

Secondary Education in Boston: The Non-Exam Schools that Educate Almost Three-Quarters of BPS' High Schoolers

Tracking Grades 9-12 Enrollment, Student Characteristics and Academic Achievement in Non-Exam Schools

Boston's three exam schools command considerable public attention, but they educate only 26.9% of Boston Public Schools (BPS) students in grades 9-12. Meanwhile, more than seven out of every ten high schoolers in BPS attended the district's other 31 schools serving high school grades in school year 2025-2026. This *Special Report* presents data on these 31 non-exam schools and the students in grades 9-12 who attend them. How has enrollment in non-exam schools changed over the past ten years? How well does the capacity of existing school buildings align with current enrollment? How do student needs and attendance vary across these schools? Are 9-12 graders in non-exam schools meeting key benchmarks of academic achievement and postsecondary readiness?

Report Objectives

This report provides information and insights on BPS high schoolers in non-exam schools:

- Enrollment Trends and Building Capacity
- English Learners, Low-Income Students, Students Requiring Special Education & Chronic Absenteeism
- Academic Outcomes
- Recommendations for BPS planning and operations to better serve these students

A special thank you to the Research Bureau's Cabinet Members for their generous support.

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Background

Roughly Three-Quarters of BPS high schoolers attended non-exam schools in SY 2025-2026 – Boston Public Schools (BPS) educated 14,554 students in grades 9–12 across 34 schools in school year 2025-2026 (SY25-26). Although public attention tends to focus on the district’s three exam schools, nearly three-quarters (73.1%) of BPS students in grades 9-12 attended 31 "non-exam" schools in SY25-26. This *Special Report* presents data on these 31 non-exam schools and the high-school-aged students who attend them.

Although non-exam schools vary in program design, admissions, and student service models, they share some commonalities in student populations. Over the past decade, the 31 non-exam schools lost more than 1,000 students in grades 9-12. Nine out of 10 students in non-exam schools are considered high-need students, which means either being low-income, an English Learner (EL), or requiring special education services. Across all the schools, large shares of students are chronically absent, missing 10% or more of instructional time. Most schools’ student performance lags behind state averages.

BPS has multiple initiatives to support high-needs students and a vision to offer advanced college courses and accelerated science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) opportunities. Despite this, BPS does not yet ensure that all high schoolers are mastering grade-level tasks or are successfully completing a core set of coursework that prepares them for post-secondary careers. This report provides the current context of student learning and post-secondary preparedness at these 31 schools.

Methodology – Unless otherwise noted, the report’s analyses and charts rely on the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)’s [Education to Career Research and Data Hub](#). The report makes four analytical decisions to make the data more transparent and practically useful. First, in order to give full attention to the non-exam schools, this report presents data only on 31 “non-exam” schools that are educating students in grades 9-12 in Boston Public Schools in SY25-26. Three of the 31 non-exam schools are in-district charter schools funded by the City budget, known as Horace Mann schools.¹ The report intentionally does not discuss the City’s three exam schools: Boston Latin School, Boston Latin Academy, and the John D. O’Bryant School of Mathematics and Science. Second, the 31 non-exam schools were grouped into six categories based on governance structure, program design, admissions model, and student service model. These six categories are: Comprehensive/Open Admission, Specialty, International/Dual-Language, Alternative/Reengagement, Pilot, and Specialized Education schools. Descriptions for each of the six categories along with which schools were placed in each category for analysis can be found in the table below.² Third, the report uses the Massachusetts public school district average and the average for ten districts in Massachusetts³ as references for describing non-exam schools’ student populations and students’ learning outcomes. In each chart, the state average is shown as an orange line

¹ These schools are Boston Green Academy, the Edward M. Kennedy Academy for Health Careers, and Boston Day & Evening Academy

² The Research Bureau acknowledges that these categories have limitations and urges the reader to carefully consider each school’s particular context when making comparisons.

³ The Research Bureau used DESE’s District Analysis and Review Tools (DART) to identify ten districts comparable to Boston. DESE identifies these as the districts most similar to the selected district in district type, total enrollment, and the proportions of low-income students, students with disabilities, and English Learners. At the time of publication, DART identified the following ten districts as comparable to Boston: Brockton, Chelsea, Fall River, Fitchburg, Framingham, Haverhill, Lowell, Lynn, New Bedford, and Worcester.

and the ten-district weighted average based on enrollment is displayed as a green line. Finally, the report uses measures to describe non-exam schools that are particularly important for strategic planning: enrollment and capacity, student need and attendance, in-school learning, and preparation for post-secondary education and employment.⁴

Governance Landscape of BPS Non-Exam Schools Serving High Schoolers

Category	Definition	Schools in Category	Grade 9–12 Enrollment	Scheduled for Closure as of Sept. 2026
Comprehensive/Open Admission	Schools have no application, exam, or entrance requirement.	Brighton High School (Brighton), Charlestown High (Charlestown), East Boston High (East Boston), English High (English), and Excel High (Excel)	2,572	Excel
Specialty (STEM/Tech/Art)	Schools focus on areas such as STEM, technology, or the arts.	Boston Arts Academy (Boston Arts), Boston Green Academy (Boston Green), Dearborn STEM Academy (Dearborn), Community Academy of Arts and Sciences (CASH), Edward M. Kennedy Academy for Health Careers (EMK), Dr. Albert D. Holland School of Technology (Holland), Madison Park Technical Vocational High School (Madison Park), and TechBoston Academy (TechBoston)	3,918	CASH
International/Dual-Language	Schools emphasize bilingual, global, or international education.	Boston International High School & Newcomers Academy (BiNCA), Margarita Muñiz Academy (Muñiz), Snowden International School at Copley (Snowden), and Quincy Upper School (Quincy Upper)	1,430	
Alternative/Reengagement	Schools serve students reconnecting with school.	Boston Day & Evening Academy (BDEA), Boston Adult Technical Academy (Boston Adult Tech), Boston Collaborative High School (Boston Collaborative), Community Academy, and Greater Egleston High School (Greater Egleston)	809	Community Academy
Pilot	Schools operate under BPS's Pilot School policy.	Another Course to College (ACC), Fenway High School (Fenway), Lyon Upper 9-12 (Lyon), New Mission High School (New Mission), and Ruth Batson Academy (Ruth Batson)	1,581	Lyon & ACC
Specialized	Schools provide intensive supports for students with higher levels of need.	Carter School (Carter), the Horace Mann School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (Horace Mann), Henderson K-12 Inclusion School Upper (Henderson Upper), and Melvin H. King South End Academy (Mel King)	323	Henderson Upper (grades 9-12)

⁴ In SY25–26, students in grades 9–12 attended non-exam BPS schools across three grade configurations: 5,411 (50.9%) attended 7–12 schools, 4,645 (43.7%) attended 9–12 schools, and 577 (5.4%) attended K–12 schools.

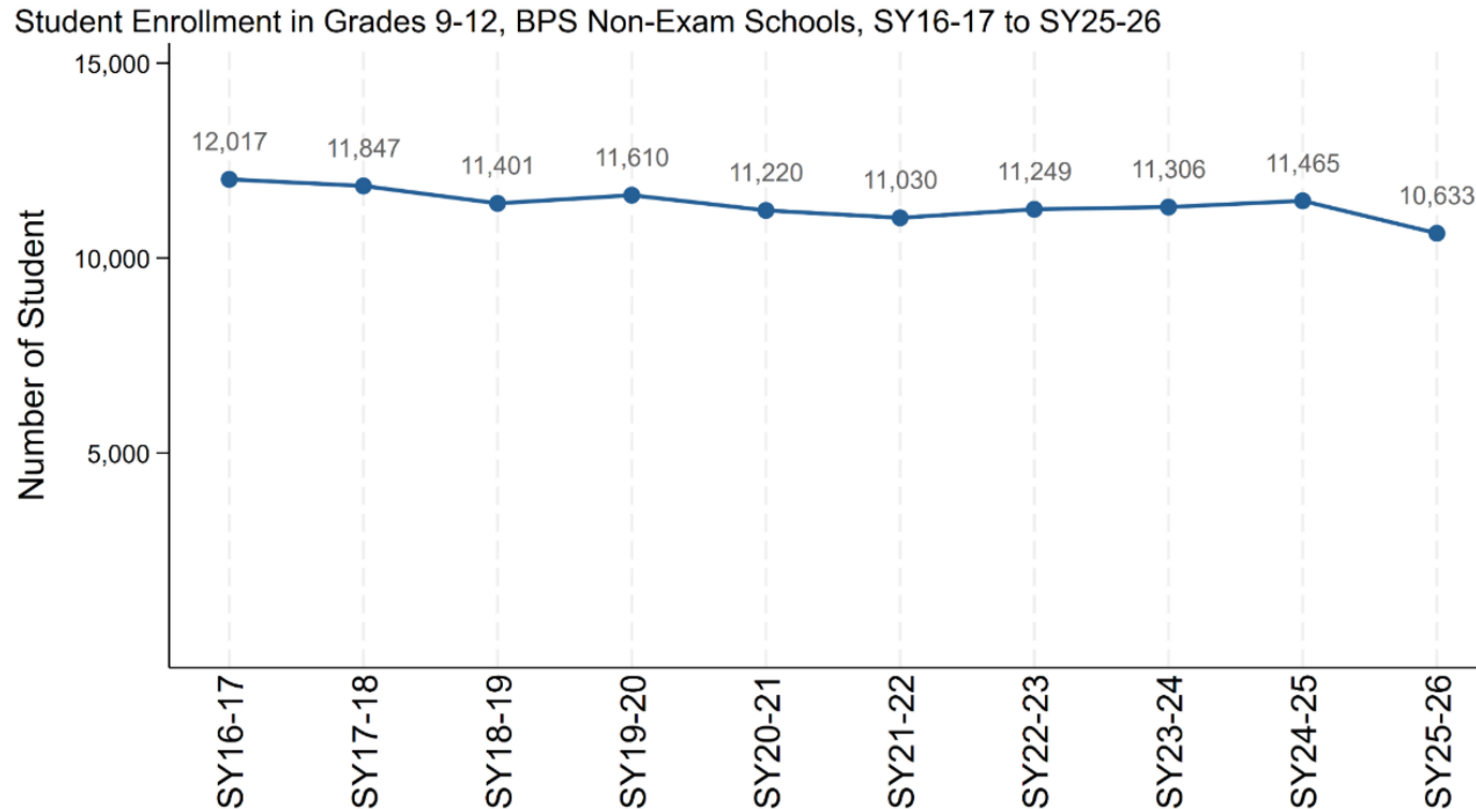
Enrollment Planning, Changes, and Building Capacity

