



# ACTION FOR BOSTON CHILDREN

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June 2019

To the students, families, educators, and community members in Boston,

I am calling for Action for Boston Children.

Over the last several years, numerous studies and reports have detailed the systemic and long-standing challenges related to equity and quality in the Boston Public Schools. Racial and ethnic gaps across many achievement measures are stark, and some of them have even increased in the past decade. Too many of our students with special needs and English Learners, and the majority of students in poorer neighborhoods, are unable to access quality programs and schools. And when some of our city's brightest students – our valedictorians – struggle to complete college and never earn a middle-class income, what does it say about Boston's ability to provide a quality public education?

In my role as City Councilor, I have had the privilege of hearing and learning from many educators and community partners, witnessing the important work they do with our children. These public servants are doing their best, and in many cases helping students achieve great things. But these bright spots in many classrooms contrast against a school system that is not moving forward at the rate we need; to the contrary, I am struck by the sense that progress in education often gets *stuck* in Boston.

As we welcome a new Superintendent to Boston, we have before us a pivotal opportunity for change. I have spent the last several months asking families, school leaders, educators and the community to reflect with me on a few important questions: How can we accelerate action for Boston children? Which issues are most critical to address? And what steps should we take to get started? Their answers informed my thinking, and I highlight them here:

- ▶ **First, we must align on a common set of values that guide us.** For me, and many others, the overarching value is equity. But equity can mean different things to different people, and we as a community need to align on what it will mean for our public school system. I offer my definition in this report, and hope to continue the dialogue across the city.
- ▶ **Second, we must focus on a few areas that are most critical to unlocking progress for our children.** After hearing from a broad, diverse set of voices in the community, I see four areas as most critical:
  - ▶ #1: A Central Office that Serves Schools and the Community
  - ▶ #2: Access to Quality Schools
  - ▶ #3: Early Foundations for Lifelong Learning
  - ▶ #4: High Schools that Prepare Students for Success
- ▶ **Third, the district needs to make concrete commitments that allow for real public accountability.** In the past, BPS has “agreed” with outside research, but left its response vague enough that it is hard to know what is really changing. In this report, I recommend specific action steps, along with expectations for timing. These won't solve everything, but they can create momentum towards greater equity and excellence.

Ultimately, taking action is a matter of public and political will. We all must demand that the pace of change in BPS rise to meet the urgency of our children's needs. As we welcome a new Superintendent to Boston, I look forward to collaborating with the district on taking bold and courageous steps to move forward, and encouraging my partners and constituents to do the same.

I invite you to join me in calling for Action for Boston Children.



Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Andrea Campbell".

Andrea Campbell  
President, Boston City Council

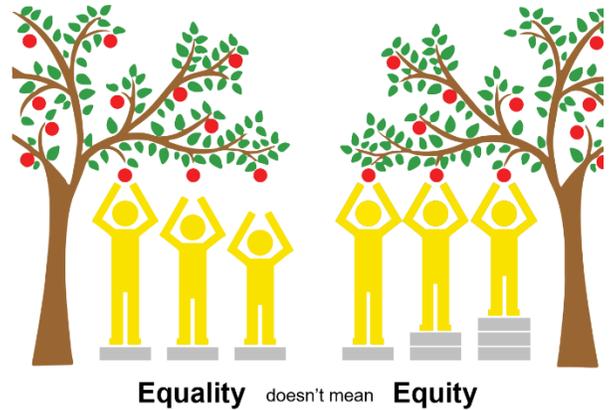
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# What is equity?

Equity is giving every child what they need to succeed in school and pursue the life of their choosing. In Boston, we must commit to the idea that those who have the least deserve the most from our public schools.

Equity is a popular word in education circles. But it is too easy to throw the word around if we don't define what we mean and then hold ourselves accountable to its implications – even when that is hard or uncomfortable. When I say that **equity means enabling every child to pursue the life of their choosing**, that is a matter of recognizing their basic dignity and inherent assets and abilities. And as I say that, it forces me to recognize that in a city surrounded by increasing wealth and amazing opportunities, these opportunities don't feel real today for thousands of our students, especially children of color. That is why **those who have the least deserve the most from our public schools and our broader system**. Yet anyone



who visits schools around Boston can see plainly that we are not delivering on that obligation today, from the facilities we offer, to the supports that are available, to the rigor and quality of instruction in classrooms. In a city that prides itself on a progressive mindset, how can we justify failing to give our absolute best to students with high needs, when the potential rewards of today's global economy are visible to any Bostonian who walks around downtown? A focus on equity must be grounded in an acknowledgement that our system has been underserving entire populations of our children for decades.

- ▶ A **~40% gap** exists in math proficiency between our White and our Black and Latinx students, and a **~50% gap** between our Asian and our Black and Latinx students\*<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ Students who are both special education and English Learners are **~5x more likely** to fall off-track to graduate, compared to students without unique needs<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ A **~30% gap** exists in expected college graduation rates between our low-income and high-income students<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ **~80%** of students in downtown Boston and Charlestown attend high-quality schools, compared with only **~5% of students** in Mattapan<sup>4</sup>

Our student population is remarkably diverse<sup>5</sup>:

**58%**

are economically disadvantaged

**42%**

are Latinx

**32%**

are Black

**32%**

are English learners

**20%**

have an identified disability

Taken together, almost **all** – approximately 90% of our children – fall into one or more of these “subgroups.” When we see the deep and persistent inequity that we do, we must acknowledge that we are not underserving groups of children here or there – we are underserving **all** of Boston's children.

