


BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

MEMORANDUM

TO: Chairperson and Members
Boston School Committee

FROM: Carol R. Johnson
Superintendent 

DATE: July 11, 2008

RE: Superintendent's Year-End Report for 2007-2008

Last month represented the close of the 2007-2008 school year, and this year-end report captures activities and highlights of work accomplished across the Boston Public Schools. While the school year began with significant fiscal challenges because of less-than-projected federal revenue (Title I) and unexpected cost increases in Food & Nutrition Services, fuel/transportation, and a transfer of external grant costs to the general fund, the district remained focused on children and the important work of accelerating academic achievement, eliminating achievement gaps, and identifying key areas of investments that will result in more students reaching proficiency on MCAS and completing high school college-ready.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

This year saw some encouraging news about increases in student achievement:

Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam (MCAS):

- BPS increased the percent of students scoring at Proficient or Advanced at a rate that met or exceeded statewide improvement in 9 of the 16 subject and grade tests.
- Likewise, BPS increased the percent of students passing the exams at a rate that met or exceeded statewide improvement in 13 of the 16 subject and grade tests.
- In mathematics in particular, results showed an increase in the percent of students reaching Proficiency and above at all grades. Additionally, there was an increase in students passing the exams in every grade but fourth where the results were unchanged from 2006.

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP):

- BPS students demonstrated the highest improvement in Grade 4 and 8 math when compared to 10 other large city school districts who participated in the urban portion of the NAEP.
- From 2003 to 2007, the percent of BPS students scoring at or above Proficient has increased by 15 points in Grade 4 math and 10 points in Grade 8 math. Only one other district demonstrated such gains in Grade 4, but no other district made such gains in Grade 8.
- On the reading exams, Boston students have made only marginal gains since 2003, but their performance continues to be higher than that of most other urban districts.
- On the writing exams, BPS students scored among the highest of their urban school peers across the country on the Grade 8 writing exams on the NAEP.

On the important issue of school support, the district launched a new Accountability Office to serve as a central point of contact for state and federal compliance, as well as school intervention issues. This office pursued and obtained \$1.9 million in grants from the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to support district-and school-level interventions in 32 schools identified by the state as Commonwealth Priority Schools.

FISCAL INVESTMENTS

Based on the data available from the district, I presented the Acceleration Agenda for improvement (Phase I) to the School Committee that included investments in programs serving a growing English Language Learner population, safety nets to increase student retention and course credit acquisition while reducing drop-out rates, and an organizational structure to promote a more intentional effort to meet the specific needs of pre-kindergarten, elementary, middle, and high school students. In an effort to recognize the needs of all students, additional investments in Advanced Placement, enrichment, K-8 expansions, and pre-K programs are embedded in the FY09 budget.

District staff examined closely cost drivers that contributed to current shortfalls and used the information to develop a more conservative and forward-looking FY 2009 budget, supported by Mayor Thomas M. Menino's additional resources needed to address the immediate budget needs for FY 2008 and the FY 2009 anticipated gap between revenue and expenditures.

The school system also implemented Future Force, an application that integrates future-year budgeting and future-year staffing to allow for improved position control.

HUMAN CAPITAL

Key human capital investments in the areas of accountability, institutional advancement, and student support will help the district identify benchmarks and establish department and school improvement targets. These investments also will help us more strategically align and measure philanthropic and community partnership resources. In addition, the Student Support Office will allow the district to ensure that students' non-academic, after-school, extended learning/summer school experiences, and work /career opportunities are responsive to student and family needs. Mayor Menino's State of the City address guided our efforts to better connect the school district's resources with those of the Boston community centers, parks and recreation, and public libraries. Initial work impacting activities targeted at middle grades students will begin this summer.

Recruitment and selection of key new staff due to retirements and transitions resulted in staff leadership changes in the Research, Assessment & Evaluation Office, Chief Operating Officer, Achievement Gap, and the High School Office, as well as newly created positions: Chief Academic Officer and Chief Accountability Officer. In addition, the restructuring of school supervision by level (elementary, middle/K-8, high, and pilot) will better align the needs of schools and school leadership with central teaching & learning services. There remain some important positions for which we are still recruiting talent, notably Special Education, Student Support, and Institutional Advancement.

