

19,000 REASONS TO ACT

The Case For Bold Change in Boston Schools



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About the Authors

Families for Excellent Schools harnesses the power of families to advance policy and political changes that create and sustain excellent schools. Founded in 2011 as a partnership between schools and families, FES launched its Boston chapter this fall. FES employs a unique, neighborhood-based organizing model that empowers parent leaders to build neighborhood chapters, host workshops and trainings, and speak out on issues important to their schools and communities.



Executive Summary

In 2009, the Boston Public Schools launched an ambitious Acceleration Agenda, a five year plan to close racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps and reach 100 percent proficiency on the MCAS by the spring of 2014.¹ But five years later, as the plan expires, BPS has made minimal gains and fewer than half of BPS students can reach proficiency in reading or math.²

This is unacceptable in a city that prides itself on being the birthplace of public education. The 2014 MCAS results reveal that a shockingly large number of schools are failing our children. In 40 Boston schools³, fewer than one-in-three students can either read or do math on grade level. These schools collectively serve over 19,000 children, 35 percent of the total student population in the Boston Public Schools.

We cannot – nor do we have to – accept this status quo. Bold initiatives like the Acceleration Agenda are not a mission impossible, but they must be backed up by concrete plans and the political will to stand up for our kids. We must ask ourselves: what is our plan to offer all Boston kids the education they deserve? Do we have the courage to act now, before another generation of kids is forced to attend failing schools? The 19,000 Boston children trapped in failing schools cannot afford to wait.

¹ <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/cms/lib07/MA01906464/Centricity/Domain/31/AccelerationAgenda.pdf>

² All MCAS data cited from MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) database

³ 39 Boston Public Schools and one Commonwealth charter school

Executive Summary cont.

OUR ANALYSIS WILL DEMONSTRATE THAT:

- **Far too many schools in Boston are failing our kids.** In 40 Boston schools, more than two-thirds of students are below grade level in math or reading. These schools collectively serve over 19,000 children, 35 percent of the total student population of the Boston Public Schools. Yet 30 of these schools were rated Level 3 or higher by the state, receiving no interventions. In fact, 33 of these 40 schools scored worse than the two schools marked for intervention by the state after this year's MCAS scores were released. The urgency to transform these schools is missing because of a failure to acknowledge the crisis that we face.
- **This is a civil rights issue.** Of the 19,000 children trapped in these 40 failing schools, 16,400 students are low-income and 16,600 are African-American or Latino. Over 6,600 students are English Language Learners and there are more than 4,000 students with disabilities attending these schools. Additionally, 26 of the 40 schools are located in Mattapan, Dorchester, Roxbury, or Hyde Park – among the neighborhoods in Boston with the highest rates of poverty in the city. This fuels a staggering and unacceptable achievement gap. Just 32 percent of African-American and 38 percent of Latino students in BPS reached grade level proficiency in math in 2014, compared with 67 percent of white students.
- **It doesn't have to be this way.** A group of schools in Boston serving high-need populations are achieving groundbreaking results. The John F. Kennedy School in Jamaica Plain and Boston Community Leadership Academy in Hyde Park have shown strong MCAS results while serving populations that meet or exceed the district average in low-income students and students of color. Both schools also serve large numbers of English Language Learners and students with disabilities. The Eliot School in the North End has narrowed and eliminated achievement gaps, with its Latino students leading the way in math. At UP Academy Dorchester, an in-district public charter school, student achievement grew 47 points in math – in just one year of turnaround. The Edward Brooke Charter School in Roslindale's enrollment is 94 percent African-American and Latino students and 78 percent low-income students, and it is among the highest performing schools in the state. At MATCH Community Day, a school designed to serve English Language Learners, students are performing extraordinarily well in both reading and math. These schools prove that the sky is the limit for Boston kids.
- **Boston needs a plan for these 19,000 students.** The City will need a plan for bold action to ensure access to a great school for each and every child, and particularly these 19,000. Great schools are the bedrock of safe, healthy, and economically thriving communities. Until all of our schools provide a world class education that puts all children on a path to success, we will never reach our full potential as a city.

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Hidden Crisis

Each year, the story is the same: MCAS scores are released, and a small number of schools are targeted for city or state-led intervention. We read about the shocking conditions at several failing schools, and we applaud the few success stories that emerge each fall. But the scale of the problem in the Boston Public Schools is almost never discussed, and the vast majority of failing schools remain unknown to the general public.

