

**Citywide Parent Council Meeting**  
**12/17/19**

CPC hosted Michael Loconto, Boston School Committee Chair. He is the parent of 3 students in the Boston Public Schools. They attend the Beethoven/Ohrenberger and are in 2nd, 4th and 6th grades.

1. Overview of the Boston School Committee (BSC) and BPS Budget

- BSC has a cyclical nature
- There are 7 members, appointed by the Mayor, who serve for 4 years which can be renewed
- Michael Loconto (ML) has served on the BSC for 6 years
- The 3 requirements of the BSC are (1) Hire and evaluate the Superintendent, (2) Set the budget, and (3) Vote on policies (Note: website also states the BSC is responsible for “Defining the vision, mission and goals of the Boston Public Schools.” <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/domain/162>)
- The Boston Public School’s budget is 1/3 of the city’s budget. It’s the largest department in the city with 10,000 employees (including teachers), 53,000 students and 125 schools
- 4 taskforces – what is the School Committees role as it relates to these taskforces? Opportunity and Achievement Gap Taskforce, ELL Taskforce, had an inclusion working group, qualify school framework. Hear regular updates from these groups and other areas such as transportation
- The BSC Committee must begin budget hearings on the 1<sup>st</sup> Weds of February each year
- The Central Office budget is separate from school budgets. The Transportation, Bolling Building staff and certain Special Education services etc. come out of the central budget
- Measurable increase year over year. ML said last year’s budget was 61.6M
- School department typically exceeds allocations that other budgets receive – I am not sure what this means!

2. Superintendent’s Strategic Plan and Build BPS

- At the time of writing the minutes, the Superintendent’s Strategic Plan was about 2/3 complete. Dr Cassellius used her tour of 125 schools to refresh the existing(?) strategic plan. ML said Superintendent hoped to have final draft middle of next month (January 2020)
- Once it’s released, there will be a 30-day public comment period and community meetings
- One priority is the acceleration of 6<sup>th</sup> grade additions to current K-5 schools and planning for the transition of the 5 existing middle schools in BPS. Mentioned Irving in Roslindale, Edwards in Charlestown and McCormack in Dorchester need to be planned for since they will closed by the district under the Build BPS plan. (McCormack will be merged with Boston Community Leadership Academy (BCLA) to create a 7-12.)

### 3. Questions from CPC Reps

Q: Describe from a high level how the budget works?

ML: Get money from several buckets:

- i. Federal aid, made up of Title I, Title II, and Title III funding. City hall budget planners are usually able to predict fairly accurately the amount BPS will receive from federal sources
- ii. State aid: Chapter 70. Student Opportunity Act signed by the MA Governor recently changed the formula from prior years. Didn't give BPS everything we wanted but gave us more than we've had in a long time. Chapter 70 aid made up about 20% of the state aid BPS received in 2007 but decreased to 4% in recent years. One explanation for this is that the wealth accrued from property taxes does not reflect the income realities of Boston residents. In the initial formula, the state predicted BPS would receive more aid from this pool and therefore allocated Boston less Chapter 70 aid. Then the charter school reimbursements further reduced this funding pool. Reasonable estimates from the state for next year estimate that the state aid to BPS will be around 10 million
- iii. Local contributions make up rest of the budget
- iv. Private grants also make up a small part of the budget

One problem that Boston has always had is the way that we cannot raise our own revenue, a vestige of the 1920s and 1930s. Raising taxes in Boston has always been hamstrung by the state. (The Home Rule petition) Property taxes have stayed relatively low and we don't allow for a Proposition 2.5 override as other districts do

Q: What can BSC do to lobby for more money from the city?

