

BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

To: Boston School Committee
From: Carol R. Johnson, Superintendent
Date: March 13, 2013

Dear Chairman O'Neill and members of the School Committee, as well as the many families, students and community partners here tonight:

I am so very sorry that I cannot be with you this evening on this important occasion. I was looking forward to being here for this historic moment. Many before us have struggled to develop a solution to a problem that has challenged our community for generations: *How can we connect quality schools with the choices our families have?* And, just as important, *how can we both ensure predictability and schools that are close to home, while also allowing for the fact that not enough of our schools are of high quality today?*

We are grateful to every one who has spent the last year working on this challenge. Each parent, student, friend, critic and partner has brought something to the table. You have informed our School Committee and, just as important, our community. I believe that we are ready to take a powerful step forward, together. Obviously, our most important task is to focus on the quality of our schools and the equity we can offer to every family as we strengthen the ability families have to attend schools closer to home. I am encouraging you to move forward tonight -- in order to allow BPS to focus on quality and implementation.

We know we have lots of work to do with our families who are confused by our current school choice system. We need to simplify what we are offering and how we explain those choices to our diverse audiences. As a system we must have ample time to work out the expansion of inclusion efforts in order to fulfill the promise of the overlay for Students with Disabilities. We have comparable work that must be devoted to the overlay for English Language Learners and expanding dual language programs.

I feel nothing but deep respect and gratitude towards the Mayor's External Advisory Committee. They have worked long and hard to deliver thoughtful and substantive recommendations to this body.

However, I am aware that they struggled as a group with creating access to more quality schools and the redundancy in maintaining the walk zone priority as we transition to a fundamentally different plan. The Home-Based model is itself a walk zone and quality-centric model. It lets families choose a school close to home while at the same time linking their list of schools to quality and capacity.

We believe that walk zone access is appropriate and fair. Today, eighty-six percent of families list a school within their walk zone as one of their top choices. This plan ensures those school choices will always remain on a family's list. However, walk zone priority is a remnant of the old three-zone system. It is no longer needed with this new home-based model, which makes allowances for quality and equity. Because the starting point for the home-based model is each child's address, I believe it is no longer necessary to set aside seats in a school for children who live nearby – because under this plan, *all* children will live nearby or dramatically closer to school.

How does the Home-Based plan work? First it starts with all the schools within a mile of your address. This is your walk zone. Then, if it has to, it will expand the number of choices to ensure you have several high-quality schools to choose from. It also balances supply and demand so it may add a school to ensure capacity. Every family has at least six schools to choose between. Some families will have more if they live close to many schools because of walk zone access.

Here is what I firmly believe: Until we can guarantee that every student has equal access to quality, we must keep working on quality. In the meantime, our assignment system must compensate for the current inequitable distribution across the district of our highest quality schools. That is what is fair.

The Home-Based model is one that none of us in this room could have drawn up on our own. It is a collaborative effort – a creative solution that meets many of the standards we have set for ourselves:

- It is more equitable than what we have today.
- It protects the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity we value in our schools.
- It does away with zones and puts a priority on helping students attend quality schools closer to home.
- It is more predictable than what we have today: It increases the chances a family will receive one of their top three choices to 80 percent.
- It cuts the average distance our children must travel by 40 percent.
- It is self-correcting and adapts as quality improves. Every time a school gets better, predictability and equity will increase and the distance students have to travel will decrease.
- It helps most English Language Learners and most Students With Disabilities know that a school nearby will always have a quality program for them.

This effort is about more than student assignment and test scores. During more than 70 public meetings and with the voices of five thousand people we heard that quality means something different to every parent. This is why we must promote inclusion opportunities, summer learning, extended day programming, arts and athletics for our students. We are grateful that the Mayor has designated specific resources for targeted improvements at underperforming schools.

I know that there were extraordinary hours spent on the EAC recommendations, but I also know that uncertainty about the walk zone *priority* occurred in the process. I am hesitant to in any way appear to undermine the hard work and time spent on this decision-making. For the EAC effort I am extremely grateful, however, after considerable thought and deliberation, after reviewing that struggle and after viewing the final MIT and BC presentations on the way the walk zone priority actually works, it seems to me that it would be unwise to add a second priority to the Home-Based model by allowing the walk zone priority to be carried over.

Therefore, I recommend that we should continue to offer walk zone access to ensure every family can always choose a school within a mile, but we should not set aside seats as a walk zone priority within the Home-Based model. It is simply not needed, as this is what the new plan itself delivers.

Leaving the walk zone priority to continue as it currently operates is not a good option. We know from research that it does not make a significant difference the way it is applied today: although people may have thought that it did, the walk zone priority does not in fact actually help students attend schools closer to home. The External Advisory Committee suggested taking this important issue up in two years, but I believe we are ready to take this step now. We must ensure the Home-Based system works in an honest and transparent way from the very beginning.

Finally, I am also recommending that the School Committee reach out to parents to hear their experiences with the new model and direct a data-driven analysis of each part of the new assignment system one year after implementation. This is information we will all need to decide whether any adjustments should be made to any aspect of the plan.

In conclusion, let us recognize and emphasize the significance of the Home-Based model. It *is already* a walk zone-centered model and we do not need to add a new layer of set-asides on top of it.

This represents a major step forward for our city. It is a bold plan that strengthens access to quality schools, builds predictability and improves our communities while ensuring our schools can serve them well. Your approval tonight will allow us to focus together on improving quality and *access* to quality all across our city. This is the most important work.

This is my recommendation. I thank you for your time, attention, careful deliberation and dedication to the next generation of our city's children who will benefit greatly from this proposal.

Gratefully,



Carol R. Johnson
Superintendent

Facts about the Home-Based model

The Boston Public Schools serves approximately 57,000 students in 128 schools. This proposal would affect the way students choose and are assigned to schools in grades K through 8; all high schools would remain citywide.

- **Does away with zones** and puts a priority on helping students attend quality schools close to home.
- Uses **addresses as a starting point** and offers families all the choices closest to home (within a mile). Where we have concerns about the quality of schools nearby, it offers more choices a little further away. Everyone has a minimum of six schools from a list that accounts for quality, location and capacity.
- **Increases the chances a family will get one of their top-three choices** from 72% (now) to 80% (home-based).
- Increases the chances a student will be **in the same class as another child from their neighborhood** by 30 percent.
- **Cuts average distance** a child travels by 40% (from 1.87 miles to 1.1 miles on average).
- Is self-correcting and **adapts as quality improves**. Every time a school gets better, predictability and equity increase and the distance students have to travel will decrease.
- It will roll out gradually due to grandfathering and sibling grandfathering. **No child has to change schools.**
- Helps **ELLs and students with disabilities** know that a school nearby will have a **quality program** for them.

This plan was developed through the work of a 27-member External Advisory Committee appointed by Mayor Thomas M. Menino, made up of parents, students and community members. The group held approximately 100 open meetings during the course of the last year and heard more than 5,000 voices during more than 50 community meetings and online surveys.

If approved by the Boston School Committee, this model would take effect for the 2014-2015 school year.

For more information and to use an interactive tool to see how the plan would work at an individual address, visit bostonschoolchoice.org.