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The Quality of Public Education in Boston: An Assessment and Some Recommendations

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I. INTRODUCTION

" ... a good school is one in which students like school, get along with other students, want to do school work, score well on tests, and want to go to college; it is a school where black and white students are friends and there is little racial conflict. No one of these goals is of highest priority ..." Crain, Mahard and Narot; 234.

Motivation, self-esteem, achievement and the development of tolerance and acceptance of others -- these are the goals that most, like Crain, et al., have come to accept as legitimate objectives of public schooling. Yet, there is substantial opinion that the public schools of Boston have been unable to achieve standards in these areas that are acceptable to the public, the students who occupy the schools, and the professionals who run them. For example, a recent survey of Boston residents' attitudes toward the schools indicates that approximately 3/4 of all respondents -- irrespective of race, or whether there were any school age children in the house -- believed the quality of the schools to be fair or poor.[12] In addition, a substantial majority of both black and white parents believe that the schools are getting worse, rather than better. In this paper, a brief review of the past and present status of the Boston schools, based on existing, accessible empirical evidence, will be presented, to determine the degree to which the overwhelmingly negative opinions about the schools are supported. In addition, studies and research that bear upon strategies for improving the educational system will be discussed.

A few words should be said about the assumptions under which this review is organized. First, this paper is limited to a discussion of public elementary and secondary education. Second, the review of both the current status of the schools and potential strategies for improving them will be limited to: (1) areas in which there is some reason to expect that involving concerned public interest groups such as the Boston Committee would be useful, and (2) where there is some potential for implementing relatively short-term programs

or activities.* In sum, the definition of problems and remedies will focus on improving the current system, rather than designing a substantially new one.

II. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF HISTORICAL ISSUES

The current status and needs of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) cannot be understood outside of the historical context in which they are embedded. Although the history of the Boston schools has been well documented, the public image of the system often reflects a view of the past that is clouded by myth and nostalgia. In order to set the stage for analyzing the BPS, it is therefore useful to briefly set out some of the historical patterns of note.

Boston and the "One Best System"

Educational leaders in Boston during the mid to late 19th century were part of the vanguard promoting the educational system that now confronts us in virtually every major American city.[29] Boston was the temporary or permanent home of many significant educational scholars and philosophers, a number of whom actually turned their hand to the modification and "improvement" of public education.[29] The reformist movement that took hold during this period advocated changes that strike us now as commonplace, but are at the heart of current crises. These included universal education, the development of "scientific management" systems, which included increased control by superintendents, the development of powerful principals who were appointed by the superintendent, and an emphasis on order and accountability -- both for pupils, who were assumed to be in school primarily to become the effective, largely subservient workforce of the future -- and for the teachers and administrators at all lower levels. In other words, the goal of the reformers was to turn a system characterized largely by voluntarism, variability and, where effective, by educational charisma, into a large, unified

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* Thus, for example, it may be argued that the fiscal base for education in Boston is strained because of municipal overburden, the school finance legislation in the state, the effects of Proposition 2 1/2, and the general problems associated with "shrinkage" due to declining enrollments. However, in my judgment the area of school finance is an issue that is far broader than Boston, while the question of how best to manage cutbacks is a matter of School Committee policy.

bureaucracy. [9,29] The fact of their success should be obvious to any observer, and most major school systems rapidly followed Boston's lead during the latter part of the 19th century and the early 20th century.

As the unified school system concept spread, so did many of its major characteristics: certification, selection, and stratification. In the minds of most prominent educational reformers of the early 20th century, the major problem facing education was how to deal with the vast waves of new immigrants that were flooding into the cities. These children -- largely Irish and later Italian in Boston -- were viewed as "socially inefficient", and largely incapable of mastering the liberal arts education that was the mainstay of the older, more selective institutions, which served primarily the merchant and upper classes.[29] Rather than making major changes in the curriculum or structure of schools to adapt to the new student population, the school system reiterated its emphasis on socialization and selection. Thus, the major function of the schools was to determine which among those attending was "worthy" of entering the examination schools, which would ensure their ultimate entry into the professional and middle classes, and which were suitable only for regular classrooms, which emphasized orderliness, citizenship, and following the rules rather than any specifically useful content.[28] Reformers of the time were beginning to argue for the need of adapting school to the needs nd abilities of children, but the fact that schools were more likely to expect that immigrant children were to adapt to them is vividly demonstrated by a survey of working children done in the early 20th century, in which children claimed that they would rather work at any job than go to school, primarily because "at least they don't hit yer here".[29]

Boston in Particular

Given the context of the bureaucratic structure, and the emphasis on socialization and selection, the Boston Public Schools were viewed by many as excellent, at least until around the turn of the century.[9] However, the changing policity context of the city produced, over the next 30 years, a system that was widely viewed by many as a primary example of how bureaucracies become corrupted.[18]

The Boston school system of the late 19th century was controlled by the Yankees, who supported the public schools in principle, and also because of their perceived ability to produce the punctual and responsible workers that

were necessary to man the businesses and factories. In fact, the Yankees had little vested interest in the quality or character of education, since they only rarely used the public educational system for their own children.[18, 28]

Most historians agree that, because of the Yankee domination of business, finance and the professions, the major opportunities that were open to the Irish immigrants involved grasping and maintaining electoral control -- and with it control of the growing city bureaucracies, including the schools. Irish control over the school committee was so profound that over the years from 1961 to 1979, only one Italian American was elected, one Yankee, one Jew and one Black (as compared to 15 Irish Americans).[21]

While teachers were selected through a rigorous examination system, and were not, therefore, directly affected by patronage, most observers believed that the exam emphasized rote memory over the grasp of subject matter.[9,28] The teaching staff became increasingly parochial in its background, coming primarily from one local teacher training school of mediocre quality. By the mid-40's, the system was thoroughly inbred, and the school system that was viewed by experts in the early decades of the century as superior was cited as one of the worst examples of rigidity.[9] Even the proud tradition of the examination schools, including the Latin school that was viewed by many as a "feeder" to Harvard, were viewed by knowledgeable educators as hopelessly administered and educationally oppressive.[9,28] In addition, even at this juncture the physical plant was deteriorating, and the lack of materials and creative management was considered serious.[9] Increasingly, the School Committee became associated with corrupt patronage, ranging from kickbacks for physical plant building and maintenance, to the staffing of almost all non-teaching jobs through political appointments.[18,28]

