

TO: Carol Johnson, Superintendent
FROM: External Advisory Committee on School Choice
RE: Summary and Recommendations – **Working Draft for Discussion**
DATE: November XX, 2012 [Working Draft, November 30, 2012]

Introduction

Since our appointment to the External Advisory Committee on School Choice (EAC) beginning in January 2012, members of the EAC have listened to the many ideas that have been shared about choice, reviewed the data, and read the various analytic reports. It is our determination that changing the school assignment process so that it increases equitable access to a quality education for all students in the Boston Public Schools is an important task. It is also our determination that the major challenge to the Boston Public Schools is developing an articulate, systematic, and outcome-focused process for increasing the number of schools within the district that provide a high quality education. Our recommendation, therefore, will address the immediate concerns of the school assignment process and the longer range concern of increasing equitable access to a quality education.

This report is organized into five sections:

- A. Background & Guiding Criteria
- B. Summary Observations & Findings
- C. General Recommendations related to student assignment, school choice and school quality
- D. Specific Model Recommendations related to student assignment process and approach
- E. Specific Recommendations for school assignment modifications to increase equitable access to a quality education

A - Background & Guiding Criteria

At his State of the City address in 2012, Mayor Menino launched this effort to improve school choice and student assignment. He appointed the 27-member EAC to evaluate data, review proposals and make recommendations for a new student assignment plan. In its early meetings in Spring 2012, the EAC refined its own charge to guide its work:

Every student in the City of Boston deserves to attend a high-quality school that meets his or her needs and is as close to home as possible. To realize this goal, the Mayor and Superintendent of the Boston Public Schools have appointed the independent External Advisory Committee on Improving School Choice (EAC).

The EAC will evaluate city data, along with information collected during a series of community meetings with parents and other stakeholders and other information-gathering opportunities. Based on this information and a data-driven analysis of the several models of school assignment plans developed by the Superintendent and her staff, the EAC will provide a final recommendation that will be presented to the Superintendent, the School Committee, and the Mayor. This collaboration will yield a new plan for school choice.

The EAC further organized itself into three subcommittees: Community Engagement, Data, and Defining Quality & Equitable Access.

Throughout the intensive process of reviewing student assignment options, one of our largest findings relates to agreeing upon and acknowledging both the limitations and potential of any student assignment system. We acknowledge that a student assignment system alone is limited in its ability and thus is likely unable to: 1) in and of itself improve school performance; 2) guarantee every family access to the school they most desire; and 3) guarantee every family access to a high-performing school (particularly in the short term).

We assume, though, that the revision of the assignment process CAN:

- 1) Offer families a more predictable set of school choices;
- 2) Offer a transparent, consumer-friendly process for obtaining school information and making informed choices about where families will send their children;
- 3) Address some of the barriers in the current system that diminish some residents' chances of accessing high-performing schools and provide families and BPS with a set of tools that will afford those who disproportionately lack access to high-quality programming and schools (e.g., the uneven distribution of high-performing schools, the scarcity of strong inclusion options) some recourse in the assignment process should no, or few, quality options be available to them;
- 4) Reduce average travel burden and, particularly, ameliorate excessive travel burdens required to access high performing schools, appropriate academic programming, and services that address the needs of particular children;
- 5) Provide flexible design and management options to respond to access challenges as school quality changes and do so without having to commission a redesign processes; and
- 6) Set the stage for a rigorous community discussion – informed by transparent data – about priorities for district-wide school improvement and the most effective strategies for achieving desired quality across the district over time.

Given the assumptions above, the EAC identified the following priorities that it hopes to balance in its recommendations for any proposed student assignment system:

- Predictability
- Equitable access to quality schools (with higher-performance on academic metrics being one measure)
- Choice
- Closer to home where possible
- More rational transportation to ensure access where needed
- Transparency
- Ability to respond to school performance changes over time

B - Summary Observations & Findings

Collectively, we wish to outline several insights gained and lessons learned over the course of the 2012 Improving School Choice process:

