

# ‘What exactly is fair about this?’: Great high schools aren’t available to all Boston kids.

By Deanna Pan Globe Staff, Updated June 15, 2023, 5:43 a.m.

PHOTOS BY CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF. DATA ANALYSIS BY CHRISTOPHER HUFFAKER/GLOBE STAFF.

**J**ustis Porter is the sort of student who should love school. She sometimes wakes up at 3:30 a.m. to write in her journal or polish her homework. Once, in chemistry class, she delivered such an impressive presentation that her teacher asked: “Do you think Justis should teach the class now?” The other kids burst into applause.

But she does not love school. The Jeremiah E. Burke in Grove Hall, like many of Boston’s high schools, is remarkable for what it lacks, offerings you’d expect to find at any typical American high school: School plays. A choir. A marching band. A choice of foreign language classes. Advanced Placement Calculus.

Justis would have liked to learn French, for instance. She loves its melodious cadence and intonation. But Spanish is the only language offered at the Burke, and this year, she couldn’t even get a seat. So she takes the class online, picking her way through quizzes in the school library, hearing herself repeat the words, but never quite sure she has it right since there’s no teacher to correct her pronunciation.

“I know I have the capacity to do more rigorous things,” she said, “... but I’m not being stretched to that point.”



Jeremiah E. Burke High School junior Justis Porter, 18, (center) listened to another student, Blessing Adedeji, while working on their writing projects at the 826 Boston education center in Roxbury. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Sometimes, when she rides the 23 bus home, she sees kids from the exam schools. She recognizes them by their loud banter and easy confidence, and how they all carry heavy backpacks. She could not list the particulars of the divide between their schools and hers — how Boston Latin Academy offers not only French but also [Japanese, Chinese, and Arabic](#); or that Boston Latin School has [more than a dozen bands and orchestras](#), plus [two high school choirs and five after-school singing groups](#) — but she knows for sure that their schools are a whole lot more like what she imagined high school would be.

She is a junior now. Soon, high school will be over. She wonders if she’s missed the whole thing.

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Over the past 30 years, traditional public high schools in Boston like the Burke have been left to languish. They are the casualties of a system that offers a smorgasbord of academic and extracurricular delicacies to students who qualify to attend exam schools and a few competitive admissions schools, and leaves others with crumbs.

The staggering difference in outcomes is well known: The city's three exam schools outperform the rest of BPS on every metric of performance and accountability. Their dropout rates are virtually zero. Nearly all of their students graduate on time. Most seniors go on to four-year colleges.



Amilcar Silva, head of school at the Burke, checked to make sure the doors were locked and looked for suspicious activity outside. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

What's never been effectively addressed in Boston, however, is the disparity in opportunities for academic and personal growth — not to mention fun — on either side of the great high school divide.

Exam school students, and students at some of the small selective admissions high schools, like Boston Arts Academy, can choose from a rich panoply of classes and extracurriculars. Boston Latin School, the district's crown jewel, boasts more than two dozen Advanced Placement courses, at least 13 distinct visual and performing arts electives, seven foreign languages, and almost as many sports as a Big 10 university, including fencing, sailing, and lacrosse.

The Burke and many other open-enrollment schools, which are accessible to all students through a districtwide lottery and educate nearly half of the city's ninth- through 12th-graders, offer a comparatively threadbare experience, with fewer arts electives, AP courses, and extracurriculars, and far less academic variety and rigor. And there are fewer of the extras — like sports and clubs — that inject joy into the high school experience and build friendships that help teens navigate adolescence. Instead, they tend to be more focused on the basics: attendance, standardized tests, social and emotional support, and safety.

For years, public debate over high school education in Boston among politicians, parents, and the media has mostly revolved around the rules for exam school entrance — essentially, which few fortunates should be given this prized opportunity — while the plight of traditional and nonselective high schools has been largely ignored.

Last week, Mayor Michelle Wu and Superintendent Mary Skipper sketched out a new vision for the city's high schools, beginning with multimillion-dollar investments in selective and specialty schools, and the promise of broader access throughout the system to college-level coursework. It's not yet clear how their ideas will meaningfully change the Burke and other schools like it.

Maybe now Boston is prepared to move beyond the exam school fight and to confront a much harder question: Why aren't great high schools available to everyone?

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Like many BPS students, Justis never applied to an exam school. It took her a while to believe in herself academically, and when she did, it felt too late to apply. The doubts had crept in during fifth grade when she struggled in math. She felt hopeless and directionless after her mother's death. She was briefly homeschooled by a relative, then transitioned to online classes. Without classmates at school or siblings at home, she was lonely; her motivation waned, and she had to repeat seventh grade.

Then, newly determined, Justis buckled down. By eighth grade, she was earning straight A's and thinking about college. Her mother had dabbled in fiction and poetry, and bought "hundreds and hundreds of books" from which she'd ask Justis to read aloud. Justis decided she wanted to be a writer, too.

Though her mother had attended an exam school, the John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science, Justis had figured that with her uneven academic history, she didn't have a shot at getting in.

And anyway, how different could the exam schools really be?