BPS Strategic Planning for Grades 9-12 – Boston Public Schools has articulated strategies for student supports, postsecondary opportunities, and facilities, and the September 15, 2026 presentation of the latest draft of the [2026 - 2031 Draft Strategic Roadmap](#) highlights three focus areas that encompass grades 9-12: high-quality instruction, holistic supports, and high-quality programming and facilities. Attendance, which is especially challenging at higher grade levels, is also a priority. Plans for student readiness include a multitiered system of supports to reach high-needs students. The roadmap emphasizes two of the principles from the City’s 2023 “[Vision for Boston Public High Schools](#)”, which is the only plan explicitly dedicated to BPS high schoolers’ education: expanding access to college and career pathways and expanding postsecondary partnerships. The 2023 vision statement and roadmap note school inputs, such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and college-level courses. The September 2026 roadmap presentation specifies some measures of students’ in-school learning as well as plans for developing mastery of core coursework for post-secondary success.

While BPS’ Long-Term Facilities Plan includes closures and mergers, it does not identify the resource efficiencies expected from these closures and mergers. The 2023 “Vision for Boston Public High Schools” included several concrete commitments: 1) rebuilding Madison Park into a facility serving 2,200 students in grades 7-12; 2) rebuilding the O’Bryant at the former West Roxbury Educational Campus complex; 3) offering early college at Charlestown High School in partnership with Bunker Hill Community College; and 4) expanding Muñiz Academy to Grades 7 – 12. Since that speech, the Administration has progressed the rebuilding of Madison Park to the planning stage, abandoned the plan to move the O’Bryant in the face of community opposition, realized the Charlestown-BHCC partnership, and expanded Muñiz Academy.

The data shown in this report regarding declining enrollment with empty seats at many schools, extraordinary levels of need across multiple dimensions, high levels of absenteeism, and weak performance on state standardized tests present an opportunity for renewed focus and comprehensive, integrated planning for these schools. This planning is consistent with BPS’ draft strategic roadmap, which BPS is planning to strengthen with concrete performance measures that are reviewed and assessed regularly by BPS leadership, as well as a complementary implementation plan. As the City develops these efforts it will be crucial to dedicate attention specifically to the 31 non-exam schools that educate grades 9 - 12.

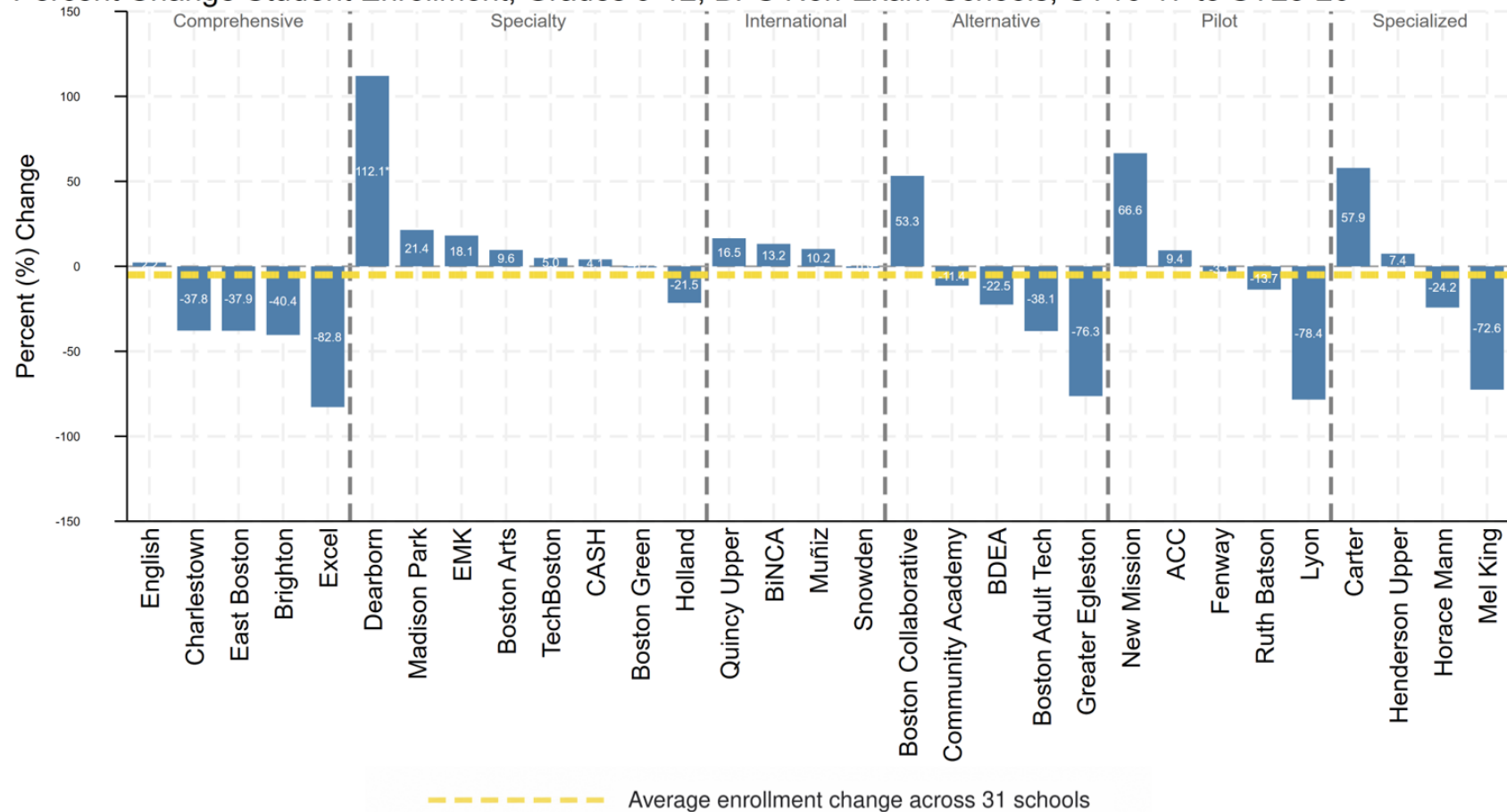
High school enrollment in non-exam schools fell sharply in SY25-26, reversing three years of modest gains and pushing enrollment to its lowest level in at least a decade – Compared to SY16-17, there were 1,384 fewer students enrolled in BPS’ non-exam schools in SY25-26, which represented an 11.5% decline in high schooler enrollment from SY16-17 to SY25-26. Enrollment in grades 9–12 at non-exam schools declined from SY16-17 through SY21-22, followed by modest increases from SY22-23 through SY24-25. From SY24-25 to SY25-26, enrollment fell sharply. Although closures are likely to reduce the mismatch between non-exam schools’ capacity and student enrollment, it is unclear whether the long-term facilities plan will reflect the steep decline from SY24-25 to SY25-26.



Source: Massachusetts Education-to-Career Hub - Enrollment: Grade, Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Selected Populations and DESE District Analysis and Review Tools (DART).

