

BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



MEMORANDUM

TO: Chairperson and Members, Boston School Committee

FROM: Dr. Carol R. Johnson, Superintendent *Carol Johnson*
Michael Contompasis, Special Assistant to the Superintendent *Michael Contompasis*

SUBJECT: "Graduation for All" – Update

DATE: September 25, 2007

Last spring, Superintendent Contompasis provided the School Committee and the Boston City Council with an overview of the work to ensure that every Boston Public Schools student graduates from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life. The presentation (attached) outlined the history of high school renewal work in Boston as well as plans moving forward to reduce the dropout rate and accelerate the academic achievement of all students.

As Superintendent Johnson begins her tenure, this issue remains a top priority for the school district and the city. We are writing to provide you and the community with an update on the work that has taken place since last spring and to suggest a timeline for a process over the next several months to deepen and accelerate efforts to ensure "graduation for all."

PART ONE: BACKGROUND / HISTORY

Thanks to the hard work of teachers, administrators, families, students, and the community, Boston is successful today in helping many students earn a high school diploma that prepares them for higher education and the workplace. We know, however, that too many other young men and women do not achieve that milestone. Like other urban school districts across the country, we are faced with the challenge of a persistently high dropout rate that is unacceptable.

For more than a decade, Mayor Thomas M. Menino, the Boston School Committee and Superintendents Payzant and Contompasis have worked with partners and the community to create and sustain schools that provide every child in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 with a first-rate education in challenging, supportive learning environments. The district also has created and expanded safety nets and alternative education settings to help students who need additional or more specialized support. The work over the past decade to transform Boston's public high schools in particular has been guided by the principle that schools must provide students with more personalized attention in order to ensure their personal and academic growth. This approach emerged from the findings and recommendations of the High School Restructuring Task Force in the 1990s, sponsored jointly by the Boston Public Schools and the Boston Teachers Union with community representation, to set direction for the years ahead, specifically to address the need for reinventing the large, comprehensive high schools whose performance at the time was generally unsatisfactory.

Since then, together we have developed a diverse portfolio of nearly 40 high schools, including small schools, comprehensive high schools organized into small learning communities, exam schools, a technical-vocational high school, pilot schools, Horace Mann charter schools, alternative schools and special programs to meet our students' broad array of needs, skills and interests. The district's message to schools of all types and structures has been consistent and strong: In order to improve student performance, every classroom must offer high expectations, quality instruction, rigorous coursework, and supportive relationships among students and adults.

This ambitious effort, with generous support from major national funders, has earned Boston a reputation throughout the country as an innovative model for transforming a system of urban public high schools.

- Our students have demonstrated consistent and sustained improvement on the state MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) exams since the tests were first administered in 1998. On the Grade 10 English Language Arts exams alone – which students must pass in order to graduate – 86% of Boston students now pass on the first attempt, which is double the 1998 passing rate of only 43%. In addition, significantly higher percentages of students are scoring at the proficient and advanced levels on the exams. Most importantly, students have made significant gains on the Grade 10 MCAS exams across all racial groups, thereby narrowing achievement gaps. Preliminary results from the 2007 exams show continued progress; the State Department of Education is expected to make those results available to the public within the next two weeks.
- Since 1995, 15 schools have maintained or upgraded their accreditation status, with no schools on probation by the end of the 2006-2007 school year. During that time, the City of Boston has invested more than \$211 million in capital renovations to high schools, in addition to the ongoing investment in academic and programmatic improvements.
- In 1995, only 6% of all Boston public high school students were enrolled in schools smaller than 500 students. Today, 42% of high school students are in small schools.
- Nearly 71% of Boston Public Schools graduates go on to two- or four-year colleges, which is higher than the national average, including suburban districts. This fact prompted the *Los Angeles Times* to write, "Once they graduate, Boston high school students head toward more successful lives than their counterparts elsewhere."
- Between 1995 and 2005, Boston students' performance on the SAT increased by 30 points in reading and 34 points in mathematics, outpacing state and national gains.