1. The EAC's assessment is that the use of busing across wide geographic areas as a primary strategy for student assignment has limited strategic purpose in Boston's contemporary context. The data assembled by the EAC shows that busing is neither counteracting historical race and class inequities, nor is it counteracting current inequities. Busing is not guaranteeing that children who travel

beyond their neighborhoods actually receive an adequate education at the end of their trips.¹ At best, busing may be helping to promote diversity in neighborhoods in Boston that remain racially and/or socio-economically segregated. However, given Boston’s changing demography since the desegregation era – and its emergence as a far more diverse city in many respects – busing may not have the import that it once did as a tool for advancing diversity, inclusion, tolerance, and equitable educational outcomes.²

2. It should be assumed that middle- and upper-class families of all races and ethnicities may want to send their children to BPS. Through the assignment redesign process we have learned that while some assume BPS schools need significant improvement, others acknowledge the improvements that have been made and want to invest in ongoing improvement for their children and other families. Moreover, many families have a strong desire for their children to take advantage of the diversity and rich learning opportunities that BPS schools have to offer.
3. BPS has made important improvements in school quality over the last 25 years. Significant improvements include:
 - A 36% decrease in the drop-out rate and corresponding 9% increase in the high school graduation rate since 2007
 - The introduction of the BPS Arts Expansion Initiative, which has led to a 22% increase, from 67% to 89%, in the amount of elementary/middle school students engaged in weekly arts and music experiences since 2009
 - The expansion of Algebra classes, which are now offered in grade 8 at every BPS school
 - 84% of BPS students pass the 10th grade Mathematics MCAS on their first attempt, up 25% from 1998
 - 65% of BPS students now attend a school that has a math proficiency rate above 30%, which is up 26% since 2008

¹According to an October 2012 MAPC report, *Comparative Study of Boston Public School Proposed Assignment Plans*, Black and Hispanic students are traveling substantially farther than White and Asian students to access higher quality schools. Black and Hispanic students are also traveling a long distance (an average distance of 1.5 miles) to attend the schools most in need of improvement; more than 50% of the Black and Hispanic students enrolled in the schools most in need of improvement are traveling outside of their walk zone to attend school.

² Today, 37% of students travel more than 1.5 miles each way, but not necessarily to attend a higher-performing school.

- Access to seats in higher-performing schools is not evenly distributed by race or income: 84% of white students and 77% of Asian students access seats in higher-performing schools, compared to 52% of Black and 61% of Latino students. [Add same% for students eligible for free/reduced lunch.]
- Students in the current East Zone have only an approximately 40% chance of accessing a quality seat in their zone, compared to approximately 80% for the North Zone and approximately 75% for the West Zone.
- Thus, while the current assignment system relies on large geographic zones, with free transportation and a wide range of theoretical choices for students, this system is not providing equitable access to quality seats.

- 67% of BPS schools have a math proficiency rate of at least 30%, up from 47% in 2008
- 77% of BPS students attend schools that have an ELA proficiency rate above 30%, up from 67% in 2008
- 71% of BPS schools have an ELA proficiency rate of at least 30%, up from 59% in 2008
- In 2008, BPS students were entering Kindergarten and scoring 54% in reading readiness on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). In 2012, 76% of these students had scored 57% on the DIBELS and were ready for first grade work. In 2012, 67% of BPS students will be reading at or above grade level by the end of first grade, as measured by this DIBELS test.

However, these improvements have yet to significantly reduce historical achievement gaps across all groups and a number of schools have yet to see notable improvement. Thus, continued work is needed to increase the number of quality schools within the district. We assert that a primary responsibility of the district is to focus its effort on improving the quality of all schools, regardless of the student assignment system. Below we recommend the further development and refining of district plans for school improvement and to address racial, class, and ability achievement gaps.

4. Much of the available data on school quality is assessed by measures of academic performance. While the EAC developed a broad definition of school quality informed by community input, we acknowledge the lack valid data measures to analyze quality against this broader definition. We have learned that families in Boston have diverse opinions as to what constitutes a quality school and that many definitions are broader than academic performance. We also realize that useful data needed to more fully understand the quality of leadership and instruction, various dimensions of students learning and social experiences, or of school community participation does not currently exist. We, therefore, include a recommendation below related to developing and analyzing a more comprehensive set of quality measures over time.
5. To measure quality based on academic performance, for the purpose of analyzing potential student assignment models, we settled on the use of the BPS' MCAS Quadrant Analysis (or MCAS Snapshot) which captures two years' worth of MCAS data showing both student performance and student growth or academic gains. The quadrant analysis groups schools into four categories: (1) high performance/high growth, (2) high performance/low growth, (3) low performance/high growth, and (4) low performance/low growth. This analysis further allows a relative score to be given to schools depending on their quadrant, and for schools to be grouped as "high", "medium" or "low" quality based on this one comprehensive academic measure. Thus, we recommend that the district use the following formula for identifying quality seats and the district's improvement rate, using the quadrant analysis.

