



BEYOND SMALL FIXES: THE CASE FOR CONTINUED ACCOUNTABILITY IN BPS

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2020, following a scathing district review, which documented significant academic, operational, and administrative failures, declining student achievement, and an increasing share of Boston schools in the bottom 10% of the state's school accountability index, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) took action to intervene in the Boston Public Schools (BPS). The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed in March 2020 was the first of two intervention agreements between DESE and BPS, both of which aimed to address chronic operational and instructional failures in the district. This report evaluates whether the state's intervention in BPS from 2020 to 2025 through the MOU and the follow-on Systemic Improvement Plan (SIP) has led to meaningful improvements in student outcomes and school performance. The study finds that **while the intervention prompted BPS to address long-standing operational and administrative deficiencies, it has not resulted in improved academic outcomes for BPS schools or students— particularly for Black and Latino students, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students.** With the SIP set to expire in June 2025, this report examines the effectiveness of the intervention, identifies persistent challenges, and outlines options for the future.

Key Report Findings

- **Focus on compliance rather than student outcomes:** Of the 41 goals contained in the MOU and the SIP, less than one-third were focused on student or school outcomes. Both intervention agreements failed to set measurable performance goals, making there little to no accountability for academic progress. To date, success has largely been measured through policy changes and administrative benchmarks rather than through improvements in student learning. As a result, we find little evidence of academic improvement or school transformation for BPS' low-performing schools.
- **Operational improvement, but critical priorities still incomplete:** State intervention forced BPS to take action on several long-standing issues, including special education policies, transportation staffing inefficiency, facilities maintenance, and school safety protocols. Many of these efforts were necessary and overdue. However, key operational priorities of the MOU and SIP are still incomplete, including on-time, reliable bus transportation and a comprehensive long-term master facilities plan.
- **Persistent academic inequities with little evidence of any pandemic recovery:** While the pandemic impacted student achievement across all districts, BPS has shown limited recovery for Black and Latino students, multilingual learners, low-income students and students with disabilities, despite this being a focus of the state's intervention and the availability of unprecedented federal, state, and local funding to support academic recovery.

- **Concentration of high-need students in a growing number of low-performing schools:** BPS increased the number of schools in the lowest-performing 10% in the state from 34 to 36. Now, these schools serve over 16,000 students, over 90% of whom are high-need and the vast majority of which are Black and Latino. On their own, these schools would constitute the 5th largest district in the state. On average, the achievement of students in these schools has significantly declined.

Recommendations

Given these findings, this report **recommends continued state oversight with a shift from compliance-focused interventions to accountability for measurable improvement in student outcomes through a third improvement agreement** between BPS and DESE Specifically:

- **Establish a new improvement agreement** that prioritizes interventions that will address student outcomes in literacy, math, and postsecondary/workforce readiness, and that will set measurable targets for increasing access to high-quality schools for high-need students.
- **Ensure transparency and accountability** through monthly public progress reporting on student achievement and operational improvements.
- **DESE-appointment of a dedicated, independent accountability lead** to accelerate implementation and report on progress to BPS and state officials, and propose changes to the district policies and practices that are preventing progress toward the goals of the improvement agreement.
- **If progress remains insufficient, escalate intervention** by formally designating BPS as an “underperforming district,” which would allow the state to have greater authority in dictating BPS’ improvement plan, including requiring immediate changes to the district policies and practices interfering with progress.

Urgency of the Moment

This June, state leaders will decide whether to conclude the state’s intervention or to continue pursuing the goal of improved educational outcomes. Without sustained accountability focused on student outcomes, BPS risks repeating cycles of stagnation that have historically limited opportunities for its most vulnerable students. This report recommends a balanced approach that builds on the initial progress of state oversight and accelerates changes that most impact student and school outcomes to ensure that all BPS students have access to a high-quality education.

2. INTRODUCTION

Boston Public Schools (BPS) serves approximately 45,000 students, the vast majority of whom are Black and Latino, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students. As the largest district in Massachusetts and one of the most well-resourced urban school systems in the country, BPS has long been at the center of state and national conversations about educational equity, urban school improvement, and district accountability. In 2006, [BPS was honored](#) as one the most innovative, fast-improving and high-performing districts in the country by the Broad Prize in Urban Education (Broad Foundation, 2006). Yet, 15 years later in the days before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted schools for over two years, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) announced a partnership with the City of Boston intended to make rapid improvements in BPS and stave off deeper state intervention in the form of a receivership designation (BPS, 2020).¹

The partnership established in a March 2020 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) would begin the state's five-year intervention to transform the academic and operational performance of Boston Public Schools. This report evaluates the impact of the state's intervention in BPS since 2020, assessing whether the actions taken under MOU and the Systemic Improvement Plan (SIP) have led to meaningful improvements in district operations, student outcomes, and school performance. Intentionally, this report will go beyond the required submissions to the MOU and SIP, as many of those do not paint a full picture of what is different for students. For example, did the SIP-required plan to redesign special education result in better outcomes for students with disabilities? Did the requirement to have "transformation schools" (schools in the bottom 10% of the state's accountability system) create a consolidated improvement plan result in schools improving?

This report finds that while BPS complied with most of the requirements of the state's intervention agreements (2020 MOU and the 2022 SIP), this compliance has not yet resulted in the transformation for Boston students and families that was promised through the partnership. BPS continues to struggle with **deeply entrenched inequities in student outcomes and school quality.** This is the case despite the infusion of \$22 M in state-funded improvement funds², and \$430 M in federal pandemic recovery dollars (Executive Office for Administration and Finance, 2024) and a 38% increase (\$418 M) in city spending since 2019 (Boston Public Schools, 2024, "Budget Development").³ The following remains true:

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- 1 The DESE Commissioner has the authority to take control of operations and governance of local school districts through designating districts as "chronically underperforming" This designation allows DESE to appoint an independent receiver to lead the district. This authority was exercised in Lawrence, Holyoke, and Southbridge. For more information: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/levels/districts/faq.html>
 - 2 The MOU promised \$12 M (\$4 M a year over three years) and the SIP promised \$10 M in state support for BPS to implement the changes outlined in the agreements.
 - 3 The city's general fund has increased its contribution to BPS by 38% or \$418 M between FY2019 and FY2025, this is above the inflation rate which was about 23% from 2019 to 2024.

- Academic performance has declined, and there is little evidence of pandemic recovery (Appendix A).
- The share of BPS students in the lowest-performing schools in the state has grown, and the performance of these schools, on average, has declined since 2019 (Appendix A).
- Achievement gaps between student groups have widened. Levels of achievement and the lack of pandemic recovery on key academic measures for Black and Latino students, low-income students, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities should raise serious alarm bells for education leaders (Appendix A).
- More students are graduating high school, but a smaller share are enrolling in postsecondary education (Appendix A).

While the state’s intervention in BPS has driven necessary improvements in district operations and administration, its impact to date on student learning and school performance remains limited. Progress has been made in addressing some long-standing challenges—particularly in areas like special education policies, school safety protocols, and facilities planning—but **the core goal of improving academic outcomes for all students, especially those from historically marginalized communities, has yet to be realized.** As the SIP nears its expiration in June 2025, and with a mayoral election on the horizon, there will be strong political incentives to declare the intervention a success and move on. However, doing so without a clear and enforceable plan for continued accountability would continue to put Boston’s students at risk, allowing deep inequities in school quality and student achievement to persist. This report assesses the impact of the intervention and presents a path forward—one that builds on the progress made while ensuring future efforts are directly focused on improving student learning and expanding access to high-quality schools. **With a stronger, outcomes-driven approach, state and city leaders can ensure that this intervention is not just another temporary measure** but a meaningful step toward lasting educational equity for all Boston students.

3. STATE INTERVENTION AGREEMENTS EVALUATION

The Road to State Intervention

In March 2020, just as the state and country were preparing for massive disruptions to public education from the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) released a scathing review of Boston Public Schools, following years of underperformance and mismanagement. The review found numerous deficiencies. These included special education in “systemic disarray,” a costly but failing transportation system, neglected school facilities, rising chronic absenteeism rates, and the segregation of the district’s highest-need students in the most underperforming schools. Commissioner Riley made it clear that “school-by-school” fixes would be insufficient as “district-wide policies and systems are significant contributors to student underperformance, particularly of Boston’s economically disadvantaged and other high needs students” (MA DESE, 2020, “BPS District Review Report”).