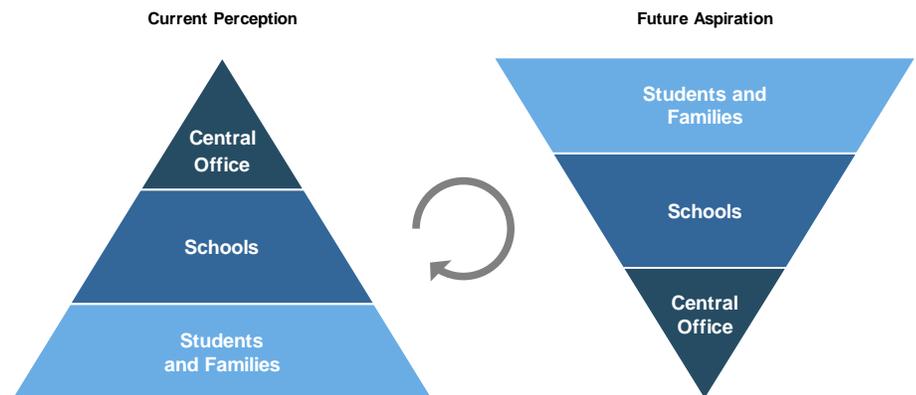
\*Across most indicators there are persistent gaps along racial lines. On average, Asian and White students are afforded more access to quality, and outperform their Black and Latinx peers. But we know that the racial categories that we use – in Boston and beyond – are imperfect proxies that can obscure the individual experience for children and mask large variation within these broad subgroups, many of whom may identify with nuanced ethnic identities. Our children come from 139 different countries, and nearly one in two students speaks a language other than English at home.<sup>6</sup> As just one example, there are known to be significant disparities in access and outcomes within the Asian American population, even though, in aggregate, outcomes for Asian American students are relatively strong. Such variation exists across racial categories. Unfortunately, data is not systematically tracked by country of origin or language, which can make it difficult to fully understand the needs of all children and families.

# #1: A Central Office that Serves Schools and the Community

**Guiding Value:** *We are first and foremost in service of our students and families: Our schools are accountable for supporting students and families, and central office is accountable for supporting schools – not the other way around.*

The foundation of a strong public education is in the relationship between the community, the schools, and the district leadership that oversees the system. Today in Boston, that relationship needs a reset.

BPS central office suffers from an identity crisis. The basic issue is a lack of core values of how the system should be managed: no clear definition of what schools are accountable to deliver, nor what mix of enabling conditions and supports they can count on from central office to do so. It is common to hear from school leaders that they lack the power to do what they believe they need to do to serve their students, but paradoxically, the system is also not



effectively managed in a top-down way. Instead, central office has a track record of generating a stream of new initiatives and programming, which often seem not well-connected. The result is that we are losing some of our most talented school leaders, who are seeking a clear and compelling student and family-centered vision. Meanwhile, the time that district staff could use to support schools is consumed by central office meetings to try to coordinate the initiative overload.<sup>7</sup>

Amidst this lack of clarity, parents and families can often feel that they are the last priority of the school system's thinking. Their day-to-day experience can feel meaningfully different based on the school their child attends: while some schools do appear to engage their communities authentically and effectively, others struggle in this area. And when BPS is considering policies that impact the community, the decision-making process does not seem to systematically and proactively consider family and community input, or work to adapt to their varying needs.

My belief is that we'll resolve the identity crisis when we flip current attitudes on their head, so that student and family needs are the system's clear top priority, and central office understands its role to be fundamentally in support of schools.

**In a high-performing system, when the central office is successfully serving schools and the community and in service of equity overall, we see:**

- ▶ ***A vision and approach that puts children first.*** School leaders and central office work together with a sense of trust and collective responsibility to determine the needs of their students and families, and work consistently to build a system where all children can succeed.
- ▶ ***A hospitable environment that welcomes all families, of all languages and backgrounds.*** Families receive kind, supportive and knowledgeable counsel. This starts with BPS welcome centers and carries through all channels of communication and touch points with our parents and families.
- ▶ ***Mutual accountability for high standards.*** School leaders are held to a set of *clear* and *high* expectations by central office, such that all of them know *what* they are accountable for, and *how* they are held accountable. Central office, in turn, uses those same standards to assess its own performance, and holds its leadership just as accountable.
- ▶ ***Responsiveness and expertise in central office service and support.*** School leaders have direct access to a consistent set of experts in central office who deeply understand their individual school contexts. The central office can adjust, and give more support to schools that need it and progressively more flexibility to schools that show readiness and results.

## What are the specific and concrete action steps that build momentum towards success in this area?

### #1.1 Collect and publicize central office perception and satisfaction data of school leaders and families on an annual basis, along with concrete steps central office will take to address areas needing improvement.

BPS surveyed its school leaders last year about their satisfaction with the support they receive from central office, but has not made the results public, or shared those results back with school leaders. Going forward, not only should last year's data be made public, but BPS should develop annual, systematic feedback mechanisms for both educators and parents, and share that feedback and a corresponding action plan transparently with school leaders and the public. In a survey of school leaders, BPS could focus on: perceptions around the clarity of expectations for school leaders; transparency in decision-making; the extent to which school leaders feel supported by each functional area in central office; and how much flexibility school leaders have relative to what they feel they need. In a survey of families, BPS could focus on: family perspectives related to key touch points with the district, including the welcome centers; ability to understand and navigate the choice process more broadly; transparency and clarity in key decisions that impact students and families; and school climate issues.<sup>8</sup> This action step is ultimately part of a broader cultural shift needed at BPS. BPS needs to move to a new model of interacting with its core constituents, where sharing feedback openly and responding to feedback promptly are core values of the district as a public agency.

### #1.2 Hold school support leaders and teams (e.g., instructional superintendents and network teams) at central office accountable for student and school outcomes at the schools they serve.

