



# An Uneven Path

Student Achievement in Boston Public Schools, 2007-2017

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# About the Authors

**Bellwether Education Partners** is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice.



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# Where has Boston Public Schools been in the past decade, and where should it go next?

Boston Public Schools (BPS) is searching for its fifth superintendent in ten years.

This **time of transition** is an optimal point to take stock and reflect.

## Key Questions in Our Research

1. How has BPS progressed in the past decade, across a variety of outcomes?
2. How does BPS' progress and performance compare with other urban districts?
3. What policies or practices may have contributed to BPS' performance?
4. What can local leaders and stakeholders take away from these results?

# By bringing together multiple data sources and viewpoints, a clearer picture of BPS' strengths and challenges emerged

## Data

**National:** National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Stanford Educational Data Archive (SEDA)

**Local and state:** MCAS, enrollment trends, college readiness metrics, pre-K access, and graduation rates

## Research

BPS' **strategic plan** and other public reports

Recent **prior research** on BPS' outcomes and policies

## Interviews

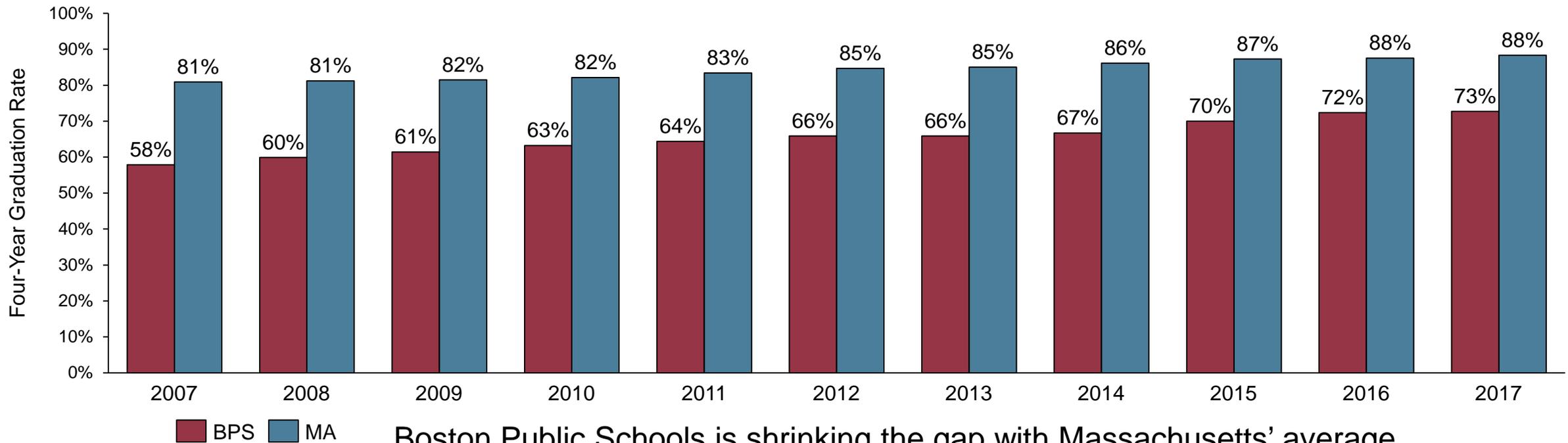
**Stakeholder interviews** with BPS central office staff, principals, educators, community advocates, teacher advocates, funders, and others

**These various data sources allow for a fuller picture of Boston Public Schools' recent progress, challenges, and context.**

# BPS has increased access to educational opportunities in meaningful ways

**BPS has seen growth in important metrics, including graduation rates, AP enrollment, SAT performance, and pre-K access.**