The 2020 review findings followed more than a decade of declining enrollment, stagnant student achievement, and widening racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps in BPS (Appendix A). However, with the district’s new superintendent still in her first year and the urgent demands of the emerging pandemic, state and city leaders swiftly opted for a structured partnership through an [MOU](#) rather than pursuing more drastic intervention measures. This agreement was celebrated as “a new way forward for BPS” and replaced the state receivership brinksmanship that had come to characterize DESE’s enforcement of its accountability system (BPS, 2020).

However, two years into the three-year MOU, DESE found in a follow-up [district review](#) that BPS had made “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” (MA DESE, 2022, “BPS District Review Report”). The lack of progress prompted a new round of negotiations—this time between DESE and the newly elected Mayor of Boston, Michelle Wu. Commissioner Riley indicated a willingness to designate the district as an “underperforming district,” which would have given the state greater authority to dictate the terms of the district’s improvement plan but would have stopped short of a receivership designation. The threat was enough to mobilize the Boston Teachers’ Union (BTU) and its allies in support of the Mayor’s opposition to any underperforming designation. As a result, DESE and BPS agreed to continue with the partnership model in the form of the [Systemic Improvement Plan](#) (NBC 10 Staff, 2022).

Like the MOU, the SIP outlined priority initiatives across multiple areas of the district’s operations. However, **neither agreement outlined specific goals for the transformation of school or student outcomes despite that being the reason for the state’s intervention.** In particular, the SIP focused on administrative and operational

deliverables with explicit deadlines.⁴ While the SIP concludes at the end of the 2024-25 school year, all of the named deadlines in the agreement have passed. This makes it possible to take stock of both the original 2020 MOU and the 2022 SIP and examine the extent to which the requirements were met.

Below, we examine the requirements outlined in the 2020 MOU and the 2022 SIP. We rely on public reporting from BPS and DESE and analysis of data to determine whether each named requirement was “met,” “partially met,” or “not met.” In some cases, we identify requirements as “undetermined” in that the reporting or evidence for the requirement being met is not clear. A major limitation of both of these agreements is that the requirements did not spell out what it would look like to fully meet the intention of the requirement.⁵ Thus, there are multiple occasions where DESE reports name that BPS submissions did not fully meet DESE’s standard. In these cases, we describe the requirement as “partially met.” Unfortunately, reporting for both of these agreements has not been fully transparent: neither agreement required regular public reporting, nor were DESE’s evaluations of BPS submissions consistently shared with the public. For its part, BPS did publish [submissions for the SIP on its website](#).

2020 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

The three-year [MOU](#) consisted of four priority initiatives for BPS, four priority initiatives for DESE in support of BPS, and one long-term priority initiative each for BPS and DESE. For this evaluation, we will examine the four BPS priority initiatives and the one long-term BPS initiative.⁶ Table 1 below presents an overall summary of the share of MOU requirements that were met, partially met, not met, or undetermined, while Table 2 lists each requirement in detail and assesses which were met.⁷

Table 1. MOU Performance Summary

Requirements	#	%
Met	5	38%
Partially Met	1	8%
Not Met	6	46%
Undetermined	1	8%

4 Examples of deliverables included, externally conducted audits of student safety, transportation and special education; hiring a coordinator for parent complaints; developing a long-term master facilities plan and creating a strategic plan for serving multilingual learners.

5 While both the SIP and MOU mention that improvement/outcome targets, a schedule for data collection and progress reporting would be established at a later date, this never took place.

6 The DESE initiatives are not evaluated here because they pertained to actions DESE would take in support of BPS, and did not specify changes (policy or outcomes) that would result from those actions.

7 We evaluate whether BPS ever met the MOU requirement during the full state intervention period from 2020 through December 2024, despite the MOU only being in place from 2020-2022. We also give credit to BPS for any increase or improvement (even as small as 1%) because the state did not set any numeric targets for improvement. Each of these decisions allow for the most generous interpretation of meeting the requirements of the MOU.

Table 2. 2020 MOU: Performance Evaluation

Initiative	Focus Area	Measure	Evaluation	Notes
Priority Initiative 1	Teaching and Learning	1.1 Increase average ELA, math, and science scaled scores in Transformation Schools (measured by MCAS).	Not Met	Analysis shows average scale scores for ELA, Math and Science decreased for Transformation schools from 2019 to 2024.
		1.2 Increase the percent of English learners in Transformation Schools progressing toward proficiency (measured by ACCESS).	Undetermined	Reporting of ACCESS data not publicly available
		1.3 Increase student growth percentiles (MCAS) in Transformation Schools	Met	
		1.4 Improve the four-year cohort high school graduation rates and reduce dropout rates in all high schools	Met	
Priority Initiative 2	Equitable Access to Student Supports	2.1 Adopt a uniform MassCore Policy and establish a uniform graduation requirement.	Met	
		2.2 Implement MassCore graduation requirement beginning with 2021 9th graders	Not Met	Met for 2023 9th graders, 2 years late
		2.3 Increase number and percent of underrepresented students enrolled in advanced courses.	Met	
		2.4 Reduce chronic absenteeism across all schools.	Not Met	Chronic absenteeism increased districtwide from 2019 - 25% to 2024- 35%, but has decreased since a high of 42% in 2022.
Priority Initiative 3	Improving Educational Services for Students with Disabilities	3.1 BPS will improve outcomes for students with disabilities by systematically addressing the quality of education for students with disabilities	Not Met	MCAS outcomes did not improve for students with disabilities (DESE Profiles 2019 & 2024)
		3.2 Undertake reconstruction of special education services to increase inclusion of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment and reduce disproportionate placement in separate settings.	Partially Met	2023 DESE data show a 1% increase in inclusion, sub-separate placement is same as 2019
Priority Initiative 4	Improve Transportation Operations	4.1 Increase the on-time arrival of school buses on the first day of school.	Not Met	43% on time in 2019, 2024 34% on time (Mayor Wu Substack post)
		4.2 Improve on-time arrival at key points and throughout the school year	Not Met	Average on-time rate stayed flat with 2019; 87% (Mayor Wu Substack post)
Long-Term Initiative	Multilingual Learners (MLL)	LT 1: Develop a plan (by May 2021) for improving services to MLLs and improve interpretation and translation services for limited English proficient parents and guardians	Met - Delayed	BPS created a Strategic Plan for MLLs in October 2022

BPS' performance against the 2020 MOU requirement was mixed, with about half of the 13 requirements not being achieved (Table 2). Notably, BPS fell short of the MOU requirements in areas that demanded concrete improvements in student achievement or operational performance.

Improvement of average achievement in transformation schools, improvement of the outcomes of students with disabilities, improvement of chronic absenteeism (below 2019 levels), and improvement of bus on-time arrival rates all remained elusive over the five years. The requirements where BPS had the most success included increasing students' access to advanced coursework, adopting policies such as MassCore uniform graduation requirements, and increasing graduation rates.⁸

2022 Systemic Improvement Plan (SIP)

Following the findings of a [follow-up district review](#) of BPS in May 2022, DESE and BPS agreed to a second, structured improvement agreement: the [Systemic Improvement Plan](#) (SIP). The SIP covered more areas of district performance and operations than the MOU, but its requirements were narrowly constructed around submissions of deliverables tied to specific dates. Where the MOU asked for BPS to demonstrate progress in improving student or school outcomes in a limited number of cases, the SIP did not mention any changes to student or school outcomes. At the June 2022 Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) meeting announcing the SIP, officials indicated that academic measures could be added to the agreement at a later date.

Using the same methodology as above, Table 3 documents the overall summary of BPS' performance on the SIP requirements, and Table 4 provides an evaluation of each of the 28 requirements. BPS shared each of its submissions to [DESE on its website](#), and in most cases, we counted a submission as the requirement being "met." However, when DESE found a submission did not meet their requirements, we labeled it as "not met" or "partially met," based on DESE's assessment of BPS' performance.⁹

Table 3. SIP Performance Summary

Requirements	#	%
Met	21	75%
Partially Met	1	4%
Not Met	5	18%
Undetermined	1	4%

8 Graduation rates increased statewide during this period, and some graduating classes had requirements waived in response to the pandemic. Additionally, BPS had some issues in accurately reporting graduation rates and accounting for student withdrawals, which became part of the SIP work to address reporting deficiencies. DESE's last assessment said that BPS had significantly improved its graduation data integrity.

