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BTU Contract Negotiations Update

Issue of Class Size Demands Explanation

While negotiating changes in health insurance and salary increases are the two big issues that still must be decided before the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) contract will be settled, progress has been made in a few important areas such as new teacher development and the creation of additional pilot schools. Discussions continue on other initiatives such as greater authority by the Superintendent over 10 chronically underperforming schools and an improved performance evaluation mechanism for teachers.

Class size has emerged as the most publicly contentious issue with the BTU claiming that the School Committee has proposed “increasing class size by two students across all levels” to its members and the media. Upon review, in a very technical sense, the BTU’s statement is correct but its public message that the classroom increase would be widely expanded is highly exaggerated. The Committee had proposed to apply an existing contract provision to a wider base of schools at all levels but its application would affect only a limited number of classes.

The School Committee’s position is that the current class size maximum at each grade level should be maintained. The Boston Public Schools has invested nearly \$100M to reduce class size that now ranges from 22 students in grades K-2 up to 31 in grades 9-12. Currently, in those elementary schools which contain one classroom per grade, the existing contract allows one or two students over the classroom maximum. The teacher receives \$1,500 for

one student over the maximum and \$3,000 for two students. In secondary schools where only one class of a regular education course is offered, the same rule applies and the teacher receives \$300 per class for one student over the maximum and \$600 per class for two students. This additional compensation is pension eligible. Last year, fewer than 30 classrooms system-wide triggered these provisions. The issue of contention is that the School Committee originally wanted to expand this contract provision to apply to any classroom that faced exceeding the class size maximum by one or two students.

The Committee just recently amended its proposal to limit its application to 75 elementary classrooms and 75 secondary classes for a total of 150 out of approximately 13,500 classes. The purpose of this change is to provide cost-effective flexibility in the assignment of students by allowing an increase of up to two students over the maximum so that a new class would not have to be opened with the added expense of a new teacher and supplies. The supplemental compensation for elementary teachers would increase to \$1,750 and \$3,500 respectively and secondary teachers would be paid \$350 and \$700 per class respectively.

Given the experience of the existing contract provision, the 150-classroom cap should amply provide the cost-effective assignment flexibility sought by the School Committee while all other classrooms would stay within the existing classroom maximums.