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It's been nine months since a review of Boston Public Schools assignment began. And though the student assignment baby is yet to be born, 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% of children attend high or medium quality schools, while in others more than 80% have that chance. It will come as no surprise that poor, black and Hispanic children have the least access to excellent neighborhood schools.

Thus the dilemma. How should we allocate the precious resource of excellent schools? Do we hand children in geographic proximity to high quality schools an even more certain ticket into them? Or do we make our first priority providing Boston's children an equal chance at high quality education, even if that means busing?

Fortunately, many charged with reviewing school assignment have begun to acknowledge that the order "you live here, you go there" is unfair. Unlike the five plans for "closer to home" assignments unveiled in September, all current proposals recommend some mechanism to enable those in "quality deserts" a chance to travel to better schools. The recently announced extension of the process to consider data on how parents choose schools is also hopeful evidence that equity and quality have moved to the center of the assignment debate.

Yet some still believe that a *promise* of school improvement is enough. They argue that we can assign students first to "closer to home" 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 multiple years, resources and institutional commitment to make quality urban schools a reality. Meanwhile, BPS, despite its best intentions, is miles away from providing quality education for all.

What then, is the solution? There's no silver bullet, but we can say this. First, we should do no harm. True, the current system is not equitable, in part because it sets aside at least 50% of seats for those in a one mile radius of a school. But a new plan must demonstrate that it improves and will not worsen equitable access, both immediately and in the long term.

Second, any plan has to deliver mechanisms so families in areas without quality schools can get to them. That could be a priority based on socio-economic status, or a walk zone equivalent lottery bump for children without high quality neighborhood options. Or it could be a plan that pairs zones or schools to achieve equitable access. A plan also must offer children with special needs and English language learners predictable and if need be, out of neighborhood access to high quality education.

Third, any plan must reflect the truth that community isn't conjured from the magic wand of neighborhood schools. It's made when families from different backgrounds come together for bake sales, international nights, science fairs, and hearings on school funding. It's found in schools where most kids are from the neighborhood, in vibrant city-wide communities like the Hernandez, and in schools like the Mather that draw from many communities. Sustaining existing school communities while also building intentional new ones is critical to the success of any assignment plan.

Last January Washington's state Supreme Court called education "the number one civil right of the 21st century." The opportunity to affirm that right is knocking on City Hall's door. Will the Superintendent, Boston School Committee and Mayor's Office answer 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? It's too soon to tell, but one thing is certain. Justice demands access to quality schools for all our children, whoever they are and wherever they live.

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