

Boston Public Schools headquarters in Roxbury.

EDUCATION / OPINION

## State receivership wrong step for Boston schools

Students deserve quality education, but change should come from district

DAN FRENCH Mar 22, 2022

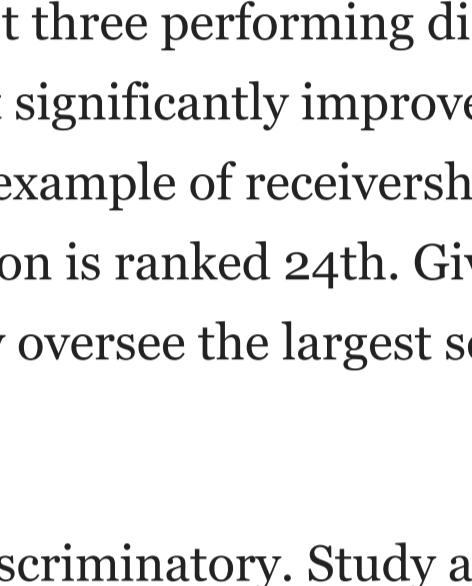
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A NEW PIONEER INSTITUTE report decries the current state of Boston Public Schools and calls for state receivership. The report relies on a March 2020 state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education report which cites churn in district leadership, a high number of schools scoring in the bottom 10 percent of schools statewide on MCAS, lack of coherent services for English Learners and students with disabilities, and low graduation rates. Next week, the state education department plans to begin another review of the Boston schools.

Yes, there are many concerns with the quality of education many Boston students receive, particularly students of color, low-income students, English Learners, and students with disabilities. However, state receivership is the wrong solution for Boston Public Schools. Here's why.

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One, Boston Public Schools are doing better than critics claim. Steady progress has been made on several fronts. Since a low of 58 percent in 2007, the graduation rate has steadily increased to 79 percent in 2021. The percent of 9th graders passing all courses, correlated to on-time graduation and college enrollment, has steadily increased to 81.5 percent in 2020. While MCAS scores are lower than desired, student growth percentiles in English language arts and math hover around the state average.

These gains have occurred while the district has become more diverse with students who need more resources to learn successfully. Since 2008, English learners have grown by 60 percent. Since 2015, high needs students have increased by 13 percent and economically disadvantaged students have increased by 44 percent. Just under half (48 percent) of all students speak a first language other than English.

Two, recent decisions made by the Boston superintendent and school committee will make a difference. In a historic decision, the school committee voted to revise the district's discriminatory admissions policy for its three selective exam schools to enable more Black, Latinx, low-income, English learner, and disabled students to enroll. The adoption of MassCore standards, a sequence of courses aligned with college expectations, as a graduation requirement will broaden access to a high-quality education. At the elementary school level, the number of schools housing selective advanced work classes has been reduced; these classes are overrepresented by White, affluent students. And 15 schools have adopted an Excellence for All curriculum, intended to provide all students with "enriching, 21st century learning experiences." These changes enable a greater percent of elementary school students to engage in a high-quality curriculum.

Three, in Massachusetts and nationwide, state receivership has a dismal history. Holyoke and Southbridge, two of the three districts under state receivership, and Springfield, with a cluster of schools under state oversight, are ranked as the lowest three performing districts in the state. In Boston, two schools under state receivership have not significantly improved after multiple years. While Lawrence is touted by the state as a successful example of receivership, the state ranks Lawrence as the 16th lowest performing district; Boston is ranked 24th. Given this poor track record, why would anyone believe the state could successfully oversee the largest school district in the Commonwealth?

Last, the state's accountability system is inherently discriminatory. Study after study concludes that the use of a single standardized test, MCAS included, produces results more strongly correlated with race, income, language, and disability than student learning and school quality. The origins of standardized testing are rooted in the early 1900s eugenics movement, which sought to construct a testing system to show that white people were smarter than black and brown people.

Massachusetts has among the widest race, income, language, and disability gaps in the nation as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The state is among only 10 states that use a high-stakes state test to determine whether a student graduates high school, a decision with life-long impact on an individual's career opportunities, life earnings, and citizenship. Yet, the state blindly continues to administer a state accountability system that discriminates against Black, Latinx, low-income, English learner, and disabled students as well as schools and districts serving high percentages of students from these groups.

