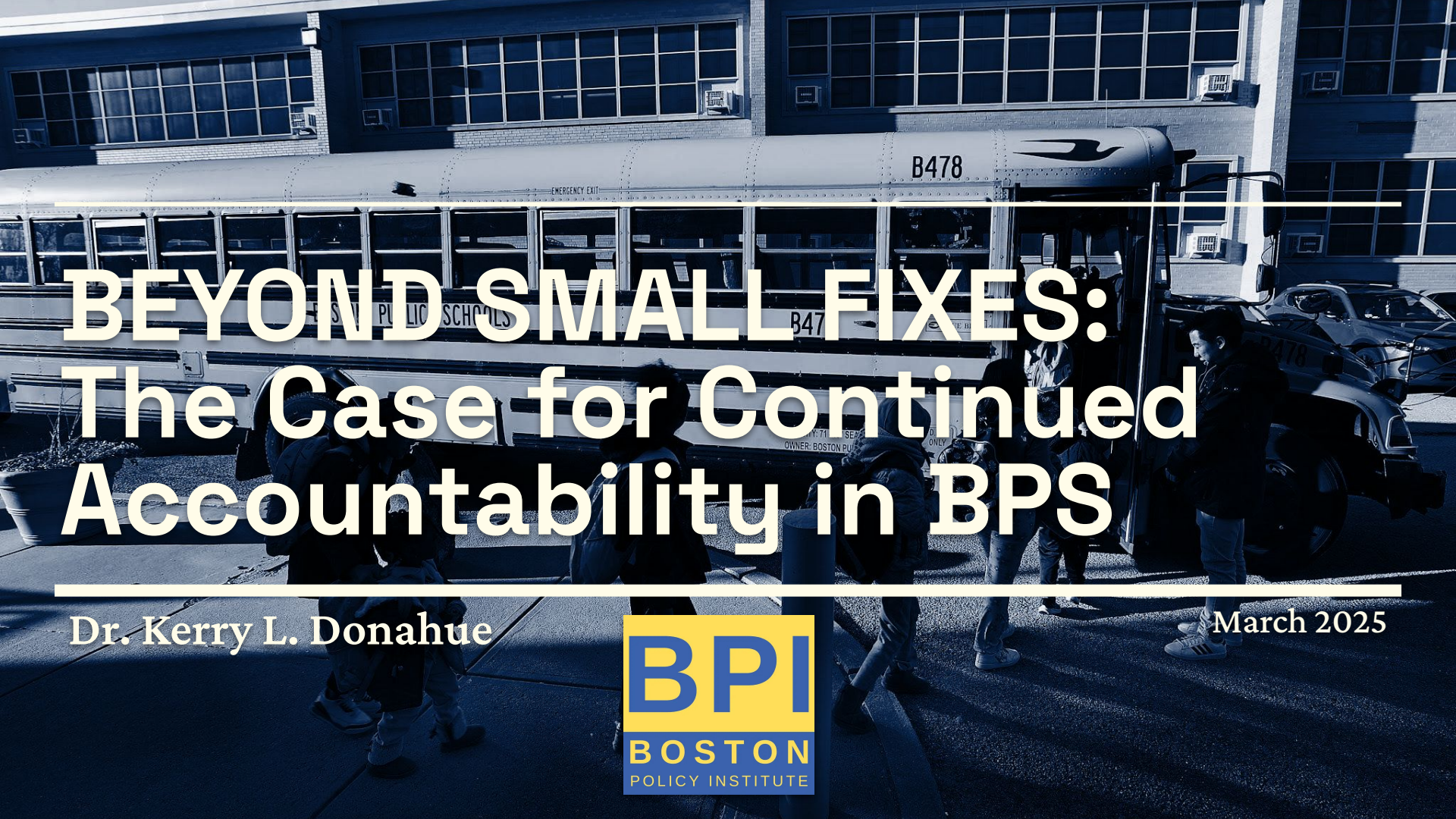




BEYOND SMALL FIXES: The Case for Continued Accountability in BPS

Dr. Kerry L. Donahue

March 2025



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“ ***BPS has shown little to no progress*** in addressing the needs of its students with disabilities, English learners, and students at the district’s lowest-performing schools, resulting in continued poor outcomes for tens of thousands of students...***BPS needs immediate improvement.***”

MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

May 2022 District Review

“ I ran for mayor ***on a promise to deliver bold, urgent change, centering our young people.*** And I am fiercely committed to that work. Now is the time to build on the progress of the past three years, lay a foundation for systemic change while we also onboard our next superintendent. ***We feel tremendous urgency*** in doing this work

Mayor Michelle Wu

May 2022 Remarks to the MA Board of Elementary and Secondary Education

Introduction & Context

Introduction

HOW WE GOT HERE

In March 2020, the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) began its **intervention into Boston Public Schools** (BPS) following a [district review](#) that brought to light numerous systemic failures across operational and instructional systems, including:

- Special education in “systemic disarray”
- Costly, yet failing transportation system
- Neglected school facilities
- Declining [enrollment rates](#)
- Rising chronic absenteeism
- Declining [student achievement](#)
- Segregation of high-need students in the lowest-performing schools

As a result DESE and BPS entered into the first of two formal improvement agreements: 2020 MOU and the 2022 SIP. **These agreements would shape the priorities of BPS over the next 5 years and were intended to bring about, urgent and systemic change to BPS.** The state invested an additional \$22 M on top of the \$430 M in Federal Recovery dollars during this period.

“District-wide policies and systems are significant contributors to student underperformance, particularly of Boston’s economically disadvantaged and other high needs students.”