If she had gone to BPS's open houses, held each fall and winter at the various schools for prospective students and their families, she'd have glimpsed the size of the chasm.

At one such event in January, inside Boston Latin School's elegant red brick Georgian Revival building on Avenue Louis Pasteur, anxious parents huddled at dining hall tables next to their children. They were mostly white and well dressed, wearing brand-name clothes and carrying luxury handbags. The head of school, Jason Gallagher, stood before his rapt audience, alongside about two dozen students.

"The amount of things you can do at Boston Latin School is really *endless*," Gallagher said. "We have over 160 clubs!"

The students, passing a microphone, described their impressive resumes: One captained the mock trial team. Another competed on BLS's sailing and diving teams. A 10th-grader spoke Italian.

Over the next hour, the students escorted families through the expansive library, whole wings dedicated to music and visual arts, as well as two separate gyms, and the cavernous neoclassical auditorium bearing the names of famous alumni on the frieze. Ben Franklin, Leonard Bernstein, Paul Revere, and many more. Parents marveled.

"So is there a lot more choice in terms of tracks and opportunities here than a lot of other high schools?" one of the fathers asked his teenage tour guide, as they passed a music studio where a student was practicing violin.

"I definitely think so," she replied brightly. "You have access to a lot more space, resources, money."

## What does the high school experience look like at different Boston schools?

Use the dropdown menus to compare the offerings at two BPS high schools.

	School 1 Burke High School	School 2 Boston Latin School
<b>About</b>	<b>Description:</b> Traditional open-enrollment high school <b>Neighborhood:</b> Dorchester <b>Enrollment (grades 9-12):</b> 350	<b>Description:</b> Competitive-admissions exam school <b>Neighborhood:</b> Longwood <b>Enrollment (grades 9-12):</b> 1,628
<b>World Language courses</b>	Burke High School: 3 courses  Spanish 1, Spanish 2, Spanish/Native Speaker HS 1	Boston Latin School: 36 courses  AP Chinese Language and Culture, AP French Language, AP German Language, AP Italian Language and Culture, AP Latin, AP Spanish Language, AP Spanish Literature, Chinese 1, Chinese 2, Chinese 3, Chinese 4, French 1, French 2, French 3, French 4, German 1, German 2, German 3, German 4, Greek 1, Greek 2, Italian 1, Italian 2, Italian 3, Italian 4, Latin 1, Latin 2, Latin 3, Latin 4, Latin 5 Poetry, Latin Prose, Spanish 1, Spanish 2, Spanish 3, Spanish 4, The Myth Tradition
<b>Arts courses</b>	Burke High School: 5 courses  HS Dance 1, HS Foundations/Visual Arts, HS Fundamentals of Music, HS Introduction To Theater A/B, Visual Arts Enrichment	Boston Latin School: 13 courses  AP Art, AP Music, Declamation, Graphic Arts 1, HS Band, HS Chorus, HS Concert Band, HS Concert Choir, HS Foundations/Visual Arts, HS Junior Band, HS Music Theory 1, HS String Technique, Theatre Arts 1
<b>AP courses</b>	Burke High School: 3 courses  AP US History, AP Literature and Composition, AP Statistics	Boston Latin School: 28 courses  AP US History, AP American Government, AP Art, AP Biology, AP Calculus AB, AP Calculus BC, AP Chemistry, AP Chinese Language and Culture, AP Comparative Government, AP Computer Science A, AP Computer Science Principles, AP Economics, AP Environmental Science, AP French Language, AP German Language, AP Italian Language and Culture, AP Language and Composition, AP Latin, AP Literature and Composition, AP Modern European History, AP Music, AP Physics C Electricity/Magnetism, AP Physics C Mechanics, AP Psychology, AP Spanish Language, AP Spanish Literature, AP Statistics, AP World History
<b>Athletic teams</b>	Burke High School: 9 teams  Boys Soccer, Girls Soccer, Girls Volleyball, Cheerleading, Boys Basketball, JV Boys Basketball, Girls Basketball, Indoor Track, Outdoor Track	Boston Latin School: 32 teams  Football, JV Football, Boys Soccer, JV Boys Soccer, Girls Soccer, JV Girls Soccer, Girls Volleyball, JV Girls Volleyball, Cheerleading, Boys Basketball, JV Boys Basketball, Girls Basketball, JV Girls Basketball, Indoor Track, Swimming, Boys Hockey, JV Boys Hockey, Wrestling, Varsity Baseball, JV Baseball, Varsity Softball, JV Softball, Outdoor Track, Boys Volleyball, Boys Tennis, Girls Tennis, Golf*, Fencing*, Winter Cheer*, Crew*, Lacrosse*, Sailing*
<b>Shared teams</b>	Burke High School: 13 teams  Football, JV Football, Fall Cross Country, Swimming, Boys Hockey, JV Boys Hockey, Girls Hockey, Wrestling, Varsity Baseball, Varsity Softball, Boys Volleyball, Boys Tennis, Girls Tennis	Boston Latin School: 2 teams  Fall Cross Country, Girls Hockey

Source: Boston Public Schools, Boston Globe analysis; Notes: \*Boston Latin School has six sports teams that are not funded by the district. In some cases, teams are co-branded on a long-term basis between the host team and one or more away schools. Also, BCLA has different offerings available to students in grades 9-10 and students in grades 11-12. This data includes all offerings available to either group.

