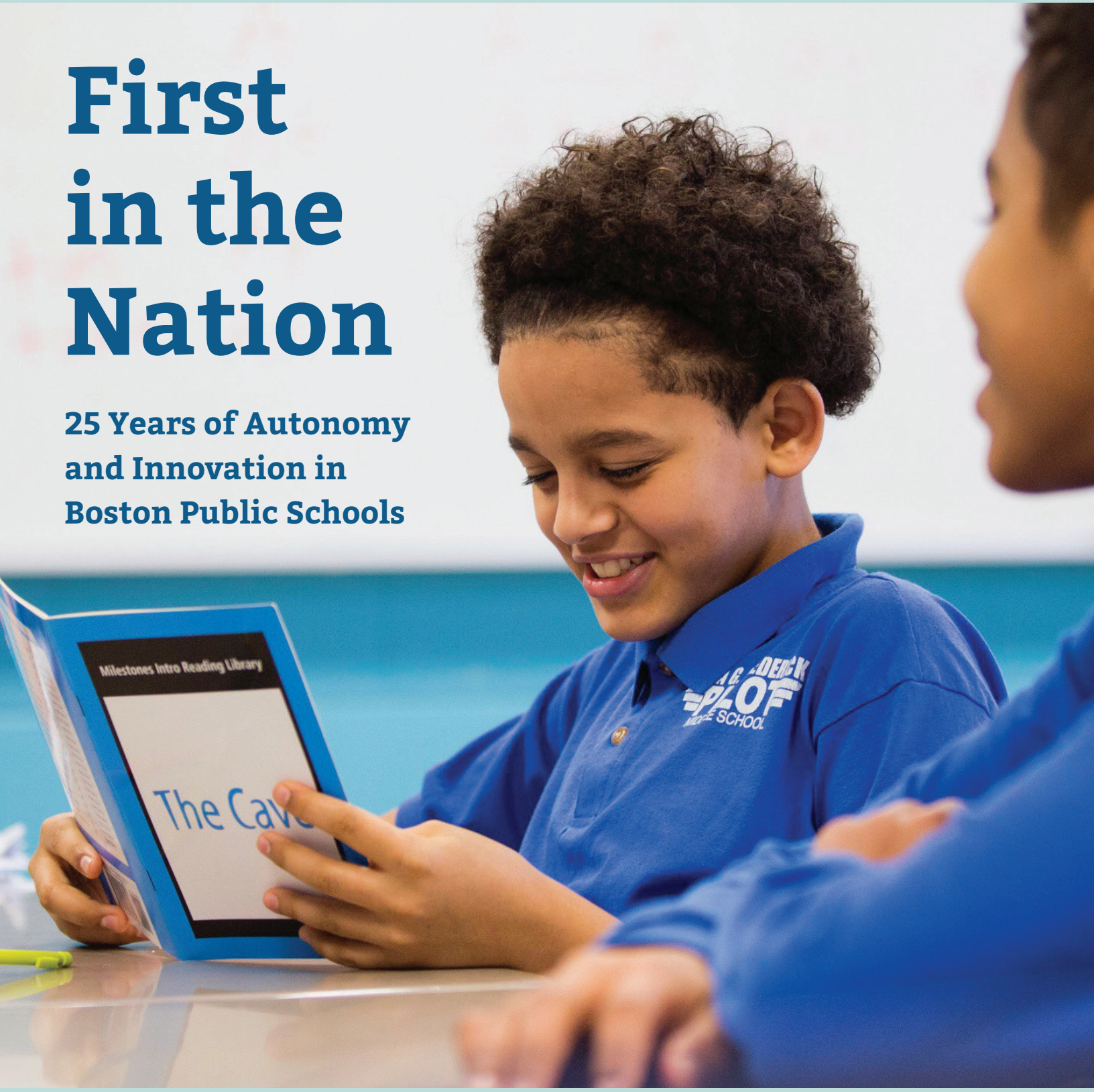
First in the Nation

25 Years of Autonomy and Innovation in Boston Public Schools



Center for Collaborative Education

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First in the Nation: 25 Years of Autonomy and Innovation in Boston Public Schools

By the Center for Collaborative Education

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The opinions and conclusions expressed in this report do not necessarily represent the views of the funders, Boston Public Schools or other contributors.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study marks the 25th anniversary of the founding of autonomous schools in Boston. The Pilot School agreement between the Boston Public Schools (BPS) Superintendent, School Committee, Mayor and the Boston Teachers Union, signed in 1994, was the first district–teacher union agreement to create in-district autonomous schools in the nation. The first pilot schools opened soon after, and today there is a network of 32 autonomous schools, including pilot, Horace Mann charter and Innovation schools—that are a popular choice among families and enroll a quarter of all BPS students.

To commemorate this anniversary, the Center for Collaborative Education, a long-time supporter of school autonomy, with support from the Boston Foundation, invited current and former autonomous school leaders, teachers, and district leaders to reflect on the evolution of autonomous schools in Boston, including how schools make use of available autonomies, the challenges they face in doing so, and the impact on the district of having a critical mass of autonomous in-district schools. We also review publicly available data on student outcomes to give a snapshot of how students in autonomous schools fare compared with students in other district schools. Several important takeaways and recommendations emerged from this reflection, which point to the important legacy and future of autonomous schools in Boston.

Key Takeaways & Recommendations

- Autonomous school leaders are clear that the six autonomies in budget, curriculum and assessment, governance, professional development, staffing, and scheduling are interconnected, but when asked what was the most important autonomy, staffing, curriculum and assessment, and budget emerged as the "top 3." The school leaders' responses support a theme in the literature that a key link between school autonomy and improved student outcomes is the extent to which school leaders use their autonomy to focus on classroom-level practice (i.e., teaching and curriculum) and resources (i.e. budget).
- Innovative practices in budget and staffing/hiring first incubated in autonomous schools spurred changes in district policy leading to a student-weighted budget model and systemwide open-posting and mutual consent hiring, which all helped to expand the autonomy of all school leaders. Autonomous schools continue to incubate and innovate by leveraging their autonomy to implement various leadership and decision making structures (e.g., distributed leadership), pedagogical approaches (e.g., performance assessment and school-wide thematic curriculum) and educational programs (e.g., bilingual education and inclusion models), among others.
- Autonomous school students are representative of the district by race, income and student disability status, but autonomous schools serve a smaller share of English Learners (EL) compared to traditional district schools. Schools must continue their efforts to eliminate this disparity in enrollment and monitor progress both at the school and network level. On performance indicators, for the most recent school years, autonomous and traditional district schools perform similarly on attendance and grade 3–8 MCAS in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math; however, autonomous schools perform better at the high school level, including advanced coursetaking, grade 10 MCAS performance, high school graduation and college enrollment. Autonomous schools have smaller disparities on these indicators by race/ethnicity and student income background compared to traditional district schools. In contrast, English Learners and students with disabilities face substantial disparities in performance compared to their peers in autonomous schools. To eliminate these disparities and improve outcomes for English Learners and students with disabilities, **autonomous schools should prioritize identifying and addressing the root causes of these disparities** as part of their school improvement efforts.
- Providing schools with autonomies has implications for both schools and the district. Autonomy implies freedom from bureaucratic constraints (in certain areas) but as in-district autonomous schools have grown in number and type with overlapping and distinct autonomies, along with significant turnover at the district level, a relationship that was originally described as a "unique partnership" has grown more complicated over time. Schools and the district must forge a relationship that is mutually supportive, beneficial, and focused on the needs of students. In support of this renewed partnership, **the district should set and clearly articulate a vision of and support for school autonomy overall and for autonomous schools**—pilot, Innovation and Horace Mann charter schools, and their place in developing a district-wide portfolio of high-quality schools.

- Leadership at the school level is also critical in achieving the promise of autonomy. While autonomy provides schools with freedom to act and innovate, increasing school autonomy does not in and of itself create better schools. Autonomy is only beneficial when someone uses it effectively. Therefore, having school leaders who have the vision, skills and competencies to use autonomies effectively cannot be overstated. **Identifying and preparing school leaders to successfully manage autonomous schools long into the future should be a priority for the network of autonomous schools and the district.**
- Using and implementing autonomy is a learning process for school leaders and the Autonomous Schools Network serves as a necessary learning community. Unfortunately, this once-vital learning community—that facilitated collaboration among schools; provided professional learning, mentorship and support for school leaders; and supported collective action in working with the district—has waned over time. However, there is still a need, indeed, a growing need for the network. After working to better understand what current school leaders want from the network, **autonomous school leaders should develop a plan to reinvigorate the network.** Collaborating with a third party to convene and coordinate the network was effective in the past and can be again.
- As district public schools that were created to serve as laboratories of innovation, the research and development potential of the autonomous schools has been underutilized. Practices incubated in autonomous schools, in budgeting and staffing, have been a source of innovation and learning for the district in the past and there is more to learn. For example, there is an opportunity to better understand how schools' approach to curriculum, use of performance assessments and distributed leadership models, among other practices, impact school climate, culture, and student outcomes. **The district and schools should invest in a research agenda to build on the current available evidence on school autonomy to better codify effective practices that could benefit schools across the district.**

INTRODUCTION

Boston Public Schools (BPS) has been a leader in school-based autonomy for 25 years. During the early 1990s, the demand for school choice in Boston was high with many families with school-age children forgoing traditional district public schools for private, parochial and other school options. With the district already facing declining enrollments, the 1993 passage of the Commonwealth charter school legislation signaled increasing competition for students. In response to the passing of the charter school legislation and the impending opening of Commonwealth charter schools in the city of Boston (and statewide), the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) developed and presented a proposal to the city and district to create "in-district autonomous schools," called pilot schools.

> "The purpose of establishing pilot schools is to provide models of educational excellence that help to foster widespread educational reform in all Boston public schools."
>
> *From* Boston Public Schools, Innovation in Action: Boston Public Schools Pilot School Program Manual, *1995*

Pilot schools were to be district public schools with autonomy in six areas: budget, curriculum, governance, schedule, staffing and professional development.[1] These areas of autonomy would allow schools to maximize their resources in order to best meet student needs. In return, pilot schools would be held to a higher standard of accountability. The Pilot School agreement between the Boston Public Schools Superintendent, School Committee, Mayor and the Boston Teachers Union was signed in 1994, becoming the first district–teacher union agreement to create in-district autonomous schools in the nation. Today, along with pilot schools, BPS autonomous schools also include Horace Mann charter schools and Innovation schools.

About This Project

To mark the 25th anniversary of the opening of the first pilot schools in Boston, the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE), a longtime supporter and advocate of pilot schools and school-based autonomy, with funding from the Boston Foundation (TBF), partnered to provide a retrospective on school autonomy in Boston. This report describes the history and evolution of autonomous schools in Boston; examines recent outcomes for students in autonomous schools and other BPS school types; gives some insight into how and to what extent schools use their various autonomies; and discusses the successes, challenges, and unintended consequences of in-district school autonomy.

1 Boston pilot schools were inspired by the Coalition of Essential Schools, a movement started in the 1980s by Deborah Meier, Ted Sizer and others that honored the power of student ideas and the professional autonomy of teachers.

This report focuses on within-district autonomous schools and does not include Commonwealth charter schools that operate independently of the district. During the spring of 2019, we invited all current leaders of autonomous schools—Pilot, Innovation and Horace Mann charter schools—to participate in an online survey. Leaders from 20 of the 32 autonomous schools completed the survey. Additionally, we conducted focus groups with teachers from 11 autonomous schools, and interviewed 20 education leaders connected to Boston's autonomous schools. Interviewees included founding and current school leaders; current and former district administrators, including superintendents; current and former teachers' union leaders; funders and supporters; and current and former CCE and Boston Foundation staff. A review of historical documents, including meeting minutes of the Autonomous Schools Network meetings and current network activities also provided insight and information. Finally, we analyzed publicly-available data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) School and District Profiles to report on a range of student outcomes.

The following questions guided the study:

1. What is the origin and history of autonomous schools in Boston?
2. How do students in autonomous schools perform across various academic and engagement outcomes, overall, by student group, and compared to students in other school types?
3. How and to what extent do autonomous schools make use of available autonomies, and what has been the impact on district practices and policies?
4. What barriers or challenges do autonomous schools face in exercising autonomies?
5. What, if any, unintended consequences have arisen due to having a large group of autonomous schools in the district?

In the following sections, we provide a brief history and timeline of the origin and growth of autonomous schools in Boston and present several indicators of student achievement to see how autonomous schools fare alongside other BPS schools. We also take a look at how schools exercise the six autonomies to achieve their missions and goals, highlighting successes as well as challenges therein. Finally, we highlight some key lessons learned that emerged from our conversations with district, school and teacher leaders, and end with some recommendations for the future. We hope that this retrospective of autonomous schools in Boston will serve as a springboard for renewed dialogue and a deeper examination of school autonomy among various stakeholders in Boston, and beyond.

AUTONOMOUS SCHOOLS IN BOSTON

In the early 1990s Boston school and city leaders, like leaders in many other urban districts, were faced with the growing momentum of the charter school movement. Boston leaders anticipated that the pending passage of the Commonwealth charter school legislation would undercut school reform efforts at the district level by diverting both funding and students into independent charter schools. In response, leaders including the Boston Public Schools Superintendent, the School Committee, Mayor and the Boston Teachers Union formed a unique partnership and signed the Pilot School agreement, allowing for the creation of in-district, public schools with autonomies similar to the state-sponsored charter schools.

A Brief History of Autonomous Schools in Boston Public Schools

The Pilot School agreement was signed in 1994 and the first pilot schools launched the following year. The earliest pilot schools included: Fenway High School, Lyndon K–8 School, Young Achievers Math and Science Academy, New Mission High School, Health Careers (now EM Kennedy Academy for Health Careers), Greater Egleston High School, Mission Hill K–8 School, the Harbor Middle School[2], and Boston Arts Academy (see Figure 1: Growth of autonomous schools from 1995 to present). In 1997, state officials authorized the creation of Horace Mann charter schools (HMCS) which, in contrast to Commonwealth charter schools, would operate within public school districts. The two earliest Horace Mann charter schools in Boston, opening in 1998, were EM Kennedy Academy for Health Careers (which converted from pilot status) and Downtown Evening (now Boston Day & Evening Academy, which converted from a traditional school). In 2010, the state authorized the creation of Innovation schools, directly modeled on the BPS pilot schools. Today, all three school models are represented among the autonomous schools in BPS (see Portfolio of Boston Public Schools).

