

UNEVEN GROUND:

STRATEGIES FOR LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD IN BPS EXAM SCHOOLS

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Zoe Nagasawa

Boston Latin School

Ashley Carey

University of Massachusetts Lowell

Peter Piazza, PhD

Center for Collaborative Education



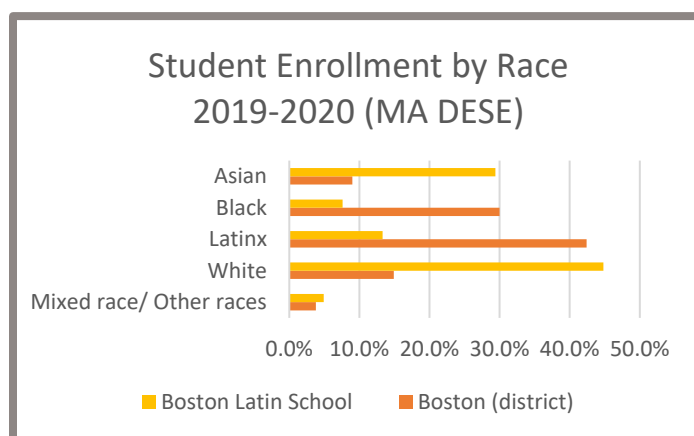
Cover Photo by:
Zoe Nagasawa,
Boston Latin School
Class of 2021

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Report Summary & Action Guide

Black and Latinx students have historically been, and continue to be, underrepresented at Boston's top exam school, comprising only 7.6% and 13.3% of Boston Latin School (BLS) during the 2019-2020 school year, compared to 30% and 42.2% of citywide enrollment (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020). Many have critiqued the BLS admissions system, which relies heavily on a private entrance exam, for discriminating against applicants from historically marginalized backgrounds and creating this striking disparity. Now, for the first time in decades, Boston Public Schools (BPS) has an opportunity to rethink this system. We offer this report as a resource for this important decision. Developed and led by a BLS senior, this report centers student voice in the hope that our research can help advance the aim of racial equity in Boston's exam schools.



We link admissions decisions to the school climate and culture for the students of color who are granted entry. In contrast to most reports on this topic, we highlight the voices of Black and Latinx students at BLS. We believe discussions about increasing the representation of Black and Latinx students at BLS must also address the experiences of students within the school itself. Based on more than 30 stakeholder interviews, a review of publicly-available demographic

data, and analysis of relevant scholarship, we outline concrete action steps to help move BPS toward racial equity in exam school admissions and culture.

Our full report offers details about policy options for more equitable exam school admissions, including the pros and cons of various changes as revealed in stakeholder interviews. Meanwhile, our action guide provides a brief overview the two primary alternative systems that utilize socio-economic status to create a more diverse student body. Please see the full report for more details about how these policies could be implemented in Boston.

To better understand the climate around race and racism at BLS, we draw from interviews with 19 BLS students conducted during the summer of 2020 as well as the experience of the report's lead author, a rising senior at BLS. As with recommended changes to exam school admissions, we use the action guide to briefly outline equity-oriented practices that are discussed in more detail in the full report.

Racial discrimination is alive and well at Boston's top school, both in the process for admission and in the experiences of Black and Latinx students. For the first time in decades, we have an opportunity to create change. At the time of this writing, BPS is convening a group of stakeholders to recommend changes to exam school admissions and the district's exam school admissions has come under scrutiny

after an internal investigation revealed that nearly 70 students had been denied entry to exam schools due to [a converting error](#) in the district's review process (Martin, 2020). Meanwhile, in Boston and across the country, people of all races are protesting systemic racism, and the nation is reeling from a pandemic that has exposed deep-seated systemic inequity. It may be many years, if ever, that we again have the same level of attention to this issue and the same groundswell for change. For the students at BLS and for racial justice in Boston schools writ large, we – especially decision makers in the Boston School Committee – cannot let this moment pass.

Alternative Systems for Exam School Admissions

Problem: Racial inequity in BPS exam school admissions

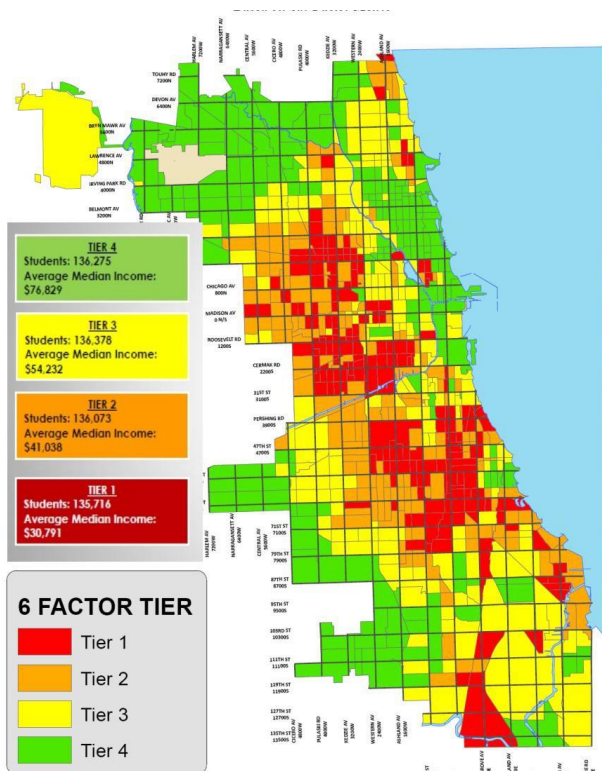
Cause: A citywide competition for exam school seats that disadvantages low-income students

Solution: Create a level playing field by considering socio-economic status in exam school admissions

Option 1. Neighborhood-Based Admission: Socio-Economic Tiers

How it works: Based on Chicago's model for selective high school admissions, we recommend the following:

1. Each Boston census tract is assigned a socio-economic index according to factors such as mean family income and the percentage of single-family homes (see Appendix A for a detailed methodology).
2. Census tracts are organized into four tiers according to their SES index (e.g., Tier 1 contains the lowest-SES census tracts, Tier 4 contains the highest), each with roughly the same number of school-age children (see Chicago map to the left).
3. Students only compete against peers in their SES tier, as opposed to competing against all students in the city of Boston. The top 25% of students from each tier are offered admissions to BPS's exam schools.



[Chicago Public Schools SES Tiers, 2010-2011](#)

Interview participants generally agreed that students who have had access to a large amount of resources should not be in competition with students who have had access to limited amounts of resources. They believed that an admissions system based on socio-economic tiers would solve this issue by creating level ground for lower income families.

-Report, Page 17

Option 2. School-Based Admission: Top Percentage from Each K-6 School

How it works: Based on proposals from civil rights advocates, we recommend the following:

1. According to student rankings at their K-6 school, top students from each K-6 school are offered admission to BPS's exam schools. Each K-6 school would be allotted a number of exam school spots, based on enrollment size.
2. Students from private schools and home-schooled students compete against each other in a separate pool for a predetermined percentage of seats.

To learn more:

Neighborhood-based admission

More details on Chicago's system for selective enrollment high schools:

- [Chicago Public Schools website](#)
- Chicago's tiers, replicated in Boston

As part of the research detailed below, we used publicly available data to assign an SES index to each census tract in the city of Boston, using the same factors as the Chicago model. We then organized census tracts into four tiers so that each roughly contained the same number of school-age children. [We offer our full data in an open access Google sheet](#) for anyone who wants to build on our work towards developing a more equity-oriented exam school admissions system. See Appendix A for more details on our methodology.

School-based admission

- Recommendations from a coalition of Boston-based civil rights groups: [Enough is Enough-Strategies and solutions to diversify Boston's exam schools](#) (NAACP Boston, 2019)
- Research that explores the use of school based enrollment for specialized high school admissions in New York City: [Community Service Society of New York](#) (Treschan, 2015)

Coronavirus caveat: Given the current pandemic, we strongly endorse the recommendation from BPS's Office of the Achievement Gap task force, calling on the district to suspend the test for the 2021-2022 admissions cycle. In our interviews, many students and some faculty who, under normal circumstances, accept tests as a part of the admissions process, do not believe that it would be fair to administer a test this year. Testing this year would only exacerbate the inequities in the system, likely resulting in an even lower acceptance rate of the city's Black and Latinx 6th graders.

Race and School Culture

"In classes, we'll be politically correct; we'll condemn voter suppression in Georgia; we'll rage against the injustice of systemic racism. In the hallways, immediately after, we'll joke about the events we just mourned and throw the n-word around like it's nothing."

-BLS student, page 25

Racism in BLS did not end when the investigations did. While the attention that #BlackAtBLS brought to the school community did start conversations about race, and did make headway, many students feel that the progress has stagnated.

-Report, page 15

Problem: A harsh and unwelcoming culture at BLS for Black and Latinx students, including both microaggressions and troubling overt racism

Cause: A highly competitive and individualistic school culture, long defined by white cultural norms

Solutions: Support for students of color, especially during key transition points during their experience at BLS; more diversity in faculty and in curriculum; regular school-wide conversations about race

1. Increasing the number of Black and Latinx faculty

Young people need mentors and safe spaces they can turn to, and this is especially true for young people of color in an overwhelmingly white school.

2. Expanded student mentorship

Programs like peer mentorship already exist. It seems a natural progression to focus on connecting young people who need the support the most, and connecting them with adults who are able to relate to and understand them

3. Support with college transition

Special and specific outreach should be conducted to reach parents of first generation students, making sure that everyone in the family understands the entirety of the college process.

4. Schoolwide racial justice conversations and curricular diversity

The school environment has to be a place where conversations about racism are constant, where voices of color are consistently being lifted up, and where the oppression they've faced and the achievements they've accomplished are staples in the curriculum.