JOHN HANCOCK/GLOBE STAFF

A couple of hours earlier, about three miles southeast, only one family — a father and his daughter, a sixth-grader — had shown up for the Burke’s open house, waiting at the front doors of the school, with its imposing Art Deco façade. The assistant head of school, Christopher Bishop, ushered the pair through the metal detector and into the family center, where he cleared a pizza box and a couple of empty 2-liters from the table in the middle of the room.

Bishop took a seat and started his pitch. The Burke, Bishop explained, was, with just 420 students in grades seven through 12, a small school with a “high-needs” population. Because so many of its students enter high school so far behind, Bishop said, the Burke offers double blocks of science, math, and English to prepare freshmen for their 10th grade Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS, exams.

The father listened intently; his daughter looked down, fiddling with the zipper on her hoodie.

Bishop mentioned a couple of “incidents” that had made the news at the beginning of the school year — a [student stabbed another student](#) in the hallway, a [student shot another](#) right outside — and assured the father they were anomalies. At the Burke, you aren’t “just a number,” he said, “you’re an individual person.”

“This is a Burke family,” he added. “All of us — every adult in this building — is responsible for you.”



Burke sophomores Isaac Dowden (left) and Nyla Bass said goodbye at the end of the school day. (CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF)



College and career counselor Richard Futrell checked senior Zahkia Warren's backpack as she walked through a metal detector. (CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF)

The 35-minute tour began with a visit to a science lab and a few classrooms, then Bishop led them through the Burke's newer wing and downstairs to the cafeteria, keys jangling at his side. He pointed out the food pantry, stocked with dry goods from Stop & Shop for kids whose families don't have enough to eat at home, and the office where staffers from the city's Youth Development Network spend the week calling parents of chronically absent students. On the way, Bishop showed them [Catie's Closet](#), the Burke's free used clothing store, filled with neat racks of clothes — dresses, coats, blazers, shirts, pants folded on hangers.

"Sometimes when kids go on job interviews, they come down here and get shirts and ties," Bishop said. He gestured toward a set of shelves. "We've got toiletries over here — soap, we have toothpaste, socks, body wash, toothbrushes, feminine products — stuff you

might need. Kids just have to ask.”

At age 15, Justis had no inkling that she was about to attend the school with a food pantry and free clothes instead of the one with “one of the finest secondary school libraries in the country,” as BLS’s [elaborate website boasts](#).

When it came time to choose a high school, she simply went to BPS’s central office in Roxbury. She remembers staring down at a long list of schools. She picked the Burke because it didn’t require a uniform and she recognized its name from riding past it on the bus.

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At first, Justis thought the problem with the Burke was the pandemic.

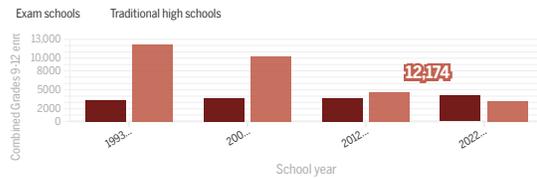
She began freshman year in the fall of 2020, feeling stuck, once again, taking all her classes online at home. She noticed students rarely turned their web cameras on, or participated in class. She suspected many were sleeping.

The next fall, classes were in person, but the school seemed empty. Muffled footsteps and quiet chatter echoed down the terrazzo-tiled halls during class changes. She didn’t get to choose any of her courses. Teachers never gave much homework. Few students stayed after school for extracurriculars.

“I was like, ‘Oh, OK, this is really it?’ ” she said.

### One district, two trajectories: Enrollment

This analysis contrasts the student population at Boston’s three exam schools with that of the city’s traditional open enrollment high schools, whose number has decreased from 10 to 5 over the last three decades as schools were closed or broken up. It does not include alternative high schools for specific student populations or high schools with academic specialties or special admissions requirements.



SOURCE: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education • CHRISTOPHER HUFFAKER/GLOBE STAFF  
Boston’s current traditional high schools are Brighton High, Burke High, Charlestown High, English High, and East Boston High. Past years include data for traditional high schools that have since closed: Boston High, Dorchester High, Hyde Park High, South Boston High, and West Roxbury High.

Made with Flourish • Create a chart

A complex series of policy choices, many made with good intentions, had brought the Burke, and high schools like it, to this point.

During the tumultuous era of court-ordered busing, middle-class white families fled Boston’s public schools en masse for private schools and the suburbs. By the late 1980s, traditional high schools were predominantly attended by students of color, while exam schools remained disproportionately white.

The stratification intensified in the ‘90s. After Beacon Hill passed the [Education Reform Act](#) of 1993, bringing forth a new age of standardized testing and accountability, Superintendent Thomas Payzant opened Boston’s first autonomous pilot schools as part of the burgeoning “small schools movement,” an initiative predicated on the idea that smaller, more personalized schools would improve student performance. Skipper, who became superintendent of the district last year, was the founding principal of one of them, TechBoston Academy.

