

Say NO to Boston Receivership: **Research and Data to Support the Case**

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Boston’s “eligibility” for receivership under state law is based on a DESE-determined list that uses outdated, biased, and inaccurate measures of school quality. If the state used the better available measures—growth scores, not achievement—Boston wouldn’t even be on the list.

- Under state law, for a district to be “eligible” for receivership, it must be in the “lowest 10 percent” of districts based on a metric/list developed by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).¹ According to DESE, this lowest 10 percent list is the same one used for determining a district’s charter school cap, as explained here: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/enrollment/CapIncrease/>. The most recent list can be accessed by clicking on the Excel spreadsheet titled “2020 district ranking.”
- The 2020 rankings—which are based on 2018 and 2019 MCAS scores—have been frozen since the pandemic’s onset, as there are no scores from 2020 and DESE has said they won’t use 2021 scores for accountability purposes. This raises the question: Is it ethical to rely on a list that is 3 to 4 years out of date to make high-stakes decisions?
- Furthermore, the list that determines “eligibility” for receivership has an “achievement” component weighted at 75% and a “growth” component weighted at 25%, both of which are combined to yield an overall rank. However, achievement scores have been completely discredited as measures of school quality by a Nobel-Prize winning economist, who found them to be racially biased and inaccurate: <https://blueprintlabs.mit.edu/research/race-and-the-mismeasure-of-school-quality/>. A layperson’s summary of the study and its applicability to Boston can be found here: <https://schoolyardnews.com/new-proof-that-the-state-accountability-system-is-biased-against-boston-b41e42896a57>.
- UMass Lowell Professor Jack Schneider has also produced research showing that the MA ranking system reflects demography more than it does school quality: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60aea369b2b1517a8d2afb0c/t/60b00f9a2dd26f3a72e1c78f/1622151076845/Demography_Report_FINAL_7.24.20.pdf
- A good summary of the two studies – Angrist and Schneider – can be found in public comments to DESE from AFT MA President Beth Kontos: <http://ma.aft.org/news/aft-ma-president-beth-kontos-criticizes-dese-continuing-biased-and-inaccurate-school-rating>

¹ <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter69/Section1k>

- While growth measures have flaws, most researchers agree that they are more accurate measures of school quality than achievement/proficiency measures. Even the GreatSchools school-rating website is shifting from achievement to growth: <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2020/9/24/21453357/greatschools-overhauls-ratings-reduce-link-race-poverty>
- When Commissioner Riley was the Lawrence Receiver, he argued strenuously and consistently for giving more weight to growth than achievement, saying that growth was the better/fairer measure.
- If you're looking at growth only on the 2020 list, <https://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/enrollment/CapIncrease/>, Boston is 83rd from the bottom, which is better than the 3 districts currently in receivership: Lawrence, Holyoke, and Southbridge. And better than the one district, Springfield, in a quasi-receivership (with many of its schools in a DESE-run Empowerment Zone).
- Even if the rankings used a 50-50 achievement-growth ratio, Boston would not be on the lowest 10% list at all. As it is, even using the current 75-25 weighting, Boston is barely on the list.
- **Question: As part of its efforts to re-examine policies through an equity lens, why has DESE not reckoned with the racial and socioeconomic bias inherent in a school/district ranking system that weights achievement and growth using a 3:1 ratio. How does DESE continue to justify that approach in light of the overwhelming research showing that achievement scores are racially biased and inaccurate measures of school quality?**

Takeovers have an abysmal track record in Massachusetts, even by DESE’s own standards. BESE has voted to place three districts in receivership: Lawrence in 2011; Holyoke in 2015; and Southbridge in 2016. Southbridge and Holyoke are now the worst-performing and second-worst-performing school districts in the state, according to DESE’s most recent district rankings. Following an initial uptick, Lawrence has been on the decline and is now back in the lowest 6% of districts.

- While recognizing that both MCAS scores and DESE’s school/district rankings are flawed measures of educational quality, they are the measures by which DESE judges districts and schools. Therefore, it’s reasonable to apply those standards to the districts that DESE takes over. Since the passage of the 2010 Achievement Gap Act, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) has voted to place three districts in full receivership: Lawrence in 2011; Holyoke in 2015; and Southbridge in 2016. How have those districts fared?
- **Southbridge and Holyoke are the worst-performing and second-worst-performing school districts in the state, according to DESE’s most recent district rankings.**
- Following an initial uptick, Lawrence has been on the decline and is now back in the lowest 6% of districts based on overall rank (16th lowest); its achievement-only rank is 7th lowest.
- The following table shows the achievement, growth, and overall ranks of the receivership districts and Boston. **Boston is outperforming all 3 receivership districts across all 3 categories.**

