

February 1, 2023

Dear School Committee Members,

I am excited to share our FY24 budget. As a school leader, I used budget season as an opportunity to think about what's working and what's not. I'd consider what I need to continue for my students and what can be repurposed for better results. The budget is a statement of our values. We've all heard this before, but I truly believe it. At a District level, this is a unique opportunity to do the same and to invest in what we believe will strengthen our schools and bring our vision of equity into reality.

In collaboration with my team and school leaders, we're building a sustainable budget beyond the end of ESSER funding that meets the future needs of our students and lays a foundation for us to invest in our priority areas. As we take on long-needed and critical changes in literacy, inclusive education, and multilingual and secondary education, we are determined to deliver on our promise of educational equity and excellence.

In the process leading to this budget proposal, I have asked the team to consider every big and small decision from the student's perspective. We are here for our students; they must be at the center of every decision we make, and our investments must strengthen our student outcomes.

To meet the needs of our students and create a fully inclusive, high-performing district for all students, I am proposing an **FY24 general fund budget of \$1,439,030,665, a \$65M increase** above the current FY23 budget to support the children of Boston. This includes the increased costs of current operations (i.e., level-service costs) due to changes in service providers (i.e., transportation) and the increasing cost of student needs (i.e., special education resources and facilities improvements), and our request for new investments.

BPS is incredibly fortunate to have the continued support of Mayor Wu and the City of Boston. Her message was clear: to build a better future, we must ensure our students have access to quality learning opportunities every day. We know that improving access and quality will take major investments, and with Mayor Wu's commitment of \$50 million to build inclusive school communities, all students will have the resources they need to succeed. We are set to begin a new era of partnership with the Boston Teachers Union and our other unions that will ensure every classroom in the Boston Public Schools is inclusive for all students. In addition, with Mayor Wu's commitment to a \$2 billion investment, we have the capital resources to launch a new era of school-building projections with the Green New Deal for BPS. We are working toward expanding access to safe, healthy, energy-efficient, inspiring learning spaces with state-of-the-art classrooms, cafeterias, auditoriums, and athletic, outdoor, meeting, and support

spaces. All students need environments where they can learn and grow and engage in activities that will help them discover their passions early on.

Through this proposed budget, we are investing in opportunities for quality and accessible early childhood education and social-emotional support for our multilingual learners to ensure our young people have the tools they need to succeed in life. We are also deepening our investment in our equitable literacy strategy and expanding our early college and career pathways programming to help students earn the college credits they need to graduate and make their dreams a reality. Our mission overall is to create learning environments where all students feel valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential. Our proposed FY24 budget lays the foundation to do so.

Since returning to BPS, I've gathered different people's perspectives and experiences about what's working in the district and the community's priorities. These perspectives have informed this proposal and helped shape what I see as our priorities for FY24. To meet the needs of our students and create a fully inclusive, high-performing district for all students, we are focusing solely on the work that is making a difference for children.

I believe we can achieve success by focusing and investing in six areas:

1. **Inclusive Education Strategy** - BPS is committed to fostering an inclusive environment by maximizing every student's potential. The recently negotiated BTU contract provides us with a unique opportunity to move this work forward in an expedited way in partnership with our educators closest to our students. Ensuring every school is inclusive requires us to rethink, retrain, and reconsider how we work as a district. We must leverage the knowledge of our students and use inclusive methods and practice of teaching and instructional materials to support all our students with what they need.

Our priority is also to further partner with families in the individualized educational program (IEP) process and placement of students in the least restrictive environments (LRE). This will require multiple years of investment. We will continue to invest in a subset of schools to make the necessary structural changes to ensure the full complement of classrooms in each school will be able to provide a continuum of services for every student. Through these investments, our students will be able to develop the fundamental skills and knowledge necessary for academic success, like reading, writing, and mathematics skills, and the ability to think critically and solve problems.