A marketplace of choices was the idea. With [millions in funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), the district converted four large high schools — South Boston, West Roxbury, Hyde Park, and Dorchester — into 13 new small schools. The number of high schools in Boston doubled, and enrollment at most of the remaining traditional high schools, including the Burke, fell.

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‘I want them to have cool classes and extracurriculars, and I want them to have more of a school spirit. ... I would want high school to be fun.’

Justis Porter



But there are drawbacks to making bigger schools smaller. Fewer students means smaller, less efficient budgets, since BPS allocates funding based on headcount and small schools don't benefit from economies of scale. Although schools receive extra money for low-income students, kids with disabilities, and other needs, it's not enough, said Will Austin, founder and CEO of the Boston Schools Fund, a nonprofit that provides grants to local schools to improve educational outcomes.

As a result, he said, at schools with lots of "high-needs" students, like the Burke, electives and other "extras" fall by the wayside — further eroding their appeal to prospective students.

"It creates this cycle," Austin said. "If the school has declining enrollment, or it doesn't [offer] a strong education, less and less families are going to pick it, and then enrollment declines even further."

Today there are [34 high schools](#) in BPS. Aside from the exam schools and a few small specialized schools with competitive admissions, like Boston Arts Academy and Fenway High School, the system is a patchwork of small in-district charter schools, noncompetitive pilot schools, alternative schools, and schools for students with certain disabilities or who are learning to speak English.



Use the arrows to see how the populations of low-income students, students with disabilities, and English learners have changed in Boston's high schools over the last three decades.

1 of 3

## One district, two trajectories: Low-income students

This analysis contrasts the student population at Boston's three exam schools with that of the city's traditional open enrollment high schools, whose number has decreased from 10 to 5 over the last three decades as schools were closed or broken up. It does not include alternative high schools for specific student populations or high schools with academic specialties or special admissions requirements.

Exam schools

Traditional high schools

SOURCE: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education • CHRISTOPHER HUFFAKER/GLOBE STAFF

Boston's current traditional high schools are Brighton High, Burke High, Charlestown High, English High, and East Boston High. Past years include data for traditional high schools that have since closed: Boston High, Dorchester High, Hyde Park High, South Boston High, and West Roxbury High.

Made with Flourish • Create a data story

Open-enrollment schools like the Burke, Charlestown, Brighton, and English High School, all now a fraction of the size they were 20 years ago, are the closest equivalent in the Boston system to the traditional American high school, open to all. But they've become schools of last resort, [disproportionately populated by students who are randomly assigned to them](#) from across the city because their families didn't choose a school at all during the registration period, or they were placed there for a particular special education program. A [2018 report](#) commissioned by BPS blamed the district's student assignment policies for the troubled condition of open-enrollment schools today, an [assessment shared by the state in its blistering review last year](#) of district policies.

"The school choice and assignment system remains a core, systemic barrier to increasing equitable access to high-quality educational environments within the district," the state said. "Until district leadership and the school committee advance a more equitable school choice and assignment system, the district will have limited success in improving outcomes and opportunities for historically marginalized students."

The Burke now has half the students it had in 2003; its enrollment has dropped at twice the rate of the district's overall decline. About 84 percent of Burke students now come from low-income families, up from 51 percent two decades ago. The share of students with disabilities has risen from 21 to 27 percent, including students with autism who are taught in a special education program, separate from their peers.

The obligation to serve so many students with disabilities and other hardships also helps explain why the Burke spends far more per student than BPS's exam schools — \$34,034 per pupil in the 2023 fiscal year, [compared with](#) \$18,061 per pupil at BLS — yet offers a fraction of the programming. Arts courses, for example, have been cut almost entirely over the years to make space in the budget for more urgent academic priorities and social supports.

A student passed by a poster with a quote from Harriet Tubman at the Burke. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

“It’s just like middle school, but you’re in a higher grade,” a Burke senior, Janice Mendes, said earlier this year. “All we do is literally go to class and then go home.”

Unlike BLS, whose budget is supplemented each year by funds from its [\\$69 million endowment](#), the Burke and schools like it can’t turn to private donors to pay for, say, musical instruments, new technology, or better athletic equipment.

While most open enrollment high schools have shrunk, the exam schools have been allowed to grow — by 20 percent since 1994 for grades nine to 12. A full quarter of all ninth- through 12th-graders in Boston now attend an exam school. BLS, with a total enrollment of about 2,400, is by far the city’s largest.

The exam schools and top selective schools cull many of the city’s most motivated young scholars and artists from each high school class; and they attract the children of the wealthiest households. The district eliminated racial quotas in exam school admissions in the 1990s, following a lawsuit by white parents. At BLS today, 38 percent of students are white, compared with 15 percent of the district overall and 3 percent at the Burke. Just 28 percent of BLS students are low income, and only 3 percent have disabilities.

