

The Boston Public Schools' Road to Receivership

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Executive Summary

When the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) released a review of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) in March 2020, few people understood how the impending pandemic would impact every aspect of life, including schools. The Department's report might have received the attention it deserved under normal circumstances. Instead, the Boston press published a small number of articles and moved on to covering the disaster that was unfolding for BPS and districts everywhere.

In this way, the pandemic robbed the public of a critical analysis of the state of BPS. The report is thorough and, in many respects, damning. It carefully documents what district leaders, teachers, and policy makers already knew: BPS fails

to help most students meet basic standards, and it fails economically disadvantaged students, students of color, English language learners, and students with special needs at higher rates than other students. With the release of the report, DESE announced a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the district. The MOU provides a description of the improvements that the state expects to see in BPS and outlines sup-

ports the state will provide to help BPS meet its goals. The state and BPS extended the timeline for executing the MOU soon after the pandemic shuttered schools.

Almost two years since the release of the state's review, BPS's struggles have only worsened. The pandemic did not cause the district's problems with operations, enrollment, or achievement, it highlighted and exacerbated those problems. In February 2022 the Boston Globe published evidence that the district has been inflating already-low graduation rates¹ and Superintendent Brenda Cassellius² announced her departure after only three years. Leadership churn, a lack of transparency, and persistently declining enrollment are all daunting challenges described in the 2020 review. The events of early 2022 are a stark reminder that improvement has not occurred in the district. Instead, the situation in BPS continues to deteriorate.

Timing matters, and the time for action is now. As the Commonwealth adjusts to life after COVID-19, schools,

Boston Public Schools are in crisis. On the heels of a pandemic, BPS has suffered a 10 percent decrease in student enrollment in under three years.

Separate from the lowest performing "transformation schools" in BPS, The Kaleidoscope Network of Schools is a statewide initiative to foster deeper learning. Its second cohort includes fifteen Boston Public Schools in the 11th to 25th percentiles of performance. The Cohort II Boston schools are all Title I schools, which collectively have high numbers of English language learners, students with disabilities, and Hispanic students, though Black students are underrepresented in this cohort, at only 7 percent. <https://www.doe.mass.edu/kaleidoscope/our-schools.html>

including BPS, are open. The district remains in financial disarray, but it has received more than \$400 million in federal COVID relief funding. In both Boston and the Commonwealth, political change is underway. Boston has a new mayor (Michelle Wu) and Governor Charlie Baker announced that he will not seek a third term. These changes present an opening for action, and students and parents need action that goes far beyond that described in the state's MOU with the district.

This paper summarizes the findings of DESE's 2020 review, highlighting key findings around the teaching and learning, operational, financial, and enrollment challenges the state identified. It also describes why, according to the report, BPS persistently struggles in these areas and how its struggles negatively impact students. Finally, the paper describes several options the district and the state have for rectifying the problems and helping BPS meet its constitutional and moral obligations to the students and families it serves. Ultimately, it recommends that the state place BPS in receivership, a controversial model that may be the district's best hope for recovery.

Introduction

Boston Public Schools are in crisis. On the heels of a pandemic, BPS has suffered a 10 percent decrease in student enrollment in under three years. Parents are sending the system a message: they would rather forge their own educational paths than continue to invest in a system that isn't educating their kids.³

It wasn't always this bad. Just 15 years ago, Boston Public Schools (BPS) won the Broad Prize, an annual award that "honors large urban school districts that demonstrate the greatest overall performance and improvement in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps for poor and minority students."⁴ But from that point on, the system has been in a rapid decline, one marked by low overall achievement, yawning achievement gaps, and myriad indicators of instability and ineffectiveness in the BPS central office.

The pandemic did not cause this decline—it highlighted existing problems in the district and in some cases exacerbated them. Prior to the pandemic, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) conducted an extensive evaluation of the district's operations and outcomes. DESE issued its report in March 2020, mere days before the entire country was under lock-down and schools buildings shuttered for more than a year.⁵

Among the most disturbing findings in the state's report is that "approximately one-third of the district's students—16,656—attend schools ranked in the bottom 10 percent of the state." Those schools, many of which have been low-performing for years, have made no sustained progress in raising student achievement, despite nearly fifteen years of shifting programming and turnaround initiatives spearheaded by the district.⁶

The report describes a bureaucracy lacking “a clear, coherent, district-wide strategy for supporting low-performing schools” and notes that the district’s failure has the greatest impact on the city’s low-income students and students of color. Income and race-based achievement gaps are entrenched, where only 25 percent of Boston’s Black students and 26 percent of economically disadvantaged students pass the English Language Arts MCAS, a basic measure of on-grade proficiency. And the situation is even worse for students with disabilities and English language learners. These groups, the report finds, experience the greatest impacts of low-quality classroom instruction.⁷

Had the pandemic not upended the world in 2020, the Commonwealth might have given the state’s report the attention it deserved, but that attention likely wouldn’t have changed anything for the students of BPS. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education released the report to the public in conjunction with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the district, an agreement outlining the steps the district would take to rectify persistent underperformance and how the state would support the district in its endeavors.⁸

The MOU (updated in 2021 to reflect a new timeline) provides a very high-level road map for improving the problems the state identifies in its report getting the district back on track. The MOU⁹ requires

- an increase in MCAS scores in “Transformation schools” (the lowest performing schools in the district);
- the adoption of MassCore (a set of state-approved college preparatory classes);
- a decrease in chronic absenteeism and increase in the number of “underrepresented students” in advanced classes;
- improvements to special education services—specifically, reducing the number of students taught in substantially separate classrooms;
- improvements in transportation

The agreement outlines how the state will measure BPS’ progress in each category. For its part, the state agreed to provide targeted teacher training, support the district with long-deferred capital improvements, and cultivate outside partnerships to help the district improve teaching and learning.

While well-intentioned, these recommendations seem overly broad and vague, especially given the state’s thorough review of what plagues BPS. Many of the outcomes the state hopes to see are difficult to measure; with two years of limited and unreliable test score data due to the pandemic, it will be exceedingly difficult to measure student academic growth for the foreseeable future.

Post review and pre-pandemic, the state might have taken another tact in Boston. There is precedent for state intervention in failing school districts, and much of it was set right here in Massachusetts.

