



333 Washington Street, Suite 854, Boston, MA 02108
T (617)227-1900 F (617)227-2815 www.bmr.org

Testimony of the Boston Municipal Research Bureau

Before the Boston City Council's Committee on Government Operations February 28, 2013

Regarding: Docket #0155, Special Act to Reorganize the School Committee

Mr. Chairman, I am Samuel R. Tyler, President of the Boston Municipal Research Bureau, and I am here to testify in opposition to Docket #0155, the proposed special act to create a hybrid school committee in Boston of four mayoral appointees and three members elected at-large. The School Committee is an educational policy body which needs to serve effectively as a cohesive and accountable body. We believe that a hybrid committee structure would be divisive and incompatible with the need for real accountability and a clear line of authority and responsibility. Also, the hybrid committee can be influenced more by special interests because it becomes more political. The appointed board structure can ensure diversity and can bring together members whose strengths and interests complement one another. For the past 21 years, the appointed Committee has proven to be more educationally focused and fiscally responsible than the record demonstrated by either the five-member or thirteen-member elected School Committees.

The Research Bureau has observed and written about school matters with the five-member elected School Committee and from 1982-1991 the thirteen-member elected Committee. We saw first-hand how many elected members were more concerned with day-to-day operations than broad educational policy issues. These members thought of themselves as politicians first whose main priority was to serve their adult constituents with current problems and issues.

Direct Accountability

The primary benefit of the appointed committee is that it holds one person accountable for Boston school performance - the Mayor. The fundamental flaw of the elected committee was that it did not ensure direct accountability in any one person or board. The Mayor was required to raise the funds to support the system, but the School Committee decided how to spend the money. This division of duties contributed to a culture of mistrust and finger-pointing rather than the improved collaboration that exists today. This direct accountability must be maintained and it would be weakened through a hybrid structure with two different means of selecting members.

Previous Hybrid Plan Dismissed

This is not the first time a hybrid system has been proposed for the Boston School Committee. In July, 1989, the Boston City Council established the *Special Commission on Public Education* with members appointed by Mayor Ray Flynn. This Commission proposed two different governing structures: a seven-member committee appointed by the Mayor and a nine-member hybrid committee, part elected and part appointed. The hybrid structure was quickly dismissed as being divisive and unable to achieve the real accountability sought in a new structure. The initial proposal for an appointed board was made two months earlier in May, 1989 by the *Mayor's Advisory Committee on School Reform*, appointed by Mayor Flynn and chaired by Hubie Jones. The Committee cited the need for "real accountability and the clear line of authority and responsibility" as the impetus for this change. In 1990 the Research Bureau issued a report that raised a concern about whether in this City, a natural competitiveness would develop between the appointed and elected members that would inhibit the Committee's ability to function as a cohesive policy body. We raise that same concern today.

Educational Stability

The appointed committee has proven to be far more successful in creating real stability in the superintendent's position and continuity of the educational program in stark contrast to the continual turnover of 10 superintendents in a 24-year period under the elected system. The first superintendent selected by the appointed committee, Tom Payzant, served 11 years from 1995 to 2006. The current Superintendent, Carol Johnson, has served as Superintendent since August 2007.

Fiduciary Responsibility

In addition to being a cohesive educational policy body, the School Committee has a duty to exercise its fiduciary responsibility, especially since the School Department is the largest city department and its employees represent one-half of the City's total workforce. Every year since 1992 under the appointed School Committee, the School Department has ended the fiscal year with an operating surplus. As an elected body, the School Committee incurred operating deficits in 11 out of 14 years prior to 1992. One of the surplus years was due to the fact that the City approved a supplementary appropriation far greater than needed for a new teachers' contract. The Mayor's involvement with the schools contributed to the fact that over the last 10 years during difficult fiscal times and escalating health insurance and pension costs, the School Department's share of total General Fund spending held steady unlike most other departments except Police and Fire.

More Democratic

By making the Mayor fully accountable for educational performance, a larger number of voters are better positioned to influence school improvement than a smaller number of voters who would divide their mandate among three at-large members. More voters in Boston go to the polls to vote for Mayor than At-Large City Councilors so far more voters hold the BPS accountable by voting for Mayor than those who would vote for at-large school committee members. In the last three elections for Mayor and City Council, the average citywide voter turnout for Mayor was 34% while the average turnout for all At-Large City Councilors was 19%. Prior to 1992, School Committee races lacked competition as well

as votes. In 1989, incumbents in four out of nine district races ran unopposed. No district School Committee candidate in a competitive race received more than 16.4 percent of the vote.

Voters Support Appointed Committee in 1996

In 1996 the voters of Boston resoundingly chose by a 70%-30% margin to retain the current seven-member appointed structure rather than return to the previous thirteen-member elected committee. On Question 2, a binding question on the November 4, 1996 ballot, the appointed School Committee won by a plurality of 59,458 votes and carried 20 of Boston's 22 Wards. The overall voter turnout for this election was 72% and about 55% of all registered voters pulled the lever on Question 2.

Confidence in BPS and National Recognition

The stability and steady progress in Boston schools under the appointed Board has given national and local foundations and businesses confidence to financially support a variety of education initiatives. In 2006, the Boston Public Schools were awarded the Broad Prize for being the nation's most improved urban school system. The School Department was a finalist for this award for the three previous years.

Conclusion

No board structure by itself is the solution to the challenges facing the Boston Public Schools. However, the existing appointed board structure is the City's best chance to ensure that the Mayor remains fully accountable for public education, that Committee members have the mix of experiences and skills to be a cohesive policy body, and that the Committee responsibly exercises its fiduciary responsibility. In recent years, some members of the Committee have been asking probing questions and requesting more information on policy initiatives presented by the Superintendent which is a healthy progression of the appointed board process. The proposed hybrid structure would not contribute any improvements to the appointed structure that has been in operation since 1992. The Research Bureau strongly recommends that Docket #0155 not be approved by the City Council.