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# An Uneven Path

Student Achievement in Boston Public Schools, 2007-2017

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## Executive Summary

Since 1635, when the United States' first public school was founded by a Bostonian, the city of Boston has held a reputation as a national leader in public education. In the past several decades, Boston has been a proving ground for new strategies such as mayoral control, charter schools, and expanded access to early childhood education. Located in a state known for rigorous standards and accountability, Boston Public Schools (BPS) has consistently ranked among the top-performing large public school districts in the country.

At the same time, BPS currently faces significant challenges, including tight budgets, aging facilities, and persistent achievement gaps by race, ethnicity, native language, and special needs status. Too many BPS students fall off track, fail to graduate on time, or lack sufficient preparation to take their next steps after high school. Furthermore, after many years of stable leadership, BPS has had four interim or permanent superintendents in the past ten years and is currently searching for its fifth. This period of transition presents an opportune time to take stock of BPS' progress to date and consider the best strategies to move forward.

In this paper, we set out to inform the public dialogue about BPS' current performance and future direction. Through analysis of academic data and interviews with a variety of stakeholders in Boston's education community, we explore a set of key questions: How does the current pace of improvement in BPS compare to the district's past performance? Do BPS' trends in student outcomes track above, below, or alongside those of other urban districts? What policies do local stakeholders view as having contributed to or hindered progress on student learning and equity? And based on recent trends and stakeholder input, how might local leaders rethink or revise their efforts?

This paper examines those questions through two lenses. The first section of the paper summarizes BPS' recent performance trends, using metrics such as graduation rates, the National Assessment of Educational Progress' (NAEP) Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), and the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). The second section seeks to understand the context for these trends through interviews with a variety of Boston stakeholders, including representatives from the BPS central office, the mayor's office, the school committee, school-based leaders and teachers, community and parent advocates, local foundations, and the teachers' union.

Our analysis of BPS performance trends finds that the district has consistently outperformed other large cities participating in the NAEP, across subjects and grade levels. Although it still trails the national average for all schools, BPS demonstrated particularly rapid improvement from 2003 to 2011, especially in eighth-grade math. After 2011, the rate of growth slowed, though Boston still leads other large cities. However, several urban district peers have instituted a variety of reforms in recent years and are closing the gap with Boston.

Meanwhile, BPS has struggled to make a dent in persistent racial and ethnic disparities in test scores and graduation rates within the district. Taken together, these trends suggest that BPS is in need of targeted, innovative strategies to improve equity and address slowing achievement trends in order to maintain its status as a national leader among large, urban school districts.

Interviews with key stakeholders revealed both strengths and challenges in BPS policy over the past decade. The policies viewed as most impactful during this period included human capital reforms—such as mutual consent hiring, accelerated hiring timelines, and the reduced role of seniority in hiring decisions—and expanded access to high-quality pre-K.

Stakeholders described another set of policies as potentially promising, but suffering from poor design or weak implementation. These initiatives include the BuildBPS facilities initiative, unified enrollment, and the effort to improve inclusion for students with special needs.

The analysis of performance trends combined with lessons from stakeholder interviewees leads us to offer three recommendations for the next BPS leader to consider, as key strategies to accelerate performance in the near future:

- 1 Articulate a clear, concise theory of action and drive it through implementation.** The next leader of BPS will have to articulate a coherent and focused vision, anchored in a defined set of key priorities, for the future of Boston Public Schools. Without a clear set of targeted priorities, district leaders will get bogged down in trying to address every strategy at once, leading to inefficiency and weak execution.
- 2 Make tough choices to advance equity.** BPS' persistent struggles with inequitable outcomes by race, ethnicity, income, native language, and special education status are incompatible with the city's vision of itself as an urban district that stands above its peers.
- 3 Double down on areas of strength and bright spots.** Both the objective data and our qualitative interviews point to a few bright spots that merit continued investment and improvement. These strengths include expanded early childhood access and quality, changes to human capital processes that appear to be attracting a better, more diverse talent pool to Boston schools, and positive external partnerships.

## Introduction

As America's oldest public school system, Boston has historically been a beacon to the rest of the country. More than 350 years ago, Boston became the first American city to offer a system of free public schools in recognition of the need for a well-educated community. Like the state of Massachusetts as a whole, Boston has long had a reputation of outperforming its peers educationally.

In more recent years, Boston has been a leader in other ways. In the early 1990s, Boston became the first city to give authority over its traditional public school system to its mayor, placing ultimate accountability for one of the city's largest and most important public services in the hands of a single elected leader. Massachusetts was an early leader in the growth of a new type of public school called charter schools,<sup>1</sup> and the city of Boston is home to one of the more successful charter school sectors in the country.<sup>2</sup> Boston is also at the vanguard of the recent push for greater access to high-quality pre-K. These initiatives have served as drivers of change for Boston and, along with rigorous statewide standards and assessment and BPS' move toward greater autonomy for school leaders, have made it a place that other cities look to for leadership.

Right now, however, Boston's school district is at a moment of inflection. After many prior years of leadership stability, Boston Public Schools (BPS) has had four interim or permanent superintendents in the past ten years, and may soon have a fifth.<sup>3</sup> In that same decade, BPS has overhauled its approach to teacher hiring, teacher evaluation, school budgeting, school assignment, and other core services that directly affect students, families, and educators.

Not all of these changes have been well-received by the community, and some high-profile recent initiatives floundered before they could begin. At the same time, BPS is grappling with tight budgets, aging facilities, and disparate student outcomes by race, ethnicity, native language, neighborhood, and family income across its schools.

As Boston leaders prepare a way forward through this time of transition, it is an opportune moment to take stock of BPS' progress to date through questions like: How does the current pace of improvement in BPS compare to the district's past performance? How does BPS' pace of improvement compare to that of other large districts? What policies do local stakeholders view as having contributed to or hindered progress on student learning and equity? And based on recent trends and stakeholder input, how might local leaders rethink or revise their efforts?

In this paper, we aim to reflect on those questions and offer some preliminary answers. Our focus is primarily on BPS and the schools it operates, but as researchers who work with and analyze school systems across the country, we also draw comparisons to other cities and reflect upon what Boston can learn from its peers. While the future of the city's charter school sector is consequential for Boston students and families—a 2016 voter referendum maintained a cap on charter school growth<sup>4</sup>—that is outside the scope of our work. We began this project before Superintendent Tommy Chang stepped down in the summer of 2018, but his departure made our work all the more pressing. This is an opportune moment to reflect on what is going well in Boston and what is not. We intend this report to inform discussion and reflection within Boston on BPS' leadership needs and its future direction.

The report proceeds in two parts. In Part I, we summarize BPS' recent performance trends using a variety of metrics. Part II examines the policies behind those trends, drawing on interviews with Boston stakeholders to describe their perceptions of the strengths or weaknesses of key policy initiatives over the past decade. Ultimately, both sections of the report are designed to work in tandem and serve as a source of information and recommendations for city and district leaders as they continue to work on behalf of Boston students. While this report is not meant as an evaluation of any particular initiative, we conclude with a discussion of lessons from the data and stakeholder interviews, as well as recommendations for how Boston can learn more about its own progress and accelerate its performance going forward.



## PART I:

# Boston's Recent Performance Trends

The story of Boston Public Schools' performance over the last ten years is complex. Looking at some metrics and time spans, BPS is performing well relative to other urban districts. Test scores and graduation rates have risen alongside access to educational opportunities such as pre-K and advanced placement (AP) courses. However, some of that growth has stagnated or reversed in the past five years. And across nearly every metric of success and student outcomes, equity challenges are deep. Growth and high performance have not been sufficient to close or even significantly narrow achievement and opportunity gaps for students historically marginalized by their race, ethnicity, family income, native language, or special education status.

As context, BPS demographic trends have shifted and enrollment has decreased in the past ten years. BPS currently serves approximately 56,000 students, about 70 percent of school-aged children living in the city of Boston.<sup>5</sup> According to BPS data, 34 percent of its students are African American, 42 percent are Hispanic/Latino, and 66 percent are economically disadvantaged.<sup>6</sup> BPS faces declining enrollment amidst competition for students from the charter sector, private schools, and neighboring school districts. From 2007 to 2017 BPS enrollment shrank by about 4,000 students, while the charter sector grew by over 5,500 students.<sup>7</sup> Declining enrollment has created pressure on BPS' budgets and buildings, as some school buildings and types of schools are under capacity, while others are overenrolled.<sup>8</sup> As this enrollment shift occurred, the percentage of black students in BPS declined from 40 percent to 32 percent, and the percentage of Hispanic students rose, from 35 to 42 percent.<sup>9</sup> One in three BPS students today are English learners, and 75 percent are designated as "high-need."<sup>10</sup>

**Data note:** There are some differences between BPS data and data reported by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) around enrollment and other metrics. BPS often includes Horace Mann charter schools in its reports. A Horace Mann charter school is a special designation for district-authorized charter schools under Massachusetts law. Other charter schools are known as Commonwealth charter schools. Because the state legally considers these schools to be separate districts, numbers reported by MA DESE are limited to BPS-run schools and exclude Horace Mann charters. Thus, high-level numbers on some metrics may appear slightly different in district vs. state reports. All data from state sources and from NAEP do not include Horace Mann charter schools or Commonwealth charter schools located in Boston.

More data on Boston enrollment is available in Appendix Figures 1-5. The remainder of this section delves into the performance data to examine BPS' strengths, weaknesses, and ongoing challenges.

## **BPS Has Increased Access to Educational Opportunities Along the P-12 Pipeline, but Inequities Persist**

BPS students today have more access to important educational opportunities than students did ten years ago. The city of Boston has invested heavily in pre-K access in BPS schools and in other community-based early childhood education settings. Total pre-K enrollment in BPS grew by 80 percent in the past ten years, from 1,700 students in 2007 to over 3,000 students in 2017.<sup>11</sup> In high school, BPS has increased the percentage of students with access to advanced placement coursework from 5 percent in 2007 to 11 percent as of 2017.<sup>12</sup>

BPS has also made significant strides in improving high school graduation rates and has halved the gap between BPS and Massachusetts statewide averages in the past ten years, as Figure 1, shows.

Serious and persistent gaps in graduation rates remain for historically disadvantaged subgroups of students. However, graduation rates are climbing for all BPS student subgroups.<sup>13</sup> Figure 2 shows graduation rates broken out by student subgroup over the past decade, and it shows particularly large gains among students with disabilities and English language learners.

Figure 1

### Boston Public Schools' Graduation Rates Are Rising Over Time<sup>14</sup>

Boston Public Schools and Massachusetts Average Graduation Rates, 2007-2017

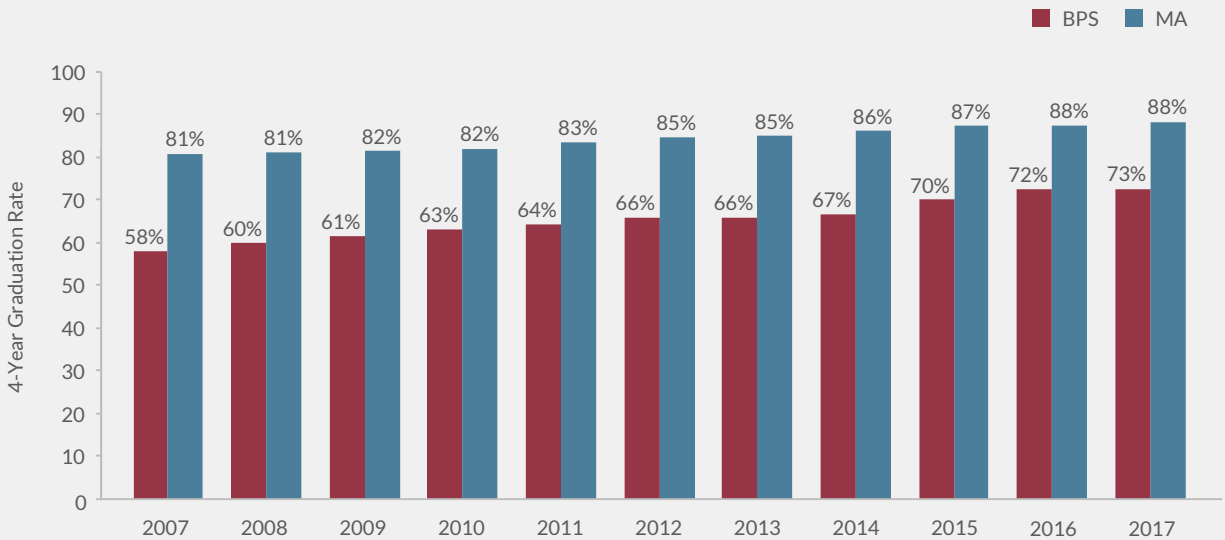
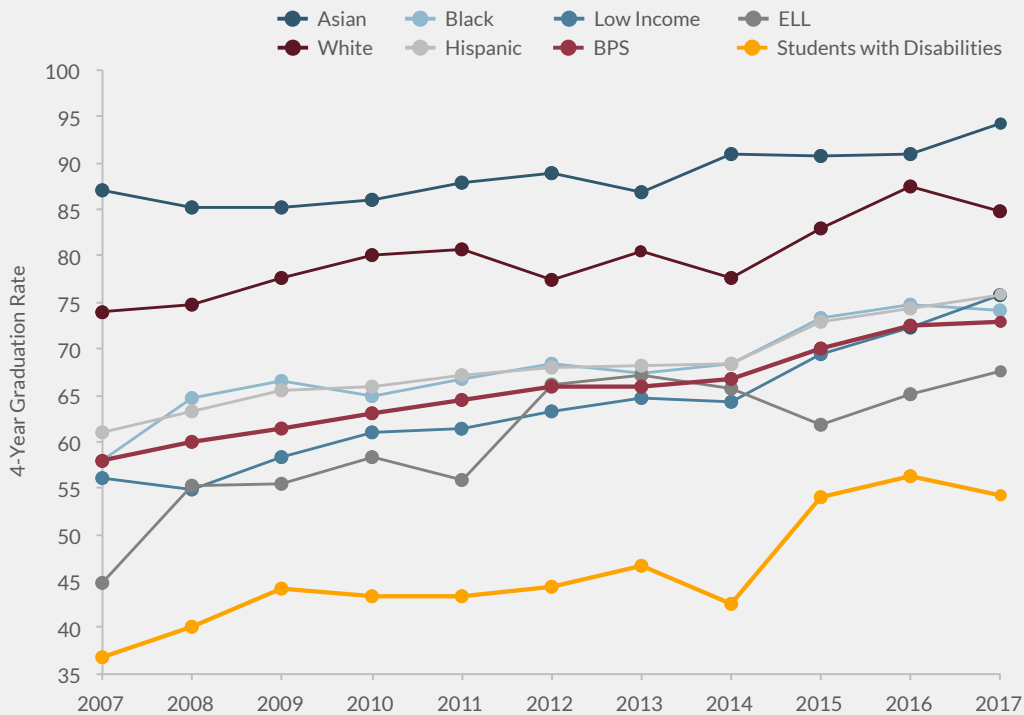


