

Wrong assignment for Boston schools

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June 3, 2009

MANY PARENTS are concerned that the Boston Public Schools proposal to change student assignment and transportation may hurt rather than help their children.

Superintendent Carol R. Johnson has proposed replacing the three assignment zones with five smaller zones to reduce busing costs. School officials say the proposal could save up to \$10 million annually.

While the proposal recognizes the priority of improving the quality of education, it does not specify how and when the reforms would be implemented. Without this information, it is impossible for parents and community members to judge whether the proposals will improve education and provide equitable access for their children.

There is an urgent need to improve school quality in Boston. There are 55 underperforming Commonwealth Priority Schools out of 143 schools in the city. Developing educational strategies that work to close the achievement gaps must be the district's first priority. The school system must develop steps to address its abysmal failure to educate English Language Learners and special-education students, as documented in the recent report of the Gaston Institute/Center for Collaborative Education and the anticipated audit by the Council of Great City Schools.

Going from three zones to five zones would be disruptive and would reduce parents' choices. It would also increase inequity by concentrating the highest number of failing schools in communities of color, especially in proposed Zones 3 and 4. We need to see specific plans developed with parents, teachers, and community representatives for each failing school that spell out the strategies and resources to turn each of them into quality schools. The school district also needs to show us details before it asks the School Committee to vote on its proposal. Parents in communities of color no longer trust officials to keep their promises. They have seen too many commitments broken in the past. Children don't learn from promises; they must see the reality of improvements in teaching and learning in their schools and classrooms.

Perhaps the most destructive aspect of the plan is the proposal to grandfather children in their existing schools without transportation. This could mean 10,000 children, nearly one-third of all students in kindergarten through eighth grade, would have to shift schools in the fall of 2010. Such a massive change would be chaotic and harmful. This proposal would also create a new inequity among students by allowing families with the resources to provide their own transportation to have access to their current school, while limiting the opportunity for families that do not have those same resources.

Many parents are upset about the proposal to end citywide student assignments to the Hernandez school, the one successful two-way bilingual school in the city. Fifty-six percent of the students at the Hernandez come from outside the proposed new zone. They should be able to finish their education at the school, and should be "grandfathered" with bus transportation. In addition, the school district should make a commitment to grow two-way bilingual programs in every zone in the city. Until that time, it must ensure that every family in all zones has equitable access to two-way bilingual programs.

Of course there should be cost savings and efficiency in student assignment and transportation, but not at the expense of access and equity. No student assignment and transportation proposals should be approved until there are specific plans to improve failing schools in every neighborhood. No student assignment proposal should be approved until there are specific strategies with timetables and a commitment of resources that will ensure equitable access to quality programs for students regardless of neighborhood, income, race, language, or disability. Our children deserve nothing less.

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