ML: Budget conversation starts in November, what are we looking for, what are we hearing in the community. There are ongoing conversations, in programmatic form. Discuss the needs for Special Ed, ELL, facilities, transportation and try to push district to find savings and find better ways to expend the scarce resources we're given. We ask what the strategic decisions are so that we can make to make the budget go further. Last year, BPS invested \$5M in safety and security (new locking door handles in school classrooms), \$8M in M7 passes for all 7-12 students regardless of how far from school they lived, and invested in making it so the ISEE is taken in 6<sup>th</sup> grade BPS classrooms during the school day. Try to identify urgent needs and meet them. 6% was the biggest year over year increase we've seen and that was for 2018. There is typically a 5-15M increase each year

Q: Philbrick rep. We are a small community with a family-like feel, but we also feel that our school's existence is on the line. Is there an advocate on BSC who can see the value of small schools and lobby to keep them open?

ML: We know that people love their small single strand schools, but they are not financially sustainable. The sweet spot for making a school sustainable is 300-500 students. Kids in smaller schools typically "suffer" because they don't have the budget to provide all the amenities they need. Every school has a foundation budget of \$200K to pay for a principal and other necessary items. The rest of the budget comes from Weighted Student Funding (WSF). Because smaller school have fewer students, it's very

hard to allocate them a baseline of staff and support services to give them the programming they should have.

Q: If the Philbrick were to be reconfigured, what happens to that building? Does BPS get the money from the sale of the building?

ML: We started this conversation several years ago and went out to community to ask what they wanted. For Roslindale, there was supposed to be a predictable pathway through middle school and then onto any high school. This didn't work out in reality. Many families really just wanted a clear pathway to the exam schools. Starting in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, kids start to move schools and also to exit the system. In the kindergarten grades, most schools are full and then after that, the numbers drop off.... ML circled back to say that we (BPS) can lay claim to the money from school buildings that the city reclaims. But essentially, by going back into the city budget, the funds are allocated to BPS and other city services anyway.

Q: K-8 parent asked where 7th and 8th grade students go (if K-8s are closed)?

ML: K-8s will remain but they are problematic in our current system. Student numbers decline and racial diversity is an issue. Creating a dual pathway for most students where there is one transition, after 6<sup>th</sup> grade or after 8<sup>th</sup> grade is the goal. We need to go back to communities and re-present options. "What is it that you want to do with the schools that are in your communities? Do you want to keep them or move them to new buildings?" A parent asked where a 6th grader who isn't going to an exam school will go?" ML responded to say that they go to a K-8 or a 7-12. This prompted a follow up question about the expansion of the 7-12 model. ML responded to say that the forecast is that we'll follow suit at Brighton High and others to create more 7-12 schools. Gave the success of New Mission (one of the newer 7-12 schools in the district) as an example of a strong school that is not an exam school.

Q: Are you going to put information out about grade configurations soon? And which K-5 schools will be selected to have a 6th grade added? Was this the question? If so, did he answer it – see below

ML: To make a school financially sustainable it needs to have in 300-500 students. WSF is the visual that a student who walks into a school with no special needs and no language needs might cost \$16,000. Another student with more needs may use \$24,000 worth of services. Using this example, the cost averages out to \$20,000/student. Before WSF was implemented, schools received funding for political reasons and often based on reasons related to social capital; it was the wild west of personal advocacy for each school. Other configurations will live on; Early Education Centers for example. The district plans to get from the current 24 configurations down to 8-9. This will make schools more cost effective and allow us to give each school a "foundational budget."

Q: Parent commented that the closing of the West Roxbury Academy created fear across the district around grade configurations. That scenario can be avoided with good planning, so other communities don't have to go through that.

ML: Says he appreciated the comment, and the proposal by BPS took the BSC by surprise. In a district with old buildings that were not built to last, there will need to be more building closures.

Q: Is there any movement on what will happen to the Jackson-Mann?

ML: Having regular conversations with both school communities who use that building (Jackson K-8 and Horace Mann School for the Deaf and Blind) BPS will start meeting with both communities in January 2020 to talk about next steps.

Q: There is a lot of talk about elected school committee. As a parent, what does ML think of this idea? What are the pros and cons?

