



Youth

Working Group
Transition Team Report

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Photos: Kit Pyne





“What can Boston city government do—whether by itself or in partnership with others—to ensure that all of the city’s youth are on a positive path leading toward a productive future?”

INTRODUCTION

With more than one-third of the city’s population comprised of people under the age of 24 years old, Boston’s youth community is multi-layered and diverse. The issues facing young people in the city are widespread, often translating to policy across various facets of city government and local organizations.

Mayor Walsh asked the Youth Working Group, “What can Boston city government do – whether by itself or in partnership with others – to ensure that all of the city’s youth are on a positive path leading toward a productive future?”

THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The following report presents recommendations

for addressing the needs and leveraging the assets of Boston’s youth by focusing on:

- 1) Youth Voice and Engagement: Supporting youth civic engagement and leadership, as well as obtaining their voice in the democratic processes of the city;
- 2) Healthy Communities for Healthy Youth: Ensuring comprehensive well-being for youth in the city, addressing public health and safety issues;
- 3) Positive Educational and Employment Pathways: Ensuring youth have access to meaningful educational and workforce development opportunities.

At the heart of these recommendations is the hope that all young people in Boston have equal access and opportunities to succeed. To achieve this goal, the Walsh administration should increase interagency collaboration throughout city government and work with public, non-profit, and private sector partners to help Boston’s youth excel and remain on a positive path toward a productive future.

FOCUS 1: YOUTH VOICE AND ENGAGEMENT

Mayor Walsh is committed to expanding opportunities for youth “to participate in civic issues and have a voice in changing their city” (Walsh Youth Policy Paper,

2013). In order to empower youth to be leaders, we recommend that the city continue to use currently effective vehicles and tools for developing youth leadership, while expanding on others to engage the large and diverse youth population in deeper and more meaningful ways.

To create comprehensive youth policy, identify gaps in service delivery, ensure the quality of youth services, expand resources, and implement the youth-led initiatives that are specified in Mayor Walsh’s goals for arts and culture, education, health, public safety, and work force development it is necessary to coordinate activities between city agencies and community-based organizations

KEEP

1. Mayor’s Youth Engagement Initiatives: The Mayor’s Youth Council and Youth Participatory Budgeting Process: The Mayor’s Youth Council offers a platform for youth to express their opinions and share fresh ideas. We have an opportunity to expand and enhance this program in the near future (also see “Implement”). Boston is the first city in the country to engage youth in a participatory budget process. The city should continue this process beyond fiscal year 2014 to maintain a youth voice in the funding of capital budget projects, as well as other aspects of local policy decision-making.



2. Youth Representative On Boston School Committee: As the City of Boston evaluates education policy for Boston Public School students, maintaining and expanding student representation on this governing body is critical and necessary for increasing youth voice and engagement (also see “Implement”).
3. Support for Youth Civic Engagement Programs: The City of Boston needs to maintain its support of youth programs that promote civic engagement. In particular, the Boston Youth Fund should continue to provide crucial summer and year-round job slots for youth leadership groups. Boston Rocks funding should continue to support youth to engage their peers and neighbors in city-owned spaces. The Mayor’s OneIn3 Advisory Council should also be continued.

IMPLEMENT

1. Expand the Mayor’s Office Youth Engagement Vehicles:
 - 1.1. The Mayor’s Youth Council (MYC):

The MYC is a national model for youth engagement, yet not enough people in Boston know about its work. Implementing a strong marketing and outreach strategy will inform residents, increase representation and engagement, and allow for the MYC and its initiatives to reach potential youth participants. In addition, structuring the MYC to include formal quarterly meetings with the mayor will provide concrete mechanisms for increased youth input, while increasing awareness of the MYC’s function and value to both youth and adult constituencies. In addition, the MYC can improve its connection with

youth who struggle with challenges such as chronic school failure, court involvement, drug addiction, etc.

