific areas of focus: *Academic Superintendents* who would supervise principals (Elementary, Middle/K-8, High, Pilot) as well as a Director of Alternative Education/Adult Education/Discipline, *Teaching & Learning, Professional Development, English Language Learners, Special Education, and Student Support Services*. This structure would replace the “Triad” model as well as the High School Renewal and Unified Student Services offices.
  - b. Create an **Office of Accountability** to develop definitions and benchmarks for school quality; monitor and evaluate district efforts to implement No Child Left Behind; establish a single point of contact for the Department of Education; and integrate the work supported in the general fund with activities of the federal resources. This office would also provide the link to the Supplemental Education Service providers and be responsible for state and federal compliance functions.
  - c. Establish the **Institutional Advancement Office** to better align the district’s needs and priorities with coherent fund-raising strategies, external partnerships for schools, and alumni giving.
  - d. Restructure the **Family & Community Engagement Office** into the Family & Student Engagement Office to build on the progress to date in engaging families, improve partnerships with groups that advocate on behalf of families, and better mobilize student voice.
  
3. Strengthen **Special Education** by separating its functions from other school support services and have the director report directly to the Superintendent to ensure the link between students with disabilities and general education, and to reduce over-referrals of students to special education classrooms.
  
4. Improve support for **English Language Learners** by creating a Newcomers Assessment and Counseling Center for entering students, standardizing translation services, and re-evaluating district practices for students whose first language is not English.
  
5. Establish a **Pre K-12 Literacy Curriculum** to ensure a consistent, rigorous program of study across all schools and grade levels that prepares children to read and write at proficient levels.
  
6. Expand **enrichment opportunities** in arts and music, athletics, recreation, and other extra-curricular activities through existing programs as well as partner agencies and institutions.
  
7. Improve **student support services** by strengthening partnerships with community-based organizations, city agencies, and partner institutions to ensure full readiness for classroom learning. This would include a specific focus on addressing students’ physical, social, and mental health needs.
  
8. Expand the district’s **school choice marketing strategy** so that families in all neighborhoods are aware of the array of school choices and programs available to them. Improve **customer service and registration procedures** to make the student assignment process more family-friendly and transparent.
  
9. Explore **new school models**, including the creation of programs focusing on International Baccalaureate, elementary Montessori, an arts-focused middle school, gender-specific programming, and school-business partnerships. New pilot schools and schools with different grade configurations (i.e., K-8 schools/pathways) should be considered.

## CONCLUSION

Boston is fortunate to have a wealth of partners who care and want to help. I want to thank those who have given me your time, who have collected knowledge, and have documented the progress over the last decade. Your insights provide a road map for educational improvement and community-building. We appreciate and thank you for the significant amount of time and energy you have taken to educate those of us who work within the BPS community.

While there are far too many individuals and organizations to list in this document, I would be remiss if I did not thank Dr. Robert Peterkin and the Harvard Graduate School of Education for their tremendous support and assistance during my transition. Dr. Peterkin led and assisted with Superintendent Payzant's transition efforts over a decade ago, and he has also provided guidance and insights and connected me to a network of resources from throughout this community. I also must acknowledge the many community organizations who, working with Frank Barnes of the Harvard Urban Superintendents Program, partnered with us in sponsoring a series of Community Forums that enlightened and informed this work.

The tremendous commitment and dedication to the children of this city is nowhere more evident than in the personal attention of Mayor Thomas M. Menino. I appreciate that he has appointed exceptional School Committee members and selected key Mayor's Office staff members who share and extend his passionate and unwavering support for giving our students the best education possible.

This is just the first report that I will present to the School Committee on my short- and long-term academic, fiscal, and operational agenda for the Boston Public Schools. The vision outlined in this report will not be mine alone to carry out. I am fortunate to have hundreds of talented teachers, administrators, and staff members who will assist me in advancing educational opportunities for all of our students. I look forward to working with them, and with you, as we serve the children and families of the City of Boston.

## LIST OF SOURCES

1. *A Decade of Urban School Reform: Persistence and Progress in the Boston Public Schools* (Rennie Center, Gates Foundation, Noyce Foundation, Davis Foundation, 2007)
2. *Powerful Reforms with Shallow Roots: Improving America's Urban Schools: Chapter on Boston: The Stars Finally Align* (Larry Cuban and Michael Usdan, 2002)
3. *Whole School Improvement in Boston* (Annenberg Foundation, 2002-2003)
4. *BPS Achievement Gap Analysis* (BPS Office of Research, Assessment & Evaluation, 2004)
5. *Transforming the Boston Public Schools: A Roadmap for the New Superintendent* (Citizen Commission on Academic Success for Boston Children, 2006)
6. *Strong Foundations, Evolving Challenges: A Case Study to Support the Leadership Transition in the Boston Public Schools* (Aspen Institute, 2005)
7. *Strategic Planning to Support Off-Track Youth: Data Review & Strategic Implications* (The Parthenon Group, 2007)
8. Multiple reports on assessment data from the Research, Assessment & Evaluation Office