

## National League of Cities feature article

# Boston Public Schools “Closing Achievement Gaps”

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Boston proudly hails its distinction as the birthplace of public education in America. The city’s claims to fame include the nation’s first public school – Boston Latin School, founded in 1635 – as well as America’s first public elementary and high schools, among other firsts. That proud tradition of educational excellence continues today, from high-quality early childhood programs through world-class institutions of higher education.

Not long ago, however, Boston faced an unprecedented decline in its K-12 public schools. When Mayor Thomas M. Menino took office in 1993, he inherited a Boston Public Schools (BPS) system that many considered to be in shambles. No new schools had been built in decades. Classrooms lacked textbooks and basic supplies. High schools were losing accreditation. Attendance and graduation rates were at all-time lows.

Mayor Menino declared that Boston could allow the demise of its public schools. In his 1996 State of the City address, he staked his political future on the improvement of the schools. Since then, BPS has undertaken an ambitious, standards-based reform agenda, including significant investments in teacher training, early childhood education, technology, after-school programs, and other strategies to close achievement gaps and prepare all students for college and career success. As a result, Boston has emerged as one of the leading urban school districts in the nation, including earning the distinguished Broad Prize for Urban Education in 2006.

As a dependent school district, BPS operates as a City department. It is governed by the seven-member Boston School Committee, appointed by Mayor Menino. Superintendent Carol R. Johnson, who has held the post since 2007, serves as a member of the Mayor’s Cabinet. Together, these three entities – the Mayor, School Committee, and Superintendent – have led the transformation of the Boston Public Schools, with a renewed focus on student achievement. Today, BPS serves nearly 57,000 students in 128 schools. About 77% of students are Black or Hispanic, 43% speak a first language other than English, 19% have a disability, and about 78% are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

The district’s five-year strategic plan, the Acceleration Agenda, outlines a set of specific goals for student success, strategies to support them, and measurable targets to monitor progress. The plan calls for closing achievement and access gaps, striving to “level the playing field” by ensuring first-rate academic, enrichment, and support services in every neighborhood.

Various indicators affirm that Boston is making notable progress:

- Boston has consistently improved student performance in Grades 4 and 8 on the National Assessment of Education Progress, the “Nation’s Report Card,” often outpacing other large urban districts. Last year, Boston’s NAEP scores in 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics were on par with scores nationwide, the first time that any urban school district has performed at the same level as the nation’s suburban districts.
- The four-year graduation has climbed steadily, from 59.1% in 2006 to an all-time high of 64.4% last year, including nearly seven-point gains among Black and Hispanic students. At the same time, the dropout rate

has decreased from 9.4% in 2006 to 6.0% today. These gains are due in part to innovative safety net programs such as credit recovery, the Re-Engagement Center, where former dropouts are welcomed back to school, and a Newcomers Academy for high school students who have recently immigrated to the United States.

- In just two years, Boston has increased the number of college-level Advanced Placement test takers by 30% and the number of AP tests taken by 68%. Between 2007 and 2009, minority students demonstrated significant improvement in AP performance, with a 58% increase in the number of exams earning scores of 3 or higher.
- On the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exams, over the past five years, the percentage of Boston's Grade 10 students achieving proficiency has increased from 50% to 67% in English Language Arts, and from 55% to 62% in Mathematics.

Boston has invested heavily in schools in greatest need of improvement. Mayor Menino was instrumental in the 2010 passage of landmark State legislation to transform low-performing schools, including the creation of in-district charter schools. The new school models, based in part on Boston's existing pilot schools, offer greater autonomy to foster more creative approaches to teaching and learning. Superintendent Johnson identified 11 low-performing schools to become "Turnaround Schools" and provided them with talented leadership, greater staffing flexibility, a longer school day, and additional human and financial resources to accelerate student achievement. Most of these schools have undergone significant transformations – not only improving student outcomes, but also restoring confidence among families and staff alike.

Boston also offers full-day kindergarten for every five-year-old, more pre-kindergarten options for 3- and 4-year-olds, a new public Montessori school, and additional K-8 schools to help meet the growing demand for continuity between the elementary and middle school years. Expanded after-school programs offer not only academic support but also enrichment in athletics, debate, music, and the arts. Enrollment in Boston's summer programs has doubled in just four years.

The Boston model also relies on meaningful family engagement in schools. Mayor Menino launched Countdown to Kindergarten with community organizations to prepare families for the transition to formal schooling. Parent University, a district-wide, year-long series of workshops, helps caregivers support and advocate for their children. Team BPS engages more than 300 parents, alumni, and community partners to volunteer as goodwill ambassadors for the district.

Feedback from parents suggests that Boston's education reform agenda is taking hold. On a recent school climate survey, 94% of parents either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement, "This school is a good place for my child to learn."

Of course, much work lies ahead to close achievement gaps and ensure all students achieve success. The city is once again exploring various approaches to student assignment, in part to reduce skyrocketing transportation costs and give families greater access to high-quality schools close to home. Mayor Menino also has called for a major overhaul of the city's only technical-vocational high school. Other challenges remain, but Boston will face these issues as it has addressed others: with a firm commitment to ensuring that every child has access to a quality education.

Boston takes great pride in its history of pioneering public education. Now, the city can be proud of its contributions to public schooling today and in the years ahead.