Here is the scale of the challenge we face: in 40 schools across the city, collectively serving over 19,000 children, fewer than one in three students are on grade level in either math or reading.⁴ That is a clear and catastrophic failure on the part of our school system, one that has devastating consequences on our children's future success. Imagine the TD Garden filled to capacity – then add a few sections. That's how many children in Boston attend a failing school.

The deeper tragedy emerges when we look at the children and the neighborhoods that these schools serve. Of the 19,000 students at these failing schools:

- 16,400 students are low-income.
- 16,600 are African American or Latino.
- 77 percent (or 27 out of 40) are located in Mattapan, Dorchester, Roxbury, or Hyde Park – the neighborhoods in Boston with the highest rates of poverty in the city.

The future of a child in poverty is dramatically impacted by access to a high quality education, yet our most vulnerable children are trapped in failing schools that don't offer the supports and tools children need to succeed. Boston is a school system where our highest-need students are being left behind.

40 FAILING BOSTON SCHOOLS

SCHOOL TYPE	SCHOOLS	% OF SCHOOLS	ENROLLMENT
K-5	21	41%	9,045
K-8	7	22%	4,125
MIDDLE	8	62%	3,670
MIDDLE/HIGH	2	18%	1,313
HIGH	2	7%	1,321
ALL	40	30%	19,474

⁴ Measured as scoring proficient or advanced on the ELA or Math MCAS

40 FAILING BOSTON SCHOOLS

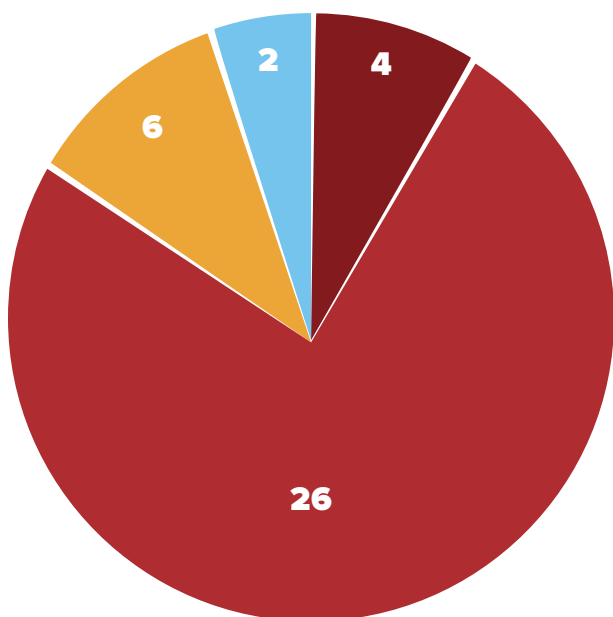
Serving over 19,000 children



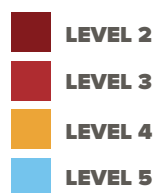
Each year, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) rates each school and district on a scale of Levels 1-5. Shockingly, of the 40 schools where fewer than 1-in-3 students reached grade level in reading or math, 30 were rated Level 3 or higher by the state – giving them little to no additional resources or autonomy to turn around their schools.

In fact, 33 of these 40 schools scored worse than the two schools marked for intervention by the state after this year’s MCAS scores were released. Of the eight Level 4 and 5 schools in this group, most have been mired in failed turnaround plans that have not had their intended effect.

It’s not good enough to wait until a school hits rock bottom before deciding to intervene. These 40 schools need bold action now, long before they bottom out into Level 4 or Level 5.



40 schools where fewer than 1-in-3 students reached grade level in reading or math, **30 were rated Level 3 or higher by the state.**



* Note: Of the 40 failing schools, 38 are included in this pie chart (the remaining 2 had insufficient data to receive a state-assigned accountability level).

Each of Boston’s 40 failing schools has a story behind it. The struggles of Madison Park High School and the Dearborn STEM Academy are no secret. However, many schools in Boston that never enter the public discussion illustrate the systemic problems that hold back our school system.

Despite staggeringly low performance, **The Mildred Avenue Elementary School** in Mattapan remains a Level 3 school. Mildred Ave. serves a population of 95 percent African-American and Latino students, and 88 percent low-income students. The school has been led by three principals in the past five years – a turnover in school leadership that has made it impossible to establish a healthy school culture. Just 11 percent of students at Mildred Ave. are able to do math at grade level.