As we move toward district-wide expansion of inclusive education, we will also lay the foundation for all schools with the following:

- **Strong Tier 1 Core Instruction.** This means helping our students build the foundational skills they need to succeed by having grade-level culturally and linguistically responsive curricula. Furthermore, Tier 1 core instruction also includes social and emotional skills, such as self-regulation and communication.
- **Implementation of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS).** This means building out district resources for training around the use of data that informs how Tier 1 core instruction is impacting student outcomes. Using this data allows us to closely monitor progress throughout the year to identify interventions and resources that may be needed

for a student who is not yet meeting grade-level expectations, including referrals and services for special education.

2. **Multilingual, Multicultural Education** - With a declining enrollment over the past decade and during the pandemic, our district is seeing enrollment growth among our multilingual learners. This is exciting news for our district and will require multiple years of investment. We will continue to align our investments with the [Office of Multilingual and Multicultural Education strategic plan](#) in this budget and future budgets. We must continue to support our commitment to expanding native language access by allocating funds to increase bilingual education programming and meet the social and emotional needs of our Multilingual Learners with Limited and Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE). We will leverage our students' home language and reshape multilingual education in our city to ensure all students' needs are met. We will accomplish this by engaging the community to plan for a multi-year expansion of bilingual, heritage, and world language programming, including student attainment of the Massachusetts State Seal of Biliteracy. Furthermore, special considerations must be taken to ensure that all Multilingual Learners with Disabilities (MLWD) receive appropriate services and support, including native language support. We will also invest in strong Tier 1 core instructional materials and training to improve instruction and outcomes across multilingual learner programming.
3. **Equitable Literacy** - The pandemic has revealed further disparities in literacy skills that impact achievement in all subject areas. This requires that we double down on our efforts to implement explicit evidence-based reading and writing support for all students in every school. Through our equitable literacy strategy, all students actively engage in culturally and linguistically responsive, standards-aligned grade-level tasks and texts daily in all content areas. With a persistent focus on grade-level access, all students will be able to attain the knowledge, skills, and capacities to succeed. Furthermore, these efforts allow us to prioritize discipline-based literacy, a way of teaching reading and writing skills tailored to the subject area being studied (i.e., science, social studies, and mathematics). This enables us to recognize earlier when gaps form and prevent them from forming in the first place. These efforts are foundational for all students to reach their full potential and bridge the educational disparities arising from the pandemic and beyond.
4. **Social Work, Restorative Justice, & Mental Health** - In addition to academic investments, we must invest in our students' social-emotional well-being and safety supports that are critical to strengthening student outcomes. Our students and staff must have access to physically and emotionally safe learning and teaching environments. We have continued to make investments in our schools over the past few years, such as restorative justice practices, bilingual social workers, family liaisons, safety protocols, bullying prevention, embedded counselors, and peer mediation, to ensure that all our students receive the support they need. Additionally, based on the safety report issued by the Council of Great City Schools, which provides detailed guidance on emergency management and safety services, we are committed to increasing our financial investments to bolster our safety protocols and ensure the safety of our BPS community. Given the lasting effects the pandemic has had on our young people, we realize that continued and increased investment in their mental health and well-being is critical. We continue to be focused on expanding our relationship with our city and community partners, and Mayor Wu is making critical investments in other city departments and agencies to align this work.
5. **High Schools & Alternative Education** - The pandemic has exacerbated inequitable outcomes among our secondary school students. To ensure better outcomes in the years to come, we need to focus our efforts on centering the assets and identities of our young people by leveraging their

voices to strengthen multiple pathways for post-secondary success. One primary goal is to create seamless transitions for all students as they graduate and continue to college or career. This can be done by expanding Early College and Career Pathways for all secondary students and creating alternative pathways and programming for students who need additional support in grades 7-12. Also, we endeavor to partner with organizations to provide robust academic and work-based opportunities for students tailored to their strengths. By doing this, we can help our students become empowered learners, enabling them to be the best version of themselves and contribute to thriving school communities.

