

MEMORANDUM

TO: Dr. Brenda Cassellius, Superintendent

CC: Michael Loconto, School Committee Chair
Monica Roberts, Chief of Student, Family and Community Advancement

FROM: The Exam School Admissions Working Group

DATE: October 5, 2020

RE: Admissions Recommendation

On July 22nd, the Superintendent asked to establish an advisory working group to recommend admissions criteria for Boston's exam schools for the 2021-22 school year in light of the educational disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. For the last twenty years, admission to Boston's three exam schools – Boston Latin Academy, Boston Latin School, and the John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science – has been determined based on students' report card English and Math grades (spring of prior year and fall of application year), and performance on a standardized test. However, Boston Public Schools (BPS) implemented an untraditional grading policy this past spring to take into account the access challenges and dire circumstances of many families across the city. With a shift in grading and significant concerns about the feasibility and utility of offering an entrance exam amidst a pandemic, the working group was tasked with recommending admissions criteria that took into account the educational impact of COVID-19.

The working group, comprised of the school leaders, parents, and advocates listed below, met throughout August and September, supported by BPS staff. The working group reviewed the feasibility of conducting an exam in fall 2020, the availability of grades and prior exams for this year's applicants, historical admissions data, and admissions policies for selective high schools in other states. As with any review of BPS policy, the working group applied BPS' Racial Equity Planning tool to its review. In doing so, the working group considered the impact of COVID-19 in Boston including the racial and socioeconomic disparities in infection rates, limited technology access, potential academic gaps and educational disparities. Additionally, the working group examined the socioeconomic, racial and geographic disparities between the school-age population in Boston and enrollment at Boston's exam schools.

Working Group Membership:

- Samuel Acevedo, Opportunity and Achievement Gap Task Force Co-Chair
- Acacia Aguirre, John O'Bryant Parent (Grade 8)
- Michael Contompasis, Former BLS Head of School and BPS Superintendent
- Matt Cregor, on behalf of NAACP
- Tanya Freeman-Wisdom, John D. O'Bryant, Head of School
- Katherine Grassa, Curley K-8, Principal

- Zena Lum, Boston Latin Academy Parent (Grade 10)
- Rachel Skerritt, Boston Latin School, Head of School
- Tanisha Sullivan, President, NAACP Branch

Recommendation

To establish the fairest possible measurement of student success across the City while minimizing the impact of – and exposure to – COVID-19, the working group offers the following recommendation for criteria for students applying for admission to Boston’s exam schools for the 2021-22 school year only:

For students applying for 7th grade admission to Boston’s exam schools

Eligibility Pool

Any sixth grade student residing in Boston or enrolled in the Boston Public Schools is eligible for exam school admission in the 2021-22 school year if they meet the following:

1. Earned a “B” average or better in their English language arts and math classes from the Fall and Winter terms of their fifth grade year, or equivalent terms prior to the Governor’s order closing schools due to the pandemic; or met or exceeded expectations on both the English Language Arts and math Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exams in their 4th grade year (SY18-19); and
2. School district (or equivalent) verification that the student is performing at grade level based on the Massachusetts Curriculum standards.

Eligible BPS students would automatically be identified and notified of their status.

Admissions Criteria and Mechanism

Eligible sixth grade students shall be invited to exam schools in the following manner:

- Based on the grades described above, up to 20% of the 7th grade seats at each exam school will be awarded to the highest performing students citywide. Students will be ranked by GPA and issued a random number to address a tie. Starting with the highest GPA (and lowest random number), students will be assigned to their first preference school up to the number of available seats. Students who do not receive an assignment in this process will be included in the process for the remaining seats for their grade.
- The remaining seats will be apportioned out to the highest performing students in each zip code, with each zip code receiving a share of exam school seats proportionate to the percentage of school age children city-wide who reside there. The seats will be filled through a series of ten assignment rounds wherein 10% of the seats within that zip code will be assigned. Zip codes will be sequenced from the lowest median household income to the highest. Students in the zip code with the lowest median household income will be placed in their preferred choice school (first, second or third) up to the number of seats allocated to their zip code for that round. Once those

students are placed, students from the next zip code in the sequence will be assigned in the same manner.

- In the event of a tie, students with the same grades within a zip code will be given a random number. Students with lower numbers will be assigned first.
- The school selection process continues until all seats at each exam school have been filled.

For students applying for 9th grade admission to Boston's exam schools

Eligibility Pool

Any eighth grade student residing in Boston (or otherwise served by Boston Public Schools) *who is not already attending a Boston exam school* is eligible for exam school admission in the 2021-22 school year if they meet one of the following:

1. Earned a “B” average or higher in their English language arts and math classes from the Fall and Winter terms of their seventh grade year, or equivalent terms prior to the Governor’s order closing schools due to the pandemic; or met or exceeded expectations on both the English Language Arts and math Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exams in their 6th grade year (SY18-19); and
2. School district (or equivalent) verification that the student is performing at grade level based on the Massachusetts Curriculum standards.