To learn more:

There are many outstanding organizations that specialize in racial justice professional development and antiracist curriculum, such as the [Center for Racial Justice in Education](#), [Teaching Tolerance](#), and [Facing History and Ourselves](#). We encourage school leaders to pursue partnerships that will foster and affirming climate for Black and Latinx students. Most importantly, regardless of the specific actions taken, we believe strongly that the process must include the voices of students, especially the voices of Black and Latinx students who are most harmed under the current system.

Introduction

During the fall of either their 6th or 8th grade year, Bostonian middle-schoolers have the opportunity to apply to the city's three elite exam schools - Boston Latin School (BLS), Boston Latin Academy, and the John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science. To complete the application process, they must submit their GPA from the previous spring and from the first two terms of that year, take a private admissions test that measures their knowledge of math and English, and indicate which of the three schools they would like to apply to. In the spring, officials contact students with their results and tell them whether or not they are invited to attend their chosen school in September. Invitation letters, despite the growing diversity in the city, are disproportionately extended to white and Asian students. As described in this report, Black and Latinx students remain underrepresented at exam schools, especially BLS, and those who are admitted face a school culture that is unwelcoming to students of color.

As a BLS senior, myself, this is a topic that I (the lead author) care about deeply. It is abundantly clear to me, as I sit in my classes, walk through the school hallways, and participate in after-school extracurriculars, that Black and Latinx people and perspectives are underrepresented in the BLS community. It is achingly evident that the school environment is, in many ways, harmful to the Black and Latinx students who do attend. I was in 7th grade when #BlackAtBLS, a student movement pushing for racial reckoning, first began. I have witnessed the changes and reforms that came out of it, and I have been witness to the racism that still continues to live in our community. I am not a Black or Latinx person, and I cannot understand the experiences of those who are, but to see such blatant racial injustice in a school whose motto is "We are first," in a school that prides itself on producing civically-engaged upstanders, is not something that neither I nor the majority of my peers are able to ignore. The BLS community is calling for change.

To fully understand the admissions system that exists today, we look at its history¹. Boston's special admissions schools did not always rely on a standardized test to determine students' eligibility. In fact "exam schools" in the city [did not require applicants to take an exam](#) as part of the admissions process until the mid-1900s (Jung, 2020a). When BLS was founded in 1635 (BLS, n.d.) It was only in 1963, as an increasing number of [families of color began to arrive](#) in Boston and population swelled (Boston Planning & Development Agency, 2017), that the city began using an internal exam to assess the large number of applications they received each year. Under both iterations of admission processes-- GPA and letters of recommendation, and, later, entrance exams-- very few Black and Latinx students were admitted.

This changed after the 1974 decision in [Morgan v. Hennigan](#), which ruled that the city's schools, districtwide, were purposefully segregated (Morgan v. Hennigan, 1974). As a part of the desegregation

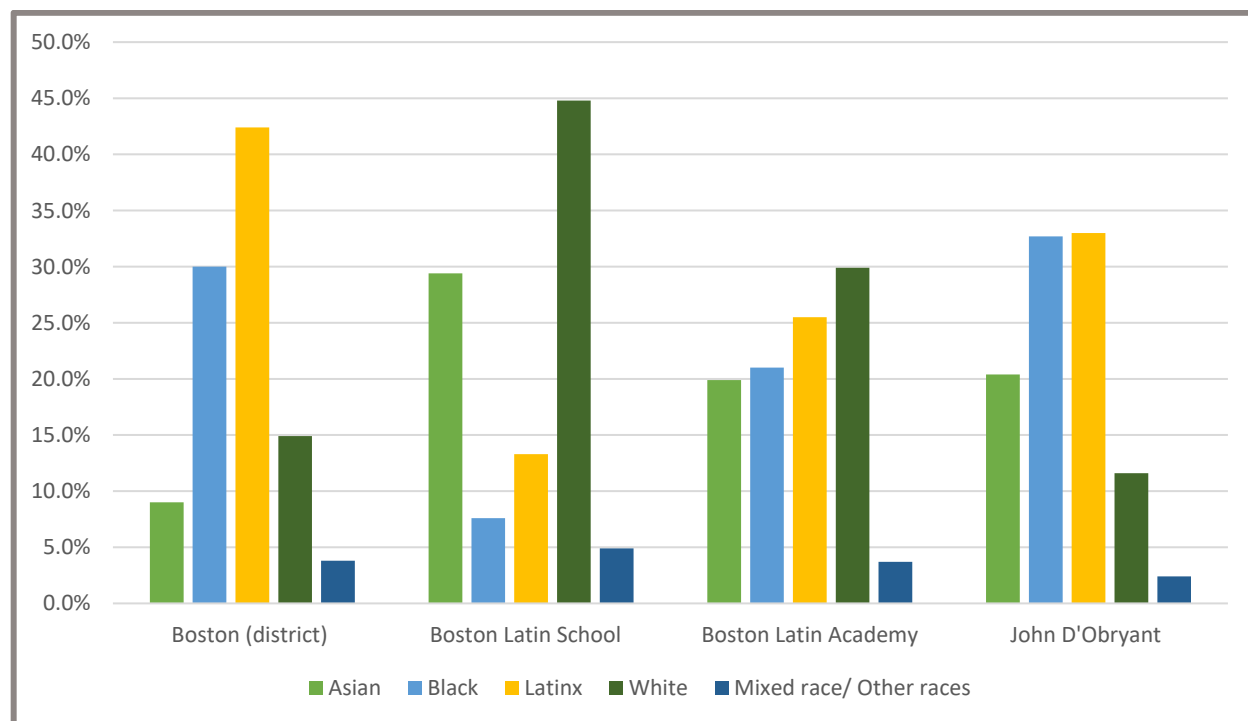
¹ Although a full account of Boston's history with desegregation is beyond the scope of this report, we briefly note changes during this tumultuous time that affected exam school diversity. For a detailed history of Boston school desegregation, please see [this timeline](#), [this video](#) and the sources cited by each.

plan that ensued, Boston’s exam schools were required to reserve 35% of their spots for students from underrepresented racial groups. The period of time during which racial quotas were utilized to promote diversity was relatively short-lived. In the late 1990s [a series of federal court rulings](#) weakened and eventually repealed the system of race-based set-asides in exam school admissions. By 1998, the Boston School Committee had [removed all race-based decision making](#) from exam school admissions shaping the landscape that exists currently (Jung, 2020a).

In 2017, a coalition led by the Boston branch of the NAACP released a report that reignited public discussion about racial imbalance at exam schools, especially at BLS. Their report, called [“A Broken Mirror,”](#) found that Black and Latinx students are drastically underrepresented in Boston’s top school, comprising only 11% and 16%, respectively, of students invited to attend BLS for the 2018-2019 school year, despite respectively making up 32% and 42% of the total student population in BPS (Lawyers for Civil Rights, 2017).

Table 1 updates the data on racial imbalance from “A Broken Mirror.” As demonstrated there, numbers have [only gotten worse](#). Black and Latinx students comprised only 7.6% and 13.3% of BLS during the 2019-2020 school year (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020). Again, these figures are drastically different than the proportions of Black and Latinx students, 30% and 42.2%, enrolled in public schools districtwide.

Table 1
Student Enrollment by Race 2019-2020



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Racial imbalance at exam schools, especially BLS, is concerning in itself: it is a clear indication that our system denies opportunity to students of color and, as described below, it helps create an environment that is unwelcoming to students of color who are admitted. It is important to note, however, that the conversation about exam school diversity extends beyond just BLS. A new [interactive tool](#) from the Urban Institute measures the extent to which racial imbalance at a single school contributes to segregation in the district as a whole. The Urban Institute tool reveals that BLS is, in fact, the largest contributor to educational segregation in the city, making up approximately 13% of the total high school segregation (see Urban Institute, 2020).

Relatedly, [a recent report](#), which shares several coauthors with this one, found that Boston is home to 65 intensely segregated white schools (Schneider et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, if white student enrollment at BLS decreased from its current level at roughly 45% towards the overall district proportion of white students (15%) other schools in the city of Boston would be more integrated.

Given the disproportionate underrepresentation of Black and Latinx students, the exam school admissions process has been criticized on several fronts. For example, the Independent School Entrance Exam (ISEE), which had been used as the admissions test for over 20 years, covers material that is not included in Boston Public School (BPS) curriculum. This made it difficult for students without access to private education and private tutoring to achieve scores necessary for entrance to BLS (Lawyers for Civil Rights, 2017). Additionally, students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have parents or guardians willing to petition teachers for higher grades, which [some believe leads to GPA inflation](#) for wealthier children (Espinoza-Madrigal & Sampson, 2019).

As the [criticism of the admissions process](#) mounts and continues, BPS currently finds itself in a time of transition. BPS' contract with creators of the ISEE has come to an end, a new private admissions test has been chosen, and new paths are being considered (Jehlen, 2020). In light of the ongoing conversations about exam school admissions, this report explores some of the context around BPS' search for a new test and reviews the methods other cities have implemented to address issues of inequity in selective or specialized schools. We review existing literature and use publicly available data as well as 33 stakeholder interviews² to outline pros and cons of options for developing a more equitable admissions system. Figure 1 lists interview participants according to their role in the debate about specialized school admission, and we offer further details about research methodology in Appendix A.

Figure 1
Interview Participants by Type

Participant Type	Number of Participants
BLS Students	19
BLS Parents	4
Community & Social Activism Groups	5
BLS Faculty & Administration	5

² Please see Appendix A for details about our research methodology.