DESE 2020 District Rankings²: Boston vs. Receivership Districts
(1 = lowest in MA; the higher the number, the better the performance)

	Overall Rank	Achievement Rank	Growth Rank
Boston	24	16	83
Lawrence	16	7	71
Holyoke	2	2	5
Southbridge	1	1	1

Springfield could be characterized as being in a quasi-receivership, with many of its schools in a DESE-run Zone. BESE members should ask DESE to separate the Zone results from the overall results. However, the overall district results are as follows based on the 2020 rankings:

	Overall Rank	Achievement Rank	Growth Rank
Springfield	3	5	11

² Go to <https://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/enrollment/CapIncrease/>, and click on the link “2020 district ranking”

The Holyoke/Southbridge results have been particularly bleak, according to the measures valued by DESE:

- While all districts saw a decline in MCAS scores during the pandemic, the scores for Holyoke and Southbridge were rock-bottom. For example, **only 5 percent of Southbridge students in grades 3 to 8 met or exceeded expectations on the 2021 MCAS in math; in Holyoke, the number was 4 percent.** Boston’s rate was four and five times higher, respectively, at 20%.³
- **In grade 10, the percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations in math was 5 percent in Southbridge and 12 percent in Holyoke.** In contrast, the rate was 38 percent in Boston.⁴

Schools taken over by DESE have fared little better. DESE declared four schools “chronically underperforming” (CUP) in 2013 and has had full operational control since that time. Nine years later, no CUP school has exited that status, presumably because not enough progress has been made to warrant release.

Source: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/list-of-level-4-schools-0/download>

³ <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>

⁴ <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>

What about the so-called “Lawrence Miracle” that we’ve heard so much about?

- **State receivership has not resulted in sustainable academic improvements in the Lawrence Public Schools (LPS), as measured by MCAS.** Furthermore, LPS continues to lag the state as whole and the Boston Public Schools (BPS) on key academic metrics valued by DESE, such as MCAS performance and graduation rates.
- Regarding MCAS achievement, there are two distinct eras: the era of the now-defunct “legacy MCAS” from 2012 to 2015 and the era of the new “MCAS 2.0” (sometimes referred to as the “Next Generation” MCAS) from 2016 to 2021. No long-term trend can be shown because the two tests—which use different items, scoring, scaling, and performance categories—cannot be compared.
- During the first era, there was a notable bump in math scores but the changes in ELA scores were slight. During the second era, LPS math and ELA scores have been consistently low compared to the state as a whole and have shown little or no improvement from year to year, with scores plummeting during the pandemic. The following tables⁵ show MCAS results throughout the receivership era:

Lawrence Public Schools: MCAS Legacy Math Scores in All Grades, 2012 to 2015

Year	LPS: % Proficient or Higher	Statewide: % Proficient or Higher	Notes
2012	28	59	Baseline year for receivership
2013	38	61	+10 increase from 2012
2014	41	60	+3 increase from 2013
2015	44	N/A	+3 increase from 2014 DESE did not generate a statewide number due to the transition to MCAS 2.0

Lawrence Public Schools: MCAS Legacy ELA Scores in All Grades, 2012 to 2015

Year	LPS: % Proficient or Higher	Statewide: % Proficient or Higher	Notes
2012	41	69	Baseline year for receivership
2013	41	69	No change
2014	44	69	+3 increase from 2013
2015	45	N/A	+1 increase from 2014 DESE did not generate a statewide number due to the transition to MCAS 2.0

⁵ All data from Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>

Lawrence Public Schools: MCAS 2.0 Math Scores in Grades 3 to 8, 2016 to 2021

Year	LPS: Percent Meeting/Exceeding Expectations	Statewide: Percent Meeting/Exceeding Expectations	Notes
2016	No results reported	No results reported	No results were reported as this was LPS's first year administering MCAS 2.0
2017	33	48	New baseline—cannot be compared to 2015
2018	29	48	-4 decrease from 2017
2019	31	49	+2 increase from 2018
2020	N/A	N/A	MCAS not administered due to pandemic
2021	10	33	-21 decrease from 2019 MCAS was administered during pandemic; DESE says results will not count for accountability purposes

Lawrence Public Schools: MCAS 2.0 ELA Scores in Grades 3 to 8, 2016 to 2021

Year	LPS: Percent Meeting/Exceeding Expectations	Statewide: Percent Meeting/Exceeding Expectations	Notes
2016	No results reported	No results reported	No results were reported as this was LPS's first year administering MCAS 2.0
2017	27	49	New baseline—cannot be compared to 2015
2018	28	51	+1 increase from 2017
2019	30	52	+2 increase from 2018
2020	N/A	N/A	MCAS not administered due to pandemic
2021	18	46	-12 decrease from 2019 MCAS administered during pandemic; DESE says results will not count for accountability purposes

Boston is doing better than the three DESE-controlled receivership districts on the metrics that matter to DESE.