BPS currently divides its schools into networks, where each group of schools is supported by a cross-functional central office team. But what are these networks truly accountable for, and who is holding them to that standard? Today, school leaders claim that the service they receive from central office staff can feel disconnected from the school's needs and experiences, and is rooted in a culture of compliance rather than an orientation to problem-solving with a customer service mindset. Clarity of accountability is undermined by the organizational design itself: many central office staff do not feel appropriately linked to a school, or even a group of schools, with some central office staff straddling multiple networks (and therefore many more schools) today. Whatever organizational design the new Superintendent puts in place should ensure that individual central office support leaders and their teams are *clearly linked to* and *held accountable for* student and school *outcomes* of a specific and limited group of schools that they serve.

### #1.3 Overhaul the Welcome Centers to establish a consistent quality of experience that is inclusive, welcoming, and supportive of families as they navigate the school assignment process.

Welcome Centers play a critical role in the connections that parents and families have with the school system. Many times, they are the first interaction that families that are new to the city have with BPS; or, they are places that families visit at vulnerable moments when their children are struggling and need to change schools. It's a setting that calls for caring, compassionate, and knowledgeable service. Instead, the feedback I have consistently heard from constituents and community organizations is that the Welcome Centers lack a customer service orientation, are compliance and paperwork oriented, appear disconnected from schools, and are generally unable to adequately inform and support parents in making informed choices for their children. An overhaul is needed, and should be rooted in a study of family feedback and recommendations. It will likely require investing in Welcome Center staff and training, such that leadership, staffing, culture, understanding of district initiatives and the school landscape – and the overall customer service mindset – are all addressed.

## #2: Access to Quality Schools

**Guiding Value:** Make choice real for families: more quality schools to choose from, equitable access to the quality schools we have, and an assignment system that families understand.

When the BPS school assignment process was last redesigned, the guiding principle of that effort was “quality schools close to home.” The adoption of the Home-Based System that came out of that process involved a new assignment algorithm to try to make good on that guiding principle. Families enrolling through the main lottery are guaranteed a minimum number of quality schools, with a list that is individualized for each child so that the schools on their list are as close to their home as possible.

**80%**  
of students in downtown Boston  
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Several years later, however, the limitations of those changes are clear. The sheer complexity of the Home-Based System undermines the concept of choice by making decisions less clear. Exceptions to the principle of choice abound: many schools retain their own separate screens or admissions processes, and our highest-need English Learners and special education students are assigned to schools by a completely separate process, in which the most in-demand, highest-

**“ For families, the reality is that the promise of choice does not feel real for all. ”**

quality schools in the city are almost never an option. Most fundamentally, it is impossible to realize a vision of quality schools close to home, when there simply are not that many quality schools in the city.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the ability to enroll in a quality school varies dramatically by race and by neighborhood.

**In a high-performing system that provides students and families with equitable access to quality schools, we see:**

- ▶ ***A user-friendly choice process.*** The decision process is easy to navigate. All families can understand the options they have, how the placement process works, and can make sense of how they got the final school they receive. And if they don’t understand, they can connect with a BPS representative who can explain in a common-sense way.
- ▶ ***Transparent data available to parents.*** Data of all kinds – not just numbers, but meaningful qualitative information – is available to parents and families to help inform decision making (e.g., the availability of seats, quality of seats, and how highly demanded seats are at every school).<sup>10</sup>
- ▶ ***A process that prioritizes equitable access to quality seats.*** The outcomes of the assignment process advance equity in access to quality seats – particularly for students who have been historically underserved, such as Black and Latinx students, and special education students and English Learners.
- ▶ ***An approach that is responsive to what families demand and relentless in its commitment to improving quality.*** A focus on access alone is not enough – we must continually use every tool at our disposal to increase the number of schools that are excellent options for our children. When schools are popular with families and are producing strong outcomes for students, we need to find ways to expand those schools or replicate similar models. By the same token, when schools have weak results and are showing consistently declining enrollment, we need to recognize that students and parents are voting with their feet, and make the hard decision to redesign or replace that school with one that can earn the confidence of families.

**What are the specific and concrete action steps that build momentum towards success in this area?**

**#2.1 Set a goal for the number of Tier 1 seats in the system, publicize the goal, and develop a plan for how to expand the number of Tier 1 seats.**

A comprehensive plan for expanding the number of quality seats in the system must be rooted in an honest and candid assessment of how many quality seats there are today, and an ambitious goal for how many more quality seats we should have and by when. As a starting point, BPS needs to make clear what they consider to be a quality school. Despite a substantial community process in 2013 that led to the adoption of a School Quality Framework, today this framework

seems to have fallen largely out-of-mind, and is not a meaningful driver of how BPS drives school improvement or how it communicates with parents. The framework itself needs work: it is difficult to understand the 20+ measures that make up the school quality definition, and how all those measures combine to determine what level of quality a family is really getting. While these Tiers still drive the list of schools that families can choose through the Home-Based System, it is difficult to even access a simple list of all Tier 1 schools in the city.<sup>11</sup> Does leadership still stand behind this framework as its definition of quality? How do families know when good is good enough?

The issue of expanding quality seats in our system is a complicated one, and will require a host of considerations. But we should not rest until there is a clear plan in place to dramatically increase the number of quality schools, especially in neighborhoods that disproportionately lack access to quality today.

#### **#2.2 Place more special education and English Learner programs in high demand, high-quality schools over the next 1-3 years.**

This recommendation addresses a fundamental inequity in BPS today: schools that have experienced declining enrollment, especially those with open enrollment policies, serve as the places where BPS locates programs for its highest-need English Learner and special education students, resulting in an exceptional concentration of need in these buildings. Meanwhile, the schools that are in highest demand from families often have few or even no seats available for these young people. This has to change. The process should begin with an assessment of how many English Learner and special education programs are in high demand and/or considered high-quality today, and deliver a phased-in plan for launching and/or relocating more of these specialized seats to high-quality schools over time. As part of this plan, it will be critical to ensure that these schools have or build the capacity to serve students with unique needs appropriately and effectively.

