



Gateways to Achievement: a State Education Agency-Led Strategy to Catalyze Innovative School and District Turnaround Efforts

Citation

Rodriguez, Ventura. 2015. Gateways to Achievement: a State Education Agency-Led Strategy to Catalyze Innovative School and District Turnaround Efforts. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:16645030>

Terms of use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material (LAA), as set forth at

<https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFIOWI2M2EwYTg>

Accessibility

<https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#)

Gateways to Achievement:
A State Education Agency-Led Strategy to Catalyze Innovative School and
District Turnaround Efforts

Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D)
Capstone

Submitted by

Ventura Rodriguez Jr.

To the Harvard Graduate School of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education Leadership

May 2015

Para mis abuelos, Virginia y Arcelio Lopez, por plantar en mi los genes de la docencia.

Para mis padres, Ventura y Virgina Rodriguez. Todos mis logros son también suyos.

Para Emily, mi compañera y el gran amor de mi vida. Sé que soy un hombre muy dichoso.

Para Isaac, Sabina, y Nia. Uds. son mi razón por ser.

For my grandparents, Virginia and Arcelio Lopez, for planting in me the genes of teaching.

For my parents, Ventura and Virgina Rodriguez. All of my accomplishments are also yours.

For Emily, my partner and the love of my life. I know that I am a lucky man.

For Isaac, Sabina, and Nia. You all are my reason for being.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank Patti and Harvey Gould, my in-laws, for the tremendous support they have provided me, Emily, Isaac, Sabina, and Nia during these past three years. I could not have completed this program without your support.

What an incredible, life-changing three years! To think that this incredible Ed.L.D. journey began with a voice message from Mark Moore informing me that I had been accepted into the program. Who knew that, three years later, I would use his strategic triangle almost daily to make sense of the world.

I owe a tremendous amount of gratitude to the many, many professors, administrators and colleagues associated with the Ed.L.D. family. To Julie, Amanda, Austin, Kristin, Scott, and Korrey, thank you for all that you do! To my many incredible professors, thank you all for your invaluable lessons, and for putting your full selves into our courses. I learned as much from observing your leadership as I did from the content. To Lisa and Adria, thank you for helping me learn much more about myself.

I was lucky to have an incredible Capstone Committee! Elizabeth City has been an invaluable advisor, mentor, teacher, and friend throughout this wonderful Ed.L.D. journey. Thank you, Liz, for your unwavering support and wise counsel. Paul Reville has been an invaluable thought partner, connector, teacher, and friend. Massachusetts owes you a debt of gratitude for your efforts to improve public education. Cliff Chuang was a constant source of support as I navigated my residency. Cliff, I have learned a tremendous amount from you and count you as a friend. Thank you for the many strategy sessions as I worked to execute my strategic project.

I am indebted to the many folks at DESE who supported me during my residency. Deputy Commissioner Alan Ingram, Senior Associate Commissioner Russell Johnston and Commissioner Mitchell Chester have been tremendous role models and mentors. Thank you to the entire ODS team for welcoming me into your ranks.

The Empower Schools team is doing incredibly important work throughout Massachusetts, and I was lucky to partner with them for the SEZP. Brett, Matt, Chelsea, Sarah, Kate, and Allison, I am forever an ally. Chris, I can't thank you enough for the many valuable lessons you provided me this year.

One of the most valuable parts of the Ed.L.D. program was being a member of cohort 3! Everyday I work to step my game up because I know I am representing all of you. What a blessing it is to have such a strong, committed group of colleagues and friends.

My three years at Harvard would not have been possible without the generosity of Carrie and John Morgridge. Thank you for believing in the Ed.L.D. program and for believing in me.

To my parents, Ventura and Virginia, and my sisters, Ellie and Gina, thank you for your unconditional love and support. I love you all!

Last but not least, to my beautiful wife, Emily. Your unconditional love and support have allowed me to pursue my dreams. Thank you! Despite my pending doctorate from Harvard, I am humble enough to recognize that I am only the second best educator in our household. I love you!

Table of Contents

I. Abstract.....	5
II. Introduction.....	6
III. Review of Knowledge for Action.....	17
IV. Description of Strategic Project.....	35
V. Strategic Project Results.....	45
VI. Strategic Project Analysis.....	51
VII. Implications for Self.....	69
VIII. Implications for Site.....	76
IX. Implications for Sector.....	83
X. Conclusion.....	87
XI. Bibliography.....	92
XII. Appendices.....	96
APPENDIX A: Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership Letter of Intent.....	96
APPENDIX B: Memorandum of Understanding Among The Springfield School Committee, The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, INC., and The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.....	97
ADDENDUM C: Agreement Between The Springfield Education Association and The Springfield School Committee for the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership Schools. July 1, 2015 – June 30, 2018.....	120
ADDENDUM D: Various Newspaper Articles About the SEZP.....	121

I. Abstract

Over the past 20 years, State Education Agencies have expanded their traditional role, focused on distributing federal funds and compliance monitoring, to become responsible for developing state-level standards, measuring student progress and, in some cases, intervening directly in low performing schools. In Massachusetts, the state's lowest performing schools are placed into Level 5 receivership, and the state's education Commissioner selects school operators to run the schools on the state's behalf. However, the availability of school operators is insufficient to meet the state's needs and expanding current efforts is not financially sustainable. The Gateways to Achievement (GtA) Initiative attempts to catalyze school improvement efforts by: 1) increasing the supply of school operators able to successfully operate low performing schools, and 2) using the state's authority of Level 5 receivership to incentivize districts to develop aggressive, voluntary school turnaround strategies. The goal is that the districts' aggressive turnaround strategies, which include partnerships with school operators, will improve struggling schools such that Level 5 receivership is not required. The GtA Initiative was developed by Massachusetts education reformer Chris Gabrieli and Commissioner Mitchell Chester. My strategic project focused on building awareness and support within the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) for the GtA initiative, and aligning it to the most important problems the agency was trying to solve. The GtA Initiative's first manifestation was The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP), an innovative partnership between Springfield Public Schools and DESE that utilizes many of the Level 5 authorities, but allows the target schools to remain under the control of local education officials. In a time of declining federal and state funds, the SEZP provides an example of how DESE may approach school turnaround efforts moving forward. However, DESE will first need to decide how the initiative, and indeed the naming of Level 5 receivers, fits within the state's current theory of action guiding school and district turnaround efforts. Additionally, the agency will need to determine if it wants to bring the necessary capacity to identify and execute these types of innovative partnerships in-house, or continue to partner with outside groups.

II. Introduction

Traditionally, the role of State Education Agencies (SEA) has been to distribute and monitor the use of federal funds and to ensure school and district compliance with federal and state education policies (Brown, Hess, Lautzenheiser, Owen, 2011).

However, over the past twenty years, SEAs have become charged with directly ensuring the quality of schools in their state, often times through direct involvement in their operation.

