External Advisory Committee
Minutes from the Meeting of the Committee
September 24, 2012
Lilla G. Frederick Pilot Middle School

Attendees
Hardin Coleman, Co-chair
Helen Dajer, Co-chair
Kelly Bates
Kathleen Colby
Ian Deason
Rahn Dorsey
Robert Gittens
Carolyn Kain
Craig Lankhorst
Ruthzee Louijeune
John Nucci
Israel Ruiz
Tammy Tai
Mary Tamer
Miren Uriarte
Bak Fun Wong
Vernee Wilkinson
William Walczak
Imari Paris Jeffries
Heaven Reda

Staff
Carleton Jones, BPS
Dr. Carol Johnson, BPS
Michael Goar, BPS
Klare Shaw, BPS
Rebecca Frisch, Mayor's Office
Martha Pierce, Mayor's Office
Additional City Hall and BPS Staff

Community observers were also in attendance

Welcome from Co-Chairs

The Co-Chairs opened the meeting by welcoming the committee members and community observers.

Approval of Minutes

The members of the committee moved to, and approved, the minutes from the last meeting. A member of the committee asked that the minutes be amended to reflect their request for a communication plan detailing the next phase of community meetings.

Working Groups

A co-chair outlined the proposal to break the committee into to three groups to discuss the different models. The co-chair stated that the groups would be organized around who could make the various meeting times. The co-chair then explained that the groups would be responsible for analyzing each of the models based on the committee's criteria for model comparison, and giving feedback on how each of the models meets/fails to meet the criteria.

A co-chair welcomed Superintendent Johnson, who addressed the committee and community observers. Superintendent Johnson then introduced Deputy Superintendent Michael Goar, who began the presentation of the models.

Before detailing each individual model, Mr. Goar explained that the plans were based on input received from over 40 different community meetings and 2,300 different community members in addition to EAC. He explained that a framework encompassing the issues of equitable access, choice, proximity to home, diversity and predictability guided the design of the models. He then talked about the quality and choice rankings in the current 3 zone system, explaining the MCAS Snapshot (academic growth and overall performance trends for the last two years), DESE Level and Popularity (an indicator of how many families chose a school for Kindergarten for the past two years) color-coded ratings.

1) No Zone Option

Mr. Goar explained that under this configuration, students would be assigned to the school closest to their home address. He stated that this option would reduce transportation costs, but would eliminate choice and wouldn't increase diversity. He stated that the "No Zone" option fails to achieve the framework goal of diversity, and that this would adversely affect certain communities. He then explained that if no seats were available in the school closest to a student's place of residence, they would be assigned to the next closest school with an open seat.

2) 23 Zone Option

Mr. Goar stated that BPS has engaged in an extensive analysis of supply (seats) and demand (those students currently attending BPS, not those who currently live in that community but don't attend BPS), and that the 23 Zone plan was the result of an effort to implement some level of choice while providing a greater level of predictability. He explained that the 23 Zone option

increases simplicity and predictability, but doesn't present the same number of options available in the current 3 zone model. He stated that this option would reduce transportation costs, and that students within a certain zone would be provided transportation to schools within that zone, but students outside of the zones would not be provided transportation. He then explained that the 23 zone plan still "falls short" on choice and diversity, and that all of the models presented were analyzed in comparison to the current 3 zone model.

3) 11 Zone Option

Mr. Goar explained that the 11 Zone model was based on feedback and the shortcomings of options 1 and 2. He said the 11 Zone model maintains the guiding values of predictability and diversity. He then talked how the models presented were created around the need to balance supply and demand, based on geography and number of students. He explained that the Zone boundaries don't follow political boundaries, and talked about how Zones 10 and 2 in the 11 Zone Plan didn't meet previously stated diversity guideline, which lead to the creation of option number 4.

4) 9 Zone Option

Mr. Goar stated that the 9 zone option is similar to the 11 zone option, except that it combines a specific area of geography in order to promote diversity. He explained that parts of option 3's zones 10 and 11 are combined to create Zone 9 in option 4, in an effort to increase diversity within that specific geographic area.

5) 6 Zone Option

Mr. Goar explained that in this option, the zones encompass a broader geography, resulting in the significant reduction of transportation savings and predictability.

ELL and Special Education Clusters

Mr. Goar explained that BPS wanted to be sure to recognize students who don't fit into the models, and thus created 3 different overlay maps that can go over any of the proposed models. He explained that BPS wants Special Education and ELL students to have the same opportunity for choice as general education students, and that transportation cost can be lowered under a clustered special education and ELL plan.

