



Key Takeaways: June 2018

For over 20 years Boston has been a national leader in applying school autonomy, district school choice, and high accountability standards to drive student learning and school model variety. Currently, education leaders are focused on improving community engagement and the choice process via more information for parents on schools. And in the wake of the 2018 departure of Superintendent Tommy Chang, the city must push harder for equitable access to high-quality options: achievement gaps for students of color, English language learners, and students with disabilities has widened per the most recent [NAEP scores](#). Ensuring that low-income families and communities of color in particular can provide broad input continues to be a challenge.

Challenges Ahead

► Ensuring families have the information they need to make choices across school systems

Boston Public Schools (BPS) has recently improved school information so families can weigh their options, but it still has work to do. New high-touch supports for parents include a new local chapter of [EdNavigator](#), which partners with employers to provide one-on-one support for parents. The online guide [Boston Schools Finder](#) is available in multiple languages with a searchable database of district, charter, and Catholic schools and offers information on school hours, type, mission, and extracurriculars, as well as basic state-provided academic information. However, in 2017 and 2018 interviews, community groups said that families desired more accessible and relevant performance information. To do that, Boston needs more than the state framework and the data it uses to define quality. Several high choice cities have adopted a common school performance framework—an apples-to-apples tool for parents to make side-by-side comparisons between schools in all sectors. This might be a daunting task in Boston, given that academic performance standards and tracking vary widely between, and in some cases within, sectors. One step in the right direction is the work of a cross-sector task force, the [Boston Opportunity Agenda](#), which recently arrived at consensus on a definition for college and career readiness. The organization can continue to develop locally relevant indicators of quality—which could become part of information guides or the work of family choice support organizations like [Collaborative Parent Leadership Action Network](#) and [EdNavigator](#).

► Addressing equity and the need for high-quality seats for all families

Since 2014, elementary and middle school students who live in areas of Boston without high-performing BPS schools are guaranteed choices and transportation to schools outside of their neighborhood. Special populations of students can choose from a list of programs that best suit their needs which, again, may extend beyond their neighborhood. However, the limited number of high-quality schools fill up first and most families either cannot get a coveted seat or decide not to apply given the lengthy bus ride. As a result, poorer-performing schools tend to enroll more students who were unable to secure a spot in another school or who moved to the district midyear, thus concentrating already struggling schools with students who have not chosen to attend them. Access is of particular concern at the high school level: interviewees reported most open-enrollment (non-selective admission) schools perform at low levels. (In March 2018, the [Boston Area Research Initiative](#) launched a [project](#) with BPS to examine the impact of the assignment system in terms of the equity of school access.) Boston cannot easily adjust the school supply by adding new schools because enrollment numbers are fairly stable, facilities repair and construction is costly, and a state cap limits charter school growth. But low-performing schools could be prioritized for aggressive turnaround efforts, perhaps tapping expertise, approach, or even assistant leadership from schools with strong track records. A newly commissioned Facilities Master Plan, [BuildBPS](#) includes data to help education leaders identify where high-quality seats are lacking and ensure that new schools or charter seats are in areas that need them most. As this project takes hold

and proves successful, the enrollment system must keep pace so that families living close to new schools will continue to have priority access. BPS may also need to adjust how it approaches controlled choice so it doesn't continue to fill low-performing schools that families are not choosing.

► **Getting input from all families, especially those most impacted by poor-performing schools**

BPS is overhauling family engagement policies and has stepped up efforts to tap groups that work directly with families to ensure that the concerns of communities they represent are heard. A new [BPS community engagement advisory](#) is tasked with providing both families and community organizations consistent information so they can engage from a common knowledge base. The hope is that this advisory group will incorporate various perspectives and interests to enable collaborative discussions around challenging and controversial topics. If implemented well, these efforts could help further the goal of making family input a regular part of the school opening, restart, and closure processes. One of Boston's current modes for family engagement is the [Citywide Parent Council](#), but there is a perception that its members do not adequately represent the income and racial diversity of the entire city. The local philanthropic community can deepen its support of engagement efforts by continuing to identify and fund nonprofit, community, or grassroots groups that engage education leaders on behalf of families. BPS and the Boston Charter Alliance (BCA) can work with representatives of those groups when considering new policies or when they must quickly communicate changes in the education system. BPS is overhauling its closure process to regularly include family input. The BCA can also consider working with its members to set best practices around family engagement during the charter school closing and opening processes.