- 1.2. Youth Summit: An Annual Youth Summit should be established. In addition, the MYC should provide a more than annual platform for youth to voice their concerns across a wide range of policy areas, similar to the Open Town Meeting and Public Hearings led by Mayor-elect Walsh's transition team. It is critical that the MYC receive technical support to train young people to plan and implement such summits, facilitate dialogue and decision making processes, and to write and deliver effective speeches.
2. Strengthen Youth Representation In the Boston Public School Decision-Making Bodies: Youth representation needs to be strengthened on the School Committee, providing more diversity among those represented (e.g., gender, exam/non-exam schools, ELL/ native English speaker, etc.). Further, youth represented should have voting power on the School Committee, which will move the current youth seat from a place of symbolic power to an official voice on this governing body. The city should have youth representatives on the search committee for Boston's new superintendent.
3. Increase Programming for Middle School Aged Youth: Middle school is an important transition time for young people, which is why two key services for middle school youth should be expanded in the city: civic leadership and positive enrichment programs. First, students should not have to wait until high school to express their views and opinions; programming should be provided for middle school students to enhance their civic leadership skills. Second,

programming and resources should be increased for middle school students who may be struggling so that they can get on a positive path, avoiding negative outcomes like risky sexual activity or street violence. To support both of these initiatives, the city should partner with organizations that are already successfully engaged and supportive of young people, close the gap of valuable resources, and improve the promotion of these community and enrichment programs.

4. Boston Youth Commission: To enhance the quality of life for Boston's youth, the city should re-evaluate its organizational structure for youth-related services and programming. Through a proposed Youth Commission or existing city office, this office should have primary responsibility to oversee the implementation of youth policy; facilitate collaboration and communication with and among youth service providers and programs; improve the coordination of resources; oversee the city's youth engagement initiatives; and ensure that youth-led initiatives are integrated into the efforts of other city departments, including those in arts and culture, education, and work force development. Models such as Boston's Elderly Commission and San Francisco's Youth Commission should be explored when considering the infrastructure, purpose, and goals of the Boston Youth Commission.

DREAM

1. Boston Centers for Youth and Family (BCYF): The BCYF facilities are severely underutilized. Centers should be both a hub for youth in their respective neighborhoods and a connector for



youth to programming across the city. With existing infrastructure in place, BCYF should be the hub for most health, athletic and wellness activities for Boston youth. For example, BCYF can implement a model similar to the New York City “Mayor’s Cups” as a way to use sports to join the various neighborhoods of that city in friendly athletic competition. Finally, in addition to the programming offered by BCYF staff, the centers should be open to programming from partnering community-based organizations and should play a key role in encouraging youth participation in city-wide activities like the MYC Annual Summit.

2. **Develop an Ethnic Studies Curriculum:** With 85% of Boston Public School (BPS) students of Latino, African American or Asian ethnicity, it is critical to modernize the history curriculum to reflect the student population. Knowing their history as well as the histories of other people of color will allow students to have more cultural pride and be more culturally aware. BPS should convene a curriculum committee to do an ethnic

studies pilot project with the long-term goal of including ethnic studies in every school.

3. **Implement a Culturally Responsive Youth Outreach and Engagement Strategy:** The City of Boston needs a marketing and outreach strategy for youth that connects young people and the adults in their lives to the various opportunities, services, and supports available in the city. Further, those who, on behalf of the city, work with and engage youth should reflect, embrace, and celebrate the various cultures and identities of Boston’s young people.

FOCUS 2: HEALTHY COMMUNITIES FOR HEALTHY YOUTH

Youth violence and destructive behavior patterns have reemerged in Boston, creating a group of young people who are traumatized and isolated, academically marginalized, and vulnerable to exposure and involvement in crime, drug addiction, sexual abuse, prostitution, and severe emotional and social challenges.

Research demonstrates the need to invest in strategies that are designed to positively impact peer culture so that youth engage positively in their education, their community, and their own futures. The City of Boston has an opportunity to reevaluate which resources and

programming have been successful and which have not, to promote healthy, safe and successful communities.

KEEP

1. Programming for LGBTQ Youth: Even as Massachusetts has been a leader in working for equality, LGBTQ youth continue to face unique challenges as they often fight to be accepted in their homes, schools, and the broader society. The city should continue to support community-based programs that create safe spaces for LGBTQ youth and make space for their voices in the broader health and youth development agendas.
2. Supports for High Risk Youth: While there are many young people thriving in Boston, there are others who struggle with issues such as drug addiction, chronic school failure, or court involvement. The city should maintain programs like the Streetworker program, which is aimed at supporting these youth, and continue to use funding like Shannon Grants to support community organizations serving this population.