Importantly, we believe that consideration of racial injustice at restricted enrollment schools should extend beyond discussion of admission. As a result, we also pay close attention to the racial dynamics at play in BLS school culture, centering BLS student voice both in our interview participants and in the writing of this report. In the interviews described below, students provide a snapshot of the current culture concerning race and racism at BLS-- a critical context given the conversations at hand. We then use responses across all interviews to outline recommendations for creating a more welcoming racial environment at BLS for students of color.

We are at a confluence of events that few could have anticipated even a few months ago, as dual crises in global health and racial injustice have turned public attention to systemic social inequity. In response, cities and states have been forced to reconsider long standing, racially unjust policies, leading to bold new experiments in everything from [reparations](#) (List, 2020) to [school policing](#) (WMTW, 2020). In this context, BPS and [other large urban districts](#) are considering new approaches to exam school enrollment for the first time in decades (Mezzacappa, 2020). We offer this report, informed directly by the voice of BLS students, to offer a new perspective on a debate that can often stalemate in polarization. We believe that, by considering the concerns of those most affected, we can find a productive pathway towards justice.

Context: Race in BLS Admissions and Culture

BPS and the Search for a New Test

In early February of 2020, BPS announced that it would cease to use the ISEE as the admissions test for the city's exam schools, and [put out a Request for Proposals](#) for another test vendor for the 2020-2021 school year (Cooper, 2020). Three companies - Strategic Measurement and Evaluation, NWEA, and Riverside Assessments - submitted bids in May, and in late June, the [district announced](#) that it would be using NWEA's MAP test (Miller, 2020). The new exam is supposed to be aligned with the Boston Public Schools' curriculum and is already being used in some BPS schools as a formative assessment; it is also a completely computer-based assessment, available in Spanish, and has an established bias-detector system.

The Opportunity and Achievement Gap Task Force, a group appointed by the city to ensure equity in the schooling system, has [recommended that BPS place a moratorium on testing](#) for the fall of 2020. Many are in support of such a moratorium, though recent news suggests that the district may not heed this recommendation (Miller, 2020). More recently, BPS has convened a group of stakeholders, including heads of school at each of the three exam schools, to develop recommendations for admissions in the upcoming school year, which could also begin to remodel the process in the years to come. They are expected to decide by September 2020.

These admissions changes follow BPS' decision during the 2019-2020 school year to administer the exam in students' neighborhood schools, removing an access barrier for some students. They also follow the expansion of the Exam School Initiative, a summer test-prep program that attempts to reach

out to low-income students. While these are steps in a positive direction, especially because the exam will be more accessible to Black and Latinx students in both content and scheduling, previous research suggests that these changes are not enough to create a fully representative and equitable admissions system.

Summary of Previous Research: Models for Specialized School Admission

Our review of research indicates that simply using a new private test is not going to solve the equity issues in the BPS exam school system. Selective high schools across the country have struggled with strikingly similar situations in recent years. Cities like Baltimore, Washington DC, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia all have systems akin to Boston's, all with an admissions exam, and all with similar racial disproportionality. Stuyvesant High School in New York City, where in 2019 [only 7 of the 895 seats were offered to Black students](#), sparked widespread conversation about the validity and fairness of test-based entry to specialized high schools (Shapiro, 2019). A private exam alone is clearly not enough to guarantee equity. In an effort to create a system where diversity and representation is featured, many have offered a variety of proposals that shift admissions away from the sole use of a private test.

Many suggest using the mandatory state tests that all public school children are already required to take (e.g., the MCAS), although [research indicates](#) that such a change might not make a dramatic difference in the overall racial balance at Boston's exam schools. A report by the Harvard Kennedy School's Rappaport Institute showed that Black and Latinx students who do well on the 5th grade MCAS do markedly worse on the ISEE just a year later (Goodman & Rucinski, 2018; see also Dynarski, 2018). White students with the same or similar MCAS scores perform, in contrast, quite well. If BPS chose to use MCAS scores as a part of the exam school admissions, then the Black and Latinx population at BLS would likely rise from the current 21% to 30%. While a sizable and important difference, the proportion of Black and Latinx students would still remain well below districtwide levels.

Notably, many of the changes that BPS has made in recent years, administering the admissions test during class time at the students' home schools, aligning it to the Massachusetts and BPS curriculum standards, seems to have shifted the new admissions test to be more like the MCAS, and the data that the Harvard Kennedy School found may apply to the new NWEA exam results. As a result, we would not expect MCAS-based enrollment to be much different than enrollment based on the new NWEA exam, which unlike the ISEE, is aligned to the same standards assessed by MCAS.

Some existing research recommends larger changes, beyond the substitution of one test for another. Due to court rulings, noted above, that constrain the use of race in exam school admissions, systemic attempts to achieve diversity through admissions have turned to socio-economic status, given that socio-economic status and race are frequently correlated. We summarize two such changes in this report: a neighborhood-based system that organizes the city into socio-economic tiers, and a school-based system that accepts the top percentage of students from each middle school.

Neighborhood Based: Socio-economic Tiers

Chicago's special admissions schools rely on the inclusion of socio-economic status. It still requires the submissions of an applicant's letter grades and a comparatively high score on two private

admissions tests, but Chicago's system also organizes neighborhoods into [four socio-economic tiers](#). Each census tract is assigned a socio-economic percentile score based on median family income, adult educational attainment, percentage of homes that are owner occupied, percentage of single parent households, percentage of the population speaking a language other than English, and neighborhood school performance (Chicago Public School Tiers, 2012).

Census tracts are then split into four tiers according to their socio-economic index: Tier 1 being the lowest quartile and Tier 4 being the highest. Each contains roughly a quarter of the city's school-aged children. Once the applications for the special admissions schools are in, students are assigned points according to each component of their application (i.e., letter grades and exam scores). Based on students' cumulative point total, Invitations to attend are sent to the top 30% of cumulative high scorers, regardless of their tier, and then to the top 17.5% of each tier. To be eligible for a specialized high school, a student's cumulative point total must exceed a minimum threshold set by the district.

This results in a schooling system where 19% of the students are from Tier 1, 22% are from Tier 2, 23% are from Tier 3, and 37% are from Tier 4. Racially, the schools are 42% Black, 30% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 17% white; the districtwide levels are 39% Black, 46% Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 10% white (Reeves & Schobert, 2019). While not perfect, Chicago's SES system is by far the [most representative in the nation](#). In the findings section below, we offer further details about Chicago's system, paying particularly close attention to its potential as a model for Boston.

In addition to reviewing research on Chicago's model for specialized high school enrollment, we also collected publicly available data towards recreating Chicago's socio-economic tiers in Boston. Specifically, we relied heavily on data from the Census Bureau and the American Community Survey to assign an SES index to each census tract in the city of Boston, using the same factors as that of the Chicago model. We then organized census tracts into four tiers so that each roughly contained the same number of school-aged children. This process helped us to identify pros and cons, discussed below, of replicating Chicago's model in Boston. As detailed in Appendix A, we were unable to fully replicate the Chicago system, because we did not have access to a racial breakdown of the school-aged population and we were unable to find individual student test score data at the census tract level; nonetheless, [we offer our full data here](#) for anyone who may want to build on our work towards developing a more equity-oriented exam school admissions system.

School Based: Top Percentage from Each K-6 School

Our second option, a model that accepts a top percentage of students from each middle school, is perhaps more straightforward. A [study conducted](#) in New York City (Treschan, 2015) showed that if the city used their state exam and extended invitations not to the citywide best scorers, but to the top 3% at each middle-school, Black enrollment at the selective high schools would rise from 4.6% to 8.8% and Latinx enrollment would rise from 7.2% to 13.0%. In NYC, this method would have amounted to an increase in Black and Latinx enrollment of 10%, slightly higher than simply substituting the state test in for the private one. Due to the nature of racial segregation within Boston and its schools (Schneider, et al., 2020), drawing from top scorers at the school level would provide a more targeted denominator for diversifying the student population in the city's exam schools. This system resembles that used to

determine public higher education admissions in Texas. Because K-6 schools in Boston are segregated, a system that admits students evenly from each school has potential to create a more equitable overall system.

Exam schools in Boston currently serve a high percentage of students who come from private schools or were home-schooled; in fact a recent audit conducted for the BLS Equity Team found that enrollment from private schools is as high as 40% at BLS. However, in our model, a system for school-based enrollment would only pull students from K-6 schools in BPS. Therefore, while the neighborhood based model would capture all students who live in Boston, the school based model would capture all students who attend BPS. Below, we discuss the implications of this difference and offer suggestions for how the district might include private and/or home schooled students in a school based model. As with the neighborhood based model, we collected publicly available data towards running a simulation of the school based model, though we were limited by gaps in publicly available data and were therefore unable to reliably predict the impact of this system. In Appendix A, we detail the process that we used in case it is instructive for similar future efforts.

The people of Boston are calling for changes similar to those already being researched and implemented in cities across the country. Following the release of *A Broken Mirror*, the Boston branch of the NAACP hosted several [neighborhood meetings](#) in 2017 and 2018, working with several community organizations, and discussed the exam school admissions process with hundreds of parents, students, teachers, and concerned community members (NAACP Boston, 2019). More recently, [an NAACP petition](#) calling on the district to suspend the test this year has collected more than 4,000 signatures at the time of this publication (NAACP Boston, 2020) Bostonians are in agreement; drastic changes need to be enacted in our system. In [a recent survey](#) conducted by the Boston Coalition for Education Equity (2019), even a large majority of city councilors support changes to exam school admissions.

The most prominent suggestions are not unlike those outlined above: inviting a top percentage of each middle school, inviting a top percentage of each Boston zip code to the high school of their choice, using a more holistic model to assess an applicant's merit, and using an admissions test that more closely matches the public school curriculum. Lawyers for Civil Rights, one of the co-authors of *A Broken Mirror*, noted that any of these solutions would pass constitutional muster. BPS has already taken steps to implement a fairer admissions system - such as selecting a test that is aligned with BPS curriculum standards - but as previous research has shown, it cannot be the final solution.