- Many more of our high schools now offer Advanced Placement (AP) courses in a variety of subjects. The number of students in non-exam high schools taking AP courses increased ten-fold between 2000 and 2005. The number of African-American and Hispanic students taking AP exams is up 162% and 324%, respectively, since 2000. The recent announcement of a new \$13.2 million grant to Massachusetts will continue to expand these offerings in Boston.

These and other indicators affirm that schools and the district are making notable gains in providing students with rigorous, engaging high school experiences. Students who remain in school have access to a wide range of supports and opportunities to help them achieve their goals. We know, however, that too many students do not remain in school, and without an education, they are unlikely to be competitive in today's changing and demanding workforce.

Therefore, we have an *urgent and compelling need to adjust and accelerate our efforts* if we are to eliminate the dropout problem and graduate 100 percent of our students.

PART TWO: DATA ANALYSIS

Boston Public Schools recently commissioned a 10-month strategic engagement to identify and analyze the population of students at the greatest risk of dropping out of high school, or Boston's "off-track" youth. In conjunction with The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Jobs for the Future, and The Parthenon Group, the district commissioned this study to devise a more data-driven, citywide strategy to reduce the dropout rate and increase the graduation rate. Findings from the study have provided an unprecedented understanding of Boston's off-track youth, providing valuable data to inform the expansion and development of educational programming to meet the needs of all students.

Among the key findings:

- Boston faces a stagnant high school graduation rate and a rising number of annual dropouts. **BPS' four-year graduation rate remained relatively flat between 2001 and 2006 – at approximately 60% – while the number of annual dropouts has increased over 25% in recent years.**
 - Since 2004, the number of annual BPS dropouts has trended upwards, reaching a six-year high of 1,900 dropouts in 2006, or 9.1% of BPS' total high school enrollment in that year. This compares to the six-year low recorded in the 2003-04 school year, when 1,500 students dropped out of BPS high schools, representing 7.2% of high school enrollments.
- Moreover, while many BPS students display impressive persistence by remaining in school for more than four years – 24% of students in the Class of 2004 remained enrolled beyond the fourth year – BPS has struggled to graduate students in this extra time. **Of students who remain enrolled after the fourth year, only 27% graduated in the fifth or sixth year of high school.**
- A significant portion of dropout activity occurs after a student's 3rd year of high school. As a result, **BPS invests significant resources in students who eventually drop out.**

Risk Populations

- **BPS students who are most at-risk for falling off-track fall into four distinct and mutually exclusive segments that represent almost 75% of all eventual BPS dropouts;** these factors also allow most at-risk students to be identified no later than the end of the first year of high school.

Segment	% of Class of 2004 dropouts	4-year graduation rate
Students with One or More 8th Grade “Risk Factors”: Students who can be identified based on having at least one of the following characteristics in 8 th grade – (1) attendance rate below 80%, (2) two or more years overage relative to grade level, and/or (3) multiple 8 th grade core course failures	26%	34%
Students with Multiple 9th Grade Core Course Failures: First-time 9 th graders who fail one or more of the following core courses – English, Math, Science, History	18%	31%
Substantially Separate Special Education Students: All students with a Substantially Separate SpEd designation at any point in grades 9-12, <u>excluding</u> students with severe disabilities who are not intended to receive a high school diploma	17%	24%
Late Entrant ELL Students: ELL (English Language Learner) students who enter BPS for the first time during high school	13%	36%

- Collectively, these groups represent nearly 75% of all dropouts. None of the off-track segments has a four-year graduation rate above 36%, and each segment represents between 13% and 26% of all dropouts.
- In 2006, almost 9,000 in-school BPS high school students fell into the above four segments. An additional 4,000 BPS youth of high school age (16-21) already dropped out of high school. **Together, these 13,000 youth represent more than 60% of the estimated number of high school-aged youth enrolled (or formerly enrolled) in the Boston Public Schools in 2006.**
- **BPS dropouts are over-represented by males (61%), Blacks and Hispanics (55% and 29%, respectively), as well as students with ELL and Special Education status.** The demographic breakout among BPS’ four “off-track” segments are similar to the overall dropout population, with the exception of the Substantially Separate Special Education category, which is more predominantly male (73%) and black (60%).
- **At least 4,500 students currently enrolled in BPS high schools are considered “overage and off-track.”** Research suggests that these students represent 93% of eventual dropouts.