As the early autonomous school leaders began to organize and develop their schools and engage with the district, they recognized that they would be stronger working together. So, in 1997, the pilot school leaders formed a pilot schools Network (now the Autonomous Schools Network) with support from the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE)[3], a nonprofit organization that would serve as the convener of the network. The network would provide a common voice for autonomous schools in interpreting the autonomies and negotiating with the district and be a source of collaboration,

FIGURE 2. ***Number of schools in Boston Public Schools by school type for various school years between 1994–2019***

Source: DESE (2019d). 2018–19 Enrollment by grade report (school). Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/enrollmentbygrade.aspx

2 The Harbor Middle School merged with the Henderson School in 2014 to become the Henderson K–12 Innovation School.

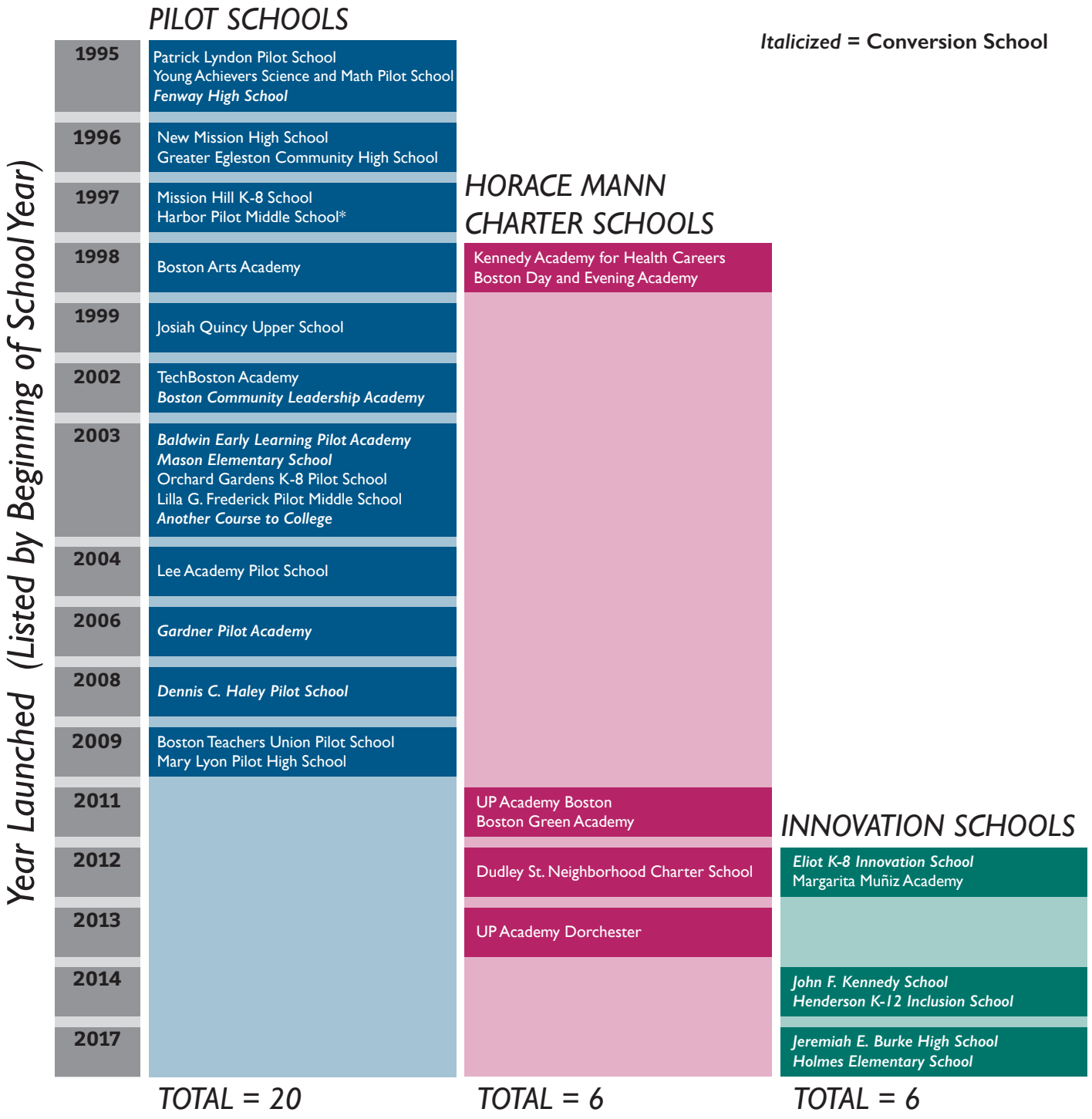
3 CCE was founded in1994 by Larry Myatt and Linda Nathan who were also co-founders of Fenway High School.

sharing and support as school leaders went about designing their unique school cultures/climates.

Over time, the school autonomy model expanded across the district and the number of autonomous schools, including pilot, Horace Mann charter and Innovation schools, tripled between 1999 and 2014 from 10 to 29 (see Figure 2). The district also expanded autonomy in certain areas to traditional schools as well, and all schools in BPS enjoy some degree of autonomy today. Twenty-five years after the founding of the first pilot schools, autonomous schools include some of the "oldest" schools in the district, mainstays over the past two decades or more.

However, despite the long history and tradition of in-district school autonomy in Boston various stakeholders point to a certain ambivalence at the district level as well as ongoing challenges about the "nature and value" of autonomy, which we will explore in later sections.

FIGURE 1. **Growth of Autonomous Schools from 1995 to Present**



Portfolio of Boston Public Schools

With 125 schools in the BPS portfolio (as of school year 2019–20) Boston Public Schools offers several school options. District schools are divided into three primary categories: autonomous schools, exam schools, and traditional schools.

Autonomous Schools, Including Pilot, Innovation and Horace Mann Charter Schools

Pilot schools: The Boston Public Schools' pilot schools, launched in 1994, are the result of a unique partnership among Mayor Thomas M. Menino, the Boston School Committee, superintendent, and the Boston Teachers Union. Pilot schools were explicitly created to be models of educational innovation and to serve as research and development sites for effective urban public schools. Pilot schools are part of the school district but have autonomy over budget, curriculum/assessment, governance, scheduling, staffing and professional development to provide increased flexibility to organize schools and staffing to meet the needs of students and families.

Horace Mann Charter Schools: In 1997, the Massachusetts state legislature authorized a second type of charter school called Horace Mann charter schools (HMCS). However, unlike Commonwealth charters, which are not covered in this report, and which operate independently of local school districts, Horace Mann charter schools are created with the approval of the local school committee and, in most cases, the teachers' union. These "in-district" charter schools are approved by both the Boston School Committee and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), and have all of the same autonomies as Commonwealth charter schools except in the areas of budget and staffing. Boston HMCS are funded through Boston Public Schools and employees are Boston Teachers Union (BTU) members. The first two HMCS authorized in the state, in 1998, were in Boston and were the EM Kennedy Academy for Health Careers, which prepares Boston students for careers in the health professions, and the Boston Day & Evening Academy (BDEA) in Roxbury, which enrolls Boston youth who have dropped out or who are overage for high school. BDEA uses a competency-based approach and so doesn't use traditional grades or grade levels and offers different schedules for day, evening and distance learners.

Innovation Schools: Innovation schools are a model created by *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap* legislation, signed into Massachusetts law in January 2010, and are directly modeled on BPS pilot schools. The 2010 state law provides educators and other stakeholders the opportunity to either convert existing schools or to create new schools that can implement innovative strategies to raise achievement and close the achievement gap by operating with increased autonomy and flexibility in six key areas: 1) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; 2) schedule and calendar; 3) staffing; 4) professional development; 5) district policies and procedures; and 6) budget. Schools specify up to six areas of autonomy in their proposed innovation plans. Boston was among the first districts in the state to open an Innovation school.

Exam Schools

Boston Public Schools has three exam schools (Boston Latin Academy, Boston Latin School, and the John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science) that admit students based on students' scores on an entrance exam and prior academic achievement. Exam schools do not have any autonomies.

Traditional Schools

Traditional schools encompass all other BPS schools that are not autonomous or exam schools, including Turnaround schools[4], special schools and alternative programs.[5] For brevity and clarity, non-autonomous, non-exam schools are referred to as traditional district schools throughout the report.

4 In 2010, the state legislature created Turnaround schools, where the district could intervene in schools that were designated as an underperforming "Level 4" school by the state. These schools are granted some but not all of the budget, staffing and scheduling autonomies that pilot and Innovation schools receive, and staff receive stipends for increased time requirements.

5 BPS also includes schools and programs to serve particular student populations. For example, Newcomers Academy at Boston International High School and several similar programs help students new to the United States get a strong start in the Boston Public Schools. Other programs serve students who are over-age or off-track, need to go to school at night, have disabilities, or are experiencing certain disciplinary issues.

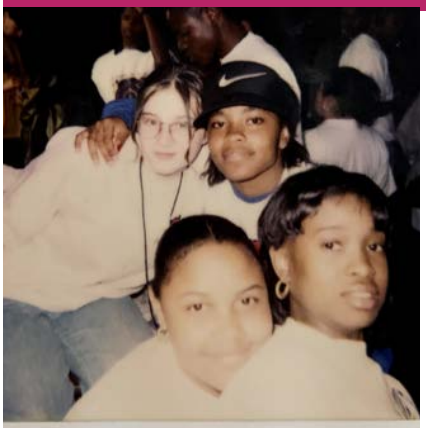
TABLE 1. ***Autonomous schools in Boston Public Schools, by grade configuration and autonomous school type, for school year 2019–2020***

	Pilot	HMCS	Innovation
Early Learning (PK–2)	▪ Baldwin Early Learning Pilot Academy ▪ Lee Academy Pilot School		
Elementary (K–5)	▪ Samuel W. Mason Elementary School	▪ Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School	▪ Oliver Wendell Holmes Innovation School ▪ John F. Kennedy Elementary
Elementary Middle (K–8)	▪ Boston Teachers Union K–8 School ▪ Gardner Pilot Academy ▪ Dennis Haley K–8 ▪ Patrick Lyndon K–8 ▪ Mission Hill K–8 ▪ Orchard Gardens K–8 ▪ Young Achievers Science & Math K–8	▪ UP Academy Dorchester	▪ John Eliot K–8
Middle (6–8)	▪ Lila G. Frederick Middle	▪ UP Academy Boston	
Middle/High (6–12)	▪ Josiah Quincy Upper School ▪ TechBoston Academy	▪ Boston Green Academy	
High (9–12)	▪ Another Course to College ▪ Boston Arts Academy ▪ Boston Community Leadership Academy ▪ Fenway High School ▪ Mary Lyon High School ▪ New Mission High School	▪ Edward M. Kennedy Academy for Heath Careers	▪ Jeremiah Burke High School ▪ Margarita Muñiz Academy
Alternative High School	▪ Greater Egleston High School	▪ Boston Day & Evening Academy	
K–12			▪ Dr. William Henderson K–12 Inclusion School

The 32 autonomous schools cover all grades from preK to 12 with multiple grade configurations (see Table 1), and include two early education schools, four elementary schools, nine K–8 schools, two middle schools, three middle/high schools, nine high schools, two alternative schools serving high school students, and one K–12 school. In SY2019, autonomous schools enrolled about 14,000 students, or just over a quarter (26%) of all BPS students, including 20% of all students in grades preK–5, 31% of all students in grades 6–8, and 31% of all students in grades 9–12.

A Timeline History of Autonomous Schools in Boston

1993 to 1995



1993: Massachusetts State Legislature authorizes the creation of Commonwealth charter schools as part of the Education Reform Act.

1994: Boston Public Schools and the Boston Teachers Union sign the historic Pilot School agreement, the first in the nation district-teacher union agreement to create in-district autonomous schools.

1995: Founding of the Center for Collaborative Education-Metro Boston (CCE), which serves as a regional center for the Coalition of Essential Schools and the original convener of the Pilot Schools Network.

Fall 1995: The first generation of pilot schools, including Fenway High School, Young Achievers Math & Science School, and Lyndon K-8 open.

1996 to 2000

1996: BPS creates the position of Special Assistant to the Superintendent for Pilot Schools.

1997: Pilot school leaders and CCE agree to formally create the Boston Pilot Schools Network with CCE serving as the convener.

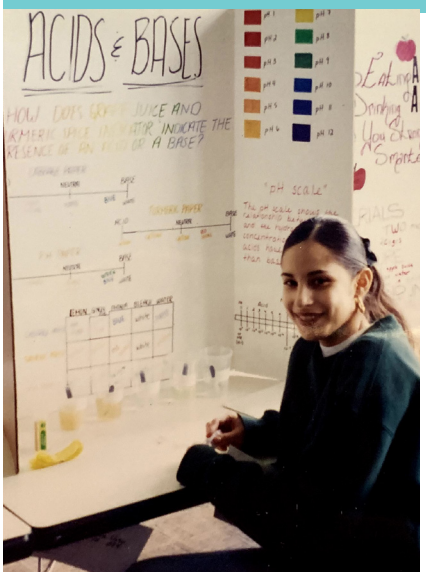
1997: State officials authorize Horace Mann charter schools, whose design is inspired by Boston pilot schools model.

1997–1998: A School Quality Review (SQR) process, designed by the Pilot Schools Network, BPS, CCE, and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform is implemented as part of the accountability system for pilot schools.

Fall 1998: The first two Horace Mann charter schools—E.M. Kennedy Academy for Health Careers and Boston Day & Evening Academy—open.

1999: Boston Arts Academy, the city's first and only public high school for the visual and performing arts, launches as a pilot school.

2001 to 2003



2000–2014: In 2000, CCE, in conjunction with Northeastern University, launches the Greater Boston Principal Residency Network (PRN), an apprenticeship-based an apprenticeship-based principal preparation and certification program to prepare new school and teacher leaders for the growing number of autonomous schools. Over 14 years, PRN produced 150 school leaders, including many current autonomous school and teacher leaders.

2001: CCE releases its first report on pilot schools progress and presents findings to the Boston School Committee, showing that, on average, pilot schools surpass district averages on a range of indicators of student engagement and achievement.

Fall 2002: Boston Community Leadership Academy converts to pilot school status—the first traditional school to do so.

2003: The Boston Foundation announces its support for pilot schools and offers planning and implementation grants for traditional BPS schools interested in exploring pilotstatus. The same year, three conversion pilot schools open.

2004 to 2008

2005–2007: CCE and Boston pilot school leaders collaborate with Los Angeles educators, community organizers, and the LA Small Schools Collective to advocate for the adoption of the pilot school model by LA Unified School District and United Teachers LA. An agreement was reached and the first two pilot schools launched in 2007. Today there are more than 45 LAUSD pilot schools.

2006: BPS superintendent Tom Payzant approves a Pilot Schools Manual which codifies all operational autonomies granted to pilot schools along with their obligations and accountability model.

2007: CCE releases a four-year, student-level study of pilot high schools and findings show that, on average on a range of student performance indicators, pilot schools outpace traditional district schools.

2009 to Now

2009: Mary Lyon Pilot High School opens as the first full inclusion public school serving Boston students.

2009: Researchers from Harvard University and MIT, with support from the Boston Foundation, release a comparative study of MCAS performance in Boston's Commonwealth charters, pilot and traditional district schools showing that MCAS outcomes for students in pilot schools were not statistically significantly better than outcomes for comparable students in traditional schools.

2010: The position of Academic Superintendent for Pilot Schools at BPS is discontinued.

Fall 2012: The first innovation schools, Eliot K-8 and Margarita Muñiz Academy, the district's first dual-language high school, are approved and opened.

2016: The Massachusetts Authorization of Additional Charter Schools and Charter School Expansion Initiative to raise the state's cap on public charter schools, also known as Question 2, is placed on the ballot and defeated.

Autonomous School Students and Outcomes

A main goal of the original Pilot agreement was to develop school models to better serve the diverse Boston student body and improve student outcomes. Different studies of varying rigor and methodologies, looking at a range of outcomes over various time periods have found that autonomous schools either "outperform" traditional schools (e.g. CCE 2001) or perform the same as or at lease not statistically significantly better than traditional schools (e.g. Abdulkadiroglu et al. 2009). Additionally, a recent state review of BPS noted that while overall autonomous schools did not "outpeform" traditional district schools based on the district's School Quality Framework (SQF), twenty-eight autonomous schools were rated in the top 100 schools, several in the top tier, including two in the top five schools. In this section, we look at the student population and outcomes in autonomous schools. We rely on publicly-available indicators of performance, including attendance, test performance, high school course taking, high school graduation and college enrollment. However, we were not able to include local measures that many autonomous schools use and value (e.g., performance assessment data) or indicators of student well-being that are collected across the system, but to which we did not have access. We also show how students in traditional district schools and exam schools perform on these measures, although our goal is not to rank schools or school types.

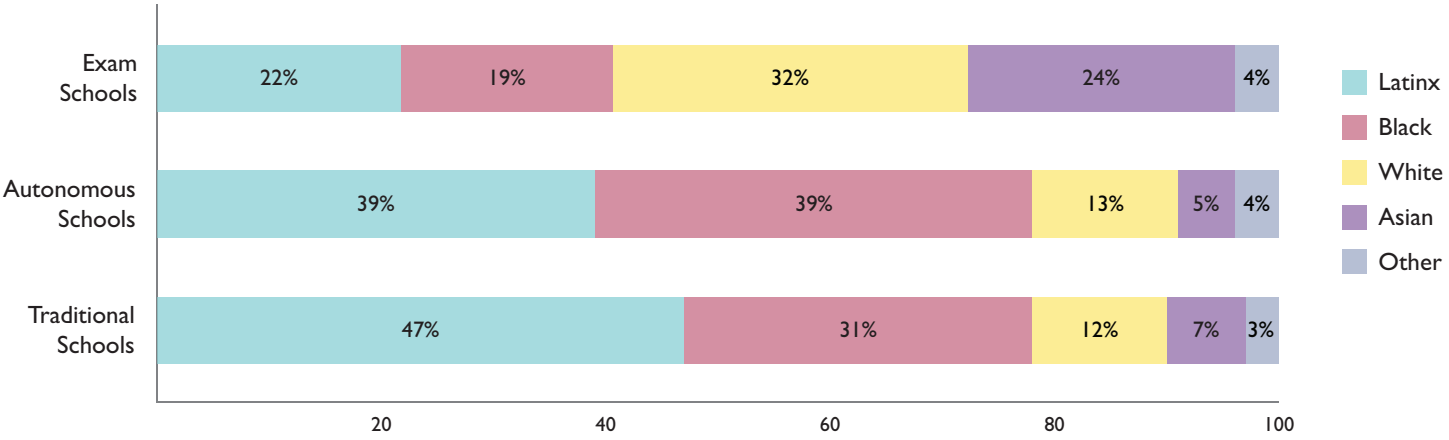
Autonomous Schools Student Population

In both autonomous and traditional district schools, Black and Latinx students are nearly 80% of all students, though autonomous schools enroll a higher proportion of Black students and a smaller share of Latinx students compared to traditional district schools. Both school types enroll similar proportions of Asian and White students. In contrast, student enrollment by race/ethnicity in exam schools is substantially different. Across the three exam schools the majority of students identify as White (32%) or Asian (24%), while Black (19%) and Latinx (22%) students together make up less than half of exam school enrollment (see Figure 3).