The problems of education should not, however, be viewed as a consequence of 20th century corruption.[4,28,29] In fact, if one examines the nature of the Boston school system, it is difficult not to conclude that its decay is in large measure a consequence of the reforms that were so earnestly sought in the construction of the "one best system". Its patronage system is a logical outgrowth of the extreme centralization of control over hiring and accountability; its lack of sensitivity to the educational needs of children is a function of the mid-19th century emphasis on the role of education in producing a subservient, orderly workforce, and its emphasis on formalistic

certification easily produced a homogeneity and rigidity in the teaching staff at the expense of inspired teaching.

None of these problems was seriously addressed over the next quarter century, despite the reports of over a dozen blue-ribbon panels that suggested that Boston education was inferior -- not only for the increasing minority population, but for those whose neighbors controlled the system.[18] It is popular today to raise concerns that public interest in the school system is declining (see, for example, Newsweek, April 20, 1981, "Why Public Schools Fail"). However, there is little evidence to suggest that people in power have cared a great deal about the quality of public schools for at least 50 years.

III. THE QUESTION OF WHITE FLIGHT, RACE AND EDUCATION IN BOSTON

It is not infrequent to hear self-proclaimed liberals lamenting the impact of Boston's federal desegregation court order on the quality of the schools. Time has dulled the memories regarding the efforts of the Boston School Committees in the 1960's and early 70's to avoid compliance with the state's Racial Imbalance Law, including its failure to provide a plan--any plan--for improving racial balance.[9,18] Nor has public memory retained its awareness of the documented maldistribution of resources to those schools that were predominantly minority, many of which were among the oldest and least well-maintained facilities in the city.[9]

But the most frequently heard complaint about the desegregation effort concerns its impact on the enrollment of white students in the schools. This concern stems from the rapid transition over a single decade from Boston as a majority-dominated system (just under 60 percent white in 1970-71) to a minority dominated system (in 1982, the minority enrollment was 70 percent). Some have argued that because desegregation activities cause a decrease in white enrollment in the schools, its consequence is not only disruption, but a rapid "resegregation".

A quick look at official white enrollments before and after the desegregation order suggest a "white flight" in response to the rapid and violent transition years when the court order was first implemented.[4] However, more careful scholarship shows that the impact of the court order has been seriously overstated, and that Boston would be a minority dominated school system at this point even without the intervention of the federal court.

Because it is crucial to improved race relations (and public relations for the city) to document that the changing composition of the Boston schools is not primarily a consequence of racial aversion, the arguments will be presented in greater detail.

First, it is the consensus of all who have examined the student record keeping system in the Boston Public Schools that analyses comparing official enrollment figures before and after the court order are inappropriate. Prior to the court-mandated efforts to keep track of students, the official enrollment figures were extremely inaccurate, and tended to grossly overestimate white enrollment.[9]

Second, the most important factor affecting the drop in white enrollment has to do with changing demographic patterns in the city that represent continuations of trends that began in the 60's. White out-migration to the suburbs began well before the court order, and most of those who moved out were of child-bearing age. The white population of the city has become increasingly old or young. In addition, the birth rate for white residents of the city has been falling rapidly (for example, the decline in annual birth rate for whites decreased by 21 percent in the years immediately preceding and following the court order), while the birth rate for Blacks has fallen more slowly. Thus, the estimate is that the white enrollment in the Boston Schools would have dropped as low as 38 percent even without a court order.[9,12]

Third, studies of "white flight" in all major cities under court order have concluded that although some occurs in the early years surrounding the court order, the extent and permanence have been greatly exaggerated. The statistical estimates of white flight on a national level are approximately 6 percent, while in the case of Boston, reasonable estimates of the maximum percentage of drop in white enrollment that can be accounted for by the court order ranges between 7 and 10 percent, almost all of which took place in 1974 and 1975.[10,12,26] Note that the recent survey of citizens by the Boston Committee indicates that there has also been a drop in the use of the public schools by black families, although it is less than among white families.[12]

In summary, it is crucial to reiterate the solidly based conclusion that (1) the desegregation court order did not "cause" Boston to "tip" from a majority white to a minority white system, and (2) with the exception of the two years between 1974 and 1976, the rate of white exodus from the school

system is remarkably similar to that which occurred in the late 1960s and early 70s.

Is Boston Resegregating?

The aggregate school-wide enrollment figures do not fully reflect the "resegregated" character of many of Boston's schools. Recent district-level enrollment figures indicate that the system-wide figures are artificially inflated by the presence of the East Boston district, which is 81 percent white. Schools in other parts of the city are correspondingly largely minority, with a high percentage of them having fewer than 20 percent white. The district level aggregate enrollments by race are presented in Table 1. Of course, within district variance is also high, with some schools presenting minority students with little exposure to students of other races. In addition, the potential resegregation within schools is increased by the tendency for minorities to be disproportionately assigned to special needs classrooms, despite constraints on overassignment under the court order. However, an analysis by Christine Rossell of Boston University indicates that despite resegregation, due in part to white flight, but to a greater extent the result of changing patterns of urban population, cross-race exposure is significantly higher in the current Boston setting than prior to the desegregation court order.[9]

Table 1: District Level Enrollments by Race: 1975 - 1982*

District	White	Black	Other Minority
District 1 (Mission Hill/Brighton)	22% (44)	31% (33)	47% (23)
District 2 (Jamaica Plain)	19 (45)	44 (40)	37 (15)
District 3 (West Roxbury)	34 (56)	57 (39)	9 (5)
District 4 (Hyde Park)	27 (61)	70 (35)	3 (4)
District 5 (Dorchester)	17 (45)	69 (48)	14 (7)
District 6 (South Boston)	40 (53)	38 (33)	22 (14)
District 7 (Madison Park)	18 (40)	37 (35)	45 (25)
District 8 (East Boston)	81 (95)	11 (3)	8 (2)
District 9 (City Wide Magnets)	33 (52)	47 (36)	20 (12)
TOTAL	30	48	22

* 1975 figures in ( ).