Enrollment fell in nearly every comprehensive school, while changes were mixed in the other categories – Several international/dual language and specialty schools experienced considerable gains in student enrollment from SY16-17 to SY25-26. In comparison, enrollment in the comprehensive/open admissions schools was stagnant or declined from SY16-17 to SY25-26. Notably, three of the schools scheduled for closure as of SY25-26 had an increase in enrollment (CASH 4.1%, Henderson Upper 7.4%, ACC 9.4%) over this period.

Percent Change Student Enrollment, Grades 9-12, BPS Non-Exam Schools, SY16-17 to SY25-26

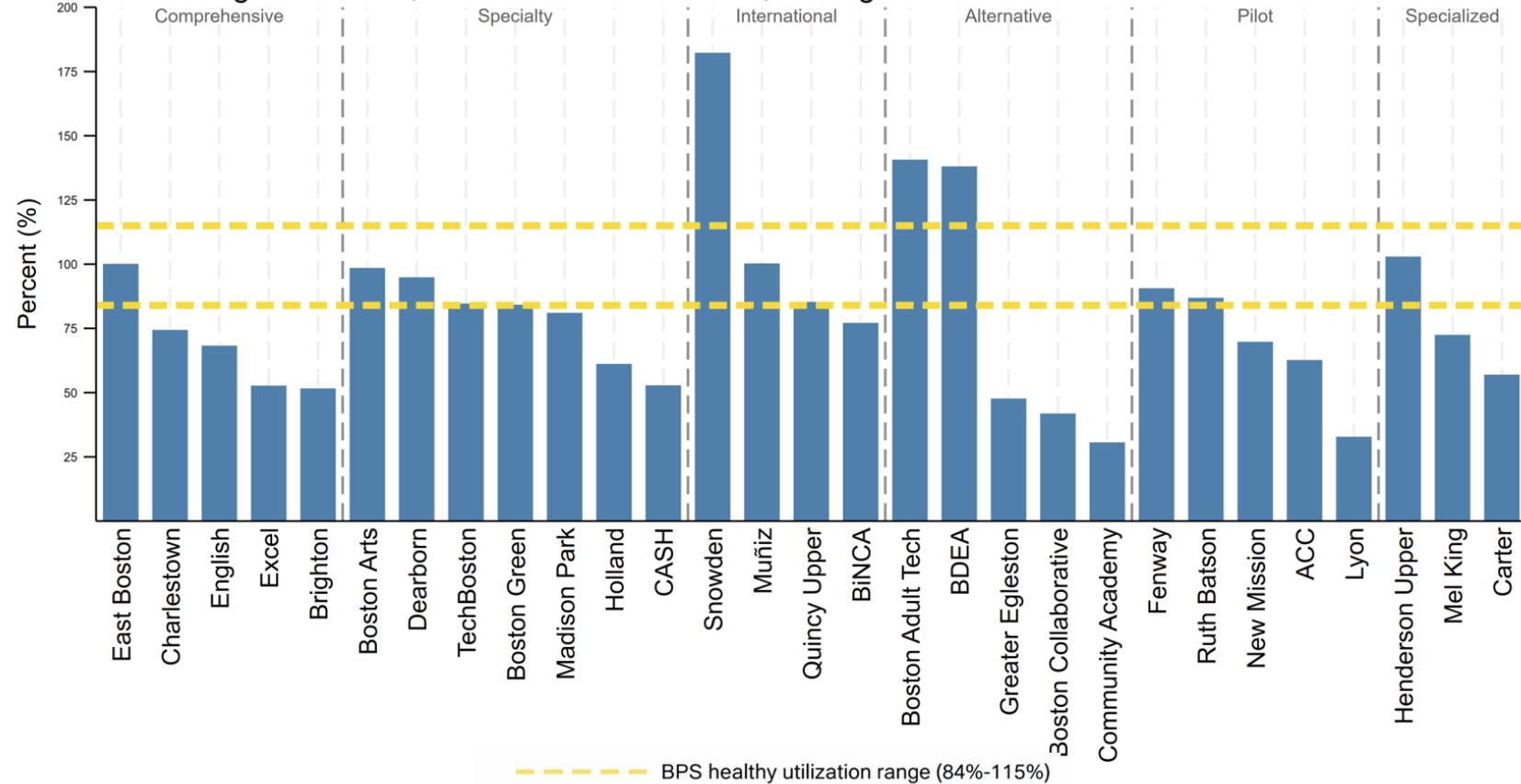


Source: Massachusetts Education-to-Career Hub - Enrollment: Grade, Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Selected Populations

Note: Dearborn uses SY2018 and Boston Collaborative uses SY2016 as valid baselines

Sixteen non-exam schools have enrolled fewer students than their buildings can accommodate for the past five years - Based on the [Long-Term Facilities Plan Data Dashboard](#), in SY24–25, the aggregate utilization rate of the 29 non-exam schools with available data was 81.1%, which is below BPS’ defined healthy utilization range. Ten were within BPS’ healthy utilization range of 84% to 115%, and three were overutilized. Sixteen non-exam schools had five-year average utilization rates below 84% of capacity. ACC, Lyon, and CASH, which are all scheduled for closure, had utilization rates well below BPS’ minimum healthy threshold.

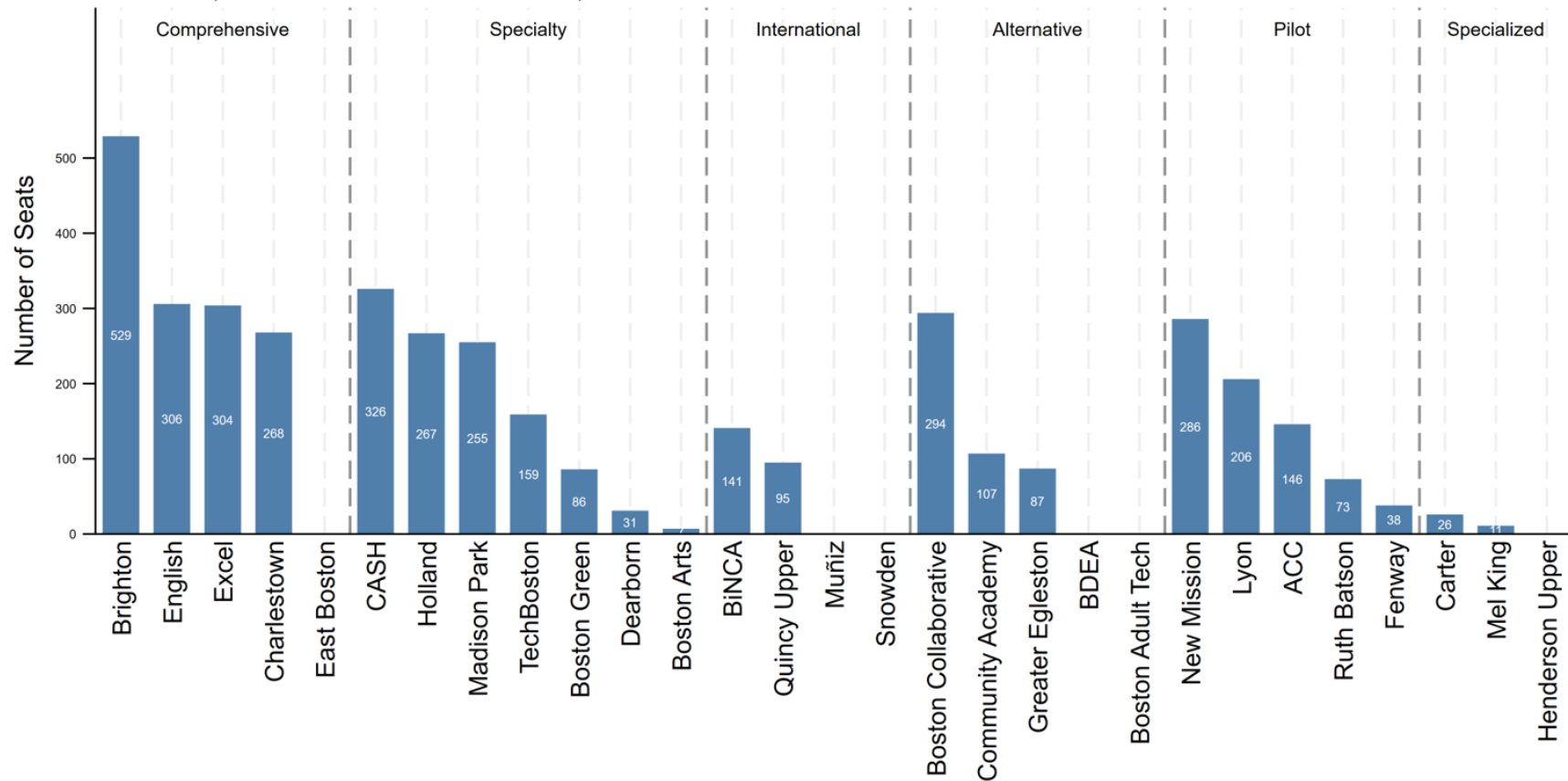
Five-Year Average Utilization, BPS Non-Exam Schools, Average for SY21-22 to SY25-26



Source: Boston Public Schools Capital Planning Department, Long-Term Facilities Data Dashboard, Last Updated 11/2025

Non-exam schools' capacity exceeds enrollment – Based on [Boston Public Schools' Long-Term Facilities Plan Data Dashboard](#), 14 schools had between 100 and 650 fewer students enrolled than their buildings could accommodate in SY24-25.

