

As audit looms, Boston schools brace for more bad news

By [James Vaznis](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 2, 2020, 11:20 a.m.



A growing number of state officials and other advocates are calling on Massachusetts Education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley to make a decision about Boston Public schools. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

By many measures, the Boston schools are in crisis. Graduation rates dropped last year, while the gap between Black and white students earning diplomas more than doubled. The state last fall ordered the school district to ramp up improvement efforts at nearly three dozen low-performing schools. A Globe review revealed that fewer than one in four

graduates at several Boston high schools earned college degrees. The school system's buildings are deteriorating, and school officials can't even keep [bathrooms](#) stocked with soap and toilet paper.

As the state wraps up its first comprehensive review of the Boston system in a decade, local officials are bracing themselves — and the public — for more bad news. Mayor Martin J. Walsh, whose administration has examined a draft of the findings, warned on WBUR's Radio Boston last week that the final version is “not going to be a real pretty report.”

The low performance of the Boston school system is propelling a growing number of state officials and other advocates to call on Massachusetts Education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley to take decisive action, even a state takeover of the entire system. Just last week, a statewide advocacy organization representing Black and Latino families pleaded with Riley and the state education board to act swiftly and aggressively.

“Mayor Walsh and Superintendent [Brenda] Cassellius do not deserve more trust or more time,” Keri Rodrigues, founding president of Massachusetts Parents United, told the state education board members. “How much longer is the state going to accept Boston's excuses for its inability to fix its schools? How many more children do we have to lose before you take this seriously?”

Many in Boston, though, believe state receivership would be a mistake.

“I don't even want to say the word ‘receivership’ — that would be the worse thing that could happen,” said Ruby Reyes, director of the Boston Education Justice Alliance, a coalition of Boston students, parents, and educators. “State oversight hasn't been helpful. I think state assistance should be resources.”

Whether the state will put the system — or a portion of it— into receivership remains unclear. When WBUR asked Walsh about a state takeover, the mayor said, “I'm not even gonna go there right now” and defended the school system's record under his tenure.

Riley, who is under pressure from some state education board members to intervene in Boston, has not revealed his hand, while a state education spokeswoman said Friday that the commissioner has not made any recommendations yet on what action he might take in Boston.

Cassellius was equally cryptic Friday when she fielded questions on WGBH's Boston Public Radio. A former state education commissioner in Minnesota, she said she would welcome state support in implementing the school-improvement plan she developed in consultation with the community after she started the job in July, saying such a partnership could bring additional resources to Boston. She noted that Walsh already has committed an additional \$100 million over the next three years to the effort.

A takeover of the entire system would be a surprise. The state's accountability system — based largely on MCAS scores, graduation rates, and student attendance — did not call for large-scale districtwide intervention in the fall when the annual ratings for all districts and schools statewide were released, noting Boston was making substantial progress toward meeting state improvement targets.

However, Riley could be compelled to act differently based on the more nuanced and deeper analysis in the district review, which encompassed visits to 100 of the 125 schools in the district, reams of data, and wide-ranging interviews with city officials, district personnel, school administrators, union representatives, teachers, students, and parents. At least one state board member has floated the idea of taking over a swath of schools and basically converting it into its own state-run district.

Tanisha Sullivan, president of the Boston-branch of the NAACP, said she has spoken with several people who have seen the report, and if the information she is receiving is true, she said, "I don't see how the state takes no action." She said all options should be on the table, but questioned whether the state Education Department, which is [already overseeing district receiverships](#) in Lawrence, Holyoke, and Southbridge, has the capacity to seize control of the entire Boston system.

“Some of what I’m hearing is we have a super-majority of students in classrooms not getting what they need to succeed,” said Sullivan, a former Boston district administrator. “It is a confirmation that the Boston Public Schools are in crisis. It will be, I believe, a call on all of us to become more intentional and aggressive in efforts to bring about quality education for all student in the BPS, particularly Black and Latinx students.”

In many pockets of Massachusetts and the country, Riley is seen as a superstar in the world of state receivership. He served as [the state receiver](#) for six years in Lawrence before becoming commissioner and orchestrated an impressive revitalization of that city’s schools.

But Paul Reville, a former Massachusetts education secretary who applauded Riley’s work in Lawrence, warned that the track record of receiverships nationwide is dismal. He noted that state takeovers have had more luck in establishing fiscal stability than yielding long-lasting academic results, calling Lawrence’s turnaround a rare outlier. Nevertheless, he added, states can still play a vital role in overhauling low-performing districts, injecting urgency and visibility to the efforts.

“One thing state intervention can bring is added authority to get things done regardless of political influence,” he said.

Riley has more insight into the inner workings of the Boston school system than any commissioner in recent decades, having worked in the BPS for about ten years, including as a principal and a central-office administrator.

But across the school system, many parents, educators, students, and other invested parties do not want Riley to seize control of the Boston district or any of its schools. They said a state takeover would undermine Cassellius and create unnecessary disruption. The district has had two interim superintendents and two permanent superintendents since Carol Johnson retired in 2013.

“We are not looking for intervention; it feels like it would be more chaos,” said Harneen Chernow, a former state board vice-chair whose children attend the Boston Public Schools and who is a member of the grass-roots parent group, Quality Education for Every Student. “We need stability.”

The state’s own record of aggressive intervention in some of the city’s worst-performing schools also raises concerns among many parents and educators. The state has struggled immensely in overhauling the [Dever](#) and Holland elementary schools in Dorchester since putting them into receivership six years ago, while the Dearborn STEM Academy in Roxbury, which the [state pressured](#) the school system to hand over to an outside operator in 2014, is floundering in the bottom 3 percent of schools statewide.

Jessica Tang, president of the Boston Teachers Union, said receivership should not be an option, citing the state’s poor track record and limited staff. She would like Riley to support Cassellius’ plan, which calls for offering more programs and staff to support the emotional well-being of students and boosting the school district’s graduation requirements. That latter effort includes having high schools adopt a state-recommended course of study called [MassCore](#) that aligns with admission standards for state universities. Last year, only 29 percent of graduates districtwide completed MassCore.

“If the state wants to be helpful, what we need are resources to support the [strategic] plan,” said Tang, including more money to renovate or replace the system’s aging school buildings. “We know there are gaps and inequities that need to be addressed and we as educators have been advocating for change.”

But it might take the threat of state receivership to get the school system to stick with reforms long enough to get actual results, said Oren Sellstrom, litigation director at Lawyers for Civil Rights.

“The achievement gap is alarming and has been for a number of years,” Sellstrom said. “That is something that the communities we work with are most concerned about and

where the district has failed to step up and take meaningful steps to close it. ... Year after year, students and particularly students of color are undermined by a failing district.”

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