

Revisiting School Assignment

– Oct 2018, Lisa Jeanne Graf

Back in 2013 I created some community proposals for changing school assignment as the parent of a child who was about to enter BPS. I am rethinking my ideas from back then and wondering if I can offer something useful to the discussion now. Below are my ideas so far.

Goals:

- To have school assignment have equal access regardless of neighborhood
- To increase school diversity (financial, racial and academic)
- To help BPS families secure good paying jobs and affordable housing
- To increase school quality (with all schools fully funded at a minimum)
- To find more funding, and areas for savings so that more money can go into classrooms.

Equitable School Assignment regardless of neighborhood

For General Education Students:

1. First have all the schools list the available seats. Try to have the seats be enough for each school to have strong funding. Try not to have more seats in the district than the number of students that are looking for seats. Also learn the percentage of schools in the different tiers.
2. Second provide the school options to each family. Each family's options would be equal in the seats that would be available to them from various schools (a number could be decided on). This amount could be close to what 12 school options would work out to. Discussion could happen in BPS and the community to how much school choice and how much having schools close to home is appropriate.

If the number of school options was on the small side then more students would have schools close to home. For this to be fair the options would need to be completely equitable. So even with schools close to home the result might be that some students would be assigned to a school that was far away that they considered of poor quality. This would more likely happen in a neighborhood with many quality schools. For other families the reverse would be true- a student would need to travel a good distance to reach a quality school. Some families might choose to not send their child to the Boston Public Schools if they didn't like the lottery results and they had the money to choose another option.

Less school options would create more segregation. To avoid this more schools would need to be options, and/or there would need to be more families moving to other neighborhoods to increase diversity in the schools.

3. If the entire district had one third Tier 1 schools, then every family would get one third of Tier 1 schools in their choice list. The percentage of schools in the different Tiers throughout the district would be the same percentage that all families would get to choose from. This approach would be adaptive to changes that happened in school quality each year.

Also any capacity school (generally tier 4 or 5) in the city would be available for assignment. If it were far away the family would need to take care of transportation. If it were closer, it would either be a walk zone or would require BPS to provide transportation.

All seats would have close to the same amount of competition. 10 seats at the Quincy for example would have 1200 families applying for them and 20 seats at the Eliot would also have 2400 families applying for them.

School assignment is currently determined by the distance of a school from a family's home address. Schools that are a little farther away could be considered if the travel time is quick compared to the commute to nearby schools. I would recommend that farther distances be considered if the travel time is reasonably quick and increases the diversity of a school.

4. Third families make their choices. Families would need to put in all the schools on their choice list (in order of preference). A farther away capacity school could be included as well if desired. There would only be one time for picking schools (no additional rounds) and the current last round for picking schools would be the one time all families would make their choices.
5. Fourth families get their results. All schools could have wait lists.

For Students who are English Language Learners, and Students who have Special Needs:

1. Learn the percentage of schools in the different tiers that provide seats for students with English Language needs. Also learn the percentage of schools in the different tiers that provide seats for students with English Language needs. By doing this each year it will give current feedback to BPS to how equitable

assignment is for these groups compared to the general education population of students.

2. Currently these groups are assigned with an overlay system. I would recommend that all students have an equal access to quality schools. Their assignment options would be the same as for general education.
3. An exception would be for students with very specific needs that have limited programming in the district. I would recommend increasing specific programming, so it is available in more parts of the district.

Have SPED and ELL students in more quality schools through-out the district

- Add more supports in exam schools for SPED populations. There are not inclusive classrooms in the Exam schools. If K-8 schools have inclusive classrooms rolled out in most schools, then the high schools need to be that inclusive as well.
- Low severity SPED programs would be equitably divided between all schools.
- High severity students would be placed in "citywide programs" that would be located at a school in each area of the city. The SLIFE and ELL Level 1-3, and Level 4-5 students would also need to be equitably placed throughout the district.
- Where possible move students from sub-separate classrooms into seats in an inclusion classroom
- Where possible cut down on school percentages throughout the district where more than 30% of students have special needs. More inclusion seats should help with this, but some schools have percentages that are too high for students and staff to get the support they need.
- Make sure that all schools are ADA compliant **now**.
- Students who are learning English as a second language would have programming at schools close to their home. For students who are beginning to learn English make sure that there are programs evenly distributed throughout the city
- Add more dual language programs through-out the district

By having schools all be more diverse in their populations, it would allow more schools to thrive and less schools to be challenged with receiving enough resources. It would also help the school quality issue in the district. If we ignore the ELL and SPED populations in thinking about school assignment, we might miss a big part of finding the solution.