Race & Racism at BLS

Admissions changes are part of a larger discussion about race and racism that we are currently having as an entire nation. Protesters in all fifty states are calling on local and federal governments to address and dismantle systemic racism in the wake of George Floyd's murder, and Boston is no exception. We have a long legacy of discrimination, inequity, and racial hostility, stretching back to redlining in the 1960s and the busing era in the 1970s. BLS reflects much of that bias, not only in the admissions process, but also within the school itself.

In January of 2016, two BLS seniors, Meggie Noel and Kylie Webster-Cazeau, [posted a video](#) highlighting the racial hostilities they had experienced and criticizing the school administration for not appropriately addressing racist behavior, beginning the #BlackAtBLS movement. Their video sparked a BPS Office of Equity investigation in February and a federal civil rights investigation into the school that began in March and concluded in September. US Attorney Carmen Ortiz and the Department of Justice [found one explicit civil rights violation](#) in November 2014, when a white male student threatened to lynch a Black female student and faced no consequences, as well as a disturbing pattern of discrimination and dismissal of racial harassment (Department of Justice, 2016). BPS' investigation [did not substantiate a violation](#) of the Nondiscrimination Policy, but did conclude that the administration violated the Students, Families, and Other Third Party Grievances of Discrimination procedures (BPS, 2016). The movement drew high media attention, which ultimately pushed the then-headmaster, Lynn Mooney Teta, to leave the school [against the protests](#) of some parents and students (Goulston, 2016).

Racism in BLS did not, however, end when the investigations did. While the attention that #BlackAtBLS brought to the school community did start conversations about race, and did make headway, many students feel that the progress has stagnated. Recently, in the wake of George Floyd's murder and the national outcry that it caused, BLS students have once again begun to push for progress in the way we discuss race and racism. These calls have become louder in response to several troubling, and very recent, incidents of racial insensitivity at BLS.

In June 2020, a conversation where a sophomore referred to George Floyd as "curious George," using a common racist trope to imply that the man murdered by police officers had been less than human, was posted online and swiftly condemned. Student athletes have reported incidents of racial slurs and discrimination on their teams. As described below, additional troubling incidents emerged in interviews with BLS students for this project. The administration called class assemblies to watch recordings of the school's prize declaimers, mostly non-black students, recite speeches that relate to race, mostly from the 1960s, which many students felt was counterproductive and insensitive. A group of juniors wrote an email to Head of School Rachel Skerritt to express their frustration with the lack of understanding. The BLS community continues to struggle with racism. Black and Latinx students continue to feel unheard and unheeded. White privilege and a culture of white supremacy permeate every aspect of the school, from the admissions process to graduation. By discussing possible alternatives to the current admissions system, we hope to address one aspect of the racism in the BLS community and uplift and amplify the voices of Black and Latinx students.

Statement of Findings

Admissions Proposals

Based on the research previously conducted and discussed earlier in this report, we saw five possible ways of changing the Boston exam schools admissions process. As depicted in Figure 2, two of the options are changes in the admissions system introduced above: a modified version of Chicago's system, and a policy that would admit a certain percentage of top applicants from each middle school. These changes would actively consider the differing socio-economic statuses of students in Boston and

seek to establish level standing for lower income applicants, instead of defaulting to the citywide competition that favors wealthier students.

The other three possibilities discussed are potential admissions factors: the use of an admissions test, the use of 5th and 6th grade GPA, and an incorporation of holistic review. These three factors are the inputs of the admissions process, the possible determinants of merit that can be used within any system. In this section, we will be discussing all of the pros and cons of each of the five, as expressed by BLS students, parents, BLS staff and close partners, and civil rights advocates.

Figure 2
Systems & Factors for More Equitable Exam School Admissions

Systems & Factors		Description
Systems	Neighborhood based: Socio-economic Tiers	A model for exam school admissions where students are organized into 4 tiers according to an index of socio-economic status. Students applying to exam schools only compete with students within their own socio-economic tier. This model is based off of a model developed for exam school admissions in Chicago (Chicago Public School Tiers, 2012).
	School based: Percentage from each K-6 school	Under this model, districts invite a top n percent of students from each K-6 school in the city to enroll in the city's exam school(s).
Factors	An Admissions Test	Utilizing tests that are aligned with Boston Public School's curriculum standards as a factor in exam school admissions, rather than using an exam that may necessitate private tutoring or schooling to achieve a competitive score.
	5 th and 6 th Grade GPA	Utilizing student GPA from the spring of their 5 th grade year and the first two terms of their 6 th grade year and ranking students according to cumulative GPA across these marking periods.
	Holistic Review	Holistic factors usually include qualitative evidence, such as letters of recommendation, personal essays, or a portfolio of previous work.

Neighborhood Based: Socio-economic Tiers

Our modified version of Chicago's socio-economic tiers is very similar to the original. Led by the report's first author, we pulled data points for mean family income, percentage of owner-occupied homes, percentage of single-parent homes, percentage of households that speak a language other than English, and educational attainment for each occupied census tract in Boston. We then calculated a total percentile for each tract, and formed the tiers based on the number of 5th-8th grade children in each tract, much like Chicago does. Ideally, the tiers would be based solely on the number of 6th and 8th

graders in Boston, but we did not have access to that data and therefore had to include the numbers of 5th and 7th grade students into our calculations.

The only major difference in our version of Chicago's system is the percentage of applicants accepted from each tier. Instead of admitting the top 30% of applicants regardless of socio-economic tier, like CPS does, we proposed a system where 25% of the exam school invitations would come from each tier, simplifying the process and allowing for more equity. We did not have access to test score and GPA data, so we could not completely calculate the impact that such a system would have on demographics.

Most of the BLS students we interviewed were, at least tentatively, in favor of using socio-economic tiers. Because residential segregation is so prevalent in Boston, they believe that this proposal would effectively begin to build better representation in the city's exam schools. Interview participants generally agreed that students who have had access to a large amount of resources should not be in competition with students who have had access to limited amounts of resources. They believed that an admissions system based on socio-economic tiers would solve this issue by creating level ground for lower income families. Many students also noted that, because this is a system based not on race, but on objective measures of poverty, it would not be as contentious as "traditional affirmative action."

This has also been noted by various civil rights advocates: an approach like this, not established on the basis of race, is entirely [constitutional and legally permissible](#) (NAACP Boston, 2019). It seems to be the most appealing option to BLS families as well. Though a small portion of our interview participants, two white parents chose this system as their favorite, because it automatically includes private and parochial school students in the calculations and because it is clearly and concretely based on factors other than race. A Latinx parent and Black parent we interviewed also voiced their approval, though they were equally in favor of taking the top percentage of students from each middle school. Many BLS staff and close partners have previously looked into Chicago's system, and believe that this is a strategy worth trying in Boston. In our interviews, it was identified as their favorite, for all the reasons stated above by the students and parents. One administrator also noted that the Advanced Work Classes, a staple in many BPS elementary and middle schools, used a similar system until the 1990s, so it has precedent in Boston and would be a sensible starting ground for change.

On the other hand, BLS students also brought up concerns that the use of socio-economic tiers would only expose more low-income students to a harmful school environment. Many low-income students attending exam schools have a hard time adjusting to the academic rigor, according to student interview testimony. They may come from smaller, under resourced schools with few academic challenges, and are suddenly thrown into a class of about 400, where every day is an academic challenge. As described by interview participants, the shock can be enormous, especially if their families do not have the capacity to help with school work and aid in smoothing the transition to BLS.

Student interviewees worry about admitting more low-income students without addressing the lack of supports to help these students be successful. Students were concerned that low-income peers might feel unwelcomed, shunned, and insecure. They also expressed concern that low-income students would be unable to keep up with the academic rigor, believe that they were accepted only because of their low socio-economic status, and ultimately drop out. Advocates noted, however, that parents with resources often will hire tutors and buy supplemental learning materials for their children; they note

that donor groups like the BLSA could help provide these resources for low-income students who may struggle with the academic rigors of BLS.

Importantly, we spoke with two staff members at Chicago Public Schools, including the data engineer responsible for calculating tiers and determining admissions offers each year and, separately, we interviewed a university-based researcher who studies school culture in Chicago's selective enrollment high schools. In each interview, we asked specifically about concerns raised by students regarding the use of socio-economic tiers in Boston. In response to questions about academic preparation, CPS staff members noted that the district requires all students to surpass a minimum threshold in order to be considered for entry to the city's specialized high schools. If students cumulative point total (again, based on letter grades and exam scores) does not exceed the minimum, they will not be offered a seat at a specialized high school, even if space is available. This kind of system, in Boston, may help to ensure that exam schools do not enroll students who are unprepared for academic rigor. Further, in her experience conducting research with students in CPS, the university researcher reported that specialized high school students have not been stigmatized according to socio-economic tier or status.

BLS students' concerns are, to be fair, more of a problem with school culture than it is with this particular proposal, but it is a problem that does need to be addressed. An extensive support system, both academic and interpersonal, explicitly for low-income students, would have to be instituted at each exam school. As we change the admissions process to be more equitable, we must also change the exam schools themselves to be safer, more welcoming spaces for low-income families. In the following section, we outline suggestions for related improvements in school culture.

Some of the civil rights activists we spoke to had different concerns about the neighborhood based approach. They worried that the formation of socio-economic tiers based on census tract would encourage gentrification. Wealthier families looking to give their child a better chance at admission would buy property in a low-income neighborhood, ultimately raising the prices and pushing out the families, often people of color, who had lived there for generations.