Following years of debate about how to make exam school admissions more equitable, the school district adopted a temporary change during the pandemic, followed by a permanent policy intended to boost diversity. The exam schools have, in fact, become [more racially diverse](#), and the proportion of historically underrepresented groups admitted has [risen](#).

But the glut of privileged students from engaged, educated families at selective schools comes at a cost to schools like the Burke.

“Look at the exam schools,” Bishop said after the open house guests left, his voice straining with exasperation. “They get the best of the best. The best of the best in the city. ... We have to work three times as hard to get our kids across this line.”

Amilcar Silva, the Burke’s head of school, visited a social studies class. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Christopher Hill, Justis’s sophomore English teacher, said teachers at the Burke endeavor to make their classes interesting, but without many extracurriculars or electives, students lack incentives to show up. Some 40 percent of Burke seniors were chronically absent from September to March of this school year.

“I used to do a unit on busing and white flight, and it just felt sort of cruel at the end, when I would show them the course catalog of Brookline High, which reads like a college catalog,” Hill said. “The reality is, it would be great to have more electives and more stuff that would keep kids invested in wanting to come to school. If it’s just the basics, then it’s hard.”

One morning in January, Hill delivered a frank lecture to his AP English Literature students on late and missing work. There were nine students in the classroom, three with hoods pulled over their heads. They sat slumped in their chairs, staring ahead at the white board, where Hill had scrawled some disappointing figures showing that the majority of students hadn’t turned in their latest assignments.

“What’s the primary driver of being in an AP class?” Hill asked. “Is it that you’re good at English? What is it?”

None of the students responded. Then another walked in late.

“It’s work ethic, right? Does this match up with a strong work ethic?” Hill said, gesturing to the white board. “It’s not because you can’t do it.”

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As Hill admonished his class, Amilcar Silva, the Burke’s head of school, quietly hung by the door. On his morning rounds, Silva sometimes stops in a classroom to lean over a student’s shoulder, asking in a whisper about their assignments. He pays particular attention to the kids he knows are struggling more than most — the ones who are homeless or in foster care, and those who work nights to support their siblings, and come in late to school, if they show up at all.

Head of School Amilcar Silva talked with senior Diamond Deas, 18, while monitoring activity in the hallway at the Burke. "If kids are well, they will create miracles sometimes," he said. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Silva, who was born in Cape Verde, started his teaching career decades ago at a predominantly white suburban high school in Rhode Island. He realized quickly he didn't quite "fit," driving to school every day in his beat-up Toyota Celica alongside kids pulling up in fancy new cars. He joined the Burke in 1989, as a social studies and English Language Learners teacher. He could relate to these students, nearly all of them Black like him, and their troubles at home.

"That's one of the reasons that inspired me to be where I am — kids that have potential but are just left to nothing," Silva said.

Hired to run the school in 2019, Silva is the latest leader at the Burke up against near impossible odds. He has seen how BPS has kept trying to fix the Burke — which opened in 1934 as an all-girls' school, named after a former Boston superintendent — beginning in the early '80s, when the school was a magnet for gang activity. Contemporary newspaper reports describe its building in shambles, snarls of graffiti covering the walls.

Albert Holland, Burke's headmaster from 1982 to 1993, ushered in a renaissance. He convinced the superintendent to cap the school's enrollment, increase its staff, repaint the walls, and clean up the classrooms, and he cleared the hallways of malingerers and toughs. By the late '80s, the school earned a [glowing write-up in Time magazine](#). In 1990, according to a local news account, 70 percent of seniors were college bound.

"It was the alternative to the exam schools, and our goal was to return it to that," Holland reminisced to a newspaper reporter five years after he left the Burke for a central office job. "We had kids going to Cornell, Bates, Michigan, Boston College. The Burke High School was working well."

That stunning progress, however, was ephemeral. The Burke endured waves of budget cuts and layoffs, beginning in 1991, and by 1995, conditions had deteriorated so severely that the state stripped the Burke of its accreditation.

That year, a chunk of plaster dislodged from the ceiling in the auditorium and crash-landed on the shoulder of Mayor Thomas M. Menino as he toured the school. Unhurt but appalled, the mayor doubled the school's budget and dedicated millions more to building repairs.

Boston Mayor Thomas Menino delivered his 1996 State of the City address at the Jeremiah E. Burke High School. MARK WILSON/GLOBE STAFF FILE

Menino [chose the Burke](#) as the backdrop for his 1996 State of City address, in which he pointedly staked his reputation on fixing the city's schools, and declared voters should "judge me harshly" if he failed. He pledged to make the Burke "the pride of Boston."

Still, the Burke floundered. In 2010, the state declared it one of the [worst 35 schools](#) in Massachusetts, and in need of intervention. Voters shrugged; Menino won reelection again and again, always by wide margins.

The state ordered the city to make an aggressive push to turn the Burke around. To lead that effort, the district brought in Lindsay McIntyre, or "Dr. Mac," as she's known to students, a veteran school leader with a background in alternative education. Armed with new autonomy and several million dollars in federal grants, McIntyre replaced half the staff, extended the school day by an hour, and eliminated punitive disciplinary practices in favor of taking a "trauma-sensitive" approach to addressing student misbehavior — focused less on punishment and more on counseling and support.