We know that the school population is now predominantly minority, and that the potential for increasing white enrollments is relatively low. In addition, both popular opinion and research evidence suggests that the public schools enroll the poorest members of the Boston community. In the recent Quality of Life in Boston survey, both black and white families who rely exclusively on the public schools for education were found to be significantly poorer than residents who choose all private or mixed options.[12] Analysis of recent Boston Redevelopment Authority data from 1980 indicates that using several common indicators of lower socio-economic status (SES - one parent families, incomes below $10,000, and residence in a subsidized housing unit), those attending the public schools were more disadvantaged than those in private or parochial schools. Some of the relevant figures are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: SES of Black and White Families Using Public and Parochial Schools*

	% 1 Parent	% <$10,000	% Public or Sub Housing	
Black/Public School	56%	62%	26%	(104)
White/Public School	40%	41%	13%	(126)
White/Parochial School	24%	20%	3%	(133)
(TOTAL City)	(40%)	(44%)	(13%)	(521)

* Black enrollment in private or parochial schools is not shown because the small N's made the results unstable.

While there are no easily available data comparing the socio-economic status of families who used the public schools a decade ago with those of today, the BPS has always served a predominantly poor population.

IV: BPS PROBLEMS TODAY

Systemic Problems

Many of the problems that face the Boston school system are more a consequence of its history, the developments of legal precedents governing the educational system, and significant social forces in the larger society, than of its own peculiar organizational characteristics. These are often severe and affect the solutions that can be posed to solve the more tractable educational

dilemmas facing the system. In a sense, they may be viewed as the backdrop against which the majority of Boston educators and citizens carry out the daily and yearly pageant of school reform, but because of their extraordinary complexity, they are not useful targets for short-term improvements. Because the scenery in a play influences not only what the audience sees, but also many of the moves that the actors may make, however, a brief review of some relevant conditions affecting school improvement efforts is worthwhile.

Fiscal Constraint. The combined effects of Chapter II of the federal Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981 (which put many federal programs into a block grant to cities and towns) and the state's Proposition 2 1/2 have put additional fiscal pressures on a school system that has balanced on the brink of fiscal collapse for several years.* There is a consensus among knowledgeable observers that the current Superintendent is, for the first time in the past half-century, achieving a rudimentary budget information system that will improve the administration and School Committee's ability to plan for cutbacks. However, this will not necessarily soften the blow of reduced funds. Most innovative programs require money, but in Boston, as in most other school systems, these are not easily found.

Administrative Structure. The administrative structure of the Boston School System is acknowledged by all relevant studies to be unwieldy and ineffective. While considerable reorganization and reassignment have taken place over the past few years, there are genuine constraints in the Boston setting on real change and reform. The degree to which each position in the school department is viewed as a patronage prerogative of the School Committee has been reduced, but the presence of various historical and current interest groups, a powerful administrator's union with a solid contract, and the accountability of the Superintendent to both, does not permit the degree of house cleaning and reorganization that might be desirable.

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* Both 2 1/2 and ECIA have a more significant effect on urban school systems.

Collective Bargaining. The Boston Teacher's Association has made major strides over the past decade in professionalizing and protecting the position of teachers. However, the need to define teachers' rights and obligations by contract also serves as a constraint to jointly desirable action. To be blunt, studies of school improvement efforts have consistently shown that they require genuine commitment--including extra work--from teachers. Where the union and administration are at constant loggerheads (as they are likely to be during a period in which the administration seeks to use criteria other than seniority in reducing the teaching force), the opportunities for eliciting the extra effort are minimized by the contract provisions. In many cases, "work to rule" will not permit individual teachers from carrying out new activities.*

The fact of staff reductions over the next ten years or so will also mean that there are very limited opportunities for hiring new types of teachers to carry out now educational programs. The staff that exists in the school system will be the one to implement any reforms.

Stagnating City Economy. Although many have viewed improvement in the school system as a means of attracting more affluent residents back to the city (and with them, the potential for more jobs) this aspiration is unrealistic. While the Boston area has been in a period of economic development, the City has not experienced renaissance to the same degree. Until greater economic development occurs, the prospects for inward migration, and an increase in the size of the school system, are relatively limited.**

Educational Climate. Just as the 60's and early 70's favored educational change and experimentation, the current climate around the country empha-

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* It should be pointed out that the relative militancy of the BTU is in response to many years of low pay, and poor working conditions. The school system's support for a professionalized teaching staff was traditionally as limited as its support for quality physical plants or curricula.

** The small number of single family homes in the city's housing stock is an additional disincentive.

sizes "back to basics" and reductions in "educational frills". This general context is not necessarily educationally unsound, but it frequently translates into public misunderstanding of, and lack of appreciation for, components of the school system thaT may be almost essential for reform. (It also often reinforces negative attitudes toward relatively slow and naturally different learners, as well as those with other special needs.)

State and Federal Mandates. To a very large extent the expenditure of monies at the local level is determined by legislation. While the current federal administration emphasizes the burden of federal regulations on local school systems, most regulations governing local operations are legislated and administered through the State. It is the state that determines the length of school years, the requirements for special education, the range of course offerings that is minimally acceptable, and so forth. These mandates seriously constrain options for local school systems, of maintaining some uniform standards. In addition, the costs of state-mandated programs are rising much faster than those for regular education, although state contributions are also larger than they used to be.

The City. School budgets have, in Massachusetts, been freer of direct political control than in most states. However, in Boston any appropriations larger than those of the previous year require the approval of the Mayor and City Council. In addition, the City is responsible for the physical plant of the school system, a major expense and concern in any urban school budget. In practice, a great deal of negotiation is required in order to maintain any fiscal predictability.