**Boston Public Schools and Massachusetts average graduation rates**  
2007-2017



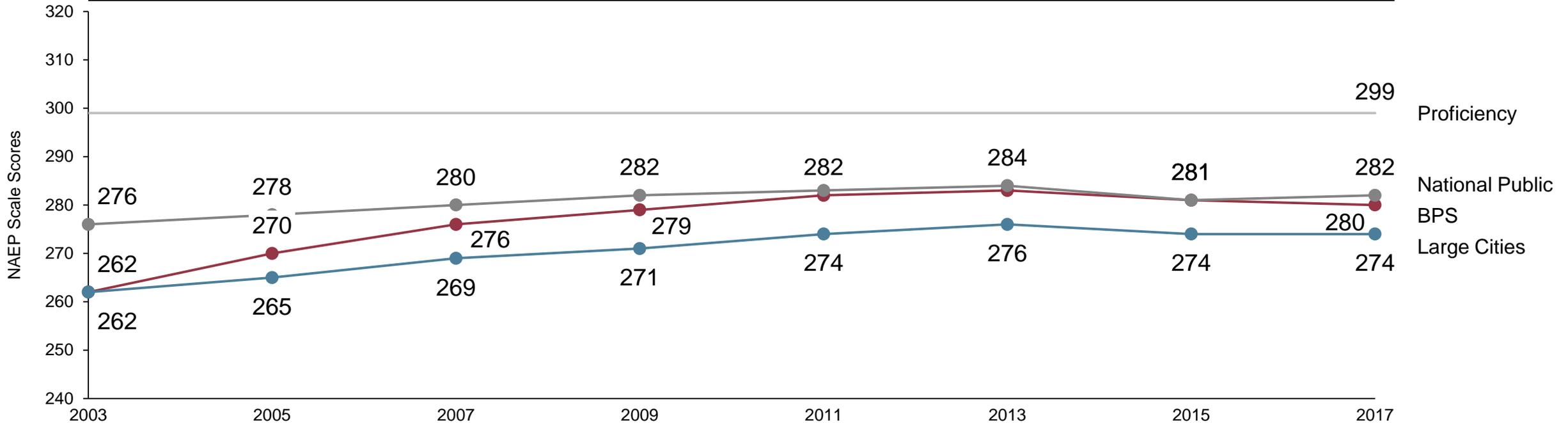
Boston Public Schools is shrinking the gap with Massachusetts' average

And compared to other cities, Boston's performance is generally stronger

**BPS' test scores, graduation rates, and other performance metrics are generally higher on average than other large, urban districts**

**NAEP average scale scores, Boston vs. large cities**

*Eighth grade math, 2003-2017*

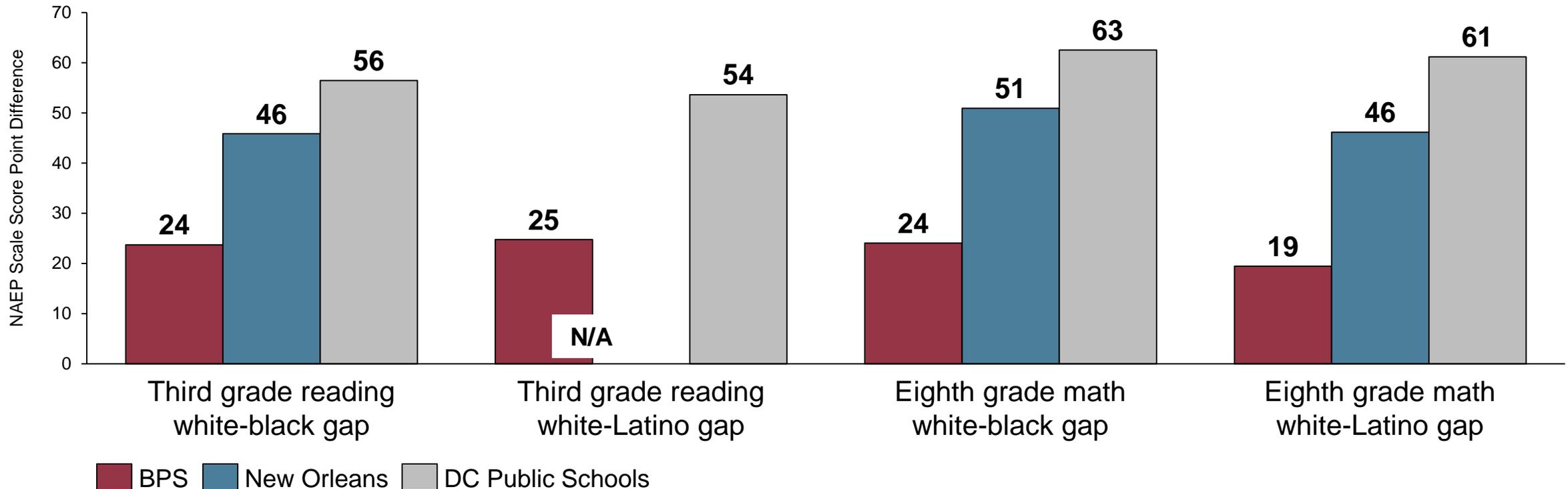


BPS generally does better on NAEP than the average large city, but worse than the national average