Spotlight

Educators Design Innovative, High-Quality School Prototypes

In February 2018 teachers and leaders in public schools from across Massachusetts, including four from Boston, participated in the first [School Design Institute](#). The program, launched by [Mass Ideas](#), is focused on helping educators and others design and launch innovative, high-quality public schools that are tailored to serve the communities these leaders are in or hope to locate.

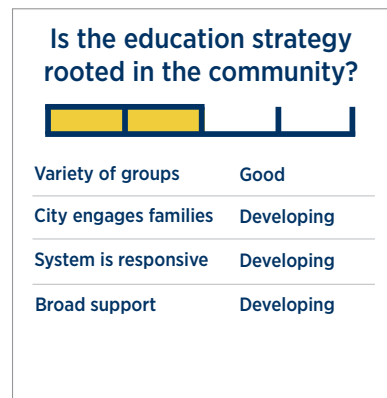
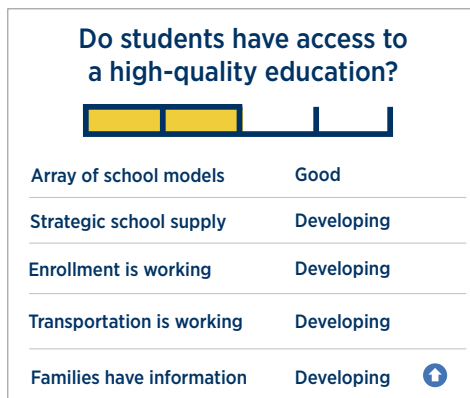
[TechBoston](#), a pilot school in the city, was one of three participating schools chosen to receive a design grant to test the prototype they developed at the Institute. The model prioritizes student and family input in the process. The Institute and grants, like the one [TechBoston](#) received, will continue to be available for selected groups to further plan, test, and implement new school models.

District, Charter, and Catholic Schools Collaborate to Sharpen Skills

In March 2018 the [Boston Educators Collaborative](#) (BEC) entered its second year of providing teachers from charter, district, and Catholic schools with an opportunity to make connections across sectors while improving their practice together as peers. The teachers who facilitate the courses sharpen leadership skills while participants benefit from the emphasis on collaborative, hands-on problem solving.

Born out of the Boston Compact, this collaborative program is truly a citywide effort. The mayor spoke in support of the initiative, [Teach Plus](#) helped select and train the teachers who acted as lead instructors, and the University of Massachusetts provided lead instructors with a stipend and participants with the possibility of earning university credit.

System Reforms



Each indicator is scored with a rubric on a 4-point scale. We added the scores for the indicators to get an overall goal score. An arrow shows increase or decrease from the 2017 score.

Key Takeaways: System Reforms

A new tool for parents making school choice decisions, the Boston Schools Finder, provides parents with information on district, charter, and Catholic schools in the city. Community engagement practices are improving and new local organizations are pushing for more family involvement, yet the city must continue to ramp up efforts to reach families most impacted by low-performing schools.

Is the education system continuously improving?



Do schools have the resources they need? School improvement happens at the school level, but making sure resources are available requires sound, citywide policy. Having the right talent in a city is critical for schools to be able to provide students with a quality education. Schools should also have control over their budgets so they have the resources to address the needs of their student population.



Do schools have the kinds of leaders they need?

Boston, a highly sought-after city in which to live, has no shortage of applicants for leadership positions in Boston Public Schools (BPS) or charter schools, thanks to multiple pipelines and high starting salaries. The Boston Compact, a partnership between district, charter, and Catholic schools, has a citywide recruitment fair aimed specifically at attracting teachers of color. A local program, the [Lynch School of Education](#), has trained a third of all school leaders—district, charter, and Catholic. [Latinos for Education](#) provides a yearlong fellowship for Latino leaders, district or charter. In addition to these cross-sector efforts, both BPS and charter schools balance internal pipelines with local and national sources. BPS is currently working to refine and standardize the competencies it uses to recruit and hire leaders and to develop a scoring method so decisions can be more data-driven. There is no data about leaders in the charter sector to fully assess quality or fit.



Do schools have the kinds of teachers they need?

