

An Elected School Committee is Not the Answer

The Boston City Council is considering a home rule [petition](#) that would fundamentally reshape the governance of the Boston School Committee. Introduced on January 8, 2025 by Councilor Julia Mejia and co-sponsored by five of her colleagues, the proposal would change the School Committee from an appointed to an elected structure. For over 30 years, the Research Bureau has supported an appointed School Committee and continues to do so. The appointed model supports stability, a focus on long-term policy goals, and decision-making grounded in professional expertise rather than political pressures.

The debate about the district's governance structure is a distraction from the urgent work necessary to improve the district's operational and academic performance. Instead of a change in the form of governance, the focus should be on enhancing the School Committee's effectiveness and improving academic outcomes for all students. Ultimately, as intended by the current system, it will be up to the voters to hold the Mayor accountable for the performance of Boston's district schools.

Background – Boston is the only municipality in the state with a fully appointed School Committee, with a home rule petition in 1991 changing it from an elected committee. This decision was affirmed by Boston voters in 1996, when 69.6% voted to maintain an appointed committee.

Currently, the Mayor appoints all seven voting members of the School Committee, with each appointee serving a four-year staggered term. The Mayor must appoint each member from a list of nominees provided by the [School Committee Nominating Panel](#) (See Appendix A). Both the Mayor and the Nominating Panel are encouraged by the School Committee's [enabling legislation](#) to appoint individuals who reflect the ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity of Boston and its public-school population. A non-voting student member, elected annually by the Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC), also serves on the committee. This approach aims to balance expertise, community representation, and diversity, ensuring that the School Committee reflects the city's population as well as that of the district's students while maintaining a focus on the long-term success of Boston Public Schools (BPS).

In November 2021, 78.7% of Boston voters approved a non-binding ballot initiative to return the School Committee to an elected body. This result may not be a reliable reflection of the electorate's views. The City Council placed the question on the ballot only on September 15, less than seven weeks before election day, leaving voters with limited time to gather information about the proposal, a task that was especially challenging because there was no campaign organized in opposition to the question. Only 28.5% of Boston's electorate voted on the question. Nevertheless, the election's results reflect deep dissatisfaction with the appointed School Committee's performance (and perhaps of the district as a whole) and should serve as a call to action for the School Committee. Those who support the appointed structure should heed the voters' warning and ensure improvements are made.

Mayor Michelle Wu [vetoed](#) a similar home rule petition in February 2023 after the City Council passed it in a vote of 7-5 with one member voting present. Her objections centered on the risk of disrupting ongoing efforts to stabilize

and transform BPS. In November 2024, a spokesperson for the Mayor confirmed her opposition to an elected School Committee, [stating](#) that “after many years of leadership transitions, as well as disruptions from the pandemic and growing needs through our recovery, Boston Public Schools needs stability to continue the progress underway on long-term structural issues under Superintendent Skipper, Mayor Wu and the administration.”

Proposed New Structure – The 2025 proposed home rule petition would create a School Committee of 13 members, four elected at-large and nine elected in the same districts as City Councilors. Each member

Proposed Changes to School Committee Structure		
	Current (Appointed)	Proposed (Elected)
Number of Members	7 appointed	13 elected
Appointing Authority	Mayor appoints. All members recommended by Nominating Panel	None
Term Length	4-year terms	2-year terms
Student Representative	1 non-voting (appointed by BSAC)	2 non-voting (appointed by BSAC)

would be elected for a two-year term. Additionally, there would be two non-voting BPS student members who serve one-year terms appointed by the BSAC. The transition from an appointed to an elected School Committee would begin in the municipal election following approval of the home rule petition, when nine district members would be elected and join four mayoral appointees on the body. In the subsequent municipal election, all 13 School Committee members would be elected.

Why the Research Bureau Supports an Appointed School Committee – History should inform the discussion of what School Committee structure will best serve Boston’s students. The Research Bureau’s December 2018 [testimony](#) before the City Council’s Committee on Education bears repeating.

“...the appointed Committee has proved to be more educationally focused, fiscally responsible and better able to tackle important, but politically difficult, issues than the record demonstrated by either the five-member or thirteen-member elected School Committees. With the elected School Committees, too many 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.

Boston’s move to the appointed School Committee structure evolved over a decade of attempts to make the elected process work. In fact, the change came only after a series of efforts to improve the governance of schools within the existing elected structure. In four separate occasions, from 1978 to 1987, legislation was enacted which focused on strengthening the role of the Superintendent, limiting the School Committee’s role in operational matters and improving financial controls in the School Department.”

To learn more about the governance of the School Committee, see the Research Bureau’s prior publications on this issue listed in Appendix B and found on the Research Bureau’s [website](#).

Mayoral Accountability – Electing the School Committee would return Boston to an era of politicization and fragmentation of decision-making, where priorities shift based on electoral pressures rather than long-term strategic planning aimed at improving academic results. Electing a School Committee appeals to our democratic ideals, but it opens public education to political meddling, as demonstrated in communities across the country in recent years. In contrast, an appointed School Committee maintains clear mayoral accountability and helps

decision-makers focus on the best interests of students rather than on their own political considerations for re-election or a race for higher office.

The Mayor's appointment power also helps ensure that School Committee members align more directly with the Mayor's priorities. While this could be perceived as a negative aspect of an appointed structure, it allows voters to select a candidate for Mayor based on the candidate's vision for the school system and then make re-election decisions based on the district's performance.

Fiscal Responsibility – Under the elected model, the divided fiscal responsibilities of the Mayor and School Committee influenced spending and resource decisions. The elected body ran operating deficits in 11 of the 14 years prior to 1992 while BPS has consistently spent within its budget under mayoral control.