# Boston's racial-ethnic achievement gaps are smaller than those in other similar-sized urban districts

**Boston has comparatively smaller achievement gaps, and its annual growth is in the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile of districts nationwide**

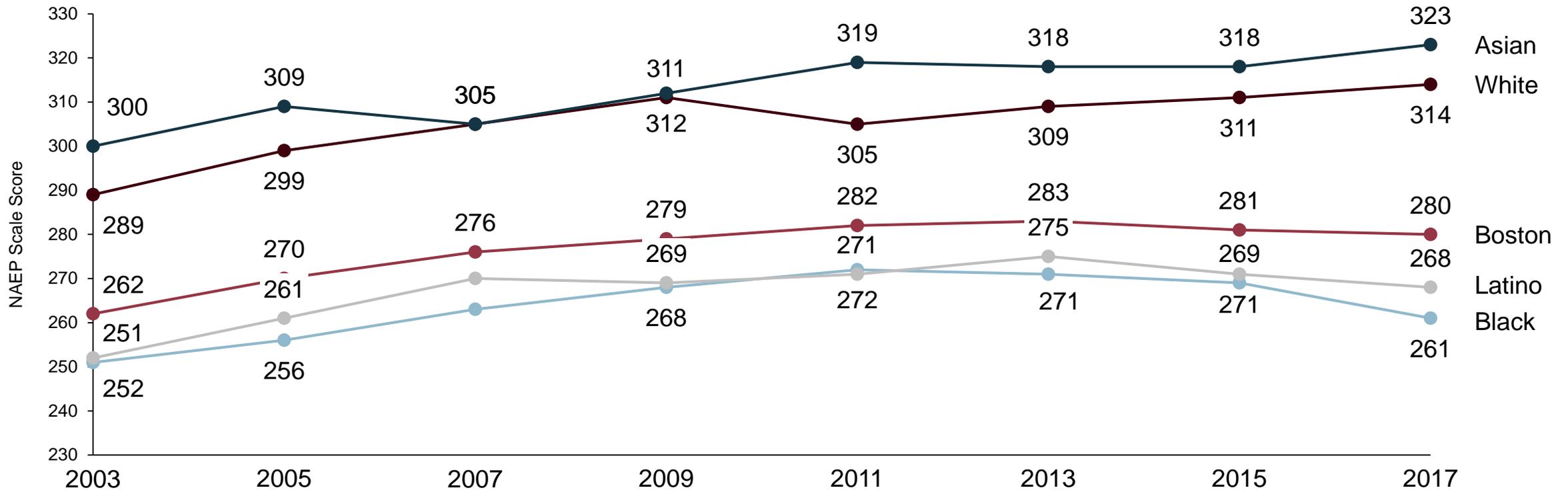
**Selected urban district score gaps based on state test results**  
*2009-2015 transformed to NAEP scale*



# But these relative strengths do not serve all students equally, especially black and Latino students

**Regardless of relative strength, according to some metrics achievement gaps have grown in Boston**

**NAEP scale scores by race/ethnicity**  
*Eighth grade math, 2003-2017*



Since 2013, math scores for black and Latino eighth grade students have declined, while scores for white and Asian students have increased.