9 A [May 2024 memo from Acting Commissioner Johnston](#) provided the only publicly shared assessment of BPS' SIP submissions. We rely on the comments from the Acting Commissioner to inform our assessment of whether a requirement was met.

Table 4. 2022 SIP Performance Evaluation

SIP Category	Measure	Evaluation	Notes
1. Student Safety	1.1 Use an improved complaint resolution system by Aug 15, 2022.	Met	
	1.2 Respond promptly to DESE's Problem Resolution System complaints.	Not Met	Commissioner notes ongoing concerns with the "timeliness and thoroughness" of BPS' response to PRS complaints
	1.3 Commission an independent safety audit by Aug 15, 2022.	Met	
	1.4 Hire a Coordinator of Problem Resolution by Sep 8, 2022.	Met	
2. Special Education	2.1 Engage experts with a track record in urban schools to assess SPED services by Aug 15, 2022.	Met	
	2.2 Provide DESE a plan for SPED leadership roles by Aug 15, 2022.	Met	
	2.3 Develop and train on updated SPED policy/procedure manuals by Aug 15, 2022.	Met	
	2.4 Establish a McKinley Schools Working Group to implement recommendations of the McKinley Intervention Team by Aug 15, 2022.	Not Met	Working group created but the Commissioner's memo notes that the outputs did not reflect the charge of the working group to implement intervention team recommendations.
	2.5 Post for senior leadership for special education by Oct 15, 2022.	Met	
	2.6 Release a SPED inclusion policy by Nov 1, 2022.	Met - Delayed	Completed in October 2023
3. Transportation	3.1 Implement operational reforms from May 2022 Bus Driver agreements.	Met	
	3.2 Achieve 95%+ on-time arrival rates each month.	Not Met	Mayor Wu's Substack post documented bus arrival times for 2024.
	3.3 Ensure 99% of buses arrive within 15 minutes of school start.	Not Met	Mayor Wu's Substack post
	3.4 Report on-time rates monthly starting Aug 2022.	Met	
	3.5 Conduct a diagnostic evaluation of the transportation system by Aug 15, 2022.	Met	
4. Facilities	4.1 Use the Building Dashboard for bathroom facility reviews and renovations by Aug 15, 2022. Renovate bathrooms in 15 schools during FY23.	Met - Delayed	14 Bathrooms completed by December 2023, original deadline was June 2023.
	4.2 Create a preventive/deferred maintenance plan by Oct 1, 2022.	Met	
	4.3 By December 31, 2023, create and implement a comprehensive, long-term master facilities plan, incorporating the recommendations of the Facilities Conditions Assessment, expected to be complete by the beginning of SY23-24.	Partially Met	DESE found that the submitted Long-Term Master Facilities Plan missed several key components: timeline, budget, enrollment projections, and clarity on the number of schools needed.
5. Multilingual Learners (MLL)	5.1 Develop a system ensuring MLL students receive appropriate instruction by Aug 15, 2022.	Not Met	The DESE Commissioner noted continued challenges in BPS in providing appropriate, grade-level instruction and language learning support
	5.2 Complete a Strategic Plan for MLLs by Aug 15, 2022, and present it to the School Committee by Oct 12, 2022.	Met	
	5.3 Report on compliance with agreements with the U.S. Department of Justice.	Met	

6. Transformation Schools	6.1 Produce an equity analysis for funding by Dec 1, 2022.	Met	Analysis was conducted, but Commissioner's memo notes actions to address "root causes" to inequity in transformation schools have not been enacted by BPS.
	6.2 Consolidate transformation school plans into robust Quality School Plans by Oct 1, 2022.	Met	
	6.3 Provide quarterly updates on the development and progress of Quality School Plans.	Met	
7. Data	7.1 Hire an independent auditor to analyze data by Aug 15, 2022.	Met	
	7.2 Publish revised withdrawal procedures by Sep 8, 2022.	Met	
	7.3 Launch a Data Working Group by Oct 1, 2022.	Undetermined	Working group was launched, but unclear whether the group met and completed its charge to monitor and report on data quality.
	7.4 Use auditor recommendations to plan investments for data quality improvements by FY24.	Met	DESE noted the improvement of data quality at BPS.

BPS succeeded in meeting a majority of the 2022 SIP requirements. Less than 20% of the requirements were not met, an improvement from the performance on the 2020 MOU. However, as stated above, outcome measurements were never established for the SIP, and the majority of the requirements were administrative actions (e.g., plans, audits, hiring, operational reforms, working groups, and reports). The one area where specific outcome targets were named and where BPS did not meet the target was on-time bus transportation. Acting Commissioner Russell Johnston¹⁰ reported on BPS' progress on the SIP in a [May 2024 memo](#), highlighting incomplete submissions for the long-term master facilities plan and deficiencies with the McKinley school working group's deliverables and implementation of the strategic plan for multilingual learners, insufficient responsiveness to parental complaints, and a lack of action on "root causes" for transformation school underperformance (Johnston, 2024).

¹⁰ Commissioner Riley stepped down in March 2024 and was replaced by Acting Commissioner Russell Johnston, who had previously overseen Boston's implementation of the MOU and SIP for DESE.

4. MEASURING THE IMPACT OF STATE INTERVENTION: OUTCOMES EVALUATION

While the agreements evaluated above focused primarily on inputs, the reason for the agreements was to improve outcomes for the over 45,000 students enrolled in Boston Public Schools. The success of the state’s intervention should be judged on whether students and schools made progress. While we recognize that the impact of interventions may take more time to shift student outcomes, we believe this kind of reporting provides a gauge on the current effectiveness of the intervention to inform what areas still need attention from both DESE and BPS.

The 2020 district review, which prompted DESE’s initial intervention via the MOU, highlighted the challenges in BPS in addressing the needs of its students. It is important to acknowledge that the state’s intervention in BPS aligned with the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted learning nationwide, exacerbating existing inequities and contributing to declines in student achievement across all districts, including BPS. However, while pandemic-related challenges affected educational outcomes broadly, the data show that BPS students—particularly Black and Latino students, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students—have experienced steeper declines and have yet to show signs of significant recovery (Appendix A). These trends suggest that while the pandemic played a role, systemic challenges within BPS have continued to hinder student progress, underscoring the need for sustained accountability and targeted interventions.

Below, we look at where BPS was before intervention (typically in 2019) and compare where it is today (typically in 2024) on key outcome measures related to each of the core areas in the SIP and MOU (Table 6). We include multiple measures where possible to provide a more holistic view of the outcomes in each intervention area. We also provide a summary of outcomes and issue a combined evaluation rating of the level of progress (Table 5).

Table 5. State Intervention Outcomes Evaluation Summary

Intervention Category	Overall Assessment	Rationale
Student Safety	Decreased Performance	Feelings of school safety and discipline rates did not change during the intervention period. High rates of chronic absenteeism, in particular for low-income and Hispanic students, persist and are above 2019 levels.
Transportation	Decreased Performance	Historic low first-day performance, on-time arrival rates are still consistently below the 95% MOU/SIP target.
Facilities	Some Improvement	BPS does not have a detailed Long-term Facilities Plan with 5-10 year budget estimates, named projects, or timelines for school renovations and consolidations. Building utilization rates are lower in 2024 than 2019. However, there are at least 7 potential upcoming renovations, which will increase access for BPS students to renovated buildings above the current 5% of students, and there has been some progress in articulating a framework and process for facilities decisions.
Special Education	Decreased Performance	Academic outcomes for students with disabilities got worse, except for graduation rates. Rates of placement into restrictive (sub-separate) placements remain above state targets.
Multilingual Learners	Decreased Performance	Academic outcomes for MLLs got worse, except for graduation rates. One new dual-language program was added, but overall access to dual-language is low (6% of schools serving less than 10% of BPS student population).
Transformation Schools	Decreased Performance	More BPS schools were in the bottom 10% of schools in the state, proficiency rates of the transformation schools declined, and higher-need students were more concentrated in those schools than prior to 2019.
Equitable Student Outcomes	Decreased Performance	Gaps widened between low-income and non-low-income students, and Black and Latino student outcomes declined on all measures except for graduation rates. White and non-low-income students are performing at or above pre-pandemic averages on MCAS assessments while recovery is minimal for Black and Latino students, and Low-income students (Appendix A).

