

The State of Things:

Tracking BPS's Road to Improvement, 2022–23

By Cara Stillings Candal, Ed.D



MISSION

Pioneer Institute develops and communicates dynamic ideas that advance prosperity and a vibrant civic life in Massachusetts and beyond.

Vision

Success for Pioneer is when the citizens of our state and nation prosper and our society thrives because we enjoy world-class options in education, healthcare, transportation, and economic opportunity, and when our government is limited, accountable, and transparent.

Values

Pioneer believes that America is at its best when our citizenry is well-educated, committed to liberty, personal responsibility, and free enterprise, and both willing and able to test their beliefs based on facts and the free exchange of ideas.



This paper is a publication of Pioneer Education, which seeks to increase the education options available to parents and students, drive system-wide reform, and ensure accountability in public education. The Center's work builds on Pioneer's legacy as a recognized leader in the charter public school movement, and as a champion of greater academic rigor in Massachusetts' elementary and secondary schools. Current initiatives promote choice and competition, school-based management, and enhanced academic performance in public schools.



Pioneer Health seeks to refocus the Massachusetts conversation about healthcare costs away from government-imposed interventions, toward market-based reforms. Current initiatives include driving public discourse on Medicaid, presenting a strong consumer perspective as the state considers a dramatic overhaul of the healthcare payment process, and supporting thoughtful tort reforms.



Pioneer Transportation seeks reforms that allow commuters to take full advantage of the coming mobility revolution — with access to a range of affordable and on-demand public and private transportation options, as well as transit-friendly real estate development.



Pioneer Opportunity seeks to keep Massachusetts competitive by promoting a healthy business climate, transparent regulation, small business creation in urban areas, and sound environmental and development policy. Current initiatives promote market reforms to increase the supply of affordable housing, reduce the cost of doing business, and revitalize urban areas.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	4
BPS in the Press, 2022–2023	6
Monitoring BPS: The State’s Latest Report	9
Students with Special Educational Needs	10
Student Withdrawals	11
On-Time Bus Arrivals	11
Student Restraints	12
Conclusions and Recommendations	12
Recommendation 1: Responsibly close and consolidate under-enrolled schools and streamline the district’s central office.	13
Recommendation 2: Make a one-time investment in auditing, updating, and training personnel on district data systems.	13
Recommendation 3: Reimagine Transportation	13



Executive Summary

In Spring 2022, Pioneer Institute published “The Boston Publics Schools’ Road to Receivership,” which detailed the findings of the 2019 state-commissioned, third-party report evaluating outcomes and operations in the Boston Public Schools (BPS). The report was scathing, citing years of declining enrollment, low test scores, financial mismanagement, and poor oversight and support of schools.

Prior to its official release in spring 2020, some speculated that the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) was laying the groundwork to place Boston’s public schools under a receiver—someone with broad authority to implement change in the district. But when the pandemic forced the Commonwealth into lockdown, speculation about what would happen to BPS ceased.

It wasn’t until schools began to reopen in 2022 that DESE and other advocates for change publicly revisited the report’s findings. Instead of receivership, DESE opted to strengthen and renew an agreement with BPS that details the improvements the district needs to make and how the state will support its efforts.

In the past year, the BPS news cycle has been relentless: A new superintendent has tried to steer the district in the aftermath of a pandemic and navigate its agreement with the state. She has done this amidst reports of issues she inherited, such as inflated graduation rates, the closure of a school due to student bullying and neglect, and continual reports that the district struggles to get students to school on time.

Earlier this year, DESE released another follow-up to its 2019 report. This most recent audit uncovers progress that BPS has made and has yet to make on key issues.

The following details key aspects of that report in the context of news reports about the Boston Public Schools. It concludes with broad recommendations for state and district action pertaining to some of the report’s key findings.

Introduction

In a state that is home to some of the best-performing public schools in the country, too many of Boston’s public schools are unfortunate outliers. The district struggles to help most students achieve proficiency in core subjects and has a history of poor management of everything from transportation to basic data collection and reporting.

In comparison to urban districts across the country with similar demographics, the Boston Public Schools have historically held their own. But praising a system that is the best of the worst—a system in which only 30 percent of eighth graders scored proficient or above on the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment¹—is an indicator of low expectations for U.S. public schools in general, not a win for Massachusetts. The students and families of BPS deserve better.

Highlighting BPS’s challenges and holding the district accountable matters: The state has a constitutional duty to ensure that all children in its public system are educated. In 1993, the legislature revamped the Commonwealth’s school funding formula in response to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court’s ruling in *McDuffy v. Secretary of Education*,² ensuring greater spending equity among school districts and creating the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) to hold districts accountable for student outcomes.³

The state has sanctioned interventions in low-performing districts before. In 1988–89, the city of Chelsea, with enabling legislation from the state, reached a partnership agreement with Boston University to manage and transform the district’s public schools.⁴

In comparison to urban districts across the country with similar demographics, the Boston Public Schools have historically held their own.

