

Memo Re: School Quality Work Group (SQWG) II

Background:

In March 2013, the Boston School Committee (BSC) approved the recommendation from the External Advisory Committee (EAC) that the Boston Public Schools adopt the Home-Based model to govern the process of school choice within the district. At that time, the EAC pointed out that solely using test scores was an inadequate measure of school quality and recommended that BPS develop a multidimensional measurement of school quality which would provide the community a sense of a school performance beyond just test scores. At that time, the Boston School Committee formed the School Quality Working Group (SQWG), a group of community members and experts, to develop such a measure for all schools. This group determined that a multidimensional assessment of school quality would cover five domains: student performance; teaching and learning; community, culture and climate; student access and opportunities; and leadership and collaboration. Initial metrics were developed by BPS to measure school quality across each of these domains. Scores on these domains were aggregated and correlated to a School Quality Tier for each school. On November 2014, the BSC voted to adopt these tiers to be used in the school choice process starting in fall 2015.

On October 14, 2015, BPS Superintendent Dr. Tommy Chang requested, and on October 28, 2015, the Boston School Committee approved a one-year postponement of the implementation of the School Quality Framework (SQF) (from implementation during the fall 2015 school choice season). On November 16, 2016, Dr. Chang recommended to the BSC that the implementation of the SQF again be postponed, due to the changes in state assessments and the difficulty of making “apples to apples” comparisons between MCAS and PARCC testing data (i.e. grades 3 – 6 ELA and Math assessments transitioned from legacy MCAS assessments to the PARCC in Spring 2015). In addition, the state’s “hold harmless” provision regarding these assessment results made it difficult to implement the SQF. The BSC accepted Dr. Chang’s recommendation and encouraged the district to seek input from school leaders, teachers, parents and students on ways to support schools and implement SQF. As a result, School Quality Work Group (SQWG) was reconvened as SQWG II to lead and manage the work of SQF implementation.

SQWG II consisted of 21 community stakeholders, including school leaders, parents and students, who were enlisted to serve under the leadership of BSC Vice-Chair Dean Hardin Coleman. Over the course of eight monthly meetings during SY 2016-2017, the SQWG II worked collaboratively with an internal BPS cross-functional team including the Deputy Superintendent of Strategy, Assistant Superintendent of Engagement, Executive Director of Data & Accountability, as well as staff representing the Offices of Data & Accountability, Engagement, OIIT, Finance, the Office of the Achievement Gap, and Instructional Superintendents. The purpose of the group was to: 1) examine the recommendations and timeline for implementation of the SQF; 2) review the 2014 SQF policy; and 3) consider research-based evidence to support the use of multiple assessment criteria to measure school quality and to inform school choice decisions. SQWG II members were asked to serve as

ambassadors for the implementation of SQF, and to assist with informing and communicating with school leaders, parents, students and community stakeholders of SQWG II progress.

During the course of SQWG II's work, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) implemented a new assessment for grades 3 - 8 ELA and Math called Next Generation MCAS for the first time (Spring 2017). Schools with students in grades 3 – 8 will again be “held harmless” from being penalized in terms of the state accountability system as a result of performance on this new assessment. In Spring 2019, students in grade 10 will be assessed using this Next Generation MCAS assessment, as well.

Summary of SQWG II Deliberations:

From September 2016 - May 2017, committee members deliberated three essential concerns: 1) how to implement SQF assignment tiers, 2) possible observation tools for school-based assessment, and 3) the equity analysis of the home-based assignment. The BPS team was asked to create informational reports for group discussion and consideration.

Committee members were provided with the timeline for BPS school choice / student assignments in SY 2017-2018 and weighed this against important considerations regarding the fact that the state of Massachusetts will not be holding schools accountable for PARCC results from 2014-15 and 2015-16 or Next Generation MCAS results in SY 2016-2017. Member feedback is incorporated in descriptions noted below.

Implementation of Updated Assignment Tiers for Fall 2017 Choice Season

After reviewing the options for school tiering for the assignment season beginning in fall 2017, the group determined that the best course of action would be to update all outcomes in the SQF with data from school years 2014-2015 and 2015-2016, and use this data to determine a school quality score, and a school quality tier, as written in policy. The SQWG II also thoroughly discussed the problems for SQF resulting from the changes in state testing for grades 3-8, and the state's “hold harmless” provision. Therefore, the group determined that to implement SQF fairly, schools with students in grades 3-8, will be held harmless from their initial SQF tier. This means that schools will not move down (but, may move up) a tier as a result of prior years' performance. This will remain true until the state has developed a measure of student performance that it feels confident using to determine performance levels. Finally, SQF data will be provided for BPS high schools, but this data will not be aggregated to a tier in school year 2017-2018.

Tools for School-Based Assessment

School leader and BSAC student representatives to the SQWG II expressed a vested interest in developing a reliable observational tool to incorporate into the SQF. As a result, the BPS internal team presented on the feasibility of implementing such a tool, which addressed

concerns about feasibility, frequency, reliability, and resources. SQWG II members suggested ways to leverage existing methods to alleviate these concerns.

SQWG II members will continue to explore the establishment of a school observation protocol as part of the assessment of schools. This will include investigating the benefit of using existing models such as the School Quality Review framework used by pilot schools or the charter school performance criteria used for Horace Mann “in-district” charter schools.