Figure 2

### Graduation Rates Have Risen for All Boston Public Schools Subgroups, Although Large Gaps Remain

Boston Public Schools Graduation Rates by Subgroups, 2007-2017



Source: MA DESE

Boston's gains at the high school level should also be understood in the context of equity gaps among different BPS schools. While overall graduation rates have risen and gaps have narrowed over time, BPS' high schools are heavily segregated by race, economic status, and student achievement. Boston's three selective exam schools enroll a disproportionate share of higher-income, white, and Asian students in BPS. A recent Harvard study offered potential recommendations to boost the diversity at those schools without reducing their selectivity,<sup>15</sup> but Boston residents should also question whether this system of high schools is productive. A rigorous academic study published in 2014 found no evidence that students admitted to exam schools had significantly better subsequent test scores or attended better colleges than peers who just missed the admissions cutoff point.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, a recent report focusing on the BPS high school students who were off-track to graduate found that these students were disproportionately likely to be black or Hispanic, and to be enrolled in an open enrollment or alternative high school.<sup>17</sup>

### **BPS Has Outperformed Other Large Cities on the NAEP TUDA Since 2003**

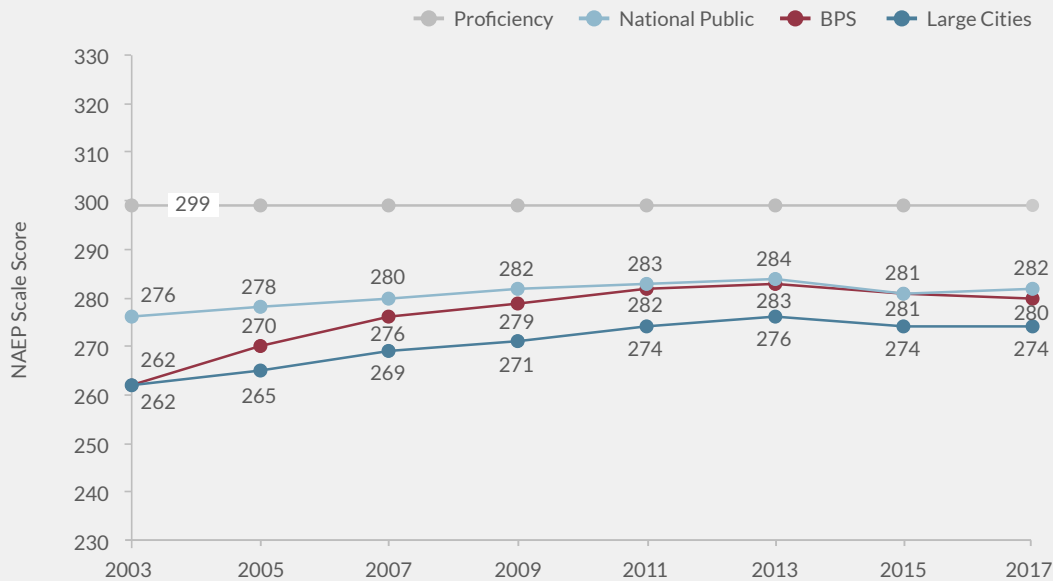
Boston is part of a small cohort of large urban districts that have participated in the National Assessment of Educational Progress' (NAEP) Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) since 2003, which allows researchers to track BPS students' results on a high-quality, low-stakes assessment. Since 2003, Boston students have consistently performed at or above the level of their peers in other TUDA cities on all subjects.<sup>18</sup> On some tests, the BPS average score is substantially above that of other cities; on the 2017 eighth-grade math test, for example, BPS outperformed the large city average by six points (Figure 3). BPS students even meet the nationwide public school averages on some NAEP tests, which is rare for an urban district with a relatively high concentration of poverty.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, BPS' performance has improved over the 14-year period in all subjects. BPS students' average scores were between 9 and 13 points higher in 2017 than they were in 2003, depending on the grade and subject level, as seen in Figure 3 and in Appendix Figures 6-8.<sup>20</sup> Between 2003 and 2009, Boston's rate of improvement outpaced that of other TUDA cities across grades and subjects—most notably in eighth-grade math (Figure 3). Since 2009, BPS growth on the NAEP has more closely mirrored the rate of improvement in other TUDA cities. An additional perspective is provided by a recent study looking at learning improvements between third and eighth grade in school districts across the country between 2009 and 2014. During that five-year period, researchers placed BPS students at the 70th percentile in growth among school districts nationwide.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 3

## Boston Public Schools' Achievement Scores Have Improved Substantially Over the Past 15 Years

NAEP TUDA Scale Scores: Boston, Large Cities, and National Public Average 8th Grade Math, 2003-2017



Source: NCES NAEP

### In the Past Five Years, BPS Performance Has Plateaued

Despite positive trends over the longer term, Boston's scores have mostly plateaued or even fallen in the past five years, depending on the grade and subject. As an example, Figure 3 shows that, of the remarkable 20-point improvement in eighth-grade math scores from 2003 to 2011, most of that occurred before 2013. In the last five years, Boston's performance in eighth-grade math has fallen by three points. BPS still leads the large city average on TUDA, but the pace of continued improvement has flattened.

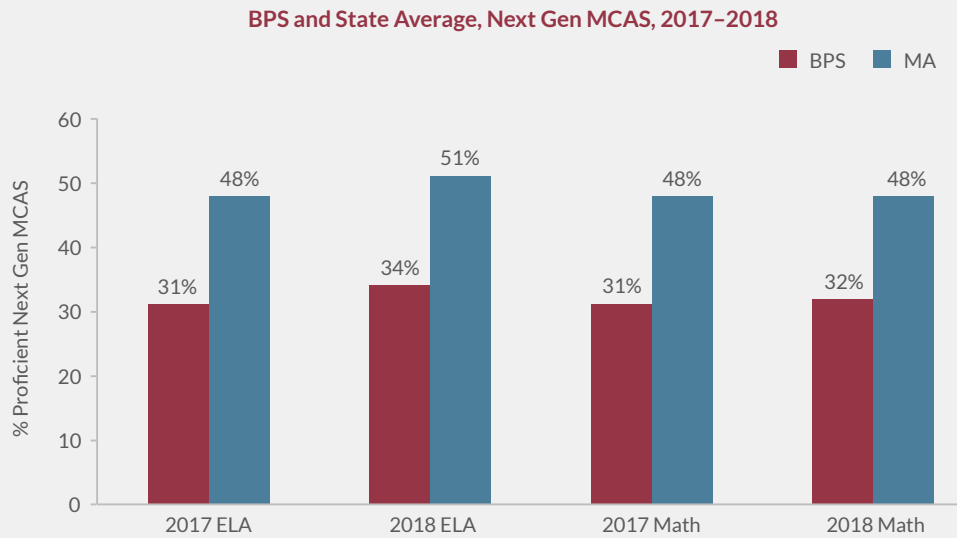
Similar trends are playing out in fourth grade (Appendix Figures 6-7). Fourth-grade math average scores grew by 13 points from 2003 to 2011, but since then, scores have fallen by four points. On the reading exam, Boston's fourth-grade scores improved markedly from 2003 to 2011, but they've bounced around since then and, as of 2017, were back to where they were in 2011. Eighth-grade reading appears to be on a different trajectory: Although scores flat-lined between 2011 and 2015, 2017 showed a recovery, with averages above any prior score (Appendix Figure 8).

The Massachusetts state test provides an additional lens on Boston students' academic performance. Changes in the Massachusetts test in recent years preclude analysis of trends in performance on the new "Next Gen" Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System

(MCAS), making it difficult to determine whether the improvement trajectories exhibited on TUDA are reflected on the state test. Still, the MCAS allows for a deeper look at how BPS students in grades three through eight perform compared to the rest of the state. In 2018, about a third of BPS students in grades three through eight achieved grade-level proficiency in math and reading. This represents incremental growth from the year prior, and is well below state averages on the Next Gen MCAS (Figure 4).

Figure 4

## Two-thirds of Boston Public Schools Students Are Not Proficient on State Exams



Source: MA DESE

### BPS' Achievement Gaps by Race, Ethnicity, and Other Student Subgroups Could Be Part of the Reason for Stagnating Scores

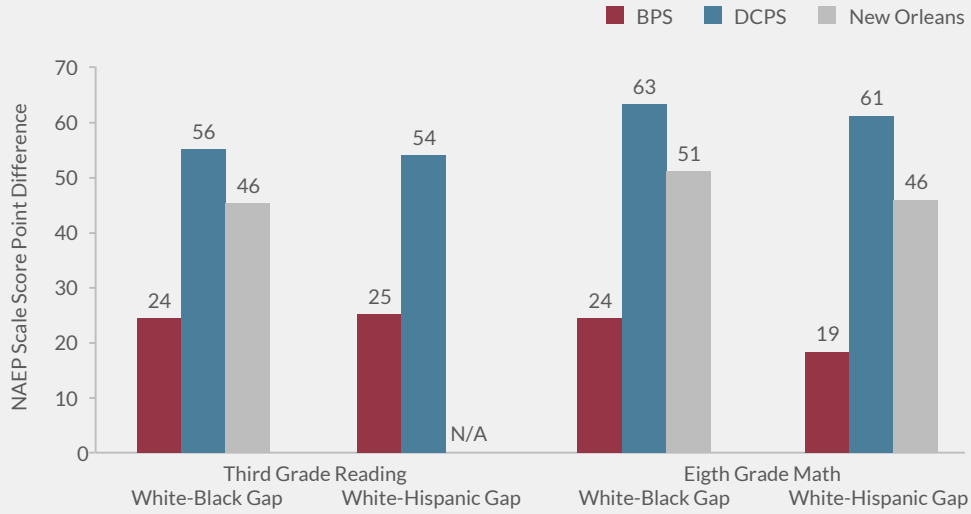
Like its large urban district peers, BPS faces the ongoing challenge of disparities in achievement along racial and ethnic lines. Notably, the size of the gaps in BPS appears to be smaller than in similar districts. According to data from the Stanford Education Data Archive,<sup>22</sup> which allows for comparisons across school districts by converting state test scores at all grade levels into equivalent NAEP scores, the white-black and white-Hispanic achievement gaps in BPS are roughly a third or even half the size of those in Washington, D.C., and New Orleans, depending on the grade and subject (Figure 5).