In the late 1980s, the state put Chelsea Public Schools in receivership, creating a unique partnership that gave Boston University broad authority to enact needed reforms in the city’s schools. That partnership lasted nearly twenty years. When it came to an end, Chelsea had become one of the highest-performing urban districts in the Commonwealth.¹⁰

The state has since placed other districts, such as Lawrence and Holyoke, under receivership. Commissioner of Education Jeffrey Riley was the receiver in Lawrence, a turnaround effort that is among the most-cited models in the research literature. When the state’s Board of Elementary and Secondary Education appointed Riley, many advocates for change in Boston were hopeful he was the person to do it, which would enable Boston to build on lessons learned from Lawrence.¹¹

Boston is a different animal, and the Commissioner, who once worked in the district, knows that well. Still, the MOU left other, less dramatic options on the table. For example, the state could choose to create a “zone” or district within BPS, one that is run by its own appointed school committee that could be granted different authorities to work with district stakeholders, such as the Boston Teachers Union. Precedent exists for this model in Springfield, Massachusetts and even other states, such as Tennessee, Mississippi, and Texas. The state could also take greater advantage of some of the Commonwealth’s high-performing charter schools and charter management organizations, leveraging their expertise in school improvement as they have done in some of Boston’s pilot schools.

The failure to pursue any of these paths combined with the pandemic has meant that Boston’s schools have gone from unstable to, by some accounts, chaotic. On September, 2021 Governor Baker called in the National Guard to get Boston’s students to school after the district belatedly announced that it would not have enough bus drivers to staff its routes.¹² BPS and the school committee remain mired in contentious debate about how to admit students to some of the only high performing schools in the district, exam schools, in an equitable manner.¹³ And all the while students are leaving the district in droves or missing all together while the central office decides how to spend millions in federal COVID relief money meant to recover pandemic-induced learning loss for students who were already behind.¹⁴

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In 2022, Boston has a new mayor. Governor Charlie Baker has recently announced that he will not seek re-election. These circumstances create an opening for Mayor Wu to demonstrate that her administration will operate in the best interest of students and for the sitting Governor to spend his political capital before leaving office. Under Commissioner Riley's leadership, the Commonwealth has an opportunity and—even more—an obligation to act. Parents across the country are demanding change. When they don't get it, they will do what they must to make that change themselves, even if it means withdrawing their children from the system all together. The pandemic gave parents a front row seat into what was really happening—or not happening—with their child's education, and many Boston parents were dissatisfied, to say the least.

The following report outlines the most difficult findings of the state's evaluation of Boston Public Schools, the situation to date, and recommendations for change that could provide the students and families of the City the education opportunities they deserve and are due under state law.

The State of BPS

According to DESE's review, problems with everything from curriculum and instruction to leadership and governance lead to opportunity gaps in BPS that drive uneven outcomes for students. Students of color, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, English language learners, and students with disabilities suffer the most.

Looking at 2020 outcomes data for the district would be unfair and unreliable, as the pandemic wreaked havoc on every

community's ability to consistently reach and teach its students. But the 2019 outcomes data included in the state's report are distressing enough. They paint a picture of a district that doesn't help *most* students meet expectations on the MCAS (a basic test of proficiency in core subjects). Data for subgroups of students are even more alarming; fully three-quarters of Black students and economically disadvantaged students fail to meet expectations on MCAS—not because they can't, but

because BPS hasn't given them the tools.¹⁵

Across the district, dropout rates are higher than the state average while graduation rates are depressed. In these categories, too, students of color and economically disadvantaged students are overrepresented. Boston has made very little progress in helping students to graduate over time, and recent report by the *Boston Globe* suggests that the numbers BPS has been reporting to the state in recent years may be misleading, or even inflated. According to *The Globe*¹⁶

In five of the last seven years, the audits found school officials wrongfully removed dozens of students from would-be graduating classes because they allegedly transferred to another school, moved to another country, or died. In each of those instances, auditors could not find documentation to support the reasons for their departure, even though federal rules require such paperwork to ensure accurate graduation rates... So instead of being counted as students with an unknown status or as drop-outs, both of which would drag down the graduation rate, they were simply removed from the equation altogether as transfers, strengthening the overall rate.

Issues with dropout and graduation rates may be exacerbated because too few students have access to the city's few high-performing schools (where outcomes data are much better). Although students of color and economically disadvantaged students make up most of the district (58.3 and 87.5 percent, respectively), they are drastically underrepresented at the city's high performing exam schools, especially The Boston Latin school. Without access to these high performing options or a charter school with a long waitlist, the only alternative for most students is an underperforming Boston public school.¹⁷

Students scoring "meet expectations or above" on MCAS English Language Arts (grades 3–8).	
All students	35%
Black students	25%
Economically disadvantaged students	26%
White students	62%
Asian students	63%

Students scoring "meet expectations or above" on MCAS mathematics (grades 3–8).	
All students	33%
Black students	21%
Economically disadvantaged students	23%
White students	62%
Asian students	73%

Boston Public Schools, Fast Facts	
Economically disadvantaged students	58.3%
Students of color	87.5%
4-year graduation rate	75.1%

Exam schools/Boston Latin School, Fast Facts	
Students of color	68.8%
Economically disadvantaged students	29.3%
4-year graduation rate	97.5%

District Review Report, Boston Public Schools, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, March 13, 2020

DESE organized its in-depth review of BPS into six distinct categories:

- Leadership and governance
- Curriculum and instruction
- Assessment

- Human resources and professional development
- Student support
- And financial aid and asset management

In each of these categories, the state's detailed report outlines how an unstable and cumbersome central office contributes to inconsistencies and a lack of support for schools. This, in turn, causes confusion and frustration for those who have the most influence on students: teachers and school leaders. There are some bright spots in the district: offices where hard-working, well-intentioned personnel are trying to turn teaching and learning around. But, too often, according to the review, these efforts are hampered by a system that is in its own way.

The following discussion will not summarize the state's entire review, but it does excerpt some of the most compelling findings in the DESE report. These findings should guide the state in next steps to turn around BPS and its lowest performing schools, in particular.

Leadership and Governance

In the areas of leadership and governance, the biggest takeaway from the state's report is that a lack of stability at the top levels of BPS leads to an incoherent, fractured strategy for supporting all schools and turning low-performing schools around. Staff turnover throughout the organization, but especially at the highest levels, is a problem: in six years, BPS has been through four superintendents, two of whom were interim.¹⁸

When one superintendent leaves and another is hired, old policies and strategies are set aside in favor of new initiatives. Strategic initiatives approved by the School Committee are put on hold, resulting in a lack of follow-through on plans for long-term improvements to all schools, especially the lowest performing. Staff become frustrated in an environment where the only constants are change and a lack of focus on what needs to improve. This frustration results in turnover, both at the central office and districtwide.

