

State education board urges dramatic action for struggling Boston schools

By [Meghan E. Irons](#) Globe Staff, January 28, 2020, 7:49 p.m.

18



State Education

Commissioner Jeffrey Riley. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2018/GLOBE STAFF

Improving Boston's lowest-performing schools will require dramatic steps, members of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education said Tuesday.

As a state report on the city's sprawling school system looms, the board urged state Education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley to consider state actions to intervene in Boston, even if that might rub some in the city the wrong way.

“The only people I would be willing to see embarrassed in any policy decision are the guardians of the status quo,” board member Michael Moriarty said in response to remarks by Riley.

Another member pressed Riley to ignore the politics surrounding the embattled district, and a third proposed he “infuse a collaborative spirit” into the city’s school system.

Riley’s office had announced in September a comprehensive review of the Boston school system; such a move has led to takeovers in Lawrence, Holyoke, and Southbridge but often results only in specific recommendations for improvement.

The reviews examine leadership, governance, curriculum, instruction, assessment, human resources, professional development, student support, and finances.

Boston’s last review occurred a decade ago, but state officials have stressed the assessment is routine, and about 20 districts are reviewed annually.

The board members’ comments came after Riley announced that he expects to present a draft of his much-anticipated BPS review to school officials in mid-February. Boston officials will have 10 days to read it for factual inconsistencies before sending it back to the commissioner’s office, which will eventually release it to the public, Riley said.

“We’re making no decisions until we see the report,” he said.

“Other states are about to overtake us,” Riley said at Tuesday’s meeting. “I’m not asking that we throw out the baby with the bathwater. On the other hand, I am asking that we think about how we can sharpen the tools at our disposal to make [our schools] better.”

Last year’s MCAS test results showed that while some school districts made improvements, a high proportion of the Commonwealth’s lowest-performing schools remain concentrated in a few districts, with a sizable percentage in Boston. Of the 97 Boston public schools included in the assessment, 34 schools serving more than 17,000 students were among the lowest-performing 10 percent of schools in Massachusetts, according to Riley’s office — and most of those were in the bottom 5 percent.

Riley launched the review of BPS to more “deeply assess district-level systems” contributing to such outcomes and work with local officials to find improvements, his office said. At Tuesday’s meeting, state education board member Matt Hills stressed the independence of the board, pointing out that the panel was established to provide some insulation for the Department of Education “with respect to politics.”

“I’m not expecting you to go out of your way to either placate or embarrass anyone,” Hills told Riley. “Policy has to be recommended, then we’ll worry about the politics of it.”

Board member James Morton also chimed in, telling the commissioner that Boston could follow the example of Springfield, which has a collaborative model that includes representatives from business, the community, the mayor’s office, and philanthropic organizations.

“I hope that what we’re doing with respect to this Boston review is to infuse the same kind of collaborative spirit in that effort with the expectation that what happens with the Boston school district will not lie on the feet of the Boston schools by themselves, but will have the support of everyone else,” Morton said.

Moriarty, a board member from Holyoke, took a shot at Superintendent Brenda Cassellius’s recent five-year vision for the district, in which she stressed bringing equity to all city schools and forming trust with families. She is also seeking a more rigorous curriculum, new resources for schools, and additional teacher training and support.

Moriarty said he has not read the full plan, though he added that he intends to do so “with an open mind and with great care.” He said he read press reports on the plan recently and expressed skepticism about it.

“These documents exist all over the place,” Moriarty said during Tuesday’s meeting in Malden. “And some of them are built to actually stimulate change and others are built to live in drawers. I don’t know if there’s any ‘there there’ yet.”

In a statement, Cassellius defended her vision, saying after more than 100 community meetings her administration has “a call to action to drastically improve outcomes for our children.

“We’re ready to meet that call with a bold strategic vision, an unprecedented financial commitment from Mayor [Marty] Walsh to operationalize that vision, and the collective will of Bostonians who stand ready with us to see this work through with urgency so every student gets what they need to succeed,” she said.
