

AN OPEN LETTER RELATED TO STUDENT ASSIGNMENT IN BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

July 7, 2010

It is with great regret that our organizations announce our decision to end formal cooperation with the Boston Public Schools (“BPS”) as the district contemplates whether to design and implement a new student assignment policy. We have reached this decision based on what many perceive as BPS’s lack of meaningful engagement with the community during this process.

In September of 2009, BPS was awarded federal grant funding to engage local parents, students, educators and other constituents in a series of community dialogues to “create a student assignment plan which ensures equitable access to high quality educational services for all students in the City, within racially and ethnically diverse schools and classrooms.”¹ BPS’s grant concept was distinct from other Technical Assistance for Student Assignment Plans (“TASAP”) grant proposals because it placed the diversity of voices and perspectives of Boston parents, educators and community members at the center of the student assignment design process. The grant award of \$241,680 was to be used, among other things, to seek assistance and expertise from student assignment specialists, demographers, community relations experts, facility and other planners, curriculum specialists, school districts with comparable and relevant experience, academics and researchers, non-profit organizations, civil rights organizations and members of the private sector. The goal was to ensure that district educators and the surrounding community had the tools to design an acceptable student assignment plan. The proposed process appeared to be a departure from what transpired during BPS’s attempted passage of the “Five Zone Plan,” which was strongly opposed by community members earlier in 2009.

BPS’s decision to apply for this grant, the grant concept itself and the subsequent Department of Education (“DOE”) award gave our organizations much hope. As this process has evolved, however, we have developed serious concerns about the pace and vigor of implementation. We also have concerns with the lack of transparency and open communication with the public about how this funding will be used. To our knowledge, there has been little to no public explanation about the purpose of the TASAP grant (namely, that it is specifically designed to aid school districts in the development of student assignment policies that avoid racial isolation and facilitate student diversity). Community members have been largely left on their own to seek out this information. In the absence of clear and purposeful communication, some people have since formed incorrect assumptions about the purpose and use of this sizeable grant.

On March 27, 2010, our organizations hosted The Golden Opportunity Summit (“the Summit”). The idea of the Summit predated the TASAP award. Following the postponement of the School Committee’s vote on student assignment, our organizations felt that the Summit would be a

¹ Boston Public Schools, TASAP Project Narrative, 7.

constructive way to contribute. We viewed the Summit as a chance to offer information and resources to BPS, to the public at large and to other interested organizations and individuals. Overall, we were pleased with the presentations and the information presented at the Summit, but we feel BPS missed an opportunity to clearly and effectively communicate the purpose of the TASAP grant and describe the manner by which community members might get involved going forward.

To be sure, a student assignment policy will not address all of the challenges facing the Boston Public Schools and the communities of which the schools are a part. However, if well-designed and accompanied by an open, inviting process of communication and deliberation, a new student assignment policy could at least open up lines of communication and be a promising beginning toward addressing longstanding challenges. We believe that anything short of full engagement around issues of equity and diversity will not serve the community well.

As we end our formal involvement, our organizations remain hopeful about the potential of this student assignment design process. We continue to believe that Boston can be a national leader on these issues, and hope that the TASAP process will help illuminate the path. Accordingly, we offer the attached recommendations, which we believe can guide the district toward the development of a fair, equitable student assignment plan and invite longer-term exploration of challenges that require more than just the commitment of local educators, but that call for a steadfast commitment from government officials and policymakers at the local, state and federal level; parents and community leaders; philanthropists and others who have concern for the children of Boston. In addition to these recommendations, we encourage stakeholders to take advantage of the student assignment resources that are housed on the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute's website at <http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/Events/Event.aspx?id=100118> and <http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/News/Item.aspx?id=100088>.