#### **#2.3 Modify the Home-Based Assignment formula to enhance equity.**

Instead of giving each family a minimum number of Tier 1 and 2 schools, give each family a minimum number of Tier 1 and 2 seats. The current assignment process sustains inequity because it does not account for the differing number of seats at each school, and the uneven distribution of students across the city. For example, take families who live near the Quincy vs. the Hale who are seeking kindergarten. Both schools are Tier 1, but the Quincy has 59 kindergarten seats, while the Hale has 22 kindergarten seats, meaning that families given the Hale on their list are less likely to receive a Tier 1 seat than families given the Quincy.<sup>12</sup> As researchers found last year, this problem is exacerbated for our Black and Latinx students, who typically live in higher density areas with fewer quality schools. These researchers recommended that BPS make technical changes to address this inequity in the assignment process, but BPS has not yet acted on this recommendation.<sup>13</sup> The district should propose specific changes and present supporting analysis that shows their anticipated impact, particularly for specialized populations.

#### **#2.4 Recognize and support schools that aim to innovate and collaborate with one another to strengthen access to quality within a community.**

BPS' efforts to improve access to quality schools should focus in the neighborhoods where such access is most lacking today – and then aim to drive improvement through authentic engagement with those communities. We should want school leaders themselves to be driving the change, coming together in groups with community partners, and building new models and supports that benefit students. My belief is that the most promising innovations will come from within schools and communities that know their students and children best. But today, BPS has no framework to catalyze or meaningfully support these community-based efforts. The most prominent current example is in the Grove Hall neighborhood, with a group of schools looking to act as a network to create a K-12 neighborhood pathway: to align curricula and school programming, attract and share community partners and resources, and offer a tailored set of wraparound mental and behavioral health supports to serve students and families within their community – all with the aim of improving the quality of education and supports for students in this community. When efforts like this arise, BPS should provide a clear response: does this align with the district's strategy? What supports and resources can the group expect? Or is BPS not willing to allow this group the flexibilities it seeks? In the absence of greater clarity and a more systematic strategy, we cannot expect the Grove Hall Alliance—or any other school and community-driven effort – to succeed.

### #3: Early Foundations for Lifelong Learning

**Guiding Value:** A foundation for our education system starts by asking: what does our typical Boston parent need to ensure that their children, from birth to five, have access to quality programs that put them on a path of lifelong learning?

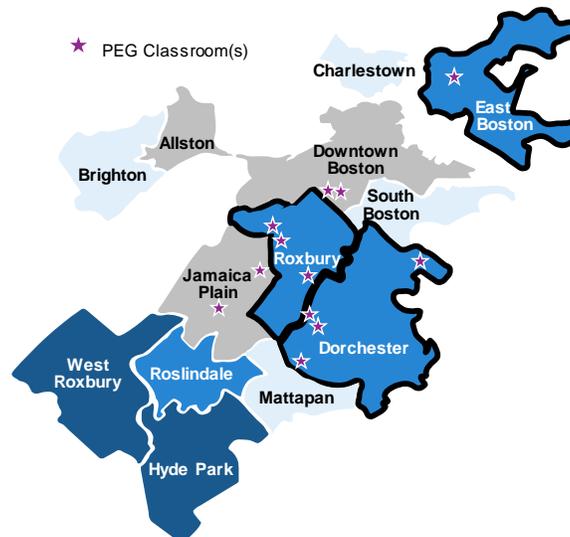
Early childhood education in Boston is often noted as a bright spot. This is for good reason: Boston has a strong definition of quality for pre-K that is commonly understood, and programs are nationally recognized. The city has relied upon a “mixed-delivery” model that includes both BPS *and* community based organizations to provide the majority of four-year-olds in the city access to quality pre-K. And earlier this year, the city built on its commitment to free, universal quality pre-K *for four-year-olds* through a sizable start-up investment in the Quality Pre-K Fund. (It is worth noting that the city includes only four-year-olds in its definition of universal pre-K, and many in the city would like this definition to include three-year-olds).

This progress should be celebrated. But now we must ensure that the promise of equitable access to quality for four-year-olds is fulfilled, while also setting our sights on greater aspirations for the full birth to five period. The long-term benefits of quality early learning and childcare are well documented.<sup>14</sup> Children who attend high-quality early childhood programs are likely to have better academic outcomes and earn more, and less likely to have poorer health outcomes or be incarcerated.<sup>15</sup> If we want to be guided by the evidence that there is no better time to invest in our children than in an early age, why would we wait until age four?

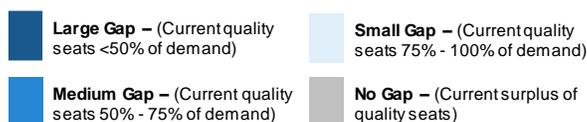
Today, until a child turns four or five, it can feel to families as though there is no place to go. The birth to four landscape is dominated by private providers that can be hard to find, and to afford. A patchwork of funding sources and cumbersome state and federal requirements that families cannot meet or do not understand contribute to locking out many children and families from access to quality childcare. We should start by asking what *parents and families need* to ensure that their children are on the strongest path to a life of learning and outcomes. And if we ask that question, it’s hard not to arrive at the conclusion that a comprehensive view of birth to five is the way forward.