In September 2014, the Burke [became the first high school](#) in the state to shed its turnaround status. By the end of the school year, its graduation rate had risen to 71 percent, chronic absenteeism had plummeted, and more than two-thirds of sophomores had passed their MCAS tests. The nonprofit EdVestors [gave the Burke](#) its annual "School on the Move" prize, a \$100,000 award for the city's most improved school.

But enrollment dropped anyway. Even at its best, the Burke has lagged on measures of how well students are prepared for higher education. SAT scores remained low. Few students passed AP exams. Since 2004, the share of graduates moving on to college has never surpassed 59 percent; in 2021, the figure was 26 percent, compared with 50 percent districtwide.

Cayen Diggs-Williams, 16, (left) talked with his mother, Dede Diggs, outside their home in Dorchester. Dede worries about her son's safety, so she drives him to school and picks him up. Cayen will transfer to Madison Park next fall. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF



Cayen, 16, arrived at his home in Dorchester. (CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF)



Cayen took his dog, Royalty, out for a walk after getting home from work. (CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF)

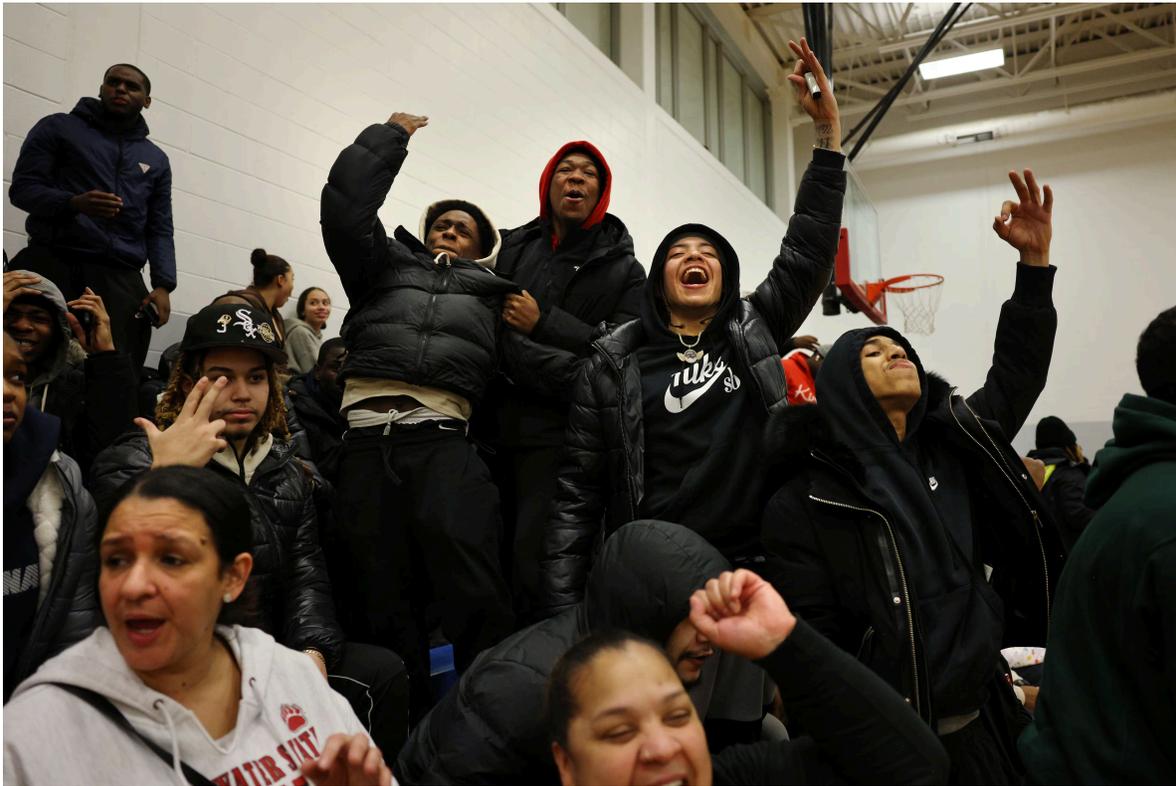
And violence in and around the Burke continues to mar the school's reputation. Every morning since last fall's stabbing, Dede Diggs has driven her son Cayen, a sophomore, to school. Although he's doing well at the Burke, she plans to transfer him to Madison Park Technical Vocational High School this fall.

"I still get nervous when it's right around the time I know they're going to get out of school, and I'll hear sirens flying down the street," she said.

There are bright spots at the Burke, of course, that school leaders are eager to promote: It's the only school in the district with an aviation program, for example, where students can practice flying on professional flight simulators donated to the school by Marcus James, a local journalist and former Delta Air Lines employee who also teaches the class. The Burke's indomitable varsity boys basketball team is the best in the district; the bleachers were so full in its last matchup against Charlestown High, fans were locked out of the gym. The Burke has partnerships with a [slew of nonprofits](#) that provide mentorship to students or help them with their homework.