In Massachusetts, the 2010 law, *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*, gave the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) significant authority to act, including “the power to intervene in turnaround schools and districts, to open new high performing charter schools in the lowest performing districts, and to innovate through in-district charter schools” (Pauley, Martin, Pg. 4). The legislation created a five-scale accountability system to classify schools and districts, with the highest performing in Level 1 and lowest performing in Level 5. Schools are classified into Level 3 if they are among the lowest 20 percent relative to other schools in their grade span statewide, or “if any one of its subgroups scores among the lowest performing subgroups in the state” (*An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*, 603:CMR 2.04). The lowest achieving, least improving Level 3 schools are candidates for classification into Levels 4 and 5, the most serious designations in Massachusetts’ accountability system. In the most persistent and troubling cases, the state can take over schools or even whole districts and place them under Level 5 Receivership, exercising near total autonomy from both local governance and collective bargaining agreements. To date, DESE has placed

one district and four individual schools in Level 5 receivership. Figure 1 illustrates Massachusetts' school and district classification system.

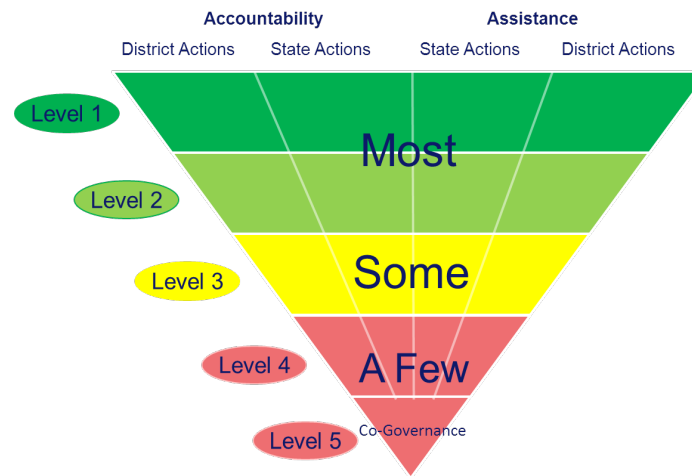


Figure 1: MA School and District Accountability System (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE], 2012)

State receivership is an important lever for increasing the number of high-quality schools and districts in Massachusetts. However, receivership alone cannot meet the scale of the challenge. Like in many states, DESE's capacity to operate schools under receivership is severely limited. One of the primary challenges is that the number of schools requiring some form of turnaround effort far exceeds the state's capacity to intervene. There are currently 293 Level 3 schools and 35 Level 4 schools. Even if only a fraction of these schools, say 5%, required Level 5 receivership, DESE would be hard pressed to find the staff necessary to manage receivership for almost 20 schools. To date, DESE has only placed four schools under Level 5 receivership.

Another challenge to DESE's school and district turnaround efforts broadly, and to receivership specifically, is the diminishing amount of funding available to support the work. For example, as figure 2 shows, over the past two years, DESE's total budget to support school and district turnaround efforts has decreased by approximately 25%, from

a high of roughly \$42 million dollars in 2013 to \$31 million dollars in 2015. Not surprisingly, the majority of the decreases are happening with federal funding, as programs like Race to The Top, which provided short-term investments to support DESE's turnaround efforts, are ending.

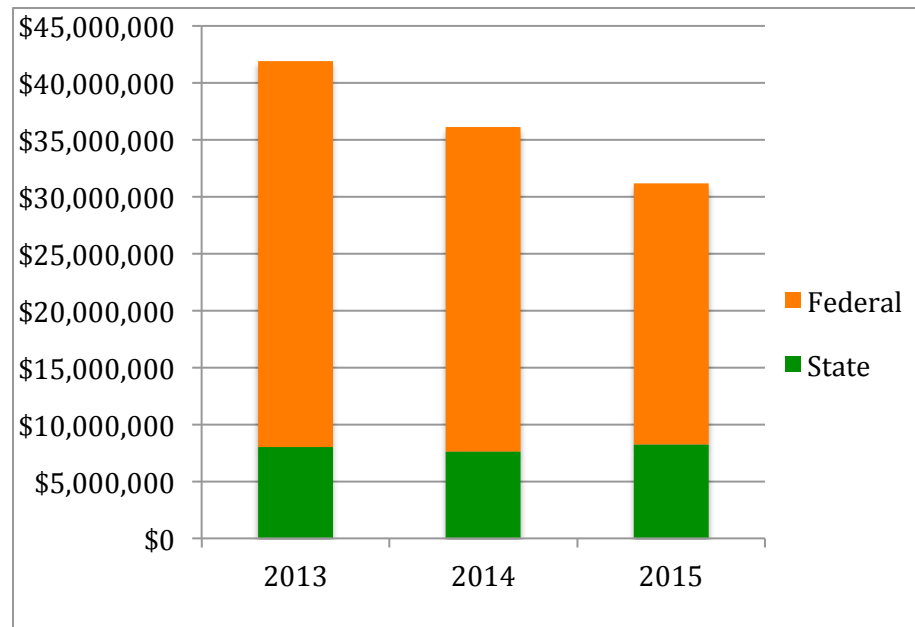


Figure 2: Massachusetts State and Federal Funding for Assistance and Turnaround Efforts for Schools and Districts

Another source of federal funds that is critical to DESE's school and district turnaround efforts, and yet is steadily decreasing, are the School Improvement Grants (SIG). These funds are provided to schools that are newly designated as Level 4 and help fund practices to dramatically increase student performance within three years. In Massachusetts, the average SIG award given to schools has been \$2.3 million dollars spread out over a three-year period. During the past five years, federal SIG funds available to Massachusetts have decreased by nearly 75% from approximately \$27

million in 2011 to \$7 million in 2015. Figure 3 below shows the decline of SIG funds in Massachusetts over the past five years.