For the purposes of designating schools as "high" or "medium" quality based on this one measure, we recommend that the district uses a threshold cut-off of [XX%] or higher, which effectively groups schools in "high" and "medium-high" OR we recommend that the district uses a threshold cut-off of [YY%] or higher, which effectively groups schools in "high" and "medium" as quality options, versus the "low" performing schools.

Quality Seats – As measured by MCAS Quadrant Analysis (student performance & growth):

1. In 2012, the percentage of seats in quadrant 1 and 2 are considered quality seats.

2. In 2012, the percentage of seats in quadrant 3 are considered medium quality seats but these schools should submit, and be held accountable, a plan that articulates their efforts to increase their student growth scores.
3. In 2012, the percentage of seats in quadrant 4 is considered low-performing or low quality seats, based on this academic measure of student performance. All quadrant 4 schools should be targeted for significant intervention.

C - General Recommendations related to student assignment, school choice and school quality

Based on the findings outlined above, the EAC makes the following general recommendations related to student assignment, school choice and school quality. We make these recommendations regardless of the specific student assignment model used.

Our first recommendation is that the district continues to assemble, analyze and make public the large quantity of data requested by the EAC through the student assignment redesign process. This availability of data will provide ongoing accountability and progress related to the recommendations in this memo. More importantly, this data will provide accountability and transparency to the families, partners and many stakeholders concerned with ongoing improvements in our schools. **We recommend annual reports to the community documenting the impact of the student assignment system on students across a range of measures, including socio-economic levels, race, special populations (students with disabilities, English Language Learners, etc.), neighborhood, and school. This report will be compiled by BPS staff and potentially additional community stakeholders.**

Our second recommendation is that we operate on the assumption that this community has the capacity and will to increase the percentage of quality seats in the district from an average of 62% in 2011 based upon 79 K-8 schools to [XX] in 2017. Further, we recommend that any increases in quality seats be analyzed in terms of their impact on increasing equitable access to quality – specifically, by analyzing changes in access to quality seats, particularly for those populations whose access to high quality schools has been most restricted in the past.

Our third recommendation is that the district further develop and refine plans for school improvement that will also address racial, class, and ability achievement. **We recommend that the district clearly articulate school improvement plans for all level 3 and 4 schools with clear metrics and expected timelines for improvement. This will be reviewed and presented on a yearly basis with the School Committee.**

Our fourth recommendation is that the district speed the development of capacity to track and analyze a more comprehensive set of quality measures and that BPS school improvement and strategic plans more explicitly focus on improving overall school quality and not just performance. **We recommend that the district, by December 2014, develop and publish valid measures for the eight indicators of quality articulated by the EAC.**

Our fifth recommendation is that parents who do not receive their first choice in the initial round of the lottery be allowed to participate in a parent compact that would involve attendance in a level 3 or 4 school.

Our sixth recommendation is that the district increase the number of two-way language K-8 schools as a way to effectively serve ELL students.

Our seventh recommendation is that the district pursue an independent study (through the provision of outside funding) that includes implications of the assignment plan, incorporating existing data on school quality, facilities/building utilization, and access to all school choices (e.g. district, pilot, and charter schools).

D - Specific Model Recommendations related to student assignment process and approach

THIS SECTION TO BE FILLED IN WITH SPECIFIC CONSENSUS OR MAJORITY/MINORITY RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING SPECIFIC STUDENT ASSIGNMENT MODEL(S) PENDING EAC DISCUSSION AND REVISIONS.

E - Specific Recommendations for school assignment modifications to increase equitable access to a quality education

Grandfathering

We recommend that all current students assigned to BPS schools as of September 2013 retain their school assignments (i.e., be “grand-fathered” into existing school) with transportation provided as needed. Their families will have the option of choosing to enter the new student assignment lottery and request a new assignment, but they will retain their current assignment unless they accept a new one. This “grandfathering” with transportation will continue through [EAC to decide: 5th grade, or the highest grade served in that school] unless the family chooses to change schools].