BPS uses nine different pipelines to attract and screen applicants. Those who pass the vetting process are made available to schools, which directly hire candidates they deem to be a good fit. Within the past year, BPS has focused on improving the racial and ethnic diversity of applicants. There is no sectorwide data about charter school teachers. Anecdotally, interviewees said that schools across the city struggle to find certified applicants to teach science or special education and English language learner (ELL) students. To address this, both sectors use internal programs: BPS operates a licensure program in partnership with the University of Massachusetts, and a handful of charter schools have site-based licensure programs. Both charter and district leaders also note the need for improved teacher evaluation systems so each sector has more nuanced data about teacher quality.



Does funding equitably follow students?

BPS allocates less than 50% of district money to its schools using a student-based allocation formula (based on an analysis of fiscal year 2013-14). Funds follow students with additional weights based on poverty level, grade level, ELL ability, and disability, among others. The district’s budget office provides strategic support to schools during their budgeting process. The budget office also provides easy-to-understand information for families about the budget process and student-based allocation.

Do students have access to a high-quality education?



Do school choice and supply meet family needs? This goal addresses how well the city is doing with providing families access to quality schools. We look at what the city is doing to ensure quality schools are in every neighborhood, and how well the choice process is working for families who want to use it.



Does the school supply represent an array of models?

Of the schools that opened or expanded between 2014-15 and 2017-18, only one has a nontraditional instructional model (expeditionary), but two offer curricular emphasis like STEM or social-emotional learning. In general, Boston has a fair amount of curricular and instructional diversity. Charter schools work closely together to share curriculum and teacher training. A new initiative, [Mass Ideas](#), draws together charter and district school teams to design or redesign schools.



Is transportation working for families?

A state law requires BPS to provide free transportation (via district bus or transit pass) to all charter and district students living outside the school walk zone. Despite having exemplary policies in place, interviewees identified transportation as a concern because of the high cost of current school bus services and its unreliability and poor safety record. BPS choice policies make sure students can apply to the closest high-quality district school, but students without a good school in their neighborhood—often low-income students—

bear the burden of traveling to attend the school assigned to them. Interviewees who work with low-income families say that many families place their preference for quality below other more immediate concerns, including transportation and distance from home. One example cited by a 2018 interviewee was the unintended consequence of a policy that provides free transit passes to high school students living outside of their school’s walk zone. Low-income families for whom a transit pass was a critical resource were said to be choosing schools farther from home, regardless of quality, to secure the benefit of a free pass.



Is the city strategically managing its school portfolio?

BPS uses enrollment and performance data to close schools, and the Massachusetts Department of Education uses transparent criteria as the basis for renewing or closing charter schools. However, interviewees said that there is no active management of the city’s schools that takes into account capacity, demand, and quality. Interviewees report that high-quality schools are at capacity, and there is no mechanism in place for expanding or replicating high-performing models. For families who don’t get into selective high schools, there are few quality options. The city also lacks a common performance framework that can guide cross-sector school performance management. BPS is currently updating its facility master plan, [BuildBPS](#). While this could help guide school siting decisions, interviewees expressed skepticism that the effort has impacted the decision-making process to date. Boston is currently at the state’s charter cap, which limits a district’s net school spending on charter school tuition at 18%, so charter schools cannot open or expand in the city.



Is the enrollment process working for families?

For the 2017-18 school year enrollment, the city’s charter schools adopted a single application, streamlining the process for parents interested in applying to multiple charter schools. But lotteries that determine who is awarded a spot are still conducted at the individual school level. BPS has a central school assignment process, but pilot and exam schools have their own individual application processes, as do Horace Mann charter schools, which have their charter approved by a local school board. In interviews, community groups reported that families perceive a lack of transparency in the district’s home-based assignment process (which provides families with a list of schools to select from, including options that are high quality and close to home). However, high-quality district schools fill up quickly, so families end up being assigned to underenrolled schools, many of which are low performing. Affluent families can send their children to independent schools when they are not happy with the option provided by the enrollment system.



Do families have the information they need and know how to use it?

In 2017 the Boston Schools Fund released its [Boston Schools Finder](#), a consolidated school guide that provides a school description, basic academic information, student and staff demographics, extra-curricular information and state-collected performance data. All students are guaranteed student services no matter what school they attend, but community advocates reported that families want better information about school-level special education and ELL services. Interviewees said that families may not know until their special needs or ELL child is enrolled and encounters problems that a school is not in the best position to accommodate specific needs. Education leaders are aware of these issues and are discussing ways to address them.