**In a high-performing early childhood system that provides our earliest learners and families with equitable access to quality programs, we see:**

- ▶ *A vision that spans birth to five.* This starts with developing a clear picture of available early childhood options for the first five years of a child’s life in our city, and a coherent strategy for how to expand access to quality. Where there are gaps, we invest to eliminate them.
- ▶ *A clear commitment to quality,* with a strong definition of quality that is consistently executed and translated to the 0-3 period, regardless of program type. This includes standards for curricula, classroom environment and size, and the credentials for our adults. The system also offers high-quality professional learning for educators, both teachers and paraprofessionals.



Relative Size of Quality Seat Gap



Source: Building a Foundation for Success: Boston’s Progress Toward High-Quality Universal Pre-K, 2018

- ▶ *Families know where to go.* Parents and families are easily connected to information to help them understand their options. As a system, we help eliminate the barriers to child care being affordable and accessible to many families. They receive the support they need to select and access the best option for their child. And this is especially true for children requiring early intervention services, or for non-English speaking families.
- ▶ *Parents who are empowered.* Once parents and families enroll their child in a program, they are engaged and empowered to become active participants in their child’s educational experience. From the start of their child’s educational journey, the system works side-by-side and authentically with parents under the collective belief that education is the key to breaking cycles of poverty.

### **What are the specific and concrete action steps that build momentum towards success in this area?**

#### **#3.1 Provide a transparent and comprehensive accounting on the progress made toward universal pre-K for four-year-olds.**

In a 2017 study, the Mayor’s office identified a gap of ~1,500 quality pre-K seats in the city for four-year-olds.<sup>16</sup> A presentation to the School Committee in early 2018 highlighted that quality in Boston varied considerably by neighborhood, with the largest gaps experienced in West Roxbury, Hyde Park, Dorchester, Roxbury and East Boston—many of the neighborhoods with the largest concentration of young children. The city’s recent commitment to creating 750 new quality seats to close the gap through a \$15 million start-up fund is exciting. But what about the other 750 seats to get to 1,500? If the city believes that these seats have been already addressed over the past couple of years, it should provide a transparent and public accounting of when, how and where this was achieved. And for any such seats—either those that were created over the past few years, or those that are being created now—BPS should make clear whether they are being placed in neighborhoods that the city identified as having the most need in 2017.

#### **#3.2 Map the continuum of options for birth to five, and publicize key data related to these options on an annual basis.**

Parents and families have described the early education landscape to me as “the wilderness” – families are unsure of their options, and it is unclear where programs and seats are located and whether these programs and seats align to the needs and demands of families. A comprehensive analysis of the options for birth to five will help illustrate the landscape for our youngest children to better understand our offerings. And key data related to access to quality seats across the city and by neighborhood (including the count, location, demand, and shortage of these seats) will help determine where there are gaps in quality and access. This data should be published on an annual basis and in ways that are easily understood by families, so that families have a clear informational tool to help them navigate their options. Such a tool could also serve as a mechanism to inform the development of a coherent expansion strategy for a quality birth to five continuum that is accessible to all.

Because this kind of information is so important, I am pleased that the Birth to Eight Collaborative, a partnership spearheaded by the Boston Opportunity Agenda, is working with the city of Boston’s data analytics office to publish the city’s first ever “State of Early Childhood in Boston,” which aims to provide a comprehensive mapping of the birth to five landscape.<sup>17</sup> This mapping will highlight the number of available seats, gaps between supply and demand, and gaps in data availability and comprehensiveness that limit access to transparency.<sup>18</sup> This effort will be a notable first step in this space, and will undoubtedly inform necessary future work on this topic.

#### **#3.3 Create a clear function that “owns” the birth to five early childhood strategy for Boston.**

The function would be responsible for setting the birth to five agenda for the city. Today, no one “owns” birth to five in a comprehensive, integrated way. BPS focuses on early childhood, but this starts primarily at age four. Arguably, if there were a clear function responsible for setting an agenda that was comprehensive of birth to five, we as a city would be primed to think and act differently. The function could live at City Hall, and play the role of agenda setting, developing strategy, coordinating across the diverse provider landscape, and problem solving. Because educational and child care programming in the birth-to-five period is reliant on the strong role of private providers, and influenced by so many factors outside of education (e.g., early health, family services, housing, workforce), a diverse set of partnerships would be needed, and multiple city agencies would need to work together more effectively than they do today. If implemented well, this function could become a “place to go” for families looking for information on the early childhood landscape.

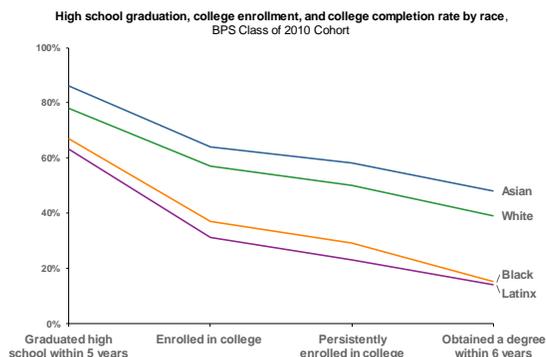
## #4: High Schools that Prepare Students for Success

**Guiding Value:** High schools are a critical gateway to adulthood. They must guide and provide students with opportunities to achieve the knowledge, experiences, and skills they need to succeed in the life of their choosing.

Behind the good news of growth in high school graduation rates – up nearly 15 points since 2007, now at an all-time high of 73% – is the stark reality of enduring inequity in our high schools.<sup>19</sup> Even as graduation rates have risen, a quarter of our BPS students fell behind two or more years academically – or “off-track” – in recent years.<sup>20</sup> Black, Latinx, English Learners, and special education students are disproportionately likely to fall off-track, and eventually not enroll or persist in post-secondary education. While we graduate the majority of our students from BPS high schools, less than half of these students (48% including both BPS in-district and charter schools) were actually “graduating ready” in 2017 as measured by certain college, career, and life readiness indicators used in Boston.<sup>21</sup> And when even 40% of our high school *valedictorians* struggle to earn a middle-class income a decade later, what does it say about the ability of our high schools to prepare students for success?<sup>22</sup>



Three quarters of our students graduate from high school. But less than half of them graduate ready for college, career, and the rest of their lives.



