

Newton Public Schools – Newton, Massachusetts
STUDENT ASSIGNMENT REVIEW PROCESS 2014-15

Frequently Asked Questions

Why is it necessary to review student assignment policies for Newton Elementary Schools?

This is an exciting time of elementary school facilities renovation and expansion in the Newton Public Schools. Because new schools will have expanded capacity to address enrollment growth, and we currently have elementary schools that are overcrowded, we have a Student Assignment Working Group that is examining elementary school student assignment policy and elementary school boundary lines. We appreciate that this causes concern and we plan to provide as much clarity as possible while also ensuring that a comprehensive process is used to find the best solutions to a complex problem. The goal of this process is not to disrupt communities but to utilize valuable resources well and have the right size classrooms and schools for all children across Newton.

What is the Student Assignment Working Group?

The Student Assignment Working Group (SAWG) is a school department committee tasked with reviewing student assignment policy and potential areas of school boundary changes. Members include Newton Public Schools Central Staff, two School Committee members and elementary school principals. Staff analysts, NPS Transportation Manager and a consultant specializing in geospatial analysis are also supporting the work of this group. There is collaboration with other City of Newton departments and public groups including Public Buildings, Public Safety, Safe Routes to School, PTO Council and other school leaders. As the process advances from the scenario development and testing phase to the proposal stage, collaboration with all key stakeholders including parents, community members, transit and public safety experts and other City and School leaders will continue to be critical.

Will currently enrolled children have to change schools?

No. The Newton School Committee, Superintendent and district administration are committed to minimizing disruption for students and families. Therefore, student assignment policy changes will only impact incoming students in kindergarten through grade 5. The policy changes will not impact students who are already enrolled in Newton Public Schools.

Will incoming students with siblings already enrolled be impacted?

Student assignment policy changes will not impact siblings of enrolled elementary students. We do not expect families to have children enrolled at more than one elementary school. Incoming elementary students with siblings in middle school or high school may be reassigned.

How are areas of potential boundary changes identified?

Newton Public Schools has established a working group and is working with a Geographic Information Systems consulting company to use mapping technology to build and test feasible boundary change scenarios based on today's student population. Such boundary change scenarios are then integrated with Newton Public School enrollment projections to test whether a boundary change scenario can be sustainable in the future. Areas within Newton that are being considered for boundary changes are near new schools or crowded schools and close to one mile transit distance to Angier, Zervas or Cabot as defined by walking, biking, busing or driving distances provided by Newton GIS. Current enrollment data, enrollment projections and GIS data are being used to study potential boundary changes. Information from Newton Public Safety and Safe Routes to School will be fully explored when potential scenarios are narrowed down to preferred options. The working group is exploring all possible scenarios to relieve overcrowding at schools by utilizing the new capacity coming soon at Angier, Zervas and Cabot. There is

a strong commitment to finding a solution that alleviates crowding in an equitable and efficient way and disrupts the least number of families and neighborhoods.

How is it determined whether a school is crowded?

The SAWG has developed a simplified capacity measure in order to understand the extent to which each school building is fully enrolled. Newton Public Schools is using a classroom utilization method for calculating this capacity measure for each school. The calculation is done by dividing the number of current students by the total the number of classrooms multiplied by average class size, and adjusting for a school's additional classrooms needed for student services, art and music. The schools with larger class sizes or without music, art or adequate student services space have been shown by this measure to have enrollment in excess of 100% of capacity. Use of this measure allows for an objective comparison among schools. Because the actual picture of building utilization is more complex, other factors such as square footage, availability of other educational spaces within buildings (cafeteria, library, auditorium), and use/age of modular classrooms are also considered.

How can the public be involved in the process?

The public is able to be involved in and stay informed about the planning process through the website, attendance at School Committee meetings, public forum participation, and public comment at school committee meetings as well as letters/calls/meetings to and with School Committee members.

What is the difference between a scenario and a proposal?

Scenarios are different approaches that represent the possibilities that exist for easing crowding and utilizing additional capacity at the new Angier, Zervas and Cabot Schools. A proposal will be a fully researched and evaluated recommendation for policy change that achieves the best results with the fewest drawbacks. It is planned for a proposal to be considered by the School Committee in late June or in July, 2015.

How will decisions be made regarding student assignment policy changes?

