

What is the “Pathways to Excellence” plan?

Superintendent Carol R. Johnson has presented to the Boston School Committee a variety of proposals to strengthen the Boston Public Schools (BPS). The proposals are designed to offer a high-quality education to every child, increase access to quality schools and programs, and ensure equity throughout the neighborhoods of Boston. The plan recommends a variety of school expansions, relocations, mergers and consolidations to support the Superintendent’s academic agenda.

Why is the school district considering school expansions, relocations, mergers and consolidations?

The Superintendent has outlined four main factors that led to the development of this plan:

- **Families’ interests:** The plan responds to requests from parents throughout the city who have asked for the expansion of high-quality schools, programs that span kindergarten through grade 8, and more pilot school seats.
- **Academic priorities:** The proposals are designed to support the Superintendent’s ambitious academic agenda for the school district, which aims to ensure that every student graduates from high school with the knowledge and skills to succeed in college, career and life. Dr. Johnson has outlined several key performance goals, with annual improvement targets for each one through the year 2012.
- **Enrollment pressures:** A declining school-aged population in Boston has led to lower enrollments in recent years. While most high schools are at full capacity, there are nearly 8,000 empty seats in elementary and middle schools throughout the city, resulting in inefficiency and unnecessary spending.
- **Economic realities:** Like school districts and households throughout the country, Boston is faced with serious fiscal challenges. The cost of utilities, food, gasoline and other expenses continues to rise, while state, federal and private resources continue to decline. This plan is designed to control spending and make better use of our existing resources, with an estimated reduction in expenses by nearly \$13.8 million over the next five years.

Why is enrollment declining?

BPS has about 56,000 students, which is down about 4,200 in the past five years. Reasons include fewer school-age children in the city, a declining birth rate, and competition from other educational providers such as charter schools. Despite these factors, the BPS continues to enroll about 75 percent of all school-age children in the city (10% attend parochial schools, 6% attend charter schools, 5% attend private schools, and 4% attend suburban schools through METCO).

What is the district doing to stabilize or increase enrollment?

Superintendent Johnson has stated that she wants Boston Public Schools to be every parent’s first choice for their child’s education. The “Pathways to Excellence” proposals are designed to improve the quality of schools and provide the options that parents have said they want: seamless transitions and more certainty in student assignment with K-8s, more early-childhood seats, and schools with special themes, such as International Baccalaureate and Montessori schools. We believe we have many positive things to offer, and we are working vigorously with staff, families, and partners to showcase our successes and encourage families to consider Boston Public Schools.

What are the anticipated outcomes of the plan?

The plan is designed to expand access to K-8 programs, increase the number of pilot school seats, help reduce the dropout rate and ensure “graduation for all” with new and improved high school programs, introduce innovative approaches to education, and create new opportunities in arts, music and enrichment. Above all, the plan aims to support the academic goals the Superintendent has established to ensure every student achieves proficiency.

Have these decisions already been made? When will they take effect?

No, the decisions have not yet been made. The School Committee and the Superintendent are conducting a community engagement process to hear questions, concerns and ideas from parents, students, staff and members of the community. After a series of community forums and school-based meetings throughout the city, the School Committee is scheduled to vote on the recommendations on November 5, just before the start of the school choice process for next year. If approved, some of the proposals would begin to take effect in September 2009, and others would be instituted in 2010 and beyond. None of the proposals affect the structure or location of schools for the current school year.

How did the Superintendent identify the schools recommended for closure, relocation or expansion?

Dr. Johnson and her staff examined a variety of data to determine which schools and programs were most and least viable. They considered each school's academic performance, including its MCAS scores and other performance results, as well as its improvement status under No Child Left Behind. The proposals also reflect the choices families make during registration, with more highly chosen schools proposed for expansion and less chosen schools proposed for closure. The Superintendent also considered a range of operational factors, such as the cost of operating each building, as well as the condition of the facility, such as any anticipated repair and maintenance costs. In all cases, the affected schools were selected based on a variety of considerations.