As above, a professor who has conducted extensive research into Chicago's selective high school admissions process has seen no evidence that their admissions system has sped up the gentrification of the city. She has, however, heard of wealthy parents buying property in lower income neighborhoods and using the address in the selective high school application. General fraud, when parents simply lie about their home address, has also been talked about in Chicago, though the professor herself has never heard of a specific instance for either case. Representatives from Chicago Public Schools echoed these points, noting that while this could be an issue, they were also not aware of specific occurrences. CPS staff conceded that individual families may gentrify low-income neighborhoods, but they believe that, on a system-wide level, such cases are not frequent enough to interfere with their goal of creating more student diversity in their special admissions schools. CPS staff also noted that they adjust socio-economic tiers on an annual basis to ensure that their calculations accurately reflect changes in housing patterns. Boston could likewise mitigate this problem by adjusting its socio-economic tiers on a regular basis, perhaps annually, to ensure for example that gentrifying neighborhoods are organized into a tier that reflects changes in neighborhood demographics.

Another noted issue with Chicago's system is the representation of low-income families living in high-income neighborhoods. Census tracts are small chunks of the city, only a couple of blocks wide each, but a striking amount of economic diversity can still exist without those few blocks. In Chicago's Tiers 3 and 4, according to the professor, the accepted applicants are almost always from fairly high income white and Asian families, despite a sizable presence of Black and Latinx middle schoolers. These students are disadvantaged and underrepresented. This could also be an issue in Boston. For example, one student interviewee lives in the projects of Charlestown, a neighborhood that is entirely Tier 3 and 4. She herself is from a low-income, Spanish-speaking, single parent household, but because her community is grouped with the wealthier parts of Charlestown, she would be included in the Tier 3 or 4 calculations. It is possible that, under this system, she would not have been accepted into BLS.

In response to this concern, CPS staff reported that Individual special admissions schools are also given the opportunity to designate 5% of their open spaces to students at the discretion of the principal. "Principal discretion" spots are used to admit students who applied but were not invited to attend through the standard admissions process. Students can appeal the decision by applying using a format that resembles holistic review, such as writing a letter that explains their circumstances and outlines why they believe they deserve a place in the school. CPS staff noted that this is one way for students who fall through the cracks of this existing system to still have a chance at attending a special admissions school. Specifically, a low income student who is disadvantaged in the admissions system because they reside in a high income area could be a candidate for a principal discretion spot.

To help ensure that low-income students in high-income tiers are not at a disadvantage, we also recommend one major change to the Chicago model: instead of using socio-economic tiers to admit 70% of specialized entry high school students, as Chicago does, we recommend using tiers to determine all exam schools admissions. Because Chicago admits the top 30% of students citywide before turning to a tier-based system to determine entry for the remaining seats, it takes a smaller percentage of students from each tier, both limiting the number of students from low-SES tiers and making the competition that much harder for low-income students in high-SES tiers. The university professor we interviewed identified this as a major flaw that compromises its usefulness as a tool for equity in Chicago. She agreed that our proposed changes would likely lead to increased diversity in admissions. Additionally, a tiered system in Boston could add weight to the applications of low-income students in high-SES tiers to buffer against the challenges described above, which Chicago does not do.

School Based: Top Percentage from Each K-6 School

Many of the people who supported the tiered system were equally in favor of the top percentage from each middle school system. Because residential segregation is so plainly reflected in our school system, this system may work just as effectively to give low-income students, many of whom are Black and Latinx, level standing ground. Many students, staff, and parents we interviewed were not opposed to such a proposal.

Some advocacy groups and two parents of color that we interviewed are more supportive of this system than they are of the neighborhood based socio-economic tiers. Because school attendance in Boston is decided by lottery system, rather than by neighborhood, gentrification would not be an issue

with this proposal. It might even convince wealthier families to stay in the district for their children's elementary and middle school education, to heighten their chances of getting into an exam school in seventh 7th grade. The increase of diversity in BPS schools that those wealthier families would bring would be beneficial to all students and would address longstanding segregation in Boston that has [only worsened in recent years](#) (Schneider et al., 2020).

Students had the same concerns about the school-based system that they had about the neighborhood-based system, though amplified. If some schools are extremely underfunded and under-resourced, then even their top students could be underprepared for the exam schools. Student interview participants suggest that, in the socio-economic tiers system, it was possible that particularly under-resourced schools would send none of their students, while other low-income students of color with more preparation would be admitted. In the top percentage from each school proposal, it is guaranteed that each school, no matter how underprepared, would send students. While students acknowledge that this could be a wonderful opportunity for many, they also believe that it would ultimately cause high attrition rates, forcing newly admitted low-income students drop out.

Two parents who were supportive of the socio-economic tier system are less open to a top percentage from each school. They echoed the concerns of the students about the varying levels of rigor in different schools, and added that it would not be fair to private and parochial school students. One parent, whose children attended a private school prior to BLS, elaborated, saying that many families stretch their budgets immensely to send children to private schools until 6th grade to prepare them for exam schools as best as possible. Likely reflecting the concerns of others, this parent reflected that if the system changed, and quotas from each school were established, then it would be a great hardship for those families, and their children would be left with few good educational options in the city of Boston.

Factor 1: An Admissions Exam

The first and most hotly debated admissions factor is the test. Generally, many students have accepted its use in the exam school admissions process. They feel that some measure of academic ability must be administered, and a test that is in line with the curriculum of BPS, is completely computerized, is available in Spanish, and has an established system of bias detection for each of its questions may be the fairest way to measure that ability. Student interview participants agree that the new test is a positive first step forward, though it will not solve many of the inequities embedded in the system. They were clear that while it cannot be the only factor, it should be a factor. It is important to student interview participants that as more Black and Latinx students are admitted to the exam schools, they will be able to keep up with the academic rigor, and will be able to succeed in the exam school setting.

BLS staff agree. They emphasized the fact that the demographics of the exam schools are a direct result of the flaws in our district and in our society as a whole. Black and Latinx students score lower on tests because they come from underfunded schools, and because they inhabit a world that is constantly telling them they will never be on par with children of other races. BLS staff do not doubt the inherent intelligence that many low-income students have, but they worry that without the proper support and preparation in the years before exam schools, the students will struggle. According to BLS

staff interviewed for this project, there is nothing inherently wrong with the admissions test itself. They believe it is the most objective way of measuring merit possible, being an equitable test and based entirely on unquestionable numbers and percentiles. If its results are unfair, it only reflects a need to improve the society that it exists in, not the admissions process itself.

Some advocacy groups and parents of color, however, do not believe that the test is the most objective assessment measure possible. They cite multiple studies conducted over the years that prove that exams like this one are biased. Standardized tests only measure [a very narrow set of skills, unrepresentative](#) of what a student may actually be capable of, and often only representative of the amount of time a family can afford to put into test preparations (Mulholland, 2015; Schneider, 2017). It does not matter that the new test that the district has chosen is better - it is still a test. Wealthier families will still be able to better prepare their children, who will still be accepted into the exam schools at higher rates. If we wish to make the system equitable and accessible to the Black and Latinx children who live in our city and attend school in our district, civil rights advocates say, then the test must be removed altogether.

This year is a special category. Given the current pandemic, all the Boston-based advocacy groups strongly endorse the OAG task force's recommendation to suspend the test. Many students and some faculty who, under normal circumstances, accept tests as a part of the admissions process, do not believe that it would be fair to administer a test this year, amid the pandemic and the disruption of education. One parent, for example, pointed out that, even if academic achievement across socio-economic groups was constant, which it is not, it would be a hardship for many low-income 6th graders to take the exam at home, as they would likely have to do, without any distractions or interruptions. Testing would only exacerbate the inequities in the system and result in an even lower acceptance rate of the city's Black and Latinx 6th graders.

Some parents do, however, believe the contrary: because announcements about the test are coming so late, and because resources are so scarce at the moment, they believe that everyone would be equally unprepared and thus on equal standing ground, compared to previous years, when higher income students had the time and opportunity to participate in private test prep courses.

Proponents of the test who acknowledge the pandemic's unequal effects, including several BLS staff and close partners, believe that the best solution would be to postpone the admissions test. November, only a couple of months into a new and unprecedented system for schooling, is undoubtedly too soon for all students to have adjusted to the unique circumstances of the 2020-2021 school year. These proponents believe that, if we test in late winter or early spring, then everyone is likely to have settled, and the test results are likely to be more representative. Critics of this recommendation, many of them students and civil rights advocates, respond that virtual learning and underfunded schools have had such an impact on students that any test at any point this school year would be drastically unfair.

Interview respondents also discussed several strategies for expanding access to test and/or application preparation to students who are historically underrepresented at BLS. Relevant for a more typical school year, BLS students noted the Exam School Initiative, the district's efforts to bring test preparation to underserved, low-income children. They believe, however, that two weeks in August, what the program usually is in non-pandemic times, is not enough preparation at all. Many wealthier students have been preparing for the exam school for their entire school careers: two weeks are not

going to drastically aid the other 6th graders. Some interviewees recommended the further expansion of the ESI. One BLS senior believes that a tutoring service should begin in 5th grade. She recommended building partnerships between the exam schools, particularly BLS, and K-6 classes in BPS. The high schoolers would serve as mentors to the younger students, providing extra tutoring in math and English, preparing them not only for the exam schools, but also supplementing their education in general. Having mentors in BLS in particular, especially if the mentors are people of color, would encourage Black and Latinx students to rank it as their first choice school and attend it.

Factor 2: 5th and 6th Grade GPA

The second admissions factor is the applicant's GPA, which is collected in the spring of a student's 5th grade year and the first two terms of a student's 6th grade year. According to our interviews, some advocacy groups believe to be a far more representative and comprehensive measure of academic ability than a test could ever be. GPA is taken over time, a collection of homework and classwork grades in addition to any tests a student might take. It gives a better sense of the effort that would go into schoolwork, a better sense of how a student fares in the classroom. As many student interviewees pointed out, some people simply do not perform as well on tests as they do on everyday classwork or on projects.