Evaluation criteria were developed at the beginning of the process in order to ensure that objective, fair and clear criteria are used in a transparent decision-making process. These criteria will be used to evaluate which scenarios are most viable and could become preferred options. There may be a weighting of criteria should that be necessary or productive to determine which options are preferred, but the need for weighting has not yet been determined.

When will student assignment decisions be made?

It is anticipated that a preferred option or proposal could be recommended before the beginning of the next school year. This timing will best support transition to new student assignment policies, with adequate time for communication to all stakeholders during implementation.

Why can't each student simply attend the school closest to them?

Newton's school facilities are not equally distributed across the City. The City's population density varies considerably; some residents have to travel farther to school and some residents live in areas that cannot be served by a single school. Also, some schools are very close to each other, so while a student might be closer to one school, a second school may also be very close. It is not uncommon in the denser areas of the City for a student to be within one mile of more than one school. Sometimes natural or constructed barriers like highways, cemeteries, parks etc. may block the most direct route to a school. At the middle school level, Day is both centrally located and in a dense area of the City and has been enlarged to be a bigger school needed to serve rising enrollments; Brown and Oak Hill are adjacent to each other. Balancing feeder patterns to middle schools becomes more complex because of school locations and sizes. At the high school level, Newton North is closer for 68% of students yet each high school is designed to serve half of the high school population.

Why do school district boundaries have to change?

Fluctuations in enrollment can be accommodated without changing district lines when schools have excess capacity, or if additional spaces or modular classrooms can be added to buildings. But in Newton many elementary schools have been near or above full capacity for a number of years and short-term space changes like modular and internal renovations have been implemented to the extent possible. Since 2004, as the district has endeavored to meet space challenges, sometimes class sizes have had to increase. In other cases, building spaces had to be taken over for regular education at the expense of other instructional uses including art, music, student services, special education, or library. Moving school district boundaries can help maintain smaller class sizes and preserve other necessary instructional and community spaces. Current elementary school districts can be seen at:

<http://www.newtonma.gov/civicax/filebank/documents/38731>

Is there a long range facilities plan for Newton Public Schools?

Yes. In the face of steady enrollment growth since 2004, the School Committee commissioned a Long Range Facilities Plan in 2007 that focused on repair and facility upgrade needs of all elementary schools. This study was updated and reaffirmed by the School Committee in 2011. This detailed facilities study is the basis of current long range plans for Newton Public Schools elementary buildings to repair, upgrade and enlarge capacity at many schools, increasing elementary capacity to serve 6,000 students in modern facilities suitable for 21st century learning. The three school building projects underway, Angier, Zervas, and Cabot, were all anticipated in the 2007 plan as replacements or renovation/expansions.

What is the impact of the agreement by the City to purchase Aquinas?

The current elementary long range plan extends twenty years and is currently being reviewed for any impact following the agreement to purchase Aquinas to be the site for a new Lincoln-Eliot School and a unified integrated preschool program.

How does enrollment factor into the Long Range Plan?

Enrollment in Newton's fifteen elementary school districts has been documented extensively and there are historical trends in enrollment growth and change. Some of these changes are predictable such as when a new housing complex opens, but others are less predictable, such as when other demographic changes occur. However, Newton has strong enrollment projection data derived from accepted methodologies including cohort survival ratios, birth data, housing data and more. Newton student projections are updated every year and capital projects are reviewed in conjunction with City Planning, Public Buildings and Executive departments to make sure that capital planning continues to support student enrollment projections. To review this information in detail, see the November 2014 Enrollment Analysis Report found at:

http://www.newton.k12.ma.us/cms/lib8/MA01907692/Centricity/Domain/1099/Enrollment_Analysis_Report.pdf

What is a buffer zone?

A buffer zone is an area between two elementary schools, located in a border area of many districts. Families living within a buffer zone can request either school for their newly registered student but the final assignment decision is made by the district and is dependent upon available space. Historically most requests are granted and students with older siblings already attending a particular school will attend the sibling's school. Use of buffer zones as a tool to manage enrollment to achieve equitable class sizes at schools has been critical in times of rising enrollment and capacity issues at schools. In 2014-15, 15% of Newton Public School elementary students live in buffer zones. Buffer zones can be seen at:

<http://www.newtonma.gov/civicax/filebank/documents/38731>

For More Information on the Student Assignment Review Process:

www.newton.k12.ma.us/districtinitiatives