Commissioner Jeffrey Riley, March 2020,
[BPS District Review](#)

State Intervention Timeline

MAR 2020

DESE conducts BPS
District Review

BPS & DESE MOU

FEB 2022

BPS Superintendent
Cassellius resigns

JUN 2022

BPS & DESE sign SIP

Mary Skipper appointed BPS
Superintendent

Election of Mayor Wu

NOV 2021

DESE conducts a follow-up
BPS District Review

MAY 2022

SIP end date

JUN 2025



2020 Context: Why did DESE intervene in BPS?

Student Achievement

- **Student achievement in BPS steadily declined since ~2014** ([see Appendix](#))
- **Persistently low achievement for historically marginalized student groups.** *In 2019 less than 1/3 of Black and Latino 3rd graders in BPS were reading on grade level and less than 1/4 Black and Latino 8th graders were doing math on grade level.*

Low-Performing Schools

- **34 BPS schools**, serving a third of BPS student population, **in the lowest performing 10% of schools in MA**
- **High-concentration (over 85%) of Black and Latino students, Multilingual Learners, and Students w/Disabilities in these schools**

Operational Failures

- **Persistently late or “no show” buses**
- **Buildings w/major facilities issues** including functioning bathrooms and unsafe drinking water
- **Significant excess capacity of school buildings** draining resources
- **Inconsistent and inadequate delivery of multilingual and special education services**

Evaluation of State Intervention in BPS

State Intervention Evaluation Report

PURPOSE & KEY QUESTIONS

- **Purpose:** This report evaluates the impact of state intervention in BPS since 2020, assessing whether the 2020 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and the 2022 Systemic Improvement Plan (SIP) have led to meaningful improvements in student outcomes and school performance.
- **Key Questions:**
 - Did BPS fulfill its obligations under the MOU and SIP?
 - What was the impact on student and school outcomes of the state's intervention?
 - What are the options available to state and district leaders for continued progress?

State Intervention Evaluation Report

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

- **Assessed compliance with MOU and SIP:** *Did BPS do what it was asked to do by the state?*
 - Assessment Approach: We examined the deliverables BPS submitted to the state, the state's assessment of those deliverables (when available), and conducted our own analysis of the data (where needed).
- **Assessed Outcomes:** *Did outcomes for students, schools, or the district as a whole change in the areas where the intervention was most focused?*
 - Assessment Approach: We examined pre-intervention and post-intervention performance across 44 different outcome measures spanning Operations, Academics, Student Safety & Engagement, and Equity of Student Outcomes.

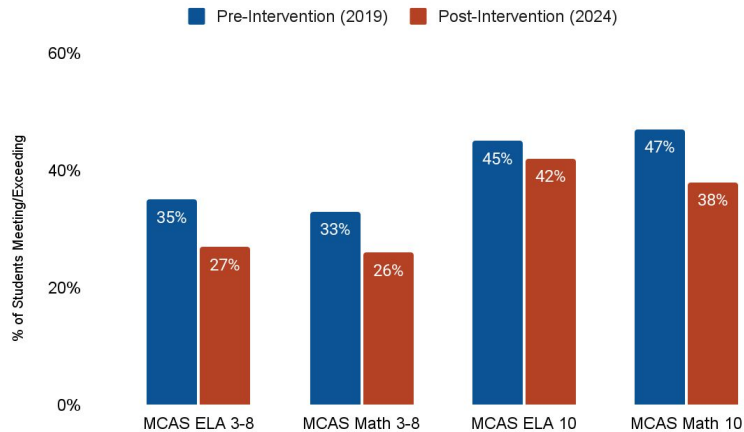
Intervention Evaluation Report - Key Findings

#	Key Findings
<u>1</u>	Academic outcomes declined, gaps widened, and there is little evidence of recovery.
<u>2</u>	Growing concentration of high-need students in low-performing schools.
<u>3</u>	State intervention in BPS focused on compliance over student and school outcomes.
<u>4</u>	BPS met the majority (63%) of the requirements in intervention agreements.
<u>5</u>	BPS made operational improvements, but key operational priorities are incomplete.

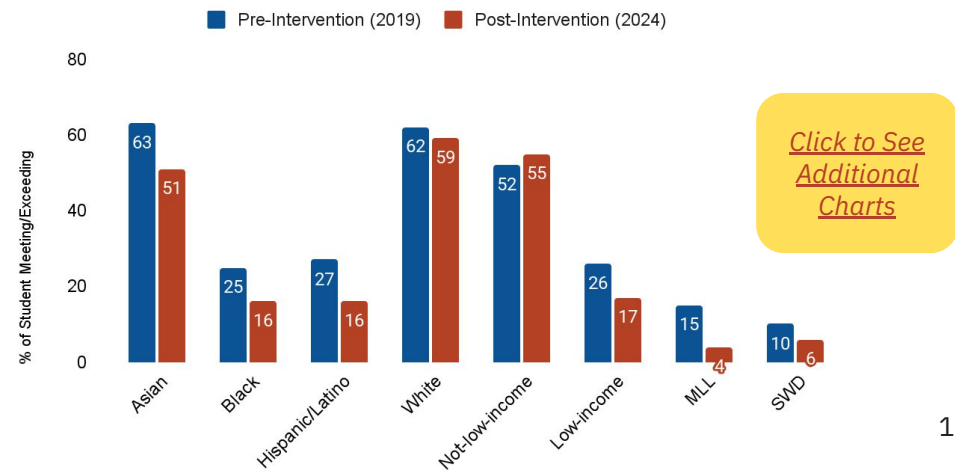
Key Finding 1: Academic outcomes did not improve, gaps widened and there is little evidence of a pandemic recovery

- Overall academic outcomes declined since state intervention, and were declining over the last decade.
- **Black and Latino students, low-income students, multilingual learners (MLLs), and students w/disabilities are all significantly below pre-pandemic (2019) performance on MCAS.**
- Since 2019, achievement gaps have grown significantly in all subjects and grade spans. For example, in grade 10 Math there is a 52-point achievement gap between Black and Latino students and White students.