Predictive Factors

- Although not part of the Parthenon study (and using a different data and methodology), **Dr. Robert Balfanz and colleagues from Johns Hopkins University, together with BPS, have identified 6th grade “off-track indicators” that are highly predictive of eventual dropout. However, nearly one-third (30%) of all city dropouts did not attend a BPS middle school, making themselves identifiable only at or after 9th grade.** Consequently, we cannot identify a comprehensive set of predictive indicators in middle school alone.
- While BPS’ research revealed that middle school MCAS scores cannot be considered comprehensive predictors of dropout risk, they nonetheless demonstrate the substantial challenge that BPS high schools face in serving students with weak incoming skill levels. **Over half (57%) of entering 9th graders received a Warning (the lowest score category) on at least one middle school MCAS exam. However, this same group of students reported an average 4-year graduation rate of 48%, indicating that high school success is not out of reach for students with low incoming skill levels.**
- Research also did not support the hypothesis that 10th grade MCAS scores offer the most important indicator of likelihood to dropout – rather, the picture is more nuanced. **Of all dropouts in the Class of 2004, 37% did not take the 10th grade MCAS, largely because they were not promoted beyond 9th grade. On the other hand, 22% of all dropouts actually achieved a passing score on both MCAS exams, but nonetheless left the system before achieving graduation.**

Program Enrollment

- The majority of BPS high schools enroll high concentrations of students at high-risk of falling off-track. Specifically, 56% of students within the Class of 2006 fall into a “target population” defined by students of ELL or Special Education status and/or low middle school MCAS performance, and yet **70% of BPS high schools have above average concentrations of the target population** (ranging from 56% to 100%).
- **BPS’ non-exam and non-pilot high schools universally enroll higher concentrations of at-risk student populations.** Because these schools enroll the majority of students district-wide, there are challenging implications for the resources and structures required to address the need to better serve those students with the highest likelihood of falling off-track.
- **Many of the schools that outperform expectations (by achieving higher actual versus expected graduation rates with the target population) are pilot schools,** which lack the scale to address a significant portion of the broader challenge of a significant off-track population. (“Expected” graduation rates adjust for the differential population served in each school so that schools with disparate groups of students can be compared to each other more fairly.) It is important to note, however, that these schools do not serve comparable populations of at-risk students – both in terms of sheer numbers and percentages of total enrollment – making comparison to large district high schools difficult at best.
- However, despite maintaining similar concentrations of at-risk students versus the larger schools they replaced, **75% of BPS’ small schools have produced marked improvements in reducing the percentage of students who fail multiple core courses in 9th grade,** a leading indicator of eventual dropout.

- **The current network of alternative education programs – both internal and external – lacks the scale, quality and intentionality to be effective** with those students for whom a dropout outcome is most imminent.
 - Currently, there are nearly 1,900 seats in alternative education programs, but fewer than 1,000 of these are in diploma-granting schools and programs, which is insufficient to meet the growing population of at-risk students in need of these target educational services.
 - The average graduation rate across Alternative Education is approximately 18%. Externally-operated sites with relatively higher graduation rate outcomes – some in excess of 50% - lack the scale and replicability needed to provide systemic improvements to student outcomes.

PART THREE: CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The findings of the Parthenon Study provide the Boston Public Schools with unprecedented specificity about (1) the populations of students at greatest risk of dropping out, and (2) the effectiveness of existing programs and models in educating these students. The analyses conducted by the Parthenon Group enable the district to develop a much more data-driven approach to *predicting* which students are likely to drop out and *preventing* their dropout by creating and expanding programs that meet the particular needs of these subsets of the student population.

Moreover, as noted above, the study identified more than 4,500 current BPS high school students who are – based on their overage and/or off-track status – already almost certain to drop out. Analysis suggests that the existing array of schools and programs in Boston cannot provide the targeted services and supports necessary to get these students back on track to a high school diploma. Rather, the district may have to develop new programs – intentionally designed to meet the needs of particular at-risk populations – similar to those in other cities such as New York City, whose alternative programs established for this purpose have produced graduation rates as high as 70%.

