

April 26, 2013

Dear Chairperson O'Neill,

So much has happened in the last month, and tragically in the last week. We write to look back on the March vote on school assignment, and forward to the next stage of our work to gain equitable access to quality schools.

Eliminating the walk zone was an important step toward equitable access to Boston public schools. We appreciate the leadership you took, and your careful attention to different voices, including those of QUEST, on the walk zone and school assignment more generally.

We are happy that the walk zone preference was eliminated, but remain deeply concerned that many aspects of the new school assignment process work against the goal of giving all Boston children true access to quality education. Foremost among these issues are inequitable choice baskets, the definition of quality, a transparent capital plan, and an annual evaluation of the assignment plan.

1. Close to home baskets are not equitable in their current formation. Too many children—particularly low income children, children of color and special needs students—will have little real access to tier 1 and even tier 2 quality schools. All Boston families should have roughly equitable access to quality education in terms of the percent of quality schools and the number of seats available in their baskets. We ask that you develop a mechanism to make the choice baskets equitable for families in Boston's different neighborhoods.
2. The current definition of a quality school (based on MCAS scores and growth) is inadequate. We are encouraged that there will be a Quality Advisory Committee to review this definition and develop a robust measure of quality. However, the group's tasks remain unclear and we are concerned that the limited quality measures available during the assignment review process will restrict their efforts. In addition, we ask that the committee include parents and teachers who are representative of Boston families, schools, and neighborhoods.
3. We continue to support a transparent and open process for developing a capital plan. The new capital plan must take into account the current condition of our facilities and must also examine capacity issues in all of our neighborhoods. Decisions to create and expand schools should be driven by data, not politics, and made on the basis of neighborhood and school need and demand. A well-documented, transparent capital plan to make clear the basis for decisions will help prevent the divisiveness that has emerged over the announced plan to add a school to the North End, while other neighborhoods continue to wait for more seats and better schools. We ask that the BSC work with BPS to develop such a plan.
4. An annual evaluation of the assignment plan is needed. It should include thorough and public data collection, clear measures of access and equity, and a record of quality improvements. In addition to an annual report, an independent body must monitor the implementation of the plan and evaluate its success at achieving improvements in access, equity, and quality. The BSC can take a leadership role in developing subcommittees and review panels to provide independent oversight of the assignment implementation.

Over and over again during the year-long assignment debate, parents and community members rightly pointed out the many broken promises for improving school quality, such as the promised but still absent bilingual school for East Boston, and for more full inclusion schools. We all must learn from this history of broken promises, as well as the hard work of many task forces and working groups who have helped to make strides to improve equitable access to quality schools.

The Home-Based A plan with no walk zone preference you approved last month is just one step in that long, hard road to equity. Without continued work, “*quality schools, close to home*” will not be a reality for many children in our city, most of them poor children and children of color. We ask that you persist in the challenging but most vital work of improving ALL Boston public schools.

If you would like to discuss this in more detail or have any questions please feel free to call Stephanie Bode Ward at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Sincerely,

Members of Quality Education for Every Student (QUEST)

cc: Dr. Carol Johnson  
John McDonough  
Boston School Committee  
Boston City Council