Highlighting BPS’s challenges and holding the district accountable matters: The state has a constitutional duty to ensure that all children in its public system are educated.

Since then, the Commonwealth has placed communities like Lawrence and Holyoke in receivership, allowing the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to appoint a receiver/ superintendent with authority to make sweeping changes in the name of improving access and outcomes for students.

Though none have been perfect, there is evidence that some state receiverships have positively impacted standardized test scores and graduation and college-going rates.⁵

The state hasn't placed BPS in receivership, but it has watched the district closely in recent years, indicating the threat of a takeover. In 2020, just days before statewide COVID-19 school shutdowns, the DESE published a scathing report describing the district's struggles.⁶

The report detailed shortcomings in leadership and governance, curriculum, instruction, assessment, student support; and financial and asset management. Among the most troubling findings were:

- instability and turnover in the superintendent's office
- incoherent processes for supporting the district's lowest-performing schools
- a lack of access to grade-appropriate curricular content
- inconsistent supports for teachers
- little transparency around school staffing models
- inflated budgets to support schools with declining enrollment rather than closure or consolidation
- outdated, sometimes decrepit facilities
- unreliable transportation

To hold the district accountable for addressing these issues, DESE entered a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with BPS in 2020.⁷ It updated the agreement in 2022, in the wake of the pandemic. The MOU outlines concrete goals for the district and offers targeted state resources to support progress toward those goals, including targeted funding and other resources for BPS's lowest-performing schools.

The goals the MOU sets and the resources it provides focus mainly on turning around the lowest-performing schools and supporting students with special educational needs and English language learners — sub-groups that the district has struggled to serve.

To date, progress in meeting the MOU's goals has been non-existent or painfully slow: Pandemic school closures, staffing difficulties, and other disruptions make BPS's road to recovery even more daunting. And another challenge is on the horizon: Federal COVID relief funds will dwindle in 2024, and experts predict that most districts across the country will hit a fiscal cliff. This means that BPS and most other districts may have to cut some recurring costs, such as supplemental staff—maybe even teachers—to meet budget.⁸

The state continues to monitor BPS closely, trying to understand the impacts of its supports and investments. Its most recent annual review, conducted by a third party, outlines the steps the district is taking and the great difficulty of effecting change in the state's largest district.

The following paper provides a pulse check on the state of things in BPS today, detailing recent changes and headlines in the district, and the extent to which BPS is improving in some of the areas the state cited in 2020. It draws heavily from DESE's most recent third-party evaluation and provides recommendations for moving forward.

To hold the district accountable for addressing these issues, DESE entered a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with BPS in 2020.

To date, progress in meeting the MOU's goals has been non-existent or painfully slow: Pandemic school closures, staffing difficulties, and other disruptions make BPS's road to recovery even more daunting.

BPS in the Press, 2022–2023

The most consequential change for BPS in 2022 was the hiring of a new superintendent. After only three years on the job and shepherding the system through a pandemic, Superintendent Brenda Cassellius announced her resignation from BPS in spring 2022.⁹ The Boston School Committee chose Mary Skipper, who had been leading Somerville's public schools, to oversee BPS.¹⁰

Skipper brings something to the district that the previous superintendent did not—a long history in Boston and its schools. For many in the community, this experience is a boon, but some school committee and community members didn't think it was enough. They were frustrated by Boston's superintendent search process, citing a lack of transparency, a rush to hire despite a small pool of candidates, and a desire to include more people of color in the final selection round.¹¹

For her part, Skipper hit the ground running. But the BPS news cycle—most of which Skipper inherited—has chased her in her first year on the job.

Before Skipper was hired, BPS was in the news for a devastating school closure. In one of her last acts as superintendent, Cassellius closed the Mission Hill School in Jamaica Plain in the wake of “two lengthy reports that found a culture of pervasive and unreported student bullying and sexual misconduct, as well as systemic failures to meet educational and reporting requirements.”¹²

The findings and closure provided a devastating example of the state's assertions in its 2020 report that the district's lack of strategic oversight of schools leaves students—especially those with special educational needs—vulnerable in every way.

And students with disabilities continue to bear a disproportionate burden in BPS, especially as issues with transportation persist. School bus driver shortages were common across the nation in the aftermath of the pandemic, but difficulties getting students to and from school aren't new to BPS. The state's 2022 plan requires Boston to improve on-time bus performance to 95 percent,¹³ but a follow-up review between 2021 and 2022 found that bus performance continued to disappoint, with too many buses failing to arrive at all. According to the state, those missed buses denied students with disabilities the safe ride to school the district is legally obligated to provide.¹⁴

Transportation woes continued in 2023, even as the district made moves to address them. Following a call for proposals for a new bus vendor in 2022, only one company—Transdev, which has been under contract with Boston since 2013—bid on the job.¹⁵

A lack of meaningful improvements in on-time bus performance after that contract was reissued in summer 2022 caused the Inspector General of Massachusetts to issue a letter to Superintendent Skipper, urging a reconsideration of the district's contract with its school bus vendor.¹⁶

Then, in the fall of 2022, came more unwelcome news about student achievement. Outcomes on the state's MCAS test were once again depressed, with only a handful of indications that some students were recovering learning lost during the pandemic.¹⁷

The state also received results from the National Assessment for Educational Progress in late 2022. NAEP results confirmed what educators and parents across the nation already knew: COVID school closures had a devastating impact on student outcomes.

