



Shannon Hodge  
Graduate School of Education  
Harvard University (doctorate program)

Shannon Hodge wrote a case study for the Strategic Planning Team of the Boston Public Schools analyzing the district's current efforts to engage the public in policy decision-making related to student assignment. Ms. Hodge attended a community forum; researched the history and present of student assignment in Boston; and interviewed key players in the review process -- including the superintendent, a representative from the mayor's office, school department personnel, education advocates, and community task force members. The interviews provided a variety of views on a number of challenges related to engaging the public, especially negotiating public mistrust of the school system, the intricacies of education and transportation policy, and the difficulty of the work of connecting the public to the decision-making process. By documenting this experience, she provided a resource for future-public engagement efforts by the Boston Public Schools.

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## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Valerie Edwards & Carleton Jones, Strategic Planning Team, Boston Public Schools  
**From:** Shannon T. Hodge, Rappaport Public Policy Fellow  
**Subject:** Public Engagement in Education Policy  
**Date:** September 7, 2004  
**Cc:** Thomas Payzant, Superintendent, Boston Public Schools

### Summary

In early 2004, the Boston Public Schools embarked upon an amazing endeavor to revitalize public trust in the school system and obtain input concerning a crucial issue: student assignment. To begin to overcome decades of animosity and mistrust, the school department utilized a process of public engagement to inform and lead decision-making in this controversial area. In turning to a different approach to policy making and immersing itself in the city's neighborhoods, the school department learned valuable lessons concerning the complications and benefits of student assignment.

To continue to build upon the successes of the 2004 public engagement process, the school department should implement the following recommendations:

- 1. Prepare and educate the decision-makers.** Although resources, especially time, are limited, the efforts of any community task force must be grounded in a thorough understanding of the issues being addressed. Without an historical, technical, and theoretical understanding of the decisions it is being asked to make, a community task force may be misguided in its work.
- 2. Involve and inform the public.** The integrity of public engagement lies in the ability of the citizenry to participate in informed discussions, negotiating decisions based on a thorough

understanding of the issues being addressed. Without truly preparing the public in engage in a policy dialogue, the process is compromised.

3. **Publicize and praise the efforts of the task force and of the public.** The work of public engagement is not a glamorous task, and citizen decision-makers may find themselves the object of unwanted attention and scrutiny. Thus, the school department should be proactive in highlight successes and community involvement instead of relying upon external entities, such as the media, to provide public a glimpse into the process.

Over the course of a few months, the Boston Public Schools made significant strides in its relationship with the public and should continue to engage the public in policy decision-making, bolstered by the successes of this effort and informed by it missteps.

## Discussion

### Student Assignment in Boston

Few educational issues have resulted in the turmoil and chaos that erupted following the 1974 court-ordered desegregation of Boston Public Schools (BPS). The city's residents engaged in a passionate battle while the nation watched, held captive by the powerful images and violent news that poured from Boston. Racial, ethnic, and class distinctions that existed prior to 1974 were magnified and exposed after Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr.'s ruling, serving to further separate a city defined and divided by its neighborhoods. Under the watchful eye of Judge Garrity, the school system implemented a variety of desegregation plans beginning with the 1974-75 academic year, including the extensive busing of over 17,000 students and a controversial pairing of two high schools, one predominately white and the other predominantly black. While other community and curriculum supports were included in the plans, the very visible busing and pairing received the most attention and incited the most emotion.

While the chaos of the 1970s eventually waned, the complicated desegregation plans continued for the next 15 years, sustained by the oversight of Judge Garrity and, later, the state Department of Education. Over the same time period, the school system experienced a large decline in enrollment, a likely result of both a decrease in school-age population and parental discontent with the controversial desegregation techniques.

In 1989, the school committee voluntarily implemented a less intrusive controlled choice student assignment plan that enabled families to identify their preferred schools and also allowed the school department to control racial balance. Other elements of the controlled choice plan included sibling and walk zone preferences and Parent Information Centers. This plan was met with the vitriol of black school committee members and families, for whom the move to parental choice and the addition of neighborhood preference signaled a possible return to segregated and unequal schools.

The choice-based student assignment system implemented in 1989 remains in place today, with the most significant modifications being the removal of race and the reduction of walk zone preferences in 1999. Prior to these changes, up to 100 percent of the seats in some schools could be reserved for students living within their indicated "walk" zones, usually determined by a one-mile radius. In 1999, this geographic proximity preference was reduced to 50 percent. The removal of race from student assignment followed a legal challenge from white students not admitted to their neighborhood schools and was also influenced by the recognition that the city's demographics had changed significantly from the early days of controlled choice; between 1990 and 2000, the city's white population de-

creased by over 47,000, changing the percentage of white residents from 59 percent in 1990 to 49 percent in 2000. As of October 2003, white students made up less than 15 percent of students in Boston's public schools, compared to approximately 61 percent at the time of Judge Garrity's order.

Substantial transportation costs in the face of budget cuts, a simmering controversy over neighborhood schools, and rising parental discontent over the unwieldy and often incomprehensible process of student assignment revealed that problems in student assignment had not been completely resolved with the 1999 changes to controlled choice. Dedicated to providing families with more of the choices they wanted and aware of the need to review the current controlled choice system, BPS leaders issued a charge to the school department to revisit student assignment in late 2001.

