

School Budget Process Needs Substantial Improvement

Questions Remain as the School Committee Moves Toward FY25 Budget Approval

In crafting its FY25 budget, Boston Public Schools (BPS) is dealing with multiple challenges, including declining enrollment, the end of one-time federal funding, a new approach to inclusionary education, and a transition from the weighted student funding model of budgeting. To help the School Committee leverage its unique budgetary oversight powers, the Research Bureau presents the following questions that School Committee members should ask the Superintendent and her team as they evaluate the proposed budget and consider changes to it. School Committee members should receive answers before they approve a budget for FY25. In addition, the Research Bureau identifies urgently needed improvements to the budget process so stakeholders, including School Committee members, can be better informed about district priorities, the tradeoffs inherent in any budget, and how the budget will lead to better student achievement.

- The Big Picture** – The Boston Public Schools Superintendent recommended an FY25 all-funds budget of \$1.68B, down \$83.8M or 4.8% from FY24. While overall spending is budgeted to decline, the general operating budget is projected to increase 5.6% to \$1.53B. As noted below, there is inadequate information provided on how the proposed budget connects to the district’s challenges, goals, and metrics for academic performance. The School Committee should be asking key big picture questions before it dives into the budget’s details.
 - What does the data tell us about what BPS’s greatest challenges are?
 - How is BPS using its FY25 budget to address these challenges?
 - Are there other options for how BPS might spend its funds to meet those challenges?
 - Has BPS identified programs, initiatives, or other items in the FY24 budget that it proposes to stop funding in FY25? If so, what are they and what data was used to make those decisions?
- School Funding Formula** – The Superintendent and her staff stated that this is a “transition year” in school funding, as the district moves away from the weighted school funding model and toward a new formula. However, with Reimagine School Funding not yet explained and implemented, the school funding methodology used to create the proposed FY25 budget is unclear. At the February 15 school budget hearing, BPS presented an overview of the FY25 funding process in which BPS used FY24 weighted student funding as a baseline from which changes were made according to items such as collective bargaining increases, soft landings, classroom reconfigurations, and other factors. Allocating funds on a case-by-case basis rather than systematically can disadvantage schools with new principals who do not know how to work the system to their advantage while leading to opportunities for schools with savvy leaders to advocate for more funding for themselves. More clarity is needed to holistically view how the Superintendent and her team distributed funds to schools.
 - In the absence of a school funding formula, how did BPS ensure that bias, favoritism, or a principal’s advocacy skills did not influence the amount of funding allocated to a particular school?

- What steps did BPS take to ensure that the funding levels for FY25 are fair, equitable, and consistent with the needs of each school's student population?
3. **The End of ESSER** – The FY25 budget does not anticipate spending Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds. Boston was allocated a total of \$431M in federal ESSER funding as part of COVID relief efforts, with \$128.9M budgeted in FY24. While no funds are budgeted to be allocated in FY25, BPS has \$13M in ESSER funds from prior years that it plans to spend before the federal deadline of January 2025. Due to the end of this funding, the budget calls for the elimination of 492.2 ESSER-funded full-time equivalent (FTE) positions. BPS has stated that in the prior budget cycle, many schools anticipated the loss of federal funds by transitioning temporary staff and expenses to ESSER funding. For other positions and programs, the district must evaluate and make clear what ESSER-funded services it wishes to continue, and what the added cost to the general fund will be by continuing these services.
- What ESSER-funded programs are being continued in the FY25 operating budget?
 - What was the process used to decide to extend those programs? What metrics did BPS deploy in making these decisions?
4. **Staffing Cuts** – The recommended budget proposes eliminating 393.1 FTE (full-time equivalent) positions in FY25, with a loss of 492.2 ESSER-funded FTE positions and an increase of 167.1 FTEs (1.6%) in the general fund. While these numbers refer to positions overall, it remains unclear whether the proposed cuts would eliminate vacant positions or if currently employed individuals would be terminated.
- What, if any, layoffs will occur in FY25? Will schools or centrally funded positions be most impacted by any such layoffs?
5. **English Language Learners** – The proposed FY25 all-funds budget includes a reduction in spending on services for English learners of \$12.7M or 8.5% despite the growth in the number of English language learners (ELL), who now comprise over 30% of all students. The Superintendent said on March 4 that projected FY25 funding is, in fact, increasing. The discrepancy may partially be the result of a change in how certain ELL expenses are coded in the BPS finance system, but it remains unclear. BPS is implementing an inclusion policy that includes special education and English-learning students in general education classrooms, beginning with ELL implementation in grades K1 and K2 in FY25.
- Is spending on English language learners going up or down? By how much?
 - What services does BPS intend to fund in FY25 for English language learners and how does this budget meet the growing need?
6. **Cost per Student** – Despite enrollment declining by more than 7,900 students (14%) over the last 7 years, the BPS budget continues to increase, with the cost per pupil rising by 46% over the last 5 years. In the budget presentation on February 7, BPS acknowledged that this rate of growth is unsustainable. Boston is projected to spend over \$30,000 per student in FY25, among the highest per capita spending of a large district in the country.
- Given that the combination of declining enrollment and increased spending is not financially sustainable, what actions are included in FY25's proposed budget that will help create a financially sustainable school system?