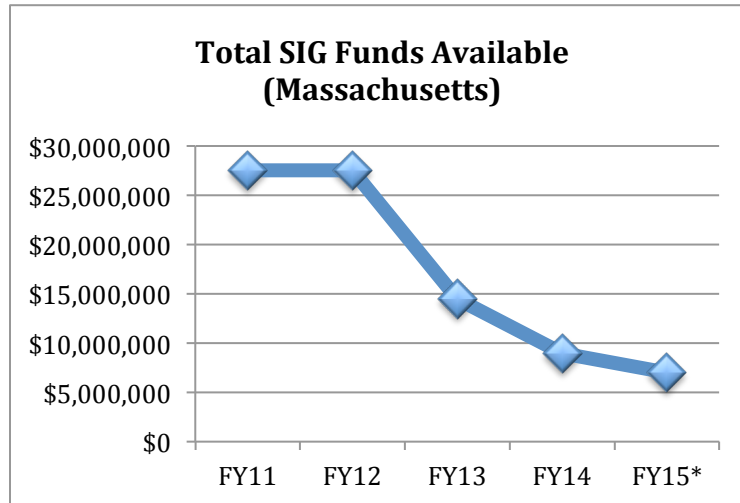


Figure 3: Total SIG Funds Available to Massachusetts

The decreasing overall funding to support school and district turnaround efforts, and the decline of SIG funding specifically, mean that DESE will have tough choices to make about how many schools and districts it can realistically support and what types of interventions have the most promise for broad impact. In 2012, DESE awarded SIG grants to 18 newly named Level 4 schools. By comparison, in 2015 DESE plans to award SIG grants to no more than 7 schools, with an average per school award of \$1 million dollars spread out over three years. The projected SIG funding level to schools in 2015 represents more than a 50% reduction to the average per school SIG awards that have historically been granted. Figure 4 below illustrates the decrease in per school SIG funding grants, while figure 5 shows the decline in school recipients of SIG grants. Based on these cuts, DESE will need to be much more strategic about which schools it funds, since the number of schools in need of turnaround will be much larger than the available

funding to support them. Additionally, DESE will need to be more specific about the practices it thinks will have the best potential for impact, given that per school awards will be much smaller than in the past.

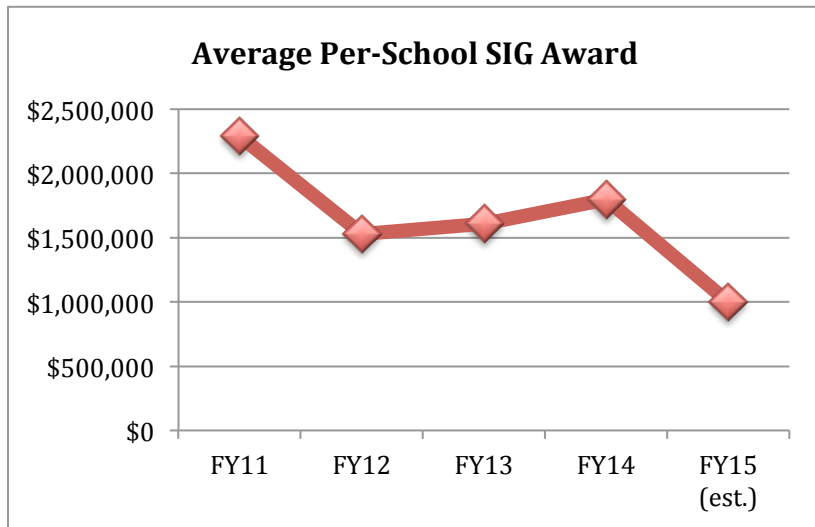


Figure 4: Average Per-School SIG Grants Awards (Massachusetts)

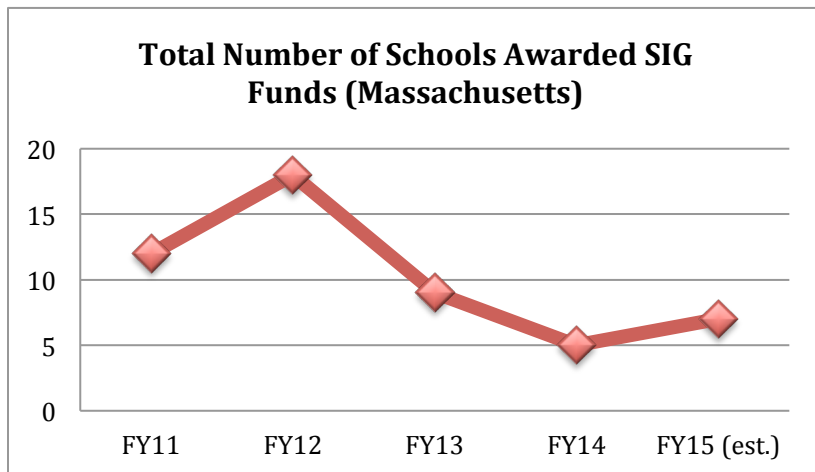


Figure 5: Total Number of Schools Awarded SIG Funds (Massachusetts)

Finally, there is also the political cost of pursuing Level 5 Receivership that DESE must consider when planning future interventions. As seen recently in Holyoke, Massachusetts, a school district that DESE placed into Level 5 Receivership, local officials and community members often view receivership as an outside “takeover” of schools. Level 5 receivership has the potential to lead to vocal and highly visible protests, like a recent one in Holyoke where high school students walked out of school in protest of the potential receivership. The animosity that receivership causes may be a necessary short-term price to pay for the promise of vastly improved schools. However, the political cost is a factor that DESE must consider when it thinks about other potential district receivership options.

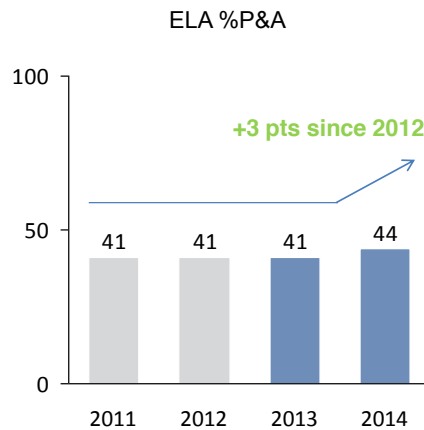
If DESE is to be successful in its goal of turning around severely underperforming schools and districts, it requires innovative approaches to ensure that the goals of the receivership are accomplished, while the very real barriers, like capacity, funding and political challenges, are addressed and overcome. Additionally, DESE needs to figure out ways for dramatic turnaround to happen far before Level 5 receivership is even a consideration. Under the 2010 legislation, the state may only intervene through receivership after a school falls into the bottom tier of performance. This usually requires a school to have many years of underperformance. Unfortunately, many children attend low-performing schools that, while not yet in the bottom-most tier, are not providing the quality of education needed to achieve DESE’s goal of ensuring “that all students have the requisite knowledge, skills, and experiences in the academic, workplace readiness, and personal/social domains to successfully navigate to completion an economically viable career pathway in a 21st center economy” (DESE Strategic Plan, 2014).

My strategic project at DESE was focused on the design and execution of the Gateways to Achievement (GtA) Initiative, a partnership between Empower Schools, a Boston-based non-profit organization, and DESE, with funding from the Gates Foundation. As originally conceived, the GtA Initiative sought to rapidly accelerate the pace of educational improvement in MA by encouraging and incentivizing cities to voluntarily turn around their lowest performing schools by using high autonomy school models, including charter schools, and redesigning district structures to support schools' greater autonomy. The theory behind using high autonomy school models is that those who are closest to students – teachers and school leaders – are in the best position to make decisions about the needs of their students. The focus on addressing district systems simultaneously is an assessment that, within traditional district structures, there are barriers that limit schools' autonomy, including some centralize district structures and formalized collective bargaining agreements. Additional goals of the initiative included increasing the number of willing and capable school operators able to turn around underperforming schools through a high autonomy, high accountability pathway, and facilitating and managing voluntary partnership among DESE, reform-minded cities, and leading non-profit school operators to turnaround failing schools.