Sincerely,



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The Golden Opportunity Summit

Exploring Equity-Minded Approaches to Student Assignment and School Reform

9AM to 5PM on March 27, 2010 at CityYear

287 Columbus Avenue
Boston, MA 02116

POST-SUMMIT RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Publicly Commit to the TASAP Community Engagement Process with the Assistance of an Independent Facilitator.** BPS is not embarking upon this process anew. The TASAP grant was awarded about three months after local parent and community groups voiced strong concerns with a proposed student assignment plan – a plan our organizations believed would likely exacerbate existing structural inequalities in Boston Public Schools. The Five Zone Plan was initially developed by BPS with little or no consultation with members of the BPS community (e.g. parents, students and community advocates). Once presented, concerns about resegregation, equity and access were voiced consistently by many different constituencies. Few changes were made to the Five Zone Plan in response to this feedback, and the revisions that were made largely ignored these community-based concerns. The Five Zone Plan was ultimately abandoned. This was inevitably a frustrating experience for both district officials and community members, in some cases exacerbating existing divisions between the district and community members. The TASAP grant affords BPS an opportunity to try again, but BPS must avoid repeating the same process. Co-creating a student assignment plan that recognizes the valuable insights and experiences of local parents, educators and community members requires that BPS fully commit itself to forging genuine and constructive relationships. Having participated in conversations with BPS officials and community members about the implementation of this TASAP grant, we believe that it is essential that BPS obtain the assistance of an independent facilitation company with no political ties or allegiances within the city and that is well practiced in helping school districts strengthen relationships with parents, educators and community members.
2. **Improve Public Communication about the TASAP Grant.** It has been about nine months since BPS received TASAP funding, yet few specific details of the TASAP grant (including how the funds will be used) have been shared with the public. Administrators have made mention of the grant during School Committee meetings and in some public forums, but by and large, the purpose of and BPS's goals for this grant have not been effectively communicated. This lack of transparency has fueled community frustrations and lead to misperceptions about the process. In particular, many members of the public believed that specific BPS proposals that were presented to the School Committee in the last few months (such as the Acceleration Agenda and the Roslindale K-8 pathway plan) were tied to the TASAP grant. Our organizations have shared these concerns with BPS multiple times. We expected that detailed information about the grant would be articulated during the Golden Opportunity Summit. We even provided BPS officials with materials that would help guide their presentation on the topic. A handout explaining the grant was distributed in participants' packets, but attendees were provided no verbal explanation of the TASAP grant. This lack of open communication is a serious concern for our organizations and, we believe, could impede successful implementation of the TASAP grant. BPS should make the TASAP handout (including translated versions, to ensure that the information is accessible to all BPS families) available at all School Committee meetings and deliver a formal presentation about the grant to the School Committee and/or in an open public meeting. BPS should make this information available on its website, clearly indicating the point of contact should people want more information.

2. **Use TASAP Funds to Seek Expert Advice and Assistance.** During the consideration of the Five Zone Plan, we recommended that BPS consult with student assignment experts and use available technology during the process of creating a new student assignment plan. Before TASAP, this assistance may have been outside of BPS’s reach. However, BPS now has funding to get this assistance. Summit participants learned about the Opportunity Analysis performed by the Kirwan Institute in 2009.² This already-existing tool could be very helpful to BPS during the TASAP process. For example, it could be used to increase awareness among policymakers and suburban education leaders about the need to pursue regional reform efforts. It could also offer valuable information about how to tailor interventions in particular neighborhoods. As BPS moves forward with the TASAP process, we continue to believe that BPS should consult with experts and make use of available technology.

3. **Include English Language Learner Advocates on Working Group and Advisory Group.** The needs of English Language Learners must be a central consideration in the student assignment design process. As we learned at the Summit, BPS has historically not been effective in ensuring that English Language Learners get the support they need to succeed in school and later in life.³ Concerns about ELL services were also central to the Five Zone Plan debate, with a strong constituency voicing a desire to replicate the dual language immersion models. In order to create a student assignment policy that increases opportunity for the district’s ELL students, we recommend that both the TASAP Working Group and the TASAP Advisory Committee include at least one member with expertise on ELL issues.

