

A Vision for Boston: Questions for the 2009 Mayoral Candidates

DAY 4: SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Student truancy and dropout rates remain a significant problem in Boston. Considering the financial constraints the City will face over the next few years, what would you propose to ensure that all students attend school regularly, and graduate from high school? How would you fund these programs?

Regular school attendance and high school graduation are vital building blocks of self-sufficiency in adulthood. In 2007-2008, the BPS's annual dropout rate was 7.6%, down from a ten-year high of 9.9% in 2005-2006. Still, despite the improvement, it means that 1,396 students dropped out of Boston's public schools in 2007-2008.

Dropout rates are higher for certain subgroups. For the 2007-2008 school year, male students dropped out at a rate of 8.2% while female students dropped out at a rate of 6.9%. Hispanic students dropped out at a rate of 10.2%.

A related measure -- graduation rate -- tells a similar story. Boston's 2008 4-year graduation rate was 59.9%. Though that figure represents a slight uptick from 2007, a Parthenon Group report BPS commissioned that same year noted Boston's graduation rate has remained relatively flat rate since 2001, consistently hovering around 60%. Certain sub-groups had significantly lower 4-year graduation rates -- male (52.7%), Limited English Proficiency (45%), special education (36.9%), and Hispanic (50.4%) students all lagged the district average by significant numbers. Additionally, of those students entering 9th grade in 2003, 25.7% dropped out by 2007.

Several strategies have been put into place to address the dropout problem. These include:

Newcomers Academy, which targets late-entrant English Language Learners, began in the spring of 2009 and will be expanding this fall under the Pathways to Excellence plan.

Transition/Truancy, or Re-engagement, Centers is a new initiative to centralize the process to reach out to truant students early in their academic careers, as well as dropouts, to get them re-enrolled, review their school options, hear about their concerns and personal situations, and choose the right school/program for them.

The Credit Recovery Program targets students only a few credits shy of graduating.

Advanced Placement programs target students seeking greater challenge at school.

Additional proposals under consideration include a pilot program already underway in Waterbury, CT, that requires the parents of consistently truant students to answer summons to appear before a probate court judge.

The economic consequences of dropping out are dire. As a series of recent studies for the Boston Private Industry Council noted, between the ages of 16 and 19 high school graduates are three times more likely to be employed than their peers who dropped out of school. Over the course of their lives, high school graduates in Massachusetts will on average earn \$456,000 more than those who drop out. Students who go on to earn Bachelor's degrees will on average earn \$1.5 million more. Dropouts are also more likely to require state social services than graduates and generate less tax revenue.

Do you believe current strategies are adequate to address Boston's dropout rate? If so, what results should citizens expect? If not, what are the elements of your comprehensive strategy to address truancy and dropout rates? How would you fund your program?

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