BPS MCAS Proficiency: Pre v. Post



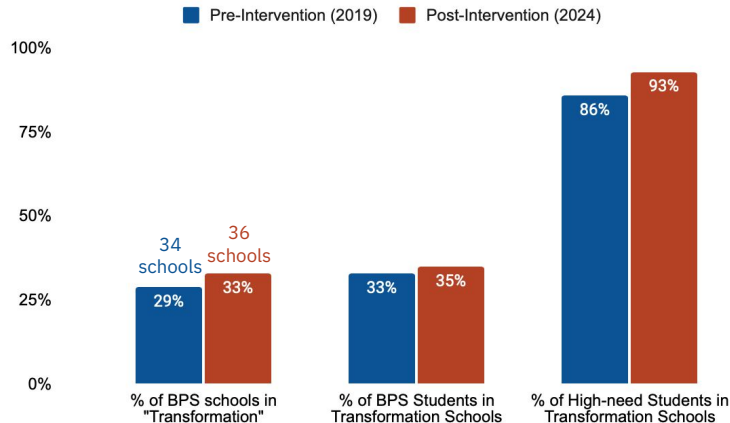
BPS ELA 3-8 MCAS Proficiency by Student Group: Pre v. Post



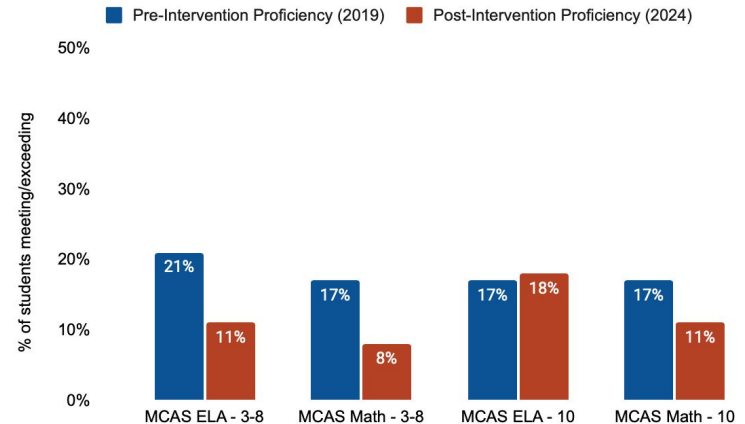
Key Finding 2: Concentration of high-need students in a growing number of low-performing schools

- **Over a third of BPS students (16,000) are now in Transformation Schools** (the bottom 10% of schools in the state). This is an increase in both the number Transformation Schools and share of students since 2019.
- **Student outcomes in Transformation Schools have declined since 2019.** Less than 20% of students are meeting grade level benchmarks in ELA and Math (less than 10% in 3-8 Math).
- **Transformation schools serve an increasing concentration of high-need students (93%).**

BPS Transformation Schools: Pre v. Post



Transformation School MCAS Proficiency: Pre v. Post



Key Finding 3: DESE's intervention focused on compliance over student and school outcomes

- DESE's intervention agreements with BPS **contained 41 requirements/goals** for BPS to complete during the 5-yr intervention
- Of the 41 goals contained in the MOU and SIP, **less than a third were focused on student or school outcomes**

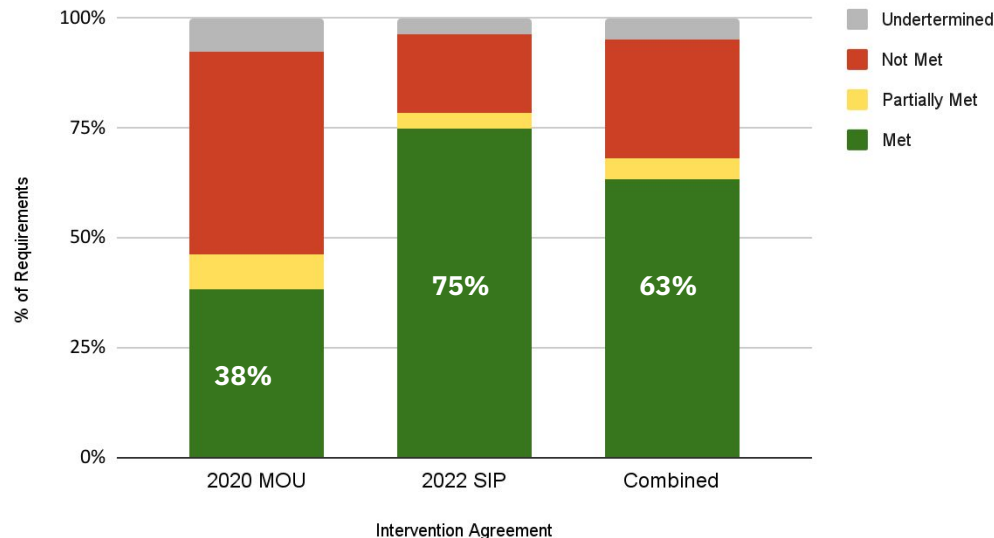
<i>Intervention Agreement Goals Analysis</i>				
Agreement Goals	MOU (# of Goals)	SIP (# of Goals)	Total (# of Goals)	% of Goals
Compliance Action	4	25	29	71%
Student/School Outcomes	9	3	12	29%
Total Goals	13	28	41	

Note: “Compliance Action” are goals that focus on plans, administrative actions, policy changes, or staffing. “Student/School Outcomes” included goals that focus on quantifiable improvement of operational services (e.g., bus on time arrivals, bathroom renovations), improvement of student learning outcomes, or improvement of school performance on key accountability measures.

Key Finding 4: BPS fulfilled the majority of its obligations under the SIP and the MOU

- **BPS met 63% of the requirements** of both the MOU and the SIP
- **BPS' performance on the 2022 SIP represented improvement from the 2020 MOU** (38% → 75% meeting requirements)
- **The SIP agreement was more oriented toward compliance actions** than the MOU ([see slide 15](#))

Summary of Intervention Requirements: MOU, SIP, & Combined

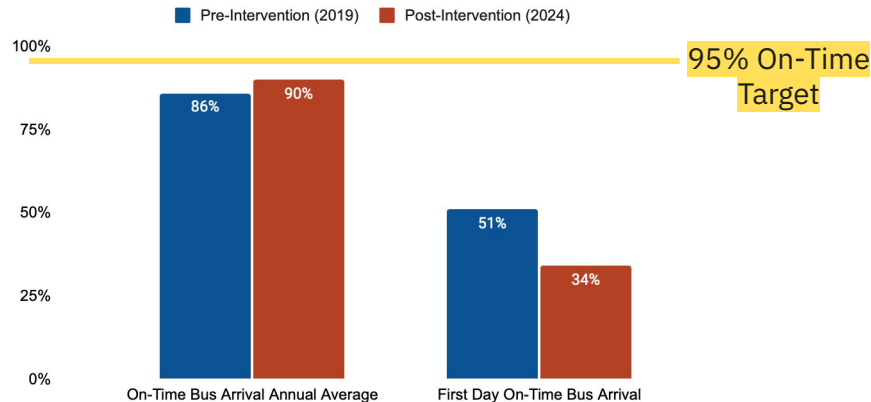


Note: This chart comes from an analysis of BPS' completion of each of the 41 requirements in the MOU and SIP over the period 2020 to 2024. [See the full report](#) for more detailed evaluation of each requirement.