Nonetheless, the achievement gaps in BPS have been persistent over time, and may be part of the story behind BPS' stalled progress in recent years. On the eighth-grade math TUDA, performance among black and Hispanic students declined between 2011 and 2017 (Figure 6). Similar patterns are evident on the NAEP TUDA reading exam: Other than

Figure 5

### Boston Public Schools' Achievement Gaps Are Narrower Than Other Districts'

Selected Urban District Score Gaps Based on State Test Results, 2009-2015  
Transformed to NAEP Scale

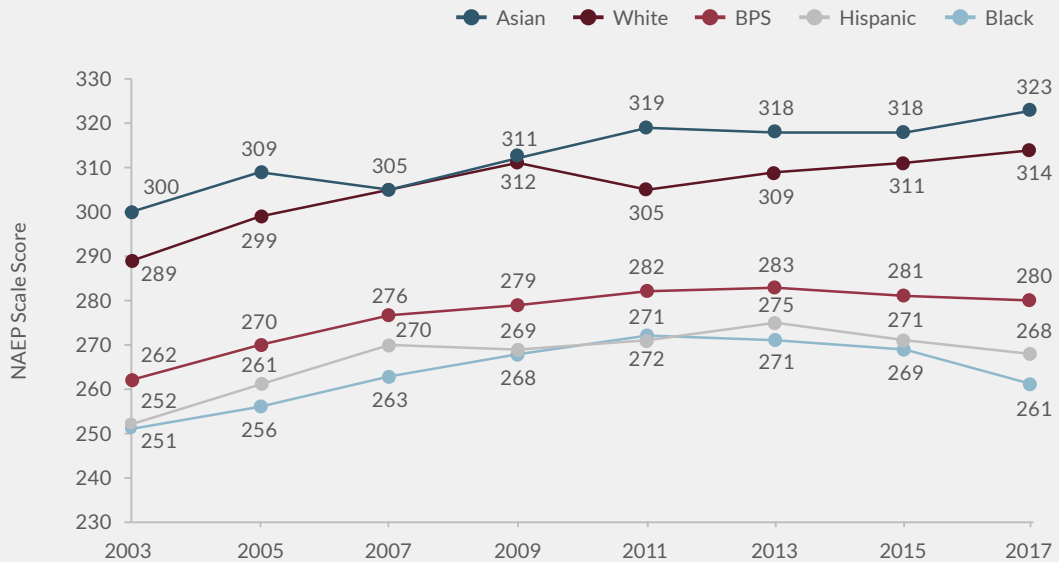


Source: NCES NAEP

Figure 6

### Boston Public Schools' Racial/Ethnic Gaps in NAEP TUDA Performance Have Increased

NAEP TUDA Scale Scores by Race/Ethnicity, BPS 8th Grade Math, 2003-2017



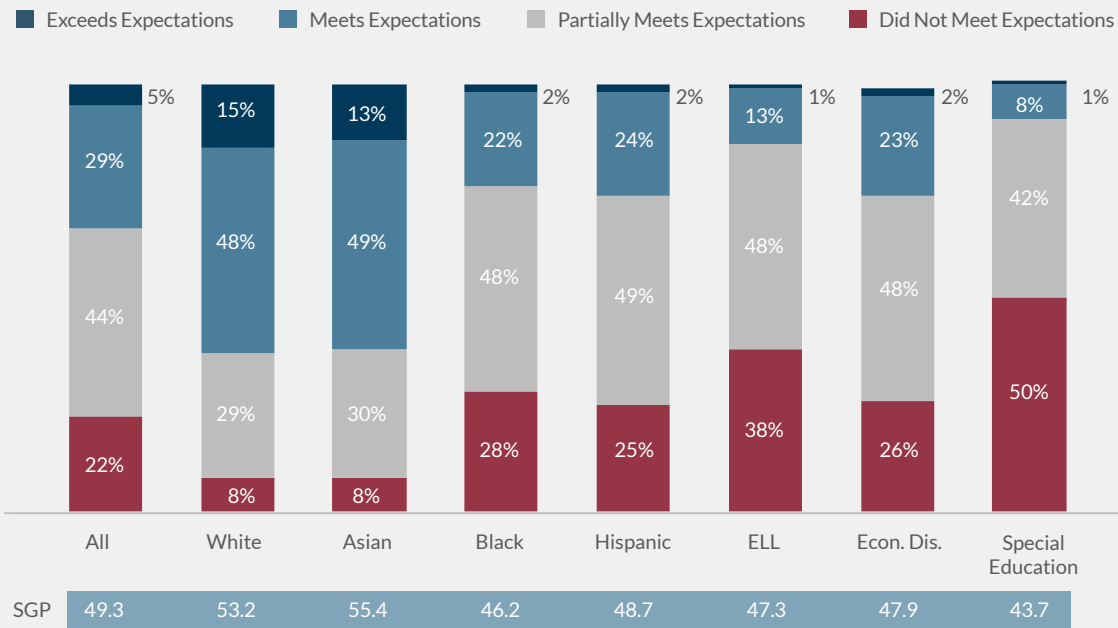
Source: NCES NAEP

Asian students, whose scores have risen over time, the reading scores of Boston’s fourth-grade white, black, and Hispanic students are all down since 2011. While the exact trends vary by grade and subject (see Appendix Figures 9-11), the overall patterns are similar. Similarly, wide achievement gaps persist in both ELA and math in Boston’s 2018 Next Gen MCAS scores for grades three through eight, as Figures 7 and 8 show. For example, only 24 percent of Boston’s black students and 26 percent of Hispanic students scored above grade-level proficiency in reading, compared to 63 percent of white and 62 percent of Asian students. Achievement gaps are about as bad or worse for English learners, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities.

To close those achievement gaps, BPS would need to accelerate growth among its lower-performing students. But that doesn’t appear to be happening either. Massachusetts uses a measure called student growth percentiles, or SGPs, to track each student’s growth compared to his or her peers with similar prior scores. For all subgroups of students within BPS, only white and Asian students had SGP scores that were higher than the district average in terms of growth. This is true in both reading and math, and it means that Boston’s lower-performing subgroups are not growing fast enough to materially close achievement gaps.

Figure 7 > State Exams Show Large Reading Performance Gaps in Boston Public Schools

**BPS Next Gen MCAS 2018 Performance Levels, By Subgroup ELA 3-8**

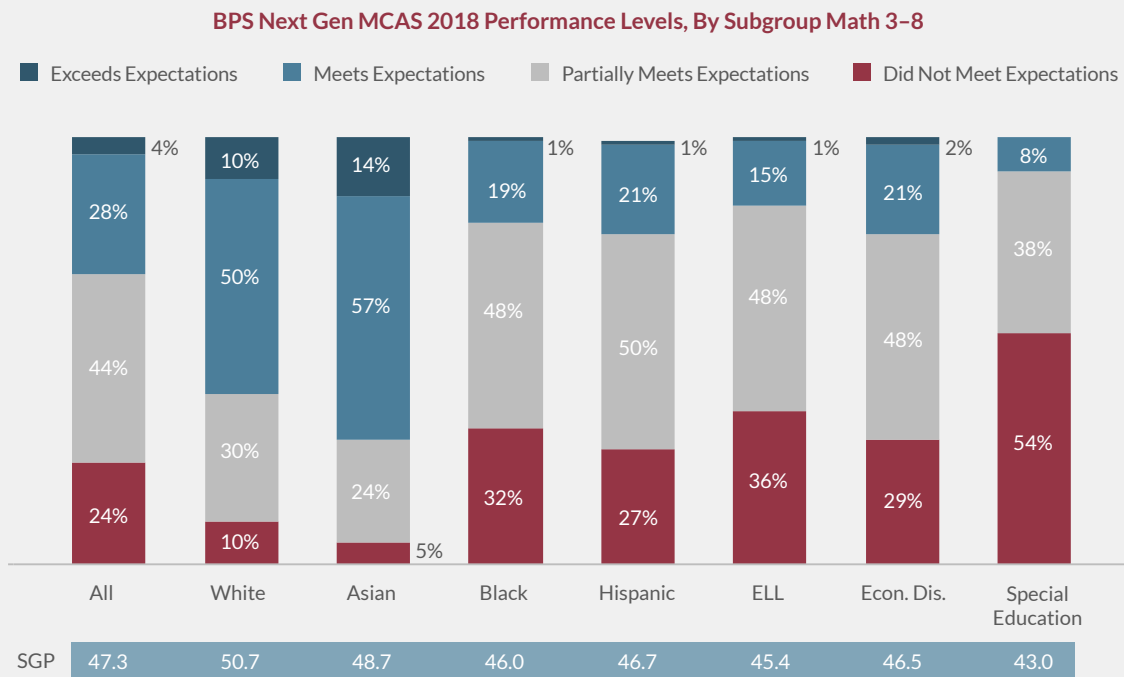


Source: MA DESE



Figure 8

## Gaps in Math Performance for Historically Disadvantaged Boston Public Schools Students



Source: MA DESE

Table 1

## Boston Public Schools Look Somewhat Similar Demographically to D.C. Public Schools and New Orleans

District	Total Enrollment, 2017-18	Economically Disadvantaged, 2017-18*	Students of Color	Students with Disabilities
Boston Public Schools	56,000**	66%	86%	20%
DC Public Schools	49,000	77%	85%	14%
New Orleans***	49,000	82%	92%	12%

\*These measures are defined at the state level and are not strictly comparable. Massachusetts defines as participation in one or more of these programs: SNAP, TAFDC, DCF Foster Care, and MassHealth.

\*\*Includes in-district Horace Mann charter schools authorized by the state and approved by the Boston School Committee.

\*\*\*All public schools in Orleans Parish, including charter schools.

Source: BPS At A Glance Fact Sheet, 2017-18, District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, Louisiana State Department of Education

## Meanwhile, Achievement Levels in Similar Urban Districts Continue to Approach Boston's

Boston students once outperformed their peers in cities like New Orleans and Washington, D.C., by wide margins, but those margins have narrowed in recent years.<sup>23</sup> DC Public Schools (DCPS) and New Orleans are interesting points of comparison for Boston because they are similarly sized, with approximately 50,000 students, and similar student demographics in some respects (Table 1). Unlike Boston, D.C. and New Orleans have historically been considered very low-performing districts, but they have made significant reforms in the past 15 years that may have helped change their achievement trajectory.

Boston still outperforms these cities in almost all academic metrics, but its lead is shrinking. A dataset created by Stanford researchers that allows for comparisons across state lines indicates that these peer cities are catching up to Boston in academic performance.<sup>24</sup> This dataset converts state test scores into comparable NAEP scale scores. Figures 9 A and B show Boston's performance on state tests as mapped onto NAEP scale scores, allowing for comparisons to other cities even in years, grades, and places without NAEP TUDA results (like New Orleans). For example, in third-grade reading (Figure 9A), in 2009 Boston students outperformed DC Public Schools (DCPS) students by 14 points and New Orleans students by 20, but those gaps had shrunk roughly in half by 2015, to 7 and 11 points respectively. In eighth-grade math, shown in Figure 9B, Boston's lead shrank from 28 and 25 points to 23 and 14 points, respectively.

### Can BPS Maintain Its Leading Status and Successfully Close Gaps?

The examination of Boston's performance trends over the past decade points to some good news and some challenges for the near future. In general, Boston's performance on standardized tests has tracked the national trends since the early 2000s, but Boston made faster progress when the nation as a whole was improving, and Boston's slowdown in the past five years has been more pronounced. Furthermore, while Boston continues to outperform many other large urban districts, some peer cities have instituted reforms, as seen in the sidebar on the next page, that have contributed to more rapid progress in recent years compared to BPS. Meanwhile, BPS has struggled to make a dent in persistent racial and ethnic disparities in test scores and graduation rates. Without the launch of new and innovative initiatives to improve equity and address stagnating achievement trends, BPS could be at risk of losing its status as a national leader in pre-K-12 education.

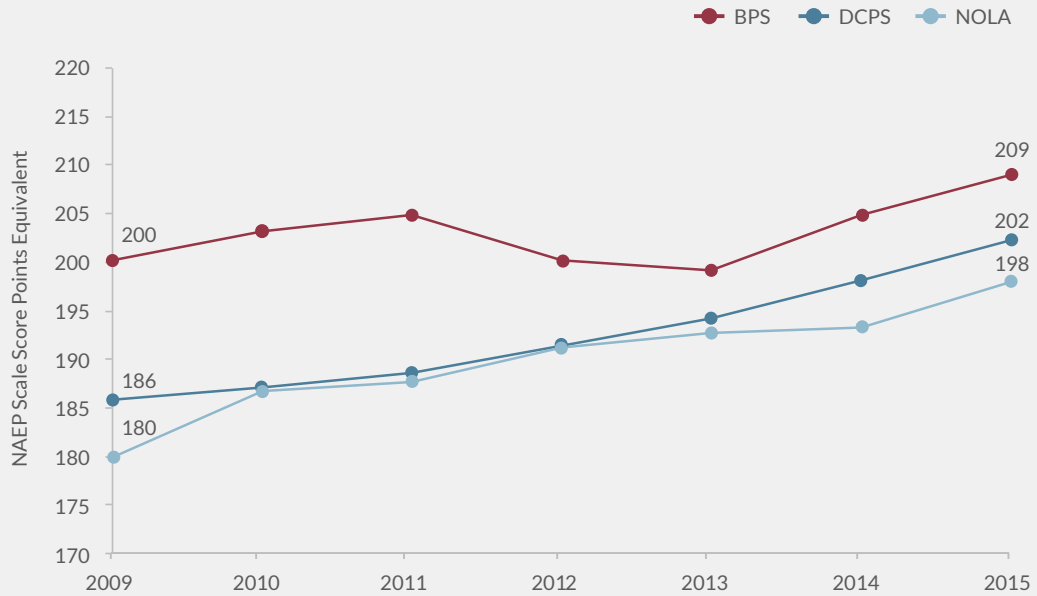
In Part II of this document, we provide context for Boston's performance trends by exploring some of the key policies and initiatives implemented in BPS over the last ten years, as identified by a variety of Boston stakeholders. Our interviews with these local leaders provide insight into which policies are viewed as most impactful and where stakeholders see opportunities for improvement. Their perspectives on the last decade in BPS policy also suggest some potential key areas of focus for moving forward.