Table 6. State Intervention Outcomes Evaluation

Intervention Category	Performance Metric	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention	Change	Performance Improvement?	Notes
Student Safety & Engagement	Increase in families and students reporting overall safety at school (BPS Climate Survey)	64%	64%	0%	No Change	BPS Panorama Survey , Compared 2022 to 2024, due to no 2019 data.
	Decrease in Chronic Absenteeism (missing 10% or more of the school year)	25%	35%	9%	Declined Performance	While BPS has decreased chronic absenteeism since a high of 42% in 2022, the rates remain significantly above 2019 levels. Chronic absenteeism rates for Hispanic students and low-income students are still above 40%.
	Reduction of suspensions	4%	4%	0%	No Change	DESE Discipline Data report for 2024 and 2019
Transportation	On-time bus arrival of 95% or higher	87%	90%	3%	No Change	BPS has consistently not met the on-time bus arrival metric set by the state from the first MOU (95%). Data from Mayor Wu's Substack (2019 and 2024),
	First Day of School On-time Bus Arrival	51%	34%	-17%	Declined Performance	Wu Substack (2019 & 2024-25)
Facilities	Increase in the share of BPS students attending a fully renovated school building	2%	5%	3%	Improved Performance	In 2019 only two BPS schools were renovated in the last decade. By 2024, three additional projects (Quincy Upper, BAA, and Horace Mann-Edwards) were completed, reaching a total of 5% of BPS' students. More new builds are scheduled / underway at seven additional BPS schools according to the SIP-required Long-term Facilities Plan .
	Increase in BPS' overall facility utilization rate	89%	83%	-6%	Declined Performance	The overall utilization rate is the enrollment divided by the amount of total building student capacity in BPS as indicated in BPS' long-term facilities data .

Special Education	Reduction in share of BPS students with disabilities in a substantially separate placement	30%	30%	0%	No Change	DESE School Profiles , Data is from 2019 (pre) and 2023 (post). BPS is in the middle of rolling out the SIP-required inclusion plan which is scheduled to be complete in Fall 2028. The implementation of this plan should reduce sub-separate placement.
	Improvement in MCAS for SWD - 3-8 ELA	10%	6%	-4%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Improvement in MCAS for SWD - 10 ELA	13%	11%	-2%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Improvement in MCAS for SWD - 3-8 Math	10%	7%	-3%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Improvement in MCAS for SWD - 10 Math	14%	7%	-7%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Increase in graduation rates for SWD	54%	61%	7%	Improved Performance	DESE School Profiles , 2023 the last Graduating Class reported
	Increase in the share of students with disabilities enrolling in postsecondary education	51%	33%	-18%	Declined Performance	DESE School Profiles , 2023 the last Graduating Class reported
Multilingual Learners	Increase in share of schools with dual language programs	5%	6%	1%	Improved Performance	One dual language program was added (Sarah Greenwood) from 2019-2024. More programs were announced to be opened in Fall 2025 , including 4 new dual language programs.
	Improvement in MCAS proficiency for MLL - 3-8 ELA	15%	4%	-11%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Improvement in MCAS proficiency for MLL - 10 ELA	13%	6%	-7%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Improvement in MCAS proficiency for MLL - 3-8 Math	13%	6%	-7%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Improvement in MCAS proficiency for MLL - 10 Math	17%	8%	-9%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Increase in graduation rates for MLL	63%	69%	6%	Improved Performance	DESE School Profiles , 2023 the last Graduating Class reported
	Increase in the share of MLL enrolling in postsecondary education	47%	30%	-17%	Declined Performance	DESE School Profiles , 2023 the last Graduating Class reported

Transformation Schools	Decrease in the # of BPS schools in "Transformation" (bottom 10% of DESE Accountability index)	34	36	2	Declined Performance	DESE School Profiles, Accountability Report
	Decrease in share of BPS students in Transformation schools (bottom 10%)	33%	35%	2%	Declined Performance	DESE School Profiles, Accountability Report & Enrollment for 2019 and 2024
	Increase MCAS proficiency in BPS Transformation schools (bottom 10%) - 3-8 ELA	21%	11%	-10%	Declined Performance	Analysis of MCAS data from School Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Increase MCAS proficiency in BPS Transformation schools (bottom 10%) - 3-8 Math	17%	8%	-9%	Declined Performance	Analysis of MCAS data from School Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Increase MCAS proficiency in BPS Transformation schools (bottom 10%) - 10 ELA	17%	18%	1%	Improved Performance	Analysis of MCAS data from School Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Increase MCAS proficiency in BPS Transformation schools (bottom 10%) - 10 Math	17%	11%	-6%	Declined Performance	Analysis of MCAS data from School Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Decrease in the share of high-need students in Transformation Schools	86%	93%	7%	Declined Performance	High-needs students became more concentrated in BPS' Transformation Schools from 2019-2024. In SY24, 93% of students in the Transformation Schools were classified as having high needs compared to 86% in SY19.

Equitable Student Outcomes	Increase in Black student achievement on MCAS - 3-8 ELA	25%	16%	-9%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Increase in Black student achievement on MCAS - 10 ELA	34%	34%	0%	No Change	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Increase in Black student achievement on MCAS - 3-8 Math	21%	14%	-7%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Increase in Black student achievement on MCAS - 10 Math	35%	25%	-10%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Increase in Latino student achievement on MCAS - 3-8 ELA	27%	16%	-11%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Increase in Latino student achievement on MCAS - 10 ELA	34%	30%	-4%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Increase in Latino student achievement on MCAS - 3-8 Math	24%	15%	-9%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Increase in Latino student achievement on MCAS - 10 Math	34%	25%	-9%	Declined Performance	DESE District Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Increase in graduation rates for Black students	72%	78%	6%	Improved Performance	DESE School Profiles, 2023 the last Graduating Class reported
	Increase in graduation rates for Latino students	67%	78%	11%	Improved Performance	DESE School Profiles, 2023 the last Graduating Class reported
	Increase in the share of Black students enrolling in postsecondary education	63%	50%	-13%	Declined Performance	DESE School Profiles, 2023 the last Graduating Class reported
	Increase in the share of Latino students enrolling in postsecondary education	53%	40%	-13%	Declined Performance	DESE School Profiles, 2023 the last Graduating Class reported
	Closure of gap between low-income and non-low-income students - 3-8 ELA	27%	38%	11%	Declined Performance	Analysis of MCAS data from School Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Closure of gap between low-income and non-low-income students - 3-8 Math	27%	39%	12%	Declined Performance	Analysis of MCAS data from School Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Closure of gap between low-income and non-low-income students - 10 ELA	29%	33%	4%	Declined Performance	Analysis of MCAS data from School Profiles (2019 & 2024)
	Closure of gap between low-income and non-low-income students - 10 Math	27%	38%	11%	Declined Performance	Analysis of MCAS data from School Profiles (2019 & 2024)

Overall, **the evaluation shows that to date, there has been very little improvement in outcome measures associated with the state intervention in BPS.** Student achievement decreased significantly across most student groups, and achievement gaps widened (Appendix A). In addition, while graduation rates increased over the period for most students, rates of enrollment in postsecondary education decreased across student groups. Furthermore, despite the focus on transformation schools in the state's intervention, BPS has a higher share of students and a higher share of high-needs students in transformation schools than before the intervention. Worse still, performance in these schools has not improved, on average, since 2019 (Appendix A). That is not to say there are not bright spots of progress in individual schools. However, the fact remains that Boston still has significant issues with both the segregation of high-need students in low-performing schools and the capacity to support students to meet grade-level standards in those schools. **The persistent underperformance of over a third of BPS schools serving over 16,000 students was a primary reason for the state's intervention in 2020, and it appears to have gotten worse.**

5. PATHWAYS FOR CONTINUED PROGRESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

For decades, **BPS has struggled to ensure equitable access to a high-quality education, particularly for Black and Latino students, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students.** Numerous reports over the years documented the systemic failures in special education¹¹, transportation, facilities, and chronically low-performing schools. However, meaningful, large-scale progress in addressing these issues remained limited until the state's intervention brought heightened urgency and accountability through the MOU and the SIP.