More than half of students (56%) in autonomous schools are identified as economically disadvantaged[6] or from lower-income backgrounds, a slightly smaller share than in traditional schools (62%), but almost double the share in exam schools (29%). Just over a fifth of students (22%) in both autonomous and traditional schools have a diagnosed disability (SWD), a substantially higher proportion than the 3% of students with disabilities in exam schools (see Figure 4).

The three different school types also vary widely in their English Learner (EL) enrollment. Autonomous schools enroll a smaller share of ELs than traditional district schools do (26% to 39%), and just 1% of students in exam schools are ELs. Over the past decade, the proportion of ELs in autonomous schools increased by 14 percentage points, but

FIGURE 3. ***BPS student enrollment by race/ethnicity by school type, SY2019***



Source: Calculations based on DESE (2019e). 2018–19 Enrollment by race/gender report (school). Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/enrollmentbyracegender.aspx

6 In FY 2017, DESE switched their definition of low-income to economically disadvantaged and adjusted the criteria and methodology for identifying students, which resulted in an overall decrease in the number of students identified as such. So although not identical, we use the terms students who are economically disadvantaged and students from lower-income backgrounds interchangeably.

the proportion in traditional district schools increased even more during the same time period. Additionally, there are differences in the ELs served by school type—a larger share of ELs in traditional district schools (42%) are in either their first or second year in Massachusetts schools compared to 33% of ELs in autonomous schools (authors' calculation of DESE data).

Overall, autonomous schools, like traditional district schools, enroll a majority of Black and Latinx students and students from economically disadvantaged or lower-income backgrounds. Autonomous and traditional district schools also enroll a similar share of students with disabilities; however, autonomous schools enroll a smaller share of ELs. In contrast, exam schools enroll a far smaller share of Black and Latinx students, ELs and students with disabilities or students from lower-income backgrounds than either autonomous or traditional district schools.

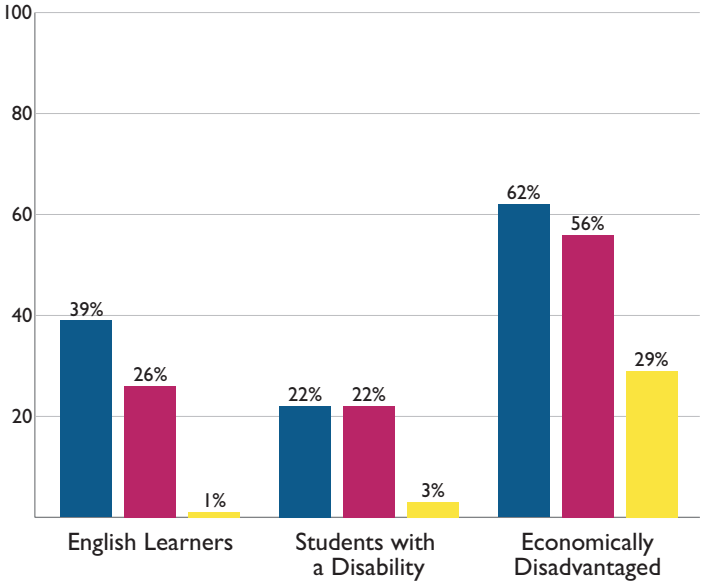
Differences in admissions policies across the three school types undoubtedly affect student body composition. The exam schools have a highly selective application process that considers scores on an entrance exam and previous academic achievement; whereas, traditional district schools follow an open-enrollment policy as do several autonomous high schools except for five that require applications, and three HMCS that use lotteries. The different admissions policies have implications for both the selection of students in autonomous schools and for outcomes (see later in report for more detailed discussion on this topic). Next, we examine student outcomes.

Attendance Rates

Attendance is one indicator of student engagement, and in SY2019, students in autonomous and traditional district schools had very similar attendance rates of 91% and 92%, respectively. Exam schools had a higher attendance rate of 95%. Additionally, on average, students in both autonomous and traditional schools missed 14 days of school, while students in exam schools missed just under nine days of school.

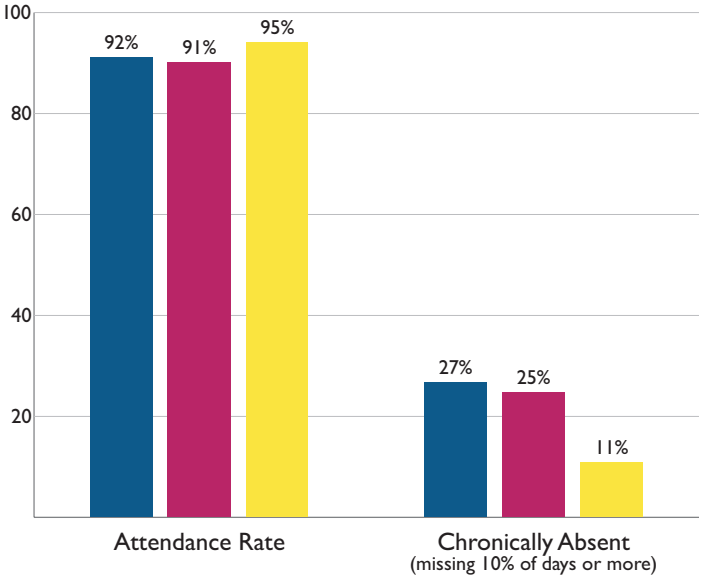
Another metric to gauge attendance and student engagement is the chronic absenteeism rate. Students who are chronically absent—meaning they missed 10% of school days or more—are at higher risk of falling off-track (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Overall, about a quarter of students at both autonomous (25%) and traditional schools (27%) were chronically absent, which is more than double the rate for exam schools where about a tenth (10.5%) of all students were chronically absent in SY2019 (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 4. ***Selected school populations in BPS by school type, SY2019***



Source: Calculations based on 2018–19 Selected populations report (school). Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/selectedpopulations.aspx

FIGURE 5. ***Attendance rates and chronic absenteeism rates by school type, SY2019***



Source: Calculations based on DESE (2019c). 2018–19 Attendance report (school). Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/attendance.aspx

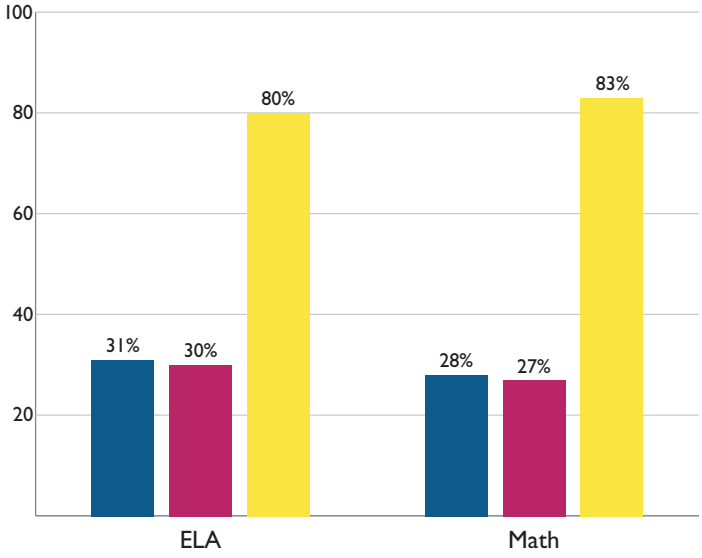
Grade 3–8 MCAS Performance

In SY2018, students in autonomous and traditional schools had very similar performance on the latest MCAS assessments in Math and English Language Arts (ELA) for grades 3–8. Almost three out of every 10 students in both autonomous schools (30%) and in traditional district schools (31%) either "met" or "exceeded expectations" in ELA. Performance was similar in Math, where 27% of students in autonomous schools and 28% of students in traditional district schools either met or exceeded expectations. At exam schools, around eight out of every 10 students either met or exceeded expectations on the ELA (80%) and Math (83%) tests (see Figure 6).

MCAS Performance by Student Group

Among students in autonomous schools, there were substantial differences in performance on the grades 3–8 MCAS in both ELA and Math by student race/ethnicity, income background, EL and disability status. The overall levels of performance and differences in performance by student group were almost identical in autonomous and traditional district schools.

FIGURE 6. ***Percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations, Grade 3–8 MCAS ELA and Math, by school type, SY2018***



Source: Calculations based on DESE (2019j). Next Gen MCAS achievement results. Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/nextgenmcas.aspx

Performance in English Language Arts

In ELA, 24% of Black, Latinx and students identified as economically disadvantaged, at both autonomous schools and traditional district schools, either met or exceeded expectations. At the same time, larger shares of students from all other racial groups, the vast majority of whom are Asian and White (55%) and students from higher-income backgrounds at autonomous (44%) and traditional schools (45%) either met or exceeded expectations. Ten percent of ELs and 11% of SWDs at autonomous schools either met or exceeded expectations compared to 37% of their peers not identified as ELs or with a diagnosed disability. In traditional schools 15% of ELs and 7% of SWDs compared to 39% of their peers either met or exceeded expectations (see Figure 7).

The majority of students at exam schools, across most student groups, either met or exceeded expectations on the grades 3–8 ELA test. For example, more than three-quarters of Black and Latinx students (76%) and students identified as economically disadvantaged (77%) either met or exceeded expectations; whereas half (50%) of students with disabilities and 42% of ELs in exam schools either met or exceeded expectations[7].

Performance in Math

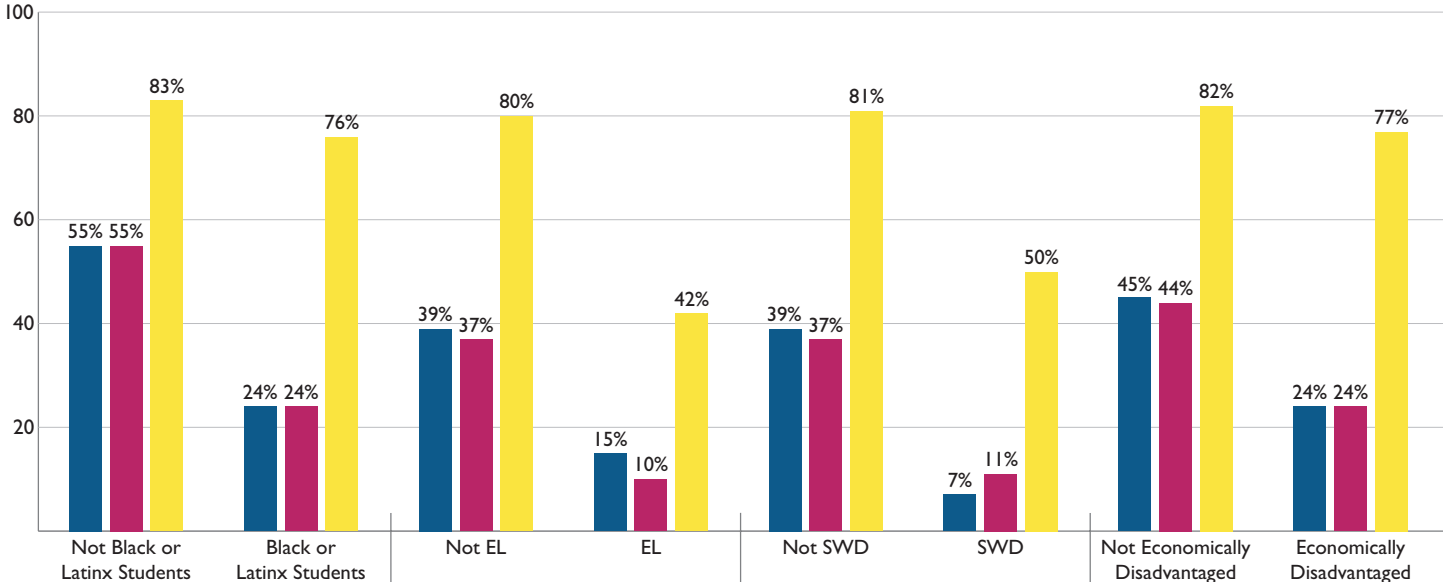
Performance in Math was similar to performance in ELA with large differences in performance by student race/ethnicity, income background, EL and disability status. About a fifth of Black and Latinx and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in grades 3–8 in both autonomous and traditional district schools either met or exceeded expectations on the Math MCAS assessment (see Figure 8). In contrast, more than half of White and Asian students (57% at autonomous schools and 55% at traditional schools) and 41% of students from higher-income backgrounds either met or exceeded expectations.

Eleven percent of ELs at autonomous schools and 18% at traditional schools either met or exceeded expectations compared to a third (33%) of students not identified as EL. Additionally, 7% of SWDs in autonomous schools and 8% in traditional schools either met or exceeded expectations.

Similar to performance on the ELA MCAS, the vast majority of students, across most student groups, at exam schools either met or exceeded expectations in math, including 78% of Black and Latinx students. However, a third (33%) of students with disabilities and 58% of ELs either met or exceeded expectations.

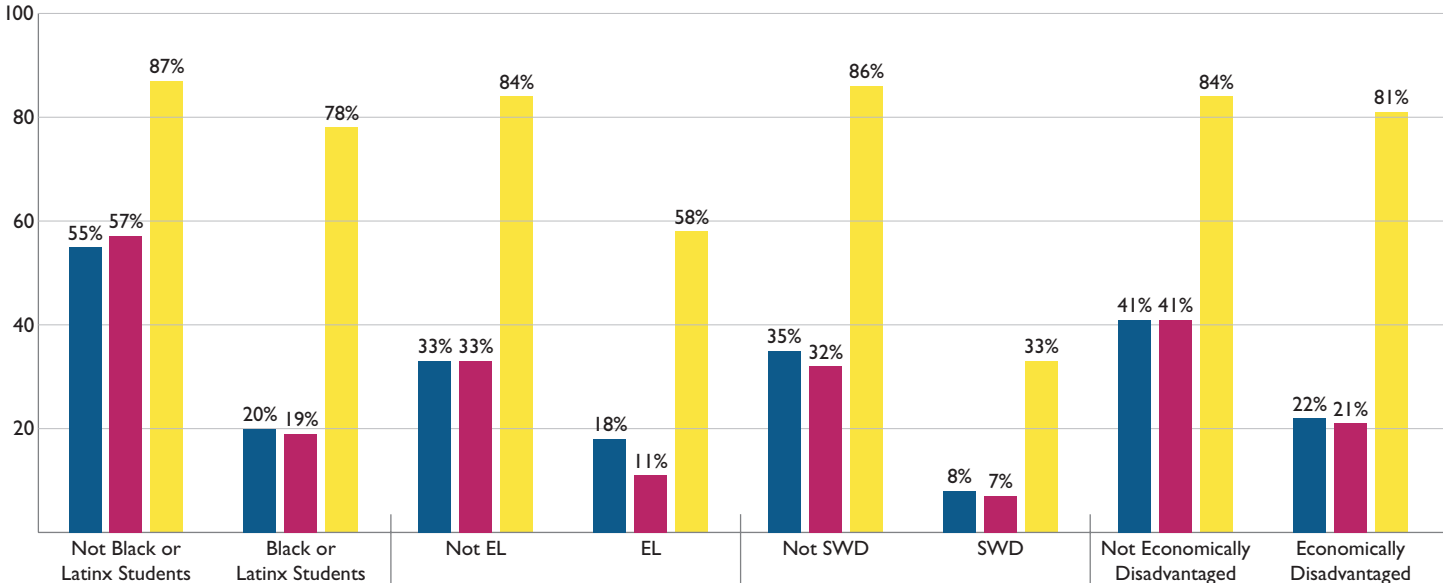
7 The English Learner student count in grades 3–8 in exam schools is based on one school (The John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science), as BLA and BLS had insufficient number of ELs for the state to report on.