Is the education strategy rooted in the community?



Is the whole community engaged? Education is a citywide endeavor. When families, community organizations, and city leaders have the opportunity to provide feedback and share in the vision, the strategy is more likely to be sustainable and meet the needs of all students. In this goal, we look at how well the city is doing with engaging key stakeholders.



Are a variety of groups engaged in education?

In Boston, a cross-section of nonprofits, business groups, and advocacy organizations play a pivotal role in providing services to individual schools. In 2018, the district’s community engagement office reported that it was improving its outreach to community groups that work with historically marginalized families. Several nonprofits advocate for families most impacted by poor performing schools, and [Ed Navigators](#) recently opened an office in Boston to support families through the choice process. But there is a perception that these groups do not have as much influence as affluent parent groups that have long been vocal in the city.



Does the city engage families in educational decisions that impact them?

Both the charter and district sectors have fairly fluid closure policies around family engagement, but BPS is working to formalize engagement practices. While the new policies have not yet been put into place, interviewees in 2018 noted the district’s intensive engagement for the [Mattahunt school restart](#). The charter sector also has some stopgap measures, like a state law requiring that schools alert families about potential closures. Community members perceive that families are less engaged in school openings. The citywide parent council typically weighs in on new school locations and models for district schools, but the umbrella organization represents each school’s parent council and does not necessarily represent local family interests.



Does the education system respond to community feedback?

While still nascent, BPS is planning and launching some innovative community engagement work. In 2017 some advocacy organizations emerged that work with families most impacted by low-performing schools. In 2018 the district launched a community engagement advisory to provide these organizations with information about district initiatives, which they can communicate to families so communities across the city can engage with the district from a common knowledge base. This will hopefully address what interviewees in 2017 expressed as a perception that the district is not listening to all families, especially low-income families of color. Charter school families can engage at the school level or through pro-charter advocacy organizations, some of which are starting to participate in the coalition supporting education citywide.



Is there a strong and deep coalition of support for the education strategy?

Mayor Martin J. Walsh steadily lost confidence in BPS Superintendent Tommy Chang and was one factor in Chang’s departure in June 2018—only three years into his tenure. In the past, the superintendent, the mayor’s office, and the Boston School Committee were fairly well aligned on district-related initiatives. There also continues to be good collaboration between sector leaders through the Boston Compact. However, contentious community politics around charter schools make it challenging for education leaders to move forward on citywide initiatives that concern both sectors.

Data & Scoring

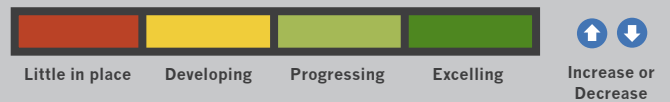
Where did we get this information?

- ▶ Interviews with district, charter, and community leaders
- ▶ Policy documents from district, charter, and state websites
- ▶ School data from each city
- ▶ A 400-parent survey administered in March, 2017 in Cleveland, Denver, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, Oakland, and Washington, D.C.

How did we score the system reforms and goals?

- ▶ Each indicator is scored with a rubric on a 4-point scale. We added the scores for the indicators to get an overall goal score. See the [Methodology & Resources](#) page for details.

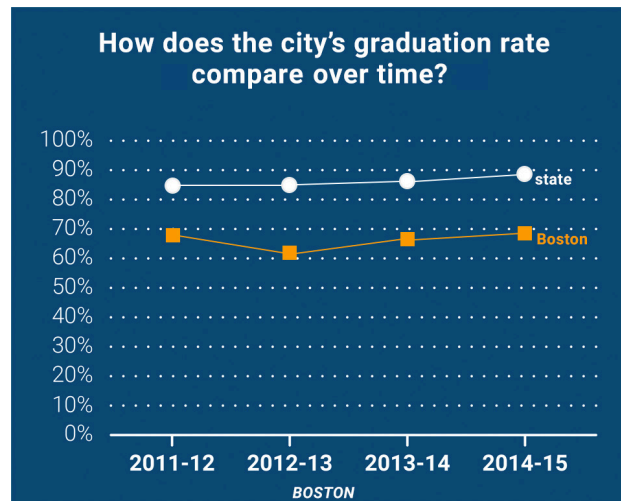
Score Levels



Key Takeaways: Student & School Outcomes

Low-income students in the city perform slightly better than their peers nationally on state assessments, but the rate at which they do so has declined slightly over time. Reading and math proficiency rates for all students in the city did not show statistically significant improvement between 2011-12 and 2014-15. In 2013-14, Hispanic students were enrolled in advanced math coursework at a lower rate than the total high school population.