Current Problems in Educational Performance

Unlike the major governance and contextual issues mentioned above, educational performance is, presumably, something that a school system has some greater potential to affect. While the BPS has significant problems in a wide variety of performance areas, only a few will be discussed here. These are chosen because (1) they affect all students at all grade levels; (2) they are problems about which there is considerable public consensus; and (3) they

involve matters of education, rather than physical plant. Other areas in which weaknesses may be defined are more subject to debate (e.g., despite the Lau decision, there are many educators and citizens who object to the presence of bilingual education as a significant priority for the schools) or are more singularly related to problems of particular grade levels (e.g., the adequacy of pre-school and kindergarten programs in attracting and retaining students).

Achievement. The data on achievement show both good and bad news for the schools. The bad news is better known, as a consequence of the recent Boston Globe series: Most students in the Boston school system score significantly below the national average on tests of basic skills.[3] In addition, the figures suggest that the BPS may have a regressive impact on student achievement: while students in the first grade start off at the national median, by the 10th and 11th grade, the aggregate system results show scores below the 40th percentile.[5]

The other side of the picture appears only after the system-wide figures are disaggregated by year and by race. Several findings are of interest. First, student achievement, both in the aggregate and disaggregated by race and grade, shows at least some improvement over the last ten years. Most of the improvement has been registered in 1980 and 1981.[5,9] The modest improvement belies the public opinion reflected in the Quality of Life survey indicating that most residents believe the quality of education has declined.[12]* Second, gains in reading achievement are most substantial for black children, indicating that there may be some positive benefits accruing from integration.[9]

The Boston Schools have not, however, achieved equality of educational outcomes.** White students continue, as they always have, to score slightly above national medians in both reading and mathematics, as do Asian students. Black and Hispanic students, on the other hand, score very poorly in reading --by the third grade, the median Black reading scores are below the 40th

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* Gains were widely publicized, but seem not to have affected public opinion.

** Note that the recent court ruling in the Los Angeles desegregation case substitutes equal educational outcomes for equal educational inputs (facilities).

percentile, and the median Hispanic scores are in the lowest quartile. The differential in mathematics scores is even greater.[6]

It is unreasonable to expect schools to compensate for all of the educational disadvantages that students may bring with them to schools. Given the probable decline in the socio-economic status of students attending school, the fact that scores have risen modestly may suggest that successful teaching has occurred. However, it should be pointed out that some knowledgeable observers believe that the aggregate achievement figures cover up high variability among schools: some schools are improving, and may even be rated as adequate at this point, while others have slipped rapidly to even lower levels of achievement which cannot be accounted for by the demographic characteristics of the students attending. Too much emphasis on district-wide achievement scores may impede rather than facilitate genuine efforts to raise the quality of education in the system, which, after all, rests with individual teachers located in specific buildings.

The ultimate consequence of low achievement is felt during the high school years. Fully 50 percent of Boston's 9th grade students fail to graduate from high school, and, of these, a significant and increasing proportion are not re-enrolling in another school.[32] Over 3/4 of the dropouts appear to have no socially acceptable destination (e.g. work, the army, etc.) Of those who graduate, only 50 percent go on to further training or a full-time job.[5] Non-promotion rates are also startling; in 1977, for example, 28% of black and 18% of white, non-Hispanic 10th graders were not promoted.[9] Thus, the probability that a Boston teenager will become a social failure is rather high.

The discrepancy between schools with regard to dropout rates is also quite startling. In the non-examination schools these range from over 18 percent per year in 1981-82 at Madison Park, to less than 2 percent at Hyde Park.[5] While the range is great, the yearly statistics presented in the recent Globe article do not provide information on trends, which again reveals differences between schools. South Boston's dropout rate, for example, is quite high, but other evidence suggests that it may be considerably lower than it was in the early 70's. (South Boston has doubled the proportion of students that it sends to college -- from the extraordinarily low early 70's figure of 8 percent.[9] Meanwhile, Charlestown High's rate has dropped from 17 percent to 8 percent.[5] Others, however, show equally dramatic increases

in dropout rate, some going from low, single-digit rates to rates in the high teens. And increases have not been associated with the court order: dramatic increases have occurred in many schools since 1977.

School Staffing Issues. The task of improving student educational experiences will fall directly into the hands of teachers. No matter how elegant the district-wide curriculum being designed by the central office, the task of translating educational objectives into learning experiences occurs in the classroom. Yet, the staffing issues facing the school system are legion.

First, the existing figures indicate that despite recent staff cutbacks, the school system is overstaffed. In the previous school year, the student-staff ratio in Boston was 13.4:1. This figure is relatively meaningless, until other comparably sized city figures are reported: Cleveland, 19.4:1; Milwaukee, 18.2:1; Indianapolis, 20.4:1; and Fort Worth, 21.5:1.[4] Boston's ratio of building administrators to pupils is similarly high. The financial consequences of the staffing ratios are compounded by the fact that Boston salaries are quite high -- an average of 7 percent higher than a sample of 20 other large and moderate-sized cities.[4] Thus, it is apparent that further cuts will be necessary simply to control the budget, and to bring Boston's staffing into line with current administrative practice.

Cutting staff has, however, implications that reverberate beyond the budget. For example, the recent Globe series reports that absenteeism among teachers has risen dramatically over the two-year period when the major cutbacks have occurred, indicating that teacher morale and commitment are seriously affected.[3] While there have been no serious empirical studies of teacher morale and "burnout" in Boston since an internal study in 1976, recent investigations of the status of education in several Route 128 communities indicate that the effects of cutbacks in resources and reduction in force are having such impact in towns that have been less deeply affected.[30]

Second, because of contract provisions, seniority will continue to be the main criterion under which layoff decisions are made (with the exception, of course, that recently achieved minority representation on the teaching staff must be maintained). As a consequence, many teachers will be shifted around, and will be required to teach subjects or grade levels where they have had no recent experience. Even where teachers are already fully certified to teach in the new areas, the amount of preparation and investment required produces additional strains. Again, there have been no significant analyses of the

degree of shifting that has and will occur, but we assume that it will contribute to teacher burnout and lowered morale.