Dorchester Collegiate Academy, a Commonwealth Charter School in Dorchester, has never realized its promise to a community desperate for high-quality choices. In 2014, only 22 percent of DCA students reached proficiency in math. After five years in operation, DCACS has been placed on probation by the state and may lose its charter if it cannot dramatically improve performance.

The Elihu Greenwood Leadership Academy in Hyde Park was named a Level 4 school by the state in 2009, but remains chronically underperforming and is still designated as Level 4 in 2014. With just one in four students reaching grade level in reading, the students at the Elihu Greenwood -- 95 percent of whom are students of color and 83 percent who are low-income -- are not receiving the education they deserve.

A parent living on the Mattapan-Hyde Park line is surrounded by ten elementary and middle schools -- seven of which are failing. This cluster of failing schools forces parents to choose between sending their children to school close to home and providing their children with a great education -- a choice no parent should have to make.

SPOTLIGHT: MATTAPAN & HYDE PARK SCHOOLS



The common denominator in these failing schools is that they are serving the students who are most at-risk of falling into or remaining in poverty without a world-class education.

- **35** of the **40** failing schools have more than **78 percent** of their students living in poverty, exceeding the district average.
- **36** of these schools exceed the district average of African-American and Latino students of **77 percent**.
- **23** of the schools meet or exceed the district average of **30 percent** English Language Learners and **21** schools have more than the district average of **19 percent** students with disabilities.

These numbers demonstrate a clear failure on the part of our school system to provide a quality education to many of our highest-need students. While some will pin the blame on poverty, the fault does not lie with parents or their children. The problem is a bureaucracy that has not enabled bold transformation of failing schools, and expanded parent choice and access to excellent school options.

It Doesn't Have To Be This Way

Thus far, **19,000 Reasons to Act** has painted a bleak picture of the challenges that children and families face in Boston. While the crisis we face is clear, we see a path forward, and good reason to be hopeful. A small but significant group of district and charter schools show us that all children in Boston can succeed, regardless of their race, neighborhood, or socioeconomic status. The challenge before us is whether we can work together to scale access to schools like these.

Each of these schools, though different, offers us a glimpse at a path forward for Boston schools:

Boston Community Leadership Academy, Hyde Park - Boston's first pilot high school, BCLA serves a student body that is 90 percent African-American and Latino and 88 percent low-income. Through its pilot status, BCLA has used its autonomies to transform school culture and provide students with the support and resources they need to excel. In 2014, 81 percent of BCLA students were proficient or advanced in reading and 68 percent in Math.

MATCH Community Day Charter Public School in Jamaica Plain enrolls a student body that is 94 percent African American and Latino, 82 percent English Language Learners, and 83 percent low-income. Yet 66 percent of students at MATCH Community Day scored advanced or proficient on the reading MCAS in 2014.

The Eliot K-8 School in the North End has cut achievement gaps to below 10 points between African-American and white students and the school's Latino students outperformed their white peers in both ELA and math in 2014, with 95 percent reaching proficiency in math, nearly 60 points higher than the district average for Latino students.

The John F. Kennedy Elementary School in Jamaica Plain has used its Turnaround status and flexibility to transform the school, with extra supports provided for English Language Learners, who make up 50 percent of the student body. The community worked together to transition to a STEM Innovation school, allowing it to maintain autonomies and continue to grow academically. In 2014, 66 percent of JFK's students scored proficient or advanced on the math MCAS, a jump of nearly 30 percent since becoming a Turnaround school.

UP Academy Dorchester, an in-district public charter school, has worked in partnership with the Boston Public Schools to transform the former John Marshall Elementary School. In 2013, just 13 percent of the Marshall's students reached proficiency in math. One year later, at UP Academy Dorchester, 60 percent of students reached proficiency. UP Academy Dorchester serves a population that is 93 percent African-American and Latino and 90 percent low income. The children didn't change from 2013 to 2014 – what changed was the bold approach that UP takes to teaching and learning.

The Edward Brooke Charter Public Schools in Roslindale, Mattapan, and East Boston have proven that Boston kids can compete with children anywhere in the state. Brooke serves a population that is 94 percent African-American and Latino, and 78 percent low-income. In 2014, 94 percent of students at Brooke reached proficiency in reading and math. At Brooke Roslindale, 57 percent of students were advanced (the highest possible score) in math – among the highest percentages in the state.

