

BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

MEMORANDUM

TO: Chairperson and Members
Boston School Committee

FROM: Carol R. Johnson
Superintendent

DATE: April 29, 2009

SUBJECT: Five-Zone Proposal

Tonight we are submitting the second draft of a comprehensive proposal both to improve academic quality and increase operational efficiencies in the Boston Public Schools.

Let me say from the outset that this is the beginning of a process that we hope will ultimately lead to improved academic achievement for students in the Boston Public Schools. That outcome is, and must be, our top priority.

Let me also say that we must not be afraid to have this conversation. We want to hear from families, students, staff, and Boston residents and taxpayers, all of whom have a stake in the improvements we make together. We must be able to have open and honest discussions about these proposals, realizing that adjustments to them may be necessary to achieve the outcomes we all want. We must consider the “disruption” factor of families who would fall under new transportation rules, what that may mean for their child’s schooling, and what any changes would mean for cost savings. We also must build on previous work and research that the BPS has undertaken, including the lessons learned from the Student Assignment Task Force in 2004.

What we propose tonight is scheduled to go before the School Committee for a vote on June 24. Between now and then, we will hold five community meetings, one in each of the proposed new zones, and we will provide regular updates to the School Committee. Given the expansive nature of these proposals, the School Committee may want to move forward with some elements and

not others; however, some of the recommendations are interconnected, or in some cases, the savings realized are expected to support our academic agenda.

The final proposals adopted by the School Committee will take effect no sooner than the 2010-11 school year.¹ In addition, these proposals only affect students from K1 to Grade 8; high schools will remain citywide.

This memorandum serves as a companion piece to the attached Power Point presentation, which we will present to you at the April 29th School Committee meeting.

BACKGROUND

Tonight's work is the latest phase in our plans for accelerating progress in the Boston Public Schools:

- **Phase I (January 2008):** *Acceleration Agenda* outlining nine key areas of focus. Specific goals and targets are laid out through 2012.
- **Phase II (September 2008):** *Pathways to Excellence* outlining school reconfiguration, consolidations, and expansions to take effect in 2009-2010.
- **Phase III (April 2009):** Continuation of *Pathways to Excellence* outlining academic improvements and operational efficiencies regarding student assignment and transportation.

The guiding principles of Pathways to Excellence are to expand excellence, increase access, and ensure equity. In a time of limited resources, we must think differently about how to adhere to these principles. We know that we cannot accomplish everything we want to accomplish without changing how we do business, operating more efficiently, and rethinking long-held practices that must be updated to reflect our school district and our families.

While much of this proposal may focus on financial savings from changing transportation and student assignment, the focus on offering a **quality school for every student** has been paramount. We recognize that in order to meet the challenges of closing the achievement gap and accelerating performance, we will need to make new and different investments. We believe this can be achieved by expanding demonstrated academic success, intervening early and preventing more expensive costs later, prioritizing investments that directly impact student learning, and identifying innovations that promote and reward creativity and accountability.

ACADEMIC IMPROVEMENTS

Our focus must be on continuous improvement that results in 1) proficiency for all, 2) the closing of achievement and access gaps, and 3) preparation of students to graduate from high school college-ready and success-bound.

¹ New students arriving after September 2009 will be assigned, wherever possible, to a school in their home zone to minimize disruption.

The *Acceleration Agenda* targets, first outlined in September 2008, remain in place, and we are making progress on many of the goals (see attached slides). Below are highlights of other interventions we plan to launch.

Commonwealth Priority Schools

Of the 55 Commonwealth Priority Schools identified by the state, we know that our interventions must be targeted and strategic. We plan to channel resources (Boston Teacher Residency graduates, Family & Community Outreach Coordinators, extended learning partnerships, arts investments etc.) into these schools.

We also plan to start a “Beacon Fund” of \$1 million to reward these schools if they show value-added gains and evidence that achievement gaps are closing.

English Language Learners

One in five of our students is an English Language Learner (ELL). We plan to expand the way we serve these students, including better identifying students who may qualify for a waiver to receive transitional bilingual education, creating multi-language schools, and opening more two-way bilingual programs.

We are expanding the Newcomers Assessment and Counseling Center to include identification of elementary students, and we will direct federal stimulus funding to support ELL students. We also plan to review our translation services to schools, knowing that better communication with non-English speaking families is crucial.

Special Education

About one in five of our students receives special education services. We are awaiting the recommendations of an audit from the Council of the Great City Schools on improving services to these students. However, there are some things we can work on in the short term and the long term.