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Any assessment of our high schools cannot ignore the powerful role that admissions policies play in perpetuating conditions that make it harder for some schools to succeed. The sheer size of our exam schools and selective high schools – which in total enroll 38% of all new 9<sup>th</sup> graders each year but only account for 7 of our 36 high schools – creates a structural constraint that concentrates need elsewhere in the system. Open enrollment high schools in the city enroll approximately 50% of the district’s students, but serve close to 80% of students with some type of unique need.<sup>23</sup> The intensity of need in open enrollment schools makes it harder to serve students effectively, and many of these schools are where higher rates of students struggle, and where fewer and fewer students and families enroll. Systemic issues like admissions policies are

compounded at the school level, with inconsistencies in the expectations we set for students, uneven instructional practices and student supports, and a lack of skills and resources to address students’ mental and physical health needs. Ultimately, the situation in our high schools calls for a dramatically different approach at both the school and the system level.

### In a high-quality high school, young people are provided with:

- ▶ The same set of high expectations and rigorous instructional experiences for all our students, regardless of background, and the supports needed to help students meet these high expectations
- ▶ Advocacy and leadership skills to set meaningful goals, along with supports to achieve and meet those goals
- ▶ Relevant and enriching learning experiences that expand horizons and motivate students to work harder and dream bigger, understanding their education is relevant to them
- ▶ A nurturing culture that cultivates both hearts and minds, fosters the development of relationships, and brings out their best
- ▶ Readiness to embark on a clear and viable post-secondary path that represents informed and authentic student choice

### In a high-performing system, the conditions are in place to enable all students to experience a quality school:

- ▶ **Prioritization of instructional excellence and rigor across schools.** The district sets clear and consistent standards for what instructional excellence looks like, and offers the appropriate supports, operating conditions, and professional learning opportunities for our school leaders, teachers and educators to get there.

- ▶ **Policies that enable our schools to better reflect the diversity of our student needs across schools.** Admissions policies and practices are adjusted to reduce the stratified distribution of students (e.g., English Learners and special education students) and reduce the extreme disparities between open enrollment and selective schools.
- ▶ **Full, wrap-around supports that recognize the mental and behavioral health needs of our children.** Increasingly, our young people across the city are impacted by trauma and exhibit a set of needs that demand a greater and more specialized level of mental, behavioral, and social and emotional resources that school level staff are not equipped to handle. We must make these types of supports a non-negotiable element of our school models.
- ▶ **Strong supports and options for youth who fall off-track.** Supports and options for students who do fall off-track are strengthened such that students who are at-risk of falling behind are supported, and those who have fallen off-track are steered to a successful outcome through a well-designed and well-functioning set of alternative schools when needed.

Two notes on our high school landscape that merit special discussion:

1. **Exam Schools:** For over a year, I have been working with other members of the City Council on the lack of diversity and equity in access to our exam schools. We have begun to see some progress, most notably that the exam school entrance test will be offered during the school day. There are many additional questions that require exploration, including fundamental questions about the selection criteria for our exam schools. Because these questions and efforts are ongoing, I have chosen to focus the action steps in this report on the many issues in our high schools apart from exam schools.
2. **Madison Park:** The potential impact of a premier, high-quality vocational program in a city like Boston is obvious. Boston enjoys a robust set of industries, and it is critical that our youth have the opportunity to master skills that are highly demanded in a quality, integrated academic and vocational program. While vocational schools across the state are highly demanded and filled to capacity, Madison Park suffers from under-enrollment. We simply must do better. My colleagues in City Hall and many of our constituents continue to call for attention to issues of more effective facilitation of partnerships, of recruitment and admissions, and of funding. I look forward to collaborating with my colleagues to continue to call for change at Madison Park.

## What are the specific and concrete action steps that build momentum towards success in this area?

### #4.1 Publicize and share post-secondary enrollment and completion data, disaggregated by high school and by subgroup, on an annual basis.

Such data will provide additional insight and transparency to families and the community to better understand how students are faring after they graduate from high school, and how well prepared they are to succeed in post-secondary education. While this data exists today (some of it deep within the State Education Department’s website), it is not easy to find and BPS does not proactively share it with families or community. It is difficult even for BPS principals to access. Ideally, this data would be used by central office, school leaders and their communities, and advocates as part of a broader conversation and cultural practice of using data to drive continuous improvement at the high school level.

### #4.2 Establish common graduation standards across high schools, with a focus on what students should be learning and a common expectation for rigor.

While it is encouraging that BPS has an ongoing initiative focused on increasing access to MassCore courses, my view is that common graduation standards are not achieved solely by prescribing a common course list across schools. Such an approach risks creating equity in name only (all students could take math courses with the same title, but does the teaching reflect the same rigor and do students learn the same skills?), and risks stifling innovation.<sup>24</sup> Instead, this recommendation will require a detailed examination of what the expectation for rigor is in any given course, and what students need to be learning in high school to be deemed ready for graduation. Teachers will need professional development and strong curriculum resources to deliver on higher levels of rigor. And students should have more opportunities to extend learning beyond coursework, though enrichment opportunities such as internships, leadership experiences, and other capstone requirements that align to college and career readiness.

### #4.3 Create a new process for open enrollment schools to develop and launch innovative school model redesigns, starting by piloting such an effort in a few schools.