Eligible BPS students would automatically be identified and notified of their status

Admissions Criteria and Mechanism

Eligible eighth grade students shall be invited to exam schools in the following manner:

- Based on the grades described above, 20% of the 9th grade seats at each exam school will be awarded to the highest performing students citywide. Students will be ranked by GPA and issued a random number to address a tie. Starting with the lowest rank and lowest random number, students will be assigned to their first preference school up to the number of available seats. Students who do not receive an assignment in this process will be included in the process for the remaining seats for their grade.
- The remaining seats will be apportioned out to the highest performing students in each zip code, with each zip code receiving a share of exam school seats proportionate to the percentage of school age children city-wide who reside there. The seats will be filled through a series of ten assignment rounds wherein 10% of the seats within that zip code will be assigned. Zip codes will be sequenced from the lowest median household income to the highest. Students in the zip code with the lowest median household income will be placed in their preferred choice school (first, second or third) up to the number of seats allocated to their zip code for that round. Once those

students are placed, students from the next zip code in the sequence will be assigned in the same manner.

- In the event of a tie, students with the same grades within a zip code will be given a random number. Students with lower numbers will be assigned first.
- The school selection process continues until all seats at each exam school have been filled.

For students applying for 10th grade admission to Boston's exam schools

A small number of seats are available for grade 10 at the John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science. A similar procedure shall be applied to ninth graders interested in applying for this opportunity. The 9th graders must demonstrate that they scored a "B" average or higher during the Fall and Winter terms of their 8th grade year OR met or exceeded expectations in the math and ELA 7th grade MCAS assessments. School district (or equivalent) verification that the student is performing at grade level based on the Massachusetts Curriculum standards will also be required.

Removal of Special Provisions

The current exam school admissions policy contains two provisions, one on non-traditional admissions and a second on entrance deferment. The working group recommends removal of both from the policy permanently.

The Non-Traditional Entry clause allows students in grades 8 and 10 who are new to Boston and missed the traditional admissions process, to seek entry through an interview process and letter of recommendation from their prior school. Students have not been admitted through this process in over ten years.

The "Acceptance of Invitations" provision allows invitees to defer enrollment, holding a seat for the year. In implementation, BPS has required that the student reports to the school at least one day before the end of the school year in which the student was invited. The removal of this portion of the policy would not affect students granted a deferment during this school year. Those students would have grandfather rights.

Current Admissions Policy to Exam Schools

Boston's exam schools serve students grades 7 through 12, admitting students in both 7th and 9th grades. The O'Bryant also admits a small number of students in the 10th grade. For the last twenty years, BPS has admitted students to its exam schools based equally on their grade point average and performance on a standardized test. Specifically, BPS averaged a student's grades in English language arts and math using the final grades of the prior school year and the fall/winter grading period of their current school year. A

point value is assigned to that average. The student's performance on the ELA and math portions of the standardized test was combined with the averaged grades to establish a composite score. Students are ranked in order of composite score and then placed within the school of their preference up to the number of available seats. Students who do not get their first choice school will then be placed in their second or third choice school if selected, before the next rank order student is placed.

Difficulty of Providing an Entrance Exam amidst a Pandemic

BPS had contracted with the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) to administer its MAP Growth test as an entrance exam for the Fall. The MAP Growth assessment is currently used in BPS and other area schools as a formative assessment. It was selected specifically because of the alignment to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks therefore assessing grade level learning, validity for use with diverse students including a strong bias review process, and built-in accommodations for English learners and students with disabilities.

However, administering the exam amidst the pandemic presented a number of difficulties, namely:

- Administering the exam in a manner that allowed all students to remain socially distanced and honor the choice of families who choose not to send their children to school in person;
- The impossibility of administering the exam remotely due to test security;
- Significant concern over any exam's ability to assess students' preparedness for exam school classes given the continued educational disruption caused by the pandemic;
- The disparate impact of that educational disruption on low-income families and families of color, who contracted COVID-19 in higher rates and had greater challenges with accessing remote learning last spring due to the disproportionate effects of the pandemic; and,
- The prospect of disruption to administering an exam this fall should Boston's COVID-19 rates continue escalating.

For the above reasons, the working group recommends that BPS not administer an entrance exam to students applying to exam schools for the 2021-22 school year only. By no means does this recommendation indicate an unwillingness to consider using the MAP Growth or other exam(s) as an admissions factor in future years.

Difficulty of Using Other Assessment Data

The working group also reviewed the availability of any standardized tests that students had taken prior to the pandemic and the feasibility of using the tests as an admissions criterion. The working group concluded there was no acceptable way to compare student performance on the many different standardized tests taken by the students in the exam schools' traditional applicant pool (i.e., students attending BPS, Boston-based charter schools, parochial and private schools, neighboring public school districts serving Boston's students of color through the METCO program or under the McKinney-Vento Act, and homeschools). For example, the working group considered using students' scores on the MCAS exam as an admissions criterion, as the majority of exam school applicants have taken it, but the exam is only administered to public school students, and last year's MCAS exams were canceled due to the pandemic. The working group also considered using MAP Growth scores from 5th grade, a test most

parochial students and some BPS students took, but there was no acceptable way to norm those scores with other tests (e.g., 4th grade MCAS, the Terra Nova test taken in some private schools, etc.). For these reasons, the working group recommends against using any test as an admissions criterion beyond the limited use of 4th grade MCAS as an alternate entry point to the applicant pool as described above.