On the other hand, GPA could possibly be even more subjective and unfair than a test, as a member of the BLS staff and a BLS parent explained. A student's grades are based on teachers' opinions and the grading policies of each individual school. One teacher could be a far harsher grader than another is; one school could be far more rigorous than another is. The grades that a student receives in one classroom could be wildly different than the grades they might receive in another classroom, with another teacher. Echoing concerns of others, one BLS parent argued that it simply would not be fair to base admissions entirely on GPA. A staff member believed that GPA should be removed from admissions considerations entirely. Though he thought it served its purpose well when it was first implemented decades ago under court order, its use is far outdated now. He would rather rely entirely on the new MAP test as the sole admissions factor as he believes GPA is too subjective.

Along these lines, one parent, who is also a BLS alumna and a 5th grade teacher, pointed out that standardizing the classes would be logistically difficult. There are different types of elementary school courses - Advanced Work Classes, Excellence for All classes, and standard courses - which often exist within the same school. How does one decide, based on GPA, who is most qualified to attend an exam school? Should an A in a standard class rank higher than a C in an Advanced Work Class? Where should the cutoff lie?

In addition to concerns about variability in grading practices across so many different schools, interview participants also noted that private schools may engage in grade inflation to help their students gain entry into the exam schools. By comparison, the test has been recently updated and interview participants believe it has been proven to have bias protection. Some participants agreed, then, that while the test may not be perfect, it is far more objective than the grade point average is. We also ask CPS staff about their use of GPA and our conversation revealed a subtle, but important distinction that may be relevant for Boston: CPS collects letter grades, as opposed to GPA, and then

calculates a student's admissions score according to their own internal formula. CPA staff noted that each feeder school has different methods for calculating GPA, making it hard to accurately compare students from different schools. By collecting letter grades instead, staff believed they were less susceptible to grade inflation.

Although it may seem like a minor distinction, the difference between using GPA and letter grades can have a major impact on the admissions process and, indeed, on the lives of individual students. In reporting published late in the summer of 2020 – just as this report was nearing publication – BPS revealed that it had [made an error](#) in converting GPA's from students who had attended [private, parochial or charter schools](#) that use grading system [different than that used in BPS](#) (Betancourt, 2020; Jung, 2020b; Martin, 2020). As a result, 62 students had been denied entry to BPS exam schools who otherwise had met the criteria for admission, 67 students were mistakenly admitted to BPS exam schools, and nearly 90 students had not been invited to their top choice school (Martin, 2020). As indicated in our interview with CPS staff, this kind of error may be avoided by collecting letter grades and assigning points accordingly (see [CPS Tiers, n.d.](#)) as opposed to collecting GPA, which requires conversion across different grading systems.

The opinions of BLS students vary. Some believe that GPA is more representative than a test, while others believe that it is more subjective and unfair that a test could ever be. It is a generally held opinion, however, that this year's GPA is going to be particularly unfair. The disruption in education has affected both student learning and the grading system that each school uses. There is no clear consistency in grades of the 2019-2020 school year's last quarter, and it is unclear whether or not there will be consistency this coming school year. For that reason, some students believe that GPA should not be used in this coming admissions cycle.

Factor 3: Holistic Review

Given the critiques that metrics like test scores and GPA disproportionately benefit white and Asian applicants, some advocate for the use of holistic factors such as letters of recommendation or personal essays. Proponents we spoke to, including BLS students, civil rights advocacy groups, and two of the four parents of BLS students we interviewed, believed holistic review has the potential to alleviate concerns associated with quantitative metrics. Many students expressed strong support for it, thinking it would offer a more complete picture of applicants and thus, in part, alleviate disparate admission rates for Black and Latinx students. They asserted that, because people are so much more complex than numbers and statistics, it is unfair to only use test scores and grades to determine merit and intelligence. Proponents think that holistic review would enable exam schools to get a sense of that complexity and make fairer, more complete admissions decisions.

At the same time, several interviewees noted they were skeptical of the schools' or district's ability to fairly review holistic applications. They expressed concerns that implicit racial bias by application reviewers could still result in an inequitable process. In response, a member of a prominent social advocacy group stated that such concerns are mere "speculation" and that the district and people of Boston, "cannot in good conscience give up on the good fight for a more fair and equitable process" out of fear. He also cited reviewer training sessions, like ones used to train college admissions reviewers,

that can alleviate concerns about bias from holistic admissions. A member of another social advocacy group noted that concerns over the subjectivity of holistic factors assume the objectivity of measures like test scores and GPA; she indicated that objective measures of student performance do not exist.

The concern about subjectivity was nevertheless echoed by interviewees who are against the use of holistic review. Alumni, administrators at BLS, and two parents argued that it would inevitably be biased. One administrator noted that she already receives phone calls from parents who are advocating for their child's admission. These parents would assuredly exert the same pressure on the teachers writing recommendations and on the group that would judge holistic factors. One of the parents we spoke with believed the inclusion of holistic factors would open the admissions process to "fraud" and "subjectivity." A representative from the BLSA echoed her concerns about subjectivity, suggesting that subjectivity might occur at both the level of recommendation writing, which would likely be done by an overwhelmingly white teaching force, and in the application review process. Those against holistic review believe by and large that an exam is the least subjective tool available.

One parent simply does not believe that holistic review would lead to any changes. He argued that most of the children who are admitted under the test and GPA system would be the same children who would get the most stellar teacher recommendations and would be able to complete the most impressive extracurriculars. According to this perspective, holistic review would yield the same demographic results that the current system does, but would take much longer to complete and assess - the effort would not pay off.

Skeptics of holistic review also pointed out that applicants are, on average, eleven years old and that requesting teacher recommendations and writing essays would only cause additional stress for the young applicants. It could, in fact, negate other efforts that students may have made to prepare for admissions, as one parent interviewee noted. Her son, for example, spent years preparing for the exam, enrolled in private tutoring and in a 2-week test prep program. Holistic review could render those efforts pointless.

Findings Discussion and Recommendations: Leveling the Playing Field

We have presented the pros and cons of two potential admissions systems and three potential admissions factors. The aim of this project is not to give the district our own opinions about the exam school admissions process. We understand that the issue is complex, and multiple parties have already put forward various proposals, in some combination of the factors we outlined above, in hopes of making the process more equitable and the exam schools more representative of Boston. There is not going to be a perfect solution that will completely satisfy the desires and needs of all parties involved, and I (the lead author) will not pretend to know what the best course of action should be, though I have my own opinions, as a BLS student myself. Beyond the recommendation that we implement a system that will take socio-economic status into account, we have no concrete suggestions for the district - we have only given BPS the thoughts and experiences of the people that will be affected by whatever decision the district comes to, and we hope that their opinions will be heard and heeded. Regardless of their shortcomings, each model proposed above would improve the current system by leveling the

playing field so that students are competing against others from similar socio-economic backgrounds, as opposed to holding a citywide competition that inevitably favors advantaged students.

Further, it should be noted that there are potential solutions to some of the concerns about each of the methods and inputs. Many concerns about the socio-economic tiers arose from the underrepresentation of Black and Latinx students within their tiers, especially in the higher-income tiers. There is still a good deal of economic diversity within each census tract, and an average may not be the most accurate way to represent a neighborhood. It could be fairer to use median data points while calculating the tracts' percentiles, at least for the income data, if not for the four other categories. As briefly mentioned before, an additional boost, either in GPA or test score, could be given to applicants based on the amount of time they have spent in a public school district. If, for example, the student spent a year in a public school district, they would receive an additional 10 points to their raw test score. If they have spent two years, they would receive 20; then 30, then 40, and so on and so forth. This could provide equity and opportunity to low-income students, who do often attend public schools, living in high-income neighborhoods, where many wealthier families send their children to private or parochial schools. It might also encourage some wealthier families to return to the public school system, bringing more diversity into schools.

Several parents were concerned about the impact that a top percentage from each school model would have on students who are enrolled in advanced classes or private schools. The transition to such a system could be made gradually, using a different percentage for public vs. private schools each year. If currently 25% of exam school students come from private or parochial schools, then the first year that the top percentage system is implemented, the district could limit the percentage of private school admittees to 22%. The following year could be 20%; then 18%, 16%, and so on and so forth. This would allow parents to resettle their children in a different school, if they so desired, and would allow the district time to rebuild underfunded public schools, so that all children are as well prepared for the exam schools as possible.

Race and School Culture

We cannot talk about increasing the representation of Black and Latinx students at BLS without also addressing their experiences within the school itself. To this end, we interviewed current Black and Latinx BLS students to get a better sense of the overall school culture as pertains to race. We also asked students to describe what they believe should be done to address issues of racism and general tension around race at the school. Conversations about students' experiences centered around three main areas: the transition to BLS for Black and Latinx students, racial microaggressions, and overt racism. This section is rooted in student voice, both in the perspectives shared by interview participants and in the very text of the report. Specifically, we draw from across our interviews as well as the personal experience of the lead author to outline concrete suggestions for how BLS might address the issues of racism at the school.

Transition to BLS

Almost every interviewee spoke about the culture shock they felt when they first arrived at BLS. Black and Latinx interviewees explained that they came to BLS from schools and neighborhoods that were majority Black and/or Latinx, and it was jarring to arrive at a school where the opposite was true. Interviewees felt that they had little in common with their classmates, who were raised in completely different environments. Student interviewees expressed that they were often the only one or one of very few students at BLS from their elementary school. Unlike their white counterparts, they came to BLS without friends or familiar faces and felt they lacked the built-in social circle that could have made the transition easier.