Across the country, NAEP scores hit a disturbing low, with dips across all grades and subject areas in almost every state and particularly alarming declines in mathematics. Even Massachusetts, which has comfortably enjoyed a top ranking on NAEP in the past decade, was not immune. The Commonwealth's math score declined six points since the NAEP had last been administered in 2019.¹⁸

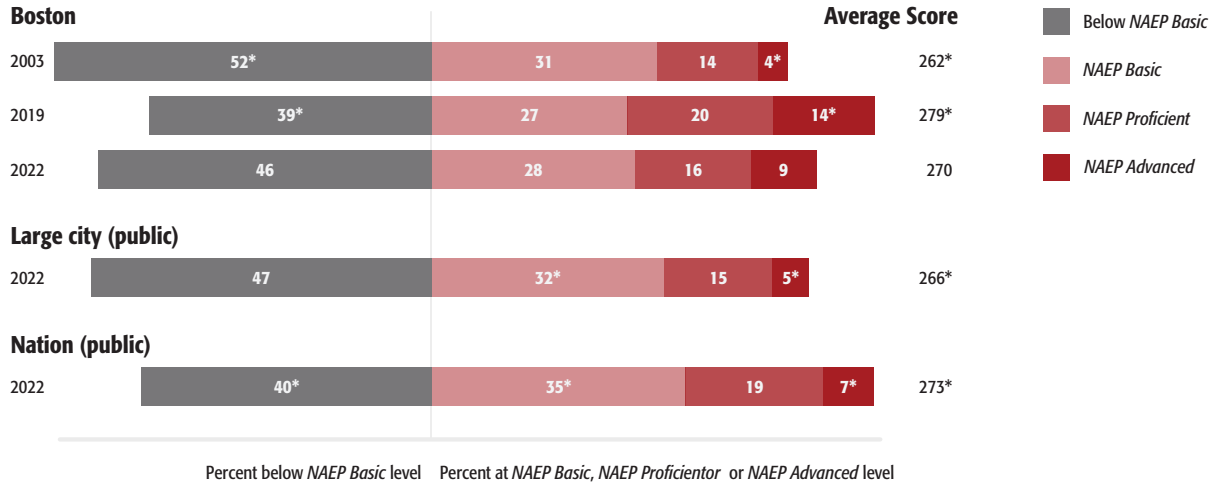
Most troubling of all is that results for the city's black and Hispanic students *significantly* trailed their white and Asian counterparts, an indicator of the yawning achievement gaps.

The most consequential change for BPS in 2022 was the hiring of a new superintendent. After only three years on the job and shepherding the system through a pandemic, Superintendent Brenda Cassellius announced her resignation from BPS in spring 2022. The Boston School Committee chose Mary Skipper, who had been leading Somerville's public schools, to oversee BPS.

Outcomes on the state's MCAS test were once again depressed, with only a handful of indications that some students were recovering learning lost during the pandemic.

Boston was among 22 of 26 urban districts that NAEP includes in its "Trial Urban District Assessment" (TUDA) study where math scores declined. Only 25 percent of eighth graders in Boston scored proficient or above on NAEP's mathematics assessment: A full 75 percent of Boston's eighth graders scored at the NAEP basic level or below.¹⁹ Results for eighth grade reading were no more encouraging, with 28 percent of students scoring proficient or above in reading, just two points above the national average for large, public-school districts nationwide.²⁰

NAEP Achievement-Level Percentages and Average Score Results



* Significantly different (p < .05) from the district's results in 2022. Significance tests were performed using unrounded numbers.

NOTE: NAEP achievement levels are to be used on a trial basis and should be interpreted and used with caution. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

Results for Student Groups in 2022

Reporting Groups	Percentage of Students	Avg. Score	Percentage at or Above NAEP		Percentage at NAEP
Race/Ethnicity			Basic	Proficient	Advanced
White	14	305	85	58	25
Black	28	253	37	11	2
Hispanic	43	255	43	12	2
Asian	12	314	90	66	33
American Indian/Alaska Native	#	‡	‡	‡	‡
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	#	‡	‡	‡	‡
Two or More Races	4	‡	‡	‡	‡
Gender					
Male	50	272	54	30	12
Female	50	268	54	22	7
National School Lunch Program					
Eligible	71	260	45	16	3
Not eligible	29	295	75	51	24

Rounds to zero. ‡ Reporting standards not met.

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding, and because the "Information not available" category for the National School Lunch Program, which provides free/reduced-price lunches, is not displayed. Black includes African American and Hispanic includes Latino. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin.

These predictable but troubling BPS student performance trends mean that too few students are graduating from the district with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful after graduation.

