

Dozens of students were not admitted to Boston exam schools because of an error

62 students, largely from nondistrict schools, have been mistakenly denied entry to the city's exam schools over the last two school years.

By [Naomi Martin](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 31, 2020, 6:16 p.m.

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Superintendent Dr. Brenda Cassellius listens as Mayor Marty Walsh speaks at the Salvation Army and TD Garden's Back to School Celebration on Aug. 18. Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

Sixty-two students, many of them children of color who came from private, charter or parochial schools, were wrongly denied entry to Boston's coveted exam schools in the past two years because of an error by Boston Public Schools, officials announced Monday.

The error cascaded, leading to 67 other students getting into schools they didn't qualify for, and another 90 being invited to a school that was not their top choice, BPS officials said.

Those accidentally denied entry — 25 students last year, and 37 this year — were notified Monday and invited to the schools they earned a seat in for this fall, said Superintendent Brenda

Cassellius. Those wrongly admitted won't be notified of the error or have their invitations rescinded, she said, as the district wants to "do no harm."

"My biggest thing is to make it right for students and families and to bring sunshine on this and correct it," Cassellius said.

The error occurred because BPS staffers incorrectly converted results from two grading systems as part of the process to determine who can get into the exam schools, which are considered the most sought-after and rigorous in the school system.

The district learned of the error after being contacted by an affected student's tutor on July 29. After officials started looking into the issue, they realized that the district's adoption of a new student database in December 2018 led to one office no longer properly converting between grading systems. The district's grading system largely uses scores of 1 to 4, while a handful of district schools and all charter, private, and Catholic schools use grading systems of A to F.

"It was just one team was not talking to the other team," Cassellius said, adding she would consider disciplinary action for the staffers involved in the mistake.

Cassellius said the district, once aware of one student being affected, decided to comb through the other students' applications to the city's three exam schools — Boston Latin Academy, Boston Latin School, and the John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics & Science — to determine whether others were affected by the same mistake.

"It gives me great hope in the district and it gives me great hope in the superintendent that we've identified this error that the district's made and we're moving quickly to fix it," said Boston Councilor At-Large Annissa Essaibi George.

The error was caught before assignments were sent out for this year's incoming seventh-graders, Cassellius said, though the families would learn of their new admittance on Monday — three weeks before the first day of school. Additionally, families of students affected by the mistake can defer admission for a year due to concerns about coronavirus and choose to enroll their child for ninth grade, she said.

The district invites more than 1,300 students each year to enroll in an exam school based on a combination of their scores on an entrance exam and their grade-point average.

Because of the grading conversion mistake last year, 25 students were not invited to an exam school who should have been, and spent the 2019-20 school year at a different school. Four of those students were from district schools and 21 were from nondistrict schools; of those, 10 were white, eight were Latino, five were Black, and two were Asian.

Also that year, 56 of the 58 students who were wrongfully invited to their lower-choice exam school were from out-of-district schools. Of those students, 23 were white, 18 were Black, 11 were Latino, and five were Asian.

There were 30 students in 2019 and 37 this year who were invited to schools they should not have been, Cassellius said.

The admissions process at the city's exam schools has long been controversial. Racial justice advocates [have pushed](#) for decades for more equitable access to the schools, especially Boston Latin School. In a district that's more than 70 percent Black and Latino, Black and Latino students make up 8 and 14 percent of Boston Latin's students, respectively. Latin Academy and the O'Bryant have much larger percentages of students of color.

The district's Opportunity and Achievement Gaps Task Force voted in June to recommend suspending the admissions exams this year due to the coronavirus pandemic, which has disproportionately affected Black and Latino communities. But the district moved forward with a three-year contract with a new test provider, NWEA, which Cassellius said would be fair, untimed, and aligned with the district's curriculum. The district has formed a working group charged with making recommendations regarding the exams admissions criteria for students starting in September 2021.

Advocates for changing the admissions criteria noted that the error disproportionately affected children of color.

"This is just another example of how Boston needs to reevaluate what equity looks like," said the Rev. Willie Bodrick, a task force member and chairman of the Boston Network for Black Student Achievement. "If the system had been listening to advocates — and we've been advocating for years now — and looked at our processes and our procedures, we may not be in this situation today."

Iván Espinoza-Madrigal, executive director of Lawyers for Civil Rights, said the district's decision to allow students who were mistakenly admitted to remain at their schools indicated that the students were apparently not struggling academically or affecting the overall quality of the schools.

"This strongly suggests that the BPS admissions process is arbitrary and disconnected from student success," Espinoza-Madrigal said, calling for an end to the entrance exam and an independent audit.

George, the city councilor, said she believed the exam should remain part of admissions. The council plans to hold a hearing on the topic soon to address concerns about fairness in light of the pandemic.

"This error demonstrates that the test is actually a really important component of making sure our young people across the city have access to the exam schools," said George, who graduated from what is now the O'Bryant School.