Why has the Superintendent proposed merging several elementary and middle schools into new K-8 schools?

We have heard from many Boston parents that they prefer the K-8 setting because of the continuity these schools provide through the elementary and middle grades. In 1995, only three K-8 schools existed in Boston. Today, there are 21 such programs throughout the city. The Superintendent has proposed eight new K-8 programs, including some in neighborhoods that do not currently have any. These proposals would increase the number of students served in K-8 settings from 9,700 today to about 15,800, an increase of more than 60%. In addition, the BPS has an excess of seats in the elementary and middle grades. There are 5,200 more seats than children in elementary schools, and 2,700 more seats than children in middle schools. Merging schools will not only help us fulfill parents' wishes but allow us to save dollars that can be reinvested in the classroom.

In schools that are merging or closing, where will current students be assigned to attend school next year?

The Superintendent and her staff are developing plans to ensure that every affected student receives an appropriate, timely school assignment for next year. In some cases, entire groups of students from one school will be assigned together to a different school. In other cases, students will be given priority to a particular group of schools from which they can choose. In all cases, regardless of school or grade level, families may participate in the registration and assignment process and make new choices for their students. The proposals are being reviewed and voted upon during the month of October so that all decisions are made prior to the start of the school choice season, which begins with School Preview Time on November 3.

Where will the special education and English Language Learner programs that are currently in closing or merging schools be located next year?

The Superintendent and her academic and operations teams are examining each of the programs that serve students with disabilities and students whose first language is not English to identify suitable locations for these programs next year. In most cases, these programs will become part of the new or expanded schools created through the consolidation process.

Who will be the principal of my child's new school? If two schools are merging, will there be more than one principal?

The Superintendent has not yet made decisions about who will lead all of the proposed new schools next year. She has indicated that when schools are merged, only one person will serve as the principal of the new school.

What will be the start and dismissal times (school hours) at the new schools?

Staff from the Transportation Department are examining the hours of all schools named in the proposals and are developing options for next year's school hours. In some cases, schools are proposed to merge that currently have different start and dismissal times, and next year's hours have not yet been determined. In all cases, each school will have one start time. For example, in a K-8 school, there will not be one start time for the elementary grades and another start time for the middle grades.

Will the new or merged schools require students to wear uniforms?

Under current BPS policy, each school's School Site Council decides its uniform policy. That practice will continue for schools affected by the proposals. Some schools that are proposed to merge already have begun conversations about how their existing School Site Councils may work together during the current school year to begin making decisions about the new school next year, including uniform policy.

Will class sizes increase if schools merge?

The maximum number of students in each classroom is established in the contract with the Boston Teachers Union and will not change under this plan: no more than 22 students in Grades K1-2, up to 25 students in Grades 3-5, up to 28 students in Grades 6-8, and up to 31 students in Grades 9-12. Many classes are smaller than these contractual limits.

Will there be before- and after-school services at the new schools?

We anticipate that many services provided at schools that are merging will continue at the new site. We will work with each principal to make sure that families who are accustomed to having before- or after-school services will continue to have access to them. Principals are engaging their partner organizations that currently operate programs in their schools to explore relocating the programs to the new schools.

With a new K-8, how will the district prepare the building so it is appropriate for younger and older students?

Like existing K-8 schools, the new K-8s will be designed to serve children appropriately from pre-kindergarten through grade 8. Every classroom will have age-appropriate material, appropriately sized classroom furniture, adjusted toilet heights in restrooms, and distinct spaces for elementary and middle grades in the building (e.g., placements on different floors or in different wings). Principals and teachers in new K-8s will work with staff from existing K-8s to learn about how best to structure and organize the school in order to ensure safe and productive interaction among children of all ages.

What programs and services will the new K-8s provide?

The new K-8 schools, because of their size and grade span, will offer families some programs and services that may not be available to them currently in their smaller elementary schools. During the budget and staffing process, each School Site Council will make decisions about how best to allocate resources for programs such as arts, music, and physical education. Regarding the arts, the Superintendent has convened a task force of district staff, non-profits, and foundations to plan for expansion of arts programs in schools that do not currently have them.

