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## Boston Schools Chief To Address Criticism Of Busing Plan

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By **BIANCA VAZQUEZ TONESS**



Next year, students at Higginson Elementary School in Roxbury will attend a new K-8 school, as part of a plan to redraw school zones to cut down on busing. Higginson Principal Joy Salesman-Oliver supports the plan, because she thinks it will force the school system to channel attention and resources to schools in the area. (Bianca Vazquez Tones/WBUR)

**BOSTON** — Boston Schools Superintendent Carol Johnson is under pressure to change a plan that would uproot approximately 10,000 Boston elementary- and middle-schools students in 2010. To save money, the city schools department has been considering a plan to redraw school zones to cut down on busing.

One zone in particular would be affected more than others. The superintendent will announce any changes to the plan at Wednesday night's school committee meeting.

Virginia Stickney lives in the South End. Her daughter is in first grade at the Mason School. If a redistricting plan goes through, she would have to find a new place for her daughter.

"I never thought that this would be such a major concern, but it is," she says. "It is. And we just want to make sure that she is taken care of as well as she can be, and we feel that that's happening at Mason."

Her new zone would give her fewer options, and include schools in Roxbury, the South End and Chinatown. Nearly 60 percent of these schools are considered by the state to need major overhauls.

“I’m surprised that there aren’t more schools in Boston proper that are doing well,” Stickney says. “I am worried that we won’t find another good school in the neighborhood. That’s very troublesome to me.”

Stickney is so worried, she and her husband are considering moving to the Dorchester zone to stay with their school.

Moving isn’t an option for everyone, and school officials aren’t encouraging it. Under the current plan, students can keep attending their schools if they can get there on their own, which won’t work for Stickney and her husband since they don’t have a car and work full-time. They depend on a school bus to get their 7-year-old to and from school.

Since 1989, the city has broken the district into three zones for elementary- and middle-school students. High schoolers can go where they please, since they can ride the T.

But Mayor Tom Menino asked the school superintendent to redraw the zones to save money on transportation, and the superintendent came up with a plan to break the three sprawling zones into five more compact ones. That would cut \$8 to \$10 million from the \$78-million-dollar school transportation budget.

Superintendent Carol Johnson recently explained the plan to parents in Roxbury.

“We really want to make sure that we have the resources, and technology, and music and arts programs, and field trips and athletic events,” she said. “In order to get those resources, we either have to get additional revenue, or we have to cut expenses in other places.”

Johnson has said she wants to focus the savings on schools in Roxbury, among other places, where she says there’s been an “underinvestment.”

One of those schools is Higginson Elementary. At the urging of Higginson parents, the school will merge with a middle school in the area, where students will finally get access to a library, cafeteria and a gym.

Higginson Principal Joy Salesman-Oliver will head up the new school. She supports the plan to limit busing, since she thinks it will force the city to channel more resources to her school.

“It’s not going to help us to have two good schools,” she says. “We all still can’t go to the two good schools. Shouldn’t we be working on creating 22 good schools? So we can spread the wealth.”

Salesman-Oliver says she isn’t planning to overhaul the two schools she’s merging, both of which are considered underperforming.

“I think we’ll just do the education plan we have, better,” she says. “We haven’t had the best teachers, we haven’t had the best — because we haven’t attracted the best teachers.”

Salesman-Oliver has been recruiting new teachers to fill six new slots. That’s six out of 33 teachers at her new school. Because of union contracts, she says she doesn’t have the power to fire teachers who aren’t working out.

**Kim Janey** organizes parents for **Massachusetts Advocates for Children**, a Boston-based nonprofit focused on young people. She says the schools in all of the neighborhoods need to be fixed, particularly neighborhoods like Roxbury,

“But until we get there,” she adds, “until we have school quality, we need to keep having access until we get there. We’re just not there yet.”

Superintendent Carol Johnson wouldn’t comment for this story. But Schools Committee Chairman Rev. Gregory Groover says he has many concerns about the proposal to limit busing, particularly its impact on Roxbury and South End residents.

At Wednesday night’s school committee meeting, he thinks the superintendent will either tweak the busing plan, delay the decision or abandon it completely.