Unused Seats, BPS Non-Exam Schools, SY25-26

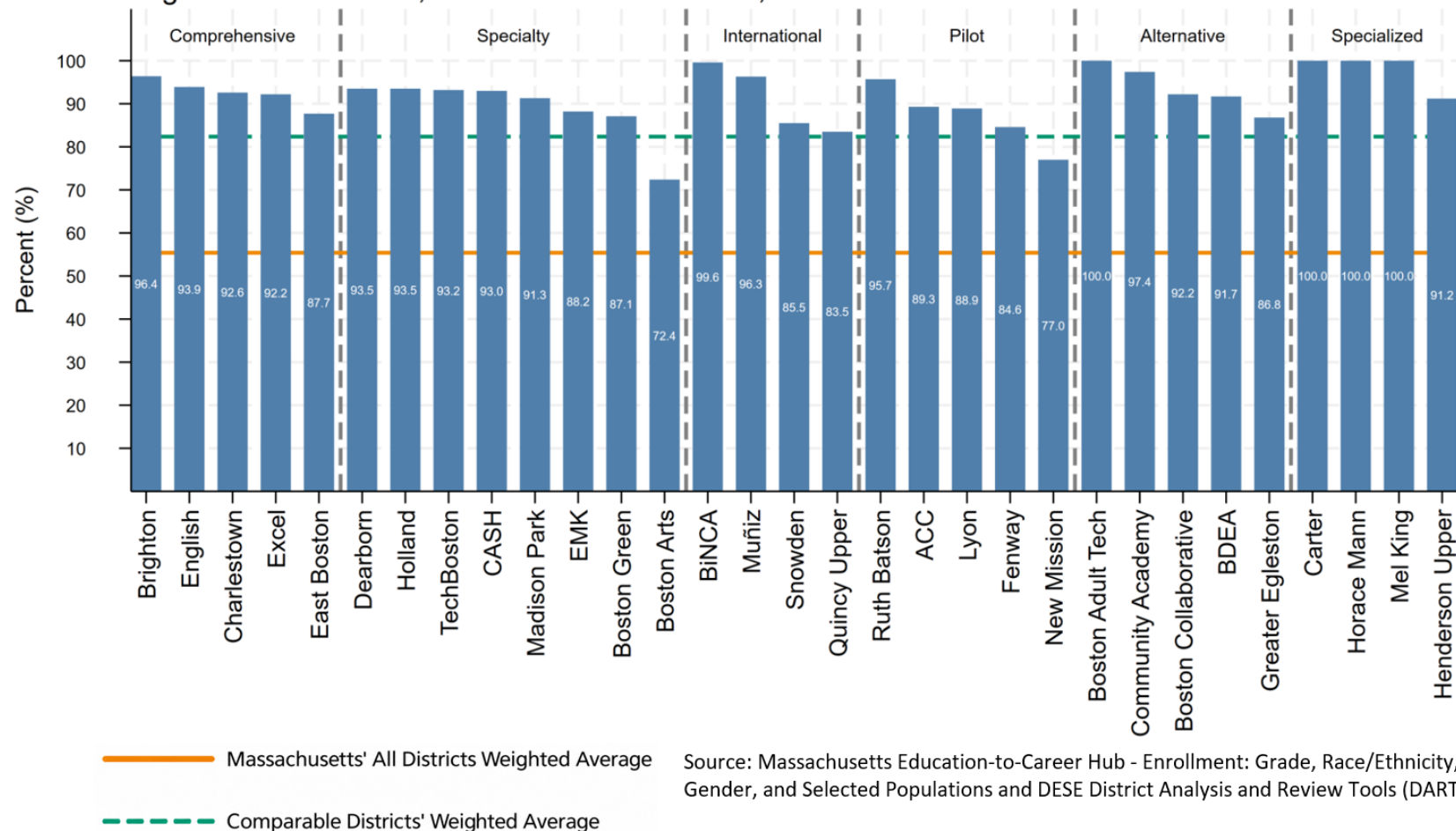


Source: Boston Public Schools Capital Planning Department, Long-Term Facilities Data Dashboard, Last Updated 11/2025

Student Populations

All non-exam schools serve students with multidimensional needs, but the form and concentration of need differ by school – In SY25-26, non-exam schools educated 9,581 (90.1%) high-needs students, which DESE defines as either being low-income, requiring special education services or being an English Learner.

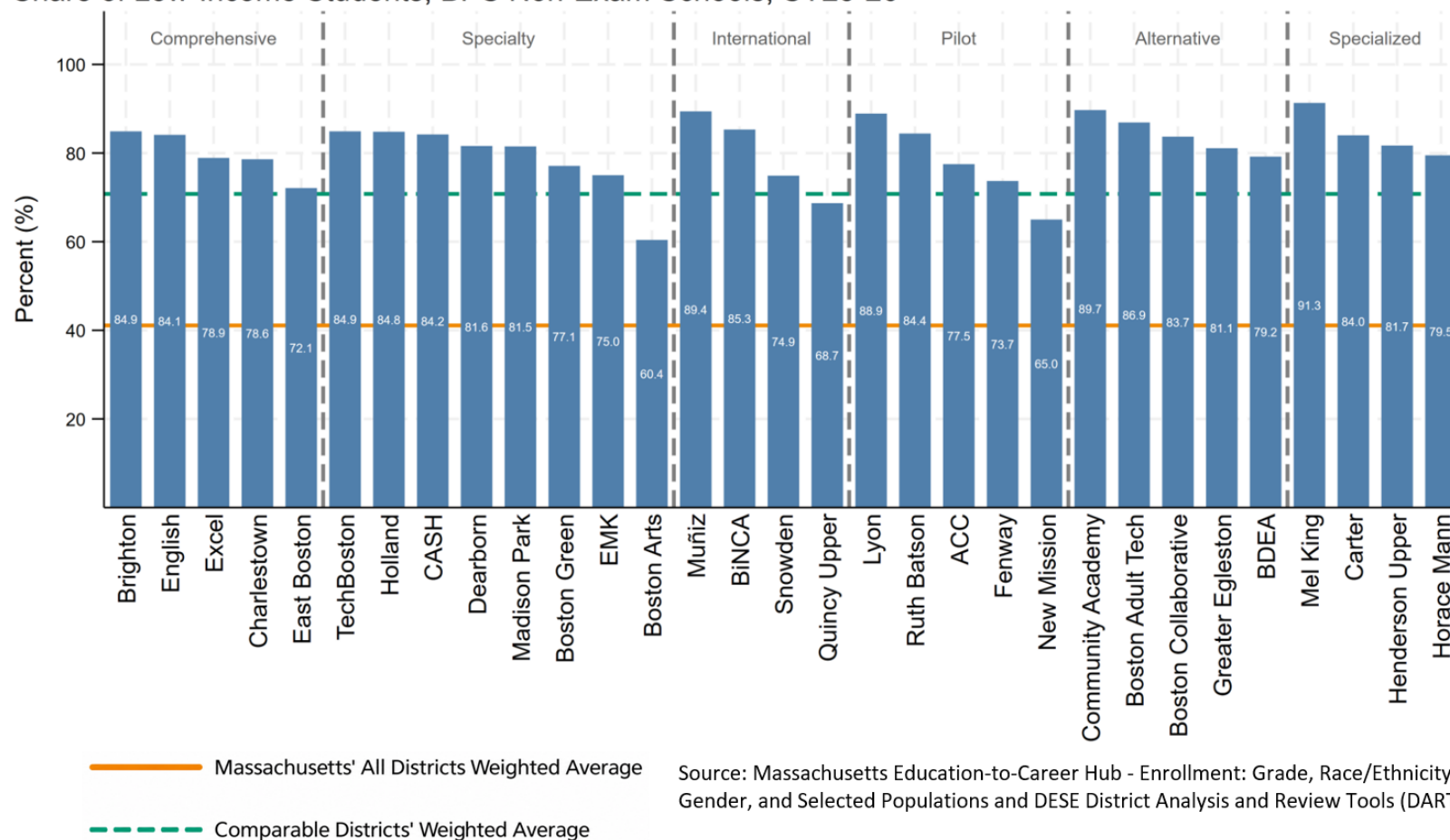
Share of High-Needs Students, BPS Non-Exam Schools, SY25-26