Instability leaves those who have the most contact with students, school leaders and teachers, confused and unsupported. The state's report includes the voices of teachers and principals, who don't hesitate to express their concern. According to one teacher, the district "needs to stay with initiatives long enough. Every time they restructure, it impacts all of us." A principal interviewed for the report called the district "proficient at reorganization."¹⁹

Incoherence of strategy is another problem, one that isn't always caused but is often exacerbated by instability at the top levels of the organization. One of the clearest examples of incoherence is the varying degrees of autonomy that schools and school models have. Autonomy itself is not the issue, rather while schools are failing to serve students, the district is giving those schools wide latitude to use the curricular and pedagogical approaches they see fit, even if those approaches

consistently fail to improve student outcomes.

Turnaround schools, pilot schools, innovation schools, and traditional schools all have varying types and levels of autonomy. Some have the freedom to determine their own curricula, while others have enhanced autonomy to determine budgets and staffing. Autonomy itself is not the enemy (an impressive body of school research confirms this)²⁰, rather the district has failed to understand that autonomy works best when there is a clear vision for what it can accomplish and when it is coupled with accountability. According to the state's review:²¹

Despite a strong historical commitment to school autonomy, the district has not achieved agreement and clarity about strengths and challenges of different levels of autonomy, provided adequate support for the effective use of autonomies, or designed and pursued a practice of accountability for results within a system in which nearly all schools experience some substantial degree of autonomy.

This scattershot approach has had the most detrimental impact on the district's many low-performing schools. Fully one-third of students in the district—more than 16,000—attend schools that perform in the bottom ten percent of all schools in the state.²² Despite various efforts to turn these schools around, almost none have realized improved performance. Those that have turned around have not been able to sustain that improvement over time. The Orchard Gardens School is one example of this inability to persist. In 2012 President Obama heralded the school as a model for school turnaround.²³ In 2021, the state classified it as "needing assistance or intervention" because of consistently low performance.²⁴

Instead of firmly guiding these low-performing schools proven supports, the district (according to the state report) has tried various approaches, and none long enough to document impact. In the three years leading up to the pandemic, the district tried three different methods to support schools in turning around: all were focused on organizing schools so that each of the district's seven area superintendents could provide targeted supports. The longest lasting support that turnaround schools received (in the several years leading up to 2018) was embedded coaching and instructional support for teachers and school leaders. In 2018–19 the district tried grouping schools according to their level of need, assigning different superintendents to each level. The central office abruptly halted this approach in 2019–20 and went back to a "geographic model," where each superintendent was responsible for some of the district's struggling schools.²⁵

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There are many problems with such abrupt changes in strategy, but chief among them is the lack of consistency these changes represent. Consistency is one of the hallmarks of successful school turnaround outlined in the literature. Some of that literature derives from successful school turnaround experiences in Massachusetts, particularly Lawrence.

A 2016 report authored by DESE and American Institutes for Research (AIR) notes that school leaders and teachers need to have consistently high expectations for what students can do and that adults in turnaround situations need to be held to a consistently high bar through progress monitoring. The research also notes that to sustain turnaround, the strategies that effected change in the first place must be consistently applied.²⁶ With such churn in personnel and constant changes in how it organizes support for schools, consistency seems out of reach for BPS.

Staffing is also a challenge for the lowest performing schools in BPS. While some schools have enhanced autonomy to hire the teachers they want, collective bargaining agreements can make it difficult for many schools to dismiss low performing teachers. An outside review of 25 school districts across the country found the Boston Public Schools ranked in the bottom 10 when it comes to a school leaders' ability to dismiss a low performing teacher.²⁷ The district's current collective bargaining agreement can hamstring school leaders, especially those who have a strategic vision for school turnaround.

The state's review also notes that the district should revise its approach to staffing school leadership positions, particularly by recruiting and providing attractive avenues for principals experienced with turnaround to enter the system. The district could consider enhancing pay or counting years of experience earned outside of the system when hiring school leaders, but as of the 2020 state review it did not. The review notes:

*Feedback to the district from principals showed that the absence of additional pay or recognition for working harder makes moving to a higher needs school unattractive, especially when leading a higher-performing school in Boston is already challenging. Leaders also expressed the worry that they would not have the staffing needed to do the hard work of school transformation.*²⁸

Strong leadership and good governance are critical to student success because they dictate how schools are staffed and how staff are supported. The state's review provides an important window into an instability that is almost endemic

to the system, leaving those charged with the work of teaching and learning few opportunities to succeed.

Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and Student Support

The state's description of curriculum and instruction in BPS is one of the most compelling parts of its review, particularly because its findings make it easy to see why so many schools are underperforming and so many students are underserved. When BPS won the Broad Prize in 2006, the district had been reaping the benefits of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA). Authorized in 1993, the MERA required all districts to adopt a statewide standards in core subject areas that would come to be known as one of the most high-quality in the country. For several decades after the implementation of MERA schools across the Commonwealth improved; the state's standards provided a common playbook for schools and teachers and the state accountability system (MCAS) provided a check on whether schools were implementing the standards in ways that helped students achieve.²⁹

Post-Broad and the unusually long tenure of Superintendent Thomas Payzant, the balance of autonomy and accountability shifted in the district. These shifts happened just as the district was entering a decade of instability in leadership. At a school level, this meant that school leaders—especially “pilot” school leaders—were given autonomy to choose the curricula and materials that teachers taught. This would seem like a good thing. But, according to the state's findings, a clear monitoring system for curriculum and instruction was not put in place as a check on school autonomy. This lack of district-level accountability seems to have led to the rapid decline in student outcomes that the district began to experience shortly thereafter.³⁰

Curricular autonomy as a mechanism for turning around schools is well documented in the literature. BPS leaders who granted schools greater autonomy were likely drawing from this body of research. But the research is also clear about the accountability mechanisms—beyond a statewide testing regime—that need to be in place for autonomy to work. For example, charter school “restarts” of struggling district schools have become increasingly common. When charter operators restart schools, they are granted specific flexibilities that can help schools improve quickly, but those flexibilities always come with increased scrutiny from districts, charter authorizers, and states. A 2015 review of three charter school networks that received federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) to “restart” struggling district schools described the progress monitoring to which these more autonomous schools are subject:

*State accountability systems, as well as grant regulations, may stipulate that turnaround providers must develop detailed plans reflecting prescribed turnaround models [including curricula and instructional approaches] and meet reporting and accountability requirements in addition to requirements stipulated by state charter school laws.*³¹

