



## BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

# Taking Success Into a New Era



Twenty years ago, a ceiling tile plummeted in the auditorium at the then-dilapidated, unaccredited Jeremiah E. Burke High School in Boston and brushed the arm of none other than the city’s mayor, Thomas M. Menino. Shocked, Menino pledged repairs and returned seven months later to deliver his annual State of the City address at “the Burke,” asking voters to “judge me harshly” if Boston Public Schools (BPS) did not improve under his watch.

Since then, BPS won the Broad Prize for Urban Education as one of the country’s most-improved school districts, notched gains on the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that exceeded national averages and narrowed racial gaps on its high school graduation rate. Voters elected Menino to five terms and made permanent the legislation awarding the mayor the authority to appoint the city’s school committee members. Boston has had just four superintendents in 20 years, introducing stability that allowed reforms to take root and grow. The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, which increased school funding and introduced nationally recognized standards, assessments and accountability systems, helped Massachusetts become the highest-performing state in the United States and also enabled the steady progress of the state’s largest school district.

The year 2015 marked the start of a new era for BPS as Tommy Chang, an instructional superintendent from the Los Angeles Unified School District, became superintendent in July under Mayor Martin Walsh. How Chang builds on the legacy that preceded him, and what innovations he launches to address BPS’ persistent challenges, will determine the district’s next chapter.

### A legacy of progress

Four months after the ceiling tile at the Burke nearly hit Menino, Thomas Payzant took over as superintendent. Payzant introduced learning standards, consistent curriculum in literacy and mathematics, and “collaborative coaching and learning” cycles that encouraged teachers to work together. With the Boston Teachers Union (BTU), he created “pilot schools”—charter-like schools with budget, staffing and curriculum autonomy. He was a stalwart supporter of the state’s new assessment, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), and oversaw four graduating classes of BPS students who, for the first time, had to pass the 10th grade exam to receive a high school diploma.

In 2007, Carol Johnson became superintendent but under bleaker economic circumstances. Johnson had to close or consolidate schools and overhaul BPS’ costly student assignment system, a vestige of the city’s court-ordered, traumatic desegregation efforts of the 1970s. Still, Johnson’s focus on equity and family engagement resulted in thousands of more children receiving arts

## Boston Public Schools

Urban District  
2015–16



DISTRICT PROFILE



### 125 SCHOOLS

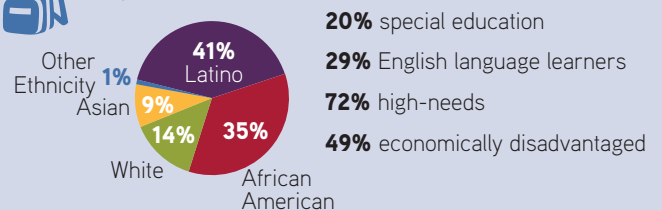
41 elementary    32 K–8    6 middle  
21 high    3 exam (7–12)    22 other



### 4,573 TEACHERS    130 PRINCIPALS



### 56,650 STUDENTS



- ▲ Boston is home to many firsts: the first public school, Boston Latin School (1635); the first public elementary school, Mather (1639); and the first public high school, English High (1821) in the United States.
- ▲ The superintendent reports to the Boston School Committee, appointed by the mayor.
- ▲ The district’s \$1 billion budget and a weighted funding formula allocates more dollars for students with greater needs.

Source: *Boston Public Schools*

instruction, high school credit recovery programs that contributed to a seven-point gain in the graduation rate (up to 66.7 percent) and a weighted student funding model that drove resources to students who needed them the most. She also committed BPS to a new “Boston Compact” that contained pledges from the city’s public schools, Catholic schools and public charter schools to work together on a unified enrollment system and partnerships across the three sectors.

# Legacy of BPS Superintendents

Photo: Tom Kates



**Thomas Payzant**  
(1995–2006)

- ▲ Citywide standards
- ▲ Collaborative teaching
- ▲ “Pilot schools”
- ▲ Expansion of full-day prekindergarten



**Carol Johnson**  
(2007–13)

- ▲ School reconfigurations, consolidations
- ▲ Expansion of arts instruction
- ▲ Weighted student funding
- ▲ Revamped student assignment system



**John McDonough**  
(2013–15)

- ▲ Longer school day
- ▲ Stronger hiring policies

After Johnson retired in 2013, John McDonough, BPS’ longtime chief financial officer, negotiated a longer school day and lifted restrictive hiring policies during his two years as interim superintendent.

At age 40, Chang is the youngest superintendent in BPS’ recent history. He brings a modern touch, including an active Twitter account, “playlists” of links and readings for his meetings, and a fresh set of eyes to the city that opened America’s first public school in 1635.

Laura Perille, president and CEO of EdVestors, a nonprofit that leverages philanthropy for urban school improvement in Boston, says she is between “cautiously optimistic” and “bullish” about Chang’s vision.