- As noted earlier, the 2020 district rankings have been frozen since the pandemic’s onset, as there are no scores from 2020 and DESE has said they won’t use 2021 scores for accountability purposes. However, it’s reasonable to look at 2021 MCAS scores for comparison purposes as urban districts were generally facing the same challenges regarding school closures, remote learning, and other disruptions caused by the pandemic.
- Such an analysis shows BPS’s continued MCAS advantage over Lawrence and the other receivership districts. According to the tables below, **BPS has outperformed all the DESE-controlled receivership districts, including Lawrence, in both ELA and Math, at both the elementary and secondary levels, both before and during the pandemic.**⁶

BEFORE PANDEMIC – 2019 MCAS Scores

Percentage of Students, Grades 3-8, Meeting or Exceeding Expectations on 2019 MCAS		
	ELA	Math
Boston	35	33
Lawrence	30	31
Holyoke	18	12
Southbridge	17	10

Percentage of Students, Grade 10, Meeting or Exceeding Expectations on 2019 MCAS		
	ELA	Math
Boston	45	47
Lawrence	30	31
Holyoke	27	17
Southbridge	23	11

DURING PANDEMIC – 2021 MCAS Scores

Percentage of Students, Grades 3-8, Meeting or Exceeding Expectations on 2021 MCAS		
	ELA	Math
Boston	31	20
Lawrence	18	10
Holyoke	12	4
Southbridge	17	5

⁶ All data from Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>

Percentage of Students, Grade 10, Meeting or Exceeding Expectations on 2021 MCAS		
	ELA	Math
Boston	45	38
Lawrence	28	20
Holyoke	34	12
Southbridge	22	5

Boston also has higher graduation rates and teacher retention rates than the three receivership districts—in some cases, slightly higher; in others, significantly higher

Source for tables below: <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>

Four-Year High School Graduation Rate⁷: Last 3 Years

	2021	2020	2019
State Avg.	89.8	89.0	88.0
Boston	78.8	75.4	73.2
Lawrence	78.5	72.8	71.4
Holyoke	76.4	72.1	72.2
Southbridge	55.2	59.5	70.6

4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate⁸: Last 3 Years

	2021	2020	2019
State Avg.	N/A	N/A	N/A
Boston	83.1	80.6	79.4
Lawrence	80.9	76.9	75.8
Holyoke	80.4	78.0	75.5
Southbridge	56.7	62.9	80.6

Teacher Retention Rate⁹: Last 3 Years

	2022	2021	2020
State Avg.	86.8	88.4	87.7
Boston	83.0	90.2	87.1
Lawrence	82.5	87.3	86.7
Holyoke	74.7	77.3	69.7
Southbridge	65.8	77.8	66.7

⁷ Indicates the percentage of students who graduate with a regular high school diploma within 4 years:
of students in cohort who graduate in 4 years

[# of 1st time entering 9th graders 4 years earlier] - transfers out + transfers in

⁸ The adjusted graduation rate does not include the transfers in.

⁹ The teacher retention rate displays the percent of teachers who remain working in the same position from one year to the next. At the district level, a teacher who moved from one school to another within a district is still considered 'retained'.

Boston is among the top-performing large-city school districts in the nation, especially in Grade 8 math, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

- Boston continues to be one of the highest-performing large-city school districts in the nation, according to the highly regarded (and low-stakes and therefore more valid and reliable) National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation’s Report Card.
- For example, according to the most recent NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment (NAEP TUDA) administered in 2019,¹⁰ Boston’s 8th graders did quite well relative to their urban peers in both math and reading:
 - Boston’s 8th graders had an average score of 279 in math. That was significantly higher than Boston’s 2003 score, suggesting long-term improvement. Moreover, **out of the 27 urban districts that participated in the test, Boston’s 2019 math score was significantly higher than the scores in 18 districts, on par with another 6, and only lower than the scores in 2 districts.**¹¹
 - Boston 8th graders had an average score of 257 in reading. That was significantly higher than Boston’s 2003 score, suggesting long-term improvement. Moreover, **out of the 27 urban districts that participated in the test, Boston’s 2019 reading score was significantly higher than the scores in 13 districts, on par with another 10, and only lower than the scores in 3 districts.**¹²

¹⁰ For more information on NAEP TUDA, see <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/tuda/>.

¹¹ See <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/dst2019/pdf/2020015XB8.pdf>

¹² See <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/dst2019/pdf/2020016XB8.pdf>