6. **Family and Community Engagement** - Genuine family and community engagement practices are essential to increasing trust within our community and provide us with the critical opportunity to receive valuable input and feedback. These efforts shape the direction of our efforts around furthering inclusive education, strong Tier 1 core instruction, MTSS, multilingual and multicultural education, equitable literacy, access to social work, restorative justice, mental health practices, and alternative and post-secondary opportunities. Additionally, we must ensure that our schools are culturally and linguistically responsive to students and families and that the district is adequately meeting the needs of our students. To this end, we must invest in further collaboration between school administrators, educators, and training for family liaisons to partner with families and further address needs that can often be barriers to learning. We also need to expand offerings in our Parent University to provide families with the information they need to navigate school. Families play critical roles in their children's success. We are obligated to ensure we invite families into these roles and support them in guiding their children's education, monitoring their progress, and advocating for their needs. Such efforts will ultimately help create an equitable environment where all students can thrive.

As we think about this budget and future budgets, BPS has two sustainability challenges facing schools: ESSER funding coming to an end and managing the general funds allocated to hold schools harmless from enrollment declines for the last two fiscal years. This budget aims not to reduce critical services to schools in the coming year while ensuring that school budgets begin to absorb their hold-harmless dollars in a strategic way. In FY23, schools received \$50M in supplemental funding from ESSER and nearly as much in hold-harmless funding (\$49M, including soft landings). While we have launched two systems transformational initiatives - the Green New Deal and the Reimagine School Funding project - neither will have a fiscal impact until FY25. In the meantime, we must begin transitioning critical school-based investments from ESSER onto the general fund while balancing the need to fully spend down ESSER. Our approach for this year to ensure we can sustain these critical services included the following:

- **Moving critical services currently funded by ESSER onto the General Fund:** We've worked with schools to identify current school-based ESSER investments aligned to our strategy for inclusive education, multilingual learner program expansion, or equitable literacy, and we are moving these positions onto the general fund. **It is necessary to secure these positions beyond ESSER.**
- **We are shifting hold-harmless support from the general fund to ESSER. This approach means that schools will not be required to make cuts to services or support to students in FY 24.** We know we can't go back to the way we used to do things. The pandemic changed everything, and we need to be even more focused on the needs of individual students - where they are. This will require us to be nimble, to add more support for our most vulnerable students, and to measure their progress so we can provide every resource they need to succeed. **Therefore, we are not**

proposing a reduction in the hold-harmless funding; instead, we are proposing a change to the funding source. We will continue to maintain and increase community transparency around ESSER funds and align with student outcomes.

Reinvesting Funds from Empty Seats in Classrooms

For the last two years, we have not asked schools to look critically at the number of classrooms or their overall school capacity. This was intentional: we needed to figure out how much of the enrollment declines were temporary and pandemic-related. This year, enrollment declined by less than projected - showing that this approach was at least partially warranted. Despite that, we are still anticipating continued enrollment declines in future years due to current demographic trends, as we have seen in other urban centers regarding the overall decrease in school-aged children and smaller entry-grade cohorts. In the next few fiscal years, schools will not be able to rely on our hold harmless policy to maintain extra capacity.

We need to confront our district's changing realities and shift resources in ways that meet student needs and accelerate improvement. This means that we will need to reconsider the number of empty seats in classrooms we have held harmless for the last two years and consider how those resources can be used to create equitable learning opportunities for all students.

We asked schools to look carefully at each classroom and what may make sense to combine while maintaining the required and appropriate class size. When schools were able to reduce the number of classrooms because of empty seats, **we did not reduce their budget or hold harmless amounts.** Instead, we worked with them to reinvest those savings in ways that are aligned with the six aforementioned priority areas.

There is a lot of work to do, and this budget represents the beginning of our work together to ensure every child, in every classroom, and in every school of the Boston Public Schools system has the same opportunity to achieve greatness within them. I am excited to be here and am grateful for this opportunity to serve the city, district, and the students I love so much as we continue to determine the best way to do this through this budget process and our budget process in the years to come.

In appreciation,

Mary Skipper