
BOSTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE IN BRIEF

December 8, 2010

Topics

Redesign and Reinvest Proposal

Formal Action Taken

The School Committee approved several grants for the Boston Public Schools. In addition, the SC voted to dispose of the Laviscount Park property, near the Boston Latin Academy (to be transferred to the Boston Parks and Recreation Department). All decisions were unanimous.

Highlights from the Meeting

The meeting took place at English High School in Jamaica Plain. There were very large groups from several schools, many with signs – some printed, some hand-made. Chants of “Save the X School” turned in to “Save our schools! All our schools!”

Superintendent’s Report

Dr. Johnson noted that Boston was named one of the most improved districts in the world in a recent report from the McKinsey group, joined in the U.S. by Long Beach, California. She commented on the importance of making data available in creating these improvements. Also, she noted that the BPS Student Information System is to be launched next year. College graduation rates of BPS graduates have risen slightly, but still need more work; she listed partners who are helping.

She described a “productive” meeting with potential charter school operators in Boston. She noted that BPS is obligated to provide transportation across the zones for charter schools. She wanted to learn about the plans of the charters, make suggestions about locations that would be most beneficial from a transit point of view, and address concerns about English language and special education service provision. She was disappointed that it was characterized as a “secret” meeting, as she had mentioned it as early as October 6 and that the communications office sent a news release about it as well. She’s also concerned about the rumors that this meeting was about selling school buildings to charters, which the district can’t do. The rumors are

Overview of the District’s Plan

Mergers

- Lee Academy/Lee Elementary (East Zone, Dorchester)
- Alighieri and Umana (North Zone, East Boston)
- Urban Science Academy/PATH (Citywide, West Roxbury)
- Brook Farm Academy/Media Communications Technology High School (Citywide, West Roxbury)
- Excel High School/Monument High School (Citywide, South Boston)

Expansions

- Holland Elementary (East Zone, Dorchester)
- Trotter Elementary (West Zone, Dorchester)
- King K-8 (West Zone, Dorchester)
- CASH (Citywide, Hyde Park)
- TechBoston Academy (Citywide, Dorchester)
- Dorchester Academy (Citywide, Dorchester)

Closures

- East Zone ELC (East Zone, Dorchester)
- Fifield Elementary (East Zone, Dorchester)
- Middle School Academy (East Zone, Dorchester)
- Emerson Elementary (North Zone, Roxbury)
- Farragut Elementary (North Zone, Mission Hill)
- Agassiz Elementary (West Zone, JP)
- The Engineering School (Citywide, Hyde Park)
- Social Justice Academy (Citywide, Hyde Park)

Innovation schools/conversions

- Gavin MS—converts to UP Academy Charter
- Odyssey—to convert to Boston Green Academy
- Clap Elementary—to convert to an innovation school (not yet determined)

“reckless attempts to enflame people” during a difficult debate.

Finally, she remarked on the death of Eleanor Perry, former principal of the Hennigan, letting people know of her memorial service. She congratulated the Boston Student Advisory Committee representative, Esteniolla Maitre, for winning a four-year scholarship to Bryn Mawr College.

Report on the Redesign and Reinvest Proposal

Dr. Johnson made a short speech restating why the plan she was presenting was important and necessary.

Highlights: We have no choice but to do this. We can’t tackle the budget problem without addressing empty seats. We can’t cut a little here and there; we need permanent savings. We need to do this if we want to maintain the progress we’ve made. Parents and students won’t have to find new schools alone; there are lots of structures and specific staff in place to help. We’ll make phone calls to *everyone* who doesn’t reach out to us first. She made comparisons between Boston 1974 and 2010. Example: 199 schools in 1974, and 135 now; 93,000 students then, and 56,000 now..

Questions from School Committee members to BPS senior staff,

John McDonough, Ann Waterman Roy, John Verre, Kamal Chavda, Irvin Scott, Michael Goar, and Eileen de los Reyes were available for questions. Most school committee members wanted many more details on the implementation of the plan and asked to see a variety of data. Summary of question topics and number of questions posed in each topic are below. (Please note this is an estimate —a few similar questions by the same person were combined, and some questions addressed several topics).