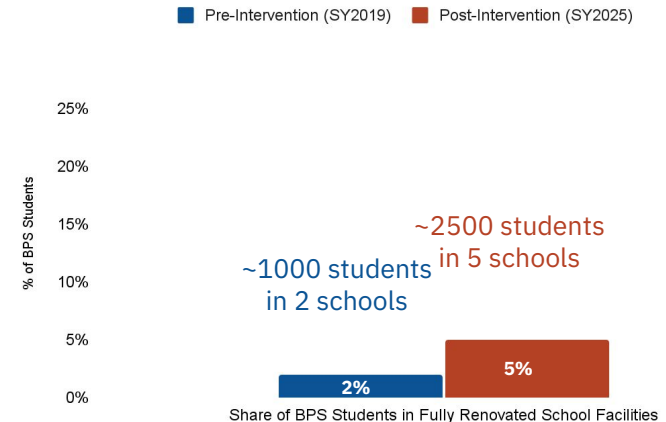
Key Finding 5: BPS made operational improvements, but critical priorities are still incomplete

- **BPS made operational improvements under the SIP in:** facilities maintenance, school safety protocols, special education policy, and transportation staffing
- **Key operational priorities and outcomes were not fully achieved in:** On-time bus arrival, and comprehensive long-term master facilities plans

Bus Transportation Outcomes: pre v. post



Access to Fully Renovated School Facilities: pre v. post



The Path Forward

With the SIP ending in June 2025, there are *three options* in front of state decision makers:

1

End State Intervention

- End state intervention in June 2025
- Risk further regression in student outcomes

2

Initiate a 3rd Improvement Agreement

- Negotiate a 3rd Improvement Agreement
- Shift focus to student and school outcomes
- Increase transparency and accountability for progress
- Require deep investment in evidence-based interventions

3

Designate BPS as an “Underperforming District”

- Formal designation as an “Underperforming District”
(the step before Receivership)
- State-mandated and approved district Improvement Plan
- Risk political challenges and pushback

Recommendation: An ***outcomes-focused improvement agreement*** is needed to accelerate progress for BPS students

A third improvement agreement should hold BPS accountable for improvement of student, school, and district outcomes. An agreement would include the following:



Measurable outcome and interim progress markers for improvement in literacy, math, postsecondary/workforce readiness, and attendance for historically marginalized students



Clear targets the expanded access to high-quality schools for high-need students and the accelerated improvement of Transformation Schools



DESE-appointed, independent accountability lead to accelerate implementation, ensure investment in evidence-based strategies, and report on progress to BPS and state officials, and identify barriers to improvement



Ensure transparency and accountability through monthly public progress reporting on student, school and operational outcomes to BESE and the BPS school committee

Conclusion

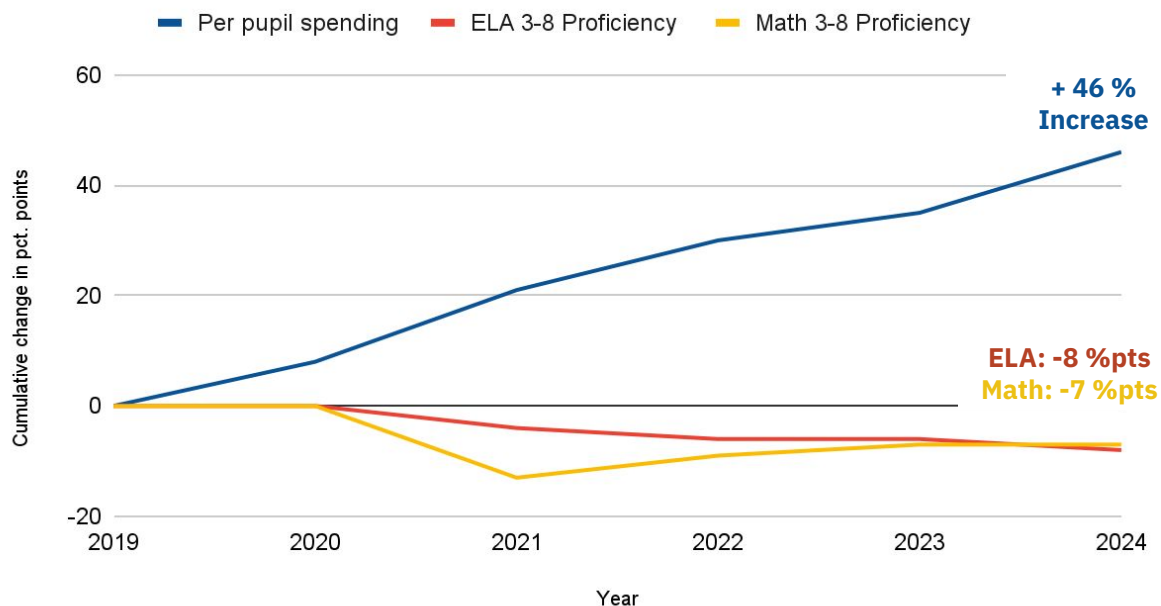
“ ***We are past the point of small fixes***, or piloting programs here or there. We need to take this moment to really develop the implementation plans that will get the ideas and policy goals to actually match the experience of students and families in our schools.

Mayor Michelle Wu, March 2020*

**Mayor Wu was a Boston city councilor at the time of this statement.*

Unfortunately, historic increased spending in BPS over this period has not led to changes in student outcomes

BPS Change in Spending and MCAS Scores (3-8) Since 2019



Note: Inflation rate over this period is ~23%.

- **BPS spending from 2019 to 2024 increased from \$20k to \$30k per pupil (46% increase).**
- Now, more than ever, there must be **greater accountability for how resources are tied to accelerating improvement** in student outcomes.
- Greater oversight from DESE can help to ensure that resources are advancing student and school outcomes.