Several important priorities and potential areas of focus have begun to emerge as a result of the Parthenon work and other external and internal analyses of the district. Together, they represent key leverage points for the Superintendent to consider as she develops a system-wide plan of action. They include:

1. *Emphasize the high drop-out rate not as a high school problem, but rather as a citywide challenge from pre-school through college.* We would be misguided to perceive the dropout problem as one that can be solved solely by focusing on grades nine through twelve. (The Parthenon study affirms, however, that interventions as late as the high school years can be successful.) In fact, the responsibility for ensuring that *all* children graduate from high school prepared to succeed after high school rests with educators at all levels, as well as with families and the community. Clearly the middle school years are a pivotal time for students – academically, physically, emotionally, developmentally – and these factors may contribute to a student’s likelihood of staying in school or dropping out. However, a student’s success in middle school is determined largely by his or her experience in elementary school, and arguably, as early as pre-school.

Therefore, the district must consistently reinforce the responsibility at all levels to ensure students are held to high standards and provided with the instruction and support they need to stay in school and achieve at the highest levels. Additionally, this responsibility cannot rest with schools alone. There must be a shared sense of obligation among schools, parents, families and all members of the community to ensure that students stay on track and receive the encouragement and resources they need both in and out of school to grow personally and academically. In fact, the ultimate measure of our collective success should be whether or not students graduate from college or an appropriate training program that has prepared them for employment and citizenship.

2. *Strengthen and expand programs for student populations with specialized needs.* The Parthenon study highlights significant numbers of dropouts or potential dropouts whose personal and educational needs may not be met best in a traditional school setting. Most notably, as noted above, the analysis cites late entrant English Language Learners, as well as students who are overage and/or off-track academically, at greatest risk of not graduating. Therefore, the district must take a close look at where these students are currently enrolled, as well as the programs and services currently in place – or not in place – to meet their needs. For example, Boston International High School is emerging as a successful program for high school students whose first language is not English, particularly students new to the country, but it is able to serve only several hundred students, rather than the thousands who may benefit from this type of learning environment. We must explore the ability to expand or replicate these and other best practices that may result in similar outcomes for target populations of students. However, we must also explore new models not currently in place in Boston, but proven successful elsewhere.
3. *Determine appropriate use of facilities to house educational programs.* School facilities as they are currently utilized do not have adequate space for the district to expand existing programs and/or open new programs. In order to expand or create programs to ensure graduation for students at risk, the current use of facilities must be examined system-wide, to determine which buildings or portions of buildings may be reprogrammed to support the district’s educational goals. Clearly this has wide-ranging implications, including potential impact on the student assignment plan. Again, this issue cannot be addressed in isolation but rather, as part of a citywide strategy for ensuring that all facilities are being used most effectively to educate students in appropriate settings, and that families and students have access to those programs.
4. *Outline clear roles and responsibilities for the many central offices and district leadership positions that are involved in the transformation and supervision of schools and programs, particularly at the high school level.* Various internal and external analyses have cited a lack of clarity – and therefore a lack of accountability – with respect to oversight, evaluation, monitoring and technical assistance for schools. Currently, there are many entities closely involved in high school reform – most notably the Office of Teaching and Learning (including specialists in Curriculum and Instruction, Special Education, English Language Learners, and more), the Deputy Superintendents for Clusters and Schools, and the Office of High School Renewal (which now includes Alternative Education), and of course, the Superintendent. Schools and external evaluators alike have noted the fragmentation that can result from the involvement of these various parties without clarity about reporting lines and where accountability for results ultimately rests. School leaders, therefore, find themselves answering to many “masters,” sometimes leading to inconsistent or even conflicting direction. This challenge has implications for the scheduled hiring of a Chief Academic Officer, as well as decision-making about the structure of the academic side of the organization.