Topic	# of Questions	Topic	# of Questions
A. Money – how to save, find	4	E. Requests for more data	4
B. Requests to clarify proposal	7	F. Charter schools	1
C. School-specific questions	5	G. Academic performance	1
D. English language learners (ELL)/Sheltered English Immersion programs (SEI)	3	H. Special education	1

A. From **Ms. Maitre (student representative)**: When will we know if money is being saved with the proposed plan?

John McDonough: 38.1 million after we shut down the proposed schools.

C. From **Ms. Maitre**: What will happen to Brook Farm Academy and Media Communications Technology High School? A new school? A merger, and if so, which is the school being absorbed?

This is being discussed – seniority issues have to be negotiated with BTU, and curriculum alignment issues have to be discussed.

B. **Mr. O’Neill** asked several questions trying to get district officials to explain *exactly* what they meant when they used the words “merge, pair, expand, absorb,” and “close.” What did this mean for each of the small high schools? He wanted to make sure that outstanding schools don’t “lose the magic” if they’re not thoughtfully combined.

Irvin Scott said that it hasn’t been decided exactly, except that good practices in each school would be deliberately identified and carried over, with time provided for the communities to

discuss the merger. He cited the merger of Academy of Public Service and Noonan Business Academy as an example of a thoughtful merger.

C. **Ms. Tamer** voiced concerns of Alighieri ES parents about moving their children to the Umana K-8, including concerns about the poor condition of the building.

Mr. Goar: We're speeding up investments into the Umana building, including creating a kindergarten play space and a renovated library.

C. **Ms. Tamer** voiced safety concerns of parents whose children would be going to the King. What is the reality? Is there reason for concern?

Ms. Waterman Roy read off the statistics of disciplinary incidents: 73 in 2008-2009, 27 in 2009-2010, and 9 this year to date. She cited the new staff and principal and the Grove Hall Safe Schools initiative for this improvement.

Jessica Bolt, the new principal, confirmed this view and noted that the 9 incidents happened outside of the school.

F. **Mr. Martinez** wanted to know the impact on transit costs of the new charter schools and asked to be given the two legal opinions about providing transit to the parochial and private schools.

Legal counsel: "We're required to by state law." **Mr. Martinez:** "It's as simple as that?"

Mr. Goar: We've changed to zone-based transit for the parochial and private schools, but we're required to transport across all zones for charters. Will ask for statutory relief and are talking to charters about this also.

E. **Mr. Martinez** wanted to know how projections of school enrollments during past mergers/closings fared against what actually happened. Mr. McDonough gave him projected and real enrollment totals. Mr. Martinez asked again for school-specific outcomes – did the students who were projected to enroll in schools X,Y,Z after schools A, B, C closed actually do so?

Mr. Goar restated the request and said he'd get him these numbers. Audience clapped hard.

A. **Mr. Martinez:** Will weighted student funding be in the plan, even though it's not in writing yet?

Mr. McDonough: It's not *if*, but *when*. He noted that weighted student funding is more equitable, transparent, and predictable than current budgeting procedures. Rev. Groover asked Mr. McDonough to give Mr. Martinez the 2007 school committee presentation on this topic.

B./D. **Mr. Martinez** asked what would happen to the "bilingual" program at the Agassiz ES. What are the first criteria for moving ELLs? Will they end up in ESL, SEI, regular education?

Dr. De los Reyes wants space to be found to keep SEI strands intact and move students together with the teachers.

B. **Mr. Martinez** wanted to know how many English as a Second Language licenses there were in the city and how many of these teachers were teaching ELLs.

Dr. De los Reyes noted that the number of fully certified teachers has doubled from 300 to 600 and there was an expansion in "category" trained teachers also.

B. **Mr. Martinez** wanted to know if schools with 40% or more ELL students should be converted to two-way bilingual.

Dr. De los Reyes was interested in entertaining this idea.

G. **Mr. Martinez** asked about the academic performance of small high schools, as they were a “great idea” at one time.

Dr. Chavda noted that it was a mixed bag. Some schools did better and some did worse relative to the large high schools they replaced. There were some minor improvements in behavior.