The Office of Human Resources continued to garner praise for improved customer service and alignment to the district's academic agenda. Key examples include:

- Creation of the Pathway Program to expand the district's staffing capacity in the high-needs area of Special Education. The Pathway Program consists of nine 10-hour seminar modules that fulfill the state coursework/professional development requirement for Moderate Disabilities licensure. In two years, 180 individuals have been enrolled, many of whom were current substitutes or paraprofessionals who have successfully sought teacher licensure. Additionally, through strong recruitment efforts, the number of licensed Special Education applicants has increased 33%.
- As a result, the number of teachers hired on waivers (majority SPED) and without a license was reduced by 50% this year from the year prior.
- Through improved hiring practices and communication to all candidates around requirements and expectations, OHR's recruitment efforts have increased the number of licensed applicants across ALL critical need areas and for black and Latino applicants. Also, OHR continued its sponsored MTEL prep programs as well as negotiated discounts with university-sponsored programs for our existing teaching staff.
- These changes have resulted in 96 percent of BPS teachers attaining Highly Qualified status under No Child Left Behind, up from 90 percent two years ago.

COMMUNICATIONS AND FAMILY OUTREACH

The district made a significant effort to reach out and communicate with families, students, and the larger community regarding the drop-out crisis as outlined in the Parthenon Study. Four well-attended community forums gave the public a chance for feedback regarding our ongoing efforts to increase the graduation rates.

Highlights of our efforts to promote our students and schools and reach our families include:

- The "Next Stop, College!" campaign, combined with "Connect Ed" messages, the new "Family Matters" newsletter, the Showcase of Schools, Summer Stuff/Summer Stuff Jr., and "Introducing the BPS" publications, increased BPS visibility.
- We continued to expand and diversify media outreach, with more frequent pitching of positive news stories to local and regional media.
- We expanded efforts to reach a broader sector of parents by translating more information for families, such as key School Committee reports.
- The Communications Office, along with the Office of Instructional and Information Technology, is in the midst of overhauling and improving the BPS web site. An easier-to-read and more family-friendly site will debut later this summer.

Phase II planning will necessitate increased efforts to further expand and enhance our communications and marketing strategies.

TECHNOLOGY

This year saw many advancements for the Office of Instructional and Information Technology for both classroom learning and infrastructure and support systems. Key highlights include:

- Successful deployment of laptops for all BPS teachers, financed through the Microsoft settlement, which will allow us to broaden our classroom instructional advancements. The “Laptops 4 Learning” initiative deployed over 4200 laptops through school-based L4L professional development sessions, and a new Summer Professional Development Institute will focus on the effective use of laptops to differentiate instruction and support student learning.
- OIIT also partnered with Boston College to conduct a four-year impact study on the use of technology in the classroom.
- The nationally recognized cyber-safety campaign was expanded and exists through its own web site (www.bpscybersafety.org).
- For infrastructure improvements, the district upgraded all Principal/Headmaster & senior Leadership wireless phones to smartphones communication capabilities (i.e. better coverage, access to data/email).
- In schools, 30 schools had upgraded technology infrastructure, including servers and the wireless network. Work stations had energy-efficient software installed to help Boston “go green.”

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2008-2009

Late last month, I hosted a retreat with our Executive Team. We began creating a set of clear, measurable, and attainable goals for 2008-09 that can be further discussed by the School Committee and can also define specific areas of focus for the Superintendent’s performance review, for which they and I can be held accountable. Guiding our work will be the Acceleration Agenda, which is listed below:

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.