4. **Include Special Education Advocates on Working Group and Advisory Group.** Although the TASAP grant was explicitly created by the U.S. DOE to help school districts design student assignment plans that “avoid racial isolation and resegregation” and facilitate racial/ethnic diversity, BPS must remain mindful of how its policies affect students with disabilities. This is especially the case since concerns about special education service delivery were voiced throughout the consideration of the Five Zone Plan. Since transportation for special education students accounts for a sizable portion of BPS’s transportation budget, BPS cannot reduce transportation costs without adequately considering issues related to the transport of special education students. Ideally, a new student assignment policy would enhance, not impede, the district’s efforts to provide special education services to BPS students. Since none of our organizations specialize in issues related to special education, we claim no particular expertise in this area. However, it is essential that special education advocates be included on both the Working Group and the Advisory Group. Summit attendees expressed interest in adding an analysis of special education to the Kirwan Institute’s “Opportunity Maps,” an idea which may be worth exploring.

5. **Housing and Schools Task Force.** The connections between housing segregation and school segregation are well known. Segregation and inequities within schools are often attributed to housing segregation and vice versa, yet it is rare for school reformers and housing advocates to work together to disrupt this cycle. However, in order to achieve meaningful integration in a hypersegregated school district such as Boston, fair and affordable housing efforts need to be linked to school integration efforts. Several presenters shared compelling information about why this is important. For example, Professor Dolores Acevedo-Garcia discussed the way that “double jeopardy” – living in a poor family *and* a poor neighborhood – affects the lives of students living in Boston and potentially undermines their learning.⁴ To respond to the challenges of creating meaningful diversity in a hypersegregated district, we recommend that: 1) Superintendent Johnson

² Jason Reece et al., The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at the Ohio State University, The Geography of Opportunity: Building Communities of Opportunity in Massachusetts, *available at* http://www.mlac.org/pdf/Geography%20of%20Opportunity_MA_full%20report.pdf.

³ See PowerPoint Presentation of Jane Lopez, English Language Learners & the Boston Public Schools. This presentation is available at http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/assets/documents/events/Golden%20Opportunity%20Summit/Jane%20Lopez_ELL_PPT.pdf.

⁴ See PowerPoint Presentation of Dolores Acevedo-Garcia, PhD, Equity of Opportunity and Child Development. This presentation is available at *available at* http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/assets/documents/events/Golden%20Opportunity%20Summit/Dolores%20AcevedoGarcia_PT.pdf.

and the School Committee form a working group to explore how affordable/fair housing advocates throughout the state might support the work of Boston Public Schools; 2) the TASAP Working Group include at least one local fair/affordable housing expert; and 3) at least one fair housing expert should be part of the TASAP Advisory Committee.

6. **Develop a Sense of Shared Responsibility for and Ownership of TASAP by Creating a Sustained Dialogue about Student Assignment, Race and Equity.** By exploring new ideas and engaging in conversation about segregation and equity, the Golden Opportunity Summit aimed to inspire new conversation between BPS and members of the community it serves. Presenters at the Golden Opportunity Summit represented only a few of many perspectives that can constructively guide the TASAP process. Community organizations and local foundations can help support the implementation of the TASAP grant by increasing awareness of, and engagement in, the student assignment process. One way to do this would be to begin and nurture an ongoing dialogue about issues related to student assignment (e.g. the impact of racial and socioeconomic isolation, the value of diversity, the importance of equity in student assignment, etc.). Information from such events could be shared with BPS officials and used to inform the TASAP process. Such a dialogue could provide community members with opportunities to share their perspectives on these issues and learn more about tools that might be employed. Offering this type of support to the district as it embarks upon the TASAP process will create a sense of shared responsibility for, and ownership of, the student assignment design process. Most importantly, perhaps, continued engagement with these issues will strengthen the public will to develop reforms that might lead to more equitable, diverse schools.
7. **Work with State and Local Leaders to Develop a Regional Equity and Diversity Plan.** As the TASAP process unfolds, we encourage BPS to engage policymakers and educational leaders at both the state and local levels in a conversation about regional school equity and diversity initiatives. At the Summit, we learned that schools in the Boston metropolitan area are some of the most fragmented in the country.⁵ We also learned that 20% of white students (but only 3% of black students and 2% of Hispanic students) in the Boston metropolitan area attend “private public schools,” which are schools that enroll virtually no poor students,⁶ while Boston Public Schools have a low-income population of 75.6%.⁷ Overall, 36.5% of BPS students are Black and 39.6% are Hispanic.⁸ We also learned at the Summit that students in high-income schools are *22 times more likely* to be high-performing than students in low-income schools.⁹ And, the challenges of concentrated poverty are magnified at two thresholds: from 7-20% and above 40%.¹⁰ We know that BPS currently has a low-income student population that is well beyond the 40% threshold.
 - Specifically, serious consideration should be given to the development of at least a few regional magnet schools that can provide both urban and suburban students with more racially and economically diverse learning opportunities. Lessons can be drawn from particularly successful existing models in Hartford, Connecticut and other locations across the nation.

