



Serving Students by Bringing Educators Together

February 3, 2016

Boston Families and Residents,

In September, Mayor Martin J. Walsh asked the Boston Compact and three of its constituent partners -- the Boston Public Schools, the Boston Charter Alliance and the Mayor's Education Cabinet -- to lead a citywide engagement process to consider his proposal to unify the application system for Boston's public schools and the public charter schools overseen by the Commonwealth.

The Mayor's proposal would allow Boston families to apply to both district and charter schools in a single application, at a single time of year. The intent of the proposal is to ease the school application process, provide better and more consistent information to families about all schools, and help families choose the schools that best meet their children's needs. The proposal also aims to create easier access to all schools for families of children who have the highest needs: those with disabilities, who are English Language Learners, or who arrive late to Boston and have missed the lottery. These aims would require the Boston Public Schools and Boston charter schools to adopt one set of rules that applies to all public schools.

As sector leaders and the Mayor's education chief, we were happy to take on that assignment and we have engaged in a three-month process to solicit initial opinions, comments and thoughtful feedback through a series of citywide community meetings and sessions with small-groups and individuals. We have sought input online, via social media, in a public survey and elsewhere.

With this letter, and a series of reports and photos from our notes in the sessions, we are reporting back to the community on what we discussed, what we heard and what we learned, as well as the next steps in the discussion to craft a unified enrollment proposal that would work for Boston's families.

To date, we have heard from 220 residents, more than 170 of whom identify as parents, and 30 who are school teachers, leaders and personnel. We also have heard from parents of toddlers and pre-kindergarteners. Their feedback and input will guide us as we take our next steps in this process.

As one would expect in gathering feedback on an important policy issue that impacts so many families, the feedback we have received through the community meeting process has been mixed. Participants at the citywide community meetings posed important questions about why such a proposal is needed and why now is the time to advance a proposal to unify charter and district enrollment systems. They requested more transparency about the process to develop a proposal going forward. And, of course, there were people in the rooms from a variety of backgrounds who expressed concerns about how such a proposal might help or hurt district and charter schools.

Speaking frankly, many individuals at the community meetings opposed the concept of unified enrollment. And yet, in the meetings we've had with parents we met in community-based organizations, particularly those families enrolling in city schools for the first time, the tenor was quite different. These families asked pointed questions about how a unified system would work, whether they would have



Serving Students by Bringing Educators Together

access to more quality schools and why we hadn't created a system such as this sooner. The time we spent in these meetings just explaining the different systems—and the very basic questions parents were asking about enrollment in both BPS and charter schools—affirmed our belief that we were on to something important, though there is so much more work to do to get this right.

We believe all of these conversations will ultimately improve the proposal that, once fully developed, comes before the decision-making boards – the Boston School Committee and individual charter boards – for their consideration and approval.

With this memo, we seek to lay out some of the key themes we heard and important dialogues we are still having as we move ahead.

### **About the Unified Enrollment Community Meetings**

Leaders from the Boston Public Schools and Commonwealth charter schools began to shape a unified proposal after agreeing upon core principles of such a plan, such as incorporating charter schools into the BPS Home-Based assignment plan and co-creating one set of rules for all public schools.

Speaking to school principals from across all sectors this past September, Mayor Walsh encouraged more collaboration across school types and bolder work from the Compact. The Mayor charged the Compact with refining and seeking community input on his unified enrollment proposal. The Compact sought community insight on a simplified enrollment system built upon these principles. Through a series of seven citywide community meetings, we began to gather initial feedback that will inform our planning and guide us in developing a more substantive proposal.

The Compact teamed up with a facilitator, had leaders from the Mayor's Office, BPS and the charters at each meeting, and worked in groups large and small to solicit input and opinions. At some meetings, we stuck with a more traditional Q&A format.

At every meeting, we asked parents and guardians to discuss their enrollment experiences.

In most of our meetings, after presentations about the Compact, the current system and the Mayor's proposal, we split into three groups to dig deeper into three of the most complicated and important facets of the enrollment system: the information parents receive about enrollment options and applications, how to best enroll students with special needs and/or English language learners, and who should administer a new enrollment system. In a couple of instances, we deviated from this format, at the request of attendees, to have a broader discussion about the proposal's pros and cons and district-charter policy issues.



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## **Highlighting Key Community Feedback**

This report outlines the feedback we received in our meetings and via our surveys. Below, we summarize the feedback received to date in four key categories that reflect the discussions at citywide meetings: Concerns about Boston Compact Transparency; Families' Assignment Challenges; Concerns about Future Investment in BPS and Its Sustainability; and Feedback on the Unified Enrollment Proposal.