After showing the special education clusters, Mr. Goar talked about how the ELL overlay would be clustered "A" through "G," and grouped slightly different than the Special Education clusters. He then stated that BPS hopes to have at least 1 or 2 dual language programs in each cluster.

Mr. Goar then showed the Middle School Feeder Map, stating that predictability was an important factor that led to its creation. He explained that the "big circles" represent middle schools and the "little circles" represent elementary schools. He then explained that some of the big circles represent K-8 schools with large capacities and that may have extra seats in middle school grades.

Mr. Goar then concluded his presentation and a co-chair thanked him before opening the floor to questions from the EAC.

Questions from the Committee

A committee member asked if the proposals only apply to students entering the BPS system in 2014. The member also asked if there is one proposal that Mr. Goar felt offered the most diversity and access to quality. Mr. Goar responded that each of the options presents unique challenges and opportunities. He explained that there are "competing interests," and offered the "No Zone" model as an example, in that it virtually eliminates diversity, but provides maximum predictability and transportation savings. He noted that BPS spends 81 million on transportation annually; 5-6 million on transportation for private and charter school students, and about 75 million for transportation for BPS students. Speaking to the first question, he stated that "grandparenting" is something that is still being discussed and considered, and that BPS welcomes input from the community and EAC as to whether there should be grandparenting, and if so, if transportation should be provided for those who are grandparented.

A committee member asked if there was a way to quantify how much better or worse each plan aligns with the goals (proximity to home, diversity, etc.) outlined in the framework. Mr. Goar responded that there is data underneath the analysis presented to the EAC, and that the data would be distributed to the EAC sometime in near future.

A committee member asked if there were ways to identify what proportion of schools meet each framework goal under the different models. They also asked about the recourse parents have as far as opting out of a school under any plan, but specifically in the "No Zone" plan where choice is eliminated. Dr. Johnson responded explaining that the State places a significant emphasis on absolute performance, weighing it four times more than they weigh growth, but noted that BPS has a lot of entering students who don't speak sufficient English and BPS is looking for progress towards a goal. She discussed the quadrant analysis, which takes a school's performance and growth into account. She also discussed BPS' 11 "turnaround" schools and 21 "high support" schools that the district is working on improving rapidly. The committee member then asked where those 32 schools (11 turnaround and 21 high support) were distributed in the different models across the zones. Mr. Goar stated that the current algorithm gives siblings 1st priority, but the algorithm could be adjusted, or there could be a second algorithm that gave priority those assigned to one of the 11 turnaround or 21 high support schools, giving students in those schools a greater opportunity to attend a different school.

A committee member emphasized how important it is for BPS to get an analysis of each zone, and then asked if the EAC would have access to the software that BPS used to develop the models. Mr. Goar responded "yes," adding that BPS has created an interactive tool through which parents can input their address and see their school options under each model. The committee member then asked about the criteria used to determine if a model provided sufficient equity in access. Mr. Goar explained that BPS evaluated the models based on if they presented a choice process that is equitable and transparent, differing from EAC's definition of equitable access which defined it as having an equitable number of quality options.

A committee member asked where quality was represented in the school choice framework. Mr. Goar stated that quality is an issue under any plan and will remain present regardless of where students are assigned. He explained that there is work well under way, and that there are schools that are currently improving, but stated that the district will always have to work on ensuring quality no matter how students are assigned.

A committee member asked if there was a metric that a student in any zone would have access to a school of a certain snapshot MCAS level, diversity level, etc. Mr. Goar responded explaining that the requested metric does exist and that BPS would be sure to provide the EAC with the requested data within the next few weeks. A co-chair then asked that the data be made publicly available on the EAC's website, so that the community can comment and ask questions.

A committee member noted the use of "proximity to home" and "safety" as metrics in one category for BPS and a different category for the EAC. Mr. Goar responded that the definition of "safety" is relative to the grade level of the child, stating that BPS has data regarding school-based safety that they can measure and quantify, but spoke to the overall difficulty in creating a metric to define safety. The committee member suggested that it is problematic for BPS to include safety in its definition of quality if safety isn't defined.

A committee member asked for a zone-by-zone range of transportation savings. Mr. Goar stated that savings range from 7% to 25% depending on the model, with special education as a caveat due to special education transportation laws.