We know that we must increase inclusion programs and classes for students with autism to better meet their needs. We have targeted federal stimulus funding to use technology to better support students with disabilities in general education settings.

Out-of-School Time Programming and Expansion of Athletic Programs

The time students spend with us is not enough to accomplish everything we would like to accomplish. What happens in after-school, surround-care, and extended learning time matters a great deal. Our Department of Extended Learning Time, Afterschool, and Services (DELTAS) will be expanding after-school programming to 15 schools annually over the next five years, with Commonwealth Priority Schools given preference.

We also plan to increase athletics at the middle school level by hiring an additional full-time employee in the Athletics Office to oversee this expansion.

Taken together, the academic, out-of-school time, and athletic improvements will go hand-in-hand with the operational efficiencies we must undertake, which are described in the next section.

THE FIVE-ZONE PROPOSAL – OVERVIEW

Boston Public Schools currently spends about \$78 million on transportation for students. Reducing these costs and freeing up those dollars for classrooms means changing the way we assign and transport students.

We are proposing five zones divided in the following ways (see map in Power Point presentation). As much as possible, these lines attempted to follow Boston's streets and major intersections in each community.

- Zone 1: East Boston, Charlestown
- Zone 2: Allston, Brighton
- Zone 3: North End, Beacon Hill, West End, Financial District, Chinatown, Back Bay, South End, Fenway/Kenmore, parts of Roxbury, Mission Hill, Jamaica Plain
- Zone 4: South Boston, parts of Roxbury, Dorchester, parts of Mattapan
- Zone 5: Parts of Mattapan, Hyde Park, Roslindale, West Roxbury

We believe this configuration accomplishes the following:

- **Preserves a range of quality school choices** for families while giving them a better chance of attending schools near their homes.
- **Provides educational continuity**, with more K-8 pathways and less confusion about which middle school to attend.
- **Promotes family engagement and creates walkable communities**, with families having a greater ability to access schools and after-school programs closer to them, and knowing which middle school their child will be able to attend.
- **Reduces transportation costs**, with buses traveling shorter distances and students requiring less transportation overall. (See appropriate section in this memorandum.)
- **Provides greater access to programming** for English Language Learners with expanded seats for:
 - Students whose families apply for transitional bilingual education waivers
 - Students in Sheltered English Instruction classes
 - Students in two-way bilingual programs
 - Students whose formal schooling has been interrupted in their home countries
- **Provides greater access to special education programming**, with expanded seats for inclusion classes and autistic classes.²

² Programs serving low-incidence populations, such as visually impaired or deaf students, will continue to have citywide status.

The attached slides describe programmatic capacity in the proposed new zones.

Seat Capacity

As you may recall, one of the issues raised by the School Committee when we first presented a draft of this plan on February 4th was a lack of middle school seats in Zone 3. We propose remedying this issue by converting two large elementary schools – the Agassiz Elementary School in Jamaica Plain and the Blackstone Elementary School in the South End – to K-8 schools. Both have capacity to grow, and each is able to accept additional middle school students from other schools. We have had a preliminary discussion with the principals of both schools and expect to discuss this exciting opportunity with their families and staffs.

Our projections still show some nominal seat shortages in Zones 1 (Grades 1, 2, and 3) and Zone 5 (K1). We are evaluating seat expansions for these grades in both of these zones and plan to provide updates as they become available.

THE FIVE-ZONE PROPOSAL – OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCIES

Our analysis of our transportation spending over the past five years and projected future spending for the next five years shows that BPS transportation costs will continue to escalate. This is not a criticism of our school bus drivers, central transportation staff, bus monitors, or other staff who shoulder the enormous responsibility of transporting thousands of children safely to and from school every day. Our work in classrooms would not be possible without them. However, we must examine how we allocate our transportation dollars and determine whether there is a more efficient and environmentally friendly way of transporting students.

Proposed Changes to Student Assignment

How we transport students is largely driven by how and where we assign them to school. We propose the following changes:

Current Policy	Proposed Policy
There are two citywide schools, the Hernandez K-8 School and the Timilty Middle School.	The Hernandez and the Timilty will be converted to zone-based schools. ³
Some students who live within the walk zone still receive a bus ride.	No student with walk-zone priority will receive a bus ride. This affects 5,000+ students. Exceptions will be made for safety.
Walk zones established using geocodes.	Walk zones will be established using a straight line distance to students’ actual home address – 1 mile for elementary, 1.5 miles for middle, or 2 miles for high school.