We hope you will take the time to read our notes from each meeting and see the photos of flip charts used to capture opinions at the meetings. They have been very helpful to us as we move ahead. Notes from the citywide meetings are posted online here: <http://www.bostoncompact.org/enrollment/>

### **Concerns about Boston Compact Transparency**

Interestingly, one focal area of the individuals who participated in community meetings was the Boston Compact itself. The Boston Compact, which is leaders from the Boston Public Schools, Commonwealth charter schools, and Catholic schools, as well as the Mayor's Cabinet, has been around since 2011, but this proposal really put it in the public spotlight for the first time. At community meetings, there was some discussion about whether the Boston Compact was being sufficiently transparent in its work – including making its meetings public, publishing its minutes and including more families and community leaders in meetings. Specifically, there were concerns that:

- Early discussions about simplifying enrollment systems should have better engaged the public.
- The Compact's funders include the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
- The Compact sought funding from the Walton Family Foundation. (Note: the Compact is not pursuing Walton funding at this time.)
- The Compact Steering Committee is comprised solely of school sector representatives and does not include parent representatives.
- Because the Compact is a non-profit entity, it is not required to follow open meeting and record laws.

As a direct result of discussions at citywide community meetings, the Steering Committee has agreed to a new protocol for making information about Compact work publicly available. Compact committees, including the Steering Committee and its subcommittees, will post on the Compact website who is participating in each meeting, what are the goals, and meeting minutes. This process began this month. Additionally, the Partnerships Subcommittee will collaborate with parents to solicit family input about how Boston's families want to work together across sectors. Finally, the funders of the Boston Compact are transparently published on the Compact website.

### **Families' Assignment Challenges**

While some families shared that they had successfully navigated the enrollment system, others faced greater challenges finding the schools that were the right fit for their children. Nearly all parents



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advocated for continued improvement in school quality, with some asking if a unified enrollment proposal is better considered once there is more quality across school sectors and all neighborhoods and a shared metric for quality in each sector. Other parents reaffirmed the difficulty of navigating the current systems. Feedback included the following:

- Some young families expressed that they are finding the enrollment process rigorous and challenging.
- Families who recently went through the enrollment system or who are now considering their kindergarten options often expressed anxiety about navigating Boston's current enrollment systems, with their multiple applications, deadlines and lotteries.
- Other families expressed that the systems are complicated, but that it is up to parents to figure out how to navigate them and that it can be done.
- Families told us they struggled to find the information about various schools that they needed to make informed school-choice decisions.

### **Concerns about Future Investment in BPS and Its Sustainability**

Many attendees expressed a deep - and shared - dedication to the success of the Boston Public Schools. This commitment motivated many education advocates and family members to attend multiple Unified Enrollment meetings and to express their concerns or outright opposition. Some of those concerns are:

- That the unified enrollment system could shift demand toward charter schools and decrease BPS enrollment.
- That the Home Based assignment system has not been in place long enough to assess its effectiveness, and an equity analysis needs to be completed before considering any changes.
- That BPS should focus on internal quality before collaborating with colleagues in charter and Catholic schools.
- And that the legislative or electoral action around the cap on the number of charter schools and state financing of public schools must be resolved before the city considers unified enrollment.

With regard to these concerns, we concur that we need to understand the impact of the Home Based assignment system on equity and are encouraged that the School Committee and BPS leaders are working to bring forward data in the coming weeks. Second, we believe that each sector has significant internal work to continue in order to provide high-quality education in every school, but remain convinced that the sectors should work on internal quality *and* address citywide issues simultaneously. This is not an either/or proposition. With regard to the broader public narrative about charter schools, the timing is no doubt unfortunate. This proposal is actually intended to ensure that charter schools in Boston are given more ways of serving more high needs students—which is something both BPS and charter school advocates care about. We believe that regardless of what happens with the efforts to lift the cap, this is a worthy goal. Our aim is to jointly develop a set of enrollment policies that would apply to all public schools. To this end, we are addressing issues such as enrolling students with the greatest



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needs, filling seats that become available after school starts, and accepting students who arrive in Boston midyear.

### **Feedback on the Unified Enrollment Proposal**

Specific discussions around the unified enrollment proposal have yielded multiple perspectives on almost every issue that emerges, ranging from parents who said they simply want to see schools working together across sectors to those who want assurances that a unified system would not impinge on their current level of choice or reduce the number of schools actually on their assignment list as options.