⁵ See PowerPoint Presentation of Nancy McArdle, The Golden Opportunity Summit: Exploring Equity-Minded Approaches to Student Assignment and School Reform (1 district for every 3,500 students). This presentation is available at http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/assets/documents/events/Golden%20Opportunity%20Summit/Nancy%20McArdle_PPT.pdf.

⁶ *Id.* (citing Thomas B. Fordham Institute, *America's Private Public Schools* (2010), available at http://www.edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news_private-public-schools). “Private public schools” are schools where less than 5% of primary school students and 3% of middle/high school students are eligible for free/reduced lunch.

⁷ *See, e.g.* <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=00350000&orgtypecode=5&leftNavId=305&>. Data is for 2009-2010.

⁸ *See, e.g.* <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=00350000&orgtypecode=5&leftNavId=300&>.

⁹ See PowerPoint Presentation of Gina Chirichigno, *Linking to Opportunity: Student Assignment After Seattle and Louisville* (citing Douglas N. Harris, “Ending the Blame Game on Educational Inequity: A Study of ‘High Flying’ Schools and NCLB,” *Educational Policy Studies Laboratory, Arizona State University*, at 22 (2006), available at <http://eps1.asu.edu/epru/documents/EP1SL-0603-120-EPRU.pdf>). This presentation is available at http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/assets/documents/events/Golden%20Opportunity%20Summit/Chirichigno_PPT.pdf.

¹⁰ *Id.* (citing The Kirwan Institute, *K-12 Diversity: Strategies for Diverse & Successful Schools*, 5, available at http://4909e99d35cada63e7f757471b7243be73e53e14.gripelements.com/pdfs/KIAltSchoolStrategiesVersion3July31_2007.pdf).

- More short term, BPS should increase communication with METCO, Inc. to determine how the program might better support BPS’s reform efforts. Massachusetts’s METCO program is one of only nine interdistrict integration programs nationwide. State leaders should evaluate METCO to determine how the program might be strengthened. They should also make efforts to ensure that METCO is adequately funded and consider ways to expand its reach so that more students can benefit from it.
 - Suburban leaders in surrounding school districts also play an important role in regional reform efforts. These leaders can acknowledge the challenges that school districts such as BPS face in educating large numbers of low-income students. Their voices will help inform the public discourse.
8. **Directly Confront the Lingering Effects of School Desegregation in Boston.** The process of desegregation profoundly affected the Boston metropolitan region. As a community, we need to be willing to confront this painful history and find a way to recommit ourselves to the ideals of diversity and equal opportunity. To create a new student assignment policy without confronting the history of desegregation in Boston is to minimize the experiences of countless parents and community members. We can easily blame desegregation for the challenges that BPS faces today, forgetting that it represented an attempt to eliminate vast inequities in access and opportunity. On the other hand, we can easily ignore the ways in which desegregation, as implemented and experienced in Boston, has affected parental and community trust and engagement in the school system. Figuring out how to confront this history is our collective responsibility. The schools cannot, and should not be required to, tackle this challenge on their own. The current BPS leadership is not responsible for how desegregation was implemented in Boston. At the Summit, we heard a presentation about “Boston in Crisis,” an institute organized by the Boston Museum (in collaboration with Facing History and Ourselves and Mass 2020), which explored the history of school desegregation in Boston with local teachers.¹¹ The “Boston in Crisis” Teachers’ Institute offers one example of how BPS and the surrounding community might begin a healing process.
9. **Coordinate and Align Student Assignment with Other Reforms.** BPS should make efforts to connect the TASAP process to other emerging reforms. Earlier this year, the Massachusetts legislature passed a series of education reform bills. Among other things, these new laws: 1) give local school districts the ability to create in-district charter schools; 2) grant authority to education leaders to make drastic changes in “underperforming” and “chronically underperforming” schools in hope of bringing about rapid improvement; and 3) increase the cap on charter schools in the lowest performing districts. Also, other DOE funding opportunities (e.g. Race to the Top,¹² the Investing in Innovation Fund¹³ and the Promise Neighborhoods Program¹⁴) and the reforms that come along with them are likely to complicate the student assignment design process. It is essential for BPS to foster strong communication and relationships with reformers to ensure that its new student assignment policy aligns with emerging reforms. To the extent that BPS receives additional funding (from the DOE or elsewhere) and/or uses reform tools created by new legislation, it should incorporate knowledge coming from the TASAP process for maximum effectiveness.
10. **Avoid Dichotomies— Do Not Put Transportation and Creating Quality Schools at Odds with One Another.** Concerns about shrinking budgets initially prompted discussions about a new student assignment plan, and financial concerns have grown more serious over time. However, conversations about student assignment should be focused around equity. District leaders and community members alike should avoid separating student assignment issues from the larger context. District leaders have maintained that spending money on transportation means having less money to spend “in the schools.” In contrast, some community groups adopted the position