Conclusion

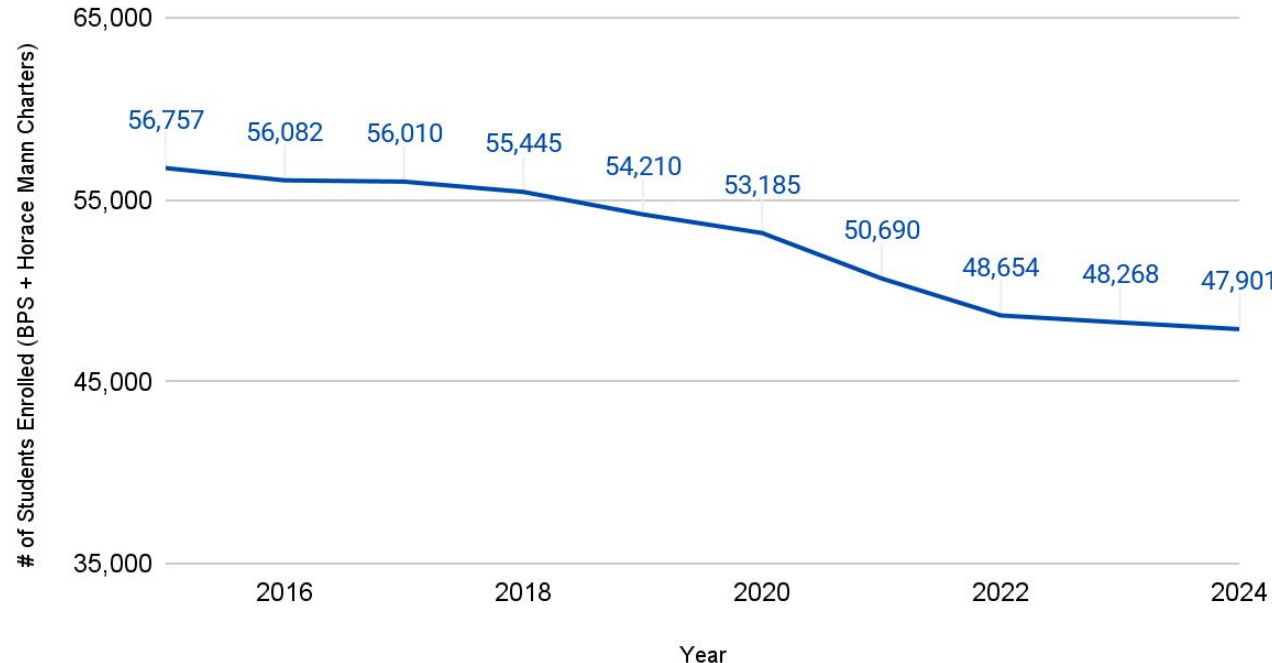
URGENCY OF THE MOMENT

- State education leaders **have an enforceable duty to intervene to ensure access quality education** for all MA students.
- **Given the level of inequity in student outcomes** in BPS and the lack of quantifiable improvement since the initial MOU, **ending state oversight would be premature.**
- **A structured, outcomes-focused, plan for accountability is needed** and would build on the initial progress of the MOU and SIP.
- **DESE's oversight pressure is crucial** for driving meaningful improvement, and **withdrawing now would risk a return to superficial reforms with no real progress for BPS students and families.**

Appendix

BPS Enrollment Decline 2015 - 2024

BPS Enrollment, 2015-2024

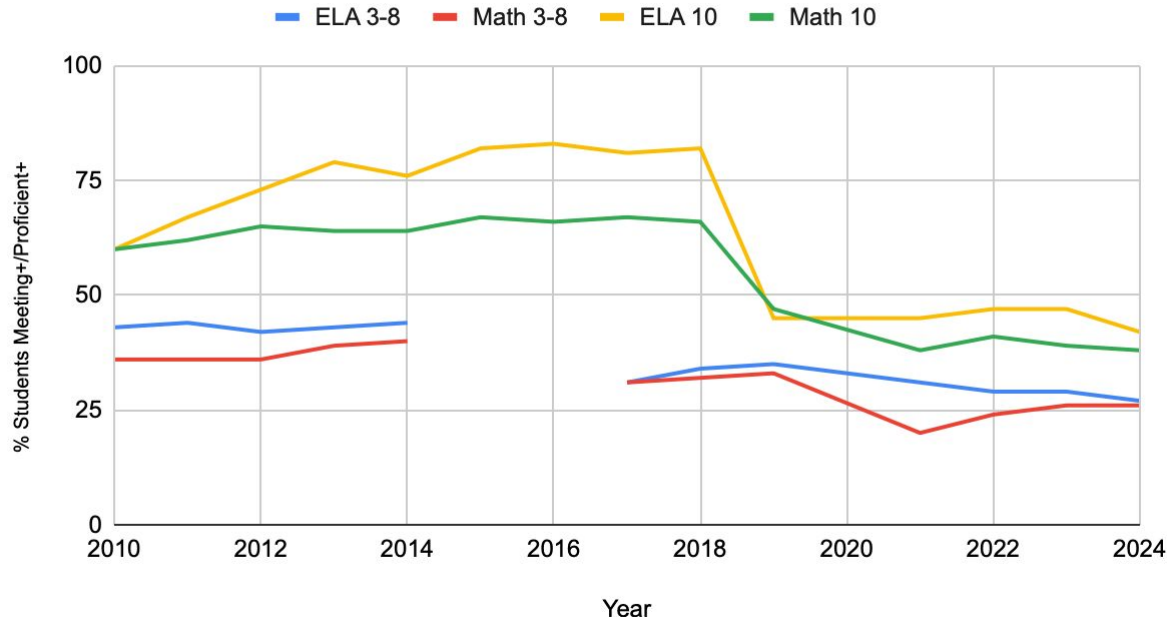


- BPS enrollment declined by 8,800 students, a **15% decline in 10 years**.
- COVID-19 accelerated a decline that was already occurring.
- This decline is **driving the need for long-term facilities planning and school consolidation**.

For more on enrollment see [Boston Indicators](#).