Third, there has been no effort turned to the design of a staff development policy that would provide adequate support to teachers who are currently under pressure, and who require (or should have) additional training or certification.* This gap in the services offered by the school department is hardly new: when Boston began its difficult road to desegregation, it did so with no preparation or staff development provided by the School Department or the district offices.[9. See also 15] The organizational responsibility for staff development and personnel evaluation processes has been useless for several years. School department officials have also conceded that staff development activities have not been logically tied either to the specific needs of buildings, or to groups of teachers.[32] Further weakening of staff development activities is likely in the coming years, since many special training and workshop activities tend to be sponsored through the use of federal grant monies, many of which have been consolidated into smaller block grants.

A final problem is that the staffing reductions will reduce the influx of "new blood" into the system for at least the next five years. Research suggests that exposure to new ideas and diverse colleagues in the work setting is one important way of maintaining staff productivity. In the absence of naturally occurring diversity, alternative means of providing stimulation for school staffs will need to be substituted if the teaching force of the school system is to avoid becoming inbred and insular.

Disruption and Discipline: Racial Tension

An issue that has been frequently raised in the press concerns the level of violence, disruption and racial incidents in the schools -- problems that are often viewed as a direct consequence of the desegregation court order. (Nearly a quarter of the white respondents in the Quality of Life survey indicated that discipline problems in the schools were increased by

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* Superintendent Spillane put a staff development plan in place in July '82. Although an admirable step in the right direction, it places much more emphasis on principals' needs than on those of teachers.

busing.)[12] While the controversy over discipline and disruption in the schools is heated, there is surprisingly little information of any value on the topic.

Official figures regarding major incidents indicate a decrease in physical assaults on teachers and students over the past two years. Reductions do not mean that the schools are tranquil, however -- the overall rate of suspensions indicates that over half are associated with offenses committed against other persons.[6] Official figures also indicate that the disproportionately high rates of suspensions for blacks, which formed part of the basis for the court ordered revision to the discipline code, still persist: In 1979-80, 2/3 of all suspensions were of black students, who at the time formed only 45 percent of the student body.[11] In addition, most agree that official figures based on suspension rates are inaccurate indicators of the actual tension and disruption that may be occurring in a school.[11,22,23]

The lack of information about racial tension and disruption that may not lead to suspension is distressing, since maintaining a reasonably well-ordered school environment is clearly a prerequisite to quality education. Where students are afraid to go to school, or where continual disruption prevents learning, achievement will obviously suffer. And, if racial incidents are high, the chances of students learning how to function in a multi-racial setting are limited.

Although we know little about the Boston situation, there are a few findings from other studies of desegregated cities that may be relevant.[25] First, "unfriendly contact" (e.g., arguments, pushing, hitting, etc.) in high schools is much more common within each racial group than across racial groups, for both black and white students. However, racial incidents involving physical aggression are nearly as likely to occur across as within racial groups. White students are more likely to see their black peers as dangerous and disruptive than vice-versa, and white boys are, in particular, more likely to be fearful about school-related incidents.

However, the settings in which the lowest levels of racial tension and unfriendly acts occur are in settings in which Black students are in the majority. This point is extremely important for the Boston situation, since it indicates that the recent shift from majority white to minority white may signal an opportunity to improve discipline and racial tension voluntarily. A

second study reinforces these findings, indicating that (1) delinquency rates of black and white students are not associated with the racial composition of the school, and (2) racial tension is as its height where the schools are between 40 and 65 percent white, but become reduced as whites comprise less than 40 percent of the student body.[8] A final point is that districts which experience considerable tension and hostility during and prior to the period of desegregation are likely to become less tense and more genuinely integrated in the post-desegregation years than are those which accomplished their desegregation plan with less public debate and turmoil.

Studies have not generally examined racial tension and incidents separately for elementary and junior high/middle school settings. Published analyses of school-specific disciplinary issues in Boston are not currently available.

Public Support for Public Education.

Probably the most serious educational problem facing the BPS is its relationship to its key constituencies. The system was, using most of the measures that have been presented here (as well as additional measures concerning facilities, materials, staff qualifications, political vulnerability and a host of other factors not presented here), no better ten years ago than it is today. Nor was it, at that time, a key feature in most Bostonians' lives. Newspapers and other public forums often point to the fact that in 1982 only one of every ten white households had a child in the public schools. However, what they fail to point out is that ten years ago, the proportion of the white population (then considerably larger in proportion to the minority population) with children in the public schools was still only one out of five.[12]

The court has clearly affected public attitudes. However, the current assessments of the quality of public education are, perhaps, simply more realistic than ten years ago. The controversies over desegregation, and the concurrent emphasis on the school system in the media, have tended to heighten every citizen's awareness of the problems in the school system.

Two additional public opinion factors should be noted, however. First, public opinion is highly variable by district.[12] Again, there is little information about public opinion by school, but it is reasonable to expect that, as in most school systems, the public does not perceive the school

system as undifferentiated. Some schools have done a better job at both involving parents and convincing them of their commitment to improved educational outcomes for their children than others.

A second point concerns the role of the media with respect to public opinion. First, the position of the public press with regard to the schools has been in the long tradition of investigative reporting -- a careful search for the flaws that public officials would prefer were not revealed. Very little attention has, conversely, been paid to analyses of improvement during the past five or six years. Second, there has been, overall, a strong tendency to reinforce concerns about the white flight/minority domination issue, rather than emphasizing the need to make the existing school system work for the students who are enrolled in it. Behind many of the media proposals for improvement lies a lack of understanding of the fact that Boston has no tradition of quality education on which to build efforts to lure middle class students away from suburban, parochial or private schools. Revitalizing the school system must begin with providing adequate services to the children who are currently served by the system.