³ Schools that serve special populations, such as the McKinley Schools, the Horace Mann School for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing, Carter Development Center, etc., will remain citywide.

Families may apply only to schools within their home zone.	Families may apply to schools outside of their home zone, if space is available, but transportation will not be provided.
--	--

We find these policy changes are justified because the vast majority of our families are already requesting to attend schools that are closer to home:

- **71%** of current students would **not** be affected by the five-zone proposal. They already live in the zone in which they would attend school under the new plan.
- **72%** of 1st and 2nd choices in Round 1 were made for schools within 3 miles of where a student lived. (2008-2009 school year)
- **81%** of families selected a first-choice school that would still be available to them in their proposed new home zone. (2009-2010 school year)
- **86%** of families who made a choice in Round 1 were assigned to a school within 3 miles of their home. (2008-2009 school year)

Taken together, these proposed student assignment changes are expected to save between **\$2.2 million and \$2.9 million annually.**

Proposed Changes to Transportation Eligibility Requirements

The proposed five-zone plan will mean changes for how we transport students – both those whose schools are in their new home zone and those whose schools are outside of their new home zone. The amount of savings we generate from student assignment and transportation efficiencies is directly correlated to the amount of “grandfathering” that occurs for our students – that is, how quickly or gradually we phase in these changes.

We propose that all students will be able to remain in their current school – but they may not necessarily remain eligible for transportation if they currently receive it.

- All students who live **outside** of their school’s zone will be allowed to keep their school assignment, but they will not be eligible for transportation. This will affect approximately 10,000 students, or 29% of kindergarten through Grade 8 students.
- Starting in September 2009, whenever possible, newly registering students will be assigned to an in-zone school to minimize disruption when new student assignment rules take effect in 2010-11.

The potential savings from allowing children to stay in an out-of-zone school without transportation depends on the number of families who indeed stay – or who decide to transfer to an in-zone school. Should there be a more gradual phase-in of this proposed change, any potential savings would decrease, as would be the case with any proposed change.

It is important to note that students living within a school’s walk zone – even if the school is across a zone boundary – will still be eligible to apply for that school with walk-zone priority.

Total Transportation Savings

The total amount of transportation savings from changing student assignment policies, changing transportation eligibility, and improving transportation efficiencies on an annual basis is:

Item	Savings
Baseline savings by moving from three zones to five zones	\$2.9 million
Student assignment and transportation changes	\$2.2 million to \$2.9 million
Elimination of citywide status	\$250,000
Application of new five zones to parochial and charter school transportation	\$1 million
Computerized routing	\$1.8 million to \$3 million
Consolidating bus yards	\$720,000
Instituting “RSVP” notification for transportation	TBD
Altering start times	TBD
Total annual savings	\$8.5 million to \$10.4 million
Total savings after five years	\$42.5 million to \$52 million

What is more difficult to quantify – but equally as important to factor into the decision-making – is the effect on families and possible disruption to their children’s schooling. We know that at least 71% of families will not be affected by these proposed changes. But that also means that 29% of students would be in a new zone and would no longer receive transportation to their current school. This is an important factor in our discussions moving forward.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

The proposed plan gives us an opportunity to strengthen and adapt our family engagement efforts. First, we want to ensure that our family engagement work is linked to learning and the academic targets for Commonwealth Priority Schools.

Second, we are planning a districtwide launch of a “Parent University” to focus on increasing parent capacity to support and advocate for student learning and school improvement.

Third, we must find ways to spread best practices across the district and ensure that all schools know what excellent family engagement looks like. In that regard, we will introduce family engagement standards as a framework to increase schools’ capacity to serve parents.

CONCLUSION

The five-zone proposal is not only an operational exercise aimed at saving money. It is linked to the ambitious goals we have for accelerating achievement throughout the district. In proposing these changes, we aim to:

- Improve academic outcomes
- Promote a range of choices for families
- Create walkable communities that will increase family engagement and enable students to better access neighborhood supports such as community centers and public libraries
- Transform our Commonwealth Priority Schools into schools of excellence
- Promote educational continuity with fewer transitions
- Increase access to programs and supports for ELL and special education students
- Reduce operating and transportation costs

The attached Power Point contains the list of community meetings and School Committee updates as we share this proposal with our families, staff, and stakeholders. Tonight marks the beginning of that process. We will continue to update the School Committee and return on June 24th with a plan that has been informed by public feedback, discussion, and insights from our families – all with the goal of improving academic achievement for students, which remains our top priority.

Attachment