What will happen to the teachers at schools that are closing or merging?

Schools will complete their staffing in January 2009 for the 2009-10 school year. In schools that are proposed to merge, many teachers will relocate together to the new schools, such as the expanded K-8 schools. In schools that are closing, those staff members who are "permanent" will have rights to another teaching position somewhere in the district as afforded to them under the contract with the Boston Teachers Union. Teachers who are displaced as a result of school closures and mergers will have other opportunities for placement. Among other openings for next year, we anticipate new positions will be created at new and expanded schools.

What will the City of Boston do with school buildings that are vacated?

The plan identifies five school buildings that would not be utilized by the Boston Public Schools next year. The futures of those buildings have not been determined. The City of Boston may identify other uses for the buildings, keep them closed temporarily, lease or sell them. In all cases, the City will undertake a community process to seek input and concerns from neighbors and abutters. Any facility not in use will continue to be maintained and monitored to ensure safety and cleanliness in the neighborhoods.

What changes does the plan propose with respect to yellow school bus transportation?

Dr. Johnson has identified several key areas for consideration that would reduce the amount of time children spend riding school buses by increasing access to schools closer to home. She has asked the School Committee to consider:

- increasing the percentage of seats reserved for students who live within the walk zone – from 50% to 60% -- on all new assignments, giving more families access to schools near their home;
- examining the location of special education and English Language Learner (ELL) programs throughout the city to place programs closer to the students who need them, reducing the need for longer bus rides; and
- modifying policies that allow some students to receive both “walk zone priority” for student assignment and yellow bus transportation, based on the distance between home and school.

Each of these proposals requires further analysis in terms of the potential impact, as well as additional detail about how and when any of these changes might be implemented.

Has the Superintendent proposed any other modifications to the student assignment policy?

No. All other aspects of the student assignment policy would remain as they are now, including giving the highest assignment priority to students whose sibling already attends a particular school.

Is the BPS retreating from its investment in small high schools?

Absolutely not. The district has made significant investments in recent years to reorganize all large high schools into smaller units, including small schools and small learning communities. These smaller settings can provide more personalized experiences for students. The portfolio of high schools also includes many new small pilot and alternative high schools. In 1995, only 6% of all Boston public high school students were enrolled in schools smaller than 500 students. Today, nearly half of all Boston high school students are in small schools.

The “Pathways to Excellence” plan calls for the creation of several new small high schools, including two single-gender schools (Young Women’s Leadership Academy and Young Men’s Public Service Academy), as well as the expansion of three successful existing schools into high school grades. The Superintendent also has recommended the closure of several small high schools that have not made significant academic progress and that are not highly chosen by students and families. Dr. Johnson has emphasized that the size of a school alone does not ensure its success. Schools of every size and grade structure must set high expectations and provide excellent instruction, rigorous curriculum, enrichment, safety nets, and all of the supports that students need to become college-ready and success-bound.

How is the school district informing families about the proposals and engaging them in this process?

- The most up-to-date information about this process is posted on the Boston Public Schools web site, www.bostonpublicschools.org/pathways. The site includes a schedule of community meetings, presentations and fact sheets about the proposals, and other resources.
- This list of answers to frequently asked questions list will be updated throughout the process, posted on the web site, and distribute to schools.
- We will use our automated telephone system, Connect-Ed, to inform families about meetings and other key events.
- We will work with local media, including outlets serving non-English residents, to keep families and neighbors informed.

How can I provide input on the proposals?

Members of the community are invited to comment on the proposals and offer suggestions through a variety of means:

- Participate in any of the meetings or community forums scheduled throughout the city, or attend the School Committee meetings on October 15, October 29 and November 5 (6:00 p.m., 26 Court Street).
- Send your comments via U.S. mail to: Pathways to Excellence, c/o Superintendent’s Office, Boston Public Schools, 26 Court St., Boston, MA 02108.
- Send an email to feedback@bostonpublicschools.org.