Figure 9

## Boston Public Schools' Performance Advantage Over DC Public Schools and New Orleans is Shrinking

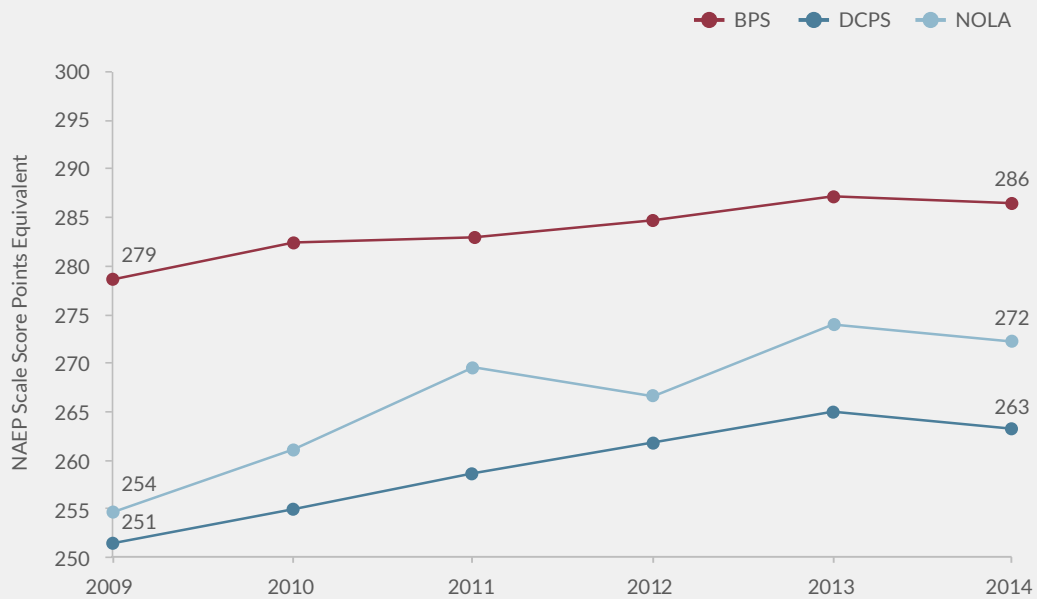
A.

**Selected Urban District Performance Based on State Test Results, 2009–2015  
Transformed to NAEP Scale, Third Grade Reading**



B.

**Selected Urban District Performance Based on State Test Results, 2009–2015  
Transformed to NAEP Scale, Eighth Grade Math**



Source: Sean F. Reardon et al., "Stanford Education Data Archive (Version 2.0)," 2017, <http://purl.stanford.edu/db586ns4974>.

## How are other cities pursuing reforms?

As the data in Part I show, Boston generally does better than other large cities in many respects, but there are some signs that historically lower-performing urban districts like New Orleans and Washington, D.C., are improving rapidly and approaching BPS' achievement levels. What are the reform strategies these districts have pursued, and how might that set them apart from Boston?

Several of our Bellwether colleagues recently released “Eight Cities,” a project to tell stories about reform strategies and successful academic results in cities that have each pursued elements of a strategy commonly referred to as the “portfolio model.”<sup>i</sup> These cities include Denver; New Orleans; Washington, D.C.; Newark and Camden, New Jersey; Chicago; New York City; and Oakland, California. The Center for Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) defines the portfolio strategy primarily as a shift in orientation for school districts away from compliance and directly managing each school in the same way, and toward overseeing performance in a diverse range of school choices.<sup>ii</sup> There are many variants of the portfolio strategy, but it is usually characterized by increasing school-level autonomy; increasing high-quality choices for families among traditional, charter, and other types of schools; student-based budgeting; performance-based school accountability; and performance supports for schools.

The portfolio strategy has won the support of many large urban districts (many of whom Bellwether has worked with in the past or is working with currently).<sup>iii</sup> Because the portfolio strategy encompasses a range of elements and ideas, there are few fully generalizable studies of its results, or indications of whether some elements are more important than others. Results from individual cities have been mixed. For example, in New Orleans, researchers have found that the transformation of New Orleans schools following Hurricane Katrina significantly increased student achievement, graduation rates, and postsecondary outcomes.<sup>iv</sup> But other districts, such as Indianapolis and Cleveland, that have pursued portfolio models have not seen similar improvements. These mixed results speak to the variety of design and implementation choices, as well as environmental factors in each city, that can shape success.

The eight cities featured in Bellwether's recent report, as well as other districts, have also pursued reforms that do not necessarily fall under the portfolio umbrella. Lawrence, Massachusetts, is an in-state example of a district turnaround strategy that used multiple kinds of central office and school improvement strategies to affect academic results under state receivership.<sup>v</sup> Districts like Denver, Memphis, and Springfield, Massachusetts, have all created variants on “innovation zones” where a subset of schools has increased autonomy and flexibility to pursue improvement strategies.<sup>vi</sup>

Any one of these other approaches may or may not be the best direction for Boston in general and BPS specifically. As Part II discusses in detail, BPS has often been ambivalent or unclear on reform strategies, and in recent years, leadership has not always clearly articulated priorities. Big changes in district strategy should not be based solely on what is trendy or what has worked elsewhere.

*Continued on next page*

But one theme that fast-improving cities tend to share, and BPS appears to lack, is a clearly articulated vision for improvement, an aligned set of priorities that will contribute to the district’s goals, and an ability to stick with the vision and priorities long enough to implement them.

Table 2, below, shows the wide variety in governance and reform approaches in Boston and four other cities—D.C., New Orleans, Denver, and Newark. This demonstrates the variety of shapes city-centric reforms can take.

### Signature Reforms and Governance in Selected Cities Show Differences in Reform Approaches<sup>vii</sup>

City	Mayoral Control	Student Based Budget	Within-District Charters	City Charter Sector 2017-18	Unified Enrollment	Innovation Network	School Performance Framework
Boston	✓	✓	✓	19%			✓*
Washington, DC	✓	✓		45%	✓		✓*
New Orleans		✓	✓	92%	✓		✓*
Denver		✓	✓	18%	✓	✓	✓
Newark		✓		30%	✓		✓

\*School Performance Framework is created/managed by the state, not the district.

- i Bellwether Education Partners, “Eight Cities,” last updated October 23, 2018, <https://www.eightcities.org/blog/introduction>.
- ii Robin Lake et al., “Sticking Points: How School Districts Experience Implementing the Portfolio Strategy,” CRPE, October 2016, <https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-sticking-points.pdf>.
- iii Matt Barnum, “Advocates of the Portfolio Model for Improving Schools Say It Works. Are They Right?,” Chalkbeat, December 8, 2017, <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/us/2017/12/08/advocates-of-the-portfolio-model-for-improving-schools-say-it-works-are-they-right/>.
- iv Douglas Harris and Matthew Larsen, “What Effect Did the New Orleans School Reforms Have on Student Achievement, High School Graduation, and College Outcomes?,” Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, July 15, 2018, <https://educationresearchalliancenaola.org/publications/what-effect-did-the-new-orleans-school-reforms-have-on-student-achievement-high-school-graduation-and-college-outcomes>.
- v Education Resource Strategies, “Back from the Brink: A Case Study of Lawrence Public Schools,” April 2015, [https://www.erstrategies.org/tap/lawrence\\_public\\_schools\\_case\\_study](https://www.erstrategies.org/tap/lawrence_public_schools_case_study).
- vi Susan Patrick and Susan Gentz, “Innovation Zones: Creating Policy Flexibility for Personalized Learning,” issue brief, iNACOL, March 2016, <https://www.inacol.org/resource/innovation-zones-creating-policy-flexibility-for-personalized-learning/>.
- vii Mayoral control refers to shifting authority over schools from a traditionally elected school committee/board to a mayor. Student-based budgeting, discussed in more detail on page 25, is the apportionment of funds to schools primarily based on student population and need. Cities with within-district charters have the ability to authorize charter schools under the authority of the school district. Unified enrollment systems, discussion in more detail on page 28, allow for families to submit a single application for the district and charter schools of their choice and be matched to a single school. And finally, an innovation network is the ability for districts to grant waivers from district and/or state processes and policies to a subset of schools to pursue innovative ideas and performance improvement.

## PART II: Boston's Recent Reform Efforts

In order to gain a better understanding of how BPS can rejuvenate progress in the near future, this section takes a look at how Boston has arrived at its current status. The following narrative examines the policies BPS has attempted to implement in the past decade, and offers some potential insights into what factors may be contributing to or hindering continued progress.

This section focuses on the initiatives launched or expanded during the ten years since Tom Payzant's 11-year superintendency ended in 2007. Since then, education policy in BPS has been primarily driven by two superintendencies: those of Carol Johnson (August 2007–June 2013), and Tommy Chang (July 2015–July 2018), with John McDonough serving as interim superintendent for two school years, from July 2013 to June 2015, and Laura Perille starting as interim superintendent in July 2018. In addition to the data analysis described above, we also conducted interviews with a sample of stakeholders representing different perspectives in the Boston education sector, including: the BPS central office, the mayor's office, the school committee, school leaders, community and parent advocates, local foundations, and teacher advocates.

Our interviews with these fifteen stakeholders were loosely guided by the strategic plans that both Superintendents Johnson and Chang developed at the beginning of each of their tenures. Looking across these plans, we identified six areas of policy that broadly align to the key strategies in each administration: human capital and performance management; instruction, curriculum, and assessment; differentiated strategies and supports; stakeholder relationships and communication; central office and governance; and financial

strategies and planning (see Appendix Figure 12 for how these six areas align with the two strategic plans). We added school assignment, enrollment, and choice as a seventh policy area, because although it was not an explicit feature of either strategic plan, changes in school assignment have been an important topic of discussion and study in Boston in recent years.

The sections below describe the themes that arose in our interviews relevant to major BPS initiatives within each policy area. For each topic area, we briefly describe related initiatives, note any external research or evidence, and then draw on our interview comments to provide some perspective on how Boston leaders perceive the reforms' successes and failures. Where relevant, we point out examples from other districts that have taken a different approach to similar challenges.

## Human Capital

Human capital policy has been one of the most significant and successful levers of reform in BPS in the past decade. Boston's most significant recent human capital reforms occurred in 2014 under the leadership of Interim Superintendent John McDonough. McDonough found workarounds within the existing teacher contract to introduce **mutual consent hiring**, accelerate **hiring timelines**, and **reduce the role of seniority** in hiring decisions.<sup>25</sup> These changes meant principals had more authority to shape their instructional teams, and fewer teaching positions were left unfilled at the start of the school year. In the old system, teacher seniority and certification were the primary basis for hiring, and school leaders had reason to hide or manipulate open positions to avoid forced placement of an undesired teacher.<sup>26</sup>

At the beginning of the 2014-15 school year BPS filled 63 percent of its open teaching roles before July, compared with only 9 percent in the year before.<sup>27</sup> This reduced staffing uncertainty for principals and teachers, and put BPS in a better competitive position compared with Commonwealth Charter Schools (which operate independent of BPS) and suburban districts. BPS found that teachers hired earlier in the year, under the mutual consent system, were more likely to receive a positive performance rating and to outperform the teacher they had replaced.<sup>28</sup> Another goal of the human capital initiative was to increase the diversity of the teacher workforce; however, the racial and ethnic composition of the BPS teaching workforce has not changed in the ensuing years.<sup>29</sup> A full evaluation of the effects of the human capital reforms would be valuable, but does not appear to currently exist.

In interviews, human capital was the most widely cited area of positive reform of the past decade; half of the interviewees pointed to mutual consent hiring as a key policy that has had a substantial positive impact on BPS students, and over a quarter also named early hiring. The stakeholders noted the positive effects of mutual consent hiring on fit between teachers and schools, principal job satisfaction, and teacher ratings.



## Highlights from Peer Cities

A recent evaluation of DC Public Schools' IMPACT teacher evaluation system found that the system boosted performance among teachers facing consequences for their results, and led to higher turnover among low-rated teachers and improved retention among highly rated teachers. This was found to have positively affected students.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the general positive perception of the human capital reforms, an unsolved problem in the new system is how to handle teachers left without a permanent role at the end of the hiring cycle—a problem with which other cities like New York have also struggled.<sup>31</sup> Currently, BPS places these staff in non-teaching roles at a teacher's salary, at an estimated cost of \$34 million.<sup>32</sup> BPS continues to work to reduce the number of teachers remaining in this pool, by tightening up on evaluation and accountability processes. Still, several interviewees felt that BPS needs a more efficient solution, and should design a system that quickly and fairly differentiates between high-potential teachers in this group versus teachers who should be let go from the district entirely.

### Central Office, Governance, and Finances

One of the hallmark characteristics of BPS is its governance model; in 1992, BPS became one of the first urban school districts in the country placed under **mayoral control**. This governance model has since become more common among large urban districts such as New York City, Chicago, and the District of Columbia. Mayoral control often begins in low-performing districts with the aim of changing district power and accountability structures in order to accelerate improvement. While this sort of governance change is by no means a panacea, researchers have found it can lead to more coherence and accountability and, as a result, faster student performance gains.<sup>33</sup> In Boston's model, the mayor appoints all members of the local school committee, who hire and oversee the superintendent. Practically, this means that Boston mayors have a strong voice in district priorities and decisions, even if they are not deeply involved in day-to-day governance. This model can also put added pressure on the mayor to stand behind hard decisions when reforms are implemented in the district.