A Call to Action

Every morning, thousands of children walk through the doors of a failing school for yet another school day. Our children deserve better.

To bring a world-class education to all Boston kids will require a commitment to bold and transformational change of a degree not yet seen in Boston. Five years ago, a key strategy in the Acceleration Agenda was to “replicate success and turn around our lowest performing schools.”⁵ As we have seen, that has been done in a small number of schools and it has worked, with increased proficiency and the narrowing of achievement gaps. The challenge is that it hasn’t happened enough. We must pick up the goals of the Acceleration Agenda and reach them by embracing key characteristics of successful schools and applying them to all Boston schools. Students and their families cannot afford to wait.

As city and state leadership prepare a strategy to address this crisis, we must embrace the following principles:

1. Listen to Families

Families in Boston are ready to lead a movement for quality schools across the city. For far too long, parent voices have been hidden in the background. We must flip this paradigm on its head, and put parents in a leading role when it comes to discussions of education in Boston.

2. Replicate What is Working

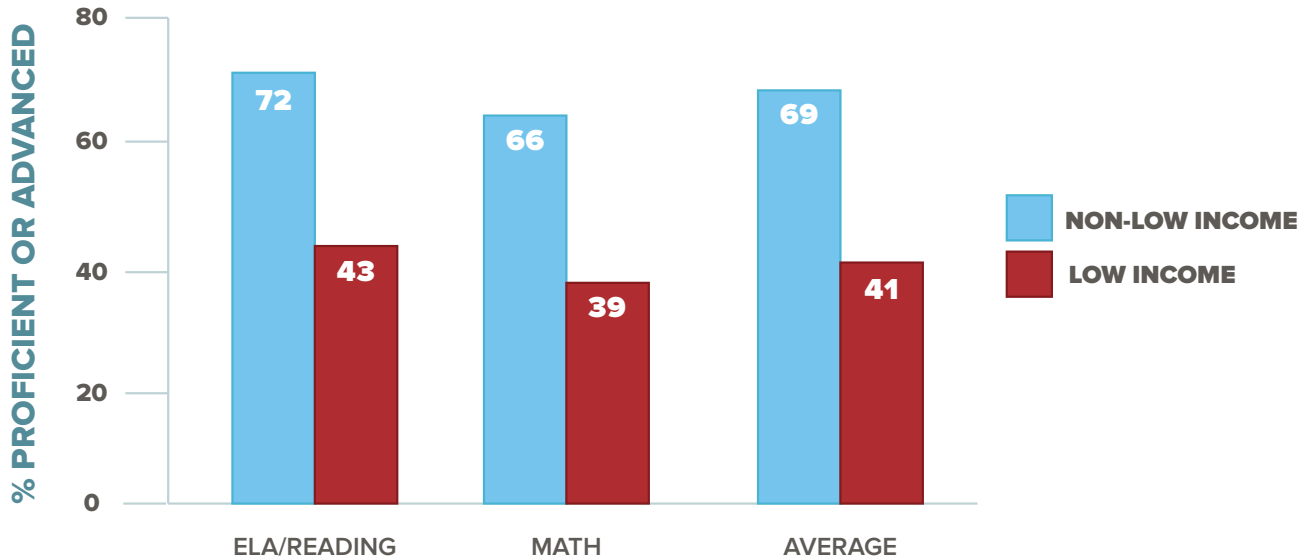
Parents and civic leaders must lead a discussion about how to scale excellence in the forms of school autonomy, great teaching, community and non-profit partnerships, cultural competency, diversity in our teaching corps, and effective parent engagement. Parents are looking for elected leaders to embrace the best strategies present in our district and charter public schools, and move past the stale debates that have surrounded school reform in the past.

