



PIONEER INSTITUTE

PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH

May 10, 2022

Mayor Michelle Wu
1 City Hall Square
Suite 500
Boston, MA 02201-2013

Dear Mayor Wu,

The City of Boston's political class has a longstanding habit of sweeping intractable problems under the rug. Your tenure offers an opportunity for fresh thinking on important policy issues, and I write you for a second time about the urgent need to reform the Boston Public Schools (BPS).

Understanding your initial stated opposition to a receivership, I am sharing for your consideration a less comprehensive and more targeted intervention in the interest of arresting what is increasingly looking like an untenable decline in Boston, the birthplace of public schools in America.

Unacceptable academic services

As you know, [the 2020 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary \(DESE\) audit](#) of the BPS revealed shocking and, in some cases, systemic failures:

- Barely half of students (53 percent) graduate from BPS high schools, excluding the exam schools (which enroll many students previously attending private, parochial, and charter schools, as well as the METCO program).
- More than 30 percent of BPS students attend schools ranked in the bottom 10 percent statewide.
- The district has no clear, consistent strategy for improving these schools.
- The achievement gap between Black and white students in recent years has doubled, and performance among Latino students is even worse than among Black students.
- When students take statewide exams, most are being tested on materials they have not been taught because the district has not aligned lesson plans with state standards.
- District failures to serve students with disabilities and/or language barriers have necessitated state and federal action.
- The high turnover of superintendents (Boston has embarked on its sixth search in 10 years) has left the central office in disarray and in need of wholesale restructuring.

No longer inadequate funding

Pioneer has long agreed that appropriate funding is crucial, but it is no longer the problem with BPS. The district [spent more than \\$25,000 per student in 2020](#), the last year for which DESE data in-district expenditures per pupil are available. SY21-22 student expenditures are certainly in excess of \$26,000 — that's a 30 percent increase since 2016, [when BPS was spending](#)

[\\$20,000 per student](#) and the superintendent and Boston Teachers Union officials claimed that education alternatives like charter public schools weren't needed. "Give us funding, and we can fix the problems," they said. But there has been no improvement; as the 2020 audit demonstrates, things have only gotten worse.

Yet union officials continue to make diversionary assertions that the "state has no grounds to say it should run the Boston schools that *it has starved for so long*." Some district elected officials make the same claim. The BPS is funded more generously than most other districts in the state, and Massachusetts schools are among the best-funded in the country.

Leadership failures and loss of the public trust

Most teachers worked with deep commitment throughout the pandemic. These teachers were bright lights and champions for students during a troubled time for the city and the state. The central office, unfortunately, did not rise to the occasion. The central office needs sustained reform, to address both the performance failures cited in the 2020 state audit and its failure to uphold the public trust. For example, it [overstated district graduation rates in five of the last seven years](#), underestimated the number of English language learners the [district isn't adequately serving](#), chronically failed to provide [basic busing services](#), botched the calculation of student grade point averages two years ago, [committed errors in offers of invitations to the city's sought-after exam schools](#), allowed the superintendent to work [without a valid license](#), and created hardships this year with significantly [delayed school assignments](#). (Again, these problems are not caused by a lack of funding; for example, Boston spends more on a per-student basis for transportation than most every district in the country.)

The district's leadership challenges extend to the school committee, which was rebuked by a Federal District Court judge for intentional deception and [the withholding of racially charged text messages](#) sent during a committee meeting last year. Judge William Young then, for the first time in his 36 years on the bench, took the highly unusual step of [withdrawing his opinion](#) in the high-profile case. Separately, the chairperson of the committee muttered [derogatory comments](#) about Asian names into a live microphone.

In the last two weeks, we have seen, with the investigation of the Mission Hill School and [widespread reports of bullying and violence](#), further evidence of systemic failure by BPS leaders to monitor facts on the ground, and to create a safe and academically compelling set of services for thousands of school children.

It is reasonable to expect the 2022 state audit will confirm the litany of issues underscored in the scathing 2020 audit. These are well-known, longstanding problems. The state Office of Educational Quality and Accountability's critical 200-page audit from 2004-05 identified many of the same systemic failures outlined in DESE's 291-page 2020 audit.

If the BPS were improving, patience might be warranted. But things are getting worse, not better. The only accountability in the system right now is on the part of the parents, who are moving their kids out of the district at a pace once unimaginable. Two decades ago, BPS served 61,000 students; in 2018 56,000. Today, the system serves almost 46,000 students, an 18%

decline in just four years. Without intervention, one wonders what will be left of the BPS in another decade.

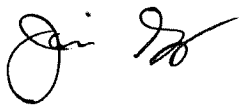
A Path Forward

We believe a real dialogue between your office and the state education department is necessary. We urge you to work together with the state education department to:

1. Appoint a hybrid school committee comprised of state departmental and mayoral appointments in order to address widespread mistrust with and a lack of accountability on that committee.
2. Appoint a receiver-superintendent for a term of six years, stipulating the specific actions the receiver-superintendent would take. Such an arrangement would make the collaborative intervention time-limited and, importantly, given the last decade's ever-changing leadership, ensure the kind of stability the district needs to get back on its feet.
3. Set a specific workplan for the receiver-superintendent, with the following focuses:
 - a. Through 2024, (i) right-size the district's central office, which on a pro-rated basis employs far more people than other districts, to free up tens of millions of dollars that can be redirected to Boston's classrooms; (ii) align the district's and various schools' curricula with the state standards; and (iii) draft a districtwide improvement plan to deal with Boston's schools that are in the bottom 10 percent statewide in terms of performance.
 - b. From 2024 to 2026, (i) implement the improvement plan for the first half of the target schools and (ii) learn from those experiences.
 - c. From 2026 to 2028, (i) implement the improvement plan for the second half of the target schools and (ii) focus on building a culture of accountability within the BPS central office in order to create the pathway to hand decision-making power back to the district.

This is a time-limited and strategic intervention. The targets of the receivership would be the central office and the schools serving students in the bottom decile of performance statewide. Of course, BPS faces numerous challenges that go beyond the mandates suggested here. But none of those challenges can be corrected without the stability, coherence, coordination, attraction of talent, and urgency this type of intervention would make a reality.

Thank you for your consideration,



Jim Stergios

Cc: Jeffrey Riley, Commissioner, Mass. Department of Elementary & Secondary Education
Mike Firestone, Mayor's Office, Chief of Policy & Strategic Planning
James Peyser, Massachusetts Secretary of Elementary & Secondary Education
Katherine Craven, Chair, Massachusetts Board of Elementary & Secondary Education