Despite the initial isolation, student interviewees eventually made friends and built communities, making the overall BLS experience easier, but the sense of isolation remained in academic settings. Interviewees spoke about the awkwardness of being the only Black person in the room, especially during History or English classes, when discussions about slavery or racism began. Every eye immediately turned to them, waiting for a comment. When they do make comments, describing their own experiences or talking about the issues of racism that continue to persist in America, Black and Latinx students expressed feeling shut down, argued with, invalidated, as if their experiences, feelings, and facts do not matter. One interviewee recounted a class conversation about the impact slavery has had on America. She made a statement about the continuation of systemic racism that drew upon her own personal experience, and a white student responded with, “That’s not true.” She immediately got the sense that her struggles and pain, which she had just described, were inconsequential to the rest of her class.

Microaggressions

The feeling of isolation and being othered is also driven, in part, by the constant barrage of microaggressions³ student interviewees experienced. BLS culture is, as many students pointed out, based in white supremacy culture. The Black and Latinx interviewees we spoke to do not believe people intend to be hurtful or provocative, but because the general culture is so pervasively white and so aggressive, many people at BLS are not able to identify actions and comments that are harmful to students of color.

Students reported that many issues stem from the competition that the school fosters. Everyone is trying to be the best in every way: in grades, in sports, in extracurriculars, even in activism. BLS students feel the need to compare themselves constantly, distinguish themselves from the rest of the some-2400 students in the school. One Latinx interviewee talked about the academic and emotional impact that this has had on him. Many of his friends in his first years at the school had been preparing

³ In this section, we use the categories “microaggressions” and “overt racism” as discussed by student interviewees. We recognize there is extensive literature and nuance around terminology related to racial microaggression. For more reading on microaggressions and school racial climate see: Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano (2009)

for BLS for a very long time, and had scored exceptionally well on the ISEE. They loved to discuss their high rankings. He, on the other hand, had only learned about exam schools a couple of days before the deadline to apply, had not been given any preparation, and ranked well into the hundreds in exam standings. Without a doubt, he had scored respectably, but when surrounded by the constant discussion of who had done the best, he was ashamed. He felt inadequate and insecure, certain that he did not fit in at such a competitive, high-achieving school. His self-esteem fell, as he stopped believing he could do well, so did his grades.

The BLS sense of competition is even encouraged, though unintentionally, between different cultural groups. A variety of cultural extracurricular clubs exist in the school: BLS BLACK, TAG (the Hispanic/Latinx group), ASIA, Desi, the Caribbean Culture Club, BLS Mesa, and a whole host of nation-specific groups. All of these are wonderful spaces, and all of them deserve recognition and support. This does not, unfortunately, always happen. One interviewee, a leader in one of these groups, said that, because all of the discussions about race, ethnicity, and culture happen in extracurricular spaces, during a limited amount of time after school, the clubs often clash. She noted that students feel pressured to compete with each other, to get more people to attend their events than the events of other cultural clubs. This is even more isolating to people of color. Instead of allyship and solidarity, contention and resentment grows. Students believe the school would need to move discussions into the main sphere of BLS life, into classrooms, into spaces without time limits, to ease the pressure to compete.

Inside of the hyper-competitive, white supremacy culture, many students do not understand their role. “In classes,” as one interviewee said, “we’ll be politically correct; we’ll condemn voter suppression in Georgia; we’ll rage against the injustice of systemic racism. In the hallways, immediately after, we’ll joke about the events we just mourned and throw the n-word around like it’s nothing.” The ignorance is exhausting for Black and Latinx students. One interview participant reflected that she “can’t be mad at them, because they genuinely don’t know any better. I’m just so tired.” Students spoke about the awkwardness and shock of white people, people they sometimes barely even know, asking for an “n-word pass.” One Hispanic interviewee recounted “dad jokes” made by white classmates; jokes that play into the stereotype that Black and Latinx (especially Dominican) fathers are not present in their children’s lives. A Haitian senior wore braids to school once, and was asked, in the middle of class, if she even ever washed her hair. Many people of color, including Asian students, though to a much lesser extent, only truly feel comfortable in BLS when they’re in cultural clubs with people who have lived through the same pain and understand it fully.

Overt Racism

There are more explicit racist incidents that Black and Latinx students go through as well. Most of the class of 2021 remembers the blatantly racist social media accounts a group of white boys created in their 8th grade year. Many students interviewed for this project referenced the comments a rising junior made about George Floyd earlier this year, discussed previously in this report. One interviewee, a Haitian-American senior, was called the n-word to his face by a white student during a gym class in his freshman year. He reported the situation, speaking with his guidance counselor for a few hours, and the white student was suspended for a day, but our interviewee was left shaken and shocked by the

incident. He never got any follow-up. The school did not inform him of the suspension, which he only heard about some time later from a friend. As suggested by student interview participants, and true of my own experience, these incidents are not the rule and they are not representative of BLS as a whole, but they nevertheless are disturbing and harmful. They are made even more disturbing, as two interviewees pointed out, by the excuses we sometimes make for them. “That’s just how he is,” we say. “He doesn’t actually mean to be racist. He’s just doing it for attention, just doing it to be funny.” We brush it off. We do not report it. We essentially protect the perpetrators of racial aggression.

Faculty members are not exempt, even from overt acts of racism. Many students feel that, though BLS teachers are always well-versed in their academic fields, some are lacking in socio-emotional intelligence, sometimes to a troubling degree. They are not, and make no effort to be, present in their students’ lives, offering them no support and paying no heed to their reactions to their lessons. Students are all aware of a white teacher who repeatedly said “ni****,” while talking about the history of racism in America in 2018, even after multiple Black students asked them to stop and use the substitution “n-word” in place of the slur. Another teacher, recounted by one interviewee and first discussed in the #BlackAtBLS movement, asked one of the few Black students in the classroom, “How would you like if I called you ni****?” These faculty members simply have not tried to connect with the children they’re supposed to be protecting and educating. They do not consider the pain they might be causing, intellectualizing everything, instead of being open-minded, open-hearted, and supportive.

When our Black and Latinx student interviewees repeatedly say that they do not want to admit large amounts of Black and Latinx 6th graders into BLS in the near future, this is why. Many of the student interviewees had such negative experiences transitioning to BLS that they expressed concern about admitting more people of color. The environment is so intense and competitive, especially for the Black and Latinx populations, and they don’t want to expose more children to such a place. They have lived through the intensely competitive, frequently cruel, supportless system themselves, and they need to see the system fixed before more people of color are exposed to it. We can improve the admissions process, but we simultaneously need to improve BLS school culture.

Findings Discussion & Recommendations: Student Ideas for Addressing Racism

Unlike changes to the admissions system, there are in fact clear pathways towards creating a more welcoming racial environment at BLS. In this section, we rely on the student interviews described above to outline the following concrete changes:

- Increasing the number of Black and Latinx faculty;
- Creating a mentorship program for students from historically marginalized groups;
- Providing supports to students of color at key transition points in their academic trajectory, especially entry to BLS and during the college application process;
- Ensuring conversations on race occur regularly in the classroom, including the implementation of a more diverse, less euro-centric curriculum.

Faculty Diversity

Every interviewee emphasized the importance of having Black and Latinx teachers and faculty at the school. Young people need mentors and safe spaces they can turn to, and this is especially true for young people of color in an overwhelmingly white school. In the 2018-2019 school year, there were two administrators of color at BLS, and there was always, as interviewees recalled, at least one person in their offices seeking support. They were safe havens, spaces where students could freely be themselves and freely talk about anything. When both administrators moved on to other schools, the Black and Latinx communities were distraught. Ms. Delorme Metayer, brought on this past school year, has been a great support, but she is only one person. Black and Latinx students need more mentors available at BLS.

Expanded Student Mentorship

Some students suggested the expansion of mentorship into a program at BLS, and possibly at the other exam schools. Newly arrived students from low-income backgrounds should have specific check-ins with people who will be able to help them adjust to the intensity, competition, and rigor of BLS. This will help smooth the transition, strengthening their self-esteem and paving the way for academic support. Programs like peer mentorship already exist. It seems a natural progression to focus on connecting children who need the support the most, and connecting them with adults who are able to relate to and understand them. We recommend that the school look into implementing a program for low-income members of Class VI and Class IV-B to ease the transition from predominantly Black and Latinx, often less rigorous schools, to a majority white, extremely competitive BLS. Specific faculty who will be able to understand the difficulties and offer safe spaces should be identified and should meet with students, either individually or in small groups, to be a socio-emotional and academic support.

Support with College Transition

In addition to supporting students at the point of their transition into BLS, students also suggested having extra support for low-income and immigrant families through another key transition point: the college application process. One student believes that the junior forum college-prep classes that we do, for example, should be moved to sophomore year instead, so every student has more time to process and prepare. Special and specific outreach should be done to the parents of first generation students, making sure that everyone in the family understands the entirety of the college process. In addition, resources should be translated into native languages and shared with immigrant parents.

We recommend doing exactly that. Students whose families recently immigrated to the United States, whose families speak a language other than English, and/or who are going to be the first in their family to attend college in the US need to be given extra support. Sessions may currently be available, but no special outreach is done to parents - all information is channeled through the students themselves. The school should explicitly run a program for these families, in the various home languages that exist in Boston and in BLS, walking them through what the college process is going to look like and what it means for their child. Guidance already runs a parent college night in the winter of Junior year. The school should consider expanding that night into a multi month program, with sessions about each

step of the college process available as deadlines begin to arise and the students begin to work on their applications.

