

Neighborhood over quality in school plan?

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On Monday night, cameras flashed, hugs were exchanged, and everyone congratulated the External Advisory Committee on School Choice on its selection of a new student assignment plan for the Boston Public Schools. Based in both family address and school MCAS performance, the assignment model answers the call for “quality schools, close to home.”

Or does it? Driving to my house after the Beacon Hill meeting, through Chinatown, the South End, Roxbury, and finally to Jamaica Plain, I worried about children who have no quality schools close to home.

Children like those in a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African-American to receive a Pulitzer Prize. Brooks begins with a haunting question:

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“What shall I give my children? who are poor,

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Who are adjudged the leastwise of the land?”

What we give our children — mine, yours, and the ones in the poem — is what school assignment is all about. Children are our hearts and our hopes, wrapped in one beautiful but fragile package. A high-quality school sends our children out to a better future, while a poor one imperils them.

The assignment model now before the Boston School Committee could potentially give children more equal access to high quality schools. But in its current form, the “Home-Based A” plan essentially guarantees neighborhood

schools while merely promising quality schools. It rewards more affluent neighborhoods with access to good schools, even as it leaves poorer neighborhoods and communities of color with many low-performing schools, and no certain path to better ones.

Compare, for example, the choices of a family on Moss Hill, one of Jamaica Plain's wealthier areas, to that of a family in Roxbury's Grove Hall. The Moss Hill child gets a bucket teeming with quality schools, including seven in the top two levels, and just one school in the lowest MCAS ranking.

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For the Grove Hall family, two top-tier and four second-tier schools are mandated by the Home-Based A plan. But their bucket also includes seven of the city's worst performing schools. Just 42 percent of a Grove Hall family's choices are quality schools. On Moss Hill, it's 87 percent.

That's inequity, as stark and bleak as City Hall Plaza. And while the home-based plan may not be the blizzard of inequitable access that some other plans would have been, it's still a substantial storm.

Instead of providing mechanisms to plow away that inequity, the External Advisory Committee left with a promise to get to it later. It kept in place the so-called walk-zone priority that favors those with good neighborhood schools. Nor was anything done to assure a more proportional balance of quality schools in address-based choice baskets. In the end the advisory committee also gave up on tools to chip away at socioeconomic inequity, such as reserving seats in quality schools for families who qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Student assignment alone cannot fix the crushing disparities in our city's schools. But we can use it to make things better, or worse. We can accept inequality and segregation as inevitable, or turn education, as the great nineteenth century reformer Horace Mann put it, into "the balance wheel of

the social machinery.”

I hope the Boston School Committee remembers this, as it considers the new plan, along with the advisory committee’s recommendations regarding accountability, quality, and equity. School Committee members should take their time and listen to parents and community groups. They shouldn’t buy into the claim, contradicted by decades of research, that good schools grow organically from neighborhood soil.

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Instead, the School Committee should cultivate the new plan’s potential for equity by eliminating the walk-zone preference that diminishes opportunities for children who live farther from quality schools. It should also insist that the district present a capital plan for long-term quality improvement. Last, the School Committee should pick up the ball dropped by the school choice panel and implement specific assignment interventions for children “adjudged the leastwise” of our city.

Cities, and city schools, become stronger when we stride across boundaries.

Boston arose as a city on a hill, not separate territorial blocks. Cities don’t strengthen community by hunkering down in isolated neighborhoods. Cities, and city schools, become stronger when we stride across boundaries and, in the words of school assignment panel co-chair Hardin Coleman, “have skin” in every part of the diverse Boston we all call home.

Mary Battenfeld, a parent of children in the Boston Public Schools, is a professor at Wheelock College and a member of Quality Education for Every Student.