Special Populations

The EAC commends BPS for systematically addressing the needs of students who come from situations that make it challenging to succeed in the classroom, particularly students who come from poverty, students who are English Language Learners, and students who have special educational needs. The EAC commends BPS for creating and implementing the weighted student formula which we agree “is more equitable, transparent and predictable, enabling schools to make greater academic progress regardless of the economy. Under a weighted student funding formula, dollars follow students. This means that BPS anticipates what each student needs each year and then delivers the appropriate funds to the school that student attends. Dollars no longer follow programs, buildings or schools. Instead, [BPS] allocates budgets solidly based on student need.” The EAC commends BPS for identifying schools that are in need of improvement as well as developing and making public explicit change strategies for these schools.

Free and Reduced Lunch Students

We recommend that any school assignment process has a clear articulation as to how it will seek to ensure that FRL students are matched/assigned to high quality academic programming that is closer to their home, provides minimal disruption in their schooling, and provides predictability for families.

We recommend that the BPS and the Boston School Committee create a standing committee of engaged citizens to which an annual report will be made on a) the ability of the school assignment process to

provide equitable access to a quality education, b) report on the educational outcomes for FRL, ELL, and Special Needs student, and c) report on the progress of schools that are designated in need of improvement.

Overlay Maps for Special Populations

The BPS proposed a series of overlay maps to address the assignment process of specific student populations, including middle school students, students who are English Language Learners (with an ELD Level of 1-3 requiring special services), and students with disabilities requiring special education services. These maps are designed to function regardless of the student assignment system used to place enrolling students in general education seats. The next set of recommendations by the EAC relates to these overlay maps for special populations.

Overlay Map for Students Requiring Special Education Services: Our first recommendation is that any school assignment process provide for and include the “placement” process that is required by Federal and State laws and regulation for students with disabilities who have individualized education plans (“IEPs”), and which comports with the purpose and letter of the special education laws that requires students with disabilities to be educated with their non-disabled peers in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent appropriate. Students with disabilities need to have the same opportunity to be educated in their neighborhood schools as their non-disabled peers under any new assignment process, and this necessitates that specialized services and programs be expanded throughout the District. BPS needs to decrease the current level of 46% of students with disabilities being educated in segregated settings by reserving seats in “inclusion” for students with disabilities (who are currently in substantially separate settings) to allow for inclusion during part or all of the school day for students with disabilities. Each student’s IEP Team needs to determine the appropriate amount of inclusion time for each student and have the ability to implement each inclusion decision through available classroom seats. BPS’ long-standing practice of assigning seats in its “assignment process” to only non-disabled peers has effectively excluded many children with IEPs from classrooms and programs because they receive their assignment/“placement” through their special education Teams in a completely different and parallel process. BPS has also historically assigned “resource-room” students who are considered partial-inclusion students as if they are non-disabled students, which is contrary to laws and regulations, and one impact of these “assignments” has been the over-saturation of certain classrooms and programs with a greater than 50% population of students with disabilities, instead of their natural proportion distribution of 30% or lower.

BPS needs to change its past practice of separating students with disabilities by creating more K-8 full-inclusion programs (like the Henderson and Mary Lyon schools), creating more K-8 inclusion seats, and establishing a higher percentage of integrated seats for students entering the system at age three. Any endorsement of the proposed overlay must thoughtfully and comprehensively address all of the aforementioned issues.

Overlay Map for Students Requiring English Language Learner (ELL) Services: *[Note: This section pending edits]* Our second recommendation is that any school assignment process has a clear articulation as to how it will ensure that ELL students are matched/assigned to high quality ESOL and ELA programming that is closer to their home, provides minimal disruption in their schooling, and provides predictability for families. We endorse the proposed overlay which allows for clustering of services in the geographic areas of needs, with the understanding that program will continue to follow students rather than students having to be bused to programming.

Overlay Map for Middle School Students: Our third recommendation is that we endorse the district’s proposal concerning middle school feeder patterns as long as parents of 5th grade students have the option of entering a lottery system for open seats.

Student Assignment Process for General Education Students in PreK (K1 and K2) through Grade 8:

PENDING EAC DISCUSSION AND REVISIONS REGARDING SPECIFIC STUDENT ASSIGNMENT MODEL(S)

DRAFT