

Mass. officials release scathing review of Boston school system

By [James Vaznis](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 13, 2020, 12:43 p.m.
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The state audit on Boston Public Schools comes months after Superintendent Brenda Cassellius started her job. She has said she would incorporate state recommendations into her own plans for the school system. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

The Boston school system has failed to address several longstanding problems, including lackluster classroom instruction in some schools and deficient programs for students with disabilities and language barriers, according to a scathing state review released Friday that recommends a wide-ranging overhaul of the schools.

“Many low-performing schools in the district have not improved,” the review found. “The district does not have a clear, coherent, district-wide strategy for supporting low-performing schools and has limited capacity to support all schools designated by [the state] as requiring assistance or intervention.”

Approximately one-third of the district’s students —16,656 — attend schools ranked in the bottom 10 percent of the state, the review noted. Onetime school turnaround successes, like the Blackstone and Orchard Gardens, have slid

back into low performance. And more than a third of the principals leading turnaround efforts are inexperienced.

The recommendations, however, did not come anywhere close to the kinds of action some advocates had been pushing for and others had feared: a state takeover of the entire system or a portion of it. Instead, the recommendations stressed working in partnership with the district. The state will take the lead on implementing some measures, while the district will handle others under careful state monitoring, under an agreement between the city and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

The review seemingly left no stone unturned. It faulted the district for promoting segregation by funneling students with disabilities and language barriers to specific schools; for neglecting the conditions of its buildings; for operating a largely inefficient busing system; and for inequitably funding schools, forcing many students to be denied programs, courses, and other opportunities available in other city schools.

Some of the most troubling findings focused on the unequal education students receive, causing many Black and Latino students as well as those with disabilities and language barriers to trail behind. The review blamed a revolving door of district leadership, noting that in recent years district officials have lacked a “districtwide strategy to strengthen rigor” and knowledge about what is being taught in all the schools.

Consequently, state review team members rated the classroom instruction they observed as often “in the middle range,” meaning the kinds of approaches required to boost student learning were limited or inconsistent, and found a lack of consistency in high school graduation standards.

Boston schools Superintendent Brenda Cassellius, a former longtime Minnesota education commissioner who started her Boston job in July, said she found a lot of value in the state review and said the resulting state partnership will be helpful as she finalizes her district-improvement plan. Cassellius said overhauling the district’s lowest performing schools is her top priority.

“As a new superintendent coming in, [the review] provides another lens into our schools, classrooms, and district operations,” she said, noting the findings confirmed what she has been hearing and observing. “There is a great opportunity for technical assistance.”

Specifically, the state will take the lead on developing outside partnerships — a move that will likely raise concerns among parents and teachers about private entities gaining greater influence in the school system. The state will also help the school system diversify its teaching force to better reflect the backgrounds of the system's 54,000 students, renovate dilapidated bathrooms in most schools, and develop a concerted effort in specific parts of the city to bolster teacher training.

"Students benefit when the state enables collaborative solutions that fit the local context," Jeffrey Riley, the state's education commissioner, said in a statement.

The Boston school system, for its part, will need to improve schools ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state, adopt the state's recommended college preparatory courses known as MassCore that align with admissions standards to state universities, improve the reliability of its school buses, and reduce the disproportionately high placement of students of color with disabilities in substantially separate classrooms — a practice the state has criticized for more than a decade.

Beyond those immediate actions, the state and the school system are formulating plans to tackle two other big challenges: the persistently low academic performance of students learning the English language and the wide variety of governing structures among the public schools — pilots, in-district charters, and others — each with some level of independence over curriculum, budgeting, and staffing.

School Committee Chairman Michael Loconto said the partnership will be helpful in closing achievement gaps and "build on success at all our schools."

But Jessica Tang, president of the Boston Teachers Union, expressed hesitation about state involvement, blaming the state for underfunding programs for students with disabilities and those learning English.

"The state has no grounds to say it should run the Boston schools that it has starved for so long," she said in a statement. "While the memorandum does not constitute a state takeover, it appears to leave the door open in ways that could be dangerous for students and our communities, given the failed track record of top-down district takeovers."

She also said it was "troubling that the state would release [the review] at a time when the community is grappling with an unprecedented state of

emergency” because of the coronavirus that has educators, parents, and students on edge.

City Councilor Andrea Campbell also questioned the timing of releasing the review.

"While we are all laser-focused on ensuring that Boston stays safe amid this outbreak of Covid-19, this report deserves close examination and discussion at a more appropriate time."

The state began its review of the Boston school system in the fall and immediately sparked debate about receivership. Fueling some speculation was recent action in Rhode Island, which took over Providence schools, while other state reviews in Massachusetts led to receivership in Lawrence, Holyoke, and Southbridge.

The district’s educational record worsened in February when the state released four-year graduation rates for the Class of 2019, which dropped for the first time in more than a decade to 73.2 percent. The diploma-earning gap between Black and white students more than doubled, and Latino students continued to trail both groups.

But state reviews have rarely led to takeovers, and the Massachusetts accountability system, which rates every district each fall, most recently noted in September that Boston as a whole was making substantial progress toward meeting state improvement targets on such measures as MCAS scores. It did, however, call for improvement in nearly three dozen schools with low test scores.

City Councilor Annissa Essaibi George, who chairs the panel’s Education Committee, said she was pleased the state did not pursue receivership.

City Councilor Michelle Wu said the review nevertheless reinforces the urgency for broad-scale improvement.

“We are past the point of small fixes, or piloting programs here or there," she said. "We need to take this moment to really develop the implementation plans that will get the ideas and policy goals to actually match the experience of students and families in our schools.”

Keri Rodrigues, head of Massachusetts Parents United, called the partnership agreement a step in the right direction yet “shockingly vague.”

“Why should parents believe BPS will be able to do these things when it has never been able to do them before?” she said in a statement. “Why should we trust BPS to have the ability to implement transformational change on its own if the district’s track record indicates it is not capable of it?”

It remains unclear whether state intervention will move the needle. The last review conducted by the state in 2009 faulted both local and state officials for failing to carry through past state-developed interventions.

Janelle Dempsey, an attorney at Lawyers for Civil Rights, said she was not hopeful that the new state partnership would lead to significant improvement, calling the agreement “weak and flawed.”

“There are no provisions for ongoing monitoring, and many of the action steps are sweeping generalizations without meaningful guidance or targets,” Dempsey said in a statement, adding it “does not go far or deep enough to provide real support for all students, particularly the most vulnerable.”

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