As Massachusetts education leaders evaluate the next steps, it is clear that **ending state oversight without a structured plan for sustained accountability would be premature.** At this critical juncture, DESE and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education must determine how to ensure continued progress, with a stronger focus on **measurable improvements in student and school outcomes.** The options include:

1. Ending State Intervention at the Conclusion of the SIP

- DESE would **conclude additional oversight** of BPS in June 2025, transitioning full responsibility for improvement efforts and accountability to district and city leadership.
- While this would allow BPS to fully own its strategic direction, there is a **high risk that structural inequities and student underperformance will persist**, given the district's historical track record of failing to initiate or sustain reforms without external pressure.
- **Without continued state oversight, there would be no enforceable mechanism to ensure progress on critical issues impacting student outcomes and limiting equitable access to high-quality education**, such as special education, multilingual learning, school transformation, facilities planning, or transportation.

¹¹ In 2009, [the Council of Great City Schools issued a report on the overuse of restrictive SPED placements in BPS](#) in violation of IDEA principles and the need for more aggressive steps to promote inclusion across BPS schools. These recommendations were largely ignored until the SIP when once again the Council of Great City Schools was asked to issue a report on BPS' SPED policies and practices. With the SIP enforcing implementation of the report, BPS took action, 14 years later.

2. Negotiating a Third Improvement Agreement Focused on Student and School Outcomes

- A third agreement could **shift the focus from compliance-driven mandates to the acceleration of student and school outcomes**, ensuring that progress is tied to clear results rather than administrative actions.
- This model would require:
 - **Clear and measurable targets for student achievement and postsecondary/workforce readiness** for Black and Latino students, multilingual learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities.
 - **Expanded investments** in research-backed interventions such as **high-dosage tutoring, evidence-based literacy instruction, and dual-language program expansion**.
 - **A clear definition of what constitutes a high-quality BPS school, including specific academic outcomes and explicit, time-bound goals to expand the number of high-quality schools serving high-need neighborhoods** through school transformation or expanding existing high-quality school models.
 - **A DESE-appointed, independent accountability lead** responsible for regularly publicly tracking progress to BESE and the Boston School Committee, spotlighting district policies and practices that are barriers to progress, and ensuring transparency on the implementation of the agreement.
 - **Consequences for failure to meet progress benchmarks**, ensuring that BPS remains accountable for improving student learning outcomes—not just procedural reforms.

3. Escalating State Intervention with an “Underperforming District” Designation

- If BPS leadership resists continued accountability, DESE should **formally designate BPS as an “underperforming district,”** triggering a **state-mandated district improvement plan** with goals, timelines, and intervention strategies.
- This would provide **greater accountability mechanisms and authority to require specific improvement strategies**, ensuring that city and state leaders act decisively to accelerate reforms in the district’s lowest-performing schools and in areas where BPS has repeatedly failed to address deficiencies.
- This option would provide **the most structured and enforceable plan for addressing persistent achievement gaps, but it could also generate significant political challenges** that could impede implementation.
- **If sufficient progress is not made on the mandated improvement plan, then DESE could act to place the district into receivership** and take full authority over district operations and governance.

Recommendation: Pursue Option 2: Continue State Oversight through an Outcomes-focused Improvement Agreement.

Ending the SIP in June 2025 with no framework for continued accountability is not a viable option. Massachusetts law makes it clear **the state’s “enforceable duty” to intervene to protect students’ access to quality, public education** (Schneider, 2007). BPS remains a deeply inequitable school system, where the vast majority of students are not meeting grade-level standards (Appendix A). There is little evidence of pandemic recovery in BPS for the most vulnerable students, and more BPS schools are in the bottom 10% of the state’s accountability system in 2024 than in 2019.¹² This has occurred at a time of [rapid increases in spending within BPS and the hiring of personnel, while enrollment has declined significantly](#) (Austin, 2025). Undoubtedly, systemic problems continue to limit access to high-quality education for Boston students. For these reasons, **while exiting the SIP may be the most politically desirable for all parties, it should be a non-starter.**

To continue to make progress, DESE and BPS should **establish a third improvement agreement explicitly focused on improving the lowest-performing schools and student academic outcomes.** The agreement will need to be **structured and managed differently than the first two agreements**, which focused primarily on administrative compliance. **The third agreement should include measurable targets and progress benchmarks and create greater accountability for change through the empowerment of a DESE-appointed accountability lead** to monitor and enforce the improvement agreement. For the SIP and the MOU, accountability was conducted mostly behind closed doors, which prevented any public scrutiny of progress. When goals were unmet, delayed, or partially completed (e.g., bathroom renovations, bus transportation, the facilities, and special education plans), there was little mention of it from DESE or BPS. **This sweeping under the rug of the state’s duty to hold the district accountable weakens the power of the agreement and is disingenuous to BPS students and families who have waited generations for change.**

¹² In addition a larger share of BPS students are now in schools in the bottom 10% of schools in the state. As of 2024, there are 36 schools, serving approximately 35% of BPS students.

6. CONCLUSION

This June, DESE faces a critical decision: whether to conclude its oversight of BPS or to take further action to ensure long-overdue improvements in student outcomes and school quality. While the 2020 MOU and the 2022 SIP brought needed attention to operational and administrative shortcomings, they have failed to drive meaningful improvements in student achievement or postsecondary readiness. The data show that outcomes for Black and Latino students, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students have worsened in many key areas, including literacy, math proficiency, and postsecondary enrollment. Meanwhile, the number of schools classified as “transformation schools” has increased, leaving a third of BPS students, over 90% of whom are high-need, concentrated in the lowest-performing schools in the state.

These findings make clear that **ending DESE’s intervention at this point would be premature and would risk leaving yet another generation of students behind.** Historically, Boston’s families—particularly those from marginalized communities—have had to find solutions to the failures of BPS, whether through METCO, charter schools, private education, or relocation to neighboring cities or towns. The state’s intervention represented a rare opportunity to disrupt this pattern and ensure that BPS provides a high-quality education to all students. However, the progress made so far has been incremental and insufficient. A return to business as usual would signal that accountability for student outcomes is optional, reinforcing a decades-long cycle of unmet promises and unfulfilled plans.

Mayor Michelle Wu acknowledged this reality when, in response to DESE’s 2020 district review, as a then City Councilor, she stated, **“We are past the point of small fixes, or piloting programs here or there”** (Vaznis, 2020). That statement remains just as true today. If DESE walks away now, the intervention will have been yet another short-term initiative that failed to shift the academic trajectory of BPS students. **A third improvement agreement can move BPS beyond the cycle of bureaucratic compliance.** This means setting clear and ambitious goals for closing academic achievement gaps, expanding access to high-quality schools for high-need students, investing in research-backed strategies such as high-dosage tutoring and evidence-based literacy instruction, and holding BPS accountable for implementing meaningful reforms in special education, multilingual learning, and school transformation. It also requires greater transparency, with regular public reporting to both BESE and the Boston School Committee on progress, and a stronger role for external accountability.

Ultimately, **BPS students cannot afford another failed reform effort. The state’s role in Boston must be one of urgency, commitment, and accountability—not of half-measures that allow deeply rooted inequities to persist.** If DESE walks away now, it will have wasted a rare window of opportunity for real change. With a more rigorous, outcome-driven approach, the state can help ensure that BPS delivers on its fundamental responsibility: to provide every student with the high-quality education they deserve.