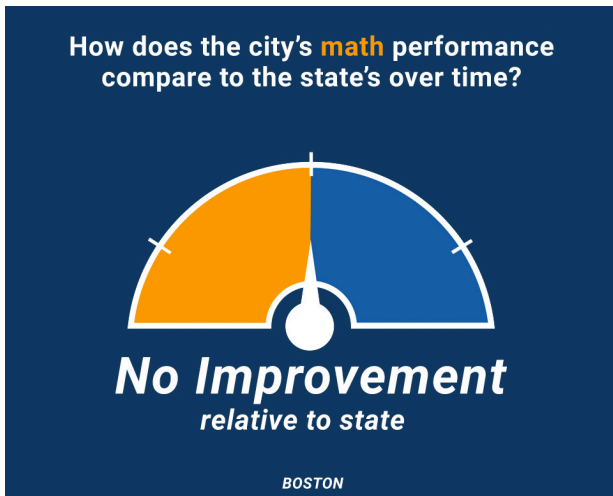
Is the education system continuously improving?



- ▶ Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the city's graduation rate improved slightly but remained below the state average.

Data: Percent of first-time 9th grade students graduating in four years, citywide and statewide.

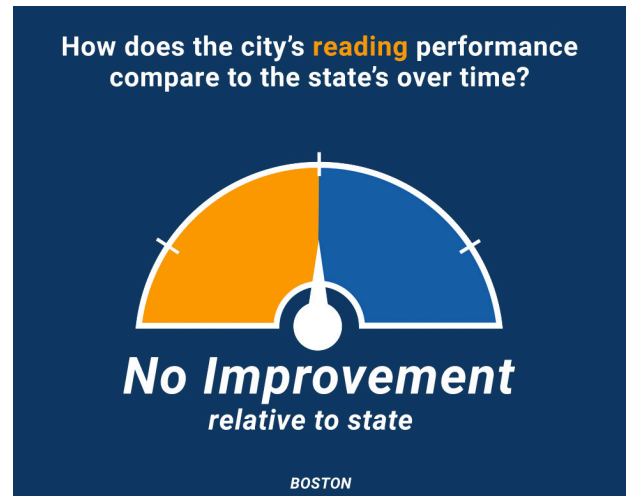
Source: EDFacts Initiative, U.S. Department of Education, Assessment and Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates Data, 2011-12 to 2014-15.



► Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the city's math proficiency rate trends mirrored the state's. In 2014-15, the city's proficiency rate was 17 percentage points below the state's.

Data: The city's estimated gains in proficiency rates across elementary and middle schools, standardized at the state level and controlling for student demographics.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011-12 to 2014-15.

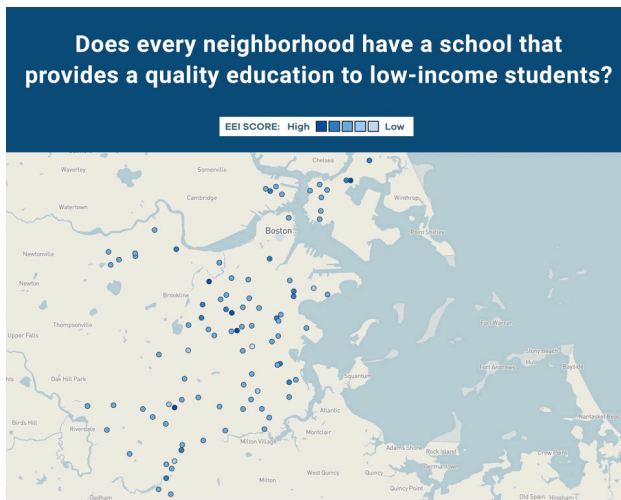


► Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the city's reading proficiency rate trends mirrored the state's. In 2014-15, the city's proficiency rate was 20 percentage points below the state's.

Data: The city's estimated gains in proficiency rates across elementary and middle schools, standardized at the state level and controlling for student demographics.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011-12 to 2014-15.

