



A Better Curriculum

Policy Recommendations for Creating Inclusive and Effective Curriculum

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TO: Superintendent Brenda Cassellius, Councilor Annissa Essaibi-George, Mayor of Boston Martin Walsh, Senator Jason Lewis, and Representative Alice Peisch

The Issue: A Fractured and Biased Approach to Curriculum

In March of 2020, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education found that Boston Public Schools (BPS) approached curriculum in a way that was “inconsistent” and created “inequitable access” to a high-quality education.¹ Student learning expectations vary from school to school, are not coordinated from grade to grade, and the district is “unable to identify which curricula are being used in each of the district schools.”² And, there is no official process for curriculum selection, or even agreement about what constitutes “curriculum.”³ To be clear: it is crucial that schools be allowed to pick the curricula that best fit the needs of their campus, but more guidance from the district would make curricula choices easier. The issues with the current structure have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, when it became clear that there was no district-wide approach to curriculum that could easily be adapted to remote instruction. Teachers were unfairly left to figure out what exactly they should be teaching, while simultaneously trying to innovate a brand new way of teaching on the fly.

This fractured approach to curricula also allows a lack of diversity and singular narratives about people of color to persist within current curricula. Recently, an ELA curriculum proposed by BPS for transformation schools was found to have 78% of its texts written by white authors⁴ and units that “perpetuate harmful dominant narratives of history.”⁵ When these stereotypes are included in curricula, the American Psychological Association finds that students from these groups experience “stereotype threat,” and believe they are inferior at academics.⁶ The National Bureau of Education Research finds that culturally responsive curricula increase “student attendance by 21 percentage points, GPA by 1.4 grade points, and credits earned by 23.”⁷ As a state that prides itself on being progressive and inclusive, Massachusetts must do more to disrupt the white lens through which we teach all of our students by

In response to these issues, a group of BPS educators came together with Educators for Excellence Boston (E4E-Boston) staff to develop solutions incorporating their classroom expertise. The team’s solutions, which should be enacted at both the district and state level, are outlined below.

¹ BPS District Review <http://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/nolevel/2020-0035.docx>

² BPS District Review, Page 15

³ BPS District Review, Page 75

⁴ <https://www.baystatebanner.com/2020/07/09/the-lens-of-whiteness-wont-close-gaps-in-bps>

⁵ <https://schoolyardnews.com/thirty-one-mission-hill-school-faculty-protest-wit-and-wisdom-curriculum-2e3b3abc4f8a>

⁶ <https://www.apa.org/research/action/stereotype>

⁷ <https://www.nber.org/papers/w21865>

The Solutions: District and State Action

To meet these needs in BPS and across the Commonwealth, we need to enact deep systemic change that will guarantee more equitable access to strong curricula that affirm the worth of all members of our communities. E4E-Boston demands the following actions be taken at the district and state level:

Vet and Recommend High-Quality Curricula

- **BPS Office of Academic and Professional Learning (OAPL) must establish an official process to vet and recommend high-quality K-8 curricula to campuses, as well as a plan to monitor their implementation.** The recommendation process must be clearly communicated publicly and use the following criteria to vet potential curricula:
 - Meet [EdReports](#) and DESE [CURATE](#) standards
 - Incorporate BPS [Essentials for Instructional Equity](#) competencies
 - Pass a rigorously-applied [Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining Practices](#) and antiracist lens
 - Include ample instructional resources for both in-person and remote learning
 - Be vetted and approved by representatives from the BTU Telescope Network, antiracist community groups, and parents of students in the relevant grade level
- **The OAPL should preserve school autonomy but offer improved coherence and student access to high-quality learning by designating a single preferred (but not required) curriculum for each grade level/subject area.** BPS will incentivize use of these curricula by offering implementation support and training. All curricular materials should be easily accessible in their own hubs on the BPS website. This consistency across the district will create a level playing field in which students' experiences are not solely determined by the schools they attend. Schools that feel they already have a high-quality, culturally-sensitive curriculum will not be required to adopt this preferred framework.

Establish and Require an Antiracism Lens for Curricula Statewide

- **File legislation in the Massachusetts General Court to establish equity and diversity criteria that all state-approved curricula must meet:** Amend [MGL Title XII, Chapter 69, Section 1E](#) by inserting language after the first sentence in the second paragraph requiring curricular frameworks to:
 - Emphasize the the contributions, accomplishments, and histories of BIPOC and other marginalized groups, thereby disrupting curriculum paradigms that center white culture and history
 - Provide students with opportunity to reflect on and confront power dynamics, systemic racism, and other inequities in American society
 - *Exact language will be drafted following collaboration with educators, aligned organizations, and legislators*

Next Steps

It is clear that there is both a need and a will to create a curricula experience that is more cohesive in BPS and that is actively antiracist statewide.

It is imperative that BPS and the Massachusetts General Court act quickly on this issue. BPS must have the revised curriculum process in place by the end of this academic year in June 2021, and preferred curricula should be selected and communicated no later than May 2022. At the start of the 192nd General Court in January 2021 legislation to create antiracist curriculum criteria must be filed and prioritized.

Together we can create a learning experience that is both high-quality and that includes previously marginalized groups in the narrative. This will empower students who have felt left behind to achieve at their full potential, and will widen the worldview of students who have always been at the center of curricula. Our students and teachers deserve this achievable outcome.