Matt Drayton of the Burke Bulldogs took the ball to the net during their game against the Charlestown Townies. (CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF)



Students, family, and fans filled the gymnasium to capacity. (CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF)

The Burke Bulldogs celebrated their victory over the Charlestown Townies. The boys basketball team won 79-63 at their Boston City League matchup in February. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

And an infusion of temporary federal COVID-19 relief funding allowed the Burke to add music, theater, and dance to its course catalog this academic year for the first time in more than a decade.

Justis tries to make the best of it. At school, she is careful not to draw attention to herself. Now 18, she is quiet and serious, always carrying a book in her arm, with a single-minded focus on going to college, somewhere not too far away, to study writing or business. This year, she's taking not only a full roster of classes, but also an online course in essential college mathematics through a local community college.

But such college-level courses, she fears, lack the prestige of AP classes; some have no live instruction, not even on Zoom.

The Burke doesn't have a student-run newspaper. Justis tried to start a creative writing club, but interest from other students soon fizzled out. So she nurtures her creativity outside of school, writing essays and poems for 826 Boston, a creative writing nonprofit, and Teens in Print, a citywide youth journalism program. In [an article](#) she wrote last year, she raged against the unfairness of it all: "Our education system pits students who do not have sharpened pencils against students who are given macbooks to do their homework," she wrote. "Which student do you think will win? Students in schools are held to the same level for things such as standardized tests, but what exactly is fair about this?"

### Options vary by school

Use the controls below to see which BPS high schools offer the courses and sports you're looking for.

Select a category of school offerings to see available options:

Language courses

Select one or more options below to see which schools offer those options ([Clear all](#)):

AP Chinese Accelerated  
AP Chinese Language and Culture  
AP French Language  
AP German Language  
AP Italian Language and Culture  
AP Latin

Source: Boston Public Schools, Boston Globe analysis; Notes: \*Sport teams available to students at other BPS high schools are counted for the purposes of this tool. Boston Latin School has six sports teams that are not funded by the district. Also, BCLA has different offerings available to students in grades 9-10 and students in grades 11-12. This data includes all offerings available to either group.

JOHN HANCOCK/GLOBE STAFF

This school year, Justis enrolled in an arts elective — the new music course — and for a while, it was her favorite class. But like so much of her high school experience, it has become a disappointment. When music teacher Hannah Livingston arrived, her department had just two out-of-tune pianos until BPS eventually sent over an old baby grand and about two dozen wind instruments that had been collecting dust — not enough for all of her students, Livingston said, but it was something.

Justis and her classmates have made do playing rudimentary instruments, like the recorder, and drumming on upturned 5-gallon plastic buckets from Home Depot.

Through it all, Justis has kept her ambitions high. When Filomena Cabral, the Burke's registrar, made an offhand suggestion to Justis that she should apply to Harvard, Justis felt a shiver of excitement. Then she remembered her “ordinary” transcript, and she wilted inside. How could she ever compete?

Justis considered transferring to an exam school. But she discovered they only admit students entering seventh and ninth grades. She realized she was stuck.

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Boston can fix its wildly uneven high school system, educational experts say. But will it?

Austin, of the Boston Schools Fund, sees two ways forward.

“You either have to consolidate schools,” he said, “or you have to give those smaller schools a lot more money to make them work.”

Consolidation is part of Wu's [\\$2 billion school construction program](#), the so-called [Green New Deal for BPS](#), which aims to repair and upgrade the city's aging school buildings and combine schools to reflect declining enrollment. Skipper, the superintendent, said in an interview the traditional high schools were designed to be big, so they have space “to really fill and build out.”

[A comprehensive districtwide facilities plan](#), due at the end of the year, is still taking shape. At best it will take years to execute, and demand unwavering political determination; closing schools is extraordinarily painful and controversial.

Skipper, whose tenure at TechBoston Academy was formative in her career, still sees a place for small high schools in Boston; some kids just do better in nontraditional environments, she said, or prefer a school with a particular academic specialty, like technology or health.

Running an urban school district like Boston, she acknowledged, requires making financial “trade-offs.” The state, she said, should fill in the gaps for the arts and other programs.

“There's certain things that we should be able to fund more broadly,” she said. “A big portion of our budget over the last several years has gone to the social, emotional, and mental health pieces that can't go away. That needs to continue. So that means that something else doesn't get funded at that level.”



Senior Janice Mendes received her "wings" from aviation teacher Marcus James during a pinning ceremony at the Burke. (CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF)



James spoke with students and guests during a demonstration of the flight simulators he donated to the Burke's aviation program. (CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF)

In the meantime, BPS has begun reevaluating the formula it uses to distribute money among schools to make it fairer, one of the many recommendations made by the state in its [review](#) of the district last year. It's also been working to develop a more standard menu of classes at every high school in its recent adoption of MassCore, the state-recommended high school program of study, which requires all graduates to take basic courses in physical education, the arts, and world languages. And the district is working on a plan — again, under intense pressure from the state — to make all schools more accessible to students with disabilities, which Skipper said will gradually distribute those students more evenly. But when, or whether, exam schools will enroll a proportionate share of students with

disabilities remains unclear; just 6 percent of seventh-graders admitted for the 2023-2024 school year have a disability, up from 3 percent in the 2020-2021 school year.