Suggestions for Improving School Quality *and* Diversity

Diversity would include ELL, and SPED populations as well as all racial, ethnic and economic groups. Some ideas to address diversity and improve school quality are:

- Place schools in underserved neighborhoods. If the schools have more space than the population nearby, then other neighborhoods would need to send their kids to the schools to fill the seats. This would increase diversity. One possibility would be building a school over a library. That would provide a library for a school and find a site for a school to be built.
- High schools will be more diverse if there is no longer an application process. Non-Exam Schools that currently have applications could stop using applications. Schools could have a cap on 400 students so that traditional high schools would have enough seats to also thrive.
- All High School should have the same graduation requirements that meet the state standards.
- For Exam schools I read some great recommendations in the following article: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/evidence-on-new-york-city-and-boston-exam-schools/> I agree with the following recommends that the test to get in to the exam schools should be one that students already take, and is mandatory for all students to take. Also, that all top students from each BPS elementary school would be invited to go to an exam school.
- Build new buildings in neighborhoods without many (or no) Tier 1 or Tier 2 schools. Invest highly in these new schools so that they are in demand.
- Create more popular programs that would draw families with diverse backgrounds. Some possibilities would be more dual language programs, Montessori program(s) as well as stem and steam programs.
- Schools that are Tier 3 could be invested heavily in to bring them up to Tier 2 in neighborhoods that don't have many Tier 1 and Tier 2 schools.
- Have more affordable housing in high-income neighborhoods so that the neighborhoods themselves become more economically diverse.
http://ljgraf.com/City_Proposals/AffordableHousing.pdf
- BPS and the city could provide more housing for students experiencing homelessness that are currently living outside of the city and requiring long bus rides. When preferred by a family, some of these students could get housing in higher income neighborhoods to increase income diversity for those communities.
- Add K0 seats to K-8 and K-6 schools (not early learning centers) that currently have low enrollment to make the schools more attractive to families.
- Have either Excellence for All or Advanced work at schools that currently have low enrollment and/or lower tiers. Ideally all schools should have some form of

advanced work. Until that happens it would be most equitable to have schools that are next in the roll out for some form of advanced work be schools with low enrollment and/or low tiers.

- For level 4 and 5 schools have a short-term goal to move towards level 3 and up, and get them out of receiverships as quickly as is possible (if they are in that situation).
- Make sure that low enrollment schools don't have budget cuts. All schools need a baseline of services and staff. These schools generally need **more** resources. Don't underfund schools by lowering student weights. Some schools have received less funds from student weighted funding since the weights for autistic students, and students with emotional impairments have been lowered. A new approach to school budgeting is recommended to address these and other issues.
- Have new METCO placements be closed to middle income families

To help Families secure good paying jobs and Affordable Housing

- Here is an ambitious proposal for helping BPS families secure better paying jobs <http://ljgraf.com/BPS/Pipeline.pdf>
- This could be scaled down for a pilot, or fully implemented for larger results.
- Here are some ideas on Affordable housing http://ljgraf.com/City_Proposals/Affordable_Housing_Goals.pdf
Also: http://ljgraf.com/City_Proposals/AffordableHousing.pdf
- Here are some beginning ideas on families experiencing homelessness: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1nts0fSpcsOAJ8jpHbrJge_9PDkhIWMWllkA-RdSHj0o/edit

Creating More Quality Schools

1. Teach students in ways that build on strengths. One example would be using reading to improve vocabularies for autistics who are hyperlexic. Another example would be allowing students who have a difficulty writing to type or use speech software to type (like Dragon software) so that the focus could be more on learning to write and not on how the writing is created.
2. Reform advanced work so that it can continue as a viable option. Stop the practice of being able to be tested out of the program. Once a student is in the program, let them remain in the program. If students don't want to leave their school for advanced work let them have some form of it at their current school.

Make Advanced Work available in an inclusive classroom for students who are currently in an inclusive classroom because of SPED needs. Ideally offer access of advanced work for all students. Several schools offer equivalent programs including Excellence for all, and the International Baccalaureate.

3. Supports for students experiencing homelessness is a great addition, with a strong partnership from Councilor Anissa Essaibi George. Plans for providing more housing for students is a great direction as well. This can be built on.
4. Improve classrooms through Build BPS to be sensory friendly for autistics and other students with sensory sensitivities. Remove fluorescent lights or at the least provide glasses that minimize the effects of fluorescent light. Also, don't have air hand dryers (too loud) or automatic flush toilets (too startling). Allow for quiet spaces in classrooms where students can take a break if they are overstimulated.
5. Support and respect all students equally protecting their civil rights. In this spirit, it would be appreciated to stop Autism Awareness Month activities at individual schools. Although teachers and parents often value them, they can make autistic students feels uncomfortable and embarrassed. If Autism is discussed, have it discussed in a more pride-based approach- sharing the accomplishments of famous autistics.
6. School Safety. Keeping students safe in school through safe buildings, staff trained in crisis situations, and by providing students strong emotional supports. Also fund supports for strengthening classroom safety plans when needed, from the central budget when a school does not have the funds.
7. Teaching skills for the future- for college and./or work
8. Have an equity of offerings throughout the district. All schools could offer equal offerings of:
 - programs like Boston Debate League and other strong partnerships
 - extracurriculars including sports (with reliable transportation)
 - Arts programing. Not all schools have equal access to the arts, even when figuring in the facilities issues at different schools. Ideally all arts programing would be offered by certificated art teachers.
 - Offer an equal variety of electives in areas like science, history, languages, civics, philosophy, etc...

