

## **Recommendation to Postpone the Rezoning of Boston Public Schools until a More Comprehensive Reform Plan is in Place**

Submitted to Superintendent Carol Johnson on May 29, 2009 by  
Gina Chirichigno, Post-PICS Coordinator & Susan Eaton, Research Director, Charles Hamilton  
Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School,  
Rahsaan Hall & Jessica Sommer, Staff Attorney, Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under  
Law of Boston Bar Association and  
Amy Reichbach, Attorney/Racial Justice Advocate, ACLU of Massachusetts

### **Executive Summary**

The Boston Public School system is at a crossroads as it considers a proposal that would change the way students are assigned to their schools. This proposal is designed around cost-cutting measures, rather than access to quality schools, at a time that the district is becoming more segregated, both by race and class. This is troubling because school assignment plans often act as “gatekeepers” to quality schools.

When a school district determines that it will change its assignment policies, it should do so only after considering a host of different factors, including the impact that racial and socioeconomic isolation have on student achievement; the effect that changes in transportation and choice will have on its most vulnerable students; whether parents have equal access to English Language Learner, special education, and innovative school options; and whether there are ways to improve efficiency within the existing framework, without the disruptions associated with redesigned attendance boundaries.

As detailed in the enclosed recommendation and accompanying research, the proposed five-zone plan would deny students access to quality schools by focusing only on cost-savings and geographical boundaries without taking into account the needs of Boston's most needy students. Furthermore, the plan fails to provide transportation to the 29% of all students grandfathered into their current schools, thus rendering “grandfathering” meaningless for many BPS families. For these reasons we recommend that Boston Public Schools decline to adopt the five-zone plan and postpone any rezoning until a more comprehensive reform plan is in place, consistent with this proposal and our recommendations summarized below.

### **Recommendations:**

**Access to Quality Schools:** Consistent with its commitment to expand excellence, increase access, and ensure equity for all BPS students and families, as stated in the Guiding Principles of Pathways to Excellence:

- 1) BPS should fully implement its own Achievement Gap Policy;
- 2) Until it is able to improve the quality of additional schools in the district, BPS should not reduce access to successful schools on the basis of geography; and
- 3) If and when BPS redraws its attendance boundaries, it must do so with attention to the distribution of quality schools and the burden of underperforming schools available to students.

**Access to Bilingual Programs:** Consistent with acceleration strategies set forth in Pathways to Excellence, BPS should:

- 1) Expand neighborhood access to language support by ensuring that two-way bilingual programs are offered in and/or accessible to students in all zones;
- 2) Maintain citywide status for the Hernandez school until similar opportunities are fully implemented and functional for students in all zones; and
- 3) Should the five-zone plan be implemented, draw narrow transportation exemptions for two-way bilingual schools to allow students to remain in their current programs.

**Using Racial and Socioeconomic Data Technologies for Rezoning, School Reform and Resource Allocation Purposes:** If and when BPS redraws its attendance boundaries, it should:

- 1) Study more closely school and neighborhood trends before adopting a new assignment policy, perhaps by conducting a simulation of how the new plan will affect BPS's highest-needs students;
- 2) Use available GIS mapping technologies to devise an attendance zone policy that is part of an effective and coherent school reform policy that does not exacerbate existing opportunity gaps;
- 3) Consider replicating some of the new student assignment models that other school districts have employed to minimize the impact of socioeconomic and racial isolation, which both affect learning;
- 4) Use current research on school diversity (economic and racial) to guide the formation of a new student assignment policy. To the extent possible, involve urban planning, public and mental health, and community advocates in this process. Consult the range of experts in the Boston metropolitan region who study the effects of racial and economic segregation;
- 5) Explore regional solutions, such as expanding the opportunities available to the highest-needs students to cross district boundaries, thus increasing their access to high-performing and low-poverty schools that are close to their homes.

Regardless of whether a new attendance plan is adopted, BPS should consider using the tools/models discussed above as it maps out a strategy for addressing the opportunity and achievement gaps that exist within the Boston metro area. This information can help inform BPS's choices related to resource allocation, needed supports, teacher training and recruitment, etc.

**Transportation:** Because transportation is key to access:

- 1) If and when BPS redraws its attendance boundaries it should continue to provide transportation to students who are grandfathered into their current schools; and
- 2) BPS should commission a study of ways other than rezoning to save transportation money, perhaps by increasing efficiency. If BPS has already conducted such research, it should make this information available.