Student achievement in BPS as measured by MCAS has been declining over the last decade

BPS MCAS Proficiency, 2010-2024

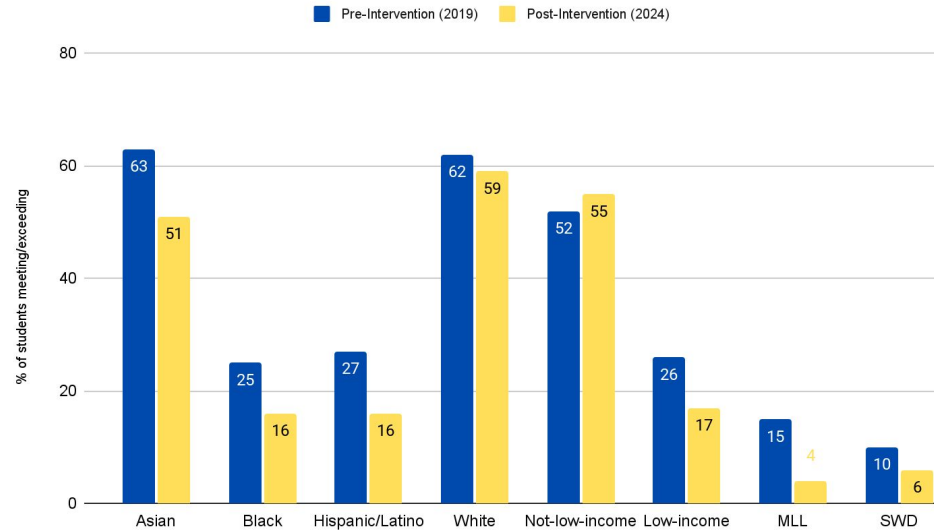


- Achievement in BPS is significantly lower today than a decade ago.
- In grades 3-8, MCAS achievement peaked around 2014, and in grade 10 in 2016-2017.

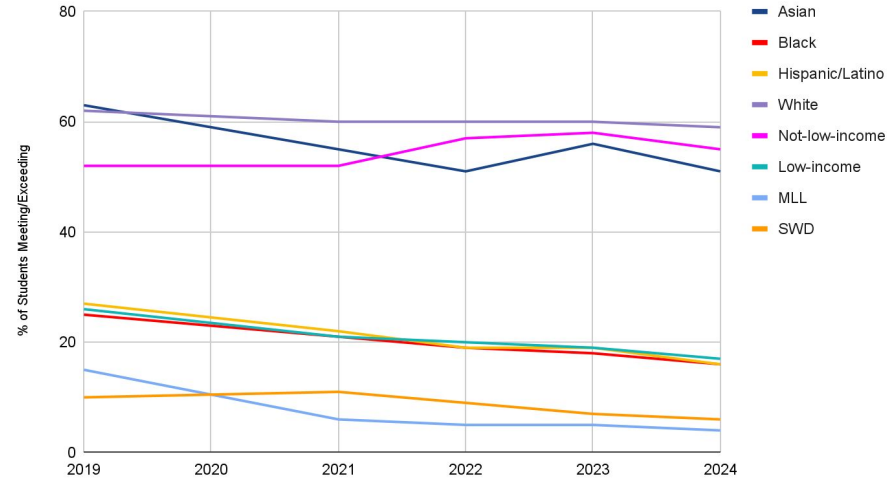
Notes: 2015&2016 there was no MCAS for grade 3-8. The MCAS assessment changed in 2017 for 3-8, and in 2019 for Grade 10