Despite the potential for mayoral control to improve coherence, Boston's four superintendent transitions in the past ten years mean that the BPS central office has undergone several internal **reorganizations and priority shifts**. This has been a hindrance to momentum in the district. Some initiatives that began with great fanfare have fallen away, while others have continued. Several interviewees noted that confidence in BPS leadership among community groups has diminished as high-profile initiatives in which they had invested time and energy foundered through implementation and leadership changes. Interviewees recommended



the next superintendent work to rebuild external trust, and quickly clarify which previous initiatives and reforms they plan to continue.

One source of perceived inconsistency in BPS is the **tension between school autonomy and centralization**. Whereas some of Boston's peer cities like Denver and New Orleans have taken a clearer stance on different kinds of autonomous schools, Boston interviewees noted a lack of clarity on this question, resulting in uneven implementation of various initiatives. For example, pilot schools, innovation schools, turnaround schools, Horace Mann charter schools, and other school types have been given varying degrees of autonomy by different leaders. Meanwhile, efforts to standardize and drive curriculum, instructional rigor, and equity from the central office have waxed and waned. Several interviewees expressed hope that the next superintendent could help clarify which decisions should be district-wide, and which are better left to individual school leaders. For example, some stakeholders advocated for a more aggressive accountability stance, including the possibility of closure or restart for persistently under-enrolled and low-performing schools, while others emphasized a need for more effective supports at those schools. One interviewee felt that BPS should do more to guarantee consistency in certain staff positions and programs in every school (e.g., art teachers, literacy coaches).

In terms of finance and budgets, BPS' most consequential change in the past decade was its shift to a **weighted student funding model** in fiscal year 2011. In a weighted student funding model, each school receives funds based on their enrollment, weighted with additional resources for students in need of extra supports, such as special education students and English language learners.<sup>34</sup> This model aims to improve resource equity among schools, respond more quickly to shifts in enrollment, and give principals more control over some budgetary and staffing decisions.

Several interviewees felt positively about the effects of weighted student funding. They noted that this model is more transparent and emphasizes equity. But some interviewees and recent research have indicated ways in which the structure and implementation of the formula could be improved. A recent report from EY-Parthenon on BPS high schools found that BPS' budget processes do not equitably support high schools serving large concentrations of at-risk students, especially in alternative and open enrollment schools.<sup>35</sup> The report also noted how school choice systems (explained in more detail below), a highly mobile student population, and declining district enrollment overall have created disproportionate budget instability and shortfalls in certain schools. Thus, while the shift to weighted student funding signaled a desire to address equity concerns in the district, the research suggests that more work needs to be done to ensure that the policy translates into a more equitable system.

## Instruction, Curriculum, and Assessment

Most major shifts in BPS instruction, curriculum, and assessment in the past decade have been **driven primarily by state decisions**, and this does not appear to be a major focus area within BPS. Examples include the adoption of the new Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and multiple changes in state testing policies.<sup>36</sup> Massachusetts' rigorous standards and assessments are likely among the factors contributing to the higher proficiency levels of Boston students compared to students in other large urban districts. Since 2007, BPS leaders have introduced various curriculum and instructional initiatives, but few stood out to interviewees for impact or sticking power. In fact, a full third of interviewees expressed the view that although there was an effective push to improve math instruction under Superintendent Payzant, the district has lost its focus on improving curriculum and instruction in the past decade.

The **BPS Essentials for Instructional Equity** (the Essentials), introduced in 2017,<sup>37</sup> represent the most recent effort to regain that focus. The Essentials include 1) safe, healthy, and sustaining learning environments, 2) learning experiences for access and agency, 3) cognitively demanding tasks and instruction, and 4) access for learning.<sup>38</sup> A few stakeholders acknowledged this initiative as promising and appreciated that BPS has created guidance, tools, and professional development offerings around these principles. At the same time, these interviewees worried that the Essentials had not been well grounded in classrooms to date, and wondered if a new superintendent would sustain the model.



### Highlights from Peer Cities

New Orleans has been part of an effort to improve the quality of curricular materials led by the Louisiana State Department of Education. The state facilitates teacher-led curriculum evaluations, and publishes ratings. The district then encourages schools to adopt highly rated curricula.

## School Assignment, Enrollment, and Choice Policies

Boston's history of school choice and school assignment is closely intertwined with the city's longstanding struggle to reduce school segregation, often impelled by court orders.<sup>39</sup> Until recently, a 25-year-old school choice system divided the city into three geographic zones and gave families the choice to enroll within those zones, in a school within a mile of their house, or in a citywide school. This zone system, which ended in 2014, was intended to give a broad array of choices within the district, but in practice BPS schools remained segregated along racial and socioeconomic lines.<sup>40</sup> Many students traveled far from home for school, putting pressure on the district's transportation budget.

Beginning in 2014, BPS introduced a new “**Home Based School Choice Plan**,”<sup>41</sup> which eliminated the zones. Each household now has an individualized list of schools within a one-mile radius. If this list does not include at least two high-performing schools and four schools in the top half of district performance rankings, the district will add extra choices farther away.<sup>42</sup> One of the rationales for this change was to balance the district’s cost of transporting students across the city with providing families high-quality school choices.

Despite the intent to improve educational opportunity in the district, in practice the new school assignment system appears to have instead **exacerbated existing inequities**. A recent evaluation by the Boston Area Research Initiative (BARI) led by researchers from Harvard and Northeastern University found that the new system worsened segregation and reduced access to high-quality schools for disadvantaged students in some neighborhoods, because it does not account for the unequal geographic distribution of and demand for high-performing schools.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the system’s overall effects on student transportation were modest: average commute times for kindergarteners shortened by just 1.5 minutes, and commute times for sixth-grade students shortened by only 20 seconds. The changes were somewhat larger among students with especially long school commutes, but the study found that these modest transportation improvements came at the expense of access to higher-quality schools farther away.

At the high school level, school assignment policy may magnify pre-existing disparities. Just over half (53 percent) of BPS high school students attend “regular” open enrollment high schools. The rest attend a variety of specialized schools: 24 percent of students attend one of three selective exam schools;<sup>44</sup> 10 percent of students attend schools with selective admissions or portfolio application processes not based on test scores; 4 percent attend Horace Mann charter schools that admit students based on a citywide lottery; and 10 percent attend a specialized program or alternative school. Without built-in protections, this system provides advantages to families with the resources to navigate complex admissions processes. According to the BARI and Parthenon studies, students in exam schools are disproportionately high-income, white, and Asian, and students who remain in open enrollment schools are more likely to be academically off track and have other complex educational needs. Thus, while the variety of school types have evolved to offer different choices for families, in practice the system appears to have deepened segregation and concentrated academically struggling students in a small number of schools.<sup>45</sup> This system has likely contributed to gaps in graduation rates and other academic outcomes discussed in Part I above.



## Highlights from Peer Cities

In 2018, Denver’s Unified Enrollment System successfully facilitated first-choice school matches for over 80 percent of 27,000 participating families. Denver also recently expanded its “enrollment zones”—neighborhoods with multiple guaranteed enrollment choices—with socioeconomic diversity and school quality in mind. Highly sought-after schools are invited to participate in a pilot program to set aside seats for low-income students.

Interviewees were frustrated by these shortcomings of the school assignment policies, before and after the new home-based assignment system was introduced. As several people pointed out, the underlying struggle with BPS’ school assignment policy is one of scarcity: There are not enough seats in highly desirable schools to go around, no matter how the choice algorithm is deployed. Some interviewees felt the district had prioritized the voices of more privileged and politically powerful families over the needs of disadvantaged students and communities.

This report does not focus on Boston’s Commonwealth Charter School sector, but as that sector in Boston has continued to grow and show strong academic results, there have been calls for more collaboration and cross-sector learning among BPS, the charter sector, and other educational institutions in the city. The Boston Compact, which began in 2010 under Mayor Menino and continued under Mayor Walsh, has been the primary venue for those collaborative efforts.<sup>46</sup>

For several years, the Boston Compact has tried to move plans forward for a **unified cross-sector enrollment system**. This would allow families to apply to Commonwealth Charter schools and different BPS schools with one application.<sup>47</sup> Unified enrollment systems streamline processes for families, ideally reduce bureaucratic barriers to enrollment in high-quality schools, and make enrollment processes more efficient for school leaders by ensuring that students do not hold on to seats on multiple school waitlists simultaneously.<sup>48</sup> For example, families in Camden and Newark, New Jersey; Denver; Washington, D.C.; Indianapolis; and New Orleans can all apply to multiple types of schools using one common application.<sup>49</sup> By integrating charter and district school enrollment, these districts aim to lower enrollment process barriers that can have an outsized effect on disadvantaged families, and yield more actionable data on the demand for schools across the public system. However, in the most recent attempts to introduce such a system in Boston, the idea of unified enrollment became entangled with political struggles over budget shortfalls and the 2016 vote to lift the cap on charter school growth.<sup>50</sup> Some interviewees also noted a lack of strong public discussion and community engagement about this proposed system. Progress on this idea is on hold.

## Differentiated Strategies and Supports

One of Boston's most notable successes in the effort to increase equity is **expanding early childhood education access and quality**. Boston's pre-K programs are nationally noted for quality, often exceeding standards set by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).<sup>51</sup> The city of Boston's pre-K programs use a mixed delivery system of school-based and community-based early childhood education providers. Over half (55 percent) of Boston's 4-year-old pre-K students attend school-based pre-K in BPS.<sup>52</sup> Recognizing the high demand for more high-quality pre-K seats, BPS is working to raise the quality of instruction across pre-K classrooms. BPS emphasizes a child-led, play-based curriculum that is well regarded by experts and local stakeholders.<sup>53</sup> As the *Boston Quality Inventory 2016* reports, the average level of quality is relatively high, but high-quality pre-K seats are not always available in the neighborhoods that need them most.<sup>54</sup> The full long-term effects of BPS' pre-K investments remain to be seen, but early signs are positive.

A handful of interviewees also lauded Superintendent Chang's focus on "**culturally and linguistically sustaining practices (CLSP)**" as one of the most positive developments in BPS policy over the past decade. Under this initiative, the district defined a set of CLSP competencies that all BPS employees should have, including: "awareness/consciousness of the structural and cultural biases that inform our systems and personal cultural views"; "authentic learning of/relationship building with communities, parents, and students"; and "the adaptation of practice to build on assets and match needs based on the foundation of the prior two competencies."<sup>55</sup> The implementation plan called for supporting the integration of CLSP into curriculum, programs, and accountability systems, and included a professional learning series for all school leaders in 2016-17 to prepare them to lead this work.

Stakeholders appreciated that Superintendent Chang had highlighted the need to focus on and improve CLSP throughout BPS, and noted that this level of investment in cultural competency was something new and meaningful to traditionally marginalized families. That said, the proponents of this work also acknowledged that the initiative had just begun and that it remains to be seen whether the strategy will continue and, if so, whether it will have an impact on student outcomes.

BPS also recently instituted new policies to **encourage greater classroom inclusion** for special education students.<sup>56</sup> Approximately 20 percent of BPS students are eligible for special education services, which is a higher percentage than in other regional or national peer districts.<sup>57</sup> Federal law requires that students with disabilities be educated in the "least restrictive environment" to support their learning needs.<sup>58</sup> Several external reports found that BPS was falling short in this regard. A 2009 report by the Council of the Great City Schools, commissioned by then-Superintendent Johnson, found that BPS did not provide for equitable special education services within each school zone, and did not ensure that special education students were included in general education

classes whenever possible.<sup>59</sup> A 2013 internal working group found that BPS educated over 42 percent of its students with disabilities in separate classrooms, as opposed to being included in regular classrooms, and Boston's rate is much higher than in other Massachusetts districts.<sup>60</sup> In response, BPS expanded its inclusive schools network and issued new policies to schools around inclusive practices.<sup>61</sup>

A third of the stakeholders interviewed identified the push for inclusion as a positive initiative within BPS, especially given the high rate of students with disabilities. Still, nearly the same number of interviewees felt that inclusion policies were not advancing quickly enough, as evidenced by the large, persistent disparities in MCAS achievement for students with disabilities (see Figures 6 and 7). These interviewees felt that implementation of inclusion policies was not fully supported with the extra resources, staffing, and guidance teachers needed to effectively lead an inclusive classroom. They were particularly disturbed by the persistently high proportion of students in substantially separate settings, and the ongoing problem of disproportionate referral of boys of color to special education.

## Planning, Operations, and Facilities

In 2017, Mayor Walsh announced the launch of **BuildBPS**, a ten-year facilities master plan.<sup>62</sup> BuildBPS calls for a \$1 billion investment in building construction and updates. Many of BPS' 134 school buildings are in need of substantial updates in critical areas such as ventilation and handicapped accessibility; however, the district also faces declining enrollment and many of its schools are under-enrolled, especially at the middle and high school level.<sup>63</sup> BuildBPS seeks to upgrade and right-size buildings to serve projected enrollment in various grade levels (from the current capacity of 69,100 seats to 55,500 seats, which more closely matches current enrollment).<sup>64</sup>

Stakeholders who discussed BuildBPS (a third of all interviewees) appreciated the need for a facilities master plan, and noted the depth of data analysis on enrollment, choice, and programmatic needs that inform the BuildBPS plan. However, all of these stakeholders also voiced frustration with the implementation of the plan, noting that milestones for progress are already behind schedule one year into the plan. Some also expressed skepticism that schools in lower-income neighborhoods would receive equitable facilities investments.