In a state where the bar for graduating high school is comparatively high, BPS performs below the statewide average and other urban districts. In 2022, Boston reported a four-year graduation rate of 81 percent. Graduation rates were slightly lower for black students, Hispanic students, and student with disabilities, at 79 percent, 78 percent, and 62 percent, respectively.²¹ In comparison, nearly 93 percent of black students in Springfield graduated in four years, a rate higher than the graduation rate for all students in Springfield, which was 85 percent.²²

Other than the gap between black students in the two districts, Boston's slightly lower average for on-time graduation may seem less problematic than some of the district's other data, but reports in 2022 suggested that BPS was not only reporting graduation rates inaccurately, but it was also inflating them.

	Percent Graduated (Reported)			
	2019	2020*	2021*	2022*
Low income	69.6	72.6	75.1	77.8
High needs	68.6	71.5	74.8	78.1
Students w/ disabilities	54.0	53.4	61.4	62.3
Afr. Amer./Black	71.9	74.6	77.7	79.0
Asian	91.5	91.9	93.2	94.1
Hispanic/Latino	67.0	69.8	73.7	77.8
Amer. Ind. or Alaska Nat.	75.0	83.3	87.5	60.0
White	81.9	83.9	86.8	87.4

*MCAS graduation requirement suspended due to pandemic

It makes sense that post-pandemic graduation rates in Boston and across the state are higher than before. During a time of school closures, the state relaxed graduation requirements in the absence of sufficient MCAS and other data. But a third-party report released in 2023 confirmed the state's charge in its 2022 review that incoherent data collection methods and systems in BPS have been leading to inaccurate reporting.

That report, by Ernst and Young, found that "the district may be overestimating its graduation rates,"²³ something the *Boston Globe* had previously asserted in its investigative reporting. According to the *Globe*, BPS inflated graduation rates by *removing* "dozens of students from would-be graduating classes by claiming, without documentation, that they transferred to another school, moved to another country, or died."²⁴

As the allegedly inflated graduation rates the district has been reporting already reflect a failure to equip all students for the future, these charges against BPS are even more troubling.

But in the barrage of bad press that falls in the category of "things Boston Public Schools should be able to control," one item stands out as not fully within the district's control. Enrollment in Boston's public schools has been declining for decades, and it worsened over the course of the pandemic. Such declines, especially in urban areas, are increasingly common across the country. The cost of living in many cities is on the rise, making urban living untenable for many families. As of 2023, Boston has one of the most expensive housing markets in the country.²⁵ In part because of high costs, birth rates are declining as well. There are simply fewer school-aged children to serve in cities like Boston.

Even considering this larger context, it's likely that perceptions of school quality play a role in the student exodus. Black families are leaving BPS and other urban districts at higher rates than ever before, reflecting a national trend.²⁶ Some black families are fleeing to schools in higher performing suburbs and a record number have decided to homeschool their children in the wake of the pandemic.²⁷

In a state where the bar for graduating high school is comparatively high, BPS performs below the statewide average and other urban districts. In 2022, Boston reported a four-year graduation rate of 81 percent.

BPS inflated graduation rates by *removing* "dozens of students from would-be graduating classes by claiming, without documentation, that they transferred to another school, moved to another country, or died."

Eight consecutive years of declining enrollment in BPS has resulted in school buildings that are, in some cases, operating at half their intended capacity.²⁸

Under-enrollment presents financial challenges for individual schools, which the state funds based on headcount. Fewer students in a building means less money to put toward staff, facilities, curriculum, and needed supports for students. BPS was able to use federal COVID relief funding in recent years to offset some of these impacts of enrollment declines, but those funds will soon be spent, which leaves the district facing difficult decisions.

Even before the pandemic, BPS wasn't taking on all the difficult decisions. Budget is something that the district *can* control, but instead of making appropriate cuts to reflect decreases in enrollment, BPS has continually expanded its budget to prop up rather than close and consolidate its schools.

Closing schools is unpopular. It causes short-term turmoil in the community. But failing to close schools is not only fiscally imprudent, but it also results in long-term consequences for student academic outcomes.

Will Austin, President of the Boston Schools Fund, has been sounding the alarm on Boston's strategy of providing "soft landing" funding to under-enrolled schools for years, noting that opting to keep those schools open comes with dangerous trade-offs. In 2022, Austin told the *Boston Globe* that the \$50 million the district spent to keep under-enrolled schools open in 2021 was \$50 million not spent on "equitable literacy or mental health."²⁹

In 2023, as it does every year, BPS had an opportunity to put forth a student-centered budget that closes longstanding achievement gaps. The 2023 budget *does* include needed investments in equitable literacy, support for students with special educational needs, and expansions in multilingual education. These investments are possible because BPS's budget has once again grown.³⁰

As Superintendent Skipper noted when she unveiled the plan, the district's budget has increased in four of the last five years, helping Boston become the district with the highest per-pupil spending of the 100 largest districts in the nation (New York City is first).³¹

If such investments yield outcomes, the budget increases could be justified. But BPS has had high per-pupil spending for years, and outcomes have not improved.