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APPENDIX A

Figure 1

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

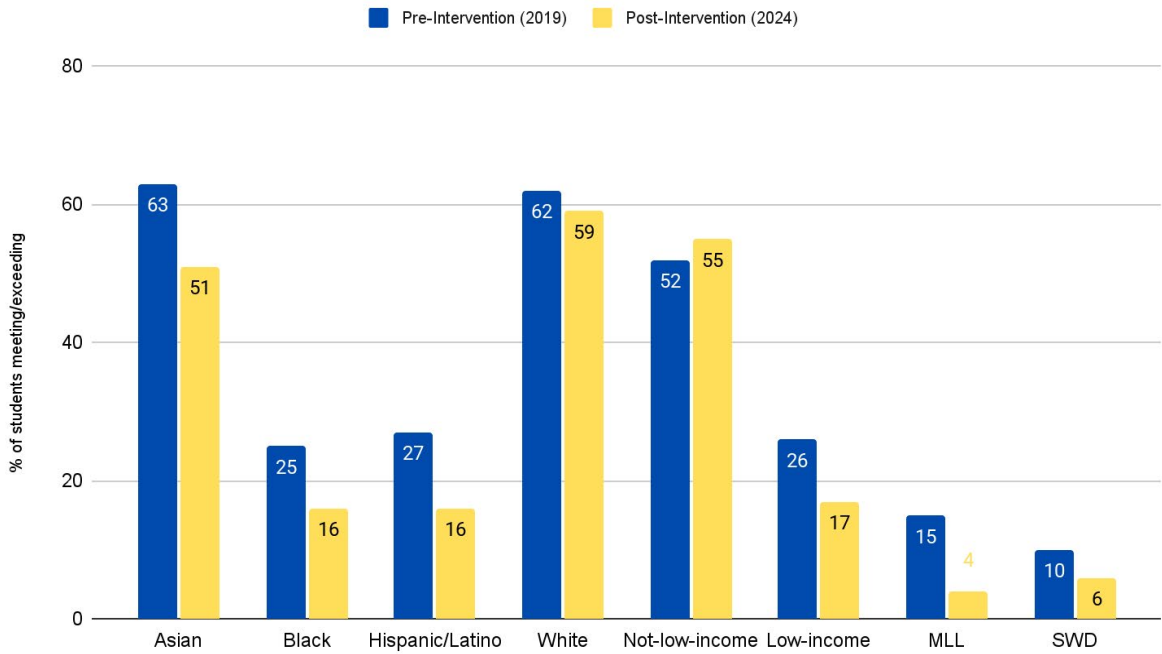


Figure 2

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

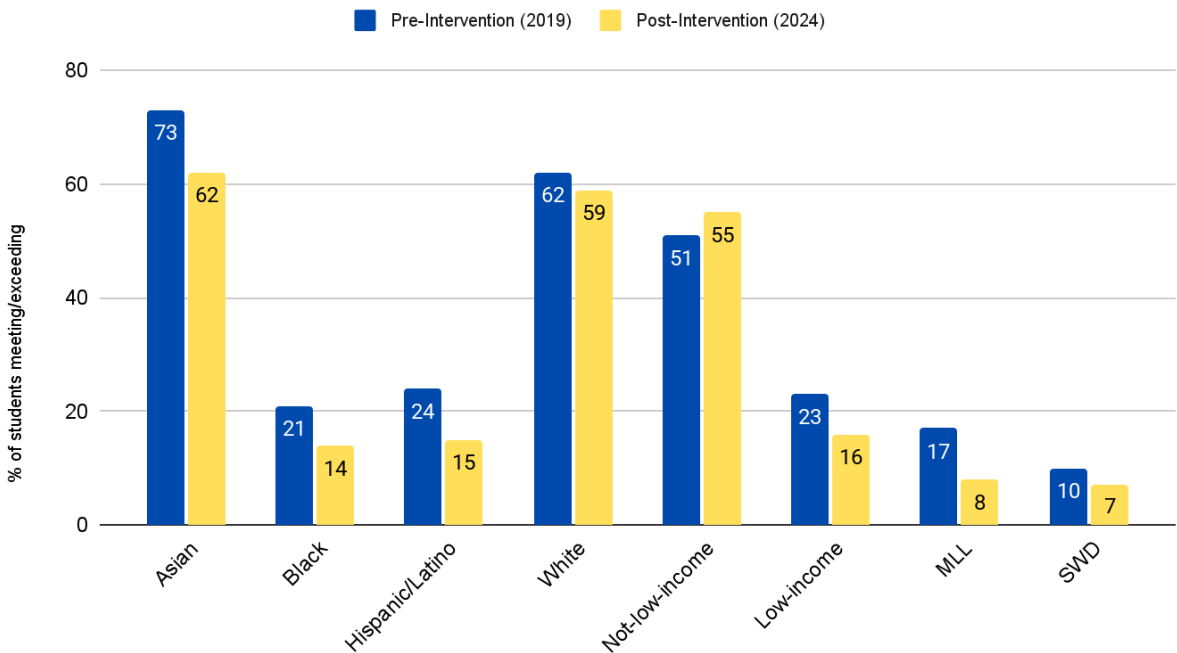


Figure 3

BPS ELA 10 Proficiency: Pre v. Post Intervention

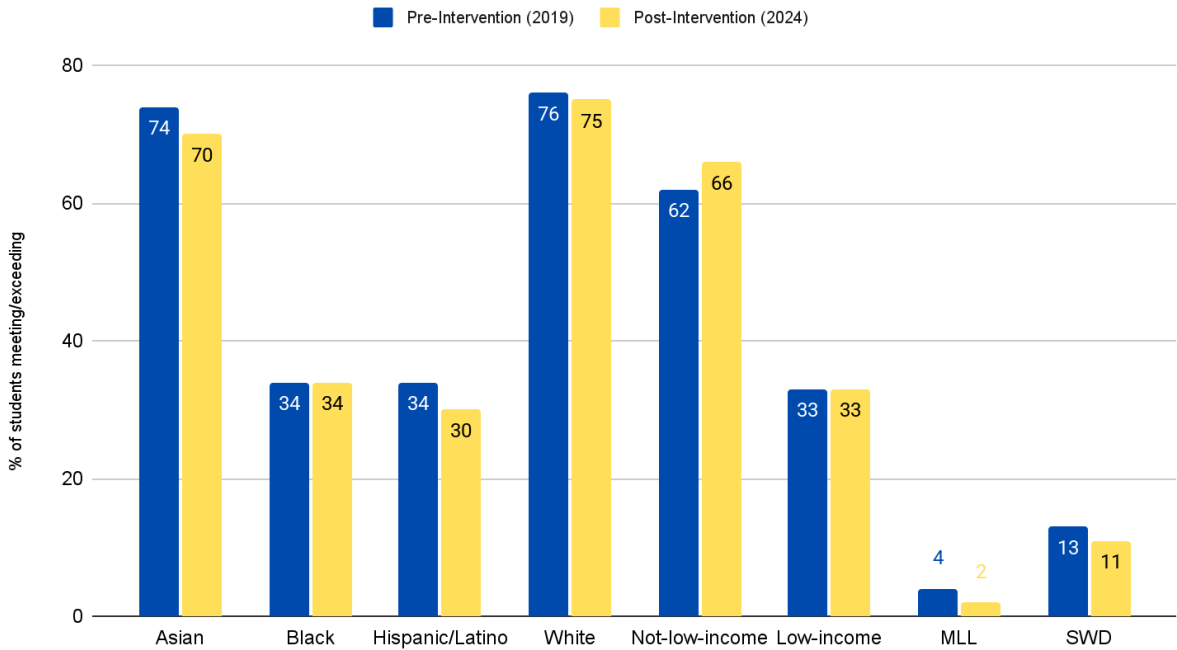


Figure 4

BPS Math 10 Proficiency: Pre v. Post Intervention

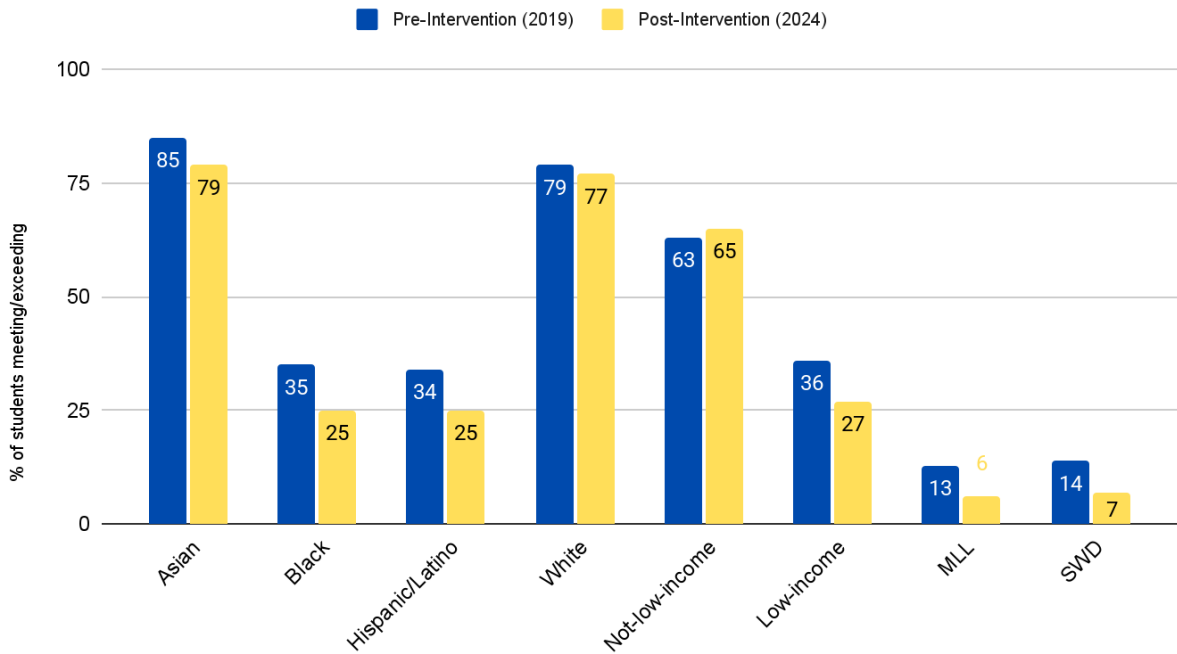


Figure 5.

