



PIONEER INSTITUTE

185 Devonshire St, Suite 1101, Boston, MA 02110

November 22, 2021

The Honorable Michelle Wu
Mayor of Boston
1 City Hall Square, Suite 550
Boston, MA 02201-2043

Dear Mayor Wu:

Congratulations on your inauguration as the mayor of our great city. For 40 years, the city has been on an exciting trajectory of economic and cultural growth. Your leadership comes as something of a capstone — a change of the guard to a younger generation interested in more creative solutions than was the case in the past.

We welcome that change. Some of Boston's challenges, as you know well, have seemed intractable in large part because of inertia and interests that want to maintain the status quo.

Pioneer Institute hopes to be a constructive partner in generating ideas—especially in education, healthcare, and transportation, where we bring strong data analysis and policy experience.

Above all else, the Institute has a keen interest in and desire to experiment and to try new approaches. As a concrete example, we believe the idea of making certain MBTA bus lines free of charge is sensible because the alternative — implementing an automated fare system with two points of entry and exit — is unworkable.

No issue is more challenging — and none more important — than fixing the Boston Public Schools (BPS). As a parent with children in one of the city's schools, and as someone who cares about the societal need to ensure fair access to the tools of upward mobility, you surely feel similarly.

It is, sadly, undeniable that the BPS are in crisis. Perhaps you agree on that point or you have a different view, but I would submit that your own experience with the schools may also be a function of your position of power in the city, first as a city councilor and now as the mayor. Your unique position and relationship to school officials is different from that of parents who do not hold political office.

Three brief points provide important context for the assertion that the city's schools are in disarray:

1. A [comprehensive 2020 state audit](#) released early into the pandemic found that graduation rates are down, the achievement gap between Black and White students has increased significantly, and the performance of Latinos trails even further behind. To make matters worse, the review found that the district was promoting segregation by funneling students with disabilities and language barriers into specific schools.
2. More than 30 percent of the system's students attend schools ranked in the bottom 10 percent statewide. The audit found no clear, consistent strategy for improving these schools.

3. Those who opposed the 2016 charter school ballot initiative as harming the traditional district schools sadly have no improvement to show in the BPS's educational outcomes since that time. Nor has the system improved since the 2020 state audit was published. Learning loss from the pandemic is impacting an entire generation of students, especially those most at-risk; and the city's response to help students make up for pandemic-related learning loss is insufficient.

You will hear over and over again that the system needs more money. But simply pouring money into the system is not the answer. Boston currently spends \$24,500 per student annually—thousands more than most districts in the state and among the highest per-pupil expenditures in the nation. Adding even \$100 million to the budget, boosting per-pupil spending to \$26,500 per student, would principally go to salaries in a system where the average teacher earns more than \$100,000 annually, in addition to exceedingly generous health, dental and pension benefits.

There are, however, several immediate ways in which you can advance real change in the BPS. And, yes, money can help, especially if it is invested with a focus on student achievement and personal growth.

1. Accelerating [recent improvements at Madison Park Technical Vocational High School](#)—the system's only vocational-technical school, which also serves a largely minority student body—can yield immediate, tangible benefits. Well-educated vocational-technical school graduates mean jobs. They possess both the knowledge to continue on to higher education and the skills employers desperately need, and they are not burdened by massive student debt. After years of stagnation—or worse—enrollment and the graduation rates are up and dropouts are down at Madison Park. We would urge consideration of the findings of the 2012 Blue Ribbon Commission report on Madison Park, especially to make it independent of BPS control, and more innovative schedules, practices and policies described in the Commission report and numerous Pioneer studies. We would be pleased to work with your administration on this agenda item.¹
2. Superintendent Brenda Cassellius can and should advance school-based improvements. For example, following the approach taken by the Lawrence Public Schools, Boston could review the wisdom of centralizing so many resources, including well over 600 positions, in the BPS district office. Rationalizing the operations and changing the culture of the district office could free up tens of millions of dollars, redirecting them from bureaucratic busyness to classrooms across the city. A secondary benefit of such an approach is the facilitation of greater innovation in our Boston Public Schools. Innovation is never mandated from a centralized command-and-control district office. Innovation in education or in any sector of the economy empowers leaders—in this

¹ [Among the findings of a 2012 Commission report on Madison Park](#) was to make the school independent of BPS control, like the commonwealth's 28 regional vocational-technical schools, which function independently from the districts they serve and are among the Bay State's greatest occupational and academic success stories. Their MCAS performance is up dramatically and the dropout rate is less than half the state average. Students' post-graduation job placements with related businesses are impressive. These outcomes are accomplished with a student body that includes a percentage of special needs students that is far higher than the state average.