MCAS Proficiency 2019 to 2024 by Student Group - ELA 3-8

BPS ELA 3-8 Proficiency: Pre v. Post Intervention

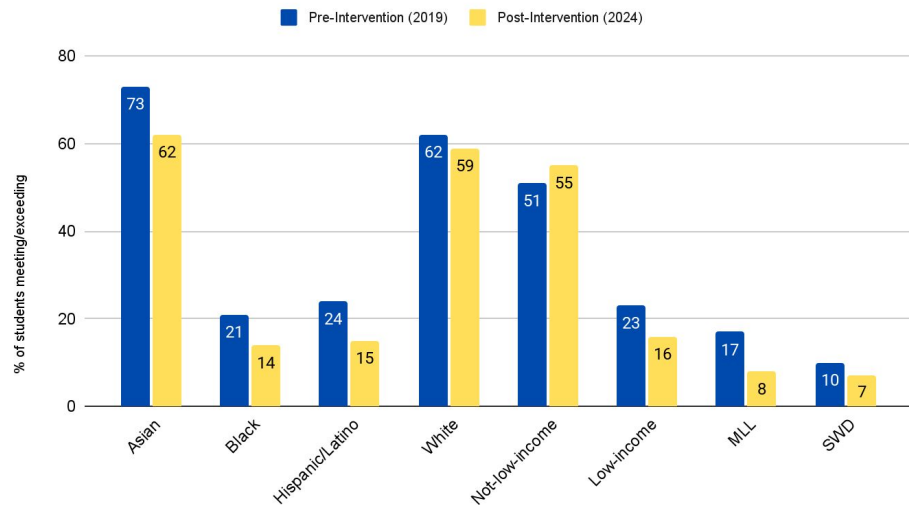


ELA 3-8 MCAS Proficiency by Student Group, 2019-2024

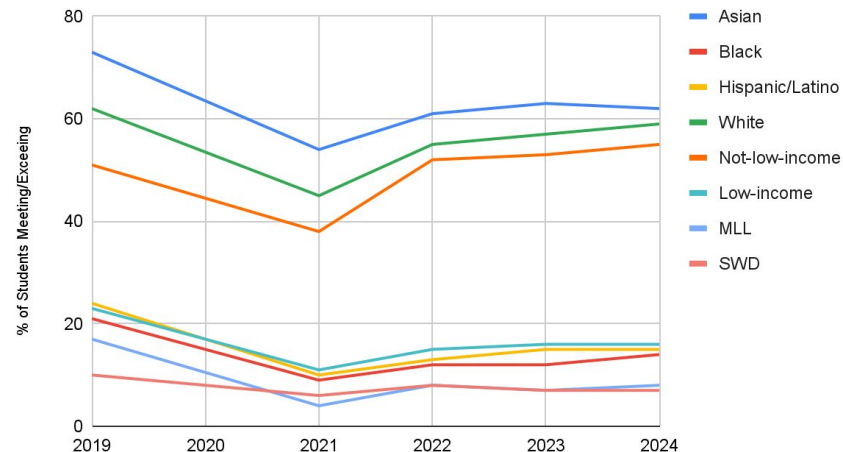


MCAS Proficiency 2019 to 2024 by Student Group - Math 3-8

BPS Math 3-8 Proficiency: Pre v. Post Intervention

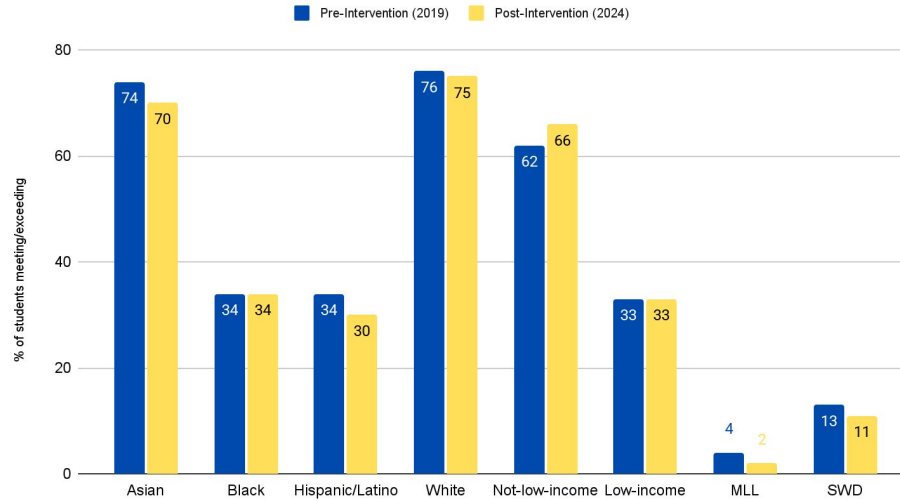


Math 3-8 MCAS Proficiency by Student Group, 2019-2024

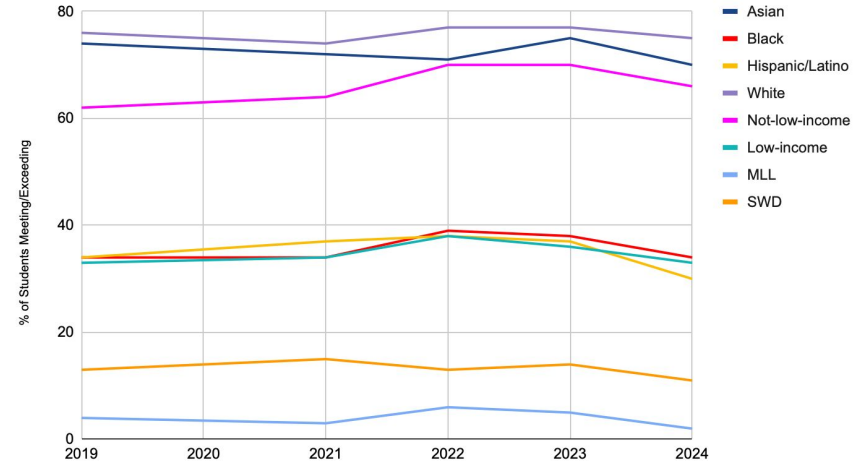


MCAS Proficiency 2019 to 2024 by Student Group - ELA 10

BPS ELA 10 Proficiency: Pre v. Post Intervention

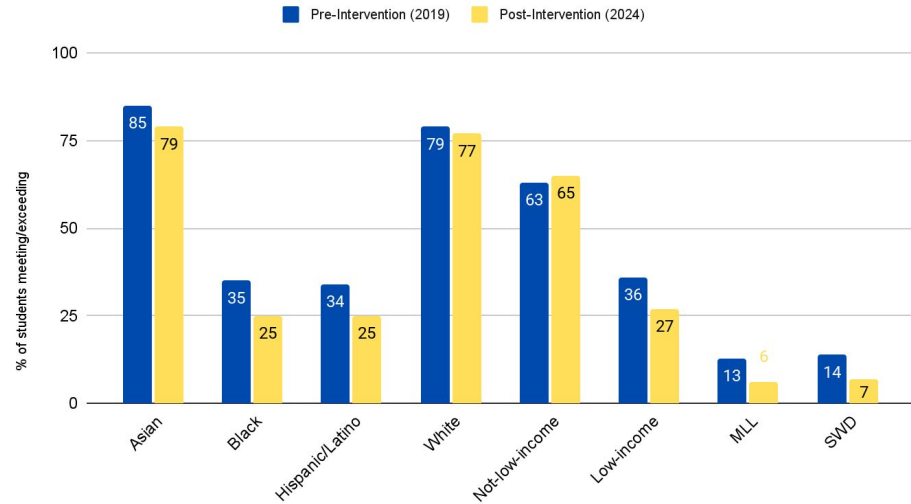


ELA 10 MCAS Proficiency by Student Group, 2019-2024

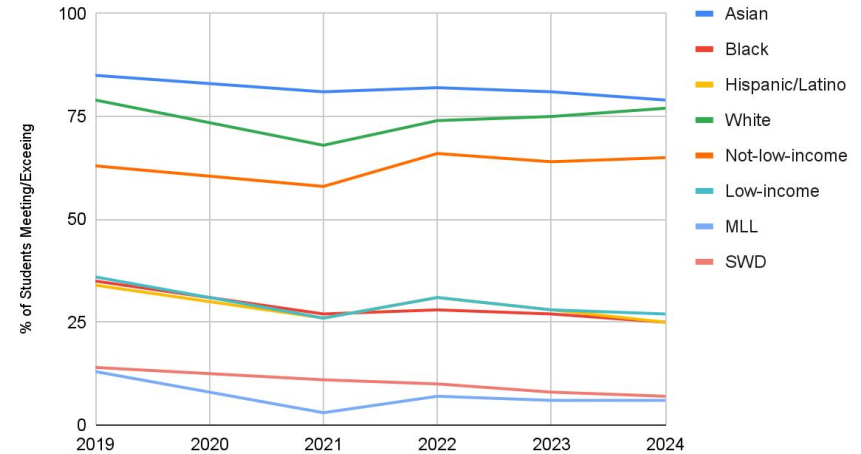


MCAS Proficiency 2019 to 2024 by Student Group - Math 10

BPS Math 10 Proficiency: Pre v. Post Intervention



Math 10 MCAS Proficiency by Student Group, 2019-2024

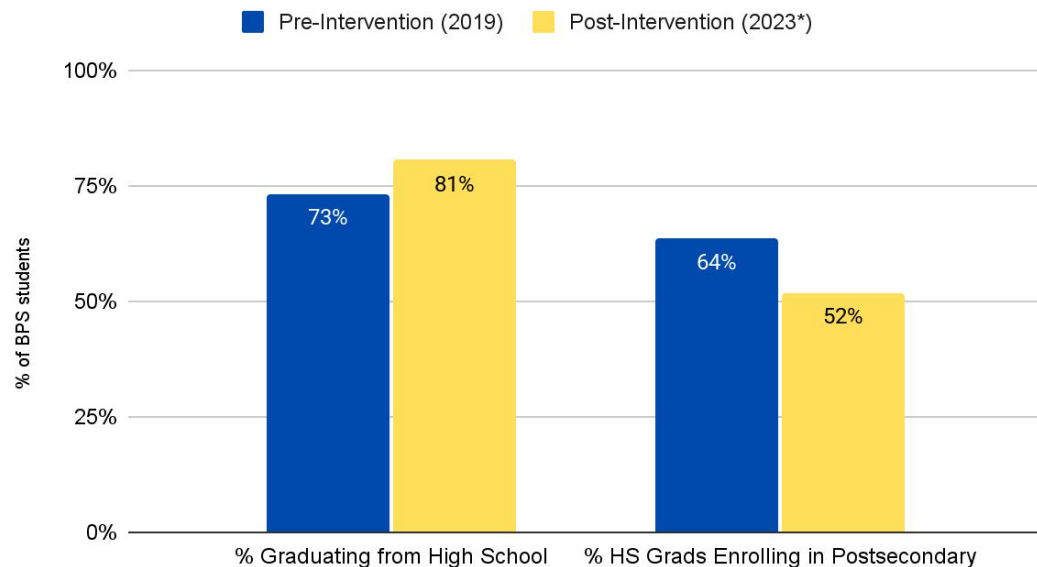


Gaps in Student Achievement on MCAS by Assessment and Grade Span

Proficiency Gaps (Pre v. Post Intervention)				
	Assessment	Gap Pre Intervention - 2019 (pct pts)	Gap Post Intervention - 2024 (pct pts)	Gap Increase (↑) or Decrease (↓)
Black - White Proficiency Gap	3-8 ELA MCAS	37	43	↑
	3-8 Math MCAS	41	45	↑
	10 ELA MCAS	42	41	↓
