

Build BPS Ideas

(updated Nov 27 adding ideas on “Where should new buildings be?”)

After the school committee meeting on January 24, I was thinking about the feedback from the school committee members regarding Build BPS. I wondered how BPS might be able to organize the process in a way that would be clear and useful. Here are my thoughts so far on how that could be done.

My first thought is on grade configuration. Have many parents been asked how they feel about giving up middle schools in the district? Has any community outreach happened to ask this question?

It appears that BPS is planning to move towards a K-6, 7-12 and K-8, 9-12 model. If families are open to losing middle schools, then this approach would appear to be the one that would be most popular. A K-6, 7-12 model would not be popular with K-8 families. An alternate K-8, 9-12 model probably would not be embraced by the exam schools, although K-8 families might consider it a decent compromise. So, the question I think becomes how best to implement a K-6, 7-12 and K-8, 9-12 model, as well as explain how it could work for families. I think the framework below could do both those tasks.

Balancing Options for K-6 and K-8 students

	For K-6 or K-8 students	For K-8 or 7-12 students	For K-6, K-8, or 7-12 students
School Grade Configuration	7-12 schools	9-12 schools	7-12 schools with admissions at grade 7 and grade 9. There would be guaranteed 50% admission at grade 7 and guaranteed 50% admission at grade 9.
Percentage of these schools to ensure equal options for K-6 and K-8 students	Equal to 9-12 schools	Equal to 7-12 schools	These schools do not impact the balance between 9-12 schools and 7-12 schools. There could be any number of these schools.

I think that this framework has many strengths:

1. It makes it possible for both K-6 schools and K-8 schools to thrive in the district. If decisions were made only on a school by school basis then over time the K-8 schools would most likely be less popular and some schools might be pushed to a K-6 model if enrollment became very low. Although this would probably happen very slowly I think it is better to set up a structure that allows both configurations to be strong long term.
2. With this model there is the possibility that specialty schools could offer two times that students could enroll so both K-6 and K-8 schools would have an equal chance of being admitted to those schools. Also, those High Schools would have a more diverse student body as well.
3. This structure would work well with k-8 schools that would like to grow to include a 9-12 high school. Some K-6 students might like to go to middle school in a K-8 that has a 9-12 high school too. This would be another path for a K-6 student to take that would reduce transitions.

Next, I would count how many students are currently in the 1st grade and provide equal classroom space for each of the upper grades. I choose that grade because it appears to be the grade with the larger number of enrolled students. The goal should be for BPS to not lose students as they get older. Also, it is easier to find uses for extra space than to scramble to build buildings if you are unprepared.

The chart below could also be shared with families.

Providing enough space for each grade equally

Number of seats for students in grade 1	Number of seats for students in grades 2-12	Number of seats for students in K0, K1 and K2
Step 1: Count the number of filled seats of students currently in Grade 1	Step 2: Have the district provide the same number of seats for each grade as grade 1. If grade 1 currently has 500 seats, then the district would make sure that there was space for 500 seats in grade 2 as well.	Step 3. In time have as many kindergarten seats as grade 1 seats.

This approach would still give individual schools the ability to have different amounts of classrooms for various grades, as populations change. If a school had periods of lower enrollment space could be used for an early learning center or to house a school partner or a community group, etc.,.

I am wondering which buildings are owned by the city and rented to Charter schools. The Build BPS plan focuses on BPS schools, but I wonder if Charter schools should be considered as part of the discussion. There might be some Charters that would like to move to a more central location in the city to have shorter trips for most of their students. As Charter schools are city schools, any student in the city can go to them so bus costs tend to be higher than for Public Schools. If the location of a charter school was in a location that was a short distance to most of the school's current student population that could possibly save money on busing.

Perhaps useful buildings could be made available to BPS in neighborhoods that don't have enough seats that charters would like to give up. This might be one way for neighborhoods with few or no neighborhood public schools might get a building for a school. But for this to work it would need to be a benefit for both groups.

A priority would be for school communities to not to be moved to another location unless there is a way for it to be an improvement on a current situation and preferred by both groups.

Addressing Equity

Ideally with the Build BPS process there would be a goal of having more Special Education options, and ELL options dispersed throughout the city. Adding more dual language schools should be part of this discussion.

In addition, currently there seems to be a range of percentages for special education seats in inclusion schools throughout the district. As part of the Build BPS process I would recommend adding inclusion to more schools so the percentage of special education students at each school could be less. I would recommend a number that was the same percentage at all inclusion schools, somewhere between 20 and 25 percent.

The other issue that I have been thinking about is how so much of school funding comes from enrollment. I think the Build BPS process also needs to think carefully about how many seats each school has so that all schools have a chance to thrive. If there are more seats available than can be filled, then that makes it possible for one school to have higher enrollment than another. If the seats available more closely matched the students applying, then there could be the possibility that all schools could be fully enrolled. The budgets need to be stabilized from year to year so either the funding needs to solidify, or the enrollment of students needs to.