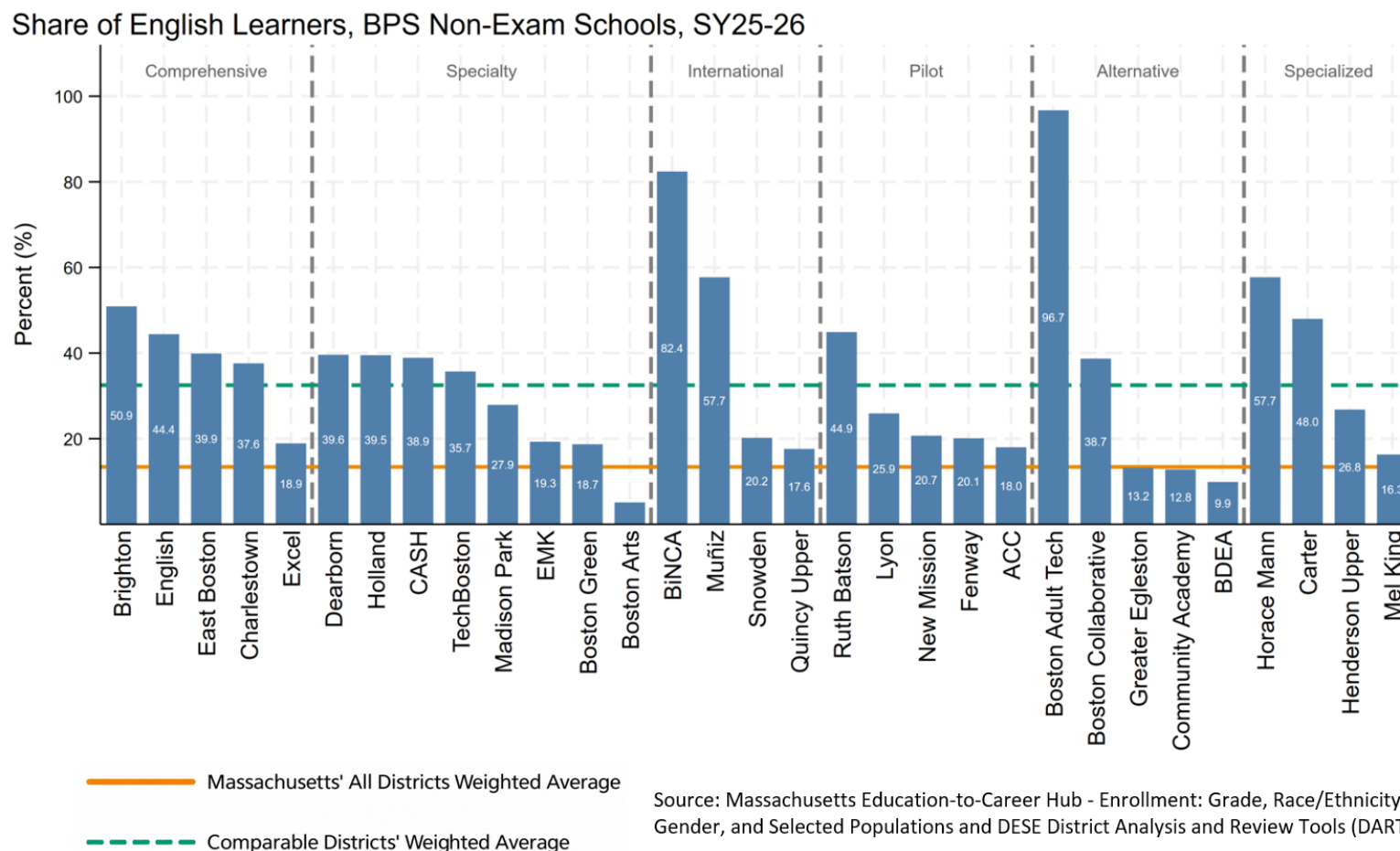
Source: Massachusetts Education-to-Career Hub - Enrollment: Grade, Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Selected Populations and DESE District Analysis and Review Tools (DART).

78.8% of students at the non-exam schools were low-income in SY25-26 – Low-income students made up at least half of enrollment at every non-exam school. The share of low-income students in BPS non-exam schools is higher than the state average (41.1%) and the average for comparable districts (70.8%). There is very little variation in shares of low-income students across school categories.

Share of Low-Income Students, BPS Non-Exam Schools, SY25-26

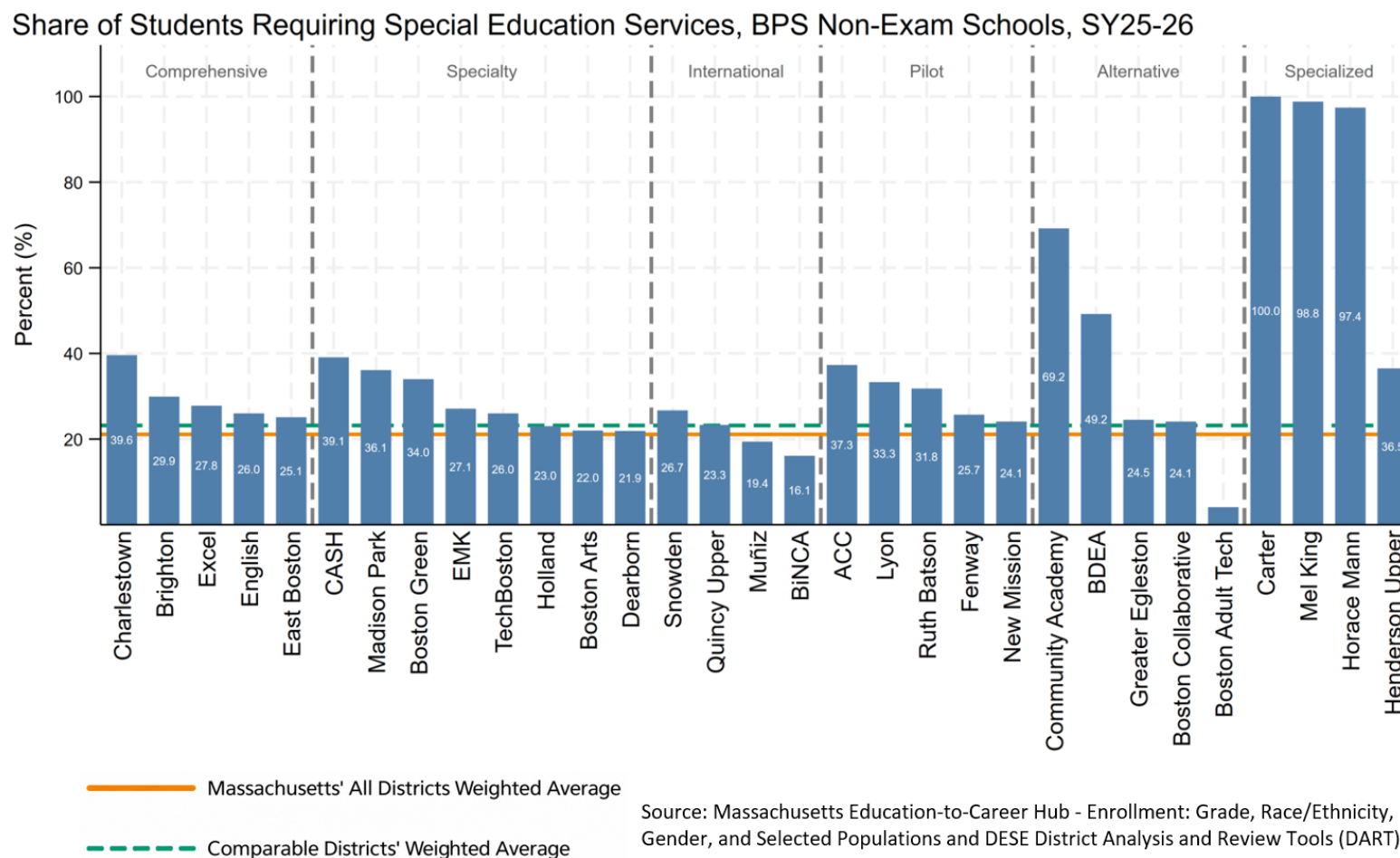


The shares of English learners vary by school – In SY25-26, roughly one-third (34.0%) of students in non-exam schools were English learners, which DESE defines as students whose first language is a language other than English and who are unable to perform ordinary classroom work in English.⁵ This share is more than twice the state average of 13.4% but just above the average for comparable districts (32.5%). While the share of English learners varied across schools, most English language learners are not enrolled in dual language or international schools.