¹¹ Information about this Institute is available at <http://www.bostonmuseum.org/deseginst.html>.

¹² United States Department of Education, Race to the Top Fund, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>.

¹³ United States Department of Education, Investing in Innovation Fund (i3), <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/innovation/index.html>.

¹⁴ United States Department of Education, Promise Neighborhoods, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/index.html>.

that there should be absolutely no changes in student assignment policies until all children have access to quality schools. Both positions overlook the role that student assignment plans can play in ensuring more equitable, higher quality educational opportunities for all students. Similarly, many groups overlook the body of research demonstrating that high concentrations of poverty in schools tend to diminish school quality in both the short and long term. Well-designed student assignment plans can help create more functional schools by attempting to ensure that individual schools do not become overburdened by concentrated poverty and the educational challenges that come along with it.

11. **Expand Awareness Through the Media.** Radio, newspaper and television stories undoubtedly influence the public will to support, or reject, specific school reforms. We rely on the media to constructively inform the public discourse, helping people to expand their awareness of the issues at hand. The media can play a constructive role in the implementation of the TASAP grant by helping to illuminate the complex issues that contribute to longstanding gaps in access and opportunity that lead to differences in achievement. Similarly, media can highlight the importance of a well-constructed student assignment plan. We urge members of the media to more fully explore the underlying context, seek out informed perspectives, and explain how other communities are grappling with similar issues. In doing this, we hope media representatives avoid the tendency to oversimplify the challenges confronting our schools and communities. At the Summit, we learned about how individual people often blame students, parents and teachers for school underperformance – a position that overlooks the need for broader structural changes.¹⁵ We also learned about how other school districts in the nation are grappling with issues related to race and opportunity.¹⁶ By taking this knowledge into account, members of the media can begin to document the types of stories that help people better understand the merits of investing time and resources into creating a student assignment plan.

¹⁵ See, e.g., research and reports prepared by The Frameworks Institute, available at <http://frameworksinstitute.org/education.html>.

¹⁶ See, e.g., PowerPoint Presentation of John Landesman, Engaging Racially Diverse Parents, Staff, and Students in Dialogue and Problem Solving; PowerPoint Presentation of Tanya Coke, Preserving Strong and Integrated Schools in Montclair; PowerPoint Presentation of Dena Dossett, Jefferson County Public Schools These presentations are available at http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/assets/documents/events/Golden%20Opportunity%20Summit/EverydayDemocracy_PPT.pdf, http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/assets/documents/events/Golden%20Opportunity%20Summit/Tanya%20Coke_Montclair_BP_S%20Summit_SM.pdf, and http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/assets/documents/events/Golden%20Opportunity%20Summit/Dena%20Dossett_Louisville_PT.pdf respectively.