

A Vision for Boston: Questions for the 2009 Mayoral Candidates

DAY 12: STUDENT TRANSPORTATION

How would you change the school assignment and student transportation options for the city with the objective of satisfying parental demands and achieving savings?

Transportation services are provided to over 45,000 students attending public, private/parochial and charter public schools in Boston and to special needs students in private placements. The Boston Public Schools (BPS) expects to spend \$78 million this year on student transportation. This represents an increase of \$19 million over the last 5 years (FY04-FY09), at the same time student enrollment has dropped by 3,844.

Spending for regular transportation, including that for charter schools, accounts for 49% of the total transportation budget. Transportation for private and parochial school students makes up 4% of the total. The remaining 47% is devoted to transporting special needs students inside and outside the district. Most middle and high school students do not ride the yellow buses but are given MBTA passes.

K-8 student assignment is limited primarily by zone. There are currently three student assignment zones in the city. Students can apply to any school in their zone or any school in their "walk zone". All high schools and some other schools are considered citywide and any student can apply.

When applying for schools, parents select their top five choices and assignments are made by a lottery that considers priorities with effort made to assign students to their top choice schools. Depending on grade level, students receive walk zone priority for schools located one to two miles from their home. After sibling preference is accounted for, fifty percent of a school's remaining seats are reserved for students within its walk zone. Transportation services are provided to students attending schools outside their walk zone, those students within the walk zone who cross major thoroughfares, and to special needs students.

An assessment of the student assignment system was undertaken in 2004. No significant changes in the plan were made, but the lottery system was revised to make it easier for parents to rank their preferences. In 2008, the student assignment plan was reviewed again, with limited effect, in an effort to reduce transportation costs. This year a plan was proposed to increase the number of school zones to five, but it has since been withdrawn for further review.

Efforts to devise a new student assignment system to reduce transportation costs have to date been caught in the quandary that, to achieve savings, the school choices now available to students and their parents would have to be reduced. In addition, the location of schools by grade level and especially of underperforming schools has made redrawing the lines of student assignment zones difficult.

How would you change the student assignment plan to achieve savings in the BPS transportation budget? To what extent are you willing to reduce choice in student assignments to achieve transportation savings? Would the building of any new schools in selected parts of the City be included in your plan?

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