

# Op-Ed: Making quality and justice keys to BPS plans

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By Gazette Staff

By Mary Battenfeld and Megan Wolf/Special to the Gazette

Nine months ago, Boston Public Schools began a school assignment review. The assignment baby is yet to be born, but one clear reality has emerged. Boston doesn't have enough seats in quality schools, and the ones we have are distributed unequally around the city. In some neighborhoods, fewer than 40 percent of children attend quality schools, while in others more than 80 percent do. It will come as no surprise that poor, black and Hispanic children have the least access to excellent neighborhood schools.

The hopeful surprise is that equity and quality have moved to the center of the assignment debate. Unlike the "closer to home" plans unveiled in September, current proposals include mechanisms so those without quality neighborhood schools can travel to better ones. As important, the timeline has been extended so the mayor's hard-working External Advisory Committee can consider new data.

Yet some believe that a promise of school improvement is enough. They claim we can assign students first to neighborhood schools and work on quality later. But this two-stage strategy risks the future of our most vulnerable children. National school reform efforts and Boston's own still-struggling "Circle of Promise" schools show that it takes many years and substantial resources to make quality urban schools a reality.

So what should Boston do? Though some proposals address equity better than others, no plan is a slam-dunk score. But there's growing consensus on what the new model must have to be a winner for all children.

First, it must improve equitable access to quality schools, both immediately and in the long term. The current three-zone system does not provide actual equal access, in part because it sets aside half the seats for families in a one-mile walk radius. But a new plan must not make things worse for the children who most need good schools.

Second, any plan must provide families in areas without quality schools a genuine chance to get to them. Factoring in socio-economic status, offering a lottery bump to children without good neighborhood options, or pairing zones or schools are some possible routes to equitable access. A plan also must offer children with special needs and English-language learners predictable access to high quality education.

Third, any plan must acknowledge that community isn't conjured from the magic wand of neighborhood schools. It's made when families from different backgrounds come together for international nights, science fairs and hearings on school funding. It's

found in vibrant citywide schools and in schools that draw more from neighborhood communities. Sustaining existing school communities while also building intentional new ones is critical to the success of any assignment plan.

We don't know how Boston will answer the call of school assignment reform. Will it be with a plan that upholds the rights of all children? Or will Boston allow geography to dictate opportunity, and open up quality education only to some? One thing is certain. Justice demands excellent schools for all our children, whoever they are and wherever they live.

*The writers are Jamaica Plain residents and leaders of Quality Education for Every Student (QUEST), a recently formed Boston Public Schools parent group. See questbps on Facebook.*