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This multi-tiered system of accountability has been missing from BPS — even in the schools where it is most necessary to help students succeed. Instead of granting flexibility in exchange for meaningful accountability, the district has leveraged “district review teams” (increasing bureaucracy and cost) and produced guiding documents that make recommendations to schools about the types of curricula they may choose and essential teaching strategies that should accompany any curriculum. But the work of these teams and the guiding documents they produce isn’t accompanied by a system to monitor whether curricula are aligned to what students need to know or whether they are faithfully implemented. The state’s review also finds that many of the curricula that the district recommends to schools don’t meet criteria for quality according to EdReports, a curriculum evaluation group that states and districts across the country routinely use to ensure that students have access to high quality textbooks. The result, according to the state, is that “the district cannot ensure that all students have “grade-appropriate, standards-aligned curriculum and essentials-informed pedagogical experiences every day, in every content area.”³²

Lack of access to grade appropriate content and instructional support for teachers means that there are a range of core competencies that many schools in the district don’t promote. There is no coordinated approach to teaching basic reading and writing skills within schools or district wide and no accountability when this lack of coordination (among other practices) leads to poor outcomes.³³ Without such a

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coordinated, research-based approach for teaching these fundamental skills, it is not surprising that so few students are able to read and write on grade level.³⁴

Observations of 989 classrooms in BPS confirm that teachers and school leaders struggle to be effective in the absence of real guidance. Many teachers are left to their own devices to modify curricula for individual students, resulting in uneven teaching and learning within and across schools. According to outside evaluators from the American Institutes for Research, “in observed classrooms, instruction was primarily rated in the middle range, indicating that interactions between students and teachers that are associated with improved outcomes were observed sometimes or to some degree but were inconsistent or limited.”³⁵

These observations provide one explanation for persistently low academic outcomes for most students. Another explanation lies with the district’s current data and assessment culture. Research³⁶ on academic outcomes and school turnaround

suggests that high-quality formative assessments (when properly administered) yield high quality data that educators can use to drive and even personalize instruction. According to the state’s review, BPS’s Office of Data and Accountability (ODA) has a clear understanding of the importance of formative assessment and high-quality data; however overall instability and lack of coherence in school curricula and operations make it difficult to use assessments and data in consistently constructive ways.³⁷

ODA employs several research-based strategies for leveraging assessment data, including coaching educators and school leaders on how to interpret and use data to enhance learning and facilitating educator and parent access to student level data in a timely manner. Teachers report that ODA’s coaching is helpful to improving practice and the state’s review notes that technology helps all BPS parents have timely access to student test scores.³⁸

But the district’s inconsistent approach leads to practical issues with consistently using assessments to inform learning. Key district policies and practices contribute to these inconsistencies:

- *Participation in formative assessments in optional and variable at the school level, and most schools—particularly high schools—choose not to participate. Pre-pandemic (2018–19) fewer than half of schools in the district participated in interim ELA and math assessments.*³⁹
- A lack of accountability for the curricula schools use leads to a lack of transparency and understanding about the formative assessments that are aligned to school curricula and whether, how, and when those assessments are competently administered.
- Educators report that when formative assessment data exist, they may be housed on multiple platforms and can be confusing and difficult to access in a timely manner; Likewise, while parents have access to student outcomes data, they receive little or no guidance on what it means for student progress or regarding how to support student growth.⁴⁰

In the areas that matter most to student learning, BPS has ample room for growth. The issues with curriculum and assessment that the state’s report identifies may lead readers to conclude stripping schools of autonomy and moving toward a “command” and control system of mandating specific curricula and assessments could solve problems with teaching and learning. But this conclusion would be dangerous. Schools can flourish with curricular autonomy if the right supports are in place. Specifically, leaders and educators need good information to make informed decisions about the curricula that will work best for the students they serve and the school cultures they create and maintain. They also require consistent development to ensure that curricula are effectively and consistently delivered in a manner that maintains high expectations for all students.

There are other ways in which the BPS budget is opaque: staffing at each school stands out in the state's review as an area of concern.

When these supports are coupled with measures that hold adults accountable for student learning, the research suggest that improved outcomes will follow. This is a “tight/loose” model of school district administration—one in which educators and school leaders have the power to make decisions if student outcomes demonstrate that decision-making is strong. At present, BPS seems to be operating with a “loose/loose” model of administration—one that gives educators and leaders ample autonomy but little support or guidance in a context of limited accountability.

Moving to a strict command and control model of administration may also prove dangerous given the instability and incoherence present throughout the district's central office and leadership. Issues with governance and leadership in the district are keenly felt at all levels of BPS. They are also apparent in some of the district's financial and asset management practices.

Financial and Asset Management

Many large school districts across the country would envy BPS's financial position. “The district's per in-district pupil expenditure for fiscal year 2018 was \$22,802, 43 percent above the state average of \$15,956.” Teacher salaries in the district, at an average of \$101,811 are much higher than the national average and “27 percent above the state average of \$80,177.”⁴¹

These are signs of a system that invests in students and hopes to attract and retain high quality teachers, especially in a city with a high cost of living. But outcomes for students and turmoil in the system suggest that the myriad problems outlined above prevent BPS from realizing a strong return on its investments. Claims of underfunding from certain stakeholders—most notably the Boston Teachers Union (BTU)—also suggest that the district could more effectively deploy its generous funding.⁴²

At first glance, BPS's plan for deploying funding to students is rooted in equity. The district allocates funds to schools based on a weighted student funding model (WSF) that accounts for individual student needs, including family background, disability, and English language learner status, among other indicators. District leaders continually adjust the WSF formula to ensure that students who need the most get the most. In addition to weighted student funding, in 2018–19 BPS launched the Opportunity Index (OI), which distributes additional funding to the highest need schools in order to provide additional partner and student support services.⁴³ Once schools receive funds, school leaders have considerable autonomy to distribute them in a way that best meets the needs of each student population.

But this generally sound approach to funding students

and schools is spotty in implementation, with some schools—particularly those serving students with diverse or different needs—not receiving their allocation based on the WSF model. The state's review notes that this inconsistency in the district's budgeting practice should be rectified immediately.⁴⁴

Inequities amongst school populations also exacerbate inequities in school funding, with schools that serve predominantly wealthier student populations (such as exam schools) able to garner grants or fundraise in a way that schools with less social capital cannot. This is not to suggest that individual schools and parents shouldn't seek outside funding to support student learning and services, but the district is less-than-transparent about how these outside endeavors lead to stark inequities in the funding and services that students receive. Increased transparency would be beneficial for parents and donors. It could also pressure the school committee and district to account for funding gaps when it reviews its student-centered funding model or allocates supports based on the OI.⁴⁵

There are other ways in which the BPS budget is opaque: staffing at each school stands out in the state's review as an area of concern. School finance experts note that transparency in how schools are staffed should be an area of focus to increase equity and achievement. School and district budgets may, for example, account for an overall amount spent on teachers and other support staff but that number tells stakeholders very little about the quality of teaching or quality of support at the school.