FIGURE 7. ***Percentage of students either meeting or exceeding expectations, Grades 3–8 ELA MCAS, by student population and school type, SY2018***



Source: Calculations based on DESE (2019j). Next Gen MCAS achievement results. Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/nextgenmcas.aspx

FIGURE 8. ***Percentage of students either meeting or exceeding expectations, Grades 3–8 Math MCAS, by student population and school type, SY2018***



Source: Calculations based on DESE (2019j). Next Gen MCAS achievement results. Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/nextgenmcas.aspx

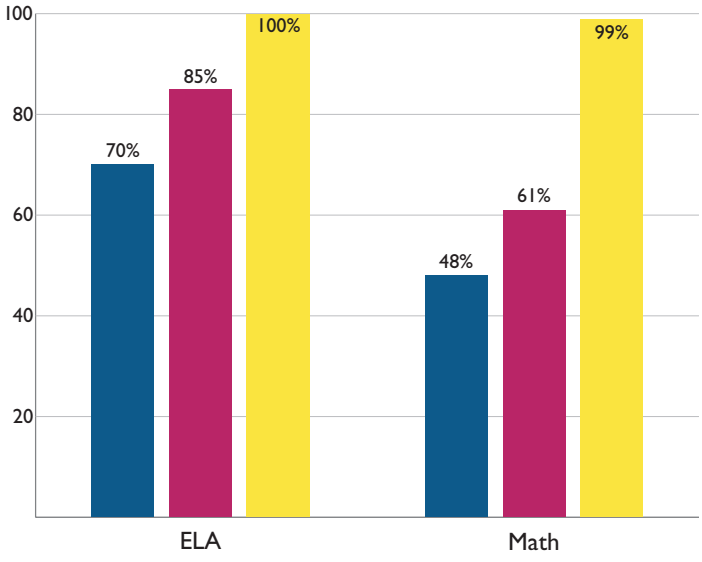
Grade 10 MCAS

The 2018 Grade 10 MCAS was the final iteration of the "Legacy" MCAS, where students were required to score "proficient" or higher on the ELA and Math tests to qualify for a high school diploma. In ELA, 85% of students in autonomous schools and 70% of students at traditional district schools scored either proficient or higher; but overall proficiency rates were lower in Math, where 61% and 48% of students in autonomous and traditional schools, respectively, scored either proficient or higher. At exam schools, essentially all students scored either proficient or higher on the Grade 10 MCAS in ELA and Math (see Figure 9).

MCAS Performance by Student Group

There were relatively small differences in proficiency rates by student race/ethnicity and income status, but more sizeable differences by EL and student disability status among students in autonomous schools on the Grade 10 ELA MCAS exam. In traditional district schools, there were sizeable differences in performance by EL and student disability status and income background as well.

FIGURE 9. ***Percentage of students scoring proficient or higher, Grade 10 MCAS, by subject and school type, SY2018***



Source: Calculations based on DESE (2019i). MCAS achievement results. Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/mcas.aspx

Grade 10 ELA Performance

The majority of Black and Latinx students (85%), White and Asian students (90%) as well as students from lower-income (84%) and higher-income (88%) backgrounds in autonomous schools scored either Proficient or higher on the Grade 10 MCAS ELA. At the same time, 59% of ELs and 91% of students not identified as EL and 68% of students with disabilities and 90% of students without a diagnosed disability scored either Proficient or higher (see Figure 10).

Overall, all student groups in autonomous schools had higher proficiency rates compared to the same student groups in traditional district schools. In the latter, 70% of Black and Latinx students and 69% of White and Asian, and 67% of students from lower-income backgrounds scored Proficient or higher on the Grade 10 ELA MCAS while fewer than half of all ELs (49%) and SWDs (45%) did the same. The performance of ELs and SWDs was in stark contrast to the performance of students not identified as EL or students without a diagnosed disability who had proficiency rates of 81% and 77%, respectively. Again, all students in exam schools scored either Proficient or higher.

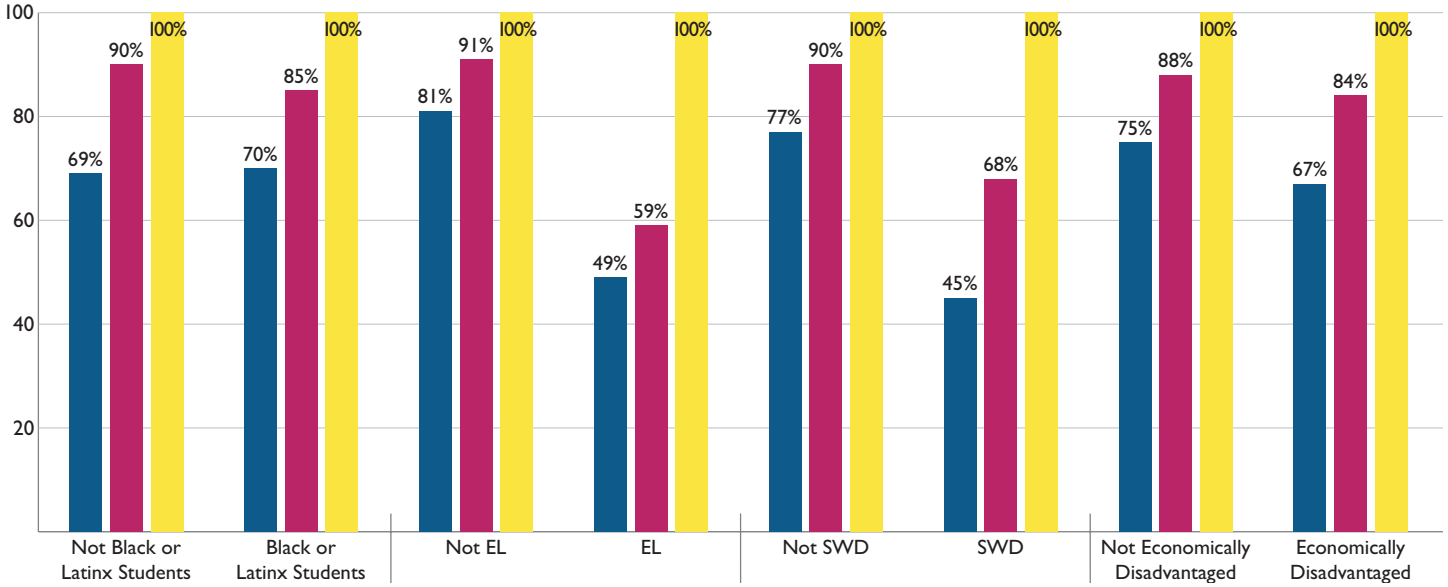
Grade 10 MCAS Math Performance

Proficiency rates were substantially lower for all student groups on the Grade 10 Math MCAS compared to ELA at both autonomous and traditional district schools. For example, 58% of students identified as economically disadvantaged in autonomous schools scored Proficient or higher on the Grade 10 Math MCAS compared to 84% on the ELA MCAS assessment. Additionally, there were larger disparities in performance between student groups compared to the Grade 10 ELA MCAS, with the largest differences by EL (26 percentage points) and student with a disability status (41 percentage points) among students in autonomous schools and 16 and 37 percentage point differences by EL and disability status, respectively at traditional district schools (See Figure 11).

All student groups at autonomous schools had higher Grade 10 Math MCAS proficiency rates than their peers in traditional schools, but the differences were smaller than the differences in ELA performance, ranging from just two percentage points for ELs to15 percentage points for students from higher-income backgrounds.

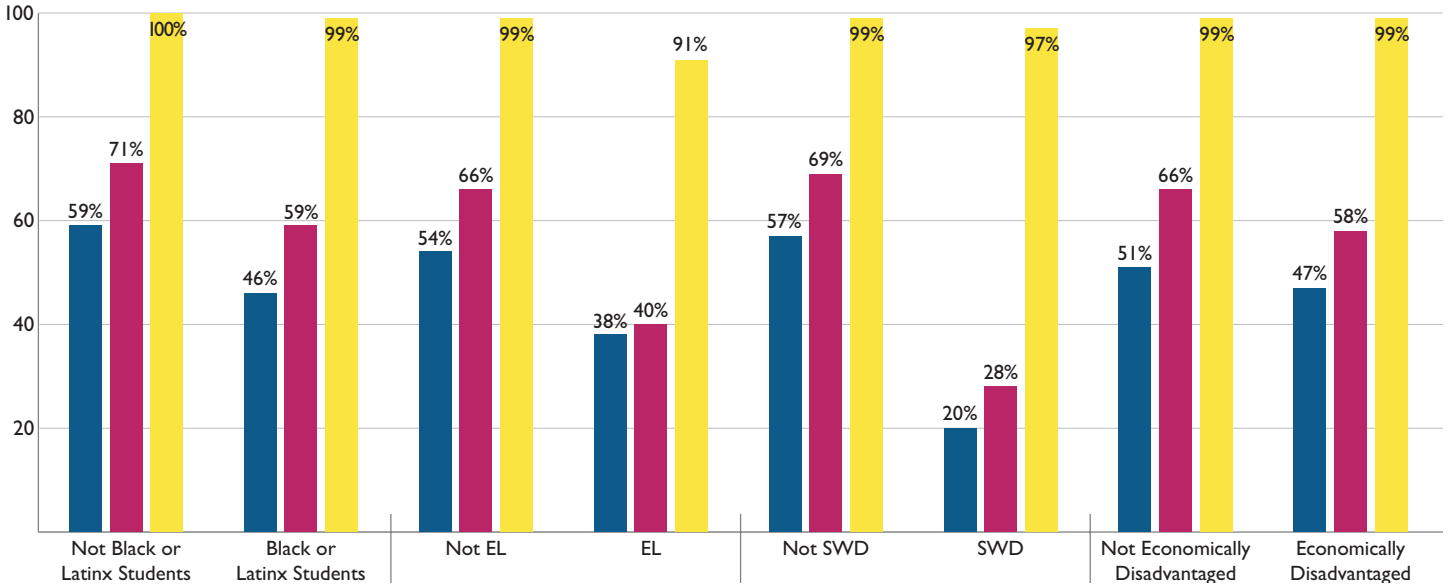
Again, since virtually all students in exam schools were assessed as either Proficient or higher on the Grade 10 Math test, proficiency rates were uniformly high across student groups—with the lowest rates for ELs (91%) and students with disabilities (97%).

FIGURE 10. ***Percentage of students scoring proficient or higher, Grade 10 MCAS ELA, by student population and school type, SY2018***



Source: Calculations based on DESE (2019i). MCAS achievement results. Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/mcas.aspx

FIGURE 11. ***Percentage of students scoring proficient or higher, Grade 10 MCAS Math, by student population and school type, SY2018***



Source: Calculations based on DESE (2019i). MCAS achievement results. Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/mcas.aspx

High School Course Taking

An important indicator of staying on track for graduation is 9th grade course taking (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Lundy & Librizzi, 2018). About three-quarters (76%) of students in autonomous schools and just over half (55%) of students in traditional district schools passed all their 9th grade courses during the 2018–2019 school year (i.e., SY 2019). The vast majority (90%) of students in exam schools also passed all their 9th grade courses (see Figure 12).

Participation in advanced coursework is also key for college readiness (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2019). Overall, 56% of students in autonomous schools and 43% of students in traditional schools in Grades 11 and 12 completed some kind of advanced coursework as did the overwhelming majority (98%) of students in exam schools.

High School Course Taking by Student Group

The percentage of 9th grade students passing all their courses across different student groups was higher in autonomous schools compared to the same student groups in traditional district schools although disparities between student groups were present at both types of schools.

For example, at autonomous schools, 74% of Black and Latinx students and 84% of Asian and White students passed all their 9th grade courses. Almost three-quarters (73%) of students from lower-income backgrounds and 82% of students from higher-income backgrounds passed all their 9th grade courses. The pattern was similar at traditional schools, albeit with lower pass rates. At traditional schools, 53% of Black and Latinx students and two-thirds (67%) of Asian and White students passed all their 9th grade courses; while 51% of students from lower-income backgrounds and 65% of students from higher income backgrounds passed all their 9th grade courses (see Figure 13).

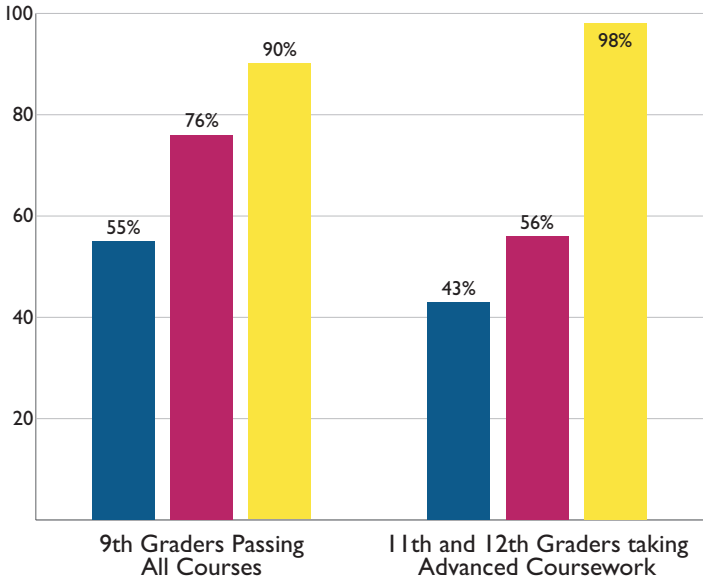
Overall, passing rates were highest at exam schools, ranging from 93% for Asian and White students to 65% for students with disabilities. A slightly larger share of students with disabilities at autonomous schools passed all their 9th grade courses compared to exam schools—70% compared to 65%.

While the percentage of 9th graders passing all their courses was relatively consistent (ranging from 84% to 73%) across student groups in autonomous schools, there was more variation in advanced coursework completion rates (which ranged from 66% to 38%). Just over half of all Black and Latinx students (54%) and two-thirds (66%) of Asian and White students in autonomous schools completed advanced coursework (see Figure 14). Disparities in advanced coursework participation were larger by student EL and disability status. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of ELs, 59% of students not identified as EL and 41% of students with disabilities and 60% of students without a diagnosed disability completed advanced coursework.

However, all student groups in autonomous schools had higher advanced coursework completion rates compared to their peers in traditional schools where participation rates ranged from as high as 53% for students not identified as ELs to 27% for ELs and 26% for students with disabilities.

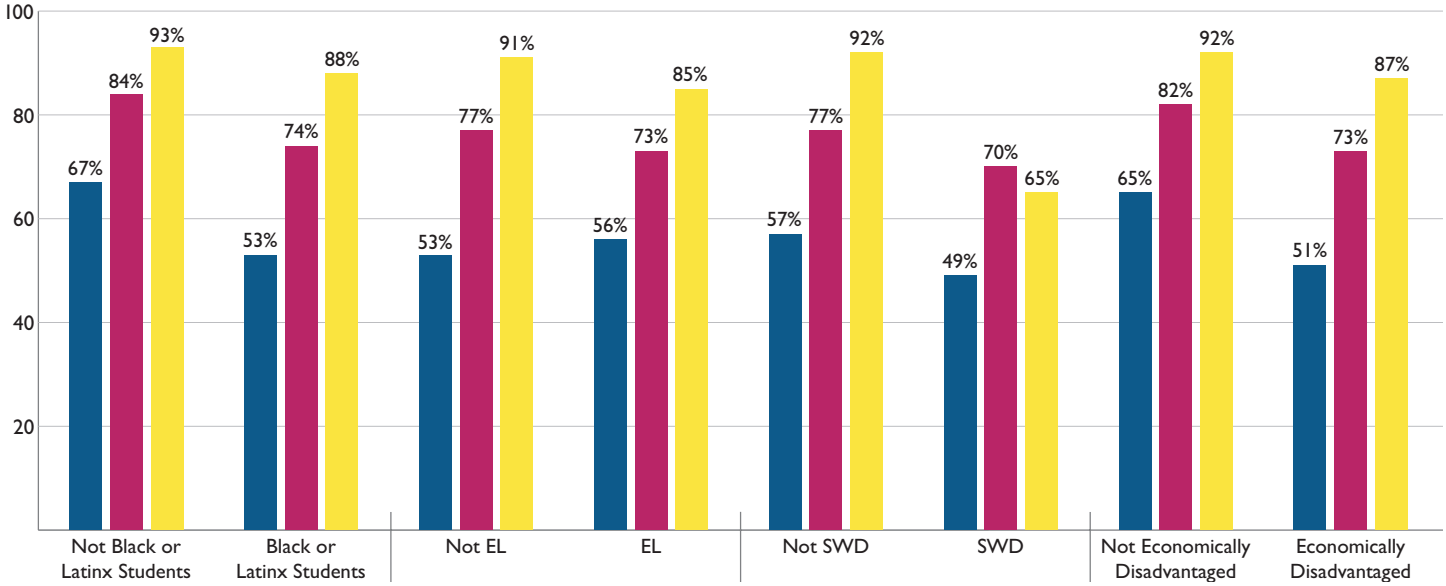
Advanced coursework completion rates were uniformly high across student groups in exam schools, ranging from 99% for Asian and White students and students from higher-income backgrounds to 93% for students with disabilities.