In 2018, as part of BuildBPS, district leaders signaled their intention to shift to new, more consistent **grade configurations** for schools: K-6 and 7-12, without dedicated middle schools. At the time, Superintendent Chang argued that more consistent grade configurations would mean less educational transitions for families and students.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, exam schools begin in seventh grade, meaning students often leave non-exam middle schools in seventh or eighth grade. It is unclear at this stage whether, when, and how this shift in grade configurations will move forward in BPS schools.<sup>66</sup> Stakeholders identified this attempted shift as another example of a BPS initiative currently in limbo, with large potential consequences for families and schools.

## Stakeholder and Community Engagement

Stakeholder and community engagement is an important thread that runs through all other BPS reform initiatives. On the positive side, several of the perceived successes in BPS in the past decade came about through external partnerships with nonprofits, funders, and/or postsecondary institutions. Examples of **notable external partnerships** that were praised by multiple interviewees include:

- The Lynch Leadership Academy, a principal training and support program housed at Boston College serving district, charter, and Catholic schools in high-need communities;<sup>67</sup>
- The Success Boston college completion initiative, with BPS, the city of Boston, the Boston Foundation, local higher education institutions, and community nonprofit partners; and
- The BPS Arts Expansion, a funder collaborative that funds weekly, year-round arts education for BPS students, led by EdVestors.<sup>68</sup>

That said, feedback from interviewees and many recent media reports suggest that BPS has substantial **room to improve its community engagement and communications strategies** to effectively reach families and community groups. One high-profile recent example was the unsuccessful attempt to shift school start times led by Superintendent Chang late in 2017. The proposal, which was unanimously approved by the Boston Schools Committee, would have shifted high school start times later and elementary start times earlier. This was framed in response to research on the link between teenage sleep patterns and student achievement.<sup>69</sup> The plan provoked strong pushback from parents, the city council, and community advocates, who argued that changes in elementary school start and end times put an unreasonable burden on working parents and were too early for young children.<sup>70</sup> The school district put these plans on hold indefinitely. Multiple interviewees cited this as largely a failure of community engagement and communication, and felt that plans could have been crafted and communicated in a way that was more collaborative, more clear, and less disruptive for families.



### Highlights from Peer Cities

In Oakland, California, a family-led activist effort brought about the creation of 49 small autonomous schools within the public school system and as independent charter schools between 2000 and 2008. However, many of those hard-won autonomies were rolled back amidst a budgetary crisis.

Overall, a theme among interviewees was that BPS could do a **better job of communicating positively and proactively with all families** and other stakeholders. Some identified a need for BPS to improve at celebrating successes, not just engaging with families at times of change and disruption. On the flip side, several stakeholders identified a need for greater honesty and transparency from district leadership about real problems and challenges in BPS. Finally, some felt that the district particularly needs to do better at reaching out and listening to lower-income, traditionally underrepresented families, whose voices tend to get lost against more vocal, more affluent families. According to interviewees, these combined communication weaknesses have had a negative impact on families' trust in the district, as well as on BPS' ability to develop strategies that will address equity and achievement gaps in the districts.



## Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this paper was to take stock of Boston Public Schools' recent progress and inform the public dialogue in Boston at a moment of leadership transition. There are signs of progress and positive changes, and there are also persistent achievement and opportunity gaps in BPS schools. The reforms of recent years have fallen short in addressing those gaps, and have suffered from insufficient communication and community outreach. More worrisome, in the course of our interviews with Boston stakeholders, it was hard for anyone to say where Boston's *future* progress will come from.

These trends and the underlying politics are not unique to Boston, and Boston remains a positive outlier compared to many of its peer cities in terms of overall academic achievement. But whereas other districts have made bigger, bolder bets in recent years—such as with unified enrollment systems, radical shifts toward school autonomy and non-district school operators, innovation zones, and performance-driven school accountability—and drawn closer to BPS' level of achievement, BPS' strategies have been more diffuse.

In fact, the stakeholders we talked to noted that community confidence in BPS' prospects for effectively addressing inequities in school quality, facilities, and achievement was at a low. Whether that's merely a reflection of the current state of transition or something deeper remains to be seen, but it is a challenge the next superintendent must overcome. Wherever BPS goes next, re-engaging community stakeholders will be a key part of the solution.

The scope of our research does not support any prescriptive policy solutions, and what works well in other districts may not necessarily work in Boston, but we have three main takeaways for the next leader of BPS:

**1 Articulate a clear, concise theory of action and drive it through implementation.**

The next leader of BPS will have to articulate a coherent and focused vision, anchored in a defined set of key priorities, for the future of Boston Public Schools. Without a unifying vision, decisions will always be made on a one-off basis instead of working toward a long-term goal. For example, in recent years BPS leadership has waffled between whether schools should have greater autonomy to drive results as they see fit, or if the central office should play a larger role in determining what should happen at each school. Splitting the difference between these two competing theories of action, and applying different rules to different schools in unclear circumstances, has muddled the larger narrative and confused stakeholders about the district's direction. Likewise, without a clear set of targeted priorities, district leaders can get bogged down in trying to address every strategy at once—leading to inefficiency and weak execution.

Clarity of vision and priorities matter immensely for effective implementation and impact in nearly all facets of the city's schools, as illustrated by the recent lack of district-wide improvement in curriculum and instruction. Interviewees noted that Boston's central office has not invested substantially in curriculum and instruction and coaching in the past decade, and/or good ideas haven't been effectively translated into practice in schools. Improving instruction is critical to raising achievement, and Boston's next leader will have to decide whether that improvement is better achieved with a portfolio of autonomous schools making decisions about their own programming or with a more centralized set of programs and supports coming from the central office. A clear answer on this question will lead to more focused action steps and a stronger implementation plan than trying to pursue both paths at once.

## **2 Make tough choices to advance equity.**

BPS' biggest struggles are not with the average performance of its schools, but with the inequitable opportunities and outcomes within its system. The depth and persistence of inequitable outcomes by race, ethnicity, income, native language, and special education status are incompatible with Boston's vision of itself as an urban district that stands above its peers. BPS faces a persistent structural deficit in its budget, driven by small, underutilized buildings and an inefficient transportation system. A perceived lack of transparency around these challenges appears to have eroded trust among some community members. These won't be politically popular issues to address, but they'll continue to hold Boston back until the city's leadership can make potentially tough decisions that drive fundamental changes to the way BPS provides educational services to its most disadvantaged students.

BPS' next leader should make changing these outcomes the cornerstone of any efforts that come next. They will also need to build the trust of community members by frankly acknowledging these inequities and proactively engaging the community to develop viable, permanent solutions. In order to do so, the next leader will need the firm support of the mayor, the school committee, and other Boston community stakeholders.

## **3 Double down on areas of strength and bright spots.**

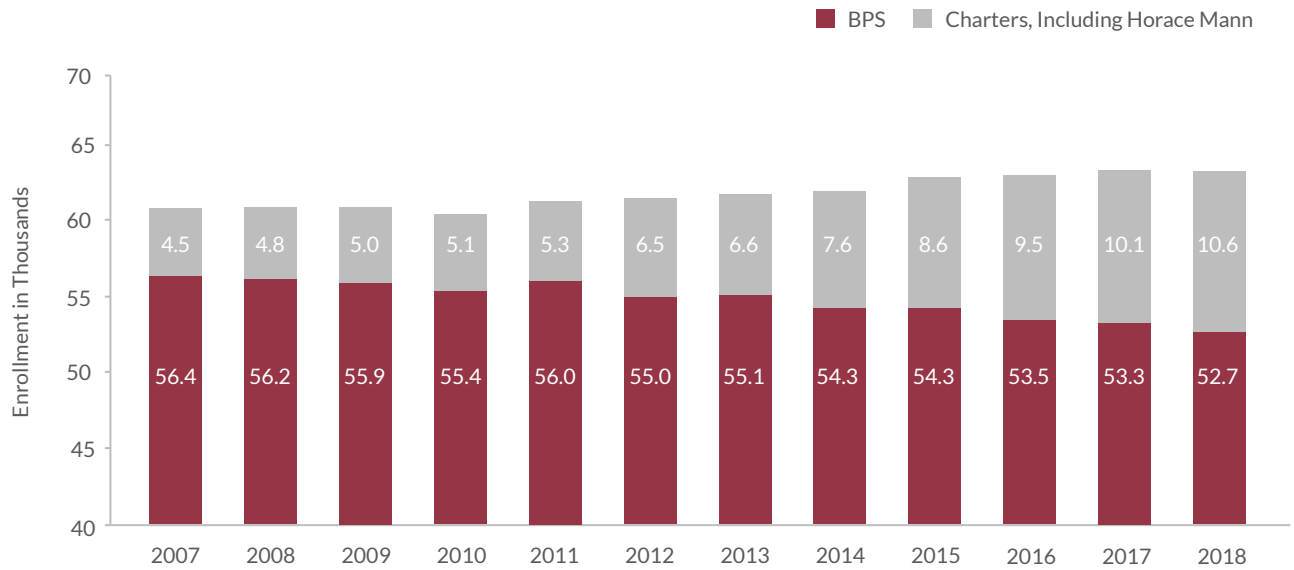
Both the objective data and our qualitative interviews point to a few bright spots. For example, Boston has improved the quantity and quality of its early childhood offerings, and it should continue to bring the lessons learned from pre-K instructional efforts through the pre-K to third grade spectrum.<sup>71</sup> BPS has also made significant efforts to improve its human capital policies. Preliminary results suggest those changes to hiring processes have helped the district recruit a stronger talent pool to work in Boston's public schools. It should continue to improve its efforts around teacher recruitment, selection, support, and retention, especially with respect to diversifying the teaching force. Similarly, stakeholders have positive perceptions of the Lynch Leadership Academy, and BPS should seek to continue leveraging its investments toward that program and similar external partnerships.

Boston residents should understand that while their students continue to outperform other large cities, this lead is narrowing, and recent trends suggest a slowdown or even a decline. The demographics of Boston's public schools are changing, and it won't be able to achieve further gains without making fundamental changes to the way it provides educational services to its most disadvantaged students.

# Appendix

Figure A1

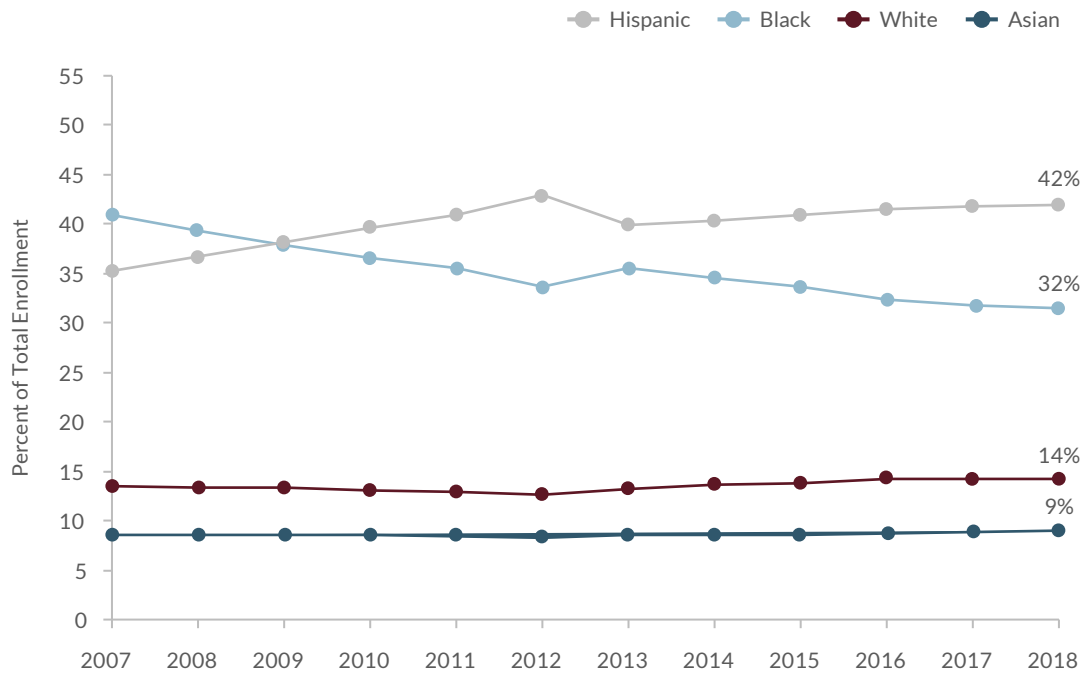
**Boston Public Schools' Enrollment and Boston-Resident Students in Charter Schools, 2007-2018**