⁵ According to Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Guidance on English Learner Education Services and Programming published January 2026, Boston "...must take appropriate steps to identify ELs so they can receive instruction designed to assist them in learning the English language and subject matter content..." following federal and state law G. L. c. 71A; 603 CMR 14.00, [Guidance and Laws - English Language Learners](#)

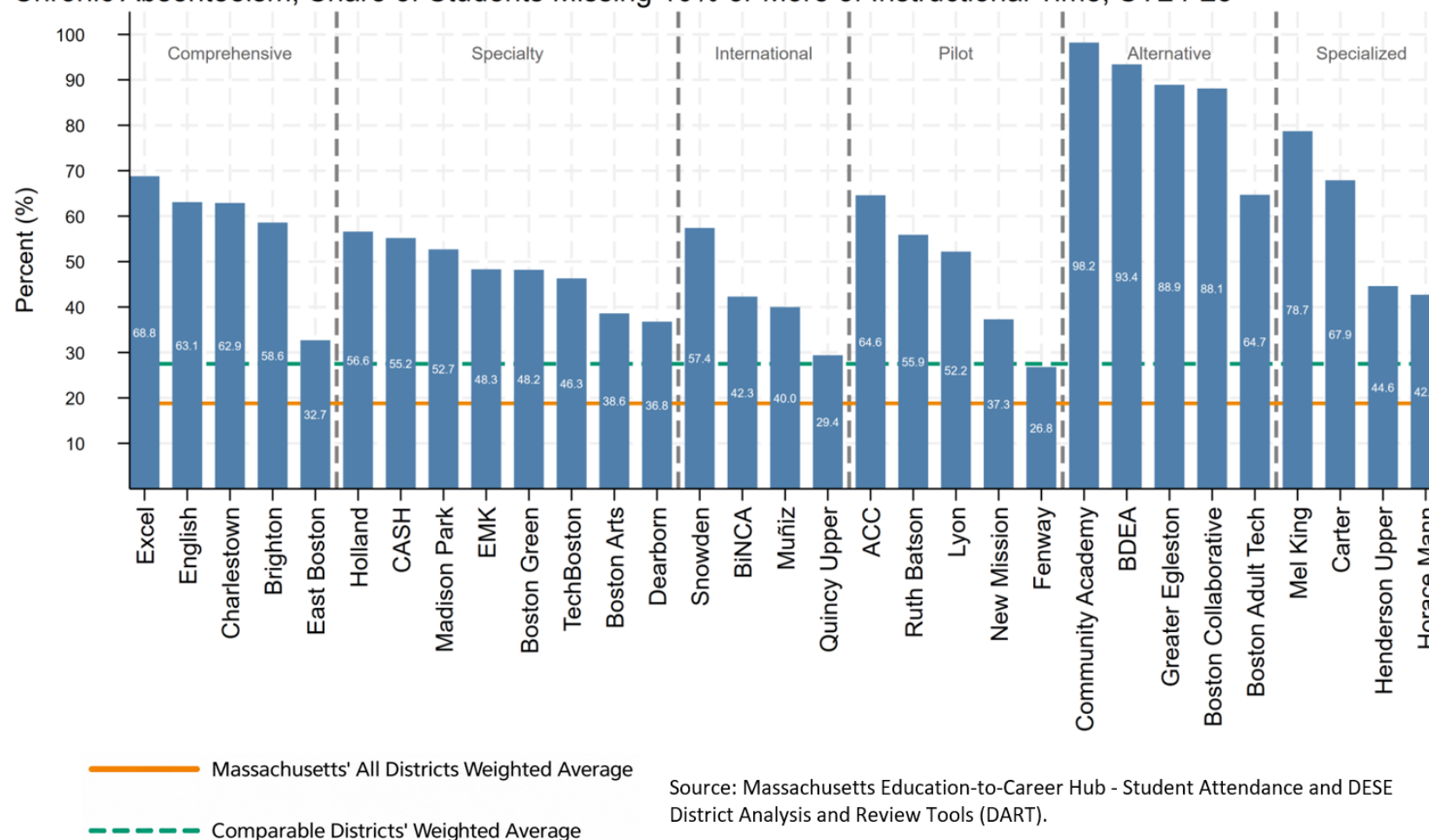
Students requiring special education services made up 29.3% of enrollment in the non-exam schools in SY25-26 – The average proportion of students requiring special education services⁶ for non-exam schools (29.3%) is greater than the state average of 21.1% and the average for comparable districts (23.2%). At Carter, Horace Mann, and Mel King, nearly all students required special education services, reflecting the missions of those schools. Although the share of students requiring special education services differed across schools, only three schools had a smaller share of students requiring special education services than the state average (21.1%).



⁶ The Research Bureau's definition of students requiring special education is equivalent to DESE's definition of students with disabilities. DESE defines students with disabilities as students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Chronic absenteeism is high at nearly every non-exam school – Across all the schools, large shares of students do not consistently attend school. In SY24-25, 5,907 (51.5%) of all high schoolers in BPS non-exam schools were chronically absent (i.e., missing 10% or more of instructional time within that academic year). In SY24-25, all the non-exam schools had chronic absenteeism rates above the state average of 18.8%. Notably, with the exception of Fenway High, all the non-exam schools had chronic absenteeism rates above the average for comparable districts (27.5%).

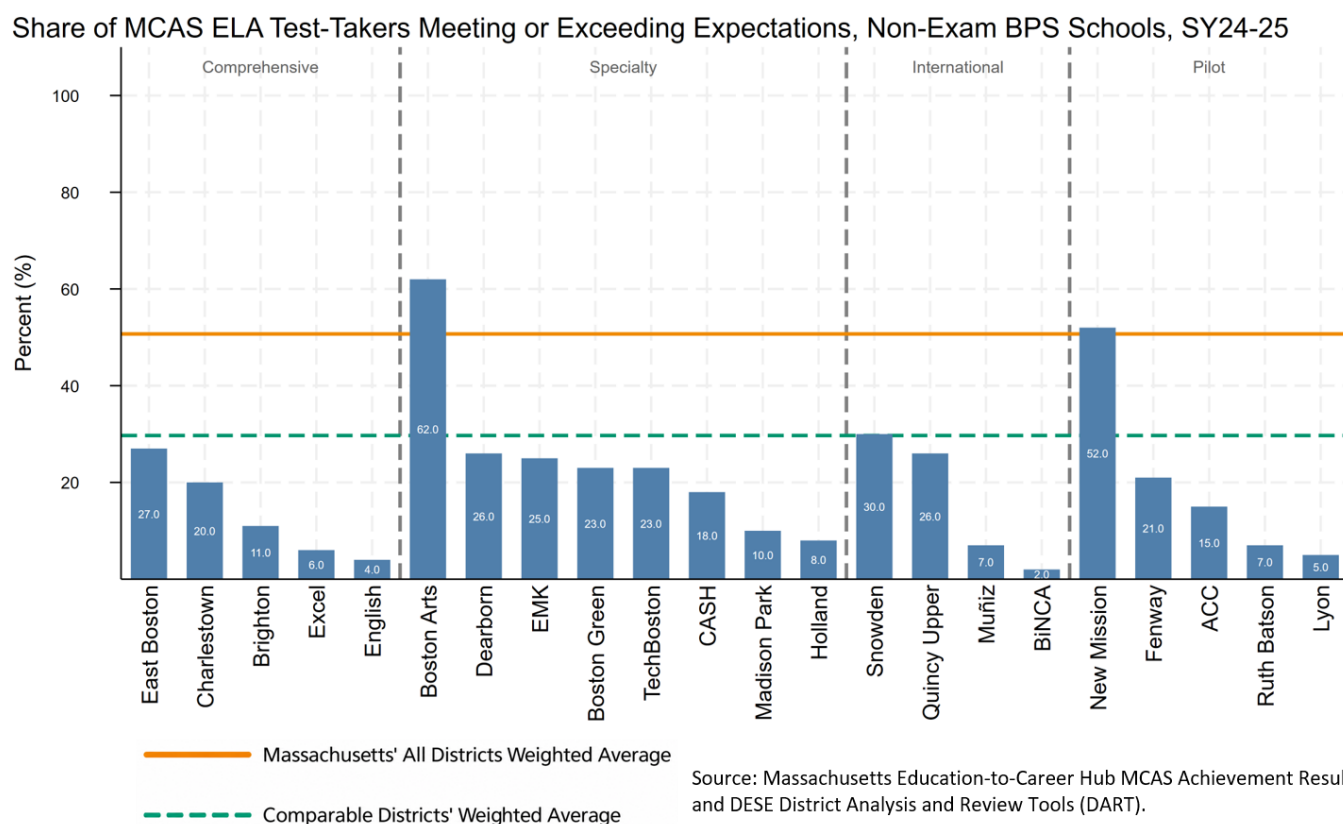
Chronic Absenteeism, Share of Students Missing 10% or More of Instructional Time, SY24-25