Equity Analysis for the Home-Based Model of School Choice

During the course of the SQWG II’s deliberations, concerns about the equity of home-based assignment were repeatedly raised, and the most valid methods of assessing equity were debated. As a result of this as well as other community concerns and policy recommendations, BPS has convened a separate Equity Analysis Advisory Committee that includes representation from the BPS School Committee, SQWG II, independent researchers, and community members. This group is tasked with identifying authentic data to evaluate the school choice decision-making process. The group will then establish a work plan with benchmarks for school year 2017-2018 and draft a Request for Proposals (RFP)/bid to recruit and hire an external consultant to complete the equity analysis, working closely with Advisory Committee members and staff, which will provide periodic reports for the SQWG II.

Recommendation:

The SQWG II members and staff agree that a multidimensional measurement of school quality to determine the rating (and tiering) of schools is of better service to the community than reliance on test scores alone. SQWG II, therefore, recommends that starting in fall 2017, BPS implement the SQF, as written in BPS policy, to determine the tiers used in the Home-Based school choice process for School Year 2018-2019. The tiers will be determined using the data from School Years 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. Given the State’s decision to hold K-8 schools “harmless” while it is developing a new assessment system, BPS will do the same. Holding a school “harmless” means that a school cannot move down a tier based on new data, but it can only move up a tier as a result of the changes in standardized testing. As a result, schools will receive tiers that are either consistent with or an improvement on the tiers that they received in the spring of 2015.

While all schools will receive School Quality Framework (SQF) data, high schools will not receive an assignment tier for the choice season beginning in fall 2017. Because students entering high school have access to all high schools city-wide, these schools do not require tiers for the function of Home-Based Assignment. All SQF data, including high school data, will be updated and publicly available via DiscoverBPS.org. This will allow families to have as much data as possible to make informed school choice decisions.

Work Plan for SY 2017-2018

For School Year 2017-2018, the SQWG II will focus on developing the following:

- **Develop Student Access and Opportunity Domain Metrics**
 - Review existing work in this area
 - Generate ideas for potential metrics
 - Review BPS (Office of Data and Accountability) analysis of draft metrics
 - Revise draft metrics based on analysis and feedback
 - Recommend metrics for inclusion in domain

- **Revise Framework to Incorporate Assessment and Survey Changes**
 - Revise metrics to align with new climate surveys
 - Revise/update assessment metrics related to MCAS to account for PARCC and Next Generation MCAS data
 - Consider revising framework to ensure that the calculation of SQF tiers lines up with the state's annual MCAS fall data release and BPS' annual school choice season

- **Communication to Stakeholders**
 - Collaborate with BPS Communications staff to design a public information campaign that will release information about SQF at key events and critical decision points (i.e., August Leadership Institute, school choice season), and to school communities and external stakeholders to maximize transparency and buy-in
 - Communicate with key advocate constituencies (i.e., CPC, NAACP, DELLAC) and gather feedback on implementation
 - SQWG II will host Stakeholder Information & Feedback Sessions (SY 2017 - 2018)
 - Meet with BTU & Principal Associations
 - Meet with Parent and Student Advocates (i.e., CPC, BSAC)
 - Invite advocates and community stakeholders to city-wide meeting at Bolling Building

- **Assess Additional Metrics and the Optimal Integration Point(s)**
 - Work with school leaders on SQWG II to determine whether a school walkthrough protocol may be used to improve information on school quality; and if so design and conduct a vetting process with district and school leaders.
 - Convene small group of SQWG II members during the summer to make recommendations about the technical challenges BPS will face implementing the SQF with PARCC data.
 - Work with small group of SQWG II members and cross-functional BPS team to determine messaging and informational outreach strategies to parents and stakeholders.

Conclusion and Next Steps:

Prior to the re-engagement of the SQWG II in School Year 2017-2018, BPS will release the SQWG II report, recommendation, and timeline to BPS school leaders, principals, headmasters, BTU, families, stakeholders, and general public when introduced by Dr. Chang to School Committee members at the June meeting prior to vote of approval, in July 2017.

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Appendix A: Concerns and comments for consideration

All SQWG II committee members were asked to provide comments to the draft report. Most of the comments received were incorporated into the body of the memo.

While the focus of the SQWG II is to monitor and assist with the implementation of the SQF, some members of the SQWG II raised concerns regarding the Home-Based Assignment system itself, as well. BPS hopes that the equity analysis, which is underway, will be able to address some of these concerns, but SQWG II members representing the Citywide Parent Council (CPC), requested that their concerns be explicitly noted. In particular, the Citywide Parent Council expressed a desire for the Home-Based Assignment system to be “reversed,” which they believe is the only way to hold schools truly harmless. Additionally, they requested an interim assignment system to be created for upcoming school choice cycle, beginning in fall 2017, for school year 2018-2019, that would ensure “equal opportunity to quality schools,” and would avoid outdated data.

The SQWG II representatives from CPC also wished to note that in April 2017, the group collected over 120 petition letters regarding Home-Based Assignment and 160 petition letters regarding the budget that were delivered to the Mayor’s Office, the City of Boston Education Chief, and City Councilors.

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