The issues and outcomes we observe in our open enrollment schools call for a transformative approach to improving student outcomes. But if a strong leader wants to really rethink the way their school operates, currently, there is no clear or easy pathway for them to access the time, space, supports, or resources to undertake a meaningful redesign process. A successful redesign process could enable a school community to reimagine the entire student learning experience,

inclusive of what students learn both in and outside of the classroom, rethink the roles of all adults in the school building to ensure that every child has a positive adult-student relationship, and take a dramatically different approach to engaging and supporting both students and adults in the building – as just a few examples. While a BPS school today could try to become a pilot school, for example, that is a change in governance, not necessarily in underlying instruction and supports for students. My emphasis is on schools who are ready for positive change to have the opportunity to re-envision the entire educational experience.

High School Redesign is not a new phrase in Boston. Most recently, we had a process focused on Madison Park that failed to yield any meaningful change. So what is different in what I’m recommending? This is not a process that can be led from City Hall; it needs to start with the right school leader, be led at the school level, with the district providing that school community with the space, time, and resources they need to do their work. If we can create exemplar open enrollment high schools in Boston, we can set in motion a broader change across the whole high school system.

### List of BPS high schools by school type

School type <sup>25</sup>	Definition	BPS High Schools
<b>Open enrollment (18 schools, ~9,000 students)</b>	Schools accessible to any Boston student through a centralized lottery-based choice process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Another Course to College (ACC)</li> <li>▶ Boston International High School</li> <li>▶ Brighton High School</li> <li>▶ The Burke High School</li> <li>▶ Charlestown High School</li> <li>▶ Community Academy of Science &amp; Health (C.A.S.H.)</li> <li>▶ Dearborn STEM Academy</li> <li>▶ East Boston High School</li> <li>▶ The English High School</li> <li>▶ Excel High School</li> <li>▶ Lyon Pilot High School</li> <li>▶ Madison Park High School</li> <li>▶ Margarita Muñiz Academy</li> <li>▶ Quincy Upper School</li> <li>▶ Snowden International School</li> <li>▶ TechBoston Academy (TBA)</li> <li>▶ Urban Science Academy (USA)</li> <li>▶ West Roxbury Academy (WRA)</li> </ul>
<b>Exam (3 schools, ~4,000 students)</b>	Schools that admit students in grades 7 or 9 based on the student’s grade point average and score on the Independent Schools Entrance Exam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Boston Latin School (BLS)</li> <li>▶ Boston Latin Academy (BLA)</li> <li>▶ O’Bryant School of Math and Science</li> </ul>
<b>Selective application (4 schools, ~1,700 students)</b>	Pilot schools that use a selective process, such as an essay or an artistic portfolio, to admit students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Boston Arts Academy (BAA)</li> <li>▶ Boston Community Leadership Academy (BCLA)</li> <li>▶ Fenway High School</li> <li>▶ New Mission High School</li> </ul>
<b>Lottery admissions (2 schools, ~700 students)</b>	Horace Mann charter schools that use an open lottery process to admit students separate from the central BPS choice process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Boston Green Academy (BGA)</li> <li>▶ Kennedy Academy for Health Careers (Kennedy HC)</li> </ul>
<b>Alternative (5 schools, ~900 students)</b>	Schools intended to serve students not served well in traditional settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Boston Adult Technical Academy (BATA)</li> <li>▶ Boston Collaborative High School</li> <li>▶ Boston Day and Evening Academy (BDEA)</li> <li>▶ Community Academy</li> <li>▶ Greater Egleston High School</li> </ul>
<b>Special populations (4 schools, ~500 students)</b>	Schools designed to serve students with disabilities who require specialized services and settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ The Carter School</li> <li>▶ Henderson Inclusion School</li> <li>▶ Horace Mann School</li> <li>▶ The McKinley Schools</li> </ul>

# Accountability Milestones

These concrete milestones aim to allow any member of the public to answer: **what** would we expect to see, and **when**, from the system, if it were acting upon these recommendations?

Within 90 days	
BPS releases central office perception and satisfaction survey results from SY18-19 to school leaders and to the public, along with a set of strategies they will take to improve issue areas	A Central Office that Serves Schools and the Community, #1.1
BPS provides a target for high-quality seats in the system	Access to Quality, #2.1
BPS releases a comprehensive and transparent accounting of the quality seat gap for four-year-olds in the city, including how many there are today, where and how the gap has been reduced since analysis conducted in 2016, and how many more seats remain	Early Foundations for Lifelong Learning, #3.1
BPS proactively socializes disaggregated post-secondary data (by subgroup, high school) with school leaders and students and families	High Schools that Prepare Students for Success, #4.1
By the end of 2019	
BPS indicates how it plans to hold central office support team leaders and staff accountable for student and school outcomes over SY19-20, and on what measures (e.g., student performance and growth, attendance, results from surveys, teacher turnover)	A Central Office that Serves Schools and the Community, #1.2
BPS puts forth a plan for increasing the number of English Learner and special education program seats in high demand, high-quality schools at the high school level <sup>1</sup>	Access to Quality Schools, #2.2
BPS indicates how it plans to modify the assignment algorithm to enhance equity, including how it plans to consider competition for seats, per the BARI recommendation	Access to Quality Schools, #2.3
A comprehensive mapping and landscape analysis of options from birth to 5 is completed, including analysis of demand, and gaps in quality and access	Early Foundations for Lifelong Learning, #3.2
By June 2020	
BPS releases central office perception and satisfaction survey results of school leaders and families from SY19-20, along with concrete next steps, based on the results	A Central Office that Serves Schools and the Community, #1.1
BPS releases results from a welcome center study of parents and families, along with a plan for overhaul	A Central Office that Serves Schools and the Community, #1.3
BPS provides a well-considered plan for expansion of quality seats over the next three school years that includes family and community engagement	Access to Quality Schools, #2.1
BPS provides a plan for which special education and English Learner programs and strands will be launched or relocated to high-quality schools over the next 1-3 years—for all schools	Access to Quality Schools, #2.2
A function for birth to 5 is created	Early Foundations, #3.3
BPS establishes new common graduation standards, after a detailed study of what constitutes rigor, to go into effect for SY20-21	High Schools that Prepare Students for Success, #4.2
BPS establishes a new process with clear criteria to engage schools in a transformative redesign process, and selects a few schools to engage in a planning year	High Schools that Prepare Students for Success, #4.3