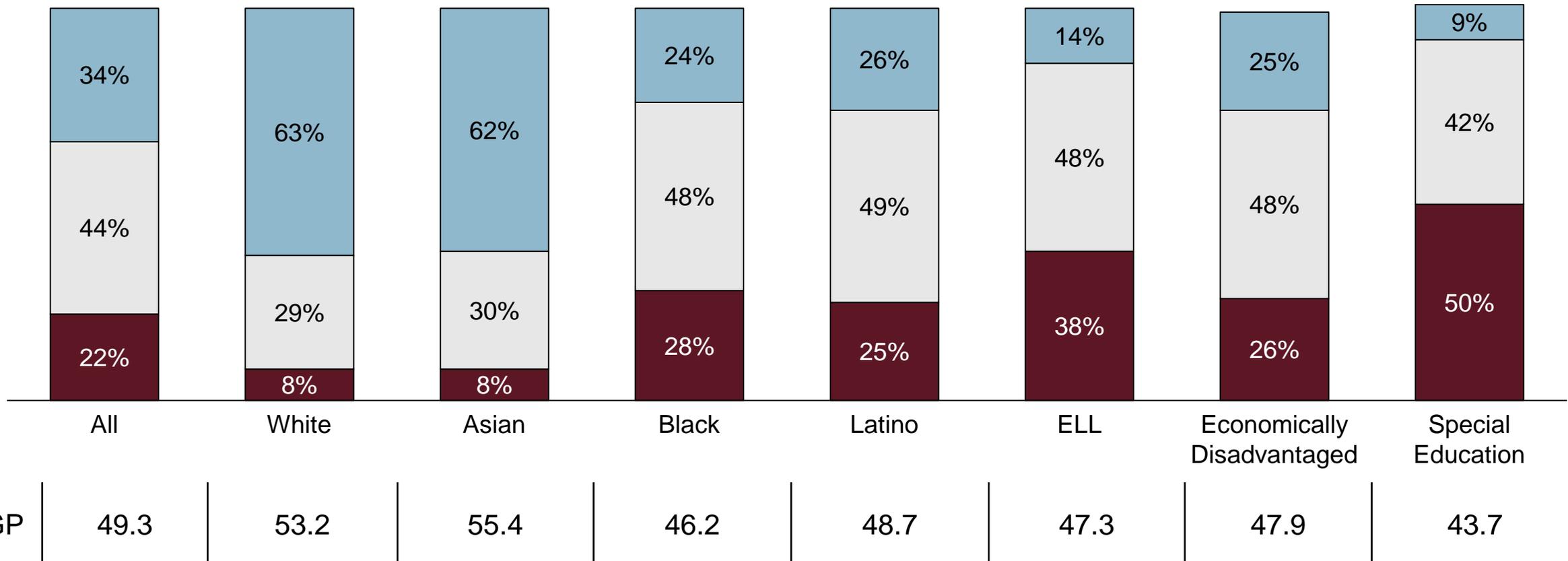
# MCAS scores show wide gaps across groups, and suggest lower scoring groups are not on a trajectory to catch up

**The student groups most in need of rapid improvement have the lowest average student growth percentiles (SGP)**

## BPS MCAS performance

Grades 3-8, ELA, 2018

■ Meets or exceeds expectations
 ■ Partially meets expectations
 ■ Did not meet expectations



# These trends in student outcomes take place against a challenging backdrop

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## **Enrollment**

BPS enrollment has fallen by ~3,700 since 2007

## **Facilities**

Many BPS facilities are aging and in need of significant repair or modernization

## **Segregation**

Racial/ethnic and economic segregation among BPS schools is getting worse instead of better

## **Community**

Interviewees perceive low community trust in BPS, and a sense that the district lacks a clear strategy, vision, and set of priorities

# Some reforms and improvements were particular bright spots in interviews, even if there is more to be done

## Human capital

Teacher hiring processes look radically different today

- Accelerated timelines
- Mutual consent
- Reduced weight of seniority

## Pre-K

Pre-K access and quality are progressing

- Nationally recognized for attention to instructional quality and curricula
- Attention to access in underserved neighborhoods

## Partnerships

External partnerships/collaborations have opened doors

- BPS Arts Expansion
- Lynch Leadership Academy principal trainings
- Success Boston

## But other high-profile controversies or dropped initiatives have created skepticism around improvement

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- Effort to shift **school start times** in response to transportation costs and research on student sleep was dropped after significant public pushback
- Movement towards a **unified enrollment system** is on hold
- BPS' stance towards **school autonomy vs. district-led change** has seemed inconsistent and unclear over the past decade
- Interviewees worried that initiatives they supported would be **shelved** after leadership transitions

## BPS' challenges are not entirely unique, but they are urgent

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- Boston's primary challenge is not the average performance of its schools, but the **inequitable opportunities and outcomes** across them
- Whereas some peer cities have pursued bold reform visions, change in Boston has been more **incremental**
- Stakeholders had difficulty articulating where **Boston's future progress** will come from
- The status quo will not **support a strong future** for the city of Boston and its citizens — the student groups struggling the most make up the majority of BPS students

# Recommendations for BPS' next leader and the Boston community

## Articulate a clear theory of action and drive implementation

- On issues like school autonomy, curriculum, and instructional strategies, BPS has tried to do everything at once, creating confusion

## Make tough choices to advance equity

- Equity does not mean everyone gets the same thing – and reallocating resources and attention to the students and schools who most need them is unlikely to be politically popular

## Double down on areas of strength

- Bright spots like early childhood education, human capital reforms, and strong partnerships give BPS a foundation upon which to build