

Holyoke Level 5 District Turnaround Plan Executive Summary



Executive Summary

In April 2015, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted to designate the Holyoke Public Schools chronically underperforming (Level 5), placing the district in state receivership. In July 2015, by appointment of Commissioner Mitchell Chester, Stephen Zrike became the Receiver of the Holyoke Public Schools. The receivership provides the opportunity for a significant, sustained district turnaround in Holyoke.

At the core of this plan is the firm belief that *all* Holyoke students deserve a world-class education. For too long, many Holyoke students have not received a high-quality education or were allowed to fail. With this plan, we will raise the bar, improve the instruction and services we offer, and provide students with the skills and tools they need to be successful in school now, and later in college and their careers.

Central to the turnaround plan are the educators¹ who are charged with transforming the district from one of low performance to one in which student achievement is consistently strong. Job one is ensuring that we employ an effective teacher in every classroom and that effective administrators lead our schools. To accomplish this, the district will implement strategies to retain high-performing staff and to recruit new talent to Holyoke, to ensure that all students receive strong instruction, interventions, and supports in every classroom, every day.

Throughout the plan, we focus on the following critical action steps to implement Holyoke's turnaround:

- Build on what is working and fix what is not working
- Empower staff to make decisions while holding them accountable for results
- Extend time to increase learning opportunities, for both students and staff
- Provide students with individualized college and/or career plans and multiple pathways to reach their full potential
- Invest partners' knowledge and skills strategically
- Engage families as active partners, repairing relationships and building trust in the district

¹ In this turnaround plan, the term "educator" means teachers, administrators, and other professional staff.

The Holyoke Public Schools will be a system of great schools that prepares its students for college and careers by challenging them to think critically and by providing safe, nurturing, culturally relevant environments in which they can learn and grow. The district's efforts will include a special emphasis on reengaging disconnected or at-risk youth, to bring them back into the system and provide them with academic and other necessary supports. The district will invest all its human, financial, and other resources in strategies that support students' learning, reallocating resources where appropriate from the central office to schools, in direct support of students. Guided by a central office designed to effectively support schools at all grade levels, the district's educators will participate in making school-level decisions that are tailored to their students. The Holyoke Public Schools will be a service-oriented district, truly welcoming and engaging families as active participants in students' education, and focused on building families' trust in the school system.

To achieve rapid improvement of academic achievement for all Holyoke's students, the district will implement strategies in five Priority Areas. These Priority Areas are aligned with the recommendations of the Holyoke Level 5 district Local Stakeholder Group (LSG) that were submitted to Commissioner Chester and Receiver Zrike on July 10, 2015, and are based on *Turnaround Practices in Action: A Practice Guide and Policy Analysis*.² The guide presents key turnaround practices to be considered by state leaders, districts, schools, and policymakers striving to improve and sustain ongoing and future turnaround efforts.

The Holyoke Level 5 district turnaround plan Priority Areas include:

- Priority Area 1: Provide high-quality instruction and student-specific supports for all students, including students with disabilities and English language learners.
- Priority Area 2: Establish focused practices for improving instruction.
- Priority Area 3: Create a climate and culture that support students and engage families.
- Priority Area 4: Develop leadership, shared responsibility, and professional collaboration.
- Priority Area 5: Organize the district for successful turnaround.

Holyoke's turnaround will include concentrated efforts to improve its lowest performing schools: William J. Dean Vocational Technical High School (Level 4); Morgan Full Service Community School (Level 5); and schools at risk of falling into Level 4 status.

² Lane, B., Unger, C., and Souvanna, P. (2014). *Turnaround Practices in Action: A Practice Guide and Policy Analysis*. Baltimore, MD: Institute for Strategic Leadership and Learning. See [Turnaround Practices in Action: A Practice Guide and Policy Analysis](#). This document is based on a detailed analysis of the experience of the initial 34 underperforming (Level 4) schools during the first 3 years of turnaround (2010–2011 to 2012–2013).

The Receiver and the Commissioner will monitor these Priority Areas closely, to ensure that strategies are being implemented effectively and are yielding the desired results. Changes will be made as needed to ensure that these strategies are having the desired impact on students' learning. Holyoke will invest its resources in strategies and tools that maximize student achievement; where strategies and tools do not demonstrate an impact on student learning, funds will be reallocated.

As a high-need and low-income community, Holyoke must ensure that its use of resources results in increased student learning. Staffing costs account for the bulk of expenditures in the school district's budget. We must ensure that those expenditures are made in the most effective manner to increase student learning; therefore, principals will have the authority to ensure that the most effective staff are selected and retained. In turn, professional learning and staff support are essential investments in staff. In every budget, the district will curtail expenditures that do not directly support the priorities identified in the turnaround plan, and reallocate funds and staff positions for more productive uses.

For the last several years, district administrators have had to cut personnel and non-personnel lines to balance the budget, and look to reorganization and reallocation to make funds available for key improvement initiatives. Some funding constraints of fiscal year 2017 are already known, so the challenge of fully implementing turnaround initiatives is to continue with reorganization and reallocation that prioritizes adequate funding for instruction.

The Commissioner and the Receiver will take all appropriate steps necessary to support the goals of the turnaround plan. Ensuring that great schools are available for all of our students will not happen overnight. Decades of decline have led to Holyoke's chronic underperformance. The strategies in the following pages will require considerable planning, discussion, and community participation in order for them to be effective. The plan includes information about how we will measure our progress along the way. The district will exit from receivership once gains are sufficient and positive change has been institutionalized to ensure continued growth and sustainable results.