<sup>1</sup> BPS is currently undertaking an effort to address this issue for high schools. Acknowledging the significance of this effort, the milestones on this topic are staggered between high schools and the rest of BPS schools.

## *How can we hold the system to account?*

Over the past several months, I have had the privilege of speaking to hundreds of community members, educators, school leaders, district officials, students and families—and their collective perspectives inform this work today.

But this represents only the beginning. Progress will not happen without a coalition of champions. Even as I call for change from my seat in City Council, I implore you to join us in our call for Action for Boston Children.

Over the next several months and beyond, there will be plenty of opportunities to show up, to host events, and to spread the word.

Interested in joining this movement? Email [Andrea.campbell@boston.gov](mailto:Andrea.campbell@boston.gov)!

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup>Based on the percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations on the 2018 Mathematics MCAS test, averaged across all 3-8<sup>th</sup> graders; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- <sup>2</sup> Excellence and equity for all: Unlocking opportunities for off-track youth in Boston Public Schools, 2018
- <sup>3</sup> Low-income students defined as those with parent income below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile, high-income students defined as those with parent income above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile; The Opportunity Atlas
- <sup>4</sup> Based on the percentage of kindergarten students attending Tier 1 schools in each neighborhood; An Evaluation of Equity in the Boston Public School's' Home-Based Assignment Policy, 2018
- <sup>5</sup> Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- <sup>6</sup> Boston Public Schools website
- <sup>7</sup> This represents a synthesis of perspectives through school visits and conversations with school leaders and educators conducted in 2018-2019
- <sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that BPS has had a climate survey for a number of years, and a joint project between the Boston Compact and the Collaborative Parent Leadership Action Network has been working to develop a shared set of questions across district, charter and Catholic schools to assess school climate.
- <sup>9</sup> An Evaluation of Equity in the Boston Public School's' Home-Based Assignment Policy, 2018
- <sup>10</sup> Demand is aptly measured by the share of a school's seats awarded in Round 1, when more choices are available, relative to the share of seats in schools that are filled in later rounds, when fewer choices are available, or through other policies employed by BPS to fill seats that may not reflect real choice. For example, when students do not receive a choice they had ranked in the BPS lottery, or miss the lottery altogether, BPS typically administratively assigns such students to the nearest school with enrollment availability
- <sup>11</sup> In 2013, BPS undertook an extensive process to recreate and re-define its tiers. In the past, tiering was primarily a function of MCAS absolute performance and growth, and schools were tiered along a relative curve (e.g., the top 25% of schools were Tier 1, and so forth). Currently, BPS does appear to utilize a definition of tiers that is arguably more absolute than relative, though some of the measures are still relative (e.g., median growth, or whether or not a school is meeting an MCAS performance target). Scores are primarily dependent on student performance (both growth and absolute measures), but also take into account family, community, and culture, teaching and learning, and leadership and collaboration measures. It is commonly believed that it is relatively difficult to access a simple list of which schools are Tier 1, and even understand how Tier 1 is defined, as a typical Boston parent or community member.
- <sup>12</sup> Kindergarten seats are defined as K2 seats; Boston Public Schools 2018-2019 School Demand Report
- <sup>13</sup> An Evaluation of Equity in the Boston Public School's' Home-Based Assignment Policy, 2018
- <sup>14</sup> Quality Early Childhood Education: Enduring Benefits, 2015
- <sup>15</sup> The U.S. and the High Cost of Childcare, 2018
- <sup>16</sup> Building a Foundation for Success: Boston's Progress Toward High-Quality Universal Pre-K, 2018
- <sup>17</sup> The Boston Opportunity Agenda is a public/private partnership with the city of Boston, BPS, and the city's public charities and foundations
- <sup>18</sup> Interview with members of the Boston Opportunity Agenda
- <sup>19</sup> Boston Public Schools website
- <sup>20</sup> Excellence and equity for all: Unlocking opportunities for off-track youth in Boston Public Schools, 2018
- <sup>21</sup> Students are considered ready if they achieve three of the four following metrics: achieve and maintain a GPA of 2.7 or higher, attend 94% of school days or more, complete rigorous courses, defined as MassCore plus an Advanced Placement, Dual Enrollment, or International Baccalaureate experience, and participate in anywhere and anytime learning such as volunteering, internships, workplace learning, credential badging, or credits earned outside the classroom; The Boston Opportunity Agenda: Eighth Annual Report Card, 2019
- <sup>22</sup> Middle class income is defined here as \$50,000 a year; The Boston Globe: Valedictorians Project, 2019
- <sup>23</sup> As defined by this statistic, this includes substantially separate special education students, English Learners Level 1-3, students who demonstrate an early warning indicator in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and students who were overage entering high school; Excellence and equity for all: Unlocking opportunities for off-track youth in Boston Public Schools, 2018
- <sup>24</sup> College, Career and Life Readiness: A Look at High School Indicators of Post-Secondary Outcomes in Boston, 2019
- <sup>25</sup> Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education