Source: MA DESE

Figure A2

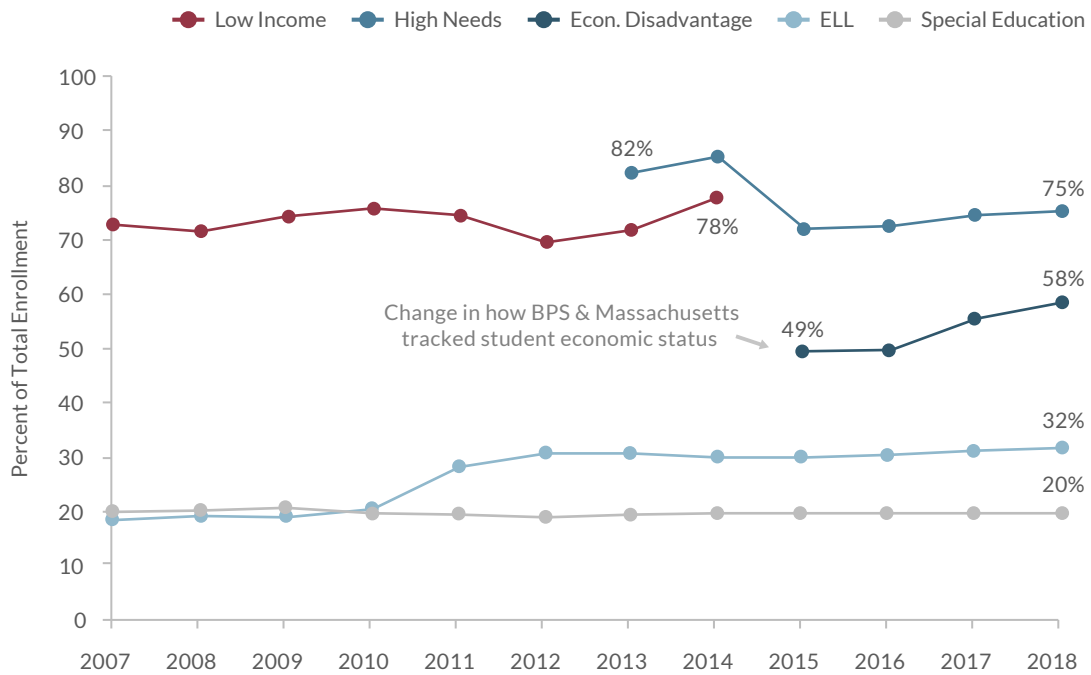
**Boston Public Schools' Enrollment By Racial/Ethnic Subgroups, 2007-2017**



Source: MA DESE

Figure A3

**Boston Public Schools' Enrollment By Subgroups, 2007–2018**

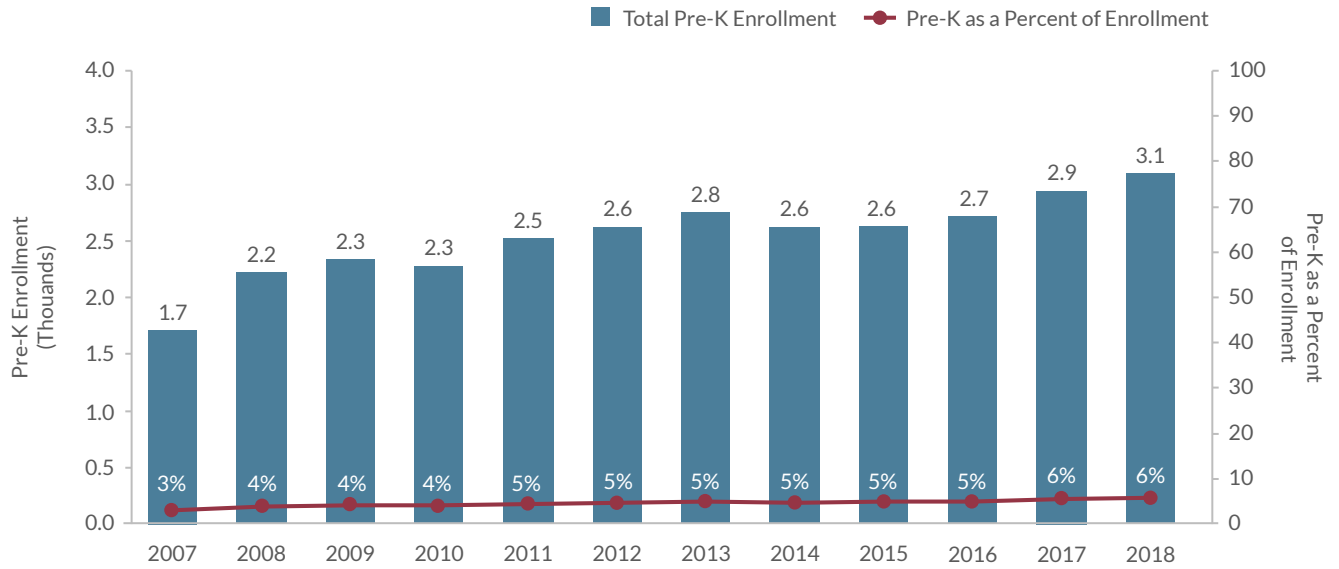


Source: MA DESE

- **Low-income:** Indicates the percent of enrollment who meet ANY ONE of the following definitions of low-income: The student is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; the student receives Transitional Aid to Families benefits; or the student is eligible for food stamps.
- **Economically Disadvantaged:** Calculated based on a student’s participation in one or more of the following state-administered programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the Transitional Aid for Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC); the Department of Children and Families’ (DCF) foster care program; and MassHealth (Medicaid).
- **High-Need:** A student is high-need if he or she is designated as either low-income (prior to School Year 2015), economically disadvantaged (starting in School Year 2015), or ELL, or former ELL, or a student with disabilities. A former ELL student is a student not currently an ELL, but who had been at some point in the two previous academic years.

Figure A4

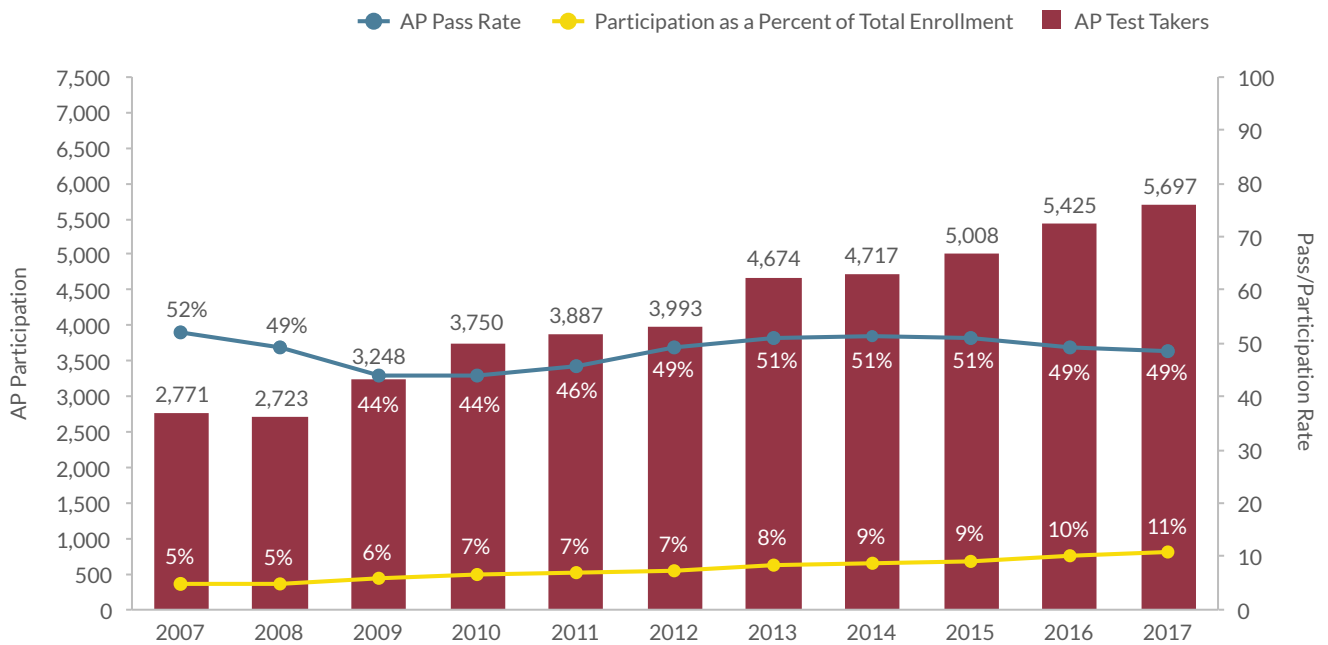
**Boston Pre-K Enrollment and Pre-K as a Percent of Total Enrollment, 2007-2018**



Source: BPS and MA DESE

Figure A5

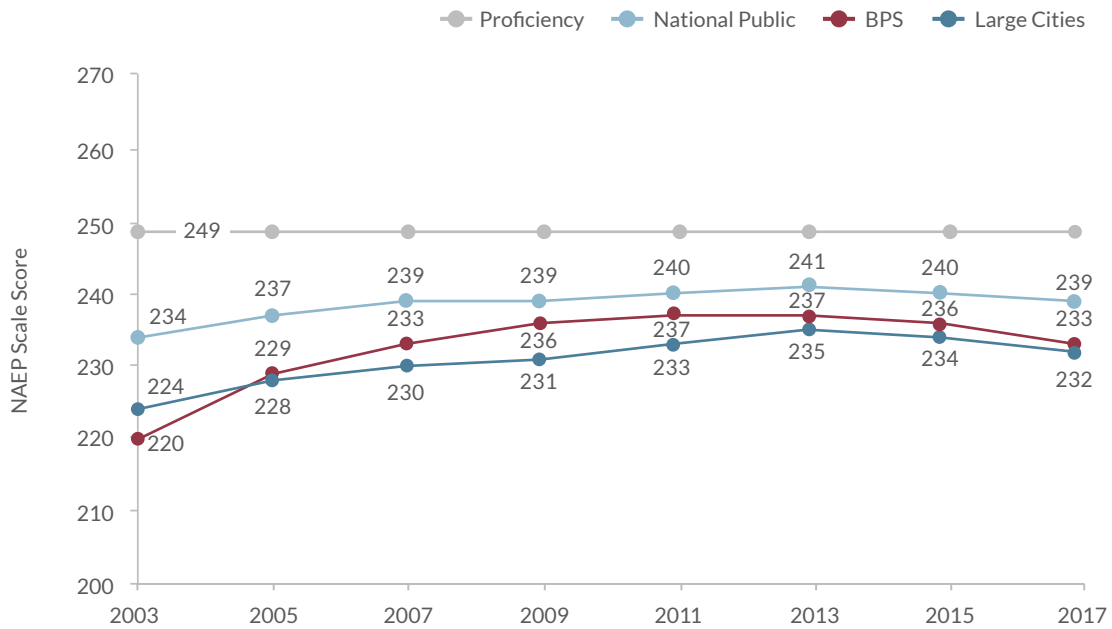
**Boston Public Schools' AP Participation and Pass Rates, 2007-2017**



Source: BPS and MA DESE

Figure A6

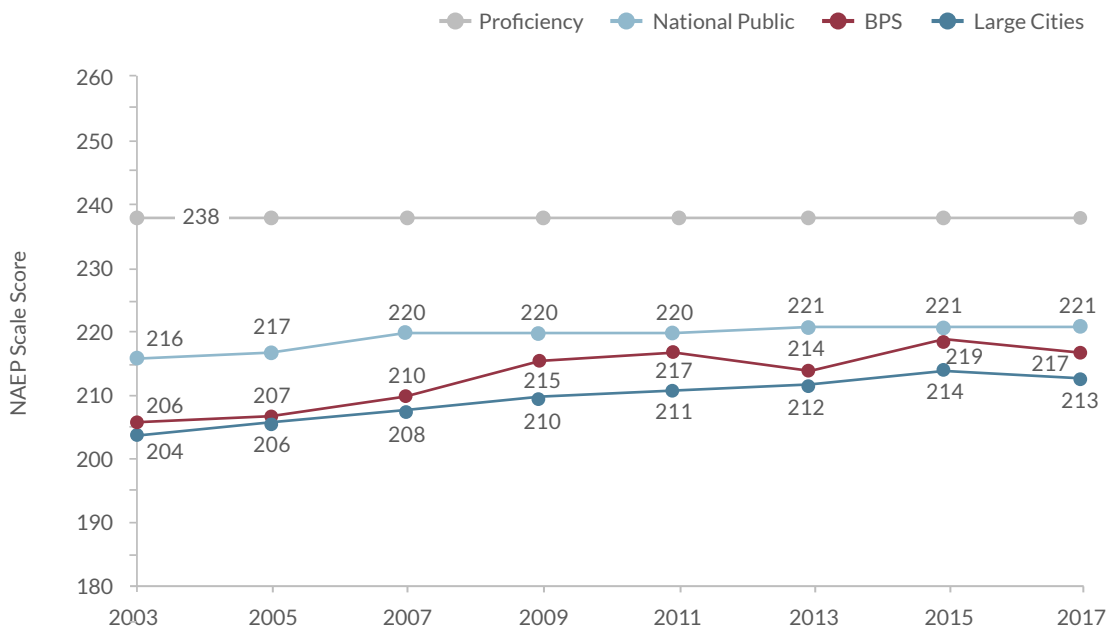
**NAEP TUDA Scale Scores, Boston Public Schools vs. National Public and Large Cities, Fourth Grade Math, 2003-2017**