	10 Math MCAS	44	52	↑
Latino - White Proficiency Gap	3-8 ELA MCAS	35	43	↑
	3-8 Math MCAS	38	44	↑
	10 ELA MCAS	42	45	↑
	10 Math MCAS	45	52	↑
Low-income - Non Low income Proficiency Gap	3-8 ELA MCAS	26	38	↑
	3-8 Math MCAS	28	39	↑
	10 ELA MCAS	29	33	↑
	10 Math MCAS	27	38	↑

BPS' graduation rates increased, but postsecondary enrollment rates declined significantly

Change in Postsecondary Readiness Outcomes: Pre v. Post Intervention

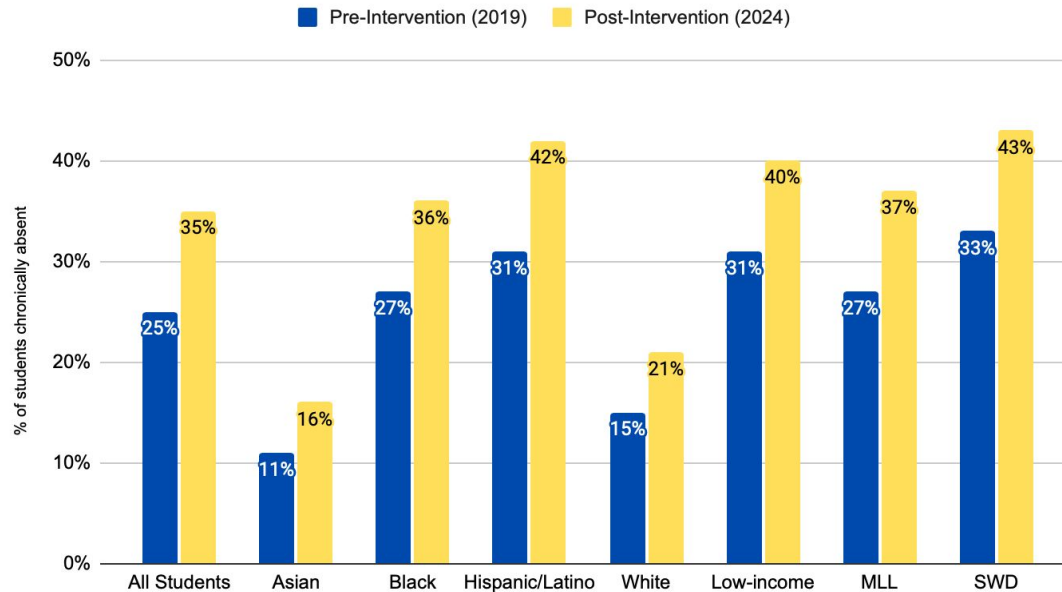


Note: 2023 is the last publicly available graduating class data.

Post-secondary Enrollment: Pre v. Post Intervention <i>% of HS Grads Enrolling</i>			
	2019	2023*	↓ ↑
Asian	84%	79%	↓
Black	63%	50%	↓
Latino	53%	40%	↓
White	79%	71%	↓
Low-inc.	58%	46%	↓
MLL	47%	30%	↓
SWD	51%	33%	↓

Chronic absenteeism rates skyrocketed during the pandemic. BPS brought down rates but not yet to pre-pandemic levels.

BPS Chronic Absenteeism: Pre v. Post Intervention



- Chronic absenteeism rates for all student groups are well-above 2019 levels (pre-pandemic, and pre-state intervention).
- In 2022, the chronic absenteeism rate reached a high of 42% in BPS.

Read the full text of *Beyond Small Fixes* at:
bostonpolicyinstitute.org/projects/beyond-small-fixes

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