

Where is the road map for Boston Public Schools facilities?

Decision-making on buildings is opaque and uncoordinated

By Megan Wolf, May 22, 2018

Spring is here and thousands of Boston's families have recently learned where their children will be going to school next year. Many will be entering new schools for the first time, as they attend kindergarten, middle school and high school welcome sessions. What will they find?

Most will experience warm welcomes by teachers, hallways lined with exemplary work, and friendly classmates. Some will enter buildings constructed in the 1930s with beautiful wainscoting and hard wood floors; others will find themselves in more modern buildings, with plenty of natural light and open hallways.

Regardless of the variation in Boston's 125 schools, families entering the BPS will have one hope in common: that the buildings will be safe and will support the educational needs of their kids.

Last year, Mayor Marty Walsh announced a 10 year \$1 billion investment in Boston's public school buildings, and a few months later, the district released "Build BPS: 10 Year Educational and Facilities Master Plan," the result of a year's worth of building evaluations. Hopes were high that the most pressing facilities issues would be addressed, from safety concerns (drinking water, uncovered radiators, doors without locks), to curriculum related ones (repurposed libraries and "cafe-gymnasium").

And yet here we are, over a year later, and despite the release of the "10-year Master Plan" that evaluates the conditions of schools, there still is no actual roadmap for the future of our schools.

Meanwhile, important decisions regarding renovations, repairs and programs are being made; they're just being made in an uncoordinated and opaque way, and generally without the notification or input of the schools and communities they most affect.

The closing of the Mattahunt School and Dorchester Academy come to mind. The Mattahunt, later reopened under a different name and grade configuration, was a decision made contrary to the wishes of most families and resulted in great upheaval for students. Dorchester Academy was closed after the systematic disenrollment of students, but without timely notification of students, families or teachers that it would be closed.

The school start-time debacle this past winter is another example. A policy was adopted that would change start times for 84% of BPS schools, but with no

evaluation of how individual schools would be affected and with little to no feedback from school communities. Due to protest by parents and educators, the plan was put on hold.

Grade reconfiguration conversations are proceeding in a similar way. Though integral to any discussion about facilities and programs, the policy question has not yet been addressed by School Committee or considered in any deliberate, public way.

Despite this, it was highlighted in several job descriptions recently published in the national Education Week.

The most glaring example, however, is a vote to be taken up this week by the School Committee regarding the development of athletic field land adjacent to the Dever and McCormack schools in Dorchester. The proposal to cede BPS control in favor of a public/private development was made without informing the schools or the local community, who have since expressed disapproval. It was made without clear plans for the McCormack, a middle school deemed ripe for reconfiguration or expansion by Build BPS.

Once again, a decision is being made not as part of a coordinated 10 year-plan, but as a stand-alone decision without meaningful public participation.

What can families entering the BPS expect? Most can expect caring teachers and a solid curriculum, but they should not expect a roadmap for their schools via "Build BPS." Instead, they should plan to keep their ears to the ground and be ready to guard against upheaval in their children's education. Or perhaps BPS and the Mayor's office will live up to the promise of a \$1 billion investment and Build BPS, creating a real, transparent 10-year plan, one created with the authentic participation of school communities, and with the needs of Boston's children and schools at its core.

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