BPS Math 3-8 MCAS Proficiency, 2017-2024

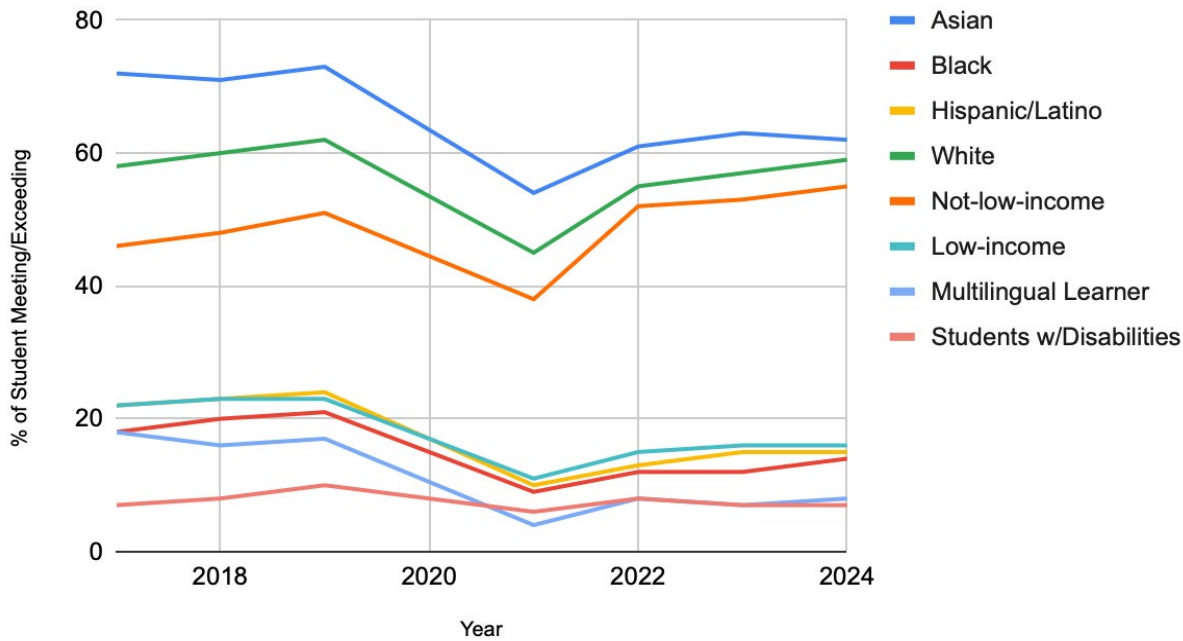


Figure 6

BPS Math 3-8 MCAS Proficiency, 2017-2024

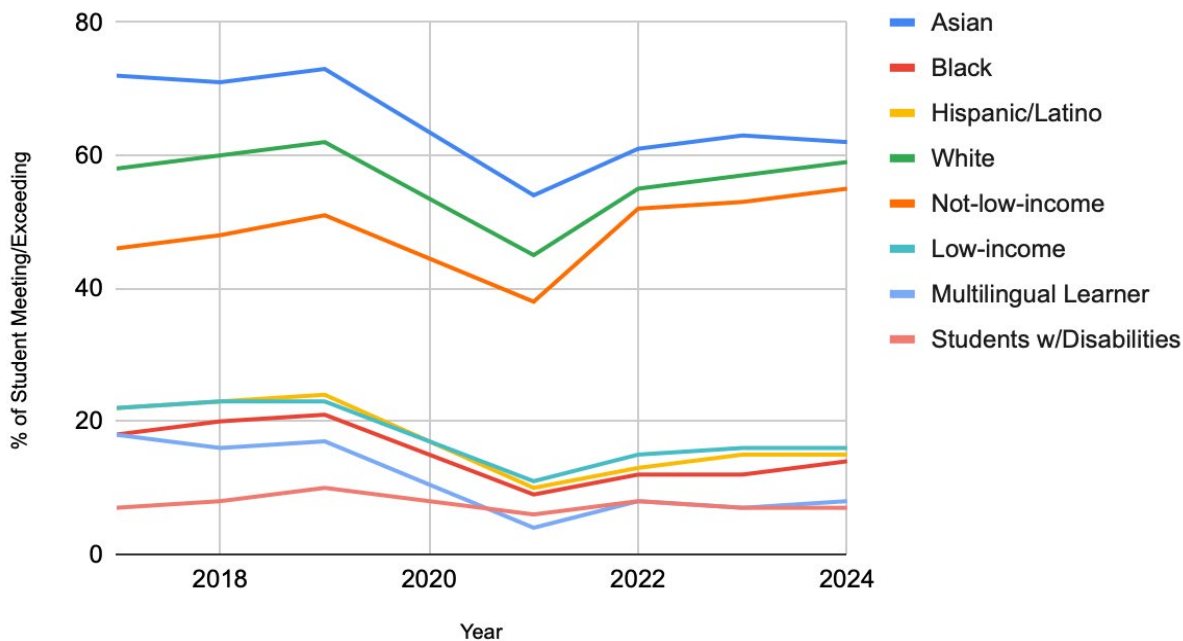


Figure 7

BPS ELA 10 MCAS Proficiency, 2017-2024

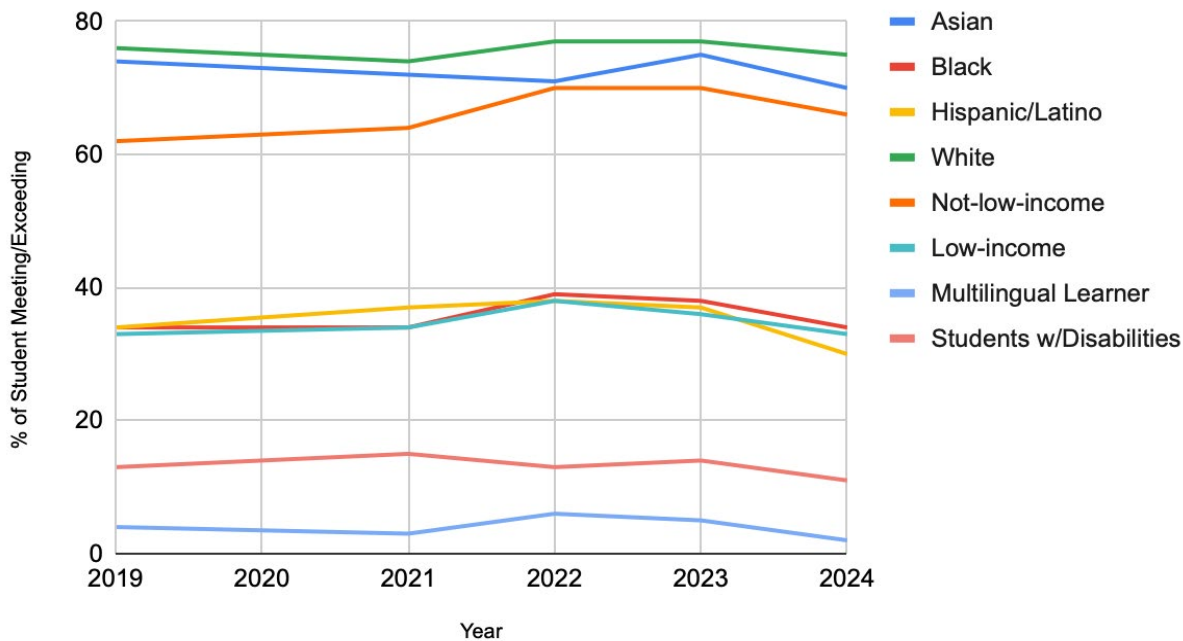


Figure 8

BPS Math 10 MCAS Proficiency, 2017-2024

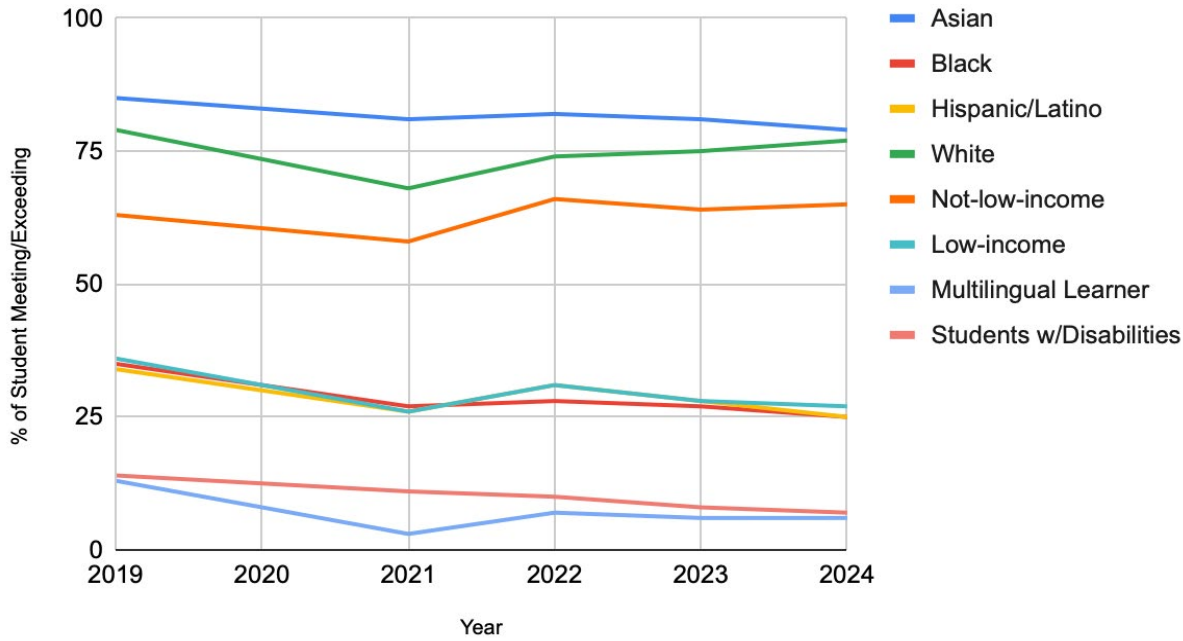


Figure 9