The focus on granting schools high levels of autonomy and addressing district systems are at the heart of the approach DESE has employed with both Lawrence and the four Level 5 schools it has placed in receivership. In 2011, DESE assumed control of Lawrence Public Schools (Lawrence) and appointed a receiver, Jeff Riley, in January 2012. As the district receiver, Jeff Riley was provided a tremendous amount of autonomy and authority to improve the district, including “all of the powers of the superintendent

and school committee and full managerial and operational control over the district...” (*An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*, 603:CMR 2.06). One of Riley’s main strategies for turning around the district was to empower school-based leadership teams to make decisions that were traditionally made by the district, including staffing, curricula, school schedule, and overall use of resources. The revised, more limited role of the central district includes ensuring that accountability frameworks are clear and consistently applied and coordinating centralized services and functions, like enrollment, human resources, facilities, and transportation. Riley refers to his approach as the “Open Architecture” model. After two years under receivership, Lawrence is starting to show some promising results. For example, student proficiency levels on the Math state exam have increased by 13% since 2012, which is a historic high for the district. Additionally, the graduation rate increased from 52.3% in 2011 to 66.9% in 2014, and the dropout rate declined from 8.6% in 2011 to 4.6% in 2014 (Lawrence Public Schools, 2014). Riley’s “Open Architecture” model is viewed by many as the reason for the district’s dramatic early improvements. Figure 6 below captures some of the increases in the number of students scoring proficient or advanced on the MCAS exam since receivership.

ELA proficiency up 3 points after years of flat performance



Math proficiency continues strong upward trends

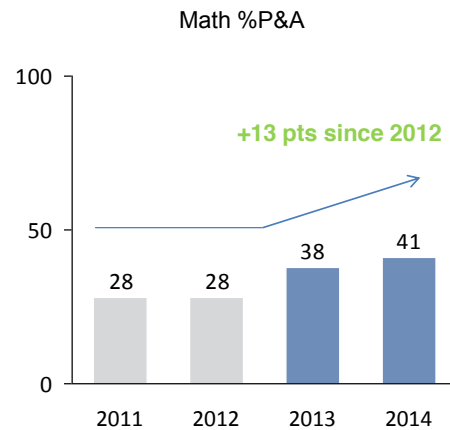


Figure 6: Lawrence Public Schools 2014 Percentage of Students Proficient or Advanced on the 2014 MCAS Exam (Lawrence Public Schools [LPS], 2014)

The GtA Initiative was built to expand the promise of the “Open Architecture” model to districts not in receivership. As stated previously, DESE understood that there were significant challenges to pursuing the level 5 receivership pathway with many additional schools and districts. Additionally, there was a dearth of high quality receiver options available to do the work. The tremendous political will required to engage in what is often viewed as a punitive and contentious approach to improving schools and districts was also a factor. In order for the GtA Initiative to be successful, Empower Schools and the Commissioner believed that the reforms needed to be done on a voluntary basis and lead by local education officials. The bet was that keeping schools in Level 4 would be met with less resistance than Level 5 receivership. Additionally, keeping local officials directly involved in running the target schools would provide the opportunity to further develop their capacity to effectively operate their schools. By targeting district and schools before they entered Level 5, the goal was to help create

drastic improvement before the need for receivership even arose. As such, the GtA strategy focused on creating both a strong interest from cities to voluntarily turnaround their lowest performing schools, and increasing the availability of willing and capable operators who could partner with districts. The role of DESE in the partnership was to help create increase interest in the GtA Initiative by identifying cities that may be good candidates for this sort of partnership, and to create the right mix of incentives and conditions to encourage districts to seriously consider this approach. Empower Schools provided technical assistance to cities and districts interested in pursuing the initiative, as well as helped to attract and incubate operators to run the schools, hence increasing the supply. Additionally, the organization could help secure philanthropic funding to support the initiative.

Empower Schools emerged as a logical partner in the GtA Initiative because of its role with the Lawrence receivership. Chris Gabrieli, the co-founder of Empower Schools, was instrumental in helping identify Jeff Riley as the receiver, attracting philanthropic funding to support the planning and transition efforts, and helping to recruit key partners, including school operators and other support organizations. Additionally, in the winter of 2013, Empower Schools began working with Salem mayor Kim Driscoll and the Salem School Committee to transition one of its struggling elementary schools, The Bentley, into becoming a charter school. The Bentley's low student achievement scores placed it on a path to potentially being named Level 5. The actions taken by the Salem School Committee to voluntarily convert the school to a charter school, as a way of averting state receivership, was an example of the types of district-led reforms the GtA Initiative sought to catalyze. The work Empower Schools conducted in Salem included providing

technical assistance to the mayor and school committee to understand the education regulatory landscape, identifying a turnaround operator and school leader, and providing resources to support the principal in the successful planning and launch of the school.

The goals for the GtA Initiative for the 2014/2015 school year, which were first articulated in a grant application to the Gates Foundation in the Spring of 2014, were:

- To attract at least one additional city to join the initiative.
- To attract at least one proven school operator to join the initiative.
- To incubate at least one new school operator.
- To design a new Fellowship for promising school operators.

My specific role included working to build awareness of, and support for, the GtA Initiative amongst DESE staff, who were ultimately responsible for turnaround efforts in the state. I initially encountered interest in, and skepticism towards, the approach, both because it did not align with the department's theory of action guiding school turnaround work and because DESE staff had little bandwidth to engage in any sort of new endeavor. The bulk of the first three months of my residency were spent liaising with Empower Schools and some DESE staff to find a way for the GtA Initiative, which had the support of the Commissioner, to help solve current challenges facing the agency. The goal was for the initiative to be a helpful tool to alleviate some of the many challenges facing the agency related to schools and districts in need of turnaround, rather than an endeavor that added additional work to an already overstretched staff.

This capstone chronicles the creation and execution of the GtA Initiative. Throughout the document, I will provide information about my specific role in helping to execute the strategy, as well as provide a series of recommendations about how best to sustain the work moving forward.

III. Review of Knowledge for Action

As mentioned in the introduction, the “Open Architecture” strategy, employed in Lawrence by receiver Jeff Riley, was at the heart of the GtA Initiative. As part of the receivership, all schools have the same level of autonomy, whether they were being run by non-profit organizations, the union, charter school operators, or by individual principal and teacher leadership teams. Unlike traditional districts, the central office does not mandate issues like curricula to be used, school calendar, length of school day, professional development, or specific working conditions. The school truly is the unit of change. By many measures, efforts in Lawrence are starting to yield significantly positive results. For example, in addition to statistics mentioned in the introduction, the district’s student growth on math during receivership has placed it in amongst the highest of urban districts in Massachusetts. Because of the early success of the Lawrence Receivership, the “Open Architecture” approach is being viewed by DESE as a potential strategy to reform other underperforming districts.