More experienced, higher-paid teachers tend to congregate in higher performing schools with “easier to teach” students (those who are already high performing or arrive at school with the background knowledge they need to be successful). These teachers and their skills are resources that are too often inequitably distributed across districts, leaving the lowest performing schools and students with the least qualified staff.⁴⁶ The state's review of BPS's budgeting practice clearly states the impact of providing only general or available-upon-request details for school staffing. It notes:

“The omission of proposed staffing, initiatives, and budgets for individual schools from some of the district's budget documents leaves families and other stakeholders without information vital to their interests.”⁴⁷

Facilities is another area in which the district is failing parents and students. Many BPS schools are in urgent need of upgrade and renovation. They are not safe or hospitable learning environments for students. Yet, the district's approach to facilities is reactive rather than proactive: there is no deferred maintenance plan in place to address the constant need for building upgrades, renovation, or redesign.⁴⁸

Transportation, too, continues to be a pain point for the district, with costs more than double the state average.

Under Mayor Marty Walsh, the City of Boston committed \$1 billion over 10 years to build, expand, reconfigure, and repair schools and invest in the technological infrastructure that the district—especially in a post-pandemic education era—desperately needs. The program is called BuildBPS. As of July 2021, the district had also allocated \$20 million of its federal COVID Relief funding to facilities improvements. Combined with federal dollars, Build BPS could move Boston's public school infrastructure into the 21st-century. However, the state's 2020 review indicated that “at this time, BuildBPS is not without its challenges and risks.”⁴⁹

Transportation, too, continues to be a pain point for the district, with costs more than double the state average. Some of this is due to the district's popular choice program, which allows families to choose a school outside of their neighborhood. Superintendent Cassellius has noted that improvements to neighborhood schools would make parents feel more secure in choosing them, which would in turn lower transportation costs.⁵⁰

With staffing levels dwindling across the district and especially in transportation services, students continue to struggle to get to school on time. This was most apparent in September 2021 when students were stranded waiting for buses on the first day back to school in well over a year. Transportation woes continued well into the fall of 2021. If the district continues to struggle in this most basic function—getting children to school—it will continue to lose students at unprecedented rates, a phenomenon that is already well underway.

Pre and Post Pandemic Enrollment

The state's review of BPS provides a thorough look into the practices and controls the district does and does not have in place for financial and asset management. It also provides important documentation about the biggest expenditures in the district (salaries and student transportation rank highly). But one area the report barely touches upon is student enrollment, which has been declining in BPS for years and which plummeted in 2020 and 2021. Questions exist as to whether enrollment will recover.

According to the *Boston Globe* reporting in Fall 2021, student enrollment in BPS declined by more than 8,000 students in the last decade.⁵¹ More than 50 percent of that overall decline occurred during the pandemic: DESE data show that between May 2019 and January 2022, BPS lost more than 5,000 students—a 10 percent decrease in enrollment in less than three years.⁵² Pandemic-induced enrollment declines happened statewide during the school closures of 2020 and early 2021, but Boston's stands out for two reasons: First, its enrollment decline over time is much greater than the state average—in most places enrollment is holding steady over time with only slight variation. Second, districts that surround Boston, such as Brookline and Newton, also lost students to private schools and home education during the pandemic but recovered or in

some cases added students when schools reopened full time in 2021.⁵³

Declining enrollment could be the result of many factors: families are having fewer children and the cost of living in Boston is exceptionally high and climbing. The district is also woefully underperforming, and parents know it. Over the past three years, Black student enrollment in BPS dropped by 8 percent while white student enrollment “remained essentially flat.” BPS lost almost twice as many Black and Hispanic students in 2021 as it did White and Asian students, who tend to attend the district's higher performing schools.⁵⁴

These numbers mirror a nationwide trend of Black families choosing not to return to public schools that weren't serving their children well. Even with schools across the country reopened in 2021, the number of Black families that have chosen to homeschool increased by 13 percent. Only 3 percent of Black families in the U.S. were declared homeschoolers prior to the pandemic. In Fall of 2021, 16 percent of Black families are choosing to homeschool.⁵⁵

For BPS, this continual decline in enrollment has consequences, and it will continue to have consequences even if the district recovers some of the enrollment it lost during the pandemic. For years, some BPS schools have been open but serving only a fraction of the students they are capable of educating. This means increased costs for everything from teachers' salaries to facilities and transportation. And because funding is tied to the number of students each school enrolls, the district sends additional funds to under enrolled schools (called soft landing funding) to ensure that each school's budget is robust enough to provide students with the basics they need.⁵⁶

Soft landing funding might stave off disaster in the short term, but it exacerbates existing inequities within the district. Schools with high enrollment can raise outside funding, attract strong teachers, and—if they have all of this and more to offer—continue to attract students. Schools with declining enrollment have none of these things, which makes donors skeptical and parents less likely to enroll their children. It's a downward spiral from which most schools don't recover.

Over the years, BPS has made some tough decisions about closing and consolidating schools—decisions that are always difficult for communities but better for children in the long run. But the continuous and increasingly steep decline in the district's enrollment means the district must do more now. *According to the Boston Schools Fund, “in FY 22, 94 out of 121, or 77.6% of BPS schools require soft landing funds.” That is a total \$33.3 million—almost the entire increase BPS' budget from FY21.*⁵⁷

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The City's BuildBPS plan recognizes declining enrolment as an issue but is nonetheless "rosy" in its predictions. The City and district believe enrollment will recover through marketing campaigns and long-awaited but thus far unrealized school improvements. In FY22 alone, the district allocated \$33 million to prop up schools with declining enrollment. This smacks of an unwillingness to make the tough decisions that will ultimately be good for kids.⁵⁸

Options for Turning Around Boston's Public Schools

Meaningful intervention in BPS is critical for students and families. And, in 2022, there is an opportunity that no one — not even the state — could have envisioned when it undertook the district's review. Between the Spring of 2020 and the Summer of 2021, BPS received more than \$431 million in federal COVID relief funds under three separate allocations of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief

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(ESSER) fund. Under the third and largest ESSER allocation (part of the American Rescue Plan), the district has broad discretion to allocate funds for learning recovery. It has undergone the community consultation process federal law requires and is beginning to earmark some of the money.⁵⁹ This isn't to suggest that the community consultation process satisfied parents or resulted

in recommendations or allocations that will ultimately move the needle for students. As of early 2022, Boston parents reported that the district had not been transparent about how it was deploying ESSER funds or about the extent to which community consultation has informed or will inform how the district deploys its funds.⁶⁰

If this is the case, it's an enormous, missed opportunity. This influx of federal funding is historic and Boston could choose to target the funding to families and make meaningful upgrades in facilities, professional development, curriculum and instruction, and assessment and accountability systems. There is a danger as well: the district could put federal money into long-term recurring investments and/or continue to fund its broken status quo. Doing this would be a waste of a once-in-a-generation opportunity. Even worse, putting federal money into recurring expenses will place the district on the edge of a fiscal cliff when relief funds run out.