Schoolwide Racial Justice Conversations and Curricular Diversity

Many interviewees also stressed the importance of regular in-class discussions. The days we dedicate to discussions about race, like our MLK Day celebrations, are wonderful. The class assemblies Ms. Skerritt holds after an explicit incident of racial aggression are necessary and important. Many students in these assemblies, however, do not actually internalize the lessons discussed. A forty-five-minute period, or even a six-hour day, is not enough to make an impression on the internalized racism that we all carry with us. We are submerged in white supremacy culture every day; to even begin to counteract that, our school environment has to be a place where conversations about racism are constant, where voices of color are consistently being lifted up, and where the oppression they've faced and the achievements they've accomplished are staples in our curriculum. One interviewee pointed out that, until his unfortunate passing, many of her peers had never heard of John Lewis. The huge gap in their knowledge about the civil rights movement is evident. Where else are there gaps in our knowledge about Black history and culture? What else do our classes omit and forget? The school should identify these topics and implement an improved curriculum that will address them, giving BLS students a complete and worldly education, not only one based in eurocentrism.

BLS staff responded to some of the student concerns when our project lead spoke with them. The administration had been working on improving school culture for Black and Latinx students since the #BlackAtBLS movement first started and Ms. Skerritt began as Head of School. Their plans have been accelerated and supplemented by the national discussion about systemic racism. We were told that new staff members of color have been hired, though we're unsure how many and what positions they're filling. The entire school community will also be having conversations about race throughout the year, and professional development sessions will be focused on helping teachers facilitate discussions about race in their individual classrooms.

The administration acknowledges that it is sometimes difficult for each individual teacher to fully and accurately talk about these issues in a way that both encompasses the pain and injustice that racism brings and protects students of color in their classes. Because of that, we are moving these conversations out of individual classrooms for the time being, and into schoolwide spaces. The administration plans to work with teachers this year to ensure that each staff member can facilitate sensitive, accurate discussions in their classroom, and is also able to apologize and make repairs if/when an action harms a student. Curriculum changes are not the priority for 2020-2021, given all the changes, discussions, and trainings that will be going on, but will be in the works for the 2021-2022 school year.

Faculty and staff must keep students at the center of any further actions they take. When explicit incidents of racial aggression occur, the students of color who are harmed should be the focus, not the perpetrators. Their mental and emotional health should be discussed with a trained professional, ideally a person of color; they should be consulted when making decisions about the perpetrator's path forward; their chosen support group, be it their peers or their parents, should be informed. Before announcing or finalizing any plans to address racism, administrators should speak with

student representatives to maintain transparency, get their feedback, and ensure that everything is done in their best interest.

Student interviewees acknowledged that the current BLS administration has been working, and continues to work, towards improving the school climate. They only urge that process on and contribute their own thoughts towards furthering it.

Conclusion

Students' reflections on school climate, though focused on particular school-based issues, highlight an overarching problem that is true both of exam school admissions and culture: competition is a barrier to racial equity. By definition, there will be winners and losers, and current systems are tilted to ensure that the most advantaged are most likely to win. In this report, we reviewed demographic data and existing research, and conducted stakeholder interviews in hopes of finding a path toward equity in a time of uncertainty and change.

It is clear that Boston's current leadership will maintain the use of an exam, though perhaps with a moratorium due to the pandemic. Earlier this year, Mayor Walsh endorsed the use of an exam, while perpetuating the inaccuracy that the city's exam schools utilized tests in admissions criteria throughout history⁴: "I'm not going to get rid of the test. It's an exam school. That's what it's always been" (Mitchell & Dearing, 2020). Despite multiple calls for the district to reconsider the use of the exam in admissions, it seems the test will remain. Importantly, even students interviewed for this project felt that the process should include some way to measure student capacity for the academic experience and challenges of Boston's top school. Nonetheless, there is unanimous consensus among the stakeholders we spoke with that the admissions process in its current form needs to change so that the demography of the city's exam schools reflects the demography of the city itself. Even proponents of test-based admissions noted that current levels of racial disproportionality are not acceptable.

However, there is very little consensus across groups on how the district can move forward in a more equitable manner. Of each of the proposed inputs and methods we discussed with interviewees, there were concerns that racial bias would impact the outcome. Ultimately, interview participants each looked for an "objective" way to determine winners in the exam school entry competition, each expressing different opinions about where or how such objectivity might be found. Although the path may be uncertain, it is clear that we should take steps to move beyond our current system. If we hold the status quo because there are no perfect alternatives, we will only guarantee further racial inequity. It may be more productive, instead, to concede the bias of each ostensibly objective measure and instead adjust the playing field so that the competition is fairer to historically underserved students.

Despite the apparent impasse on how to move forward with exam school admissions, BLS students have provided clear actionable steps to improve the conditions for Black and Latinx students in

⁴ As detailed earlier in this report, the city's exam schools began using exams in the admissions process in 1963. Before 1963, admissions criteria included a recommendation from the student's principal and good grades (Jung, 2020a).

their school. The action steps outlined here - such as expanding student mentorship programs and holding regular schoolwide conversations about racial injustice - have real potential to improve experiences for students who attend BLS today. Though the school has begun making progress in some of these areas, like efforts to hire more diverse faculty, there is still much room for progress and improvement. Regardless of the specific actions taken, we believe strongly that the process must include the voices of students, especially the voices of Black and Latinx students who are most harmed under the current system.

Racial discrimination is alive and well at Boston's top school, both in the process for admission and in the experiences of Black and Latinx students. For the first time in decades, we have an opportunity to create change. At the time of this writing, BPS is convening a group of stakeholders to recommend changes to exam school admissions and the district's exam school admissions has come under scrutiny after an internal investigation revealed that nearly 70 students over the last two years had been denied entry to exam schools due to [a converting error](#) in the district's review process (Martin, 2020). Meanwhile, in Boston and across the country, people of all races are protesting systemic racism, and the nation is reeling from a pandemic that has exposed deep-seated systemic inequity. It may be many years, if ever, that we again have the same level of attention to this issue and the same groundswell for change. For the students at BLS and for racial justice in Boston schools writ large, we cannot let this moment pass.

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Appendix A: Methodology

We relied on the following primary data sources for this project: publicly available data, such as Boston Public School enrollment information and socio-economic data on Boston neighborhoods; existing literature on specialized high school admissions and culture; interviews with stakeholders in the BLS community and experts in race-conscious K-12 school admission.

In order to run data simulations for the neighborhood-based socio-economic tier proposal, the lead author accessed public data collected by the American Community Survey in 2018 from the Census Bureau website. We pulled data points for [mean family income](#), [percentage of owner-occupied homes](#), [percentage of single-parent homes](#), [percentage of households that speak a language other than English](#), and [educational attainment](#) for each occupied census tract in Boston. For each of these categories, we then ranked the census tracts from highest to lowest value or lowest to highest value, depending on the category, and calculated the percentiles for each. We calculated a total percentile for each tract by averaging the five category percentiles, and formed the tiers based on the [number of 5th-8th grade children](#) in each tract. Using [data about the racial makeup](#) of each tract, we were able to calculate BLS's projected demographics if the students admitted from each socio-economic tier were perfectly representative of their tracts. We acknowledged, however, that it was unlikely that, when factoring in various admission inputs, like a test or GPA, the students admitted would be perfectly representative. Without MCAS, MAP, or ISEE data disaggregated by home address, we were unable to accurately project BLS's demographics under the neighborhood socio-economic tier system.

In an effort to supplement our research with MCAS scores, the lead author also calculated school-based tiers. Using the opportunity index, which BPS has already calculated for the 2020-2021 school year and is [publicly available](#) on their website, I ranked each school with a 5th grade class by least advantaged to most advantaged. I then created four tiers based on the [number of 5th graders](#) in each school. Using [publicly available 5th grade MCAS data](#) disaggregated by race for each school, we projected the racial demographics of BLS under the school socio-economic tier system. This data is, however, likely not reliable either. Schools only report average MCAS scores per race if there are at least 10 students in a group, and many schools had white and Asian students, but fewer than 10. The consistent lack of data skewed our simulation and left results ultimately inconclusive.

To understand the various proposals policy makers have put forward to change Boston's system, and to understand other cities' approaches to selective high school admissions, we analyzed existing literature and proposals on methods and inputs used in exam school admissions. In reviewing the literature and proposals, we were particularly interested in work that addressed the issues of disparate acceptance rates for Black and Latinx students. From the works we reviewed, the lead author developed a list of methods and inputs that are frequently used in exam school admissions that seek to increase diversity while staying within the narrow bounds of law. There were two common methods that seem to address issues of disparity in admissions. Each of these methods rest on the premise that students from historically marginalized groups will have a greater chance of admittance to an exam school if they only compete against students within a similar socio-economic tier or students who attend the same elementary or middle school. Common data sources used in the consideration of applicants included

quantitative inputs like test scores and grade point averages (GPA) as well as qualitative inputs letters of recommendation or personal essays, referred to as holistic factors in this paper.

After finalizing the list of methods and inputs, the project lead developed [an interview protocol](#) to understand what BLS stakeholders think about the potential methods and inputs, customizing the protocol according to the position and expertise of each interview participant. We then compiled a list of BLS stakeholders, which included current BLS students, BLS faculty and administrators, BLS alumni, and Boston-based social advocacy groups. To listen to and amplify Black and Latinx voices further, we also conducted individual interviews with various members of the BLS community. All interviews were facilitated by the report lead, a rising senior at BLS, with support provided by report coauthors. We asked students about their personal experiences with the admissions process and with racism in the school, consulted administrators to fully understand their role in this system, spoke with a representative of the Boston Latin School Association (a major BLS partner and benefactor), and interviewed parents. Ultimately, we conducted 33 interviews for this project, as depicted in the table below. Each interview lasted roughly 30-60 minutes and each was recorded with participant permission to aid in the analysis of themes and policy recommendations.