Upon starting my residency, and learning about the GtA Initiative and the Open Architecture strategy influencing it, I began developing questions that I wanted to better understand about the initiative. For example, the schools that the GtA Initiative targeted were those that were persistently low performing. Why did it make sense, I wondered, to provide those schools with high levels of autonomy, if they clearly were already struggling? Would granting the low performing schools high levels of autonomy only be successful if school operators replaced the current school leaders? Were school operators really best positioned to utilize autonomy to drive improved student results? Because the GtA initiative was so new, I felt confident that I could help revise the strategy if research

showed that some of its central premises could be challenged. These questions became the focus of my Review of Knowledge for Action (RKA). Specifically, I wondered:

1. **History of School Turnaround Efforts:** What was the genesis and history of school turnaround efforts more broadly, and what were the results to date?
 - A. What do history and research reveal to be promising practices of school turnaround?
 - B. How does the GtA Initiative fit historically within past school turnaround efforts? How is it different from past efforts? Why, based on the initiative's design, do we think it has a strong likelihood of success?
2. **Role of Autonomous Schools in Turnaround Efforts:** Is there any evidence that high autonomy school models are a necessary, or promising, condition for successful school turnaround?
 - A. If so, which school-level autonomies are most critical?
 - B. If high autonomy school models are necessary, but not sufficient, what else needs to be in place to increase the likelihood of successful turnaround?
 - C. Is there evidence to suggest that school operators are best positioned to utilize high levels of autonomy to drive school turnaround?

History of School Turnaround Efforts

Although educators and administrators have engaged in school reform efforts for decades, “school turnaround” is a more recent endeavor (American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2011). The word “school turnaround” means different things to different people. The term has been broadly used to describe the process of improving struggling schools and school districts. At the same time, the term is also used to refer to a specific model, called the “turnaround model,” available to school district as part of the U.S. Department of Education’s SIG program (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010). Mass Insight Education, a Boston-based non-profit, offers the following definition for School Turnaround: “Turnaround is a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that: a) produces significant gains in achievement within two

years; and b) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performing organization” (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007). The speed of desired outcomes (2 years) and an “emphasizes on a ‘start from scratch’ approach designed to overcome a history of resistance to change” (AIR, 2011) set school turnaround efforts apart from earlier school reform efforts.

Beginning with the NCLB Act, SEAs were charged with identifying schools with low performance gaps, and sizable gaps in subgroup achievement. The schools were then targeted for improvement or restructuring. With passage in 2009 of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), known as the stimulus bill, this reform effort took on added dimensions. “The ARRA included a one-time infusion of \$3 billion to transform the NCLB-era School Improvement Grant (SIG) program into an aggressive reform strategy that sought to ‘turnaround’ schools in the bottom five percent nationwide” (O’Brien and Dervarics, 2013). The new infusion of funds continued to be awarded and managed by state education agencies through their SIG application process. However, “the strengthened SIG program required low- achieving schools--- as determined by standardized test scores, achievement gaps, and high school graduation rates” (O’Brien and Dervarics, 2013) --- to select one of four reforms models. The four models, as defined by the US Department of Education (Terry, 2010), were:

1. **Turnaround model:** Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50% of the staff, and grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility (including in staffing, calendars/time and budgeting) to fully implement a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student outcomes.
2. **Restart model:** Convert a school or close and reopen it under a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an education management organization that has been selected through a rigorous review process.
3. **School closure:** Close a school and enroll the students who attended that school in other schools in the district that are higher achieving.

4. **Transformation model:** Implement each of the following strategies: (1) replace the principal and take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness; (2) institute comprehensive instructional reforms; (3) increase learning time and create community-oriented schools; and (4) provide operational flexibility and sustained support.

The different approaches were created based on both NCLB and other experiments undertaken in some cities, and inform the criteria of another key program from the U.S. Department of Education, the Race to the Top initiative. Nonetheless, whether the four ARRA SIG reform strategies have a solid basis in prior research is a much-discussed topic among researchers, and a debate that still rages today (O'Brien & Dervarics, 2013).

In general, it is fair to conclude that the research on the success of school turnaround efforts is limited, inconclusive, and “less empirical” than other interventions. One reason offered for this conclusion is that school turnaround is still a relatively recent practice, and thus not a lot of information is yet available for researchers to study efforts. Another is that “school turnaround” is not an intervention that is easily packaged, so it is hard to prove what impacts it directly has, versus other reforms. Brownstein (2012) points out that the transformation model, which is the most popular model chosen under the federal SIG program, has 11 separate components and is “not a ‘model,’ in the strict scientific sense that it mandates clear steps, curricular materials, or benchmarks” (Brownstein, 2012). Additionally, there is no clear consensus about how to define when a school has “turned around.” While some common metrics typically include increases in student test scores and graduation rates, other efforts seek to measure things like attendance rates and changing teacher, student, and family perceptions of the quality of the schools (Honig & Rainey, 2012).

Another reason why the research on school turnaround is inconclusive is that much of the available research is largely anecdotal, based on case studies or observations, not experiments (Dee, 2012). For example, the influential 2008 school turnaround guide issued by The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) includes a disclaimer that the evidence base used to develop the recommendations “is *low* because none of the studies examined for this practice guide is based on a research methodology that yields valid causal inference” (Herman, Dawson, Dee, Greene, Maynard, & Redding, 2008). In fact, much of the research I reviewed that made recommendations for school turnaround practices were based on case studies. As a result, recommendations about effective school turnaround efforts can easily be discounted as “unscientific” and being focused on only a very small sub-section of schools.

Putting aside the validity of the inferences that can be made from current school turnaround studies and “experiments”, the findings produced from these reports are mixed, and the conclusions are often times contradictory. Peck and Reitzug (2013) provide the most concise and thorough argument against the current concept of school turnaround, which the authors claim has been heralded as a new, innovative reform in education since the passage of NCLB in 2002. In fact, the reform is actually “a well-worn idea borrowed” from the business sector, where “organization turnaround” practices actually had very poor results (Peck & Reitzug, 2013). The authors also argue that, in general, the available research does not indicate “widespread success of turnaround schooling”, and question why it is so strongly prioritized by federal education policy. Furthermore, “turnaround advocates have tended to downplay the approach’s connection to educational reform antecedents” (Peck & Reitzug, 2013), like Reconstitution, instead

describing school turnaround with ahistorical emphasis as new approach to education reform. Ignoring the lessons of the past, including the limited success of Reconstitution, helps create a misleading view of the promise of the strategy. The authors further argue that Mass Insight's definition that turnaround happen with two years is actually antithetical to research, which suggests that dramatic improvement takes between 3 and 7 years. However, given the moral imperative to intervene in low performing schools, the authors, despite their relentless attack on the practice of school turnaround, advocate continuing with efforts, but making them less combative against teachers.