Stability and Professional Focus on Educational Strategies – Establishing district seats and shortening terms to two years presents several downsides. Members holding district seats would likely be motivated by their desire to be re-elected in their own district, and they could consequently prioritize local interests over the needs of the school system as a whole. Two-year terms may also lead to a lack of stability and continuity, making it more difficult to create and implement long-term strategies.

A political focus could lead to School Committee candidates who do not necessarily have the educational and managerial expertise essential in overseeing a large urban school district. The appointed system allows the Mayor to choose diverse, highly qualified members, while emphasizing the experience of appointees.

Representative of Student Demographics and Not Voters in Low Turnout Elections – Elected School Committees are often not representative of student demographics. Across Massachusetts and nationally, urban voters struggle to elect School Committee members who represent the linguistic, racial, and ethnic diversity of their students, including in Lowell, Everett, and Lynn. In Worcester, a district that is 75% students of color, the nine-member elected School Committee is majority-white even after the school district was sued and added district-based seats intended to increase candidates of color.

A [recent study](#) from Brown University's Annenberg Institute for School Reform showed that the voters who turn out for school board elections tend to be much whiter and wealthier than the student population in the public schools. The researchers found that the demographic disparities tend to be most pronounced in majority nonwhite jurisdictions and school districts with the largest racial achievement gaps.

Historically, Boston's School Committee elections led to candidate apathy and low-turnout elections. For example, in Boston's November 1989 election, no district School Committee candidate in a competitive race received votes of more than 16.4% of those registered in the district, and candidates in four of the nine seats were unopposed. Candidate apathy was recently demonstrated in 2023 when Worcester switched to district-based seats. Candidates in four of the six districts ran unopposed.

As the Boston Globe [wrote](#) in a 2021 editorial, "The contention that an elected school committee would be more democratic is dubious. Boston suffers from dismally low voter turnout in municipal contests. In off-year City Council elections, turnout is in the low to mid-teens of the electorate — in 2019, it was 16.5 percent." Turnout was a similarly anemic 18.97% in 2023.

Conclusion – Changing the School Committee’s governance structure will not resolve the challenges facing BPS. The appointed system has provided a governance framework that promotes mayoral accountability, fiscal responsibility, professional expertise, long-term strategic focus, and the prioritization of students’ educational needs rather than the needs of specific neighborhoods or political interests. These are all essential to address BPS’ challenges. The home rule petition would alter who is responsible for Boston Public Schools for the first time in over three decades and present a major change by reinserting electoral politics directly into the district’s governance.

The City Council should reject the proposed home rule petition. Reverting to a form of governance that proved highly ineffective is not the answer. The success of the School Committee depends on how well its members fulfill their roles, providing meaningful financial oversight and a defined educational policy for the district. The current School Committee could be more effective by, for example, providing more [rigorous financial oversight](#), which should be prioritized rather than shifting to an elected body that may jeopardize the stability and focus needed for meaningful progress.

Appendix A – School Committee Nominating Panel

School Committee Nominating Panel Members 2025		
Category As set forth in Ch. 108 of the Acts of 1991	Number of Members	Current Representatives
Mayoral Appointees	4	Sammy Nabulsi, Rachel Skerritt, Jerry Howland, Natalie Rivkin McSwain
Parents (Selected by Citywide Parent Council, Citywide Educational Coalition, Boston Special Needs Parent Advisory Council, and Bilingual Education Citywide Parent Advisory Council)	4	Angelina Camacho, Charlie Kim, Joanne Freeman, Susan Ou
BPS Teacher (Selected by Boston Teachers Union from its membership)	1	Neema Avashia
BPS Principal (Selected by Boston Association of School Administrators and Supervisors)	1	Will Thomas
Business Community Representative (Represented by Boston Private Industry Council, Boston Municipal Research Bureau, and Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce on a rotating basis)	1	Midori Morikawa
University or College President (Selected by MA Commissioner of Higher Education)	1	Mary Grant
Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education	1	Rhoda Schneider
TOTAL	13	

Appendix B – Research Bureau Reports on Elected or Appointed School Committee

December 11, 2018 - [BMRB Testimony before the City Council Committee on Education](#)

February 28, 2013 - [BMRB Testimony before the City Council Committee on Government Operations](#)

January 2013 - [Now is Not the Time for Hybrid School Committee Proposal](#)

January 23, 1997 - [Comparing Boston's School Committee Structure](#)

October 21, 1996 - [How Can Voters Best Affect Educational Improvement?](#)

October 8, 1996 - [Question 2 – A Choice that will Impact Boston's Finances](#)

September 18, 1996 - [Why the Change to the Appointed School Committee?](#)

September 16, 1996 - [A Thoughtful Process to Appoint School Committee Members](#)

September 6, 1996 - [History of the Boston School Committee Structure](#)

September 6, 1996 - [So What Is the Question Anyway?](#)

April 18, 1991 - [BMRB Statement Before Legislative Committee on Education, Arts, and Humanities](#)

March 14, 1991 - [BMRB Statement Before Legislative Committee on Education, Arts, and Humanities](#)

September 6, 1990 - [Bureau Reaffirms Support for Appointed School Committee](#)

July 26, 1989 - [Bureau Supports Appointed School Committee](#)

June 1, 1989 - [BMRB Statement before The Special Commission on Public Education](#)

October 21, 1987 - [Boston Moves to Improve School Governance and Accountability](#)

December 19, 1986 - [The Spiraling School Budget](#)

July 30, 1984 - [Reexamining the Role, Compensation and Staffing of the Boston School Committee](#)