For its part, the state has little to no authority to tell the district how to spend its allocation, especially the bulk of the funding (\$276 million)⁶¹ allocated under ESSER III. Unless it decides to formally takeover Boston's public schools, the state can only request that the district spend its funding in

certain ways or use its own ESSER allocation to entice the district to spend the money in ways that align with the state's priorities (through matching grants, for example). The state should strongly consider both options as it monitors BPS for compliance with the MOU and systemic improvement.

Available evidence suggests that the district does not have the will to make dramatic, systemic changes. School leaders and educators are consumed by the work of getting students who have missed so much learning back on track. Turning around BPS requires drastic action initiated by the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education. The Commissioner also requires buy in from other stakeholders, including the Governor, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, and Boston's new mayor, Michelle Wu.

What could the state do? The body of literature on school district turnaround is small — most efforts to improve performance focus on individual schools. But there is precedent for a whole district approach, and much of it set right here in Massachusetts. The state could choose one of three paths to force improvements in Boston:

- stick with the status quo and tinker around the edges of the system by focusing on the lowest performing schools;
- create a state-run "district within a district," or "Zone" that includes the lowest performing schools in Boston. This model would provide the state and/or another entity the authority to intervene heavily in those schools while allowing the few higher performing BPS schools to operate as usual;
- place the district in receivership, appoint a new superintendent, and relieve the current school committee of some of its decision-making power. In this model, the state would have authority to make sweeping, system-wide changes in the district. It would also become wholly responsible for the success or failure of a turnaround effort.

Option #1: The Status Quo

Sticking with the status quo should be the least attractive option for students and families, but if the state chooses to let Boston stay the course, there are two main components of the MOU that deserve special attention: 1) Continuing to focus on the 10 percent of lowest performing schools and holding BPS to the "measures of success" outlined in the original MOU, which include growth in ELA, math, and science scaled scores and improvement in dropout and graduation rates; 2) Continued focus on BPS schools that DESE entered into the Kaleidoscope Network for Deeper Learning and continued accountability for BPS's commitment to stable leadership in those schools;⁶² and 2) fully implementing an "earned

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autonomy model” that gradually allows schools more autonomy as performance improves.

Continuing to focus on schools that qualify for additional supports (the lowest performing 10 percent and those in the Kaleidoscope Network) is essential. Re-evaluating which schools qualify for the Kaleidoscope network and the kind of targeted professional and other supports they need is also necessary. The state should also set ambitious but achievable goals for MCAS scaled score growth and could incentivize the district to invest some of its federal funding to concentrate on these schools. Investing COVID relief funds could mean:

- reimagining staffing to attract more diverse, highly-effective teachers and leaders with proven track records of turnaround success;
- providing intense coaching in core subject areas for teachers in low-performing schools; and
- allowing students and families to choose from a menu of pre-approved academic and supplemental services to recover and enhance learning lost during the pandemic.

All BPS schools, including the lowest performing, should retain some autonomies but be held strictly accountable for demonstrating that they are using those autonomies to drive improvements. The district must better support schools by ensuring they use relevant high-quality curricula and participate in formative assessments that educators use to drive instruction.

Accomplishing these objectives will take time and dedication, especially in a district with such instability at top levels

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and a track record of failing to hold schools accountable for outcomes. Moreover, all schools will have limited reliable data about what students can do coming out of the pandemic, which means a longer road to implementing the practices necessary to make an earned autonomy model work. These and other strategies (some of which are included in the existing MOU) could begin to chip away at the performance and other difficulties individual schools currently face, but it is unlikely that they will do anything to address the systemic problems in the district overall. The historical record also suggests that it is possible to turnaround low-performing schools in Boston, but very difficult to sustain turnaround in a district with such instability at the top.

Option #2: Create a State-Run District or “Zone” within a District

When Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans and its public schools Louisiana responded by creating a “recovery school district (RSD). The RSD was a legislatively enacted state takeover of the very lowest performing schools in the Louisiana, it included the entire city of New Orleans and expanded into Baton Rouge. Following Louisiana’s lead, other school districts have undertaken similar efforts. Mississippi and Tennessee both created achievement school districts. While Louisiana’s RSD led to remarkable gains for students, improvements in Mississippi and Tennessee have been less pronounced.⁶³

One of the hallmarks of the RSD was partnership with high performing charter schools and charter management organizations (CMOs), leading New Orleans to become the first all charter school district in the country. The premise of charter-schooling, especially in the context of school turnaround, is that autonomy in exchange for strict accountability is a model that works. The impressive and extensively documented performance of many of Boston’s charter schools provide an example...⁶⁴

At the heart of this model lies something familiar in Boston’s charter schools — a reliance on a school-based management (SBM) approach that empowers school leaders with broad authority to manage budgets, determine the length of the school day and year, and choose curricula. The difference between successful SBM approaches and the current approach in Boston Public Schools, however, is that SBM requires an external authority, such as the state or a charter school authorizer, to hold schools strictly accountable for outcomes and close them when they persistently fail.

Creating a recovery school district within Boston could mean taking the schools that currently perform in the bottom 10 percent statewide and putting them under the authority of a separate school committee, appointed by the state. The newly appointed school committee would negotiate with the BTU and other stakeholders. It would be able to dismiss ineffective teachers and re-assemble teaching and leadership staff in each school. The state could provide schools needed supports but also hold them to a higher bar, subjecting its schools to the same type of review and accountability protocols it uses for charter schools. The new school committee would also have the authority to engage outside partners to run district schools and even influence the types of curricula participating schools could choose and the assessments they administer.

