

A Brief History of BPS Student Assignment

- 1896** – In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the U. S. Supreme Court upholds the principle of “separate but equal.” Though the case is about segregated railway cars, it has particular relevance to education.
- 1954** – In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court rules “separate but equal” schools are unconstitutional.
- 1965** – Massachusetts passes the Racial Imbalance Law, prohibiting “racial imbalance” and discouraging schools from having student enrollments that are more than 50% minority. The Boston Public Schools (BPS) is ordered to change its assignment practices. The School Committee (School Committee) seeks a repeal.
- 3/72** – Black parents file a class action suit in U. S. District Court (*Morgan v. Hennigan*) claiming BPS schools are intentionally segregated. Judge W. Arthur Garrity is assigned to the case.
- 1973** – The Massachusetts Board of Education mandates a racial balance plan for Boston.
- 6/74** – Garrity finds that BPS officials, acting under the direction of the School Committee, have created and are maintaining a racially segregated school system that gives fewer resources to schools with mostly black students. In a partial judgement, Garrity enjoins the BPS, School Committee and city from discrimination on the basis of race and from creating, promoting or maintaining racial segregation.
- 9/74** – Garrity orders the BPS to implement the state’s racial balance plan as a temporary remedy (Phase 1) and orders the School Committee to create a permanent plan. Busing of students between Roxbury and South Boston begins.
- 2/75** – The School Committee fails to submit a plan. Garrity appoints four “masters” to draft Phase II, the permanent plan known as the Masters’ Plan, completed in 5/75. Over the next 15 years of active court involvement, the judge issues a series of remedial orders addressing a range of issues, including assigning students to schools, busing students to schools beyond walking distance, closing and opening facilities, recruiting and assigning faculty and staff, vocational education, exam school admission, student discipline, and parent and community participation.
- 9/75** – Phase II is implemented. The city is divided into eight community districts and 867 “geocodes” for assignment purposes. Each geocode is paired with a school in its district – either one nearby or one in another part of the district – with pairings designed to produce racially balanced enrollments in each school. Students are guaranteed assignment to their community district school. They may also apply for 32 citywide magnet schools and programs, with assignments following citywide racial guidelines. Garrity’s order also sets aside 35% of seats in matriculating classes at the three exam schools (Boston Latin School, Boston Latin Academy and Boston Technical High School) for black and other minority students.
- 12/82** – Citing good faith efforts of the School Committee to comply with the orders, the district court begins a “transitional course of disengagement” from the school system, while ordering that racial balances in the eight districts be maintained indefinitely. The court delegates primary responsibility for monitoring compliance with its orders to the State Dept. of Education.
- 9/85** – Garrity enters final orders in several areas, including student assignment. The Masters’ Plan is the basis of the orders, although it may be modified. BPS staffing must reach affirmative action goals of 25% black and 10% “other” minorities for teachers/administrators. The BPS later appeals the assignment order dealing with specified racial guidelines, and the Boston Teachers Union appeals the staffing order.
- 6/86** – Supt. Laval Wilson convenes a task force which recommends changes to the plan. These include districtwide school choice, establishment of parent information centers, elimination of separate magnet schools, and decentralizing assignments.
- 1987** – An experimental community district (District B, combining districts 3 and 4) is established which increases school choice in Hyde Park, West Roxbury, Mattapan and Roslindale.
- 9/87** – The U. S. Court of Appeals rules on the 9/85 challenges and finds the BPS has attained “unitary” status in school assignments, meaning schools are as desegregated as they can be given city demographics. The BPS is free to design a new assignment plan, with no restrictions, as long as it does not take any action that might intentionally re-segregate the schools. However, it must follow court-ordered guidelines for faculty and staff.
- 12/88** – The School Committee adopts the Controlled Choice Student Assignment Plan, designed by consultants Michael Alves and Charles Willie. The plan organizes elementary and middle schools into three zones – East, North, and West. The High School Zone is citywide. Students may apply for schools within their zone of residence as well as several citywide schools. Racial/ethnic “ideal racial percentages” (IRPs) are established in each zone, reflecting the zone’s student population. The Dept. of Implementation seeks to assign students so enrollments in each grade in each school are within 10% of the zone IRP. Key elements of the plan include parent choice, priority assignments for students in bilingual and special education, sibling and walk zone preference, Parent Information Centers, monitoring and oversight by the BPS Dept. of Implementation, and school improvement strategies including Zone Planning Councils. The 35% minority set-aside for the exam schools is maintained.