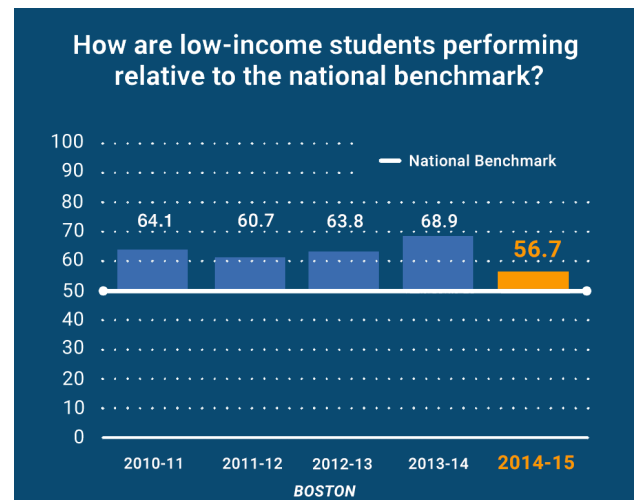
Do students have access to a high-quality education?



► The Education Equality Index (EEI) identifies how students from low-income families are performing in cities and schools across the country. See this interactive tool to explore individual school performance.

Data: The Education Equality Index (EEI) was supplied by Education Cities and GreatSchools. See their site for more detail.

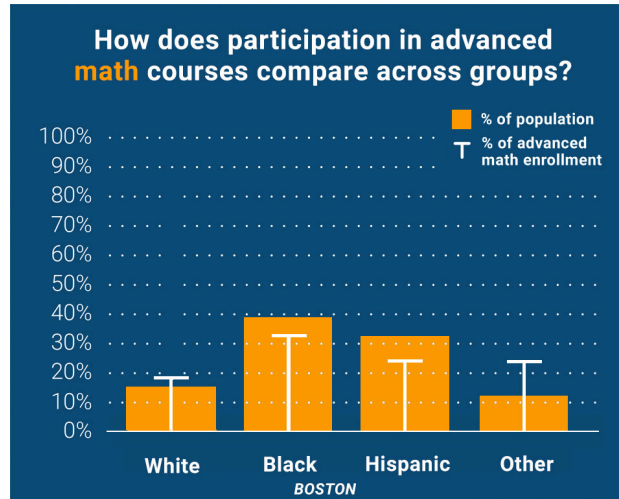
Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2010-11 to 2014-15; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010-11 to 2014-15.



► Students from low-income families in the city are performing somewhat better in math and reading than low-income students in the average city. EEI scores in Boston have decreased by 2% over time.

Data: The Education Equality Index (EEI) was supplied by Education Cities and GreatSchools. See their site for more detail.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2010-11 to 2014-15; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010-11 to 2014-15.



► In 2013-14, students who identified as Native American, Asian American, Pacific Islander, or of two or more races (shown above as “Other”) had disproportionately high enrollment in high school advanced math coursework. Hispanic students had disproportionately low enrollment.

Data: Enrollment of students in math courses above Algebra II. Rates calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in advanced math by the number of students in the school. Sub-group rates determined at the school level.

Source: U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection 2013-14.

Data & Scoring

Where did we get this data?

- Publicly available state and federal data, making our results comparable and reproducible.
- The most up-to-date data available for all 18 cities at the time of our data collection. See [Methodology & Resources](#) for more information.

What makes the data citywide?

- We include all charter and district schools within the municipal boundary of a city.
- In Houston, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, and San Antonio we use school data from multiple districts within the municipal boundary.

About Boston

Boston Public Schools (BPS) has long been a leader in school autonomy and choice. Both the first charter school and the first district autonomous school opened in 1993. BPS also has in-district charter schools, Horace Mann charter schools, and Innovation schools. Massachusetts has high academic standards and strong authorizing practices for charters, which have set a high bar for accountability. All schools in BPS have a great deal of autonomy over staffing and budgeting. While education leaders across sectors collaborate regularly, community-level politics between the charter and district sectors are still challenging.

School Choice in the City

All charter schools are open enrollment. In 2014-15, BPS implemented a “home-based” assignment plan for K–8 students, which offers families a list of district school choices that includes all the schools within a mile of their home, plus high-performing options.