A committee member talked about the importance of connecting the plans for long-term and immediate school improvement, and asked if the two could be linked in the conversations taking place at future community meetings. Mr. Goar explained that BPS' academic team has put together a concrete plan that will hopefully be presented in the near future, which details ideas that BPS is going to rollout in an effort ensure that the district's schools are continuing to improve. He spoke of a plan for each school that is customized to the school's specific needs, stating that specialists have analyzed schools, diagnosed problems and created plans to assist communities with specific interventions. The committee member then asked if BPS knew a range of potential savings for each of the models, explaining that resources are important to improvement. Mr. Goar responded "yes," but explained that interventions can't afford to wait on resources saved through transportation under any plan.

A co-chair stated that there is no way to guarantee that the money saved through transportation will go to specific school-based improvement programs, suggesting that proximity to home and transportation savings should be on a "separate table" because they aren't as relevant to quality. Mr. Goar responded that grandfathering also affects resources saved and resources available for improvement. He explained that the School Committee will determine the amount of saved resources that will be re-allocated to specific programs.

A committee member explained that English Language Learners (ELL) are one of the most mobile student populations, and asked how BPS will evaluate the ELL clusters if the populations shift. The committee member then explained that immigrants have been used to desegregate public schools where there have been problems with racial balance, and asked how BPS will guarantee that this doesn't happen in Boston, and that ELL students end up where they need to be.

A committee member asked why BPS included the no-zone and 23-zone models if they failed to meet many of the criteria outlined in BPS' own framework for model evaluation. Mr. Goar explained that interventions and modifications could alter the potential effects of either of the proposed models. The committee member then suggested that the issues of school performance and school improvement plans be connected and presented to parents.

The Committee member also said that she was pleased to see that the District created overlays for Special Education and ELL students since their assignment process is different and that she looked forward to working with BPS on how implementation of the proposed overlays would address the need of "placement" for students with special needs, address the need for more inclusion, and ensure the equitable distribution of special education students throughout the District

Dr. Johnson stated that she wanted to address the misconception that quality wasn't being considered, and talked about BPS' work in pinpointing schools that aren't and haven't been making progress, and formulating plans to improve them. She explained that quality is the driving force behind BPS' plans and that geography has to be overlaid with quality.

A committee member stated that when they read "equitable access," they assumed that it meant what the EAC had defined as "equitable access," and they felt that BPS' definition was oversimplified. The committee member then stated that the EAC believes that for every model, there should be a quality indication for all of the schools in each zone. Dr. Johnson replied that some of the maps were drawn specifically to increase parents' access to quality options, but suggested that BPS officials clearly detail what they were thinking about as they deliberated and created the models.

Addressing the committee member's question concerning ELL students, Mr. Goar explained that BPS is working with the Academic Superintendents to create one or two dual language programs in each ELL cluster.

A committee member asked why the "no zone" and 23 zone models were presented if they didn't meet BPS' framework goals. Mr. Goar responded by explaining that there is room for modification in each of the plans, but particularly the "no zone" plan.

A committee member asked Mr. Goar to further explain whether the "ease of execution" metric pertained to BPS or parents and students. Mr. Goar responded that BPS will have to outline what needs to be done to ensure that the benefits of the selected model are manifested in every zone, neighborhood and school.

A committee member asked when the EAC would receive data lined up with the maps. Dr. Johnson explained that BPS would provide data extrapolated across models before the next EAC meeting.

A committee member asked what would happen under the "no zone" model if the closest school to a student's home was filled. Mr. Goar responded that the student would be assigned to the next closest school.

A committee member asked if it was possible for BPS to overlay the median income map with the models. The committee member also suggested excluding the suburbs from the map and "pulling apart" the city so that the models can be easier evaluated.

Questions from the Community Observers

A community observer asked the amount and potential time frame of transportation savings. The observer also asked BPS to identify the high support schools on the map for each of the models.

Another community observer asked if there were any plans to change the lottery process or current algorithms.

A community observer asked about the supply and demand of Special Education and ELL seats, and asked how BPS was going to reinvest savings in school improvement.

The next community observer asked that BPS make the student assignment process easier for parents to learn, explaining that parents don't have time to understand the process during presentations.

Next Steps

A co-chair asked that the EAC members analyze the quality of schools, available seats, and cost of execution, for each zone in every model. The co-chair noted that it is also important to address the potential changes in the algorithm, and the interventions that would need to be in place for those who don't live near any quality schools or are late arrivals. Dr. Johnson announced that the presentation would be made again at the October 3rd Boston School Committee meeting.

Conclusion

A co-chair thanked everyone for coming and the meeting was adjourned.