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	

Figure 10

BPS Transformation School Proficiency Rate: Pre v. Post Intervention

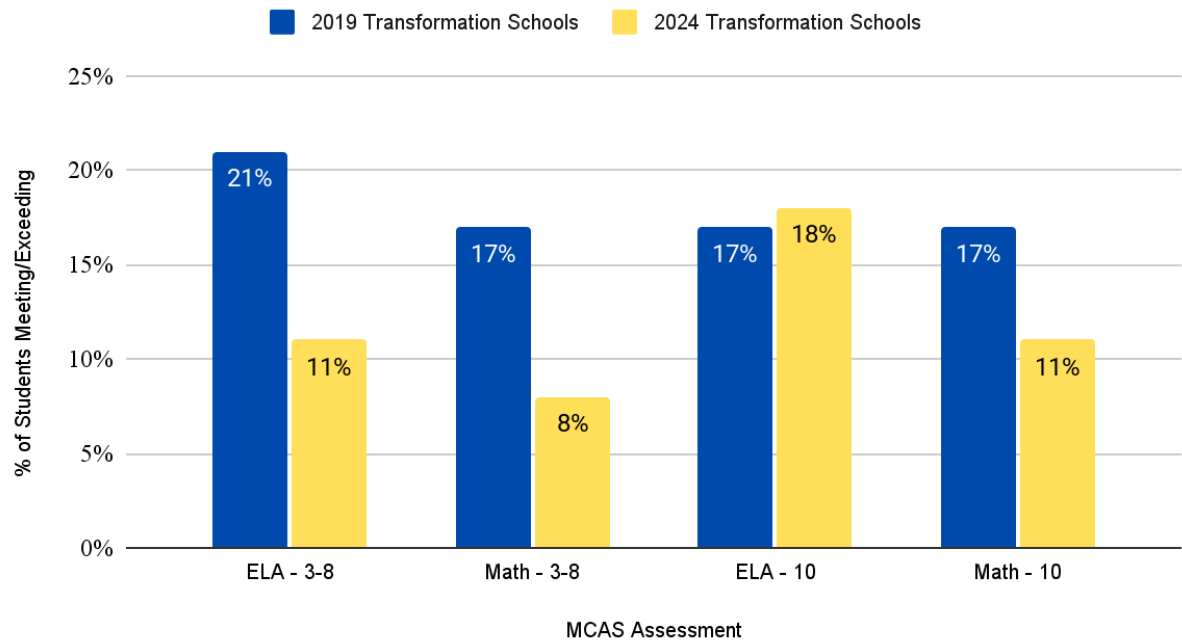


Figure 11

Change in Postsecondary Readiness Outcomes: Pre v. Post Intervention

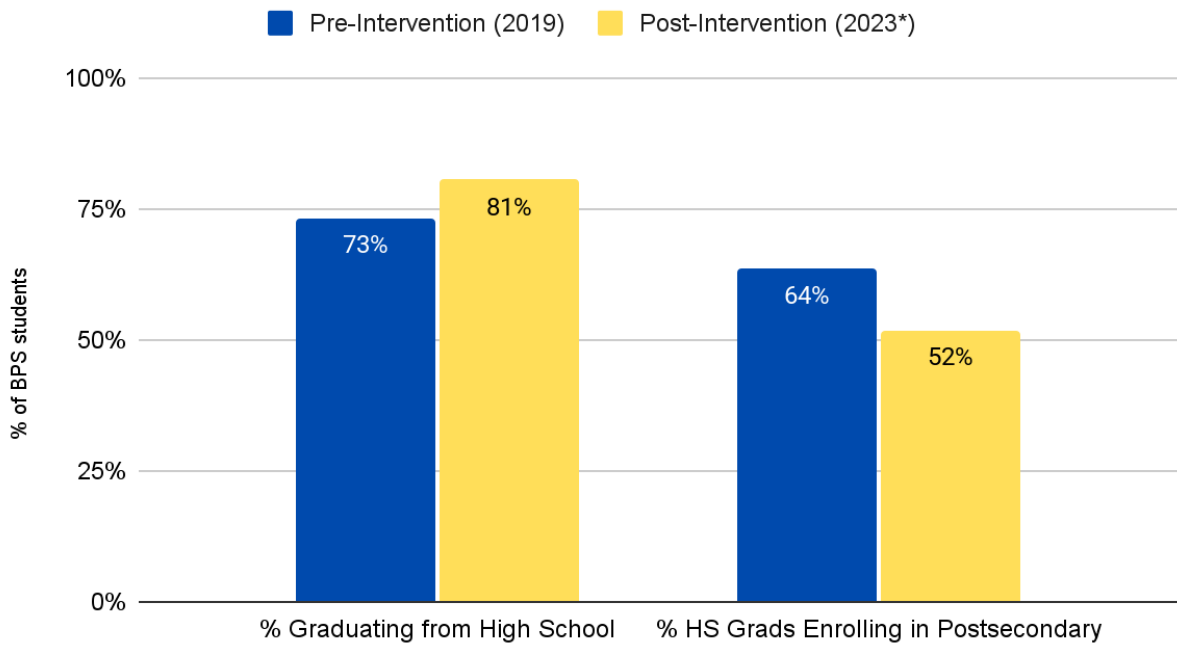


Figure 12

BPS Change in Spending, Enrollment and Achievement Since 2019