Andy Smarick (2010), a former distinguished visiting fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, provides an assessment that very much agrees with Peck and Reitzug's critique of school turnaround, but arrives at a very different conclusion. Smarick argues that turnaround "is not a scalable strategy for fixing America's troubled urban school systems." Instead, he argues that "two generations of school improvement efforts, lessons from similar work in other industries, and a budding practice among reform-minded superintendents" (Smarick, 2010) points to a more promising example of what to do with America's lowest performing schools – close them!

Despite the inconclusive and "unscientific" research practices, numerous research studies make recommendations about effective school turnaround practices based on the evidence they reviewed. Much of this evidence is from observation of schools that have successfully been transformed, with researcher then working to identify the key levers that lead to the school's success. However, much like other research focused on school turnaround, there is little agreement amongst these studies about the specific levers that

lead to successful school turnaround efforts. Below I summarize the findings and recommendations from the four most prominent studies I reviewed.

Frederick Hess and Thomas Gift (2009) agree with Peck and Reitzug about the origin of turnaround reforms, and, to a large extent, concur that the results from the private sector do not lead to predictions that the reform will work to “systematically turn around all troubled schools – or even a majority of them” (Hess & Gift, pg. 2). However, based on their study of the reform in the private sector, the authors identify four lessons that they postulate could help the turnaround efforts in education prove a valuable tool in improving some underperforming schools. The tools are:

1. Providing school leaders with the flexibility, autonomy, and urgency to turn around their schools;
2. Not hesitating to remove principals and school leaders as a way of jump-starting the turnaround process;
3. Viewing school turnaround as “an all or nothing proposition” in order to focus efforts around clear, explicit objectives.
4. Avoiding forcing schools to adopt organization-wide, top-down solutions. Instead, districts should focus on setting high goals for schools and making sure leaders have the autonomy to execute.

Mass Insight’s Report *The Turnaround Challenge* (Calkin et al, 2007), considered one of the earliest comprehensive research studies on school turnaround and called “the bible for school turnaround” by Secretary of State Arne Duncan, proposed a framework for turning around failing high-poverty schools. The work draws on analyses of more than 300 research studies, news articles, and varied resources on school intervention, related federal and state policymaking, effective schools, poverty impacts, and organizational turnaround. In addition, the authors interviewed practitioners, researchers, leading policymakers, and reform experts as well as the directors of school intervention in six urban districts and 50 school management and support organizations. The report

was highly influential, helping to frame federal Title 1 and Race to the Top policy, and was used as a guide to develop turnaround strategies in schools, districts, and states across the country.

Like Hess and Gift, *The Turnaround Challenge* advocates providing turnaround schools with greater flexibility and autonomy to act. The authors propose creating “turnaround zones”, within which schools are accorded greater autonomy and given incentives to act. However, unlike Hess and Gift, the authors suggest a focus on developing specially prepared school leadership to run turnaround schools with high levels of autonomy. The study also found that effective school turnaround examples had a relentless focus on hiring and staff development, on building highly capable, distributed school leadership, articulated clear performance-based behavioral expectations, and utilized integrated, research-based programs and related social services.

Turning around chronically low-performing schools: A Practice Guide (Herman et al, 2008) is part of a series of Practice Guides developed by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), a division of the U.S. Department of Education. A panel of nationally recognized individuals with expertise in research and the topic of school turnaround were enlisted to conduct a rigorous review of existing research. These experts established a series of recommended strategies that are assigned a strong, moderate, or low rating of evidence based on the degree of replicability and generalizability of the studies upon which they are based.

Unlike *The Turnaround Challenge* or the study by Hess and Gift, the *The Turnaround Practice Guide* does not emphasize the need for school leaders to have flexibility and autonomy. However, like *The Turnaround Challenge*, this study

recommends a strong focus on hiring and developing a staff that is committed to the school's improvement goals and qualified to carry out school effort. Like Hess and Gift, the study also advocates removing school leaders or staff who are not willing or able to execute the turnaround strategy effectively. *The Turnaround Practice Guide's* additional recommendations include maintaining a consistent focus on improving instruction and working to establish "quick wins" early in the school turnaround process.

Turnaround Practices in Action (2014) is a comparative qualitative analysis of the practices employed by Massachusetts Level 4 (underperforming) schools that experienced success in their turnaround efforts, versus those that made little, to no, progress. The report was commissioned by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), and is the third in a series of reports comparing practices at the 14 "Achievement Gain Schools" (those that successfully exited Level 4 status), with those that either remained in Level 4 or progressed to Level 5 (state receivership). The authors conclude that Achievement Gain schools demonstrated several key characteristics, regardless of the turnaround model they employed. Many of these characteristics are similar to ones found in *The Turnaround Practice Guide*, including maintaining a focus on improving instruction. Similar to *The Turnaround Challenge's* "turnaround zones", this study also emphasizes the need for the district to provide the schools with the necessary authorities and flexibility to execute their turnaround efforts. This work includes the district developing systems and structures to support school-based turnaround efforts by removing obstacles, which may include existing district policies. For example, the authors recommend that districts re-examine school funding formulas to ensure that funding decision are based on need, and focused on those services and actions

that will provide direct instruction to students. Additionally, the study emphasizes the need to develop staff by establishing collaborative and collegial school cultures for teachers to grow. Some of the other key characteristics from this study include focusing on creating safe, orderly, and respectful learning environments for students.

The scan of available research has shown that the results of school turnaround efforts are inconclusive and the overall success rates for school turnaround are low (Stuit, 2010; Rhim, Kowal, Hassel, & Hassel, 2007). Additionally, the results are “less empirical” because of the reliance on case studies, rather than experiments. However, most of the case-based studies reviewed, highlight some form of leader autonomy as a key ingredient in successful school turnaround efforts. This assertion is supported by further studies as well, including the American Institute for Research’s (AIR) (2011) *School Turnaround Pocket Guide*, which identifies a key component of turnaround as “removal of barriers to flexibility and autonomy” (AIR, 2011). Additionally, a 2010 report written by FSG Social Impact Advisors included a belief in the critical need for leaders to have “some degree of autonomy over human capital, schedule, budget, and program” in their section of recommended practices (Kutash et al, 2010). In the next section, I will look at the evolution of school and principal autonomy reforms historically, and their role in school turnaround specifically.

Role of Autonomous Schools in Turnaround Efforts

“Central to the vision of Lawrence Public Schools is the empowerment of individual schools in a decentralized district environment. In the past, common terms and conditions of employment have been centrally negotiated and uniformly applied, regardless of each school’s unique needs. Moving forward, local stakeholders will determine the nature and utility terms and conditions of employment previously set centrally, consistent with the directives of and subject to the approval of the Superintendent” (Lawrence Teacher’s Union Contract, 2014, pg. 1).

