

State Pilot School Option for English High

Local option an alternative to greater state control

Boston's English High School and three other underperforming schools in the state may convert into special Commonwealth Pilot Schools rather than be designated as chronically underperforming. The State Board of Education (BOE) postponed a vote to designate the four schools as chronically underperforming at its November meeting, instead allowing them the option to adopt a Pilot School model. This model promotes autonomy while incorporating some of the strict accountability elements required as part of the chronically underperforming designation. To move forward, a school's conversion must be approved by the superintendent and the teacher's union head as well as two-thirds of the school's faculty.

If English High School becomes a Commonwealth Pilot School, it will face a more sweeping process than traditional Boston Pilot Schools. English High School's governing body would not be bound by School Committee mandates or teacher contract rules and would have full autonomy over budget, staffing, curriculum/assessment, governance and schedules. The school would also be required to downsize from the current 1,250 students to under 450 students.

If the English High School staff votes against becoming a Pilot School, the BOE would likely designate it as a chronically underperforming school at its January Board meeting. The Board can designate an underperforming school as chronically underperforming if it has failed to demonstrate

adequate improvement within two years. English High School has been designated as underperforming since 2002. Once a school is designated as chronically underperforming, it is subject to state oversight and the superintendent has the authority to remove the school's principal. The superintendent and principal have greater flexibility in staffing, including the ability to dismiss teachers or other employees without regard to contract seniority provisions.

So far, two schools in Fall River and one in Holyoke have been designated as chronically underperforming. However, the state did not restructure any of these schools to the full extent allowed under the law. The BOE has been reticent to exercise full control of chronically underperforming schools, preferring instead to provide support while the local community takes the lead. This position, along with uncertainty about how the court would rule if more stringent BOE action were challenged as conflicting with teacher contract provisions, may explain why the BOE created the Pilot School alternative.

The Boston School System (BPS) believes it needs to move beyond the BOE's position by seeking control over more underperforming schools in its negotiations with the Boston Teachers Union. The BPS wants the Superintendent to have more authority over staffing, curriculum and scheduling in ten turn-around schools.