IMPLEMENT

1. Strengthen Promotion of Community Health Centers and Peer-to-Peer Counseling: All community health centers should be engaged in a citywide approach to public health and public safety efforts. In particular, the city should increase and promote peer-to-peer counseling, in which young people share public

health information concerning drugs, sexuality, and violence, and positive behavior. Portions of the funding available through Safe & Successful Youth Initiative, violence prevention support available through the Department of Public Health, and the Shannon Grant programs should support expanded efforts to engage high risk youth in public health education and peer-based violence prevention efforts community based agencies, health centers, and BCYF programs as partners.

2. Support and Enhance the City's Trauma Services: Youth who experience trauma are at a greater risk of hurting themselves and others. In the city of Boston, there is impressive but understaffed infrastructure for addressing traumatic incidents like homicides or fires, but there is not enough ongoing mental health support for youth who are in crisis. If the city expands its trauma supports and institutes effective follow up services, the city may prevent more young people from engaging in violence or risky behavior in the future.

DREAM

1. Establish Youth-Led Safe and Cultural Spaces:
 - 1.1. Promote Safe Cafes at Community Centers: Concerns around youth violence have caused many organizations to refrain from holding youth social events. The city and youth-serving organizations must partner to create safe spaces for youth to socialize. Talent shows, open mics, dance parties, and other safe and supervised social events decrease the need for young people to identify unsupervised spaces to socialize where drug use, inappropriate sexual

activity, and violence are much more likely to occur. As part of this effort, the city should encourage the 37 community centers located strategically throughout Boston neighborhoods to provide the physical space for ongoing, regular teen social activities.

- 1.2. Redevelop The Strand Theatre: The Strand Theatre presents an opportunity to develop a nationally recognized theatre that offers safe spaces for youth, provides vehicles for youth voice and engagement, expands culture and art in the city, and promotes meaningful and year-round employment for youth.
2. Incorporate Youth into Boston Police Academy and In-Service Training: All new recruits to the Boston Police Academy as well as all current officers should receive community police training to improve relationships between youth and police. This training should be ongoing, to raise awareness among youth and police about their common interests and maintain a shared sense of responsibility that protects the rights and dignity of youth and ensures the safety of all Boston residents.

FOCUS 3: ENRICHING EDUCATIONAL AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The City of Boston must invest in enriching educational and employment programs that support a positive future for today's youth. Many programs exist that reach the full spectrum

of youth and the city should continue to support them. There are also new ideas that should be implemented inside and outside the classroom to advance each child's educational and career opportunities.

KEEP

1. Partnerships for College Access Programs: In order to increase the number of youth who pursue and complete college, young people need to have access to college campuses to understand what they need to do to succeed academically and to access necessary college financial aid. The city benefits from many partnership and mentoring programs that create pathways to college, such as programs at local public colleges.
2. College and Career Pathways for English Language Learners: To ensure equal access to competitive college access and workforce development programs, it is critical to maintain partnerships with existing programs in the city that support Boston's growing population of English Language Learners (ELLs) and provide culturally sustaining programming to youth who are increasingly multicultural and multilingual. In addition to maintaining these programs, there is also an opportunity to align resources from the city and the school district to support these programs.

IMPLEMENT

1. Advocate for Youth Employment among Boston Companies: While the City of Boston has consistently funded the Mayor's Summer Jobs Program, there is an opportunity to increase private sector engagement to expand employment opportunities for young people. Every summer, 4,000 out of the 14,000 youth who apply for summer jobs are left unemployed. The Walsh administration should encourage the 350 private companies with more than 100 employees who do not currently hire youth to hire young people during the summer and throughout the year. Employment for youth should offer connections to growing vocational fields in the city and state.
2. Expand Partnerships with Community-Based Organizations for Academic Credit: BPS should expand its partnerships with organizations and programs so that students may obtain academic, arts, athletics, and civics credits through their participation in community based organizations and institutions of higher education. Making this a citywide opportunity will increase engagement among youth in their communities, and relieve BPS from the responsibility of providing these critical educational experiences, which are currently limited.
3. Advocate for MBTA Youth Passes: With over one-third of Boston's youth not able to afford MBTA passes, the mayor should advocate with the state's Department of Transportation for free or low-cost MBTA passes for youth up to 21 years of age. Mayor Walsh should partner with existing coalitions and the MBTA to research, develop, and implement a Youth Pass program.. Transportation access will enable