Omitted from the district's plan is the meaningful closure and consolidation of under-enrolled schools. Instead, BPS will rely on the last of its federal COVID relief funding and additional funding from Mayor Michelle Wu's Green New Deal to punt on the tough decision of rightsizing the district until federal funds are spent. It's a decision that only delays the inevitable, all while the state continues to monitor whether the district's investments (and its own) yield any measurable return for students and families.

Monitoring BPS: The State's Latest Report

Despite the steady drum of questionable press, BPS and its new leader are attempting to turn things around, and they are doing it with support from but also under the watchful eye of the state.

In early 2023, DESE published a third-party review of BPS's progress toward implementing the terms of its improvement plan. While this most recent report was less thorough and somewhat less scathing than the state's 2022 review of the district, it highlights that little progress has been made in several high-risk categories.

Outside consulting firm Ernst and Young (EY) used data provided by DESE and from "interviews and internal documents, primary research or publicly available resources" to understand why BPS is failing in some domains and provided recommendations for next steps.³²

Eight consecutive years of declining enrollment in BPS has resulted in school buildings that are, in some cases, operating at half their intended capacity.

Despite the steady drum of questionable press, BPS and its new leader are attempting to turn things around, and they are doing it with support from but also under the watchful eye of the state.

The EY report gathered data on a subset of issues, or domains, that emerged in the state's previous report. They are:

- Student program participation for students with special needs and English language learners
- Student enrollment and withdrawals
- Student discipline
- Student restraints
- On-time bus performance
- Parental complaints

EY evaluated BPS performance on each of these domains on several dimensions, including whether BPS has in place effective policies and procedures, training and communications for staff, and the tools and systems to help staff effectively implement policies and procedures associated with each domain. The report also assesses the extent to which the district effectively assigns roles and responsibilities for implementation, engages in oversight and monitoring, and gathers complete and accurate data.

The findings in some domains are similar to the state's 2022 review, which described a system where individuals and schools may flourish despite the system's tendency to get in the way. Well-intentioned and often highly qualified school staff are doing what they can to support students, but they are struggling because BPS is a large district, with a large and expensive central office, that lacks coherent systems for gathering and disseminating information. As result, the district fails to effectively guide, monitor, and hold schools accountable.

Many of the high-risk issues EY identifies track neatly to the bad press BPS has garnered in the past year. Systems for tracking individualized education plans, documenting student withdrawals, getting students to school on time, and communicating the frequency and appropriate use of student restraints are issues BPS needs to resolve immediately, according to the report.³³

Students with Special Educational Needs

The equitable treatment of students with special educational needs has long been a sore spot for BPS. In 2020, *The Boston Globe* exposed that students with certain special needs were being purposefully excluded from some of the district's dual language schools.³⁴ The Massachusetts Inspector General's 2023 report charges that late and missing buses violate the civil rights of students with special educational needs.³⁵

These are only two items in a longer list, which includes charges that the district did not adequately serve students with special educational needs during COVID-19 related school shutdowns and remote schooling, an issue in districts across the nation.³⁶

Ensuring that students with special educational needs have access to a free and appropriate education is not only a state mandate, it is federal law. Better access for and support of students with special educational needs is an area the state explicitly identified for improvement in its revised 2022 MOU with the district.

The district has made some progress under state oversight. In most domains assessed for this issue, EY identified BPS practices and procedures for identifying and supporting students with special educational needs as low risk.

The report recommends action the district could take to improve its technology platform for documenting identification and support of students with special needs and suggests that the district put in place procedures for ensuring all identified students are properly categorized. EY's observations related to these recommendations are only moderate risk.³⁷

But the domain the evaluators consider high risk is a critical one—the district's oversight and monitoring of Individualized Education Plan processes, including implementation. When students are identified as having specific needs, a team of teachers and specialists works closely

BPS is a large district, with a large and expensive central office, that lacks coherent systems for gathering and disseminating information. As result, the district fails to effectively guide, monitor, and hold schools accountable.

Ensuring that students with special educational needs have access to a free and appropriate education is not only a state mandate, it is federal law.

with families to tailor an individualized educational plan (IEP) to the student's needs. The IEP is a legal document outlining the services, accommodations, and adaptations a student must receive. Once a plan is approved, the IEP team should ensure it is implemented correctly—school and district officials must continuously monitor the plan to ensure it works in the best interest of students.

The EY report finds that roughly 30 percent of the sample of IEPs it reviewed were overdue in the BPS system. This suggests those IEPs weren't being monitored for appropriate implementation or reevaluated in a meaningful way, meaning the district couldn't verify whether students were receiving the services they need. The consulting team recommends that BPS create a centralized process for evaluating IEP data on a regular basis, certifying that all IEPs in the district have valid data and documentation attached, and monitoring any IEPs that are expired or about to expire.

Student Withdrawals

When a student leaves the district for any reason, school officials should report that reason. Students may move to another district or state, may choose to enroll in a private school, could opt to certify as a homeschooler, or could simply drop out of school altogether.