At this time, school department officials, community leaders, and city representatives all noted the enormity of the task facing the school department. Lingering public mistrust of and animosity toward BPS combined with vivid memories of the turmoil of the 1970s would undoubtedly complicate any present attention to the issue of student assignment. Historically, parents in Boston have expressed their dissatisfaction with the public school system by turning to other options, including moving out of the city; placing their students in private, parochial, or charter schools; or participating in voluntary inter-district transfer programs. Entering the public debate over neighborhood schools and choice with the intention of renewing discussion of the controversial student assignment issue would have a significant impact on the entire city; negotiating this review process would require a tremendous amount of patience, preparation, and political savvy.

### **Public Engagement in Public Policy: Recommendations**

What made this review of student assignment vary significantly from previous system efforts was that it was heavily informed by – and even more noticeably, largely led by – the public. The superintendent and chief operating officer were aware of the public battles they faced over this issue. Therefore, instead of using department officials to research, develop, and implement a policy, they turned to members of the public to lead this review of student assignment. A community task force, composed of relative unknowns, ventured out into Boston's communities to listen to parents and families, studied hundreds of pages of data related to public schooling, and struggled to make difficult decisions that would impact more than 60,000 children. The work of this task force was noticeable and commendable not only because of its efforts specifically concerning student assignment but also for its work in renewing public trust and interest in BPS. The school department must make use of the lessons it has learned from the efforts of the community task force by continuing its successes and addressing its failures, thereby enabling the system to continue to engage the public in decision-making.

### **Recommendation #1: Prepare and Educate the Decision-Makers**

When school department officials initially began researching student assignment in 2001, it became apparent that most internal staff did not understand the process of student assignment. Thus, months were spent educating and informing key personnel about the issue, from algorithms to parental choice to geocodes to walk zones. Unfortunately, time constraints made that same level of preparation unavailable to the community task force members, who were thrown onto the front line and asked to make decisions about education and transportation policy without the benefit of thorough preparation.

Since most of the task force members were not educators, such issues were foreign, and the task force struggled mightily to understand their responsibilities. Valuable months passed before the BPS

Strategic Planning Team was able to use an activity to show the task force that the issue of student assignment involved much more than simply moving lines on a map. Instead of waiting for the task force to discover that it was confused, the school department should have been proactive in educating and preparing members to tackle such difficult subjects.

Before any public group becomes immersed in such a controversial and historical issue, its members should be well-prepared and well-informed. An orientation should be held for task force members, addressing such issues as:

- specific goals and responsibilities of the group;
- how the issue is understood within the school department;
- potential obstacles and challenges;
- overcoming individual issues of mistrust;
- working with – and sometimes against – the media; and
- handling public scrutiny and personal criticisms.

While an orientation certainly cannot solve all the problems a group might face, it is the least that can be done to truly prepare and educate the ordinary citizens given extraordinary responsibilities.

### **Recommendation #2: Involve and Inform the Public**

The community forums held all over Boston utilized an innovative format and structure that encouraged city residents to voice their opinions, concerns, and suggestions related to student assignment. Instead of implementing a town-meeting structure that could have been easily commandeered by overly vocal residents, all forums included small groups led by trained facilitators who focused discussions and ensured that all voices were heard.

While this type of structure should be continued, more time should be allotted to preparing the public to have *informed* discussions about the decisions being made. Over 70 pages of data and prospective models were presented in the community forums with virtually no time allowed for residents to absorb information before being asked to comment. One process observer noted that without an informed public, there is no true public engagement. Thus, much like the necessary preparation of the task force, informing the public is an integral part of this process.

### **Recommendation #3: Publicize and Praise the Efforts of the Task Force and of the Public**

Negative media attention and the secrecy of the final task force meetings overshadowed what had been a monumental effort. Instead of focusing on how the community group actually listened to parents and families or how the various proposed models might affect their neighborhoods, many city residents became obsessed with what the newspapers were reporting. The public wanted to know why the task force suddenly closed its meetings, why its decisions were taking so long, and how the school committee would respond, succumbing to suspicions that the task force was just a front and that the real decisions about student assignment would be made by politicians negotiating behind the scenes.

The school department must recognize the role of public relations in public engagement, publicizing and praising the efforts of not only the citizen decision-makers placed on the front lines but also the public, which set aside decades of animosity and mistrust to reach out and engage with the system. The task force received comments and input from well over 1,000 city residents, but the school department did little to publicize this information and praise these successes publicly.

## **Benefits of Public Engagement**

Urban public schools are beset by numerous problems and face tremendous scrutiny and attention, with each day bringing a new concern and a new priority. BPS staff had been researching student assignment and developing models for nearly three years before the task force was appointed. Several times over the course of those years, it seemed that the review would be tabled and that student assignment would take a backseat to other, more pressing issues. As school personnel shifted priorities to respond to federal, state, and local demands, student assignment could have easily been set on a back burner and left without any resolution or serious deliberation, or the lengthy process of public engagement could have been avoided altogether. However, several people including the chief operating officer and strategic planning team were champions for this issue generally and this process specifically, pushing and encouraging the department to continue discussing and researching student assignment and lauding the benefits of public engagement. They made sure that student assignment and public engagement maintained high levels of visibility within BPS even when they could have easily been overshadowed by other issues. Without such champions, a focus on the costs of public engagement could easily outweigh an understanding of its numerous benefits.

Task force members, school department officials, city leaders, and community advocates all recognize the importance of engaging the public in educational policy planning and decision-making as a result of this BPS process, noting that regardless of the outcome, the public is more likely to take ownership of an issue if it is substantially involved in the planning and development of decisions. The school department has made significant progress by developing and implementing a sustainable process of public engagement that can be applied for other issues, while navigating uncharted, and sometimes turbulent, waters. These are significant steps forward for a city often consumed by its history.