A. **Ms. Raynor** asked about floating a bond to cover the budget gap and what federal and state money was being sought.

Mr. McDonough explained that bonds normally aren’t used to cover operating expenses. He wasn’t optimistic about federal and state money.

C. /E. **Mr. Barros** asked about the safety outside the King building. He was told that that was the purview of the Boston Police Department, so he asked for a report to be given to the school committee prior to the next meeting.

The chief of the BPS police noted that incidents have happened in and around the school.

D. **Mr. Barros** wanted to know if students in SEI programs who were moved would see any change (improvement) in their instruction. He noted that ELL services are best provided in schools that understand students’ cultural context.

Dr. De los Reyes restated the plan to keep SEI students together with their classmates and teachers and said that the district is seeking principals who have demonstrated skill in welcoming new groups of students.

D./ B./H. **Mr. Barros** requested the exact criteria for moving these students. He also wanted to know what were the plans, school by school, and eventually student by student, for moving students with special needs.

Mr. Verre explained that they’ve been identifying specific locations for entire programs to be relocated and making sure that students have options in their zones. There will be more than one option for each student.

E. **Mr. Barros** wanted to have data on the geographic equity of programs. How does the new proposal help or hinder progress on the academic achievement gap, neighborhood by neighborhood?

The superintendent and senior administrators made note of this.

A./ B. **Mr. O’Neill** asked about the prospects for local aid and whether there will be a cushion in the proposal if the state cuts local aid this year. He also wanted to see the savings estimates laid out by category, school by school.

Mr. McDonough said he’d share the school-by-school analysis.

C/E **Rev. Groover** wanted to know about the availability of elementary seats in East Boston prior to the vote next week. He was concerned about all the parents who ship small children through the tunnel when they’d prefer to stay locally in East Boston.

B. **Rev. Groover** also wanted to know what “priority” means, exactly, for the students who are displaced. Would it come after sibling priority was taken into account, etc.?

Public Hearing

Reverend Groover noted that the plan proposal is “not a done deal,” and that the school committee genuinely wanted to hear from everyone.

First, about 13 questions submitted by the public, representing many more separate or duplicate questions, were read out loud. Senior staff remained to answer them, though they often couldn't provide exact answers to the specific questions. Many questions were similar to what school committee members asked, with an emphasis on individual schools. Overall, the questions reflected that the public didn't understand why specific schools were being closed.

Initial Questions

- Why are you closing [Urban Science Academy, Alighieri] if you're only saving \$300K or less per school?
- How did you decide which school has or doesn't have potential to improve?
 - **Dr. Chavda**: Data points such as the school's Composite Performance Index (CPI), Student Growth Percentile (SGP), percent of students in Warning on MCAS, improved CPI over two years, and school choice data were all considered.
- 70% of Fifield ES students walk to school. Aren't you wasting money on transit by closing it?
 - This data was directly disputed by **Mr. Goar**.
- Please clarify the language about Monument and Excel high schools.
 - **Irvin Scott** restated the merger strategy, but did not clarify the language.
- Will the Learning Adaptive Behavior (LAB) cluster at the Agassiz be split? What will happen to autistic children at the Lee?
 - **John Verre** noted that open spots or places to add whole strands were being explored at four other schools, including the Ellis. The Lee children will stay where they are; it's a merger that doesn't entail a move.
- How will students be supported in the high schools? What will happen to class size?
 - **Michael Goar** said that the cap on 31 students per class won't be lifted.
- Why are choices for regular education students all three to eight miles away?
 - **Ann Waterman Roy** said that parents can choose *any* school in their zone, but the ones on the list are highly desired.
- Could we see the empty seats by grade level?
 - **Ann Waterman Roy** promised to get these numbers out.
- What are in-district charters and innovation schools, and what's their effect on the budget?
 - These are budget-neutral, stated **Michael Goar**. Innovation schools are similar to pilots, stated **Ann Waterman Roy**. In-district charters are like UP Academy at the Gavin.
- How will this address dropouts and those at risk of dropping out?
 - This issue is still forefront in our minds, shared **Irvin Scott**. Credit recovery will continue and expand.

Public Comment

There were 117 people signed up; 72 people (or pairs/groups) spoke for over 2.5 hours.