If a student transfers to another school or decides to homeschool, they wouldn't count toward a district's graduation rate. On the other hand, if a student drops out of school, the district's graduation rate should fall and its dropout rate rises. If these data aren't accurately captured and verified, schools and districts could inaccurately report graduation and dropout rates.

The EY report finds a general lack of data on why students leave BPS. When data are available, BPS has no formal process for verifying the accuracy of student withdrawal reports. Of a sample of 100 student withdrawal reports, EY found that “only 20 had any information related to withdrawals uploaded.”³⁸

The act of verifying data is a district's job. Once a school reports that a student has withdrawn, districts must check that a reason for withdrawal has been captured and verify that the reason provided is accurate. When such reports are inaccurate, community members and other stakeholders may believe a district's schools are doing what they should — helping students graduate from high school — when the opposite may be happening.

Inaccurate reports can be especially pernicious if a district systemically fails one group of students. Transparency is accountability. Without accurate information, the district can't be held to account.

On-Time Bus Arrivals

Stories of Boston students stranded at bus stops have become common, even when bus driver shortages aren't to blame. When buses do arrive, they may be late. A late or absent bus leaves students unsafe and robs them of needed time in school. Both scenarios frustrate overburdened teachers and wreak havoc on working parents. In a city made for horse and buggy, the community can have sympathy for anyone who signs up to drive a yellow school bus, but chalking BPS's issues up to narrow and congested city streets overlooks the district's failure to establish proper processes and procedures for student transportation.

The EY report clearly states that, over time, BPS has failed to allocate the right resources to getting students to school safely and on time. In a system that serves over 46,000 students,³⁹ only one person in the district has the official responsibility of overseeing and managing information related to bus routes. This means that appropriate information pertaining to bus routes and schedules is often incomplete and rarely reviewed for accuracy. EY consultants also noted,⁴⁰ among several data points, that:

- Of a random sample, data were missing for 25 percent of planned bus arrivals.
- 25 percent of the planned AM routes for September 2021, December 2021, January 2022, and June 2022 did not have arrival records.
- Information about buses and bus routes was, in many cases, inaccurate, with AM buses classified as PM buses.

The EY report finds that roughly 30 percent of the sample of IEPs it reviewed were overdue in the BPS system. This suggests those IEPs weren't being monitored for appropriate implementation or reevaluated in a meaningful way.

Stories of Boston students stranded at bus stops have become common, even when bus driver shortages aren't to blame. When buses do arrive, they may be late.

While the district has a technology platform to track and report data on buses, it has not effectively delineated roles and responsibilities for entering information into the platform, and it has failed to check the information it does have for accuracy. When buses are late or missing, the district often has no information about what happened, providing little solace to parents and students, and further justifying the state's involvement in monitoring and holding BPS accountable for improvements.

Student Restraints

Student restraint is the practice of using “bodily force to limit a student’s freedom of movement” if a student poses harm to themselves or others. The state sets clear guidelines on how and when student restraint should be used—it is a last resort when other strategies to de-escalate student behavior have failed.

“State law requires that schools report all restraints via the DESE Security Portal by the end of the school year, either by the school leader or a delegate. The BPS central office is required to annually certify restraint data submitted to DESE.”⁴¹

The EY report puts most of the student restraint practices evaluated in the moderate risk category. School leaders and personnel are generally aware of and employ appropriate practices, and they record and report incidents of restraint at the school level. However, not all schools and personnel have the tools and training they need to report the restraint information to the district, and some school leaders and personnel are unaware of tools that will streamline the process of reporting incidents to the state.

The result is different schools employing different practices for reporting. Some have even created their own reporting tools. Such practices lead to inconsistencies and inaccuracies.⁴² This is especially worrisome as student restraint is not a practice that government or school leaders and teachers take lightly—if restraint is inappropriately practiced or reported, it could violate student civil rights.

Similar to other high-risk issues identified in the report, EY concludes that the districts’ oversight, monitoring, and data collection for student restraints is lacking.

The consultants suggest that BPS needs to provide school leaders with training and tools to enter restraint data into the district’s system and ask them to certify the accuracy of that data every year. They also suggest that BPS formalize its review processes, performing data accuracy and completeness checks at least quarterly and cross-checking data uploaded from schools to the district with the data the district provides to the state.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As the 2022–23 school year ends, BPS and its new superintendent have a large task ahead. State oversight has forced greater transparency in district operations, and that transparency has resulted in some positive change. But the district has a long way to go to streamline and rationalize critical processes; establish procedures for overseeing and holding schools accountable; and create a realistic, student-centered budget. Superintendent Skipper will attempt to do these things in the context of a looming fiscal cliff as federal funds expire, and amid continually decreasing enrollment.

The district’s agreement with the state and the most recent EY report provide important technical recommendations for change. Advocates for students and families should continue to highlight progress toward sound implementation, and the press should continue to highlight the consequences of BPS’s incoherence, including a lack of important services for students with special needs, consistently inconsistent access to on-time transportation, and inaccurate data on student performance.