Academic Achievement & Outcomes

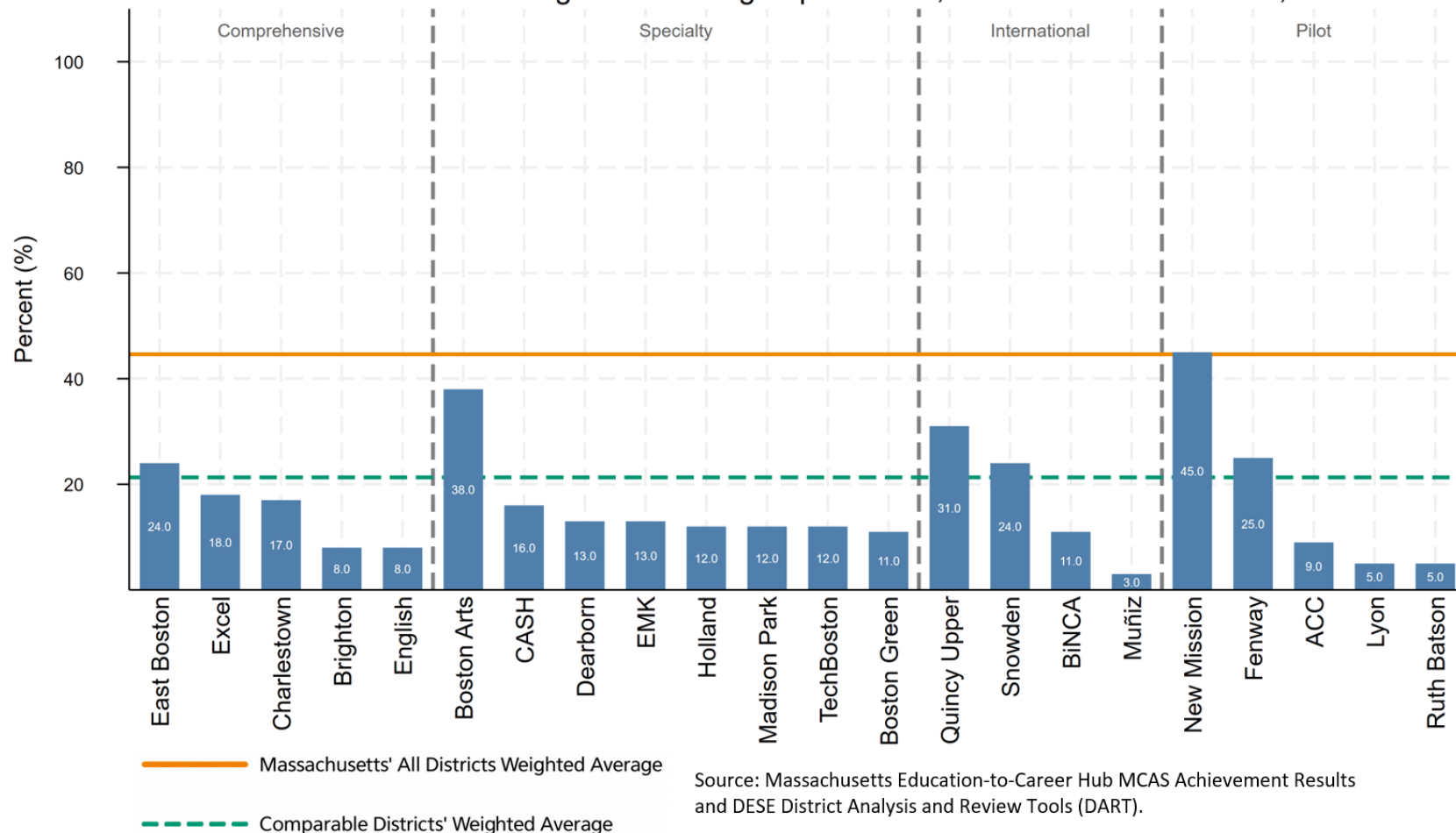
The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) provides a statewide measure of whether tested students meet Massachusetts' academic expectations in English language arts (ELA), math and science at the 10th-grade level. The share of test-takers "meeting or exceeding expectations" represents the percentage of test takers who demonstrated the skills and knowledge Massachusetts expects of 10th grade students.

Most 10th Graders in Non-Exam Schools Do Not Meet Grade-Level Expectations in Reading and Writing – Just 21.4% of high schoolers in non-exam schools met or exceeded expectations for MCAS ELA in SY24-25. At 18 of the 24 schools, one in four or fewer test-takers demonstrated the reading and writing knowledge and skills expected by the state in 10th grade. Only three schools had higher shares of students meeting or exceeding MCAS ELA expectations than the average among comparable districts (29.7%). Even fewer schools, just two, had larger shares than the state average (50.7%) of students who met or exceeded expectations in 10th grade ELA. There is no consistent association between school category and 10th grade ELA MCAS scores.



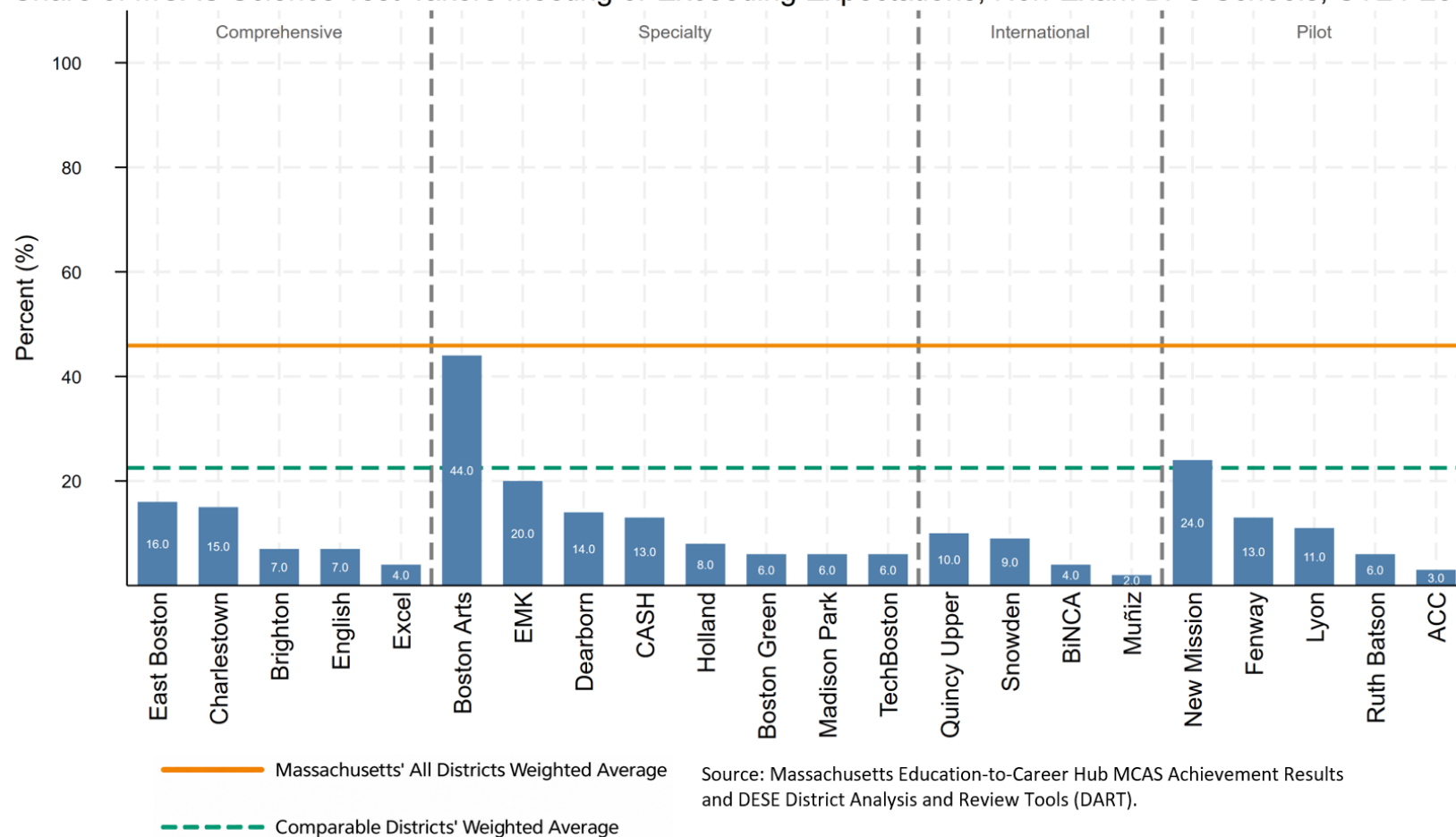
Only 17.3% of 10th Graders in Non-Exam Schools Are Proficient in Math at Grade Level – At 21 of the 24 schools with data available, one in four or fewer test-takers met or exceeded statewide expectations on the 10th-grade MCAS math test in SY24-25. While six non-exam schools had higher shares of students meeting or exceeding MCAS Math expectations than 21.3%, the average of comparable districts, only New Mission, which had 45% of 10th graders meeting or exceeding expectations, essentially matched the state average of 44.6%.