There is precedent for this approach in Massachusetts. The Springfield Empowerment Zone in Springfield, Massachusetts is an approach to school district turnaround that focuses on the schools most in need without a state takeover of the

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entire school district:

*Empowerment Zones are a partnership with a district that sustainably provides a cohort of Zone schools with wide autonomy and strong accountability under innovative governance. Zone schools remain part of the district, yet operate under a different structure and system that sustains and protects that autonomy over time, supports existing schools to take advantage of their newfound freedoms and selectively adds new talent and leadership where needed.*⁶⁵

Schools in the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP) “operate under independent contracts with both the school district and teachers’ union and are governed by a non-profit board of directors.” Like Louisiana’s recovery school district and similar efforts in Mississippi and Tennessee, the SEZP heavily leverages outside providers, including some charter management organizations, to provide resources to zone schools.⁶⁶

Prior to the pandemic, results in SEZP schools were marginally better than they had been before the partnership. An initial study, published in 2017, showed that students in SEZP schools realized small gains in English language arts and math but not enough to substantially impact median student growth percentile.⁶⁷

The benefit of a “district within a district” or “zoned” approach is that it feels more palatable to a diverse group of stakeholders than an outright takeover of a city’s schools. There is room for negotiation in a “zone,” which may feel less punitive.

But Boston is not Springfield, and the weaknesses that the state’s report documents in Boston pervade the whole district and start at the top. The report reads as though the higher

performing schools in Boston sustain performance despite the district, and the problem in Boston affects far more students than Springfield: it is difficult to imagine that this more “surgical” approach could serve more than 16,000 affected students (some of the largest school districts in the Commonwealth don’t have 16,000 students). Finally, the results from

Springfield and other zones are not yet compelling enough to warrant full blown replication. Instead, the state may need to look to two other success stories from the Commonwealth, particularly the receivership experience in Lawrence, MA.

Option #3: Receivership

State receivership, or the takeover of an entire school district, is uncommon in the U.S., in part because it is a drastic measure. Massachusetts has deployed this option only a

handful of times and mainly in small urban centers, such as Chelsea, Holyoke, and Lawrence, MA.

Receivership is intense and puts the onus on the state to deliver results. Ultimately, the state *should* accept responsibility for Boston because it has a constitutional obligation to protect student’s rights. In *McDuffy v. Secretary of Education*, the Supreme Judicial Court of held that “the Commonwealth an enforceable duty to provide an education for all its children, rich and poor, in every city and town through the public schools.” The Court found that while the state can “delegate some of the implementation of the duty to local governments,” it may not “abdicate” its responsibility.⁶⁸

Under Massachusetts law, the state must follow a prescribed process to initiate receivership, beginning with a district review to “to assess and report on the reasons for the underperformance and the prospects for improvement.” If the review finds that a district is chronically underperforming, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) must vote to place the district in receivership. With an affirmative vote:

*the board shall designate a receiver for the district with all the powers of the superintendent and school committee. The receiver shall be a non-profit entity or an individual with a demonstrated record of success in improving low-performing schools or districts or the academic performance of disadvantaged students who shall report directly to the commissioner.*⁶⁹

Because it is a comparatively uncommon approach, the literature on how to successfully execute a district takeover is scant. But one case is cited more than any other in the existing literature: the successful state takeover and turnaround in Lawrence, MA, where now-commissioner Jeffrey Riley served as receiver.

The state placed Lawrence in receivership in June 2011. Just three years later, the city had documented meaningful gains in student achievement. In 2017, a study of the Lawrence receivership published in the peer-reviewed journal *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* compared Lawrence Public Schools to demographically similar districts not subject to state takeover.” That study found: “the turnaround’s first two years produced sizable achievement gains in math and modest gains in reading... and no evidence that the turnaround resulted in slippage on non-test score outcomes.”⁷⁰ Though not without its problems,⁷¹ Lawrence Public Schools continues to sustain many of the improvements it realized (and continues to realize) under receivership.

In practice, receivership means that the state has broad

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Receivership is not a magic bullet. To date, Lawrence is one of the few successful models of receivership nationwide.

authority to intervene in a district in the interest of improving its schools. The state can appoint a new school committee, sit at the table with the local teachers' union, and generally

engage in sweeping reforms. In Lawrence and other places, receivers rely heavily on outside partners, including educational management organizations, for- and non-profit entities, and universities.

Receivership is not a magic bullet. To date, Lawrence is one of the few successful models of receivership nationwide. Context matters: no receiver should seek to copy what happened in Lawrence. But there are fundamental aspects of that

receivership that could provide a roadmap for a takeover of BPS. In her analysis⁷² of the Lawrence receivership and its outcomes, Beth Schueler locates five principles on which the district turnaround operated:

- Establishing higher expectations for students and staff through ambitious performance targets and dropout recovery.
- Increased school-level autonomy AND accountability. A small number of schools were handed over to new managers.
- An effort to improve the quality of human capital, through staff replacement, staff development, and a new performance-based career ladder compensation system.
- Extended learning time, through expanded school day, enrichment activities, tutoring, and special initiatives.
- An emphasis on using data to drive instructional improvement.

This list reads like much of the literature on school (not district) turnaround; it represents commonly agreed-upon strategies for helping schools achieve better outcomes for all students.⁷³ Within this list are key strategies currently missing in Boston and DESE's MOU with the district: specifically,

- a focus on increased accountability in exchange for autonomy (the MOU discusses "earned autonomy, but the accountability mechanism—especially with limited MCAS data—is vague), and
- improvements in "the quality of human capital," which in Lawrence meant broad authority to dismiss and replace low-performing school leaders, teachers, and other personnel.

Enhanced accountability in BPS could include reassessing the curricula that low-performing schools can choose, providing extra supports to schools that aren't implementing MassCore with fidelity and quality, and mandating that all schools participate in formative assessment and progress monitoring to ensure the autonomies they already enjoy are effective. Finally, use of "data to drive instructional improvement," something that the review points to as one of the district's few strengths, should happen in all schools, not just those who currently opt into progress monitoring.

Broad authority to change staffing could mean drastic changes in both schools and at the central office, perhaps dissolving layers of central office personnel so that school leaders and educators can have a direct line to the people and resources they need. Some local stakeholders, particularly the powerful BTU, could be an obstacle. However, once receivership occurs, it is in the union's best interest to come to the table.

Schueler's case study of Lawrence describes how the union came to see receivership as "inevitable," which led to less obstruction and more collaboration.⁷⁴ This enabled Riley to be aggressive in replacing school leaders (he exited more than half of the district's principals in the first two years), even if he was less aggressive in replacing (unionized) teachers. This is part and parcel of a school-based management approach: leaving decision-making to strong leaders and holding them accountable when they fail.