School/ Issue	Parents	Teachers/ Leaders	Students	Partners	Advocacy groups/ other	Total
Agassiz ES	6	4	1	1		12
Emerson ES	5	2	2	1		10
Excel HS	2	4	4			10
Fifield ES	4	4	1	1		10
ELC-East	2	2*		1		5
Farragut ES	1	3				4
Alighieri ES	3					3
Lee ES	1	2				3
Edison K-8	2					2
Brook Farm Academy		1				1
Lee Academy		1				1
Monument HS		1				1
Urban Science Academy	1					1
General / other	2	1		1	6	10
Total:	29	25	8	5	6	72-73

- *Speaker asked to be placed on next week's action items (principal of ELC-East)*

Though the hearing was emotional, full of pleas not to break up school “families,” there was also a pattern of specific concerns raised by several school communities:

- Approximately seven speakers felt schools weren't given any time before being placed on the new list at one week's notice. The Farragut and Fifield expressed this concern the most.
- Approximately seven speakers expressed that the reasons for closing their schools were either inconsistent with other decisions, not fully explained, constantly changing, or not based on the school's most current data. The Emerson, Agassiz, and Fifield expressed this concern the most.
- About seven of the speakers felt that the small high schools couldn't be merged without losing the high performance.
- A full quarter of the Agassiz' supporting speakers suggested that leasing their building to MATCH was the true motive behind the closure.
- Three speakers at the Emerson and two at the Aggasiz were concerned about disruption to SEI and special education programs, respectively. 799 signatures from the Emerson were presented. An Aggasiz parent of an autistic child plans to seek a court injunction staying the vote.
- Four speakers were concerned about the safety at the King K-8 or at newly merged high schools.
- Three speakers from the Lee Elementary – principal, teacher, and parent, looked forward to merger with Lee Academy. A Lee Academy teacher representative was concerned that the merger would destroy their specific structures, especially the governing board. Two Edison K-8 parents expressed their satisfaction with the merger that closed the Garfield.
- Other issues on brought up by at least four people:
 - For some schools, this is breaking up neighborhoods and actual families of siblings in different programs at the same school.
 - There are no equivalent programs or schools, and the suggested choices are bad.
 - “We have specific suggestions for *how* to do the mergers successfully or *how* to save money without closings – talk to us.”
 - There were several emotional pleas from students and parents, talk about breaking up school families, and a variety of other statements.

Notable quotes (some are paraphrased)

“Has this plan gone far enough, and will the other 75% of the budget shortfall be met through operational expenses, or will you end up cutting budgets *in schools*?” (Sam Tyler, Boston Municipal Research Bureau)

“It's not one teacher – it's the whole building [that make 60% median SGP, etc., possible]. You're not supporting a successful ELL schools, and instead shifting to charters. It's a slap in the face [to ELL teachers].” (Agassiz teacher).

“I fought hard for placement for my autistic son. If weighted student funding moves dollars where the kids go, why not put *more* special needs students into Aggasiz, and solve the budget problem that way?” (Mother of Agassiz student; speaking through Spanish interpreter)

“We haven't been given any warning. We're a last-minute addition to the list, to balance the budget.” (Fifield teacher)

“The Emerson is where all our kids learn English. If it's shut down, we might as well pack our bags and leave.” (Emerson father, crying, speaking though Cape Verdean interpreter)

“We're being merged for the benefit of the [underperforming] Umana? Give us *our* principal, *our* structure, and the Umana building. Merge it, and call it the *Alighieri* K-8.” (Parent at Alighieri)

“We heard many reasons for why we're being closed. First it's the money. Now, we're being closed because the Cape Verdean students aren't doing well on tests, and the city is mad.” (Emerson parent, speaking through interpreter,

Quick Links

News articles, press releases, and district materials presented during the December 8th meeting:

In the News

- 12.9.2010. The Kids Are Going to Learn. Op-Ed. *The Boston Globe*.
http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2010/12/09/the_kids_are_going_to_learn/
- 12.9.2010. School Committee Questions Cuts. *The Boston Globe*.
http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/12/09/school_committee_questions_cuts/

From BPS

- BPS' press release: <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/node/4159>
- BPS webpage on redesign: <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/redesign>