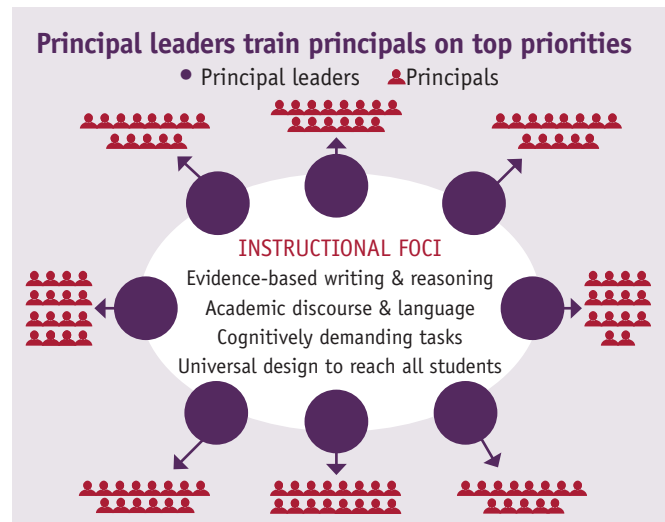
“I’m a little closer on some days to bullish—largely around the vision for raising rigor and cognitively demanding work, but I’m also glad to see his language around the opportunity gap and equity for all kids,” Perille says.

## Equity and adult learning

Upon taking office, Chang released a [100-day plan](#) that included two essential strategies to increase students’ college and career readiness. The first is increasing equity of opportunity in the district, which has stark achievement gaps between white and Asian students and their African American and Latino peers. For example, BPS now has launched a work group to examine its popular Advanced Work Class program (AWC)—an accelerated curriculum

for gifted and talented students in grades 4–6. Participation does not reflect [BPS demographics](#); African American and Latino students comprise 76 percent of overall district enrollment but just 44 percent of AWC students. In addition, BPS is conducting an audit of high school course-taking after discovering that 18 of its 28 secondary schools have less than 5 percent of graduates completing MassCore, the state’s recommended set of courses aimed at preparing students for college or careers. Schools with higher percentages, Chang noted, are the district’s three selective exam schools or high schools with larger numbers of white and Asian students. Similar racial gaps appear on other indicators, such as state assessments.

Chang’s second strategy is to transform adult learning. BPS surveyed principals on Common Core State Standards implementation and identified four “[instructional foci](#)” for schools: evidence-based writing and reasoning, academic discourse and language, cognitively demanding tasks, and universal design to reach all students. To maximize the instructional foci, principals’ monthly professional development centers on building their skills as facilitators of adult learning, such as creating functioning school Instructional Leadership Teams. Chang reorganized the central office to assign eight “principal leaders” who each work with 14–18 principals on strengthening instruction and examining student data. Chang shadows the principal leaders to give them feedback on the quality of their coaching and team building.



“If we don’t transform adult learning, I don’t think we’re going to have a chance with what happens in classrooms,” Chang says. “There is a lot of rebuilding of structures around teacher support and teacher leadership. We want to try to bring that back.”

Next up: more curricular consistency, which has unraveled because one-third of schools receive autonomy from district-provided curricula and other rules. Autonomous schools include pilot schools, turnaround schools, state-designated “innovation” schools and in-district “Horace Mann” charter schools. Chang says he believes in “autonomy with guardrails” to ensure equity and predicts that schools will not view autonomy as an escape from central mandates if his team provides quality supports, particularly in developing teachers and leaders.

*“If we don’t transform adult learning, I don’t think we’re going to have a chance with what happens in classrooms.”*

Tommy Chang, Superintendent, BPS



## Revamping teacher hiring and evaluation

BPS [revamped its educator evaluations](#) and supports in 2011 to include goal setting for student growth and a new classroom observation rubric. About 94 percent of teachers continue to be classified as proficient or exemplary, a lack of differentiation that hinders support. Reasons include a dearth of multiple evaluation measures, inadequate alignment among school leaders about what constitutes proficient or exemplary teaching practice, and a lack of high-quality feedback on classroom practice, reports Emily Kalejs Qazilbash, the assistant superintendent for human capital. To create more consistent expectations among school leaders, BPS is using videos of teachers with normed performance scores. Content experts from BPS' offices of Instructional Research and Development, Special Education and other teams are observing teachers to complement principal evaluations. BPS also is designing its own measures of student growth in each grade and subject to supplement what teachers select, as well as including student and staff feedback in educator and leader evaluations. And it plans to partner with the BTU to make the classroom observation rubric simpler and more aligned with current state academic standards.

BPS' work on evaluation and supports comes as the district granted new hiring [flexibilities](#) to all principals. Under Superintendent McDonough, BPS began using a little-noticed clause in its contract with the BTU enabling all principals to "open post" vacancies to any applicant and not hire BPS teachers on the basis of seniority. The move meant that all principals, not just those in autonomous schools, could hire earlier in the year and select any candidate from inside or outside the district. In 2015, BPS filled

## BPS fills more teacher vacancies by July 1



Source: Boston Public Schools

83 percent of vacancies before July 1—as opposed to just 10 percent filled by July 1 two years ago—and now competes with area suburban districts for a larger talent pool.