Some of the key feedback from families indicated that they wanted:

- Every school to have the teachers, tools and training to serve a diverse population of students
- Access to “apples-to-apples” information on all of their school choice options with a common definition of quality
- Charter schools to consider following the same disciplinary codes as district schools
- Charter schools to be *additive* to a family’s list of BPS schools.
- A third-party administrator for the unified enrollment system, rather than the city, BPS or the charters managing the system.
- In particular, families noted that it is not clear which charter schools have the capacity to serve which types of students with disabilities.
- One place for families to see what each school has to offer, including but not limited to before- and after-school care, advanced work, discipline policies, educational services for students with special needs, parental involvement in governance, and availability of guidance and mental-health counseling.
- Enrollment information sent in the mail and available online.
- Information about charter school availability presented whenever information is presented regarding all other BPS options.

We appreciate all of these perspectives and recommendations, and particularly the people who stepped forward to raise them. We believe many of the questions and ideas will strengthen our effort to coalesce around a workable and successful unified enrollment proposal for the Mayor and policy boards to consider. We also know one enrollment system alone cannot address every educational concern, but we believe the final suggestions we make will balance the concerns we have heard on either side of this concept.

### **Survey Responses**

Aware that many families are unable to attend meetings around the city, we designed an online survey to help additional families participate in the discussion around unified enrollment. To date, we’ve received 149 responses to our unified enrollment survey. About 20 percent of respondents self-identified as employees of the Boston education system, while 85 percent were parents or guardians. Of the



Serving Students by Bringing Educators Together

respondents who self-identified as parents, 80 percent were district parents, another 11 percent were charter parents, 6 percent were Catholic school parents, 1 percent were METCO parents and another 9 percent identified as “other.” Approximately 20 percent of parents who took the survey reported having a child with special learning needs or who speaks English as a second language.

About half of the respondents ranked their feelings about unified enrollment between “neutral” and “very excited,” while the other half were “strongly opposed.” About three quarters of respondents were most interested in the Boston Compact’s goal of establishing collective responsibility for closing opportunity and achievement gaps.

### **Preparing Next Steps**

As intended, we will now take the feedback we received and turn it into draft policy. We will continue to have detailed discussions with policy experts, advocates, parents, partners and the public as we do this work and make decisions about how best to proceed on all of these issues and more.

As we develop a detailed unified enrollment proposal and work through any lingering questions, we will continue to assess the feedback gathered from the survey and meetings. We are asking any groups who want to hear more about this proposal or weigh-in as we develop the detailed plans to contact us directly. We will also continue to gather input and perspectives by visiting community organizations as we are invited to them and to further collect feedback online.

Interested individuals and families should please complete our survey to provide feedback by following this link: <http://www.bostoncompact.org/enrollment/>.

Mayor Walsh intends to unveil his more developed proposal in the months ahead, at which point it would be submitted to the decision-making bodies in Boston and at the State House. The finalized proposal will require legislative action.

We will publicly share details along the way as the proposal develops further and will also continue to seek input from the community and from our fellow educators.

### **Conclusion**

Mayor Walsh challenged us to develop a more equitable enrollment system. We believe a unified enrollment system could eliminate the inequities that exist when one student’s parents have the time, knowledge and resources to apply to multiple schools in each sector, and another student’s parents do not.

We understand the concerns of those who say each sector needs to prioritize internal work on quality before collaborating with other sectors. We also know students benefit when adults collaborate across



Serving Students by Bringing Educators Together

sectors and that it is possible to make enrollment easier for families even as we work through important issues such as school quality, service to students with special needs and, separately, proposals about the charter cap and other matters. This proposal does not address those other issues but it does take a significant step toward equity for all families in enrollment. We are working to develop a detailed proposal that first and foremost creates a simplified, more accessible application process for families, as well as strengthens each sector.

We believe this carefully shaped proposal will help support Boston Public Schools in serving all of Boston's children, reducing transportation costs, and ensuring the playing field is level between district and charter schools. For charter schools, a unified enrollment system will help achieve their mission of serving an increasingly varied population of students, including those with greater needs, and to grow deeper roots within their communities.

We ask for your support and engagement as we work to create equitable opportunity for Boston's students and families through this unified enrollment proposal.

Sincerely,

Rahn Dorsey

Chief of Education, Mayor Martin J. Walsh's Office; Boston Compact Steering Committee Member

Shannah Varón

Chairwoman, Boston Charter Alliance; Executive Director, Boston Collegiate Charter School; Boston Compact Steering Committee Member

Ross Wilson

Managing Partner of Innovation, Boston Public Schools; Boston Compact Steering Committee Member