



School choice that works for Boston's parents

Dorchester Reporter

By Steve Poftak

Fingers crossed, waiting for the envelope to arrive, an educational future in limbo. College acceptance day? No, it's the Boston Public School assignment process for kindergarten.

It begins with a dizzying array of choices. Boston offers not one, but three levels of kindergarten -- K0, K1, and K2 -- and different school compositions -- K-5 or K-8 -- which dictate whether your child can take "Advanced Work", reputed to be the key to coveted exam school slots. And the decision about advanced work needs to be made now, before your child has even started kindergarten, unless you want to risk transferring him or her to a school that offers advanced work in fourth grade, followed by another transition in sixth grade to junior high.

Those weighty questions are just the first step. Once you figure out how you want your child's schooling to be structured, you can begin evaluating individual schools. There are visits, open houses, talks with other parents, and reams of data to evaluate - test scores, promotion rates, and disciplinary figures.

After sorting through and deciding which schools you want, step three is the lottery. But the lottery doesn't distribute precious classroom slots based solely on an assigned number. There are a number of other considerations that affect your child's chances, like sibling, walk zone, and previous admission (to lower levels of kindergarten) preferences.

Got all that? Good, because there's more. Step four is the wait-list shuffle. Your child can receive an assignment but still be wait-listed at another school. If slots open at that school, you can transfer your child, though spots often become available only after the school year has begun. So, by October, the process of getting your 4- or 5-year-old into public kindergarten in Boston should end.

Boston's school placement process is confusing to all, and impenetrable to some. There are BPS assistance programs staffed by conscientious people, but they can only do so much to help parents make sense of such a complex system.

For those parents with time, initiative, and luck, the process can provide access to educational opportunity and some excellent schools. But for the rest of us, it represents a barrier we muddle through - or eventually abandon, by removing our children from the system altogether.

Not surprisingly, a quarter of Boston's children are educated outside the district school system. In addition, many parents move out of the city once their children reach school age. They move seeking better schools, but they also want predictability about the school their child will attend.

What's the solution? Advocates of neighborhood schools are quick to point out that their approach would address most of the problems listed above. But the physical distribution of schools (and current distribution of students) makes this solution unworkable.

Tinkering further with the lottery system might help, but several years ago a blue ribbon task force did just that and though it succeeded in removing some flaws, the system remains difficult to navigate. What we really need is a school choice system that truly responds to parents.

Over the last 15 years, school choice has improved the options available to parents. Charter and pilot schools have proven extremely popular. Thousands of Boston children are currently on charter school waiting lists and pilot schools like Lyndon, Mason, and Mission Hill are vastly oversubscribed in the BPS lottery.

Last year seven more pilot schools were allowed, and the Mayor and the BPS deserve praise for taking steps to meet the demands of parents. But seven new pilots only begin to address the unfulfilled demands of parents. From a review of the BPS lottery results and charter school waiting lists, its clear that parents want more pilots and charters, as well as certain curriculum models from the district systems. The City should respond by replicating popular district schools, creating more pilots, and lobbying the legislature to lift the cap on charters. Conversely, if a school is consistently undersubscribed, it' s time to reevaluate the structure and curriculum of that school.

Boston has some great schools, but access to them remains problematic. A more responsive and transparent selection process is important, but the biggest step BPS can take to recapture the quarter of the city' s studentage population that take a pass on district schools and to prevent parents from moving out of the city is to listen to them. Boston needs to offer the school choices that parents have clearly demonstrated they want.

Steve Poftak is the Research Director at Pioneer Institute, a resident of Boston, and a parent.