Change is needed to ensure that every Boston student is provided a high-quality education and social, emotional, cultural, and academic support to graduate with multiple career, education, and life opportunities. But the city and district should make these changes, not the state. Here are some recommendations:

- Eliminate policies that deny opportunities to historically marginalized students. These include suspending disproportionate numbers of Black and Latinx students and placing disproportionate numbers of these students in substantially separate special education programs, using a eurocentric curriculum, administering standardized tests as interim assessments, supporting selective schools, emphasizing English language over students' first language, and school closures that disproportionately occur in neighborhoods of color.
- Fully implement the state's LOOK Act, which enables districts to use native language in instruction, including dual language programs.
- Reduce substantially separate special education programs and devote greater resources to well-planned and resourced inclusion schools.
- Implement a pre-K-12 ethnic studies program. Participation in ethnic studies, particularly for students of color, can increase attendance, grades, and graduation rates.
- Strengthen district accountability systems to assess school progress using multiple measures, including a school quality review model, and provide schools with ample support to address gaps in service.
- Eliminate standardized test interim assessments and replace them with teacher-designed, standards-based performance assessments.

Key to making these changes is a transition to an elected school committee. Mayoral transition and overreach in school committee decisions have led to a revolving door of superintendents and less investment in the school district by Boston families. Boston remains the only district in the state without an elected school committee. Families of color, low-income families, and immigrant families have too little say in their children's education. This is undemocratic, plain and simple. Last November, almost 80 percent of Boston voters endorsed a switch from a mayoral appointed to elected school committee.

Yes, the Boston Public Schools need to remain committed to fully educating all its increasingly diverse students. But state receivership is the wrong path to follow.

Meet the Author

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President, Citizens for Public Schools

 Bio 

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Jean Sanders  7 months ago

MCAS is not relevant to these questions that I have for MA BESE and Riley and Peyster (relative to BPS and also Lawrence (which is in my geographic region and schools in Worcester County where I grew up).

1. When there is a consent decree, and "managers" are overseeing the BPS , does the school system remain under the decree forever?

2. Why do we have schools under a "manager" or a "receiver" when this is antithetical to the democratic process that we need to grow in the community/city and that we should encourage?

3. Why is there not a plan submitted that will clearly define the conditions and standards that Lawrence has already met and what they are expected to complete in order to end the receivership. The constant answer of : They are not ready yet. is not accountability on the part of BESE.

4. Now, in thinking of Springfield "empowerment", what does that mean in light of Mr. West's comment that it should be "expanded" in Springfield (whether or not there are factors of scale that need to be considered). What should the BESE use as guidelines and what data are necessary in making those decisions. MCAS is not sufficient to answer any of these questions.

Addendum: the spring Webinar that IES presented on the MA oversight process for "accountability" is not useful in answering these questions. I wrote to Mark Schneider the director of IES and told him so.

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Jean Sanders  Robert Lee  7 months ago

new tests were devised to keep Jewish students out of the Ivy League colleges. The political view at the time was, "Jewish students are over-achievers because they read and study and participate in classes; they are just not that bright". So to compensate for "over-achievers" getting into college they instituted a test and sure enough they got the Jewish enrollment down. I have references but don't need to post them here.

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Jean Sanders  Jean Sanders  7 months ago

I think Binet also had a more practical task (not lost in ideology). "How can we find which students are most likely to achieve in the current schools that we have now with the curriculum and materials and resources in France?" That is a total different purpose than "keeping Jews out of college" which was the stated purpose for tests for students in the US at Yale. There are current debates about psychology and the science of testing - not all scientists have a nefarious purpose. The purpose is sometimes up front; but other times it emerges when politicians decide "here is how we can use this new method" to continue sorting people into "haves and have-nots", the haves are usually up front in the decision making and sometimes you get a Hitler, Stalin, Putin, trump in charge of the decision making process in the political sense.

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Jean Sanders  Jean Sanders  7 months ago

"anybody who uses Darwinian logic and/or votes for a Democrat today is a eugenicist." I believe it was his cousin who distorted the purpose ... they had two different track records.

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Jean Sanders  Valentina E. Edelmann  7 months ago

the creation of Commonwealth articles should delete these comments.

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Valentina E. Edelmann  7 months ago

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Jean Sanders  Valentina E. Edelmann  7 months ago

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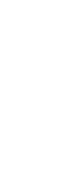
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