V: SOME MODEST PROPOSALS FOR STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THE SYSTEM

Long range improvement for the Boston Public Schools will obviously require attention to the systemic problems identified earlier, as well as more local educational problems. However, in the short run, some programs of modest scale might have significant impact. Three examples will be given below.

The major assumption underlying the following suggestion is that the new efforts at improving the quality of the schools in Boston should center on the groups that are <u>most affected</u> by the school, and which have been least attended to by district-wide improvement programs: the teachers and students. If a program can improve the quality of life in schools for these groups, it has a chance of making a real difference in education of creating a school which teachers and students <u>like</u>, and in which there is an expectation that students will succeed.

School Based Improvement Programs

What is known about effective strategies to promote modest improvements in existing school systems? A significant amount of research has, in the past eight years, been devoted to this question. Among the generalizations that have emerged from this research are:*

- o effective strategies for improving the quality of education are typically school based rather than centralized;
- o they typically involve teachers in identifying problems, planning change programs, and determining what kinds of staff development are needed;
- o support from the principal is essential, although it is not necessary to have what is known in educational jargon as a "dynamic instructional leader" in place at the school;
- o they typically do not require extensive financial resources -- several studies of what is required to initiate short term (but effective) school based educational change estimate that between 3 and 10 thousand dollars per school can produce marked differences;
- o they require sustained assistance from outside agencies, including district staff, educational experts, trainers, and individuals who are knowledgeable about the process of creating organizational change;
- o they are generally modest in scope -- that is, they are not radical changes that require new staff or a total restructuring of the curriculum, but, where successful, they require some participation from most of the staff and students;
- o they work best where at least part of the change effort involves locating and implementing materials and ideas that are already available, rather than designing a totally new program from scratch;
- o they require at least two or three years of involvement from all supporting organizations and agencies in order to ensure that effective changes will "stick", although effective planning and initiation can occur within six to nine months;
- o they are most effective when they are oriented toward the solution of problems that are central to the educational process: e.g., issues relating to the curriculum, the classroom behavior or pupils, or specific issues of pupil achievement.

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* It should be emphasized that these conclusions probably do not apply to more major system-wide reorganizations, or radical change. This section draws heavily on 2, 13, 16, 17 and 24.

These findings point to the three areas of compatibility between the successful strategies and the needs of the Boston situation:

- o the general approach -- school based innovation -- is compatible with, and may help to build upon, the current administration's attempt to promote school-based management;

- o the emphasis on building successful schools using available resources within the schools, and minimizing the level of outside support, is compatible with current fiscal constraints;

- o the need for support from external agencies, not to direct or design change programs but to provide assistance to school staff in finding solutions to problems that they identify, suggests key roles that could be played by community resources.

The approach is also quite different from the usual approach to reforming the schools, in which "solutions" to perceived problems are decided upon, either at the district office level or by some external group bent on reform, and simply handed to schools to implement. This approach rarely works in large school systems, for a variety of reasons. For example:

- o even in a highly centralized district, schools have considerable autonomy, as do teachers. The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that schools are easily able to avoid carrying out projects that are perceived as ill advised, overly burdensome, temporary, or too poorly supported.

- o centrally designed programs and district-wide programs are often not well designed for adaptation to individual schools.

- o most centrally mandated programs are underfunded. Particularly in poorly equipped urban school systems, such as Boston's, appropriate materials and support simply don't materialize. Teachers become ever more skeptical about the value of each year's crop of reforms.

- o general tension between teachers and administrators, which are typical of urban systems, may make it difficult to "sell" programs that have been developed with minimal teacher involvement.

- o there is a tendency to implement most reform programs before they are well thought through, due to the enormous pressures on central administration staff and other public agencies to show that they are "doing something".

Many of these problems can be avoided with smaller scale school-based planning.

Translating these findings into a workable set of programs for the schools might involve activities such as the following:

- o coming to some agreement with the BPS with regard to how small a number of pilot schools should be selected (ensuring, of course, that the principals of the schools were eager to participate). One evidence of principal commitment would be a willingness to allocate a large proportion of the school-based staff development budget to the support of a project);

- o drawing upon existing materials to design a specific planning process for each of the schools. This might include some constraints on the types of problems that would be considered (e.g., schoolwide, dealing with students, etc.), providing each school with a "facilitator", either from the district staff or from one of the local universities. The role of the facilitator would be to serve as an organizer and a link to outside resources that the school might need;

- o developing ties with local information systems that provide information about national or state "promising practices" (e.g., curricula, materials or programs that have been evaluated or otherwise certified as effective);

- o developing some procedures to monitor programs, to publicize the results to other schools, and to evaluate the impact on the school.

If pilot activities appear successful, new schools could be added in each school year. Ideally, each school might become involved in a process of cyclical planning for school-based improvement, meeting the specific needs and problems that are not fully encompassed in the district's improvement agenda.

The cost of such a program would be almost entirely dependent on the degree to which BPS resources would be available, and whether local universities would be willing to contribute staff support and time pro bono. However, programs of this type may be cost beneficial because they address multiple problems with a single effort.

Previous studies of school-based improvement programs have suggested that a major benefit in addition to improved educational settings for students is improved morale among teachers. This results from the ability of the staff to collectively grapple with a perceived need and, in the process, learn about different methods of solving whatever problems they are facing.

Designing and implementing such a program should be relatively easy using local resources. Several agencies in or near the Boston area have expertise

relevant to school-based improvement programs and could be called upon to aid in developing a pilot program for the Boston schools.*

One final point should be made here. Although the above proposal is compatible with the current Superintendent's emphasis on school-based management, it should not be confounded with it. What is being urged is a teacher focused process, which may or may not be managed by the principal. Rather than having the principal be the arbiter of innovation within the building, a school-based innovation program should, if properly designed, work with and through the Boston Teachers Union as well as through the BPS. Just as the principal has the power to act as a gatekeeper for school improvement, so does a powerful building unit have the ability to undermine a change program that is perceived as counterproductive. Both groups similarly have the potential for stimulating and encouraging genuine improvement, and both have a much clearer stake in actual educational gains than does City Hall or the central office.