The BTU is challenging the hiring flexibilities and the evaluation system's outcomes, which it contends has racial, gender and age biases. BPS stands by the hiring flexibilities and wants to improve the diversity of its applicant pool. BPS leaders note that early staffing has resulted in [more diverse candidates](#) being offered jobs earlier.

Despite the disagreements on evaluation, BTU President Richard Stutman says the union looks forward to working with Chang and noted that BPS is already more responsive under his leadership. "We are hopeful the future will be better than the past," said Stutman, who has been BTU president for 13 years.



## Results

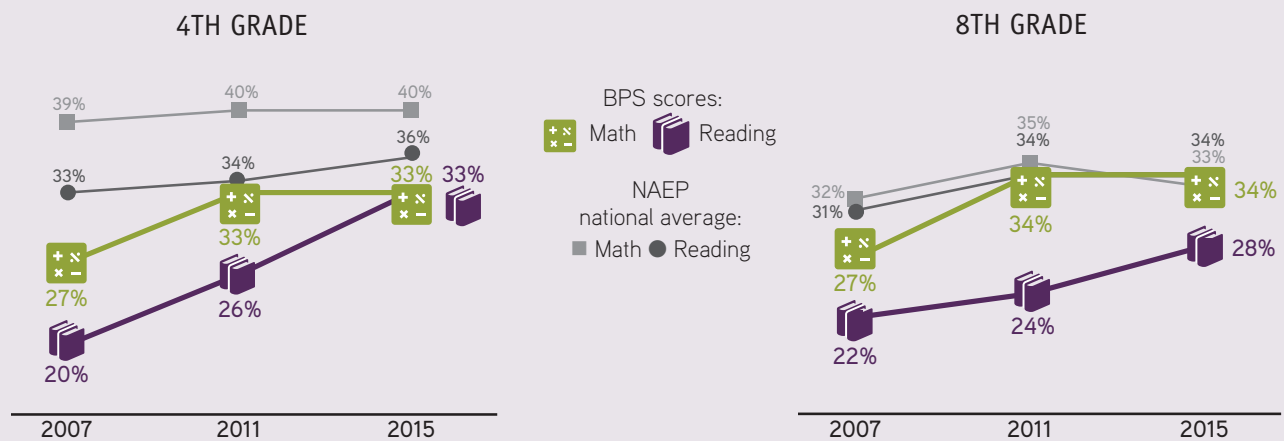
BPS is seeing growth in achievement data and other measures:

- On the TUDA, Boston scores near the top of participating school districts, and on the NAEP, Boston is closing in on the U.S. national average, which includes some of the nation's highest-performing students and districts.
- It also has narrowed the racial gap in four-year graduation rates, even as the city's overall graduation rate has risen.
- About 71.5 percent of graduates attended two- or four-year institutions of higher education in 2013, up from 53.2 percent a decade earlier, [state data show](#). Yet just about half persist

to attain a degree six years after enrolling in higher education immediately after graduation, and about one-third of graduates take at least one remedial course, according to a [Boston Foundation study](#).

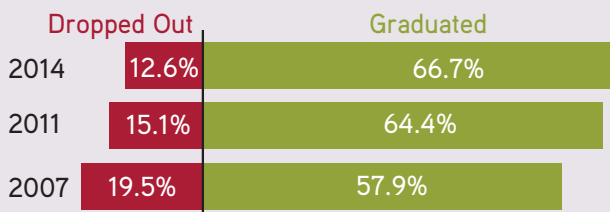
- About 31 percent of 11th and 12th grade students took an Advanced Placement (AP) class in 2013, up from 19 percent in 2005.
- In the classroom, BPS has put a premium on exposure to the arts: Nearly 93 percent of elementary and middle school students receive weekly arts instruction, up from 67 percent six years ago.

### BPS NAEP/TUDA proficiency rates are closing in on the NAEP national average



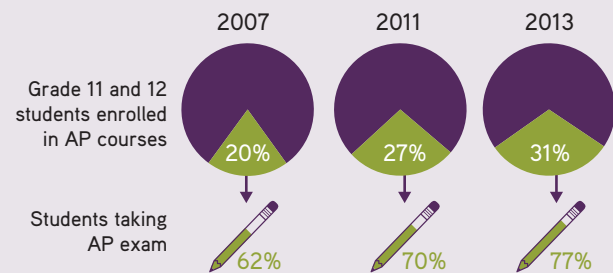
Source: NAEP

### More students graduate, while fewer students drop out



Source: Boston Public Schools

### More students enroll in AP courses and take exams



Source: Boston Public Schools

## Conclusion

Twenty years after losing and regaining its accreditation, Burke High School, now housed in a \$49.5 million renovated facility, won the prestigious "School on the Move" award from EdVestors as the most-improved Boston public school. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan [praised](#) the school's accomplishments and Massachusetts' overall record during a visit to campus in November 2015. The Burke's turnaround symbolizes BPS' own journey.

Still, achievement results for BPS' students of color and poor students trail those of their white, Asian and higher-income peers. The new superintendent, working under a new mayor, wants to improve access to quality schools and equip principals and teachers with the time and skills to hone their craft. **It's the next phase in the history of a school system that has a strong track record and yet much to prove.**