Recognizing that decision makers at the school level are most aware of, and potentially most able to, efficiently respond to schools’ organizational needs, school districts throughout the United States have experimented with different ways to grant more autonomy to local public schools. Over the past decade, decentralization of decision-making authority to local schools has unfolded in some of the nation’s largest school districts, including New York City, Boston, Denver, Oakland, and Baltimore. In Massachusetts, Lawrence Public Schools has not only moved to a decentralized, “Open Architecture” model, but has also recently negotiated a contract with its local teacher’s union to guarantee the right of individual schools to set working conditions with, and for, its teachers.

Decentralization of decision making as an education reform strategy, however, has a long history in the United States. David Tyack (1993) does a thorough job of painting the evolution of centralization and decentralization debates starting in the late 1800’s, with the founding of “Common Schools”, through the early part of the twentieth century, which was dominated by administrative progressives’ “One Best System”, which sought to “depoliticizing education” and make school systems “efficient, differentiated by function, and accountable” (Tyack, pg. 13). In the 1960s and 1970s, school decentralization reforms generally sought to increase school and/or community control over schools (David, 1989). By the late 1980s, many districts turned to other reforms,

often titled Site-Based Management (SBM) or site-based decision making. Although their details varied, these policies stemmed from at least one main common underlying assumption: if policy makers shifted authority for various school-related decisions from broader levels of government (e.g., from district central offices) to individual schools and school communities, then schools would better be able to meet their students' needs than if district central office administrators or other policy makers made those decisions (Malen et al., 1990; Peterson, 1991; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992).

However, research on these initiatives did not bear out this assumption (Cotton, 1992; David, 1989; Malen et al., 1990; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992). For example, from their review of nearly 200 documents, including 98 policy reports and 8 systematic evaluations about school site-based management initiatives, Malen et al. (1990) concluded that "there is little evidence that school-based management improves student achievement" (p. 56).

According to Richard Elmore (1993), these results were not surprising, given that "the politics of centralization and decentralization" in American Education are "not fundamentally or directly about teaching and learning" (Elmore, pg. 35). The clear disconnect between structural reforms and the instructional core, writes Elmore (1993), means that "major reforms can wash over the educational system, consuming large amounts of scarce resources... without having any discernable effect on what students actually learn in school" (Elmore, pg. 35).

According to Honig and Rainey (2011), researchers generally cite at least one of the following three reasons for the limited school performance results created by site-based management practices. These include: 1) a lack of focus on teaching and learning

improvement both in the policy designs and on the part of participating schools during implementation; 2) policy makers' inattention to building schools' capacity for using their new authority to realize improvements for students; and 3) school district central office administrators' failure to play key support roles in implementation—particularly when it came to actually providing participating schools with new decision-making authority.

By the early 1980s, approximately 60 percent of school districts with enrollments of at least 50,000 students had experimented with some form of Site-Based Management (Van Langen and Dekkers 2001). Around the same time, researchers began to attend to the relationship between school achievement and how schools and school districts are structured and make decisions, with much evidence pointing to the principal's central role in school governance (Purkey and Smith 1983).

Honig and Rainey (2011) argue that current school-based principal autonomy initiatives represent a new wave of reforms to increase schools' decision-making authority. Whether intentionally or not, the new reforms successfully reflect the lessons of past failed decentralization attempts in their designs, and thus have a higher likelihood of success than past initiatives, like Site-Based Management. The authors point out that this new wave of autonomy has at least three distinctive features: 1) a central emphasis on teaching and learning, 2) a focus on and investment in school capacity building, and 3) the involvement of district central offices as key implementation supporters.

Many of the empirical studies measuring the impact of school-level autonomy on student achievement are focused on comparing the effects of students attending schools with varying levels of legal and regulatory autonomy. For example, Abdulkadiroglu,

Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, and Parag (2011) examined the impact on student achievement for students attending charter, pilot, or traditional public schools in Boston. Similarly, Clark (2009) compared the performance of students attending high schools in England that opted out of local authority control, and instead became autonomous schools funded directly by the central government, versus those who remained under local control. While these studies are helpful to make general conclusions about the impact of specific “types” of legally defined autonomous school structures, they do not provide information about how the schools actually used their autonomy to improve student achievement. I am less interested in trying to answer the question of whether or not students attending charter schools perform better than those who do not. I am more interested in seeing how school leaders - whether in charter, traditional public, or pilot - use the autonomies they have, and what practices are proving most successful in improving student achievement.

Linda Nathan’s (2014) recently completed study about “the role and impact of autonomy for school leaders and their teams across” (pg. 7) Boston Public schools postulates that school-based autonomy is crucial, but not sufficient, “for creating and sustaining excellence in individual schools” (pg. 10). In Boston, nearly one-third of the city’s schools currently have some form of legal autonomy status, including charter schools, Pilot Schools, and Innovation Schools. However, the author found that, regardless of the school’s autonomy status, there were common practices being implemented by leaders of the highest performing schools. Most of these practices focused on how the leaders made decisions about resource allocations within the schools. “The difference is, leaders at autonomous schools exercise flexibilities that have been formally granted to their schools (if not consistently recognized by the district), while

leaders in traditional schools typically must develop ‘workarounds’ and ‘one-off solutions’ to put many of the highest-potential strategies in place” (Nathan, Pg. 7). The need to constantly develop these workarounds, finds Nathan, leads many principals in traditional public schools to become frustrated and disillusioned, and ultimately leave the district. Therefore, the author makes a series of recommendations about how Boston “can strengthen and support autonomy and accountability across its portfolio to promote innovation for equity and high performance” (Nathan, pg. 9). Some of the recommendations include developing a vision for the role of school level autonomy in ensuring high performing schools for every child, along with accompanying support and accountability for performance. The absence of such a vision is in stark contrast to other cities utilizing high-autonomy models, where there is a clearly articulated theory of action for the role of high-autonomy schools in the district’s overall goals. The lack of a clearly articulated vision in Boston “has created a void that makes it exceedingly difficult for school leaders and district leaders to stay on the same page about how they will collaboratively improve school quality and student outcomes” (Nathan, Pg. 10).

Implications for Strategic Project

“Research shows that blanket autonomy for school leaders does not *by itself* lead to improved student performance. But research also demonstrates that flexibility *can* enable higher performance when leaders use it to design instruction and organize resources strategically, with the added benefit of fostering a more committed and cohesive school culture due to increased school-level ownership of those choices” (Nathan, 2014, Pg. 13).