ML: Responded that for him, there are 2 absolutes to being a member of the BSC.

i. I will obey the will of the people

ii. I will never run for an elected school committee.

Says Boston to an appointed model because of some bad experiences with the elected school committee. The school department was out of sync with rest of the city budget.

The BSC is now in its 29<sup>th</sup> year of delivering a balanced budget under the appointed model. ML says he wants a School Committee that is in sync and making the best and most efficient use of scarce resources. There is a big scale difference when comparing Boston to other districts with elected committees that are much, much smaller.

Some key points to note about the BSC: 4 of us are parents, and we have ethnic and gender diversity. Career and work experience is also a factors; current appointed committee has 2 lawyers, 2 members who work in Higher Education, a Financial Services executive etc – a pretty broad range of skills representing our district. ML supports the current structure.

Q: Why would you put yourself forward as a candidate for appointed but not as an candidate to be elected?

ML: Doesn't think that an elected School Committee could achieve the same level of harmony and balance that the current appointed model does. Says he isn't one for politics and the politics that electing a school committee would not be of interest to him. Referred to himself as a "city finance guy" not an "education guy." Also concerned about special interest groups being elected.

Q: We live in a wealthy city in the wealthiest country in the world. Why can't we fully fund education?

ML: Agreed, and said this is why we found commonality fighting against Ballot Question 2 in the 2016 election, and for the Student Opportunity Act. In terms of funding sources, he does not believe that going after the PILOT (Payment In Lieu Of Taxes) program is the answer though, instead thinks local and state taxes are a better source of revenue.

Should be asking businesses to chip in and luxury buildings too. (More on PILOT <https://www.boston.gov/finance/payment-lieu-tax-pilot-program>)

Q: Happy to hear that Superintendent has said that additional money coming in from Student Opportunity Act should be allocated equitably. Commented that paraprofessionals (paras) are often employees of color. What kinds of Professional Development can BPS give paras so that they have more training and support?

ML: Agrees there is limited resources for PD for paras. Says we should be looking at creating a para-to-teacher training track since paras live in our communities, work in our schools and reflect the racial diversity of our district that we need as teachers in our schools.

Q: Build BPS – who makes that plan? Who are the decision makers?

ML: Decision makers are Superintendent and the School Committee. BSC ceded authority to the Superintendent to reconfigure schools. BSC members were hearing over and over in the community that families wanted K-6 schools, and he thinks this makes sense. BSC is trying to react and respond to what the community wants. Believes it's ok to configure our schools around the exams schools that educate 1/3 of BPS high school kids. As we complete school projects (Dearborn Stem, Eliot, BAA) we free up money to start new school building projects.

Q: “You alluded to the make up of what this room looks like. How can you assure that when you go out to communities that you won't see the same kinds of people over and over who don't reflect the makeup of BPS?”

ML: Agrees that we need to do better to hear more voices in the community, for example – BSC needs to hold daytime meetings. He said that there are always groups in Boston who he listens to and the NAACP and BEAM (Black Educators Alliance of Massachusetts) as examples. Says it is a challenge to reach communities of color with the current structures in place.

Q: Question about decision making as it relates to testifying before BSC. Rep relayed that CPC spent a lot of energy polling CPC reps and schools to evaluate support for Dr Cassellius during the Superintendent selection process. While CPC reps were testifying in favor of her candidacy at School Committee the evening of the vote, the press broke that she had been offered the position. With this in mind, can ML honestly say that BSC listens and considers the opinions of the stake holders and people who testify at School Committee?

ML: Responded to say that “the press says a lot of things.” BSC does take stock of what they hear through testimony, from their members and from many community sources. Have been operating in a way that is very analog. Have begun to meet in quarterly retreats. Has noticed that direct democracy has been on the rise and BSC needs to change the way it operates to respond. Have made a change to the way they vote on major issues – for example, they now hear testimony at one meeting and then vote at the next meeting. He said BSC is open to ideas and suggestions.