

EYE ON THE NEWS

**Time for Receivership in Boston**

It’s the best option for reversing the steep and long-running decline of the city’s public school system.

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Education

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) recently launched its second review of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) in three years. The move has some up in arms because state law requires that officials conduct a review no more than a year before approving state receivership. For BPS, receivership is long overdue. After more than 15 years of consistent and rapid decline, the district has shown no ability—and limited will—to stem the tide.

The review’s findings aren’t likely to offer many surprises. Since 2004, two reports—one from a now-defunct state-accountability office and the other from DESE—dedicated nearly 500 pages to BPS and its many failings. Little had changed in the 15-plus years between publication of the two documents. Under normal circumstances, the most recent DESE report would have made more of an impact, but fate intervened. It was released on a Friday afternoon in March 2020, just as the world as we knew it was about to come to a screeching halt.

Still, the 2020 review was [devastating](https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/03/13/metro/mass-officials-release-scathing-review-boston-school-system/?p1=Article_Inline_Text_Link). District graduation rates were down, the achievement gap between black and white students had doubled, and the performance of Latino students trailed even further behind. To make matters worse, the report found that the district was promoting segregation by funneling students with disabilities and language barriers into specific schools. More than 30 percent of the system’s students attend schools ranked in the bottom 10 percent statewide, and the state found no consistent strategy for improving these schools.

The review stopped short of recommending a state takeover of BPS, though it had relied on the district’s self-reported data. Now we have reason to question that data. Last December, the *Boston Globe* reported that BPS underestimated the number of English-language learners the system was serving inadequately. Two months later, the *Globe* reported that the Boston Public Schools may have [overestimated its graduation rates](https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/01/31/metro/bps-may-have-overstated-graduation-rate-five-last-seven-years/?p1=BGSearch_Overlay_Results) in five of the last seven years. Brenda Cassellius, the sixth BPS superintendent in ten years, announced her resignation, effective at the end of the school year.

Last year, BPS botched the calculation of student grade-point averages, resulting in some students improperly being offered invitations to the city’s sought-after exam schools, while others who had earned invitations were denied. Parents are now being told that they will get word about exam-school admission in May—after the deposit deadline for some of the private schools that many parents with means would opt for if their children aren’t admitted to one of Boston’s few high-performing public schools.

This January, a federal district court judge took the rare step of withdrawing his earlier opinion upholding the district’s exam-school admission plan. He had been “misled,” he suggested, by the omission of insulting text messages about white parents living in a more affluent neighborhood from two school committee members, who later resigned when the messages were made public. The texts came on the heels of the resignation of the committee’s chairperson after he muttered derogatory comments about Asian names into a live microphone.

Parents are voting with their feet. Enrollment that stood at 54,000 just a few years ago is down 10 percent, to between 48,000 and 49,000. And yet, three Massachusetts governors and four Boston mayors have found it politically expedient to ignore the steady decline of BPS since 2006, when it was awarded the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education, which, until 2014, went to public school systems demonstrating the greatest overall performance and improvement in student achievement while narrowing achievement gaps among low-income and minority students.

“[I firmly oppose receivership](https://www.wbur.org/news/2022/03/28/state-education-officials-begin-review-of-boston-public-schools),” said new Boston mayor Michelle Wu at a recent meeting of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. She expressed “deep gratitude for our educators for the progress that we’ve made” and “a deep appreciation for the scale of the challenges ahead.” Boston Teachers Union president Jessica Tang has said that “the state has no grounds to say it should run the Boston schools that it has starved for so long.” Out of the 100 largest school systems in the U.S., BPS ranks second in funding, behind only New York City. In 2020, the system spent $24,000 per student, according to DESE. To compare, Miami Dade County spends just over $11,000 per pupil. Meantime, BPS and its supporters continue to fight measures like tying funding to the implementation of proven reforms.

It’s long past time for state leaders to intervene; DESE should appoint a new receiver-superintendent. Since the school committee hasn’t exactly earned the public’s trust, the department should also appoint a majority of school committee members. Naysayers point out that receivership isn’t a silver bullet. Nationally, such moves have a mixed record. But if focus is maintained on a few critical objectives, the likelihood of success is strong.

For starters, the Boston receivership should be phased, with the immediate emphasis put on serving the 30 percent of students who languish in schools that rank in the bottom decile statewide. Another accent should be on rightsizing the BPS central office, which employs more than 500 people—far more, on a pro-rated basis, than other Massachusetts school districts. The move would free up tens of millions of dollars for redirection into classrooms. Longer-term, the receivership should work to embed a culture of accountability within the streamlined central office before planning begins for handing responsibility back to the district.

Other successes in Massachusetts demonstrate that receivership, when done right, is a far better option than the status quo. The City of Lawrence is much poorer than Boston—its schools receive about a third less than BPS on a per-pupil basis—and has a far higher percentage of English-language learners. Still, a recent receivership headed by current DESE commissioner Jeffrey Riley resulted in graduation rates rising by 50 percent, a dramatically downsized and more efficient central office, and a major expansion of district enrichment programs.

For two decades, the same leaders who now oppose receivership blamed the Boston Public Schools’ woes on competition from charter public schools. But since they snuffed out the growth of that option by defeating a statewide ballot initiative to lift the charter cap in 2016, things have only gotten worse.

Now receivership is the bogeyman. Everyone from parents to federal judges doubts the accuracy of district claims, and the 30 percent of BPS students in underperforming schools continue to languish. For those students and their families, receivership represents the best hope for Boston schools to reverse a steep and long-running decline.

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