- Successful inclusion practices with the best results for student outcomes- emotionally, socially as well as academically.
- Critical staff at each school including one nurse, one social worker, one physiologist, and one guidance counselor (for high schools).
- Also, parity in sports and locker rooms between male and female athletes.

In 2013 I wrote “ A Framework for Quality Schools” Most of the ideas are still timely:
http://ljgraf.com/Improving_School_Choice/quality%20framework.pdf

Finding areas for savings so that more money can go into classrooms

- More staff at schools versus staff in central office supporting schools would be a better investment for student wellness and achievement
- See if it is possible to have some of the students in out of district placements, brought back into Boston. One possibility is that the City of Boston could rent one of their buildings as a satellite campus of a popular out of district school. That way a student could still get the setting they need, and the school would have an opportunity to serve more of their students closer to their homes. This would save money on transportation.
- Several school start time issues were not solved when the issue was shelved until later. One issue is that 9:30 schools with extended learning time have buses that are coming home late in the afternoon. Another issue is many high school students want and need a later start time. If these issues can be addressed, and school start times can be set up in a way that works for family’s work schedules and lives (with useful family engagement) then there is the potential for some savings in the transportation budget.
- Reduce testing to the amount required legally. Less testing would cost less money and also free up more time for students to be taught, which would help with student achievement.
- Spend less money on school police and more on therapy and nurses, and general social emotional supports
- By bringing programing for SPED and ELL students closer to their homes, this could create savings in the transportation department because students entering the district could have shorter bus rides.
- Cutting down on door to door service is reasonable if it is voluntary, and appropriate for the student. A possible change should **not** be part of the I.E.P. process. Students should maintain the right to door to door service.

One idea would be that another bus stop is offered as an option for door to door service so that families know that another stop is possible and for them to know

what the cost savings would be for the district. For the most part door to door service is costly because the stop is far from the school that the child goes to.

The positive of a bus stop farther than home would be more exercise during the day, and a shorter bus ride. My daughter currently has a ride that is about 40 minutes each way. The convenience of the bus stop outside our door is wonderful especially in the winter. But I would consider another stop if it was warm in the winter and it shortened my daughter's bus ride. I would also want to maintain door to door in her 504 in case another stop did not work out.

- One city-based idea would be for there to be a cap on overtime for city employees. This might mean that more city employees would need to be hired, but that in itself would be a positive- allowing more Bostonians to have jobs that pay decently. Any savings could be put in the BPS budget.
- Learning if grants are available to build a school building in neighborhood that would improve student diversity. New Market Tax credits can be used for this purpose. They have been used for public schools in the past and not just charter schools.
- Reform of the PILOT system. Making PILOT tax payments mandatory in Boston would need to be changed in state law. This would be worth researching and crafting a bill. Also see if there are more places where what Non-profits can easily offer BPS match up well with what BPS needs.
- For Equity School Accounts could be district wide (like Brookline) so that fund raising will help all schools in the district equally.
- Securing more funding from the city, state and federal government.
http://ljgraf.com/BPS/Education_Funding_Ideas.pdf

More Equity in Funding

- Currently a school gets more money in title 1 dollars if students at a school have a higher need population. I believe that, this needs to be changed on the state level because it is too tempting for districts to cluster students with higher needs to access more funds. Ideally districts would just not do this, but I think it would be more effective if the state set up funding to be for the average need of a district, and not by individual schools.
- On related note it is also tempting for districts to let schools slip into level 4 status to be able to receive turnaround funds. It would be ideal if the state had financial incentives to have schools in their districts have less extremes in achievement. So, if schools were more similar in their achievement- more funds would be available. That would mean that Level 1 and 2 schools would not be penalized for serving students with higher needs and Level 4 and 5

schools would be less likely to be underfunded by a district, because those levels would not give a financial benefit to that district.

Community Benefits that Non-profits could provide through the PILOT program

1. Poverty often impacts educational outcomes. Instead of just dealing with the results of poverty I think it would be a better idea to also try to lower the percentage of families in Boston who are in poverty. Families who are homeless could have a priority for these suggestions. Have more non-profits offer more good paying jobs to BPS families. It could be considered part of community benefits. <http://ljgraf.com/BPS/Pipeline.pdf>
2. Therapy is sometimes paid for by parents using non-profit partners. The parent's insurance is billed, and then the co-pay is paid for by families. One idea would be for a non-profit to pay for family's copays when a family's insurance is used. Then in either situation a family is not paying for therapy and more students have access to therapy.
3. Have each fine arts institution partner with BPS to offer free passes for families once a year who go to BPS. The plus of this is that students who don't like crowds can go on quiet days and really enjoy the arts. Free days at Museums are not ideal for all families (especially families that are neurodiverse) since they tend to be very crowded.
4. Whenever possible help families improve their housing, and health. All nonprofits should have goals for directly helping the families in the Boston Public schools.
5. Ask BPS staff, families and students what community benefits they would like to see. A list could be referenced in meetings between communities and non-profits as a starting point for discussions about community benefits. A database could be created where needs are posted and non profits could then choose from.