3. Embrace Partnership

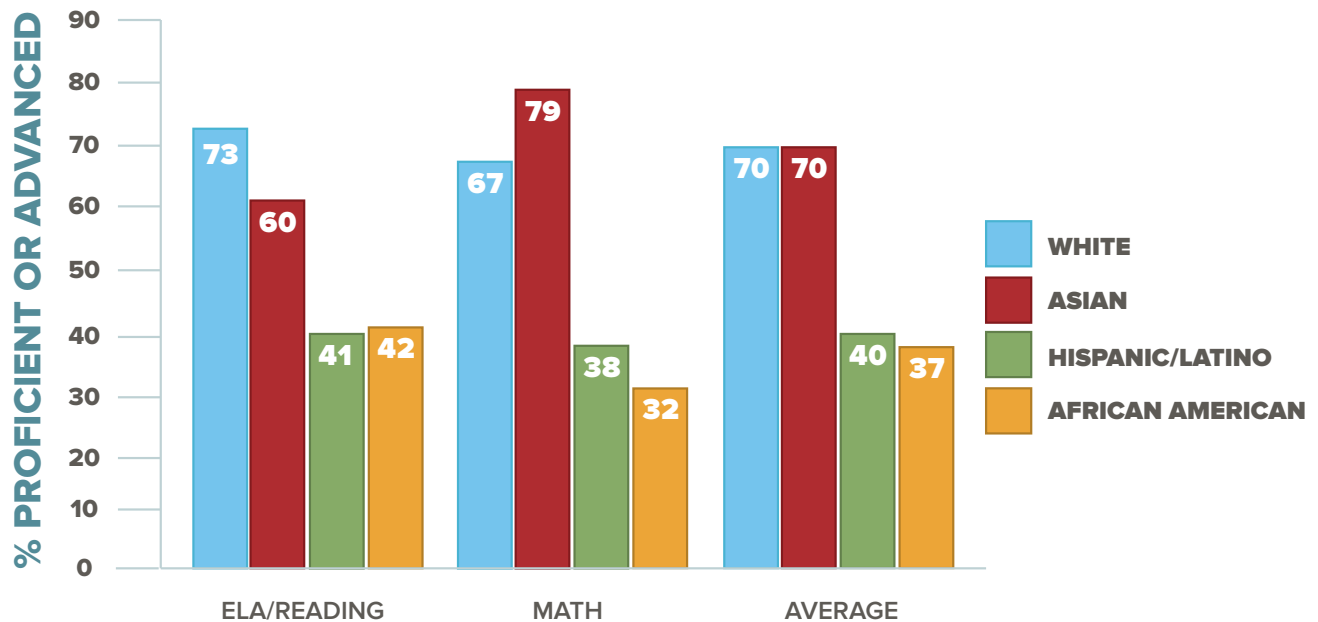
It’s time to end the divisive nature of education politics in our city and embrace a culture of partnership that recognizes that we are all in this together. When schools in our city are failing, all of our children suffer. Achieving our mission will require a broad coalition of parents, teachers, elected leaders, faith leaders, community-based organizations, Boston Public Schools leadership, parochial school leaders, and charter school leaders. Anything short of a true community uprising will fall short of our goal to bring great schools to every corner of the City of Boston.

⁵ <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/cms/lib07/MA01906464/Centricity/Domain/31/AccelerationAgenda.pdf>, p. 12

2014 MCAS RESULTS BY INCOME (all grades)



2014 MCAS RESULTS BY ETHNICITY (all grades)



Appendix B: Excerpts from the BPS Acceleration Agenda

This paper refers to the sections of the Acceleration Agenda that are cited below. The entire document can be found on the BPS website.⁶

Goal: Ensure all students achieve MCAS proficiency (pp. 7-8):

Certainly, MCAS scores are only one measure of success. We know that standardized tests tell only a portion of the story about the complex task of educating all students in every classroom, and taken alone, they paint an incomplete picture. However, MCAS exams remain one of the cornerstones of education reform in Massachusetts and provide valuable information about the state of our schools.

Today, proficiency is the standard by which all students and schools are measured. We must insist that our children have more than a basic knowledge of subject matter; we must expect them to think, apply knowledge in new settings, and learn to express themselves in creative ways. As noted earlier, Boston has made great strides in moving students from warning and failing levels to passing levels. Now we must move all of our students even further, into the proficient and advanced categories on MCAS. Every student in every grade must reach these levels of understanding and performance in the classroom and on the exams.

Goal: Close access and achievement gaps (p. 8):

We cannot label ourselves a great school district when some students are performing at the highest levels while other students are not. Therefore we must redouble our efforts to prevent and eliminate achievement and access gaps.