Governance Model

In 1991, a seven-member Boston School Committee was formed to oversee BPS schools and hire the superintendent. The mayor appoints new School Committee members from candidates recommended by a Citizen’s Nominating Panel comprised of parents, school staff, and community representatives. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is the sole charter authorizer in the state. In-district Horace Mann charters are additionally approved by the Boston School Committee.

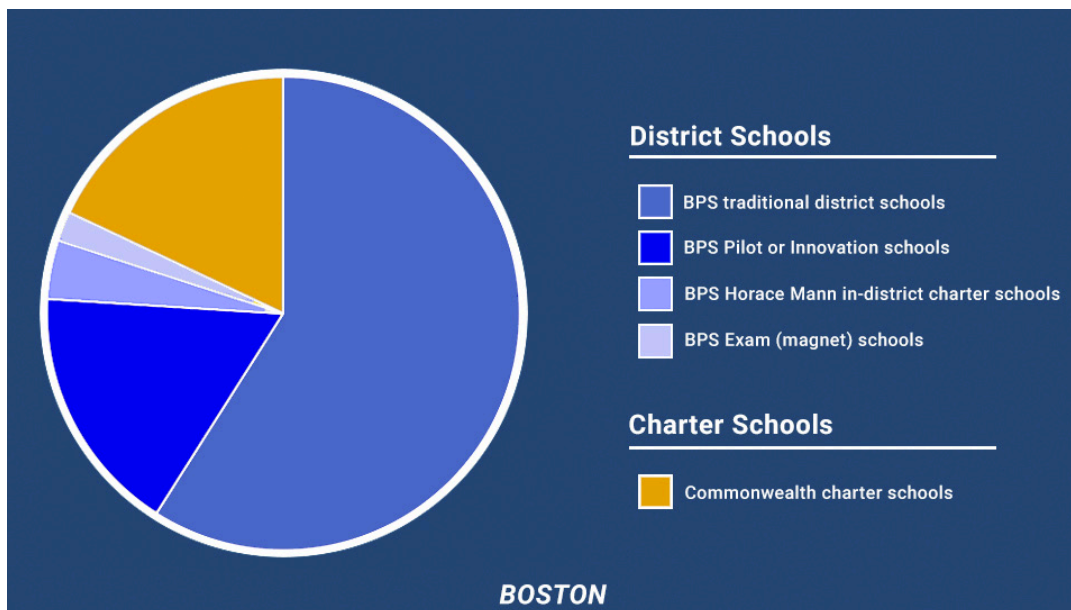
2016 District and Charter Student Body

Enrollment: 65,461 students (BPS and charter schools)

Race and ethnicity: 42% Hispanic, 35% black, 14% white, 9% other

Low-income: 70% free and reduced-price lunch (participating in one or more of these state-administered programs: SNAP, TAFDC, DCF foster care, and MassHealth).

2017 School Composition



Note: Enrollment data for both charter and district schools. Demographics data for BPS schools only. Source: Boston Public Schools, 2016. School data from researcher analysis of public records, 2016-17.

About This Project

The Citywide Education Progress Report looks at how a city is doing across three goals:

- The education system is continuously improving
- All students have access to a high-quality education
- The education strategy is rooted in the community

Across each goal we present indicators of what the cities are doing (what we call “system reforms”) and how they are doing (what we call “outcomes”).

Our city reports focus on education strategies for the 2017-18 school year. Our analyses reflect developments through June 2018. These are updates to our original reports from the 2016-17 school year.

To understand how well cities are doing, we used state and federal data to track school improvement, graduation rates, and student access to high-quality schools. Our student and school data cover the 2011-2012 to 2014-2015 school years. To understand city strategies and identify early progress, we relied on interviews, surveys, public documents, and news articles from 2014-2015 to the present. This analysis uses data for district and charter schools to look at all schools within municipal boundaries, rather than just one sector or district.

We cannot say that employing a certain strategy will lead to a particular result, or even whether a particular strategy is effective in these cities. But the reports can help us to see how a strategy is working, what problem areas remain, and which cities are seeing promising results.

The 18 cities in this study include Atlanta, Boston, Camden, Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Antonio, Tulsa, and Washington, D.C.

To learn more about the project, compare other cities, and read the cross-city analysis, visit:
research.crpe.org/projects/stepping-up



The Center on Reinventing Public Education is a research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell developing systemwide solutions for K–12 public education. Learn more about our work at crpe.org.