

A Vision for Boston: Questions for the 2009 At-Large City Council Candidates

STUDENT TRANSPORTATION

How would you change the student assignment plan to achieve savings in the BPS transportation budget and satisfy parental demands? 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?



Felix Arroyo

Over the past 5 years I have worked very closely with young people in Boston as a volunteer youth sports coach and as an elected member of my local Community Center's board. I believe that all of the youth in Boston deserve to attend quality schools that value them and prepare them for the future and we must ensure that we provide opportunities for our youth to be active in constructive activities after school and during the summer months. Our young people are the future of our city and will be my top priority as a City Councilor At-Large. Generally, I support school choice and oppose drastic changes to the student assignment plan. As a Councilor, I will closely examine any new proposals with an eye towards ensuring school choice and keeping quality public schools an option for children in all of our City's neighborhoods.

John Connolly

We need to reform the current system for student assignment. While proponents of the status quo point to the range of choices that a student in an underserved neighborhood has, we need to acknowledge the other reality of the status quo—every year, there are just as many if not more underserved students, predominantly students of color, who are administratively assigned to our lowest performing schools.

I support a new review of student transportation and student assignment with the understanding that the status quo is unacceptable and that real reform is a necessity. To accomplish this reform, we must build consensus across all neighborhoods and look to replicate successful schools and programs. We must also recognize that in most cases, it is easier to foster parental involvement, afterschool programming, and community based learning when children go to school near to where they live. Finally, we should be committed to a real plan for creating quality schools across Boston by taking all savings from student transportation reform and dedicating that money to improvement plans and expanded programming options in our underperforming schools.

Tomas Gonzalez

We don't have enough information to make informed choices about busing at this time. BPS attempted to collect information on busing, but not enough surveys were returned. We need a far more aggressive outreach program to parents to determine their need for busing. An independent auditor should be hired to manage this process, analyze results, and make recommendations.

Some elements of busing are beyond our control. A federal mandate dictates that special needs children be bussed. This represents twenty percent of our busing budget. Busing is tied in to the school choice issue; because nearly all charter school students are bussed. And in neighborhoods

in which kids live more than a mile away from a school, I would advocate for building new schools. I feel strongly that the Back Bay/Beacon Hill neighborhoods deserve a local school.

Before changing student assignments or getting rid of busing we need to make sure that parents in all neighborhoods have a diversity of high quality local schools to choose from for their children. We can't do away with our current system if it means that parents in many neighborhoods will be left with worse educational options for their kids.

Tito Jackson

My own experience as a student in Boston gives me first-hand knowledge of the complexity of the issue of student transportation. While Boston has many great schools and many hard-working and effective teachers, there is still tremendous variation in the quality of nearby educational resources across neighborhoods and communities. This variation motivated investments in student transportation thirty-five years ago, and while there have been important improvements, neighborhood-level disparities of educational options continue to exist.

While the cost of transporting students is an important issue given the fiscal constraints faced by the City, it cannot be the only or even the most important issue in this debate. Children do not choose the neighborhood into which they are born, and it is unfair to limit their opportunities based on where they live. The construction of new schools should be considered as an option, but as an At-Large City Councilor, I would first concentrate on directing resources to existing schools in neighborhoods most in need.

Andrew Kenneally

Our focus should be increasing parental involvement because where there are good schools, parental involvement is high. One of the best ways to do this is by allowing parents to send their child to the school closest to their home. By doing so, we can take the over \$70 million dollars and invest it back into the classroom, especially in those schools that are underperforming.

The thing is, the Boston Public Schools take everyone. We have some students that come from very supportive homes and others that come from challenging homes where they are numerous socio-economic factors that negatively impact the child's performance. The BPS needs the resources to address these issues, such as providing a designated mentor program to those students that need it.

I would be interested in building new schools in neighborhoods that don't have them. I would not be opposed to renovating old buildings or leasing space.

Ayanna Pressley

I have grown to not like the term "neighborhood school", because I am not so much concerned by a school defined by a geographic boundary. What I am committed to is building community schools. That means engaging parents, churches, community groups and centers, youth groups, and students in taking ownership of the school in their community and making it better. As things stand now, community schools are difficult to create, as there is little ownership and minimal relationships built between a community and the schools nearby. And there are too many communities that lack a school with which to engage. As a City Councilor, my goal will be to ensure that every child in every neighborhood gets a quality and challenging education.

To get to this community school idea, we must ensure that we are putting the quality school cart *before* the school reassignment horse. The recent 5 zone plan that was proposed fails this test – leaving several zones with too many poorly performing schools.

By focusing on poorly performing schools, we can create an environment where most parents will choose the schools in their community.