The Boston School Committee adopted an Achievement Gap Policy that guides the work of schools and the district in eliminating performance disparities. We must put this policy into practice systemically and continue to identify and address achievement gaps at all levels – from the classroom to the district as a whole. Our school communities must engage in frank discussions about these gaps and take intentional steps to eliminate them. We must identify and confront the root causes of achievement gaps, always asking ourselves why some students excel when others do not. It is unacceptable to attribute these disparities to the students themselves. Rather, it is our responsibility as adults to set high expectations for every child and ensure that all students have access to rigorous curriculum, effective instruction, and the supports they need to achieve at the proficient and advanced levels, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, educational program or socio-economic background.

Strategy: Replicate success and turn around low-performing schools (p. 22):

In every community, the people of Boston have articulated their urgent need for more high-quality options. Boston Public Schools offers access to award-winning, nationally-recognized schools whose results are heralded and whose practices are researched and shared across the country. Our families demand – and every student deserves – nothing less than the best we have to offer.

When schools don't educate students well or meet the high expectations of our community, we must work to improve the quality of those schools. In schools that require substantial improvements, such as the Commonwealth designated "Level 4" turnaround schools, we must take swift action to put them on a new path to excellence. In extreme cases, schools that are deemed unable to make the fundamental changes necessary for improvement may not reopen in their current form. Instead, the existing program would be replaced by one with a proven record of success in order to meet the needs of students and families in that building.

Expanding what works and significantly altering what doesn't require innovative approaches that challenge the status quo. The new education reform law passed by the Massachusetts legislature in January 2010 provides us the ability to create at least four Horace Mann in-district charter schools. These new schools will surely replicate best practices from our portfolio of successful programs, but they also allow us to establish new methods of reaching excellence. For Level 4 schools, we must take dramatically different approaches to turning around underperformance through innovative use of time, resources, and human capital.

Strategy: Deepen partnerships with parents, students and the community (p. 27):

Schools alone cannot ensure that every child achieves academic success and personal well-being. Parents and families remain our most important partners. Therefore, educators must do everything possible to develop strong, sustained relationships with families and key partners to challenge, engage, and support students in and out of school. We must forge robust home school connections with ongoing communication among parents, teachers, principals, other adults, and students themselves, focused on academic improvement. Families must have a clear understanding of expectations for teaching and learning, as well as an active role in school decision-making, particularly through School Site and Parent Councils.

⁶ <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/cms/lib07/MA01906464/Centricity/Domain/31/AccelerationAgenda.pdf>

Appendix C: The 40 Schools

SCHOOL	ELA % Proficient & Advanced	Math % Proficient & Advanced	Neighborhood
Curtis Guild	23	42	East Boston
James Otis	29	57	East Boston
Joseph Lee	46	29	Dorchester
Orchard Gardens	32	40	Roxbury
Blackstone	17	30	South End
Clarence R Edwards Middle	46	30	Charlestown
Curley K-8 School	39	31	Jamaica Plain
David A Ellis	24	37	Roxbury
Edison K-8	38	32	Brighton
Harbor School	38	21	Dorchester
Harvard-Kent	32	54	Charlestown
Higginson/Lewis K-8	33	21	Roxbury
James Condon Elementary	31	35	South Boston
James J Chittick	25	35	Mattapan
James P Timilty Middle	42	26	Roxbury
James W Hennigan	23	25	Jamaica Plain
John W McCormack	39	33	South Boston
Lilla G. Frederick Middle School	35	19	Dorchester
Madison Park High	47	24	Roxbury
Maurice J Tobin	27	27	Roxbury
Michael J Perkins	27	48	South Boston
Mildred Avenue K-8	23	11	Mattapan
Mission Hill School	33	23	Jamaica Plain
Mozart	30	39	Roslindale
O W Holmes	31	30	Dorchester
Thomas J Kenny	22	29	Dorchester
William Monroe Trotter	30	37	Dorchester
Winship Elementary	25	50	Brighton
Wm B Rogers Middle	49	16	Hyde Park
Dorchester Collegiate Academy Charter	51	22	Dorchester
Dearborn	40	22	Roxbury
Elihu Greenwood Leadership Academy	25	34	Hyde Park
Henry Grew	28	32	Hyde Park
John Winthrop	18	15	Dorchester
Mattahunt	10	17	Mattapan
William Ellery Channing	28	28	Hyde Park
John P Holland	14	25	Dorchester
Paul A Dever	27	41	Dorchester
Greater Egleston Community High School	69	18	Roxbury
TechBoston Academy	56	26	Dorchester