Share of MCAS Math Test-Takers Meeting or Exceeding Expectations, Non-Exam BPS Schools, SY24-25

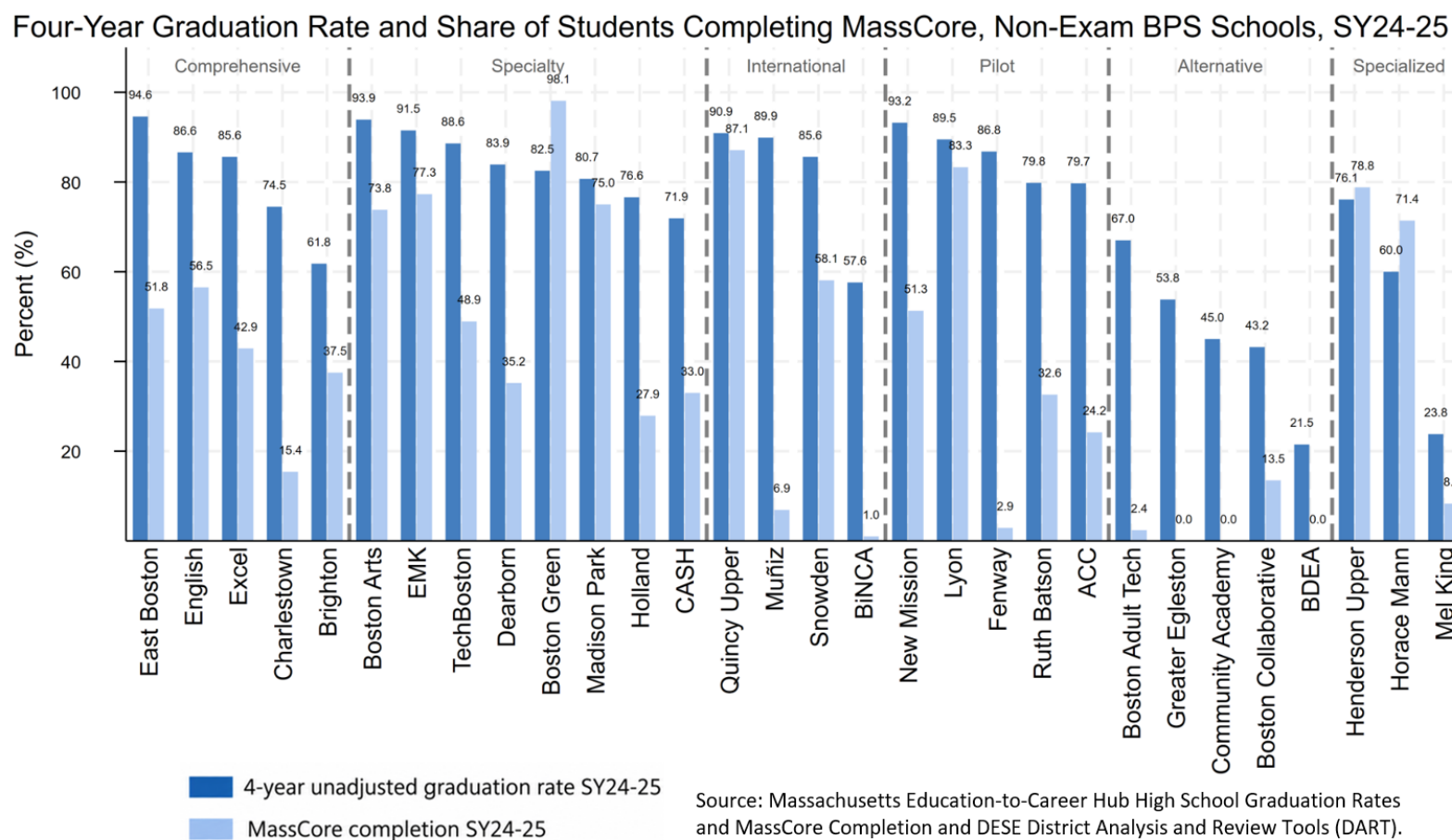


Only 12.5% of 10th Graders Met or Exceeded Grade-Level Expectations in Science in SY24-25 – At all but one school, Boston Arts Academy, one in four or fewer test-takers met or exceeded statewide expectations in high-school science. All the non-exam schools had lower shares than the state average of 45.9% of students meeting or exceeding MCAS expectations in science. Two of 23 schools exceeded the comparable-district weighted average of 22.5%.

Share of MCAS Science Test-Takers Meeting or Exceeding Expectations, Non-Exam BPS Schools, SY24-25



Schools vary not only in whether students graduate within four years, but also in whether graduates complete the state-recommended college- and career-ready course sequence – The MassCore graduation requirement, enacted by the Boston School Committee in 2021, set BPS graduation standards based on a state-recommended set of courses. In order to meet this requirement, high schools must offer these courses and provide appropriate scheduling capacity and planning for students to fulfill these requirements in 4 years. MassCore was adopted as a graduation requirement with a five-year implementation window, effective with the Class of 2026. Based on the most recent data available, most SY24-25 graduates from non-exam schools did not demonstrate MassCore completion. Only three of the non-exam schools with available data for SY24-25 had MassCore completion rates above the state average of 82.1% for that year. At the March 25, 2026, Boston School Committee meeting, BPS administration [reported that 81%](#) of the Class of 2026 was on track to fulfill the MassCore graduation requirement.



Findings and Recommendations

Boston Public Schools has set the following as its “[North Star](#)” for its planning and operations:

“Every child, in every classroom, in every Boston school has the same opportunity to achieve greatness as anybody else, with the same unfettered access to excellent teaching, joyful learning, and every conceivable tool needed to unlock their brilliance.”

This report demonstrates that, despite this ambitious objective, BPS is not currently meeting this standard for students in its non-exam high schools. It is critical to note that the scale and complexity of student need provides an essential context for interpreting school performance and resource needs for educational instruction. Even when setting aside school models that are designed to serve unusually high concentrations of a particular population, such as international/dual-language schools for English Learners and specialized-education schools for students with disabilities, Boston’s non-exam high schoolers have multidimensional needs.

In addition, 10th graders’ low science and math MCAS scores raise questions about whether they have the necessary academic foundation to take advantage of advanced college coursework and STEM programming at non-exam schools. The discrepancy between MassCore completion and MCAS 10th grade scores suggests a disconnect between MassCore completion and mastery of grade-level subject matter.

Within BPS’ diverse landscape of non-exam schools, which reflects Boston’s commitment to school choice, the Research Bureau recommends that Boston Public Schools do the following to ensure all BPS students graduate with a consistent foundation of learning:

- **Continue, deepen, and refine** strategies for improving student performance with particular attention to the underlying drivers of absenteeism. Regularly assess and disclose how differing interventions are working. BPS has highlighted chronic absenteeism as an important metric, both in their overview of the 2026-2031 [Strategic Roadmap](#) and in a March 2023 presentation on “[Chronic Absenteeism and District Improvement Strategies](#)”. The district must follow up, discussing which strategies and tactics worked, which did not, what implementation challenges occurred, and how absenteeism rates have changed.
- **Assess** student demand and outcomes for various models of education through reports, surveys, and enrollment trends. Consider whether the current portfolio of schools is appropriate and what signals enrollment and demand suggest for future facility planning. Disproportionate enrollment declines and low early grade enrollment at certain schools may signal changes in demand that should be addressed at the facility level. The capital and operational costs of operating 31 high schools should be carefully considered in the context of limited resources.
- **Ensure** that the objective outcome measures that are centered on student achievement currently in the September 2026 School Committee presentation have clear performance thresholds and are paired with detailed implementation plans with milestones centered on changes in student outcomes.

- **Commit**, at the School Committee level, to consistent, timely and periodic reviews of performance metrics. These reviews should strive to maximize the timeliness of the data and its relevance to policy making. These reviews should be a stand-alone report (i.e., not subsumed into a longer presentation or as an appendix) with the opportunity for the School Committee members to ask questions and interact with District staff.
- **Develop** (or publicly share) a more coordinated planning process that integrates the proposed strategic plan with an annual and biennial refresh of enrollment projections and facilities planning.
- **Expand** and deepen the Long-Term Facilities Plan to assess the current configuration of high school assets and develop a strategic approach to closures, rehabilitations, and new construction. Develop (or publicly share) the district's long-term thinking around grade 9 – 12 facilities, governance, and school models.
- **Identify** areas of strength and strong performance at these schools and determine whether there are lessons that can be applied to similar schools. Develop analytical groupings for schools that could be peer-learners to support schools' performance. As an example, Fenway and New Mission had comparable chronic absenteeism rates as well as similar shares of English learners and students requiring special education but different MCAS and graduation outcomes.