The Lawrence turnaround model also relied heavily on giving students and families more of what they need to succeed, including longer school days, learning academies over school vacations, and intensive, personalized tutoring. Some of this is already happening in Boston's designated turnaround schools, but for these interventions to work, stakeholders must implement with intention.⁷⁵

Not all tutoring is high-quality, and the approach used in Lawrence was based on the highly successful MATCH-Corps tutoring model, one that trains tutors to ensure their work is closely aligned with what is happening in classrooms. Extended learning time, too, must be intentional. If leveraged properly, federal stimulus funds could greatly enhance initiatives like tutoring and expanded learning time in Boston.⁷⁶

The changes that occurred in Lawrence—from staffing to supplemental instruction—eventually shifted the culture of expectations in the district from one that saw students as "left behind" to one that emphasized that all students could succeed. The five pillars Schueler outlines worked together to effect turnaround.

Boston's school leaders have the autonomy and, in some cases, resources, to turn around individual schools. What they lack is clear direction, support, and accountability from the top. State takeovers can be controversial and unpleasant. Recognizing that, state leaders need to confront an important question: is putting the Commonwealth's largest school district in receivership more likely to benefit the students and families of Boston than the status quo or other viable options?

The evidence points to the potential benefits of receivership

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being worth the risk. The district has demonstrated that its current approach isn't working, and its MOU with the state doesn't do enough to hold district leaders accountable for student outcomes. Less aggressive options, like a turnaround district or zone, could uplift individual schools, but they would do nothing to address the systemic issues within the district that the state's review describes in such detail. Boston's schools are failing most students. The district has had generations to turn around chronically low performing schools. Despite some small pockets of progress, the district has been unable to sustain even small improvements. The children of Boston deserve better.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Change

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has completed a thorough review of the Boston Public Schools and its areas for growth. That review was completed before the COVID-19 pandemic upended schooling and it found that the district was consistently failing to offer most students opportunities to learn that will help them succeed in college and career. *Most of the children who attend low-performing schools in the Commonwealth attend Boston Public Schools*, children of color and economically disadvantaged children suffer the most, as the district has persistently failed in its attempts to close longstanding access and achievement gaps.

The state has meticulously documented the district's problems, and its review provides a thorough recommendations to improve BPS. But the Memorandum of Understanding between DESE and BPS is broad and gives the Department little power to effect real change.

BPS suffers from high rates of turnover, especially at the top levels. Schools have great autonomy, but the district fails to hold them accountable for outcomes. Of the 100 largest school districts in the nation, Boston ranks second in per-pupil spending, at more than \$25,000 per pupil. Only New York City spends more.⁷⁷ Despite this, most children who attend BPS schools cannot pass the MCAS, a basic test of grade-level proficiency in core subject areas. The pandemic has obscured some of these problems and exacerbated others. The stakes for the district, which is under-enrolled and seemingly unwilling to come to terms with the long-term financial impacts of declining enrollment are high. The stakes for students and families, who get only one shot at a K-12 education are much higher.

Recommendation 1: The Commonwealth should initiate receivership of the Boston Public Schools.

To initiate receivership, the Commissioner must request another audit of Boston's schools. If he does, he should act quickly. Receivership has never been popular, even when it has been effective, and the politics are tricky. Mayor Wu

has not indicated support for receivership, but she may, with the encouragement of a popular outgoing Governor. Even if the state legislature objects to receivership, which it likely will, with a new audit and a strong recommendation from Commissioner Riley, the State Board of Education could initiate a new day for Boston's students. At least one state board member⁷⁸ has already publicly stated that receivership should be on the table for Boston's schools. Should this happen, the Department of Education should also clearly communicate its intent to parents, teachers, and students, providing a forum for parents, in particular, to voice their opinions and learn about the conditions of receivership and what the state plans to achieve by taking such action in the Boston Public Schools.

Recommendation 2: Appoint an experienced receiver, assemble a school committee of committed local stakeholders, and customize a plan for BPS that draws from lessons learned from other state takeovers but honors the specific needs of the community.

To date, the Commonwealth has used receivership sparingly. By focusing only on the communities where there is no other option, DESE and its appointed receivers have been able to marshal the state's resources and the resources of outside partners (such as Boston University) and commit to a long-term approach to district turnaround. BPS is a large system and it will require more resources and time than other communities, like Chelsea or Lawrence. Focusing on evidence of what has worked in other communities and incorporating the voices of parents and other local stakeholders will be an important first step in getting BPS on a road to improvement.

Recommendation 3: Recruit and/or retain capable school leaders and empower them to focus on teaching and learning.

The literature on successful turnaround shows that autonomy matters for schools, if it is coupled with strict accountability for outcomes. The receiver should staff schools with leaders who have a proven record of helping all students achieve and should allow those leaders great discretion in the areas of staffing, budgeting, and even curriculum, so long as those leaders show growth. The receiver should support schools in making sound curricular decisions, by giving them access to data about what works for students. An evidence-based approach to early literacy should be a priority for all K-8 schools. The receiver should also require that all schools participate in progress monitoring and receive in depth-training on using data to drive instruction. Summative assessments will be one key to holding schools accountable for outcomes, but the receiver should also consider other measures that matter to the community, such as school safety, climate, and culture, as assessed by parents, teachers, and students.

Recommendation 4: Leverage federal money to invest in academic, emotional, and supplemental supports for students and families

With access to more than \$4 million in federal COVID relief funds, the receiver should focus on large, non-recurring investments in facilities, data systems, curriculum, and teacher training. The state may also match funds that the receiver invests in these things and in supplemental programming, such as tutoring and vacation learning opportunities that will help students recover and accelerate their learning. A condition of receivership should also be the provision of mental, physical, and social supports for students and their families.

Recommendation 5: streamline the central office and incent stability

Receivership provides an unprecedented opportunity to fundamentally redesign a school district in order to prepare it for long-term success. Much of the state's review of BPS focused on instability and inefficiency in the central office. The function of the central office should be to support schools in achieving academic excellence, and this means that a central office needs qualified personnel who have incentive to stay in the district for long periods of time. One of the first tasks for a receiver should be an in-depth assessment, building on the state's initial review, of central office personnel and their roles and responsibilities. If an office or a position isn't adding value to the work of school leaders and teachers, the resources required to sustain that office or position may be put to better use in schools. Principals, teachers, and community members should have a direct line to the human and other resources they need, and the district should be redesigned with this principle in mind.

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