5. *Similarly, tighten alignment between the work of the district and that of **external partners**.* There are numerous public and private agencies with deep and ongoing involvement in schools and school-aged youth. We must ensure that all of these organizations are working in unison and without duplication in support of a clearly articulated strategy for eliminating the dropout problem. The district has an opportunity to develop and execute a reform plan while simultaneously engaging partner organizations (such as the Boston Plan for Excellence, Boston Private Industry Council, Center for Collaborative Education, Jobs for the Future, Freedom House, and many others) and public agencies at the City and State level (Mayor’s Office for Jobs and Community Services, Department of Youth Services, Department of Social Services, etc.) to ensure delivery of a seamless array of services to schools and students. Moreover, improved coordination among these organizations would position the district to approach national foundations and other potential funders with a coherent, citywide strategy that incorporates the strengths and expertise of each group. Such a strategy must acknowledge and address the full range of needs that students bring to schools, including the academic but also the many social, health and other issues that are more pervasive among low-income urban students.

6. *Ensure consistency of high-quality programming in **alternative education sites**, both internal and external.* A broad range of alternative education programs – some operating within BPS, other in community-based organizations – provide services to students outside of traditional school environments. In partnership with the Center for Collaborative Education, the district is conducting a “school quality review” process among all internal and external alternative education sites. The study examines variation among the programs with respect to funding, staffing, approach, curriculum, student outcomes, data management, and so on. With more and more students requiring the services provided in these alternative settings, it is essential that the programs be developed, funded and monitored in a thoughtful, systemic way, and that students are placed in these settings based on their needs and each program’s ability to address them. As these questions are explored, the district also must consider the role and capacity of the BPS Office of Alternative Education to support the work.

7. *Improve the **collection and monitoring of data** at all levels.* Particularly through the rollout of MyBPS, the district has made significant improvements in recent years to capture and track various student indicators, but there is not yet a fully integrated system that can be used to inform timely, effective prevention, intervention, and recovery of students at greatest risk. Such a system would require migration of various data sources into a single application that captures historical and real-time student attendance, academic performance (course grades, assessments, etc.), discipline records, and other critical data. Above all, such a system must easily generate user-friendly reports that provide principals, teachers, guidance counselors, parents and central offices with vital information about individual students in order to be more effective in preventing students from falling off track, as well as in providing the supports necessary to intervene and recover these students. The effectiveness of such a system relies heavily on appropriate data collection and entry at the school level, the consistency of which varies greatly from school to school.

Next Steps

In order to ensure graduation for all, the Boston Public Schools, partner organizations, City and State agencies, higher education and the community at large must work together to identify gaps in the current approach and devise strategies for improved programs and services. Over the next three months, Dr. Johnson will devise a citywide plan of action about the Boston Public Schools’ role in ensuring “graduation for all,” with preliminary recommendations presented to the School Committee no later than January 2008, in preparation for the FY2009 budget development process.

To inform the development of this plan, the district will engage in several parallel activities:

- The School Committee and Superintendent will launch a public engagement campaign, including a series of community forums to engage families, students, teachers, Headmasters, and members of the community (including business, higher education, faith communities, etc.) in discussion about the current dropout/graduation rates in Boston, as well as potential strategies to address the challenge moving forward. One or more of these forums may focus on a particular at risk population, in order to have more targeted conversations about particular strategies for subsets of students. [Note: A community-sponsored public engagement opportunity takes place this week: On Saturday, September 29, Freedom House will host the “Taking Back Our Education” conference, 9:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.]
- Superintendent Johnson also will continue visiting schools and community programs in order to observe classrooms and speak with students, teachers and administrators. In her first month on the job, the Superintendent already has visited nearly a quarter of the Boston Public Schools, including nine high schools.
- Former Superintendent Contompassis will coordinate an assessment of existing programs and partnerships to determine ways that they may be better aligned to focus on the populations identified in the Parthenon study. This work may include research of effective models in other urban districts, such as those in New York City cited above, to identify new programming that may benefit off-track youth in Boston.

These simultaneous efforts will provide a starting point for Superintendent Johnson to develop an academic plan, consistent with an overall K-12 vision for the district, toward the goals of all students achieving proficiency, closing the achievement gap, and 100% graduation rate.

We look forward to discussing these matters with you at the September 26 meeting of the School Committee and in the months ahead.

Attachments