Special Programs to Improve the Climate of Desegregated Settings.

Boston has not engaged in any special program development designed to improve the quality of race relations in the schools. One observer has called the public school's attitude one of "racial neutrality" -- pretending that racial issues are educationally insignificant, even during the period of extreme disruption during the first two years of the court order. While school systems have varied in the attention paid to developing programs for desegregated settings, Boston stands out as derelict in this regard.[15,8]

It is not, however, too late to remedy this situation, particularly on a school-by-school basis. School-based programs that addressed the specific needs of teachers and pupils should be limited to activities that have been shown by research to have an impact on the quality of education in similar settings. Among these are:**

- o in-service staff training. Human relations training for both minority and white teachers has been shown, even with very small programs, to

* Several of the more successful school-university pairings used similar techniques. The NETWORK, in Andover, managed a similar school improvement program, which included several urban schools across the country. The Rhode Island Department of Education has for several years run a statewide program of the type discussed here, through their Bureau of Technical Assistance.

** This section draws heavily on [8].

affect students' perceived liking of school, their perception of teachers as racially open and the fairness of school rules. The use of one-shot programs is considerably less effective than intermittent programs over the course of several years.

o student biracial committees. Student committees that are involved in settling interracial disputes or incidents are extremely effective in reducing racial tension and gaining cooperation from students. While they are not appropriate for lower elementary students, some modified version of a biracial committee would be useful for upper elementary, middle/junior and high school students.

The Boston Public Schools have consistently failed to adopt the recommendation of introducing student involvement in discipline as part of the school-wide disciplinary code. The notion of a bi-racial committee, whose function and jurisdiction is clear, can, however, be initiated on a school-by-school basis consistent with the district code.

Teacher support for biracial committees is essential in order to make them effective. In schools where teachers and students support such a committee, racial tension is considerably lower.

The best time to initiate biracial committees is during period in which racial relations are relatively calm. One research report indicated that "unless the biracial committee has had ample opportunity to develop its skills during the quiet times, it is unlikely to be effective in times of crisis"[8: 137]

o improved extracurricular activities. Involving students in extracurricular activities is most difficult during the last two years of high school, when most students work. However, prior to that time efforts to expand extracurricular activities should be expanded for a variety of reasons. First, it has significant positive effects on both black and white students' liking of school, on self-esteem and general happiness. Second, it increases parent involvement with the school (and, presumably, parent approval of the school). Third, extracurricular activities offer opportunities for positive interracial contact, and involvement in them is assoicated with positive racial attitudes. Finally, student involvement in extracurricular activities is associated with greater academic effort and higher achievement. (Note that these findings are true for all students in schools with high extracurricular involvement -- not just those who are involved.)

School-based extracurricular activities may involve teachers, parents and other community members.

o Structures to help teachers teach. A number of educators around the country are developing teaching techniques that are intended to reduce current educational emphases on individual performance and failure, and to reward, instead, group performance and behavior. These approaches are particularly useful in mixed racial settings, because they reinforce cooperation in learning. These educational techniques are based on the same finding that underpins the need for more extracurricular activi-

ties: working with students of the opposite race in situations where both can "win" promotes good race relations in school.

One major research finding of relevance to educational structures should be emphasized here. The suggestion that "tracking" is resegregative and racist in character is frequently made. Many have attacked the marked increase in the classification of special needs students as a similar mechanism to segregate students by classroom in supposedly desegregated settings. Recent research suggests that this argument has both positive and negative aspects from an educational perspective.[8]

First, research on tracking clearly indicates that it does not benefit black students, although it may benefit whites. However, most researchers conclude that the impacts of tracking on black educational achievement are not significant. On the other hand, both black and white students in recently desegregated school systems show more positive interracial contact and more positive attitudes toward school in tracked rather than non-tracked schools. Tracking requires clear monitoring to ensure that assignment is based on fair assessment of ability and performance, but it may be useful to retain tracks for at least some courses within most schools. However, this would be appropriate only where there is a genuine commitment to providing frequent cooperative educational experiences that involve students from all ethnic and racial groups.

Monitoring and Feedback to the System

Compared to other major school systems in the country, Boston has a meager store of research and systematic analysis to guide planning and action. It is unreasonable to expect school district staff to fill in the gaps that have, unaccountably, been left by the academic community that surrounds the city -- the BPS is too poor, and too preoccupied with management of the system, to embark upon a major effort to collect and analyze data.

Nevertheless, planning is undoubtedly hampered by the lack of data about significant and critical issues, such as teacher morale and motivation, students' racial attitudes and interracial contacts, the true level of disruption and violence in the schools, and so forth. Lack of information also prevents public accountability -- not only are the poor schools able to hide behind no information or aggregate figures, but the better schools or

those that are improving cannot be identified and rewarded. Thus, the incentives of public recognition are dampened.

If the BPS concurs in the need for data on key topics and development of efforts both to collect baseline information and to design monitoring systems to measure progress, it would put Boston on a footing that would make it more comparable to other school systems. If the public agrees that scores are not the only aspect of schooling that is of social value, then the development of means to determine whether other goals are being met would be of use. It might be suggested, for example, that regular attempts to assess the "quality of life" for students and teachers would provide evidence of problems, or of success to supplement achievement scores.

Designing and maintaining a monitoring and feedback system outside the BPS would also have the value of providing an objective view of the system -- one which would undoubtedly have more impact on public opinion. In addition, because such a program would be best initiated with the cooperation and participation of the Boston Teachers' Union and the student government, as well as the BPS, it would have the added value of gaining some commitment from the most involved members of the system.