9/89 – Controlled Choice is implemented for kindergarten and grades 1 and 6.

5/90 – Judge Garrity issues final judgment and withdraws from the case, allowing the School Committee to be completely responsible for BPS student assignments. The U. S. Court of Appeals upholds the ruling in 2/91.

9/90 – Controlled Choice is implemented for all grades, K-12.

12/90 – Plan revisions include increasing walk zone preference from 50% to 75% of a school's seats.

11/92 – More revisions are made: only students in kindergarten and transition grades 1, 6 and 9 must submit applications.

11/96 – Modifications to the plan continue under the superintendency of Thomas W. Payzant. Assignments can be made from the waiting list regardless of race; some schools potentially can have their walk zone seats increased to 100%; and assignments can vary as much as 15% above or below a school's IRP.

12/96 – Julia McLaughlin, a disappointed applicant to Boston Latin School, successfully challenges the constitutionality of the minority set-aside policy in exam schools admissions. The School Committee approves a new admission policy for the three schools: 50% of seats will be awarded to the highest ranking applicants based only on admission test results and grade point average, and 50% will be awarded using test results, GPA and flexible racial/ethnic guidelines.

8/97 – Another student plaintiff, Sarah Wessman, successfully challenges the new exam schools admission formula.

1997 – The Boston School Desegregation Case is officially closed.

6/99 – Boston's Children First (BCF) files suit in U. S. District Court challenging school admissions based on racial preferences and the use of "racially drawn" assignment zones. BCF further asks that the School Committee be required to reassign all BPS students under a racially neutral admissions plan.

7/99 – The School Committee votes to eliminate the use of racial/ethnic classifications in all school assignments, effective in the 2000–01 school year. As a result, the issue of a return to "neighborhood schools" is raised among community and political leaders and the general public.

11/99 – As recommended by Supt. Payzant, the School Committee adopts the New Choice Plan, which reduces walk zone priority from 100% to 50% and gives priority for remaining seats to students with no walk zone school. The School Committee orders the superintendent to continue analysis of insufficient capacity within walk zones and to consider changes in walk zones when new schools are built and existing schools are expanded.

4/03 – The U. S. District Court rules on the Boston's Children First case (6/99). The court finds that the walk zone priority policy challenged by BCF is constitutional and that the three "Master Zones" are no longer being used as a racial balancing strategy. In its ruling, the court states that it believes BCF's "ultimate goal, mandatory neighborhood school assignments, . . . is not constitutionally compelled."

12/03 – Mayor Menino, the School Committee and superintendent launch a public process to seek input on student assignment, appointing a 14-member community task force which convenes a series of public forums to hear how parents choose their children's schools and what residents like and would change in the current plan.

9/04 – The task force issues its report. Among the recommendations are: retain walk zone priority for 50% of seats; preserve sibling priority; change the the mathematical formula by which students are assigned to schools; allow families who live close to a zone line to choose schools on either side of the line; and focus on improved school quality. The task force recommends that the School Committee consider two zone configurations: the existing 3-zone model, or 6 zones for elementary schools and 3 for middle schools. The committee retains the 3-zone model.

11/04 – The School Committee votes to expand "walk zone" choices for elementary and middle school students to include nearby schools outside the zone of residence, to be implemented in 1/05 for the 2005–06 school year.

7/05 – The School Committee votes to adopt a new mathematical formula, or "algorithm," to assign students for the 2006–07 school year. The new formula allows greater access to schools where the applicant has sibling and walk zone priority, and allows families to list their choices in true order of preference, without being penalized for choosing popular schools.

1/06 – Families apply for 2006–07 schools using the new algorithm. As expected, it results in fewer students receiving their first choice school, but more students receiving one of their choices and fewer students being "administratively assigned" to a school they did not choose.

SOURCES:

Boston Public Schools and Boston School Committee memoranda and documents

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