FIGURE 12. ***High school course-taking, SY2019***



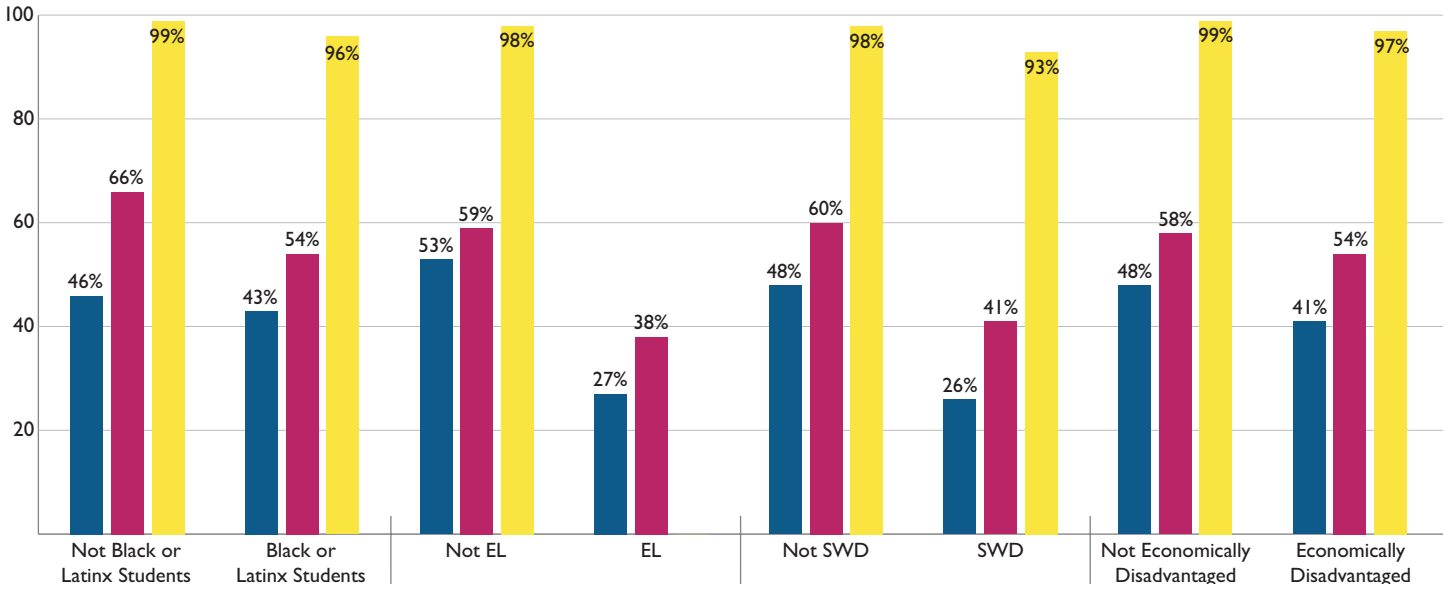
Source: Calculations based on DESE (2019h). 2019 Grade Nine Course Passing Report (School) - All Students - All Subjects. Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/gradeninecoursepass.aspx and 2019 Advanced Course Completion Report (School) - All Students. Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/advcoursecomprate.aspx

FIGURE 13. ***Percentage of 9th graders passing all courses by student population and school type, SY2019***



Source: Calculations based on DESE (2019h). 2019 Grade nine course passing report (school) - All students - All subjects. Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/gradeninecoursepass.aspx

FIGURE 14. ***Percentage of 11th and 12th graders completing advanced coursework by student population and school type, SY2019***



Source: Calculations based on 2019 Advanced Course Completion Report (School) - All Students. Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/advcoursecomprate.aspx

High School Graduation

On average, autonomous schools have higher high school graduation and lower dropout rates than traditional district schools. About three-quarters (73%)[8] of students from the SY2018 cohort from autonomous schools graduated high school within four years, 10% dropped out and 17% are still in school. The four-year graduation rate at traditional district schools was 63%, 18% of students dropped out and 16% are still in school. At 10%, the dropout rate for autonomous schools was almost half the four-year dropout rate at traditional schools (18%). At exam schools, 97% of students graduated within four years, 1% dropped out and 2% are still enrolled (see Figure 15).

High School Outcomes by Student Group

Across student groups, students at autonomous schools had higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates than their peers at traditional schools. However, students at both autonomous and traditional schools have far lower graduation and higher dropout rates than all student groups in exam schools (see Figure 16).

College Enrollment

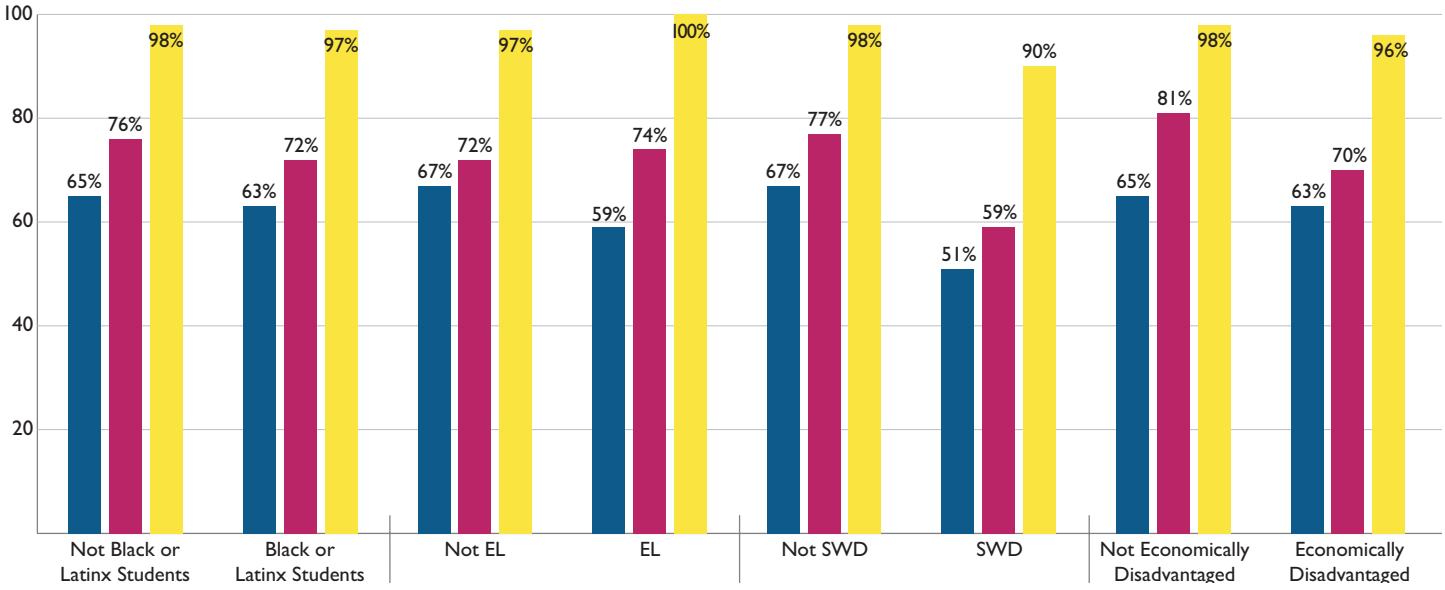
Beyond high school graduation, enrollment in postsecondary education is an important milestone for many students, and increasing the number of college-ready students is a major goal across the district. Among the graduating class of 2017, 71% of graduates from autonomous schools enrolled in college within 16 months of graduating from high school, with the majority enrolling in bachelor's degree-granting institutions (i.e., four-year college/university)[9]. The college enrollment rate for graduates of traditional high schools was lower, at 60%, with a slightly larger share of graduates enrolling in community colleges (32%) compared to bachelor's degree-granting institutions (29%). The vast majority of graduates from exam schools enrolled in college (93%) and overwhelmingly chose four-year institutions (85%) with just a small share (8%) enrolling in community college (see Figure 17).

College Enrollment by Student Group

Overall rates of postsecondary enrollments are fairly consistent across different race/ethnic and income groups within autonomous schools. Black and Latinx graduates (72%) as well as Asian and White graduates (71%) and graduates from both lower-income (72%) and higher-income backgrounds (70%) had similar college enrollment rates. College enrollment rates were lower for ELs (63%) and SWDs (60%).

Differences in college enrollment were more prevalent among graduates from traditional district schools. Among students from traditional district schools 58% of Black and Latinx graduates and 70% of Asian and White graduates enrolled in college immediately following graduation. Less than half (47%) of SWDs and 63% of their peers without a diagnosed disability also enrolled in college. Differences in enrollment were smaller by income background and EL status—just a three-percentage-point difference by income—and ELs and students not identified as EL had almost identical enrollment rates of 61% and 60%, respectively. College enrollment rates for graduates of exam schools were uniformly high (91%–93%) across all student groups (see Figure 18).

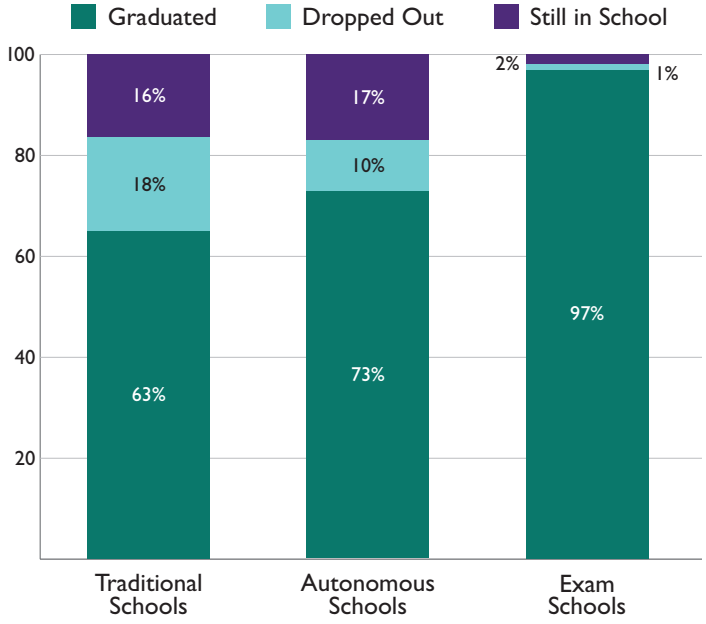
FIGURE 16. ***Four-year high school cohort graduation rate by student group and school type, SY2018***



8 Two autonomous schools, Boston Day & Evening Academy (BDEA) and Greater Egleston High School are committed to explicitly serve overage students and/or non-traditional students, and therefore, graduating within four years of beginning high school is neither expected nor necessarily a goal for many of their students (the same is also true for several traditional district schools, including Boston Adult Technical Academy (BATA). If we do not include these two schools the average four-year graduation rate for autonomous schools is 83%.

9 Two-year colleges offer great postsecondary educational opportunities; however, there are significant differences in completion rates by college type and therefore an important indicator.

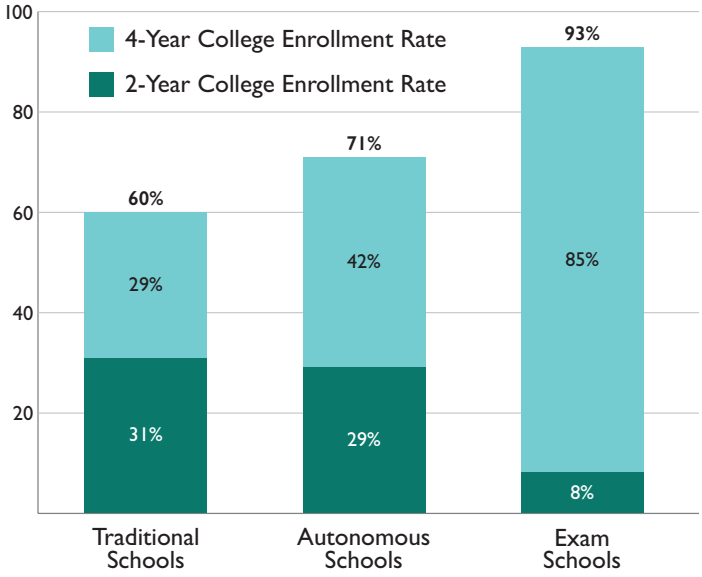
FIGURE 15. Four-year high school cohort graduation, dropout and enrollment rates by school type, SY2018



N.B. Not all numbers add up to 100% as we omitted percentages of students that earned a GED, were permanently excluded, or were "non-graduate completers."

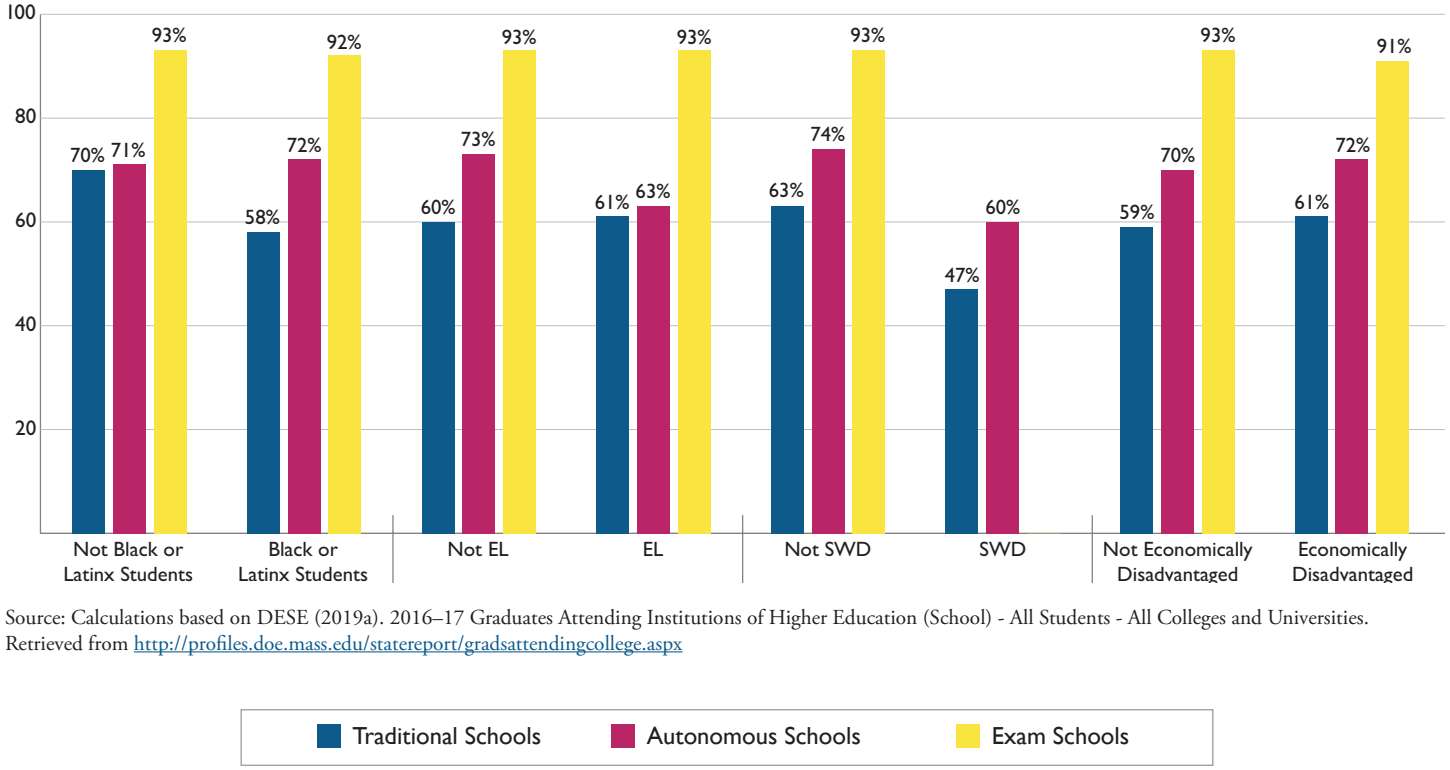
Source: Calculations based on 2018 Graduation Rate Report (School) for All Students 4-Year Graduation Rate. Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/gradrates.aspx

FIGURE 17. Percentage of BPS graduates enrolling in college within 16 months of graduating from high school, Class of 2017



Source: Calculations based on DESE (2019a). 2016–17 Graduates attending institutions of higher education (school) - All students - All colleges and universities. Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/gradsattendingcollege.aspx

FIGURE 18. Percentage of students enrolling in college within 16 months of graduating from high school by student group and school type, Class of 2017



Source: Calculations based on DESE (2019a). 2016–17 Graduates Attending Institutions of Higher Education (School) - All Students - All Colleges and Universities. Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/gradsattendingcollege.aspx

Closing opportunity gaps and improving outcomes overall and particularly for student groups that have been historically underserved are priorities high on the district agenda (see Draft BPS strategic plan). While there is room for improvement on the indicators described here, the data suggest that compared to traditional schools, students at autonomous schools are more likely to stay on-track, graduate from high school and enroll in college. This snapshot of student performance also suggests that autonomous schools have more narrow opportunity gaps for Black and Latinx students and students from lower-income backgrounds, especially in high school course taking, high school graduation and college enrollment. There are, however, clear areas for significant improvement for both autonomous and traditional district schools, including in test performance, in reducing chronic absenteeism rates and in eliminating disparities for ELs and students with disabilities.