youth to attend after-school/vacation programs, artistic and athletic experiences, employment and other opportunities, all of which lead to healthier and safer communities.

4. Provide Books for Homework and Study: Many public school students across the city are not allowed to bring home their books to study; in some cases, if a student brings home a book from school it is considered stealing. Every effort should be made to address this most basic of educational needs as soon as possible. If, however books cannot be purchased in the short term, it should be mandatory for all schools to provide electronic and printed copies of the most recent and relevant school materials.
5. Create the Boston School Equity Task Force: In October, Mayor Walsh agreed to establish a Boston Equity Task Force to examine and promote standards of equity for all publically-funded schools in the city. This task force should include representatives from youth groups in Boston, teachers, parents, and leaders from exam, non-exam, and charter school from around the city.

DREAM

1. Improve the Boston Youth Fund for Youth Employment: First, the Boston Youth Fund should expand to better meet demand for summer jobs. City funding should be increased to support 1,000 more young people each summer. The Boston Youth Fund should be also be expanded to include youth ages 14 to 19, and should provide as many young people as possible, especially those older youth with

year round employment opportunities. Youth employment can provide a powerful mechanism to engage youth as partners in working to support community peace and stability. By expanding the program, the city should also consider job opportunities for disconnected youth, at-risk youth, and non-Boston Public School students who may be seeking alternative education. Additionally, the BYF job placement should mirror that of the job market. The program should be structured so that youth are screened and selected by the participating agencies and departments to ensure a fit between their skills and the vocational goals of the participating youth. Furthermore, the city's employment program should be structured to allow youth to stay with the same organization over time rather than limited to the selected summer. This consistency will enable young people to develop their skills and long term relationships with employers to boost self-esteem, understand real world life skills, and identify a long-term vocational pathway.

2. **Coordinate School and Community Center Partnerships:** Boston is rich in its resources and potential for partnerships with the array of colleges and organizations in the city. Unfortunately, some schools have stronger partnerships with colleges and organizations than other schools; some, do not have any meaningful partnerships at all. Organizations find it challenging to navigate school bureaucracy in order to bring services to young people. Every school and BCYF facility should be expected to have at least one major partnership that provides in-school or out-of-school time support. This would require BPS and BCYF to create a portfolio of partners so that schools and community centers can

form meaningful partnerships that match their capacity, mission, interests/focus and leadership style. To move this forward, the engagement department at BPS should conduct focus groups with potential partners and develop a marketing campaign to increase partnerships. BCYF should create a partnerships position or department within its existing structure.

3. **Increase Alternative Education Pathways and At-Risk Student Supports:** Many young people are not able to get through the traditional four year high school structure. Boston has seen a dramatic decrease in its dropout rate in part due to the establishment of alternative education programs which help young people to get back into a supportive educational environment. While Boston must continue to make its traditional high schools more supportive, the city should double the number of alternative education slots to support youth who struggle in traditional education settings, particularly those between 18 and 24 years old.

4. **Expand Arts Programming:** All schools should offer a rich variety of music, arts, and cultural programming that takes place both during and after school. The arts have the capacity to reach, engage, and retain students, to improve academic outcomes and to help close the achievement gap. Leveraging the city's strong partnerships can potentially help move BPS towards this goal.

5. **Expand the Civics Curriculum to All High Schools:** In 2013, Boston launched a civics pilot to educate youth on how to become engaged citizens. This curriculum should be evaluated, strengthened, and expanded districtwide. Additionally, the district should continue to engage youth leadership

organizations to support an out-of-school component that allows young people to participate in action projects in their communities.

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Organizational titles and affiliations are provided for identification purposes only.