Vocational-technical school reforms can be achieved by in-district schools as well. At Worcester's high-performing technical high school, teachers have successfully altered schedules, practices, and policies to accommodate and implement the vocational and academic standards required to create a strong program. One of those changes should be to adopt the regional voc-techs' model of alternating weeks of vocational and academic education. [Madison Park's current insistence on daily academics prevents the implementation of most vocational training.](#)

case principals and other school leaders. The Institute will be publishing research on this question in the coming months and would be pleased to share the results with your office. We believe a full and transparent audit of the BPS central office is long overdue.

3. As part of the effort to decentralize innovation, we believe a study should be undertaken as to how the city's pilot schools and Horace Mann charter schools can gain more flexibility to manage themselves. Of course, accountability is important, but we would urge your administration to seek ways to focus on accountability of results, academic and otherwise, over direct control of "inputs" in these schools, which were founded to experiment and inform the broader BPS system.
4. With the hundreds of millions of dollars provided by the federal government, one opportunity with immediate impact is to establish acceleration weeks for students and other special "catch-up" programs during the year and over the summer for students who have been adversely impacted by learning loss due to COVID-19.
5. We all want students to learn and achieve at a level that will open doors for them, whether they are academic, career-technical or directly work related. Testing is an important piece of the state and the city's accountability system, and the MCAS has long been demonstrated to correlate well with success in college and work. It is, however, still an unknown as to whether the city's schools have aligned their curricula consistently with the state standards, which define the content of the MCAS. That is unfair to students, and we should do our all to make sure that students are tested on materials that have been presented and discussed with them. We believe an audit to ensure high levels of consistency with the state standards is a demonstration of your commitment to fairness and quality.
6. But the superintendent cannot force much-needed changes any more than her predecessors could. Given the difficulty that the district has had over recent years, and the benefits resulting from the intensive state intervention in Lawrence, we believe that the city and state should proactively partner to develop an intervention focused on those schools most in need of improvement. Specifically, we urge your administration to demonstrate a particular focus on the schools that rank in the bottom 10 percent statewide and the 30 percent of BPS students who attend them. Clearly, an emphasis on basic learning in math, English, science and civics is desirable, but as the work in Lawrence has demonstrated, access to academic enrichment programs is important. The results in Lawrence, where there has been a significant improvement in student achievement and where graduation rates have risen 50 percent, are inspiring.

In the late 1990s, Mayor Thomas M. Menino took the podium at the Jeremiah E. Burke High School and called for the constituents gathered that day and constituents around the city to "judge [him] harshly" if there was not significant improvement in the BPS. That was almost 25 years ago. While there are pockets of excellence in the district, no rational person can say that the system is working well — nor even much better than back when Mr. Menino laid down his challenge.

For evidence of that fact, one need only take a look at a 2004 district review by the state's Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA). The recommendations of the 2020 state audit are distressingly similar to those in EQA's 2004 district review.

Boston children can't afford another review 17 years from now that again finds the same set of systemic problems, and more promises from a quarter century ago.

The usual playbook simply does not contain the answers needed to make lasting and significant improvements to the Boston Public Schools. Transforming the BPS into a 21st-century school system worthy of the name "Cradle of Democracy" will require creative and courageous leadership. But if successful, it would be a contribution that would be revered by families and schoolchildren for generations to come.

We wish you courage and success in this effort, and stand ready to work with or in support of your administration.

Respectfully,



Jim Stergios
Executive Director,
Pioneer Institute