Difficulty of Relying on the Current Grading Criteria amidst a Pandemic

Relying on grades as an admission criterion is similarly problematic for BPS students, as half of the grades (Spring Semester) that are generally considered were calculated using a special process due to the pandemic. Placing too great a reliance on grades is also problematic given the lack of uniformity between the grading systems used by BPS, charter schools, parochial schools, private schools, and other public schools serving Boston students during a pandemic. The working group considered using Fall semester grades as an admissions criterion but recommends against it for the following reasons:

- There is a lack of uniformity across the City as to which schools are offering in-person instruction, which schools are offering completely virtual instruction, and which schools are offering a hybrid of the two for the Fall 2020 semester;
- The educational disruption caused by the pandemic in the Spring 2020 semester will likely negatively impact student performance in the Fall 2020 semester, limiting the validity of the Fall 2020 semester grades as predictors for exam school success;
- The pandemic has disparately disrupted the education of children of color and students from low income families, who contract COVID-19 in greater rates and are less likely to have financial flexibility to secure additional educational supports (e.g., tutors, learning pods, educational software, etc.);
- The stress and trauma caused by the pandemic and its impact on student performance are sufficient to question the validity of the Fall 2020 semester grades as predictors for exam school success, especially for students in low-income communities and communities of color hardest hit by the pandemic; and,
- The traditional use of grades for admissions (spring of the students prior year and fall of their current year) might be highly susceptible to manipulation, especially in the absence of a test or other admissions criteria. The working group determined that it would be best to use grades that have been given without the knowledge that they would be the sole determinant of exam school admission.

As a result, the working group recommends using only pre-pandemic grades to determine exam school admission for the 2021-22 school year. Specifically, the working group recommends using grades from the applicants' first and second terms from the 2019-20 school year. The working group recommends that a student may enter the applicant pool if they attained at least a B average in the first and second terms as aforementioned.

Use of Zip Code in Admissions to Exam Schools

The working group reviewed current and historical admissions rates and is deeply concerned by how little of Boston's racial, socioeconomic, and geographic diversity is reflected in the exam schools as a whole, particularly at Boston Latin School. The working group examined models from other cities for promoting racial and socioeconomic diversity in their selective high schools. The working group is particularly intrigued by Chicago Public Schools' model, which tiers neighborhoods based on socioeconomic factors, enabling students in neighborhoods of similar socioeconomic status to compete for seats at selective high schools. The working group recommends that BPS explore different models for promoting racial, socioeconomic and geographic diversity at its exam schools. Furthermore, the working group recommends apportioning 80% of the seats for the 2021-22 qualified applicants by Boston zip code so that Boston's exam schools can better reflect the socioeconomic, racial and geographic diversity of the City's school age population. The working group recommends apportioning the first 20% of seats to the highest scoring students, citywide, to provide an additional means of admission for all students, particularly those in neighborhoods with small school-age populations and/or a disproportionate application rate for exam schools.

Recommendations beyond Admissions for the 2021-22 School Year

The Superintendent's charge to the working group was to develop an admissions criteria for the SY20-21 school choice process. Members engaged in a significant review of data and assessed the feasibility and equity of several options and determined that more work needs to be done in order for exam school enrollment to better reflect the socioeconomic, racial and geographic diversity of Boston's school-age children. Given the district's selection of a test and the criteria used for selection, this should be a topic of consideration for future discussion. The working group recommends that the district review the policy going forward, and consider an expanded criteria approach potentially inclusive of assessment, grades, zip code or other factors. To this end, the working group recommends that Boston Public Schools continue to convene a working group focused on presenting recommendations on admissions criteria for the 2022-23 school year and beyond. Current members are willing to serve on such a committee.

While reviewing, and ultimately rejecting, the possibility of utilizing the MCAS as an exam school admissions criterion, the working group was deeply concerned by both the overall low percentage of BPS students meeting or exceeding expectations on the MCAS (formerly termed proficient or advanced), and, in particular, the low percentages of Black and Latinx BPS students meeting or exceeding expectations. To improve BPS students' performance on the MCAS and advance their preparation for exam school work, the working group further recommends the district establish an expanded Exam School Initiative beginning as early as 4th grade and running through October of the 6th grade year. Finally, the working group recommends providing appropriate support – both before and during the school year - for admittees who, while academically prepared for exam school content, may require more time to get acclimated to the pace of exam school study. This should begin in Spring 2021 with students selected for SY21-22 entrance. This level of support and any expansion of ESI will require additional financial resources, and therefore a commensurate increase in the city's budget to the district as opposed to a reduction in spending elsewhere.

The Exam School Admissions Working Group commends Superintendent Cassellius and the Boston School Committee for recognizing the need to pivot during this critical and challenging time for our

students and families. The working group also acknowledges and extends deep gratitude to the BPS staff that supported the process with excellence and dedication.