The consultants suggest that BPS needs to provide school leaders with training and tools to enter restraint data into the district’s system and ask them to certify the accuracy of that data every year.

The district has a long way to go to streamline and rationalize critical processes; establish procedures for overseeing and holding schools accountable; and create a realistic, student-centered budget.

But there is much more to do, and students need change urgently. They shouldn't have to wait. DESE and, where appropriate, the Legislature should take bolder action, especially if the district doesn't begin to make swift progress toward its goals.

Recommendation 1: Responsibly close and consolidate under-enrolled schools and streamline the district's central office.

Had the state placed BPS in receivership in 2022, the district might have passed a different budget in 2023, one that deploys money the district is using to keep under-enrolled schools open to provide more students with the services and materials they need, including one-to-one tutoring and high-quality instructional materials.

Even without the direct control an appointed receiver would enjoy, the state could create a task force to help BPS plan school closures and consolidations and redesign the district to make consolidated schools more attractive to stakeholders. It could also provide a one-time facilities grant that would help the district renovate and reimagine new, consolidated schools, experimenting with different curricula and themes that might be attractive to students and parents.

And as the task force assesses how to create greater efficiencies by closing school buildings, it should also make recommendations for creating greater efficiencies within the district itself.

Time and again state reports note that the BPS struggles mightily with monitoring and oversight. An audit should assess where the central office needs to dedicate more human and financial resources and where it needs to shed layers of bureaucracy to create a more direct line to the school leaders and teachers who are implementing the district policies that affect students and families. A short-term state investment could mean long-term savings for the Commonwealth and the district.

Recommendation 2: Make a one-time investment in auditing, updating, and training personnel on district data systems.

School districts across the nation could have used pandemic-relief funds to make critical investment in data systems, but many chose to invest in personnel instead. Investments in human capital felt necessary in the short term but will have real consequences in the face of a looming fiscal cliff. Support staff and others whom families have come to rely upon may face layoffs. BPS made some sound investments in curricular resources, facilities, and socioemotional supports for students, but its investments to date don't do enough to solve the district's issues with overseeing, monitoring, and helping schools use sound data to drive instruction and future investments.

The state could support BPS with a one-time investment to audit and update its data collection and monitoring systems and train personnel to use them efficiently. An investment in improving data collection and monitoring should focus first on special education and IEP services, English language learner placement and progress, and transportation.

To assess the efficacy of its investment, the state should continue to monitor district progress with the help of a qualified third party. It should also conduct its own periodic return-on-investment analysis to determine the extent to which modified data collection systems and better training achieves specific goals in each domain.

Recommendation 3: Reimagine Transportation

Transportation challenges in Boston have only worsened over time, and the most recent request for proposals process to find a new transportation provider was a stark failure, yielding only one proposal from the very entity that has struggled to get students to school consistently and on time. BPS has failed to dedicate the human resources necessary to monitoring transportation, and as it attempts to improve a system that consistently fails, transportation technology is rapidly improving.

Even without the direct control an appointed receiver would enjoy, the state could create a task force to help BPS plan school closures and consolidations and redesign the district to make consolidated schools more attractive to stakeholders.

The state could support BPS with a one-time investment to audit and update its data collection and monitoring systems and train personnel to use them efficiently.

Instead of continually investing in solutions that don't work, it is time for the district to diversify. BPS could experiment with transportation grants, where the district provides each family with an allocation of funds to direct to transportation costs. The district wouldn't pay families directly; rather, families could choose whether the district buys them a bus or MBTA pass. Some schools already provide these options to families. Other families might use the funds to cover the cost of gas to drive one or more students to school.

Pending state approval and regulations, such a system might attract newer transportation service providers to states. For example, Hop, Skip, Drive is a transportation start-up serving families and students in at least 10 regions across the country.⁴³ The company operates like Uber, but for kids with school-related transportation needs. It boasts vetted drivers and allows parents to set up one-time or repeated rides for students using a platform that allows them to see that their child is with the driver they have chosen.

The state could also collaborate with the district and establish a competitive grant program, where for-profit and nonprofit organizations and community members could submit ideas or programs that reimagine how to get students to school. Arizona allocated federal COVID relief funds this model, which yielded parent carpool cooperatives and ideas for fleets of micro-transit vans, which serve fewer students more efficiently.⁴⁴

Instead of continually investing in solutions that don't work, it is time for the district to diversify. BPS could experiment with transportation grants, where the district provides each family with an allocation of funds to direct to transportation costs.