- How is the district’s increased spending per pupil tied to efforts to improve student academic outcomes?
7. **Hold Harmless** – Since FY21, BPS has not asked schools to make cuts or to look critically at their number of classrooms while the district determined how much of the enrollment decline was temporary because of COVID-19. In the FY25 budget, BPS resumed evaluation of the number of classrooms and proposed a net decrease of 52 classrooms across the system, while proposing to spend funds to hold schools harmless for certain enrollment trends.
- What is the cost to the school system of continuing to hold schools harmless, both in direct costs and in the downstream costs of operating more facilities than needed, such as increased transportation, facility maintenance, and personnel costs?
 - What is the timeline for phasing out “hold harmless” funds?
8. **School Closures** – BPS released its [Long-Term Facilities Plan](#) in December, as required under the 2022 Systemic Improvement Plan agreed to with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). As part of this process, the district recognized that it is operating too many under-enrolled facilities and proposed pursuing fewer, larger schools that have greater programmatic offerings. The document raised the possibility of school closures but did not include plans for specific closures or mergers. As the recent reversal on the proposal to move the John D. O’Bryant School to the West Roxbury Education Complex underscores, decisions about large-scale changes in the school system must be made following sustained community input. While no mergers or closures are detailed in this budget beyond the planned Shaw-Taylor and UP Academy mergers, school closures, mergers, and new grade configurations for School Year 2025-2026 should be announced before the next enrollment cycle begins in January 2025 so the district can bring its facilities into alignment with its enrollment.
- What is the Superintendent’s timeline for announcing potential school mergers and closures, and what is the plan for engaging the community in the discussion of her proposal?
 - Given the potential scale of changes, mergers, or closures, does the proposed FY25 budget include sufficient funds to support a robust community engagement process to ensure that parents and other members of the school community are involved in the decision making?
9. **School Safety** – Across the country and in Boston, youth mental health has been in decline and behavioral problems in schools continue to challenge teachers, staff, and administrators. Reports of bullying and acts of violence have been on the rise. A MassINC [poll](#) in May 2023 of parents of Boston Public Schools students found two thirds of parents concerned about their children’s physical safety and emotional well-being while at school.
- How, if at all, does the proposed budget support expanded or new strategies to address the increase in dysregulated behavior by students and enhance school safety?
10. **Transportation** – BPS is required under state law to provide transportation to certain student populations beyond those who attend BPS schools. These include charter public school students, those attending parochial schools, and special education students in out-of-district placements. The proposed FY25 general fund budget includes \$92.6M for transportation, an 8.0% increase from the prior year, but does not delineate between costs for non-BPS students and expenses incurred to transport students attending BPS schools.

- How much of the transportation budget is dedicated to transporting students to BPS buildings and programs, as compared to transportation to other schools such as charter public schools and parochial schools?
- What is the current cost per student for transporting BPS students? How has the cost per student changed over time given increased transportation spending and declining enrollment?

Recommendations – The current process for presenting the Boston Public Schools budget is woefully inadequate. At the initial budget presentation on February 7, the public and members of the School Committee were provided with an initial PowerPoint deck and an Excel workbook, followed by two additional PowerPoint presentations in subsequent hearings. As they try to understand the budget, the public and School Committee members are left to interpret row upon row of spreadsheet data with little narrative to guide them. The Superintendent presented the budget at a School Committee meeting during which committee members were not permitted to ask all their questions, being told to submit them in writing. Answers to those written questions have not been provided to members or the public.

At \$1.53B, the school budget will be the largest single expenditure in Boston’s FY25 operating budget. The BPS budget deserves careful scrutiny given its size and the impact it has on the ability to fund other City services. It is crucial that the Superintendent and her team be forthright throughout the budget process so the School Committee, City Council, families, and the general public understand the proposed budget and its impact on students. To address these serious deficiencies, the Research Bureau recommends the following changes to the school budget process.

- BPS should resume publication of [budget books](#) that provide greater detail on funding, the rationale for proposed expenditures, and how it connects to district goals. This publication should be provided early in the budget process so it can be used as a resource by the School Committee, the City Council, and the public in understanding the proposed budget. A potential model is the City of Boston, which publishes a comprehensive budget book as part of its initial recommended budget release.
- School Committee members must be allowed to ask any and all questions of the Superintendent and her staff, both at the initial budget presentation in February and subsequently. When School Committee members submit questions in writing, they should receive prompt answers in writing that are made public. As the entity with the primary responsibility over the school budget, the School Committee should not proceed with a vote on the budget until members’ questions are addressed.
- The School Committee should hold working sessions to discuss and vote on proposed changes to the budget. This could involve scheduling special meetings following budget presentations and discussions to allow for careful consideration of adjustments to the budget proposal. This oversight and direction could occur through votes taken at various stages of the process and not only at the last meeting.
- The Superintendent must provide more information on how the proposed budget will drive the results the district is seeking to achieve, and what tradeoffs are involved in doing so. At present,

the budget does not clearly connect to the district’s priorities, goals, initiatives, and metrics for improving student outcomes.

- The School Committee must actively embrace its budget review and approval responsibility, not only during the budget season but consistently throughout the year. The School Committee plays a crucial role in ensuring that the BPS budget aligns with educational standards and priorities and is fiscally responsible.