SCHOOL AUTONOMY IN PRACTICE

How schools use autonomy to fuel innovation and change

> "I chose to lead in an autonomous school because I believe in the foundational precepts of our autonomies. In autonomous schools we have the opportunities to create authentic learning communities that are informed by the specific needs of our community. We are able to work with community members to establish and execute specific goals that most closely align to our schools."
>
> *—Autonomous School Leader*

With autonomy in budgeting, curriculum and assessment, governance, professional development, staffing, and scheduling[10], autonomous schools were created to be models of educational innovation and to serve as research and development sites for effective urban public schools, and in Boston the district has expanded autonomy in certain areas to traditional district schools as well based on successful practices in autonomous schools. In this section, we look at some of the approaches schools have taken over time to use their autonomies to improve teaching and learning and to promote positive school cultures, professional collaboration, and teacher leadership and empowerment. We also describe two key innovations—in budgeting and staffing—first incubated in autonomous schools and then expanded districtwide.

Budgeting

> "Although each of the autonomies has played an important part, the budget autonomy has been most critical to our ability to make the most efficient and effective use of the resources our school receives from the district. Recent restrictions on how we can allocate some of our funds have reduced this capacity."
>
> *—school leader, Baldwin Early Learning Pilot Academy*

With budget autonomy, school leaders have the flexibility to use their budgets to set staffing roles, programs, and services for their school. Schools also can create separate nonprofit fundraising entities to raise funds to supplement the budget they receive from BPS. In the early years of in-district autonomy, pilot school and district leaders collaborated to form a Fiscal Autonomy Committee that worked to create consistency and parity in interpreting and implementing budget autonomy. As a result of the work of this committee, the district created a standard budget formula for pilot schools that gave school leaders a great deal of flexibility in how they spent their school budgets. With evidence that budget autonomy supported innovation at autonomous schools, the district implemented a new budget model giving school leaders districtwide greater autonomy over their school budgets.

10 Pilot schools and HMCS have all six autonomies and Innovation schools select specific autonomy areas when they propose their school plans.

The Weighted-Student Funding Formula

In school year 2012, then BPS Superintendent Carol Johnson implemented a new weighted student funding (WSF) formula model where "dollars follow students" for all district schools. Under the WSF, various factors (e.g., grade-level (including students identified as "high risk" or "off-track" as incoming 9th graders), income background, EL, special education and/or vocational status) are assigned a weight whereby students with higher learning needs who require more resources are allocated higher funding than students who have more average learning needs, and a school's budget is calculated by adding the individual funding estimates for every student enrolled in the school. With this model, a larger proportion of school budgets is allocated to the school level (versus the district—as there are certain services for which all schools must budget) providing school leaders with greater budget autonomy than they enjoyed under the previous system. Today, all district schools receive a lump-sum budget based on the weighted student formula; however, autonomous schools can also opt-out of some discretionary district services and receive the value of the service in their lump-sum budget.

Autonomous schools often have prioritized using their budget autonomy to hire student support personnel and/or expert instructors, or to purchase specialized instructional programs. For example, the Boston Green Academy allocates more resources for student support and now has a proportionately larger student support team (for the size of its student population) than traditional BPS schools. At the Baldwin Early Learning Pilot Academy, the budget allocates resources to hire specialists from outside BPS to teach special courses. Similarly, Mission Hill K–8 School has used its budget flexibility to hire a choral director from an external partner. Schools also use funds to implement new programs. For example, Josiah Quincy Upper School (JQUS) used budget autonomy to pay for professional development, equipment, supplies and licensing to implement the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. A co-head of school shared that they would not have been able to execute the IB program if not for budget autonomy.

While the WSF and the expanded autonomy it provides to all district school leaders is viewed by most as an improvement to the previous budget model, there are some challenges. First, some school leaders were clear that the weights are not adequate for some groups of students, such as those who have interrupted formal education and students with severe special educational needs. Second, others argue that the district practice of leaving seats empty impacts the total budget available for a school. For instance, one school leader described the district's practice of under-enrolling students at the beginning of the year in order to leave seats available for transfer students who would be assigned to the school later in the year, noting that the district wanted to fund the school according to the enrollment at the beginning of the school year, which would reduce the overall size of the school's budget and make it more difficult for them to serve the needs of the students who would arrive later in the year. Additionally, changes in the collective bargaining process around certain staffing requirements (e.g. requiring a paraprofessional in every K–2 classroom) have budget implications for schools, which may constrain their budgeting autonomy somewhat.

Staffing

"Our ability to staff our building according to our students' needs and our school's mission and vision has been critical. We have been able to create a safe, consistent and positive environment where the arts flourish alongside academics. We have done this with a high-needs population and with no additional funds. I credit that to our ability to determine the needs of our community and staff appropriately."

—Megan Webb, principal, Orchard Gardens K–8 Pilot School

When asked to identify the most important autonomy, current autonomous school principals named staffing more often than any other autonomy. This autonomy allows schools to structure faculty and staff roles to achieve their educational objectives.

Hiring to Support Mission and School Culture

Staffing autonomy allows school leaders to select their preferred teachers to fill vacancies and create staff roles/positions for their schools. Autonomous schools work to maintain school culture and staff cohesion through the hiring process, with teachers and other members of the school community often taking part. Historically, vacancies have been filled by district level human resources staff and assigned as needed, and though originally, only available to autonomous schools, more recently staffing autonomy was expanded to traditional schools as well.

"We were able to construct a thorough and careful process by which we could both recruit and hire folks who aligned to the core mission, values and beliefs of the school. That doesn't mean that everybody thought the same, but it does mean that everybody's there for the same purpose and the same reason. It was more about the mission and how we as a team of educators were going to be instrumental in carrying out the mission through our teaching practice and engaging with families."

—teacher leader, EMK Academy for Health Careers

Teachers reported that higher staff retention is a positive outcome of being able to vet and hire candidates as a staff. They reflected that since teachers are selected through a rigorous process, they show that they really want to be at the particular school and tend to stay on for a long time, which leads to a strong professional culture where people are invested and support each other.

School leaders also were clear that staffing autonomy is critical for ensuring that teachers who are hired believe in the mission of the school, will work toward realizing that mission, and have the skills to support the mission. Principals have the authority to interview and hire candidates who they think will be the best fit for the school and to excess[11] teachers who do not fit with the school culture. Schools create Election to Work Agreements laying out the work rules that are specific to teachers in their school communities. Technically, autonomous school teachers work on annual contracts, which means that even teachers with permanent status in the district can be excessed from the school (but not the district) after any school year.

The Expansion of Hiring Autonomy to All District Schools

The demonstrated success of the use of staffing autonomy in autonomous schools led the district to rethink its then traditional staffing model, which was centrally controlled, based on seniority and gave priority to internal candidates. In September 2014, under the leadership of then interim Superintendent John McDonough, BPS replaced its seniority-driven staffing model with open-posting. Through open-posting, schools can advertise, recruit and hire teachers from either inside or outside the district, without being required to first look at the unassigned educator pool or taking seniority into consideration. Mutual consent hiring where teachers could only be hired with the "mutual consent" of the candidate and school leader (or hiring team) also was expanded to all schools (instead of just the autonomous schools) at the time. These changes gave school leaders increased autonomy to identify and hire teachers who best match the needs, mission and vision of their schools.

In an interview with former BPS interim Superintendent McDonough, he noted that when staffing autonomy was limited to just autonomous schools, the number of schools to which teachers in the transfer or excess pool could be assigned was narrowed[12], which was unfair to traditional schools.

11 To excess a teacher is to not renew her/his/their contract. Teachers can be excessed from the school only if the teacher has a satisfactory rating yet may not be a good fit for the school (e.g., differing teaching philosophy, not committed to team-based teaching, etc.). Permanent teachers who are excessed can apply for other district teaching positions. If they are not hired by another BPS school, then they will be placed in a temporary assignment in the district for the next school year.

12 It is important to note that in times of budget cuts, autonomous schools are subject to taking on teachers from the excess pool as autonomous school hires cannot result in a teacher layoff.

"That's when we introduced, the ability for all schools throughout the district, regardless of their status, to have full autonomy in the hiring of staff. [Restricting staffing autonomy to autonomous schools] was leading to an increase in conditions for failure in non-autonomous schools. We had a growing number of excess teachers from consistently underperforming schools, with a requirement for the district to continue to employ them… however, teachers could not be employed in the same building, so we were narrowing the number of schools they could be assigned to. That was a real problem, and I would say an unintended consequence of the evolution of autonomous schools in Boston."

—John McDonough, former Boston Public Schools Interim Superintendent

Another longtime BPS leader and former interim superintendent, Michael Contompasis, agreed that open-posting and "the ability to modify the restriction on having to take the most senior person in the transfer or excess pool regardless of whether indeed that person was a fit for the school," was a positive outcome for autonomous schools that traditional district schools would benefit from as well. Overall, school leaders, teachers and district personnel agree this was a beneficial innovation that all schools should have access to.

"Open-posting used to be a privilege of just the pilot schools and certain autonomous schools. Positive outcomes proved that a school is able to recruit and retain much better educators through open-posting, and now that's been made available to all district schools."

—Richard Chang, co-head of school, Josiah Quincy Upper School

In contrast, union representatives discussed the negative consequences of the open-posting policy. One noted that the extension of staffing autonomy across the district exacerbates the challenges with the unassigned pool of teachers.

"It causes a problem for the teachers. They're either in this position because their school closed, or because their class was prohibitive, although that is a very minor number I would think. Or there's been a reduction in Spanish teachers, or math teachers, in the particular building. So, someone's out the door. And then because the other school doesn't have to take them, because of staffing autonomy, they're allowed to languish. We've had this problem for years now, and we've always said the district should force a school to take them, and if they're unsatisfactory, go through their regular channels. But the school district has not done that because of staffing autonomy at these other schools, including pilots. The problem with that is once you are in the [unassigned pool] position, you are forever tarnished as someone who didn't hold the job or couldn't hold the job at another school, and that really is unfortunate. So, I think it's a colossal waste of money, and I think it hurts the district because every time there's an issue on money, someone says well, you're employing people you don't have to employ. You should just fire them."

—Richard Stutman, former president, Boston Teachers Union

The union position is that there should not be any unassigned teachers and that schools should have to hire from the pool of unassigned teachers before conducting an open-posting.

While autonomous school leaders have full autonomy in hiring and firing teaching staff, they have more limited autonomy over other job categories outside of the Boston Teachers Union, such as custodial, food service, secretarial/clerical staff and paraprofessionals. Therefore, they are more restricted when it comes to hiring and firing in these job categories, which makes leaders feel somewhat constrained in shaping the team of teachers and staff serving their students.

"The autonomies came from an agreement between the Boston Teacher's Union and the school department. I wish they involved more unions. I want everybody in my building to see their role in educating our students. Whether you are the cafeteria staff, the custodian, whatever, I want you visible, I want you positive. I'm not their supervisor or their evaluator. I can provide my input, but it's a whole different ballgame when I get to coach them or have some real say in the quality of their work."

—Ayla Gavins, former principal, Mission Hill K–8 School

However, as of the 2019–2020 school year, the district did extend mutual consent hiring to include assistant principals and paraprofessionals working with certain populations, providing schools with some additional autonomy in staffing beyond teaching roles (DESE, 2020).

Using Autonomy to Improve Teaching and Learning

In our survey of current autonomous school leaders, school leaders were clear that the autonomies are interconnected, but when asked what was the most important autonomy, staffing, curriculum and assessment, and budget emerged as the "top 3," illustrating a focus on using autonomies to drive teaching and learning. Nine out of 10 school leaders also indicated that they use professional development and curriculum and assessment either "extensively" or "very much" and these were the two areas where their practice varied the most from district practice.

The school leaders' responses support a theme in the literature that a key link between school autonomy and improved student outcomes is the extent to which school leaders use their autonomy to focus on classroom-level practice and resources by building the professional capacity of teachers and staff through professional development and innovation around curriculum and assessment (see Hamilton Associates, 2015).

Scheduling

> "At Young Achievers we spent five days a week planning and developing our curriculum and instruction together as a team. A lot of that time was during our extended day and we spent considerable time in the building or sometimes off-site developing our curriculum, and curating materials. We often participated in off-site excursions and field experiences that we knew we wanted to embed in the curriculum. I think the time was hugely beneficial because in my previous school with the short days, six hours as opposed to the eight-hour day at Young Achievers, it wouldn't have been possible to do that given the time constraints that we were under. So the ability to flexibly use the time was a critical element of our autonomy and afforded us the opportunity to creatively structure and schedule our day."
>
> *—Shakera Ford Walker, Director of Teacher Development at Boston Public Schools, and former pilot school teacher*

Autonomy over their school schedules gives autonomous schools fairly wide latitude as to what they do within the parameters set forth at the state level for the length of the school year and instructional time. Traditional schools also enjoy some autonomy in scheduling as a result of the collective bargaining agreement with the BTU that allows them to set their schedule and adjust the length of their instructional blocks with 55 percent staff approval (DESE 2020). Despite the significant autonomy in this area, autonomous school leaders highlight a few structural constraints to their scheduling autonomy. For example, schools that share a building with other schools have to coordinate their use of common spaces and have the same start and end times due to busing schedules (see Barriers to Fully Exercising Autonomies, below). Schools also have to follow the district holiday calendar, which janitorial and dining services follow, so a school cannot decide to hold classes on a BPS holiday and take a different day off. However, school leaders focus on what they can change and use scheduling autonomy to extend the school day, create longer learning blocks during the school day, and to provide teachers with common planning and meeting time, which helps to promote strong professional collaborative cultures in schools.

Teachers consistently talked about the benefits of having common meeting and planning time to collaboratively develop curriculum and assessments and engage in professional development among other activities.

> "I think there's a space for earnest conversations about teaching students. I think there are more conversations about what we do. It encourages more reflection, I think. The fact that we have institutionalized time for department meetings that happen in the course of the school day, those structures make that possible."
>
> *—teacher, New Mission High School*

Importantly, using scheduling autonomy to increase professional collaborative time also allows schools to better leverage their autonomy in other areas—specifically in curriculum and assessment and professional development.

Curriculum and Assessment

> "In order for us to truly be able to create or change conditions to maximize the learning of all students it is imperative that decisions about curriculum and assessment be made at the school level."
>
> *—Autonomous school leader*

Curriculum and assessment autonomy enables autonomous schools to select or design the content offered in their schools and the methods with which to evaluate student performance and progress. Schools have a variety of approaches to selecting curriculum content and assessment methods. Whatever their approach though, teachers typically have a significant voice in selecting and/or developing the curriculum for their schools. Teachers from several schools described a combination of department-level and individual teacher decision making (where teachers have some flexibility to modify the selected curriculum in their classrooms) around curriculum.

Teachers Empowered to Design and Implement Curriculum

Across autonomous schools, teachers commonly play a major role and have an important voice in the curriculum and assessments used in their classrooms. Classroom teachers in most traditional schools do not typically make decisions about what curriculum to use, so this aspect of influence is somewhat unique to the culture of autonomous schools and contributes greatly to teacher empowerment (although the recent state review of BPS noted that it was "widely assumed by many traditional school and district leaders that traditional district schools are not required to use district curriculum or assessments" (DESE, 2020, p. 56) and have autonomy in this area. A teacher from Fenway High School explained that when she was at a traditional district school, "she was given a schedule and told what to do," but now at a pilot school she could "put a little bit of myself" into the work. Another teacher, at the Margarita Muñiz Academy, made the point that teachers know their students best and "can teach things they are interested in or know to be relevant versus being told what to teach." With teachers often in the lead, and in keeping with their specific goals and missions, schools offer a variety of curriculum/instruction and assessment methods. For instance:

- Several autonomous schools have developed performance-based assessment systems mitigating or eliminating the use of standardized tests in their regular instruction and assessment. Several schools (e.g., BCLA, Mission Hill and Young Achievers) require students to demonstrate their learning through portfolios and exhibitions. At New Mission High School, students participate in portfolio assessments twice per year. For the portfolio, students have to write four essays—one for each grade-level team—and give a presentation.
- Josiah Quincy Upper School provides the International Baccalaureate (IB) program for all students. Every student is encouraged to take at least one IB exam before graduating with the majority of students taking more than one.
- Fenway High School uses curricular autonomy to offer Humanities (ELA and History together instead as separate courses) and was one of the first schools—if not the first—in Boston to do so. The school also offers a Spanish for Native Speakers/Ethnic Studies class.
- Margarita Muñiz Academy is a bilingual Spanish/English school. Teachers instruct in one language for a period of time that is determined by the individual teacher. There are also designated days where discussions with students outside of the classroom are in Spanish.
- Boston Green Academy has implemented a project-based and green curriculum for seniors that is mission-aligned and was developed by teachers.
- Several schools offer interdisciplinary classes including Humanities, which replaces separate social studies and English language arts courses, and integrated science.
- Boston Day & Evening Academy and Greater Egleston High School both use competency-based education and grading systems.

