

Excerpt from D.C. Policy Brief #2 — Work Group 2

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Baltimore, MD

Baltimore: By zone & residence for ES; City-wide lottery for MS/HS

GOALS:

- Great school choices (access to high quality options)
- Keep school communities at the center

APPROACH:

- ES/K-8: Assignment by residence & attendance zones
- MS/HS: by city-wide lottery
 - Preferences are given to siblings, for feeder pattern continuity, and to students living in the same quadrant of the city.

Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) operates 171 public schools and 33 in-district charter schools, with a total enrollment in SY 2012–13 of 84,748. BCPS’s student population is 85% Black, 8% White, 5.4% Hispanic, 1% is Asian, and 0.6% American Indian or Alaska Native. Eighty-four percent are eligible for free/reduced-price meals.

Current Student-Assignment Policy

BCPS’s student assignment policy is a hybrid in that it assigns elementary-school students by residence within attendance zones, but uses a city-wide lottery to assign a majority of middle-school students and all high-school students. Fifth graders not living within the zone of a K–8 must enter the city-wide lottery and are given first priority in the MS placement process. Fifth graders living within the zone of a K–8 school may either exercise city-wide choice (in a second-priority group) or exercise the right to attend their zoned K–8 school. In processing requests for a middle school, BCPS gives priority for:

- siblings;
- feeder pattern continuity (some ES have designated MS, and others do not); and
- students living in the same quadrant of the city.

Eighth graders have full city-wide choice of high schools and charter schools, and eighth graders attending a 6–12 school have automatic eligibility to attend grades 9–12 in that school. Although BCPS bills itself as a “district of choice,” BCPS also states that its operating philosophy includes “keep[ing] school communities at the center.”

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BCPS presents a school-choice fair each year in mid-December, as well as school “open houses” during November, December, and early January. Fifth and eighth graders select and rank up to five desired schools on a choice application that they submit to the central office in mid-January. Decision letters are mailed to students by March 31.

Boston, MA

Boston: Assigned choice sets with lottery

(Implementation starting in SY2014-15)

GOALS:

- Provide families with more equitable access to high-quality schools closer to home
- Reduce transportation costs
- Increase predictability
- More directly connect elementary schools to nearby K-8s and middle schools
- Maintain diversity

APPROACH:

- ES/MS: Assigned “choice sets” of schools, with seats allocated by lottery with defined criteria and weighting
 - Each family receives a set of six or more school options that includes the schools within one mile of the home as well as at least two of the closest schools from each of four tiers of school performance.
- HS: by city-wide lottery

Preferences:

- Siblings and to students living within a walk zone

Boston Public Schools (BPS) operates 121 public schools and six in-district charter schools, with a total enrollment in SY 2012–13 of 57,100. Of BPS’s student population, 40% are Hispanic, 36% are Black, 13% are White, 9% are Asian, and 2% are categorized as “other/multiracial.” Seventy-five percent are eligible to receive free/reduced-price meals. BPS captures approximately 74% of the estimated 77,200 school-age children living in Boston; state-authorized charter schools enroll about 9% and private and parochial schools enroll about 13%.

New Policy (SY 2014-15 and thereafter)

In 2012, Boston Public Schools began a year-long public process to overhaul the three zone lottery student-assignment system it had utilized since 1988. BPS’s stated goals were to:

- provide families with more equitable access to high-quality schools closer to home,
- reduce transportation costs,
- increase predictability,
- more directly connect elementary schools to nearby K-8s and middle schools, and
- maintain diversity.

The Boston school board established a 27-member External Advisory Committee (EAC) that held approximately 100 open meetings during the course of a year and received input from more than 5,000 people through more than 50 community meetings and online surveys.

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The EAC considered multiple models and approaches, including 6-, 9-, 11-, and 23-zone plans as well as two different versions of a home-based policy based on a proposal by the members of the MIT economics department, which had provided some analytical support to the EAC and BPS. In February 2013, the EAC recommended a *home-based policy* to the Boston school board, which approved the plan in March 2013 for implementation starting with SY 2014–2015. Boston’s new policy limited school options, but provides every student with some higher quality school options and options closer to their residence.

Under the new home-based policy, BPS will provide each home address with a customized list of six or more school options based on proximity to the home and on school academic performance based two-thirds on English-language Arts and math MCAS scores and one-third on MCAS score growth. The list will always include the schools within one mile of the home as well as at least two of the closest schools from each of four tiers of school performance. All high schools will remain available city-wide, but the plan establishes ES-to-MS/K-8 feeder patterns. Students will rank their options and BPS will assign the students to their highest-ranked choice at which space is available, using the existing sibling and walk-zone priorities and tiebreakers.

School assignments and bus transportation rights for current students are grandfathered for at least five years. However, BPS has conservatively estimated that, holding other factors constant, the new policy should reduce the median student distance traveled to school by 39 percent (to 1.15 miles). The MIT team has estimated that the new policy should decrease the average bus coverage area to 6.5 square miles from 24.5 square miles.

Student Assignment in the Washington Metropolitan Region

By geographic zones and student residence

The public school boundary and assignment policies in the small cities and large suburban jurisdictions surrounding Washington D.C. are based almost completely geographic zones and the residence of the student. With limited exceptions, students in Arlington, Alexandria, Prince Georges’ County, Montgomery County, and Fairfax County expect simply to attend their attendance-zone schools. For the most part, choice is limited.

In Alexandria, Arlington, and Prince George’s County, there are efforts to provide alternatives to the strictly neighborhood-based systems. In Arlington in particular, elementary school choice is provided through specialized elementary and middle school programs that are available regionally or district-wide in addition to International Baccalaureate and access to a magnet high school in Fairfax. Both Prince George’s County and Alexandria provide for region-wide, specialized, and magnet programs. However, not infrequently, families are required to provide their own transportation to these special programs and schools.

Montgomery County and Fairfax County in particular operate some magnet and specialized programs, and Montgomery County allows for some choice across a selection of high schools within regional “consortia” of high schools. Within these consortia, students have the right to attend their zone school but may also request any of two to four other nearby high schools. The district takes into account students’ sibling status, free/reduced-price meal eligibility, and gender as it evaluates requests in order to maintain “comparable demographics” and manage utilization at the schools within the consortium. Except for Washington, D.C., each of the jurisdictions listed above provides bus transportation for students living more than a specified distance from their school. Some districts provide bus service to stops within ¼ mile of a student’s home, while in other regions a child may be required to walk a mile to the nearest school bus stop. In Washington, D.C., DCPS provides busing only for high-needs and out-placed special-education students and for a small number of students whose schools have recently been consolidated with another school.

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Although easy to navigate, student-assignment policies in the Washington suburbs do not necessarily provide predictability or stability because school districts frequently re-draw attendance-zone boundaries in order to equalize enrollment pressures in areas of rapidly increasing school populations. Absent grandfathering policies, these boundary changes can force some students to change schools every few years.