To accomplish these goals, when each building is considered for updating have a plan for how many seats will be available. There could be a check off list like the following:

1. How many seats for the whole school so that it can thrive in the district? Make sure that throughout the district there are not a lot more seats, than can be filled.
2. Of the seats which percentage will be ELL, General Ed, sub separate, and inclusive seats? Make sure that inclusive seats are the same percentage throughout the district.

Where should buildings be located?

1. All neighborhoods should be welcoming places for families to raise children. If schools are not available for students of all ages, in all neighborhoods that will impact where families will move to. Having large differences between neighborhoods for available classroom seats is not equitable.
2. If schools are equally built in all neighborhoods it would be easier to have a less segregated district. Students from nearby neighborhoods could choose each other's schools. However, if higher income neighborhoods don't get schools many will choose private schools. If lower income neighborhoods get more schools, it is more likely they will be more segregated. This is because more families would get placements at schools close to their homes because that is where most of the open seats would be.
3. With Build BPS the district should plan on building schools that will strengthen all neighborhoods and lessen segregation. BPS should not just react to the present but be mindful of how present decisions will affect the future. Let's plan a future that we would ALL want.
4. If there are more schools in neighborhoods either by student population, or to be more equitable to all neighborhood school assignment needs to be revisited to make sure the district does not become more segregated.

Possible Order of Priorities for Build BPS

1. Repairs that address safety issues. Addressing door locks working and restricting building access for possible gun violence is important. I am glad that this is a priority for the city council and BPS, and that movement is happening in this area. Another example that I would recommend would be making water in K classrooms safe to drink. Kids can't read signs in that grade that say "This water is not meant for drinking" in classrooms with lead in the drinking water.
2. Start by finding win-win building solutions for co-located schools. Both school communities should be happy with the outcome.
3. Whenever possible keep school communities in their current school unless the community welcomes or requests a move. This is especially important in struggling schools, as such schools are too often closed instead of given needed investments.
4. Find out if middle schools want to turn into other grade configurations. If so learn what middle schools want to become a K-8, K-6, 7-12 or 9-12 or early learning center (that could flow into a k-8 or K-6 school). Also learn if K-5 schools want to become K-6 or K-8 schools. See what high schools would like to be 7-12 schools, 9-12 schools or 7-12 schools with 50% admission at grade 7 and 50% admission at grade 9.
5. Add more inclusion and ELL options throughout the district, including more dual language programs.

6. Also learn if some K-8 schools would like to include a high school. That could be another option for school communities to consider with various buildings.
7. Make classrooms more comfortable for students with sensory sensitivities including autistic students. Have non-fluorescent lighting as fluorescent lighting can cause headaches and sensory overload. Have paper hand dryers (not noisy air dryers) and toilets that do not automatically flush (this can be too startling).
8. In deciding what schools get their choices prioritize schools in the lower tiers, and then work to the higher tiers. This would be reasonably equitable and straight forward to implement.

New Buildings

In some cases new buildings might be needed when there isn't enough capacity in BPS currently for student needs. Here are some possible uses for new buildings:

1. Adding one more exam school. If this happened I would recommend that all the exam schools would go through the general lottery for seats. Otherwise schools would become even less diverse than they are currently.
2. One of the biggest expenses for BPS is out of district placements. For the students that are placed in out of district placements perhaps there could be a satellite campus of one or more of the most popular schools. Then needs of those students could be met in Boston, and there could be transportation savings as well. The city of Boston, or BPS could provide a building for that school or schools.
3. Some K-8 or K-6 schools might want to provide an upper campus high school as well as an elementary school.

Parent Engagement

1. Share the charts above if BPS finds them a useful framework.
2. Share the list of priorities. Several items on the list would be welcomed by families. Ask families and community members to discuss possible changes to school configurations. BPS could then listen and be responsive to what they hear and look for win-win solutions.
3. Give a handout with links to your website with all the Build BPS school data <http://buildbps.org/> Also make it easier for families to find the email address to send ideas to: buildbps@bostonpublicschools.org
4. For the next "parent engagement" It would be great if BPS could share a map with all the buildings that they own including those rented to Charters, or other groups, and city buildings that could be used. It could just be listed with numbers, so it could be easier to make, and then have a corresponding page that lists the different schools with information about them. Some information included would be current grade configurations, number of classrooms for each grade, and if the classrooms were general ed, inclusive or sub separate classrooms. They could also list the number of

inclusive classrooms that could be used in each school (since that is the direction that the district is going). Although much of this information is on the web, including a print version would be more inclusive (not everyone has web access), and get parents to think of the big picture in a welcoming way.

. I will update at this link as I brainstorm more. I would welcome thoughts.
lisa_jeanne_graf@msn.com