Source: NCES NAEP

Figure A7

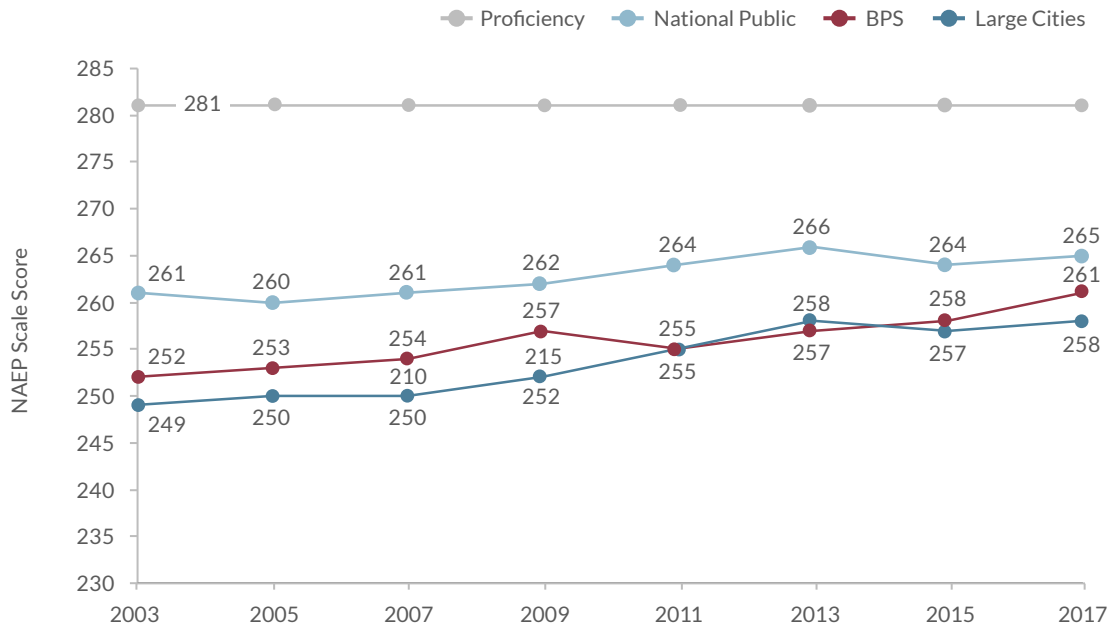
**NAEP TUDA Scale Scores, Boston Public Schools vs. National Public and Large Cities, Fourth Grade Reading, 2003-2017**



Source: NCES NAEP

Figure A8

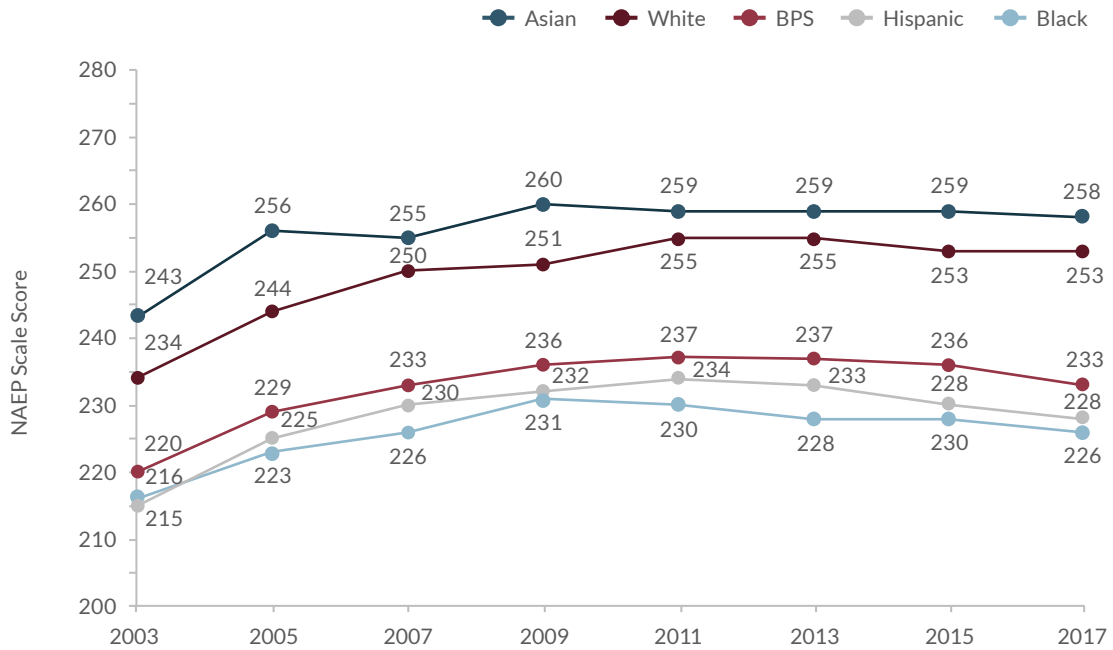
**NAEP TUDA Scale Scores, Boston vs. Large Cities, Eighth Grade Reading, 2003-2017**



Source: NCES NAEP

Figure A9

**NAEP TUDA Scale Scores By Race/Ethnicity, Boston Fourth Grade Math, 2003-2017**

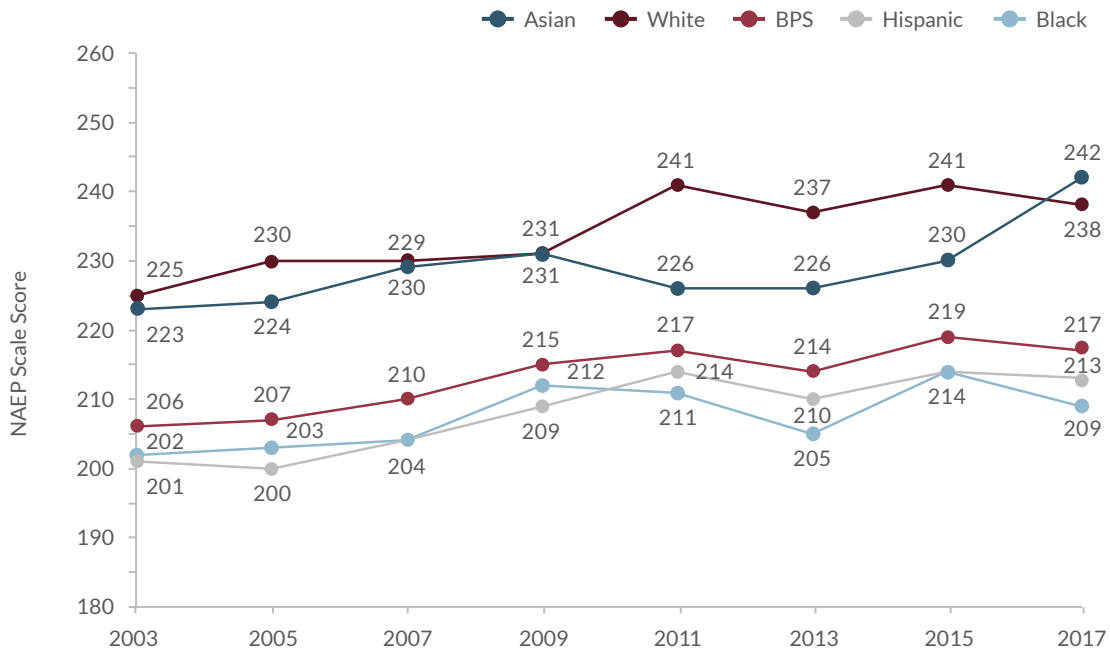


Source: NCES NAEP



Figure A10

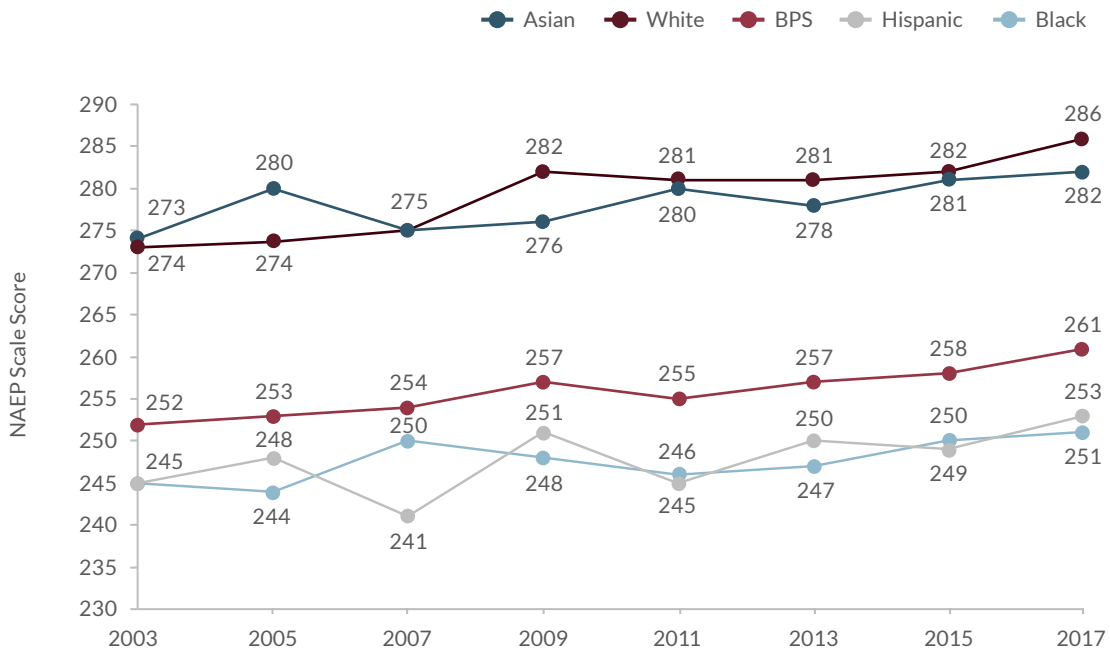
**NAEP TUDA Scale Scores By Race/Ethnicity, Boston Fourth Grade Reading, 2003–2017**



Source: NCES NAEP

Figure A11

**NAEP TUDA Scale Scores By Race/Ethnicity, Boston Eighth Grade Reading, 2003–2017**



Source: NCES NAEP

## Policy Reforms in Recent BPS Strategic Plans

Interview Topic Areas	Carol Johnson Acceleration Agenda 2009-2014: Key Strategies	Tommy Chang Stronger Schools, Stronger Boston, 2016-2021: Key Implementation Focus Areas
<b>Human Capital and Performance Management</b> (teacher recruitment, evaluation systems, compensation)	Strengthen teaching and school leadership	Attract, develop, and retain a highly effective instructional team that is responsive to the diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic needs of Boston youth.
<b>Instruction, Curriculum, and Assessment</b> (teacher training & development, leader training and development, quality standards for student work, progress-monitoring assessments)		Implement an inclusive, rigorous, and culturally/linguistically sustaining PK-12 instructional program that serves the development of the whole child.
<b>Differentiated Strategies &amp; Supports</b> (specific strategies for low-performing schools, addressing achievement gaps for black and Latino students [or other ethnicities demonstrating achievement gaps], early childhood, special education, English learners, opportunity youth)	Replicate success and turn around low-performing schools	
<b>Stakeholder Relationships and Communication</b> (parents, union, board)	Deepen partnerships with parents, students, and the community	Engage students, families, and community organizations as advocates and partners for equity, access, and results for all students.
<b>Central office and governance</b>	Redesign district services for effectiveness, efficiency, and equity	Develop and deliver a coordinated system of high-quality support, customer services, and communications centrally and at schools.
<b>Financial strategies and planning</b> (facilities, grant funding, budgeting)		Build a sustainable financial system that invests resources equitably and strategically.
<b>School choice</b> (school assignment, selective admission)		

## Endnotes

- 1 Note: Massachusetts has two types of charter schools: Commonwealth Charter Schools and Horace Mann charter schools. Commonwealth Charter Schools are operated independently from local school districts under the approval of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education; Horace Mann charter schools must be approved by the local school committee, and in some cases, the local teachers union, in addition to the state board. BPS operates six semiautonomous Horace Mann charter schools. These schools are not subject to the same policy requirements as other BPS schools, and their data are not included in BPS data except where noted.
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- 7 MA DESE 2017-18 Enrollment Data; see Appendix for more.
- 8 Build BPS, page 141.
- 9 MA DESE Enrollment Data; see Appendix for more.
- 10 A student is high-need if he or she is designated as either low-income (prior to School Year 2015), economically disadvantaged (starting in School Year 2015), or ELL, or former ELL, or a student with disabilities. A former ELL student is a student not currently an ELL, but who had been at some point in the two previous academic years. Data come from MA DESE Enrollment Data; see Appendix for more.
- 11 MA DESE; see Appendix for more.
- 12 MA DESE; see Appendix for more.
- 13 MA DESE.
- 14 BPS and Massachusetts used several different formulas to calculate graduation rates. The four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate, or ACGR, is mandated by the federal government and is thus the best metric to compare with out-of-state districts. ACGR measures the number of students who graduate divided by the adjusted cohort for that graduate year—the number of students enrolled at the beginning of ninth grade, adding for students who transfer into the school, and subtracting for students who transfer to another school or leave the district, but do not drop out.
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Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice.

Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.

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