Barriers to Fully Exercising Autonomies

Asked if and how district and/or state practices and policies hindered their autonomy, school leaders identified three concerns: 1) [lack of] commitment to and understanding of autonomies at the district level, (2) district and state assessment requirements and (3) district busing schedules' impact on scheduling autonomy.

Lack of support from the district

School leaders perceived an overall lack of commitment to and understanding of autonomies and an underlying "mistrust" of the autonomous schools from some district managers, leaving some school leaders unsure whether district personnel really believe that autonomy is good for students and schools. To overcome this barrier, leaders suggest that 1) there should be a greater expressed commitment to autonomy at the district level, 2) that all district staff read the Autonomous Schools Manual[13] and receive training in interpreting the autonomies, and 3) that a senior staff position dedicated to working with the autonomous schools be created on the BPS leadership team.

State testing requirements

The Pilot agreement was made before the widespread implementation of high-stakes standardized testing requirements. Autonomous school leaders noted how required testing infringes on their ability to develop curriculum and assessment methods that fit their school goals. Not only does state testing divert time away from instruction, especially in grades 7–10, but many (though not all) autonomous school leaders do not consider standardized test scores a valid measure of student performance in their schools. Instead, many schools rely more on performance assessments and competency-based approaches to instruction. Yet, school leaders understand that "kids can't graduate if we don't offer the MCAS, so you can't deny a student those tests," and thus must devote some time to preparing students for them.

Busing

Transportation, specifically busing, impacts schools' start and end times and limits autonomy for setting schedules. Boston has a very complex busing schedule for public school students as well as Boston residents who attend private and charter schools. Thus schools that depend on buses to transport their students can only adjust their start and/or end times if the changes fit within the larger transportation schedule. For instance, Lilla Frederick, which was one of the last schools to open in the district, and as a result has less desirable start and end times, considered making changes to its schedule, but was told by the district it could not unless it found another school to swap bus schedules with them. Boston Community Leadership Academy (BCLA) faced a similar predicament when it moved to a building shared with New Mission High School. Schools that share a building have to have the same start and end times due to busing schedules, so BCLA had to change its weekly schedule, reducing the amount of collaborative time for teachers.

13 The Boston Autonomous Schools Manual is an operational manual for BPS autonomous schools and district staff explaining the policies, practices and responsibilities that govern the autonomous schools in BPS. It was created by the Autonomous Schools Network in collaboration with the district in 2014.

Professional Development

Professional development autonomy gives schools the flexibility to set requirements for and implement programs to support learning and growth for teachers and other staff at the school level. Implementing this autonomy is closely tied to other school autonomies. For example, schools use budget autonomy to allocate resources to fund professional development activities, and to design or enroll in professional development activities to support the effective implementation and delivery of the curriculum and assessment methods that they have in place. Schools also use scheduling autonomy to set aside time for professional development activities.

Several schools have an early release day one day per week for students and longer school days for students four days per week. Teachers meet for planning and/or professional development during the early release days. Some autonomous schools also have more days of professional development during the summer.

The autonomy over professional development enables schools to develop programs that are specific to the training needs of their staff in direct support of implementing school-wide initiatives**.** For example, when New Mission High School decided to adopt an "AP for all" program with the goal of ensuring that students complete at least one advanced placement course by the time that they graduate, the school principal reported that autonomy made it possible to ask teachers to participate in the necessary training, which required more than the standard hours of professional development time[14]. When Another Course to College made the shift to a full-inclusion school, all teachers were required to become dually-certified and participated in the Pathway Program[15] offered by Boston Public Schools. This is an example of a benefit of having autonomy within a district—schools can take advantage of and opt into district programs that are relevant for their needs.

Governance

> "It's critical having a strong governing board supporting the school leader."
>
> *—Nicole Bahnam, principal, Boston Community Leadership Academy*

Governance autonomy provides autonomous schools with the power to make decisions at the school level and to decide how to allocate decision making responsibilities in a school. The key structure for exercising this autonomy is the governing board[16], which sets and approves a school's vision and major policies and programs; appoints and evaluates the school leader; approves the annual budget and Election-to-Work Agreement; and intervenes or negotiates with the district as needed among other responsibilities. Early pilot school leaders especially spoke about the importance of having a board that would speak up when autonomy encroachments occurred, especially in the early years:

> "[During a certain time period], I would characterize it in retrospect as a divide-and-conquer strategy. The schools with strong leaders and strong boards retained a modicum of autonomy. The ones that didn't have that were kind of back in the fold and lost the vitality of the early pilots."
>
> *—Larry Myatt, founder of Fenway High School and co-founder of the Center for Collaborative Education*

Over time, the need for a strong and active governing board has not decreased, and school leaders acknowledged the value of the support of a governing board that includes voices from a variety of stakeholders.

> "Community people, partners, university folks that are sitting on your governing board and giving you their perspective, I see that as a real win. But everybody might not. They might see it as another task. I see it as a huge win because I'm a believer in having lots of voices around the table helping to create something."
>
> *—Naia Wilson, former school leader New Mission High School*

14 The number of hours that teachers are required to participate in professional development and how much teachers are paid for those hours were points of contention between pilot schools and the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) in the early 2000s. For a time, there were no limitations on the number of hours that schools could require teachers to participate in professional development (through the Election to Work Agreement). After some debate, the BTU contract included limits on the number of hours that teachers could be required to work above and beyond the standard BTU contract, prior to teachers being paid for additional hours worked.

15 The BPS Office of Human Capital established the Pathway Program in 2006 to build the district's capacity for licensed, qualified teachers in the high-need area of special education. The Pathway Program prepares individuals for special education positions, and more recently, program goals have expanded to include support for the district's commitment to inclusive practices. Currently, the program also enrolls participants who seek dual licensure in special education and their primary content area and thereby qualify for inclusive practices positions.

16 Pilot schools are required to have a governing board, HMCS have a board of trustees, and Innovation schools can establish a governing board if governance was one of the autonomies in their approved innovation plans. All public schools are required by the state to have a school site council as well.

Teacher Leadership and Empowerment

As part of their governance structure, autonomous schools also typically embrace distributed leadership as an important value, where teachers, staff and (in some cases) students are all included in decision making.

All schools (that have governance autonomy) have teacher representation on their governing boards, which allows teachers to contribute to the development of school policy, annual budgets, staffing plans, and the formal evaluation of their principal. But teacher leadership goes well beyond this in many autonomous schools, where teachers have a variety of significant leadership options beyond the governing board.

Many autonomous schools are small schools and use their staffing autonomy to hire more teachers and fewer administrators and staff in non-teaching roles. The schools utilize distributed leadership models where leadership or administrative responsibilities are parceled out to teachers. Typically, teachers who take on significant other responsibilities are compensated with stipends or reduced teaching loads.

For example, at Boston Green Academy, teachers can set agendas and make decisions at the team level without consulting the principal:

> "That also kind of gets into governance, in a way. [Our principal] puts a lot of trust in teachers to make decisions. I make decisions on a daily basis with my grade-level team. I run maybe a third of them by him. He just trusts that we're doing what we need to do."
>
> *—teacher, Boston Green Academy*

At Mission Hill K–8 school, starting in the 2019–20 school year, the principal role has been replaced by two teacher leaders (the Patrick Lyndon and Boston Teachers Union Pilot School also use this teacher leader model). Decision making is consensus driven with all teachers expected to participate in deliberations around school program, policy and hiring decisions. This level of involvement in decision making increases feelings of responsibility and empowerment among teachers.

> "The autonomy makes me feel more responsible for what I'm doing. I cannot just say, 'Well, that was the principal's decision. That didn't work. Told you.' It's, 'No. I put my hand up and said I agree to that or I will do that.' It falls on me as a member of this community if it doesn't work or if it does work, right? And we can celebrate the fact that we made a great decision and it works. So, responsibility is the bigger word for me."
>
> *—teacher, Mission Hill High School*

Overall, school leaders use all of the autonomies available to them to support innovative and diverse school designs. With support and input from teachers, staff and their broader school communities, school leaders leverage the flexibility and freedoms the autonomies provide to implement a range of structures and strategies with an emphasis on improving teaching and learning to best meet the needs of their students. Although challenges are commonplace, innovative practices in budget and staffing/hiring, first incubated in autonomous schools, have been adopted districtwide and helped to improve school practice across Boston.

School Spotlight: Staffing Autonomy at Mary Lyon Pilot High School

The Mary Lyon Pilot High School is a full inclusion high school serving about 133 students. Located in Brighton, the school first opened in 2009 and is part of the Mary Lyon continuum that also includes the Mary Lyon K–8. As a full inclusion school, a majority of seats are for general education students with a smaller number reserved for students with emotional or behavioral disabilities; however, in the most recent school year nearly half (47%) of the school's students were students with disabilities. School Principal Herve Anoh points to the importance of staffing autonomy for his school, noting that "designing a fully inclusive school for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities requires us to be able to create or change the conditions to maximize students' learning. To achieve this, it is paramount to be able to select and engage with educators who share the same view." Based on that understanding, school leaders have used staffing autonomy to focus on selecting and hiring teachers who are aligned with and enthusiastic about the school's mission/vision as a full inclusion model and on creating new administrative roles to support the school's unique needs.

At Mary Lyon, there are two adults in each classroom—a teacher who is dual-certified in general and special education and a paraprofessional. This staffing model is key to implementing the school's full inclusion model as well as its restorative justice model, both of which put a priority on "keeping kids in the classroom" rather than removing students from classrooms when an issue arises. The school uses a "push in" approach to intervening with students rather than "pushing out" students. The only intervention students leave class for are therapy sessions. The priority on keeping students in the classroom and with their peers is especially important for a student population where students are more likely to act out because of their trauma; if students were removed every time they acted out, "there would be nobody in class." At the same time, this strategy can create additional challenges for teachers who have to focus on instruction, building relationships with students, creating a safe classroom space, as well as attending to students and student behavior that would typically have a student removed in other schools, so the support and presence of a paraprofessional is essential. Additionally, counselors, social services team members and administrators also "push in" to provide support to teachers and paraprofessionals as needed. Ultimately though, the teacher decides what support is needed and when and who "pushes in."

Mary Lyon also has used staffing autonomy to create a larger administrative team, which increases teacher leadership. Originally, the school had just one school administrator but the administrative team has grown to a team of three to four people, including the principal, dean of engagement, and dean of student support. The additional administrative roles provide opportunities for teacher leadership—as teacher leaders take on these responsibilities and the administrative team works within a shared leadership and decision making model.

Overall, staff believe that the school's approach to identifying and selecting teachers and providing rich opportunities for teacher leadership, including creating new staff roles, has been successful as they have high teacher retention among a group of teachers who have credentials that are in high demand (i.e., being dual-certified) and who thus have other options. Teachers at the school described feeling empowered by the school's culture and the leadership and decision making model. Teachers at Mary Lyon truly feel as though they are a part of something—the school is a tight-knit community, and the educators who work there love the school. Shared decision making empowers the teachers, and they play an active role in developing the school culture and structures. One teacher summed up a common sentiment saying, "people would not stick around if they did not love the school and the challenge that is inherent in working with [this] student population."

School Spotlight: Curriculum and Assessment Autonomy at Mission Hill School

The Mission Hill School is a Boston pilot school serving approximately 250 children in grades K0–8. The school was originally located in the Mission Hill neighborhood of Roxbury, but was relocated to the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston in 2012. Founded in 1997 by educator and author Deborah Meier, the school is modeled on democratic principles, and emphasizes a project-based, collaborative curriculum, inclusive of all learning abilities.

The school's collaborative curriculum is centered on having schoolwide curricular themes, where the entire school population focuses on one of three themes each trimester: Science and Technology, Ancient Civilizations, and The Struggle for Justice in America. Students also take math as a separate subject area, although it is often integrated and connected to each theme. More specific topics under each theme are selected each year. For example, the specific themes for school year 2018–19 were: Chemistry, Kingdoms of the Nile and The African American Experience. Within this curriculum, students engage in project-based learning that lets students guide their own experiences.

For example, for The African American Experience focus, students in Grades 1 and 2 drew portraits of famous African Americans and created posters answering the following questions:

- How did the first Africans get to America?
- How were they treated? Why?
- Can separate be equal?
- What is worth fighting for?

Older students across different grade levels created an African American experience timeline—some students drew illustrations of key events to post along the timeline, while others wrote descriptions of the events to accompany the illustrations—as well as an Underground Railroad quilt and slideshow presentation.

Taking advantage of the curriculum and assessment autonomy it has as a pilot school, the Mission Hill School has created a unique and innovative approach to curriculum that transcends grade levels and unites the school around learning that is relevant to them. The schoolwide approach has been successful in creating a common culture among students and teachers where both teachers and students share decision making privileges, and student voice plays a large role in curriculum design.

LESSONS LEARNED
Insights from 25 years of autonomy and innovation

> "BPS aims to develop a robust portfolio of high quality, innovative schools to meet the growing and diversifying needs across the district. In its ongoing quest to improve and expand school quality and choices, BPS embraces the true notion of innovation and seeks to incubate a pipeline of innovative school proposals—whether through the vehicle of an autonomous pathway pilot, Innovation, Horace Mann charter or other mechanisms within traditional schools."
>
> —*from* Innovation Schools in BPS: Presentation to Boston School Committee, *November 2015*

Autonomous schools have helped to provide families with more choice and unique school designs and curricula offerings within BPS, have influenced district practice—most notably in budgeting and staffing/hiring—as autonomy is extended to leaders of traditional district schools, and have leveraged distributed and teacher leadership models to help achieve their goals, among other successes. There also have been challenges in having in-district autonomous schools within a traditional public school district. In this section, we highlight some of these challenges, the lessons learned and the opportunities to address these challenges to help us to continue to leverage and learn from the innovations and practices in autonomous schools.

The District Role and Relationship with Schools Is Critical

District support for autonomy and innovation has varied over time and across different administrations over the last 25 years, and with it the relationship between the district and autonomous schools. Almost unanimously, both current and former school leaders stressed how important the relationship with and support of the district leadership is to exercising autonomies. School leaders described points where the district has been a major source of support and other times a hindrance to the exercise of autonomy. In general, school leaders described having friendly and professional relationships with central office staff, who were in many instances helpful, while simultaneously pointing out that differences or confusion over the interpretation of the autonomies can be commonplace, if not a daily occurrence.