More reforms may be on the horizon.

Days after introducing what she called “a generational change” for the city’s high schools, the mayor spoke at the Burke’s commencement at White Stadium, and seemed to acknowledge the city should do better by the Burke community. She noted Burke students were often — perhaps too often — described as resilient.

Janice Mendes used her phone to record a video of herself while preparing for the Burke’s graduation ceremony at White Stadium in Franklin Park. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

“We don’t want our students to have to lean on being resilient all the time in situations where you’re not getting the resources and services you need,” she said. “We want you to thrive because you are accessing every possible opportunity that this city has.”

The centerpiece of Wu’s high school proposal, though, involves expanding the O’Bryant exam school by 400 seats and enlarging Madison Park, where the district hopes to revamp the admissions process to attract more motivated students. Both moves could further concentrate high-needs students in schools like the Burke. More college-level courses at the traditional schools would give students like Justis more opportunities but wouldn’t address that fundamental problem.

“What’s going to happen in Brighton and Charlestown and the other places if they become more and more [full of] the kids who have struggled through elementary and middle school?” asked Hardin Coleman, a former School Committee member and dean emeritus of Boston University’s Wheelock College of Education and Human Development. “Will we resource them appropriately? Those are questions the city should be prepared to answer.”

The exam school system, he added, “has a toxic impact on all our schools, and this will be another example.”

Coleman believes BPS should move away from its stratified system toward one built around neighborhood high schools.

He pointed to East Boston High School, the only traditional high school in Boston with a waitlist. With 1,300 students, East Boston is the district’s largest traditional high school and offers five AP courses, five arts classes, three world languages, and a dozen sports. The school is also predominantly Latino, and more than 90 percent of its students come from low-income households, are learning English, or have disabilities. Yet its attendance, graduation rates, and MCAS scores [have risen consistently](#), even through the pandemic.

East Boston was the only neighborhood in the city exempted from Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr.’s 1975 desegregation plan due to its geographic isolation. As a result, its high school has always been reserved primarily for East Boston residents. So it’s not surprising, Coleman said, that local families are committed to its success, and that can make a transformational difference.

“There is more vested energy in the local schools,” Coleman said. “Kids are better known. Principals are seeing the same families on a regular basis, and so those important relationships are growing.”

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Justis sees some progress at her school, with the arrival of a few new classes and electives. Next year, the Burke plans to offer three more AP courses, according to Hill, including AP African American Studies. To her great dismay, though, Justis has been told she can only take two. But one will be Hill’s AP English Literature class, and she is aching to start. She keeps an essay of hers he graded in her sophomore year taped to the wall near the mirror in her bedroom; his dark scribbles in the margins remind her she can always improve.

And she hopes her school will, too, for the kids that come after her.

“I want them to have cool classes and extracurriculars, and I want them to have more of a school spirit,” she said, “I would want high school to be fun.”

Fun is a word you rarely hear in discussions about high school policy. Yet it’s the lifeblood of a school community, it awakens and inspires and keeps kids coming back. That was clear on a recent Tuesday after school. Eighteen-year-old Alicia Rose was all nerves backstage at the Burke auditorium. Janelle Gilchrist, a professional ballerina hired to teach dance two days a week at the Burke, had convinced Alicia to perform a ballet solo — called Cupid Variation — for the school’s first-ever fine arts showcase. The audience seats were mostly unfilled.



Senior Alicia Rose, 18, (left) and junior Melissa Dias, 16, watched a recording of their previous dance performance while waiting backstage during the Burke's fine arts showcase. (CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF)



Alicia smiled after finishing her ballet solo. (CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF)

Alicia, who graduated as the Burke's valedictorian, with a full-ride scholarship to Union College, had never taken an arts elective until her senior year. She took every one of the new arts classes the Burke added, thanks to its COVID money.

"Last year ... I would just e-mail my teachers, 'Send me the work. I'll do it at home,'" she said. "But this year, I'm here every day now, and it's because of dance, it's because of theater."

On the same stage where Menino once promised to make the Burke "the pride of Boston," a quartet of students, led by Livingston, the music teacher, wobbled through a brief arrangement — one on saxophone, another on trumpet, and two on clarinet.

Then Alicia, in a white tutu and silver tiara, took the stage, twirling gracefully on slippered feet in the soft glow of the spotlights. It felt bittersweet to be leaving the Burke, now that she's gotten a taste of what high school could have been like, full of hard work and stress, but also camaraderie and joy.

"It felt good," she said later, still buzzing with adrenaline, after she'd skipped off stage, to her friends' exuberant cheers. "It felt freeing."

Senior Alicia Rose, 18, performed a ballet solo during the Burke's Fine Arts Showcase. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

*The Great Divide team explores educational inequality in Boston and statewide. [Sign up](#) to receive our newsletter, and send ideas and tips to [thegreatdivide@globe.com](mailto:thegreatdivide@globe.com).*

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