VI: THE SPECIAL CASE OF SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITIONS

The previous sections of this paper have dealt with issues of schooling that affect both elementary and secondary schools. However, public opinion is coalescing around the need to upgrade not only the opportunities <u>within</u> the educational system, but the opportunities that are available to students who are graduated from it. In recent months, promising headway has been made in this regard; the "Boston Compact", a joint agreement between the public schools and local industrial groups, is a prime example of citizen concern for upgrading employability and employment.[2] The "Boston Compact" provides a basis for progress which is securely based, in most cases, on a foundation of research.*

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* Note, for example, that the Compact, like the present review, advocates emphasis on the arts and extramural activities as means for increasing student motivation. The Compact also alludes to the need for school-based planning, but provides no basis for estimating how this goal will be achieved within a district-wide reform program.

However, without in any way minimizing its value, it is useful also to emphasize the limitations of the "Compact", and the need for further effort in this area.

The Compact acknowledges that ensuring that students find jobs at the end of their educational careers requires not only basic literacy, but also experience with career and vocational education. Yet, the career and vocational education systems are currently in great disrepair.[20,32]

Since the opening of the Hubert Humphrey Occupation Center (HHORC), the number of occupational education teachers in the system has risen substantially, -- up 28 percent since 1976.[4] But, it should be pointed out that occupational education teachers represented a mere 3.8 percent of the teaching staff in 1982.** Moreover, there was a drop in this staffing category after the implementation of 2 1/2. Thus, the current priorities on occupational education in the system are clear.

When the current superintendent arrived, he found a system that was characterized as a "mixed bag of success, failure, cross-purposes and missed opportunities".[32: 29] Concurring with a State Department evaluation of occupational education in Boston, School Department officials found in their review that occupational and career education below the high school level was either limited or virtually nonexistent, and that at the high school level, the curriculum and articulation with other programs was a shambles. A 1981 State review concluded that most of the equipment was not operational and was insufficient for educational purposes, and that students were very poorly informed about vocational education alternatives.[20]

A state review of HHORC approximately a year later praised staff commitment to serving the needs of students, but pointed to problems that remained despite the opening of a building that was to become a "city-wide magnet program(s) in job skills training and trade apprenticeship instruction on a scale and of a quality that can someday become the envy of all New England"[9: 135]. Most pointedly, they emphasized that the Center still showed significant problems relating to equipment (much of which was not in place), curriculum (most of which was not yet written), recruitment (few systematic procedures to

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** This should be contrasted, for example, with 8.1 percent of teachers as specialists in bilingual education, and 19.2 percent in special education.

get students to enroll at the HHORC existed), equity (most staff indicated that they were not sufficiently knowledgeable about adapting program offerings to those of limited English speaking ability) and parent involvement.[20] Of even greater concern were the political problems, most notably the reluctance of many headmasters at the regular high schools to promote the HHORC's split-day programming (which requires students to take basic education courses at their base school, and travel to the HHORC for the other half of the day), leaving the Center underutilized. In addition, the addition of the HHORC was apparently viewed by some high school headmasters as relieving them of the major burdens of occupational and career education, rather than carrying out the vision of the HHORC and the high schools as an integrated approach to education and skills training.[32]

The Boston Compact emphasizes upgrading these conditions, improving students basic skills, and increasing the number of structured work experiences for vocationally oriented students at the HHORC.

The Boston Committee might wish to consider ways of supporting these objectives, since the Compact is ambitious in scope and scale. An alternative, however, would be to supplement the Compact in an area that is unlikely to be developed in the near future -- providing job skills to the many students who are not sufficiently motivated or who lack the guidance to reach the HHORC programs.

The bulk of the Boston students are enrolled in "general education" or "business ed" programs -- eg., they are neither college prep, nor settled into a clear vocational track. These students are, perhaps, in greatest jeopardy of failure in the job search because not only are they often lacking in basic skills, but they also have not been exposed to a setting in which they could learn appropriate job skills. Short-term assistance to these students might have a big impact and bridge the period between the planning and implementation of the Compact programs. More specifically, the introduction of a massive work-study program for juniors and seniors would have the benefits of introducing students to work settings where they might be supported in learning to cope with the requirements of simple, unskilled jobs. Such a program might be accompanied by a work skills curriculum that could be developed with the cooperation of major local employers. Success at completing the requirements of a simple job in high school might well motivate the student who is unlikely to be active in extracurricular activities to stay

in school. It may also provide a taste of success and social skills that could make the student more employable upon graduation. This approach is, of course, no substitute for a genuine upgrading of educational and work opportunities on a more massive scale, but may help in meeting the needs of students who will not be exposed to the improved programs of the future.

VII: CONCLUSIONS

The past eight years have been difficult ones for the BPS. It has come through the period with many scars, but there is little evidence that the major problems of the system are due to desegregation. Furthermore, the turmoil of desegregation, and the constraints of the court order, have unquestionably broken an historical pattern of patronage (described in the first section) that resulted in providing maximal services to a tiny few, but below standard educational opportunities to the many. In implementing reforms for the sake of racial justice, educational equity for the poor, and those who lacked access to the patronage system, was also ensured.

In addition, now that the old patterns are either gone or diminished, there are opportunities for improvement that would not have existed on a system-wide basis before. Although many seem to feel that the public school system is irredeemable, without a serious attempt to initiate improvement it is difficult to entertain this assumption seriously.

Yet, many of the current recommendations and programs sponsored both by the BPS and by outside groups still have a kind of blind-men-and-the-elephant quality. Each task force or group is still trying to figure out what the elephant is like based on an understanding of only one part of the complicated beast. There is nothing wrong with band-aid and short-term remedies for a system that has serious problems. Yet, because the new BPS seems to be committed to developing long-term solutions and reorganizations, it would seem that the help that would most benefit it would be information that would assist in defining some of the key problems more precisely than has ben possible here.

Thus, if asked to pick a starting point among the alternative recommendations presented in the previous sections, the goal of developing a monitoring and feedback system would be likely to have the most lasting impact. Since it

could also have short term high visibility within the system and among the public at large (assuming an interest in the press), it becomes an even more attractive option. But there are many alternative ways in which externally initiated, modest programs can positively affect the system. The theme of school focused improvement that has been emphasized throughout the latter half of this paper is, however, a research-based criterion that should remain prominent in further discussions.

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