Status: Ongoing. Credit recovery programs are being piloted in 5 sites this Summer 2008, and the expansion to the additional sites are planned for the 2008-09 school year. Two community centers have also expressed interest in hosting credit recovery programs to provide year-round and weekend access in selected communities. Two schools have indicated an interest in becoming International Baccalaureate sites, and a team has put together preliminary information regarding IB requirements. We have had conversations with a few of the higher education institutions about expanding dual enrollment opportunities and expect the state Legislature to respond to resource needs as a part of the Governor’s “Readiness” initiative. Twenty-one schools received Pilot School Planning grants and to date, the district has received and reviewed 5 applications for new pilot programs.

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 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.

Status: Nearing completion. Most key staff have been hired, and the new organizational structure has begun. Frank Barnes, Chief Accountability Officer, has coordinated all of the reviews conducted by the state and revised the implementation plan regarding our Commonwealth Priority Intervention work.

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.

Status: Not completed. Officers were elected to the new Special Education Parent Advisory Committee. We are working with Human Resources to strengthen recruitment efforts, and we have asked the Council of the Great City Schools to conduct an audit of our entire special education service referral and delivery system.

4. Improve support for **English Language Learners** by creating a Newcomers Academy for newly arriving students, standardizing translation services, and re-evaluating district practices for students whose first language is not English.

Status: Ongoing. We are searching for a permanent director of the English Language Learners Office. We recently completed the coordinated review process on the ELL program and are in the process of developing a response to the areas identified for improvement. We expect to use the data from the Gaston Institute’s studies on ELL and Latino student performance to address these issues. In particular, we want to further examine the practices used by five of our schools (Bradley, O’Donnell, Fenway, McKay, and TechBoston Academy) that demonstrate stronger results for Latino students.

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.

Status: Not completed. We are building on the work of a committee that was formed to examine our literacy practices, and we are re-examining our systemwide approach to literacy.

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.

Status: Ongoing. Working with external partners and funders, we have solicited and received funding to support a survey of all schools on their arts offerings. We have convened an arts planning team that will examine the data, target expansion, and seek resources to pay for improved arts opportunities. The superintendent has made formal presentations to several arts funding groups and secured music equipment funds for two schools from VHI Save the Music. The relocation of the Roland Hayes School of Music to operate within the John D. O’Bryant School of Mathematics and Science will expand after-school music opportunities for students.

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.

Status: Ongoing. We have begun work on the Mayor’s mandate to better link schools with community centers and libraries. This summer, selected middle school sites will provide a morning academic program, lunch, and a community recreational program.. We are continuing to identify leadership to direct our Student Support Services division.

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.

Status: Ongoing. Efforts in recent years to improve communication and customer service have led to higher satisfaction rates among parents surveyed. Additional efforts to market particular schools will expand beginning this summer. Staff are also examining policy and procedural changes to make the registration and assignment process more family-friendly. Issues related to student assignment will play an important role in discussions pertaining to Phase II.

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.

Status: Ongoing. We will bring proposals for pilot schools to the School Committee in the coming months for opening in 2009-2010. We are working with high school headmasters and middle school principals interested in the International Baccalaureate model. Jason Sachs, Director of Early Childhood Education, is working with other early educators to determine training, locations, and prepare program choices for Montessori options.

One year has passed since my introductory press conference on June 19, 2007, when I promised to “hit the ground listening.” Since then, I have met with hundreds of students and parents, visited 80 of our 143 schools, attended monthly meetings of various community groups, spoken at conferences and workshops sponsored by our partners, and met with many constituency groups who make up the larger Boston Public Schools community. This city is fortunate to have so many committed, dedicated, and engaged partners willing to work with us to improve public education.

The end of the school year is a time to look back – to reflect on what worked, on our collective accomplishments, and on the small, everyday triumphs that add up to a successful school year. It is also a time to look forward – to the challenges and opportunities that await us, to a renewed sense of purpose, and to a new round of students who will begin their educational journeys with us. Much planning and

executing lie in front of us this summer, and I look forward to a school year even better than the one we have just completed. With the help of the School Committee, and our students, staff, families, and partners, I know that is what we will achieve.

Attachments: BPS "Points of Pride"
Student achievement / graduation rate data