> "Several staff have been helpful at key moments—mostly in the budget office and in [the Office of Human Capital]. They have supported our autonomies in helping us make hires, manage finances and secure needed supports. At times, central office leadership has also been there to support us in times of need. But often it is the day-to-day working with the district that makes it difficult to exercise autonomies."
>
> —*Matt Holzer, head of School, Boston Green Academy*

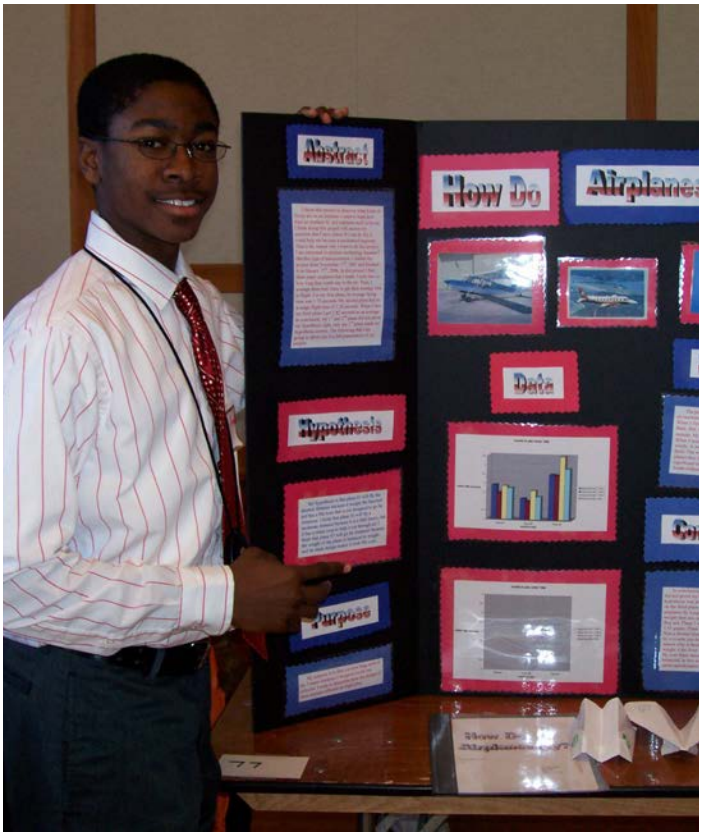
Among the current challenges to exercising autonomy is having to work with district staff who are not familiar with the details of the autonomies. School leaders commented that district staff are not always familiar with the Autonomous Schools Manual and often do not know how to handle requests from autonomous schools and may say "no" based on their interpretation of whether a request would be possible for a traditional school. If an autonomous school leader does not fully understand the extent of their autonomy and does not push back, then a "no" might curtail the exercise of their autonomy. However, challenging the district response often requires time and effort that could be better spent on other tasks. As described by one principal, this is a challenge that characterizes communications with the district:

"The ongoing challenge is having to educate central office staff and not having a clear path to support when an autonomy is questioned or thwarted. Although there have been wonderful central office staff who 'get it,' my default mode is to anticipate a delay, if not a battle, in making a move that is allowed by the autonomies but is atypical for traditional schools."

—Tavia Mead, principal, Baldwin Early Learning Pilot Academy

School leaders identified two major reasons for the limited understanding and inconsistent interpretation of the autonomies. One, the high rate of turnover in staff at the district level and two, differences in priorities and varying levels of support for autonomous schools across different superintendent administrations. Some leaders also suggest a general ambivalence or lack of commitment to protecting autonomies—leaving some unsure that the district believes that autonomies are good for students.

This distrust of the central office support for autonomy is an ongoing and prevalent theme. It was raised by a 2014 Working Group on School Autonomy and raised in discussions with school leaders during a recent state review of the district as it was during our conversations with school and district leaders. It is a challenge that has to be faced and resolved.



Former BPS Superintendent Johnson agreed that (the seemingly continual) negotiation of the scope and limits of autonomies is a challenge, but often necessary—due to the flow of new policies and regulations from state and federal agencies that must be interpreted at the district level and then communicated to schools. For example, during her time as superintendent she required that autonomous school leaders participate in regular professional development meetings at BPS to facilitate the sharing of regular updates regarding new district mandates. At the time, some autonomous school leaders felt that these additional meeting requirements were an encroachment on their autonomy to structure their own professional development and also contributed to a decrease in participation in autonomous school leaders network meetings (more on this below). However, according to former Superintendent Johnson, the mandates were non-negotiable and the meetings were critical to ensure that everyone was on the same page regarding state and federal regulations.

"I think that there were times when there was critical information that we felt everybody needed to have access to. So if the state changed the rules around accountability, school improvement, or if there were safety provisions that had to be in place, we wanted everybody there. And we were sometimes uncomfortable that some school leaders just felt like because they had autonomy they could opt out of all professional learning at the district level. I would say that I felt like two things, one the successes that they had had were worth learning about from other schools in the district. Sometimes I felt like we missed an opportunity to have them share the lessons learned in this autonomous experiment. [S]econdly, there were things that everybody had to know because they were regulatory in nature. An example of that would be we had to revisit our entire strategy for English language learners because of the Department of Justice and the Office of Civil Rights had come in and said that we were not providing the right services or the right information to families. […] So again, this is all about what are non-negotiables. I felt like everybody needed to know something that was more of a regulatory nature, so they understood that while we want to give you autonomy, we can't break the law."

—Dr. Carol Johnson Dean, former BPS Superintendent (2007–2013), Interim President, LeMoyne-Owen College, Memphis, TN

A Strong Autonomous Schools Network Aids Success

In addition to having a good relationship with and the support of the district, autonomous schools also benefit greatly from having a strong network of support among the schools themselves. The Autonomous Schools Network (originally the Pilot Schools Network) was started in 1997, when the first pilot schools were just starting. Pilot school leaders realized that they might have more leverage in negotiating with the district on the use of autonomies as a unified network rather than as individual school leaders. They also decided that having a third party to coordinate the network would allow school leaders to focus more on creating better conditions for teaching and learning, and less on dealing with district policies. The Center for Collaborative Education became the official convener of the Pilot Schools Network and provided advocacy, facilitation, coaching, professional development and research support to the schools.

The Pilot Schools Network was based on a shared vision and similar beliefs about education and the kinds of schools that leaders wanted to create. For early pilot school leaders, the network was a learning community for sharing successes and working through challenges as they were building their school communities. The network also served to orient and mentor new school leaders and was a collective voice to negotiate with the district around the administration and interpretation of the autonomies.

> "It was a space and opportunity to learn from and with colleagues to reflect on my own practice and our practices as a school. It's one thing to be able to highlight the bright spots in our school, but it was also worthwhile to be able to present a challenge, or a dilemma, that we were having within that space and be able to learn with and from colleagues and harness support for solving complex challenges. It was just a rich environment to be able to socialize, yes, and build a network of peers who you could rely on and reach out to for support. For me, the key piece was learning from and connecting with one another."
>
> *—Shakera Ford Walker, Director of Teachers Development at Boston Public Schools, and former pilot school teacher*

Former and current school leaders consistently spoke about the value of having a network to negotiate with the district to prevent encroachment upon and inconsistency in the interpretation of the autonomies. The network facilitates communication across schools and helps to identify their shared challenges so they can address them collectively. Additionally, as a place where leaders come for information, ideas and support, the network also helps to ensure fairness with respect to the use of the autonomies where leaders make sure they are receiving similar treatment and opportunities in terms of the autonomies.

Monthly network meetings continue to this day, but over time, overall participation in the network and cohesion have diminished. Autonomous school leaders believe that this shift is due to a number of factors, including changes in leadership in schools, increases in the number and types of autonomous schools, increasing demands on school leaders' time including required participation in more district-sponsored meetings, and decreases in external funding to support the network. School leaders would like to have a more robust and active network again, while at the same time recognizing that 25 years later a new network structure or format may make more sense. Overall, as a current school leader made clear, a resurgence in the network requires that "all leaders commit to being active in the network. It is only a network if people attend and are active."

School Autonomy Has Yielded Some Unintended Consequences

In-district school autonomy has resulted in innovative practices at both the district and school level. However, along with the positive outcomes there have also been some unintended consequences as the number of autonomous schools has increased and the range of school models has expanded.

Open Enrollment vs. Application: An Issue of Equity?

Autonomous schools are a desirable option for many families in the district and arguably helped to keep students/families in district public schools, especially during the years of fastest growth for the sector. For example, a 2004 CCE study found that pilot schools typically had long waitlists (see Tung, Ouimette & Feldman, 2004). More recent data show that BPS families are more likely to choose autonomous schools as either their first or second choice compared with traditional district schools, and students in traditional schools are twice as likely to have been administratively assigned than those in autonomous schools (Wilson, 2015, Presentation to Boston School Committee).

With demand for seats high, five autonomous high schools[17] have implemented admissions processes to screen for fit and commitment to the school's philosophy. The application

17 The student assignment process is the same for autonomous elementary and middle schools as for traditional district schools and does not consider prior academic achievement.

process for these schools ranges from a one-page application and/or attendance at an information session (e.g., BCLA, New Mission High School) to an interview and/or essay or additional requirements (e.g., Fenway High School, Greater Egleston High School). Additionally, Boston Arts Academy, Boston's only high school for the visual and performing arts, requires an online application for an audition and an in-person audition. None of the schools consider a student's prior academic achievement for admission.

The presence of an application process—even one that does not consider previous academic achievement—raises important questions for school leaders who are actively engaged in this discussion among themselves.

Earlier research suggests that the student population at autonomous schools differs from the traditional school population regardless of whether or not a school has an admissions policy. A 2007 CCE study, *Strong Results, High Demand: A Four-Year Study of Boston's Pilot High Schools*, found that both pilot high schools with an application as well as open-enrollment pilot high schools enrolled a lower percentage of students with risk factors (e.g., 8th grade attendance rates below 80%, entering 9th graders who earned a Warning on the 8th grade Math MCAS or students who were overage) compared with traditional district high schools[18]. In fact, over time the open-enrollment pilot high schools whose students are assigned through the district lottery had lower proportions of students with risk factors compared to the application pilot schools. The authors concluded that the pilot schools' "reputations for success" attracted the interest of college-bound students and their families who disproportionately selected pilot schools as their first and second choices in the lottery (Tung & Ouimette, 2007). A study the following year showed that students/families who chose a pilot school but did not receive their first choice in the lottery left the district at twice the rate of students/families who chose a traditional district school and did not receive their first choice (Ouimette & Tung 2008).

While the application process at some autonomous schools does not alone explain the differences between the student populations at autonomous and traditional schools, these differences (observable and unobservable) have implications for school outcomes and also raise questions of equity for the sector. BPS already has a stratified school system with a concentration of need in a subset of schools, (i.e., open-enrollment traditional district comprehensive high schools (see Lundy & Librizzi, 2018), so any selectivity on the part of autonomous schools, especially if it results in fewer entering students being administratively assigned, may be contributing unintentionally to the further stratification of the system.

Autonomous Schools Need Strong Leadership at Multiple Levels to Succeed

Finally, we also heard clearly that the effective use of autonomies requires strong and committed leadership at a variety of levels—teacher, school leader and district. Strong teacher leadership in classrooms and in making decisions on curriculum and assessment benefits students directly. Teacher leaders at autonomous schools have taken on a range of responsibilities—well beyond the traditional teacher role—that benefit their peers and the school as a whole.

School leaders benefit from having distributed leadership models in their schools as well as from being part of a community—a network of leaders—to facilitate their growth and learning, which they bring back to their schools. Finally, the examples of successful collaboration between the Autonomous Schools Network and the district that have led to important districtwide initiatives also point to leadership at the district level as an enabling factor in realizing the promise of autonomy.

Ultimately, leadership at the teacher, school and district level as well as within the Autonomous Schools Network has been key in taking advantage of the opportunities provided by autonomy and in facing the challenges that come with autonomy, and it will continue to be key in the future.

Autonomous schools have been a source of innovation and learning in the district and can continue to do so, but to realize that goal, schools need the expressed support of the district; an active and vibrant Autonomous Schools Network to support professional practice and as a collective voice for negotiations with the district; and a pipeline of leaders—at the teacher, school and district levels—to sustain the legacy of autonomy in Boston.

18 Also see, Lundy & Librizzi (2018) p. 17.

REALIZING THE PROMISE OF AUTONOMY
Conclusion and Recommendations

This look back at in-district autonomous schools in Boston over 25 years highlights some key successes and important lessons learned. Beginning with the early pilot schools, autonomous schools have created unique and innovative school designs and programs that have increased the diversity of district offerings, provided more options for families, and as a result have strengthened the district. Our snapshot of engagement and achievement outcomes showed that, on average, autonomous schools performed relatively well on a host of student outcomes, particularly at the high school level, including high school graduation and college enrollment rates. Additionally, effective practices and innovations incubated in autonomous schools have influenced districtwide practices in budgeting (i.e., the weighted student funding formula) and staffing (i.e., open-posting), and schools have used their autonomy to support distributed leadership models with significant teacher leadership, introduce new or original approaches to curriculum and assessment, and create school schedules that provide more time and opportunities for teacher collaboration, among other things.

Along with these accomplishments, there have been some unintended consequences and challenges, some of which are ongoing. At times, individual schools have struggled with maintaining effective boards and the distribution or right balance of teacher leadership. More broadly, the seemingly continually shifting relationship with the district and waning cohesion as a network are causes for concern. As well, high schools that require applications have to consider how and to what extent their admissions process impacts their student enrollment and outcomes.

Today, Boston is a very different district than it was in 1993 when the Pilot School agreement was signed. The early pilot school founders and initial advocates of in-district school autonomy had high hopes and aspirations for this model, some of which have been realized; however, innovation in schools may be needed now more than ever. To fully realize the promise of autonomy in Boston we make the following recommendations.

Goals for District Leaders

- **Set and articulate a clear vision of and support for autonomous schools.** District commitment to supporting school autonomy is critical to achieving the promise of autonomy. The district should set and clearly articulate a vision of and support for school autonomy overall and for designated autonomous schools—pilot, Innovation and Horace Mann charter schools—and their place in developing a district-wide portfolio of high-quality schools.
- **Invest in professional learning to build the capacity of district staff on the history and interpretation of school autonomies.** With a clear vision and commitment to supporting in-district autonomy, a next step is to improve the knowledge of the autonomies across district personnel. Each district office should be aware and stay abreast of (especially in times of turnover) the scope and interpretations of autonomies and how they differ for different types of autonomous schools. Cabinet and district leaders, including staff in budget, human resources, curriculum, assessment and facilities especially need to be educated on the scope of school autonomies. At various times in the history of autonomous schools in BPS, there have been specific staff positions (e.g., the Academic Superintendent and Assistant Academic Superintendent of Pilot Schools) or liaisons appointed to support and advocate on behalf of autonomous schools. Having a dedicated role in central office should be considered.

- **Identify and grow school leaders who understand and have the capacity to manage autonomy to improve student learning and outcomes.** A consistent theme throughout this retrospective was the critical role of leadership in the growth and success of autonomous schools. While autonomy provides schools with freedom to act and innovate, increasing school autonomy does not in and of itself create better schools. Autonomy is only beneficial when someone uses it effectively. As various stakeholders made clear, having school leaders with the capacity to effectively use the autonomies is critical to improving schools and student outcomes. School leaders play a central role in all schools but leaders at autonomous schools have responsibilities that are not as common at traditional public schools, including competency in working with a governing board, budget and financial management, and facilitating a range of distributed leadership models, and require skills and capacity not typically addressed in most principal preparation programs. Additionally, given that a wealth of research evidence supports the importance of effective school leadership for improving student outcomes, ensuring that the district has a supply of current and future school (and teacher) leaders ready and able to lead autonomous schools is paramount to achieving the district's goals for improving student opportunities and outcomes.

Goals for Autonomous School Leaders and the Network

- **Commit to and invest in building and sustaining a strong Autonomous Schools Network.** Along with district support and partnership in implementing the autonomies, autonomous schools and school leaders also benefit from having an active network. Historically, the Autonomous Schools Network promoted and supported strong collaborative relationships between and among autonomous schools, serving as a professional learning community, a support mechanism for new and veteran leaders, and a collective voice to engage with the district. There is a continued—and even growing—need for the network to serve this purpose. Autonomous school leaders should work to better understand what current school leaders want from the network and develop a plan to reinvigorate it. Collaborating with a third party to convene and coordinate the network was effective in the past and can be again.

- **Set goals to eliminate disproportionality in enrollment and disparities in outcomes, especially for English Learners and students with disabilities.** The student enrollment at autonomous schools closely matches that of traditional district schools by race/ethnicity overall and student disability status. However, despite gains over the last decade, autonomous schools enroll a smaller share of English Learners (ELs) compared to traditional district schools. Schools must continue their efforts to eliminate this disparity in enrollment and monitor progress both at the school and network level. Additionally, while autonomous schools show relatively strong outcomes in several areas with smaller disparities by race/ethnicity and student income background compared to traditional district schools, ELs and students with disabilities face substantial disparities in performance compared to their peers in autonomous schools. To eliminate these disparities and improve outcomes for ELs and students with disabilities, autonomous schools should prioritize identifying and addressing the root causes of these disparities as part of their school improvement efforts.

Goals for District, School and Other Stakeholders

- **Invest in research on the relationships between autonomy, effective school practices and student outcomes.** Autonomous schools have been a source of innovation and learning in the district with respect to budgeting and staffing and can continue to support innovation in those and other autonomy areas. For example, there is an opportunity to better understand how schools' approach to curriculum, use of performance assessments and distributed leadership models, among other practices, impact school climate and culture and student outcomes. There is a need to build on the current promising evidence that school autonomy, when used well, can improve student outcomes. In addition, a research agenda should examine school practices in the different areas of school autonomy and how they relate to school climate, teacher and staff satisfaction, family engagement as well as student outcomes (both academic and non-academic).

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