Endnotes

- 1 See [The Nation's Report Card: 2019 Reading Boston Grade 8 Snapshot Report](#).
- 2 See [edlawcenter.org](#).
- 3 MERA, St. 1993, c. 71.
- 4 Berdik, Chris and Daniloff, Caleb, "BU in Chelsea: A Private College Takes on Public Education," BU Today, April 24, 2008.
- 5 Schueler, Beth E., Goodman, Joshua, S., Deming, David, J., "Can States Take Over and Turn Around School Districts? Evidence from Lawrence, Massachusetts." Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 39(2), 311–332.i
- 6 District Review Report, Boston Public Schools, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, March 13, 2020.
- 7 Memorandum of Understanding between the Boston Public Schools and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, effective March 10, 2020.
- 8 Roza, Marguerite, [The Stakes Are Only Getting Higher For Pandemic School Aid Spending](#), Forbes.com, February 7, 2023.
- 9 Fortier, Mark, [Boston Public Schools Superintendent Brenda Cassellius to Resign](#), NBCboston.com, February 7, 2022.
- 10 [Mary Skipper Selected as Boston Public Schools Superintendent](#), Boston Public Schools press release, June 29, 2022.
- 11 Vaznis, James, [NAACP urges Boston School Committee to restart superintendent search](#), *The Boston Globe*, June 28, 2022.
- 12 Larkin, Max, [After allegations of bullying and official neglect, Boston's Mission Hill School will close this summer](#), *WBUR*, May 6, 2022.
- 13 "Boston Public Schools Systemic Improvement Plan for Immediate Implementation," June 22, 2022, see [BPSSIPSigned FINAL.pdf](#).
- 14 McLaren, Mandy, [BPS bus failures violated rights of special education students, state finds](#), *The Boston Globe*, February 24, 2023.
- 15 Jung, Carrie, [BPS poised to contract again with bus vendor, despite pattern of frequent delays](#), *WBUR*, November 10, 2022.
- 16 Gavin, Christopher, [Boston schools: Mass. inspector general concerned over late buses](#), Boston.com, March 1, 2023.
- 17 Young, Colin, A., [Mixed MCAS results show pandemic's lingering impact, state officials say](#), *GBH News*, September 29, 2022.
- 18 See [NAEP Mathematics: Mathematics Highlights 2022](#).
- 19 See "The Nation's Report Card," ["NAEP 2022 Mathematics Assessment," "Largest Score Declines in Math in Grades 4 and 8 Since Initial Assessments in 1990."](#)
- 20 See [The Nation's Report Card: 2022 Reading Snapshot Report: Boston Grade 8](#).
- 21 See DESE [Cohort 2022 Graduation Rates -Boston](#).
- 22 See DESE [Cohort 2022 Graduation Rates -Springfield](#).
- 23 Huffaker, Christopher, [Boston hit an all-time graduation high in 2022, but can the rate be trusted?](#), *The Boston Globe*, March 21, 2023.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 See Investopedia, [The 10 Most Expensive Cities in the U.S.](#)
- 26 Russell, Jenna and Huffaker, Christopher, [Boston schools lost 15,000 Black students in the past 20 years. Where did they go, and will they ever return?](#), *The Boston Globe*, November 26, 2022.
- 27 Parks, Casey, "The Rise of Black Homeschooling," *The New Yorker*, June 21, 2021.
- 28 Huffaker, Christopher and Martin, Naomi, [Boston Public Schools' enrollment drops for 8th consecutive year](#), *The Boston Globe*, December 2, 2022.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 See ["Superintendent's FY 2024 Final Budget Letter."](#)
- 31 See U.S. Census Bureau press release, May 18, 2021, [Public School Spending Per Pupil Increases](#)
- 32 See DESE [BPS data assessment report - DocumentCloud](#), 2.
- 33 Ibid, 28.
- 34 Matthewson, Tara Garcia, [Boston schools deny some students with disabilities enrollment into dual-language programs](#), *The Boston Globe*, July 13, 2020.
- 35 McLaren, Mandy, [BPS bus failures violated rights of special education students, state finds](#), *The Boston Globe*, February 24, 2023.
- 36 Vaznis, James, [With Boston Public Schools in crisis problems are mounting. Can the system save itself?](#), *The Boston Globe*, October 16, 2021.
- 37 See DESE-BPS Independent Data Consultant, Final Report 2023, 28-29.
- 38 Ibid, 41.
- 39 See DESE [Cohort 2022 Graduation Rates -Boston \(00350000\) \(mass.edu\)](#).
- 40 See DESE-BPS Independent Data Consultant, Final Report 2023, 52.
- 41 Ibid, 46.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 [HopSkipDrive safe youth transportation solution](#).
- 44 A for Arizona, "Transportation Modernization Grants," [AZ Transportation Modernization Grants Snapshot](#).

About the Authors

Cara Stillings Candal is a Senior Fellow at Pioneer Institute. She has an extensive background in national and international education policy and teacher development, and she is the author/editor of numerous articles and several books about school university partnerships, charter schools, and other structural innovations in education.

Mission

Pioneer Institute develops and communicates dynamic ideas that advance prosperity and a vibrant civic life in Massachusetts and beyond.

Vision

Success for Pioneer is when the citizens of our state and nation prosper and our society thrives because we enjoy world-class options in education, healthcare, transportation, and economic opportunity, and when our government is limited, accountable, and transparent.

Values

Pioneer believes that America is at its best when our citizenry is well-educated, committed to liberty, personal responsibility, and free enterprise, and both willing and able to test their beliefs based on facts and the free exchange of ideas.