I completed my RKA in August 2014. Based on my initial review of the available research, and the questions that I sought to answer, there emerged several implications for my strategic project. Based on my research, I reached two conclusions. The first was that high autonomy models were a promising and, at times, a necessary ingredient for

successful school turnaround. However, autonomy alone was not sufficient to guarantee success. Instead, the research suggested that most successful turnaround efforts also had an explicit focus on building the capacity of school leaders and teachers so that they were able to leverage the high autonomy into improved student outcomes. In other words, the role of the district in most successful turnaround efforts went beyond simply diffusing autonomy to the school site, focusing on accountability, and closing the efforts that were not successful. The role of the district included a focus on learning and teaching, a focus on building capacity for school leaders and teachers, and the direct participation of central office staff to ensure that school leaders are able to actually utilize the autonomies. Additionally, district accountability frameworks not only measured outputs (ie student test scores), but also require schools to identify up front (in school design plans) the inputs and levers they were implementing, so that the district can ensure that schools are paying attention to the right things.

My second conclusion was that individuals (ie principals without affiliation to a school management organization or charter school), with the right level of capacity, support, and training could also be successful in turning a school around. There was no evidence to suggest that school operators or charter schools were better positioned to lead successful school turnaround efforts. Therefore, my conclusions challenged the GtA Initiative's notion that school operators and charter schools were inherently best positioned to lead turnaround efforts.

Based on these findings, I decided to advocate for two major changes to the design of the GtA Initiative. The first related to who was considered a prime target to lead successful school turnaround efforts in a district. Based on the research, I felt the

need to advocate for the inclusion of using individual principals as an option for school turnaround efforts, for many of the reasons I have already discussed. An added benefit of using individual principals was that, for many of the districts initially being considered for the GtA Initiative, the only organizations available to serve as school operators lacked roots in the local communities, and could have potentially been viewed as outsiders “taking over” the schools. Expanding the GtA initiative to include recruiting and supporting individuals to turn around schools through high-autonomy models would increase the likelihood that local talent could play a role, which may help reduce the perception that outsiders were driving the work.

The second major change I decided to advocate for as a result of my RKA was related to the role of the district in the GtA Initiative. Specifically, the district role in the GtA Initiative needed to be more robust than simply devolving autonomy to operators and holding them accountable. As several studies pointed out (Nathan, 2014; Honig 2013), providing schools with high levels of autonomy is not enough. While not wanting to impede on a leader’s ability to use their full range of autonomies, through strong accountability frameworks, districts must ensure that the school improvement plans include evidence that leaders are paying attention to the right things. For example, while not prescribing the means, districts can mandate that school improvement plans include clear strategy for how autonomies will be used to improve instruction and how leaders’ capacity will continue to be developed. For districts, it will be critical to establish clarity about how district-wide policies and procedures will not impede on school leaders’ ability to execute their plans. At a minimum, a clearly articulated plan must exist about how issues will be resolved as they arise.

During the next several months after I completed my RKA, I worked with DESE staff and Empower Schools to incorporate my recommendations into the overall design of the GtA Initiative. While I was successful in impacting some aspects of the initiative's design, I was not able to make as much impact with others. I will expand on my successes and failures revising the GtA Initiative strategy in the Results section of my Capstone.

IV. Description of the Strategic Project

Strategic Project Overview and History

As described in the introduction section of my Capstone, my strategic project at DESE was focused on the design and execution of the Gateways to Achievement (GtA) Initiative. The initiative sought to rapidly accelerate the pace of educational improvement in MA by encouraging and incentivizing cities to voluntarily turnaround their lowest performing schools by using high autonomy school models, including charter schools, and redesigning district structures to support schools' greater autonomy. In order for the GtA Initiative to be successful, efforts needed to focus on both creating the demand from cities to voluntarily turnaround their lowest performing schools, and increasing the supply of willing and capable operators who could partner with districts.

My Role

Between June and December 2014, my strategic project was organized into three broad stages.

Stage #1	Stage #2	Stage #3
June 2014 – August 2014	September – December 2014	January 2015 to present
GtA Initiative Design and Alignment to DESE strategy for District and School Turnaround	Development and Design of the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP)	Development and Execution of the SEZP, key actions for the formation of the zone, and overall implementation of the strategy.

Table 1: Strategic Project Stages

For my Capstone, I am focusing on the first two stages. The third stage is currently in process, and will not be concluded until the summer of 2015.

Stage #1 (June 2014 – August 2014)**GtA Initiative Design and Alignment to DESE’s strategy for District and School Turnaround/Strategic Project Implementation Strategy**

I met with Commissioner Mitchell Chester, Deputy Commissioner Alan Ingram, and Associate Commissioner Cliff Chuang in June of 2014 to discuss my involvement with the GtA Initiative. I had previously met with Chris Gabrieli to discuss the project as part of my residency matching process. At the meeting with Commissioner Chester, Deputy Commissioner Ingram, and Associate Commissioner Chuang, we collectively decided that my strategic project was going to be to help facilitate the execution of the GtA Initiative. The initial scope of my work would include:

1. To provide the Commissioner a set of recommendations regarding the scope and structure of the GtA Initiative partnership between DESE and Empower Schools for the 2014/2015 school year. This included a decision about the development of any formal partnership agreements between DESE and Empower Schools, shared outcomes, and use of resources from both agencies.
2. To work to incorporate the GtA Initiative within the scope of DESE’s existing district and school turnaround efforts, so that it provided an additional tool that is available and utilized to support district and school turnaround efforts for the 2014/2015 school year.
3. To serve as the liaison between DESE and Empower Schools during both the partnership development phase and the design and execution of the GtA Initiative.

Cliff Chuang, Associate Commissioner for Educational Redesign, was assigned as my residency supervisor. Associate Commissioner Chuang had previously been the point person on developing, in partnership with Empower Schools, the GtA application to the Gates Foundation. However, most of DESE’s school and district turnaround work fell under the auspices of the Office of District and School Turnaround (ODST), which was supervised by Senior Associate Commissioner Russell Johnston. Therefore, though not officially a supervisor, my work would invariably lead me to intersect with Senior

Associate Commissioner Johnston, who was scheduled to begin working at DESE in August 2014.

In order to quickly lay a strong foundation upon which to execute my work, and to develop a theory of action for my leadership of the GtA project, I created an entry plan process to structure my first six weeks at DESE. I had three goals for my entry plan process. The first was to get to know people in the agency – their strengths, challenges, scope of responsibilities - and to share with them my background, my role, and the goals, structure, and focus of my residency. This was important, given that I was new to the agency, had no positional authority, and was leading work with far reaching implications. My second goal was to refine and revise my strategic project, and to identify a theory of action and develop a timetable of activities to successfully execute the GtA Initiative. My third goal was to better understand the relevant history, norms, formal and informal modes of operation, and decision-making processes within DESE. In order to successfully execute my strategic project, I knew that it was going to be necessary to not only create a strong case for the GtA Initiative, but I would also need to build alliances and relationships within DESE to move the work forward.

In order to achieve the goals of my entry plan, I reviewed numerous documents, including DESE reports, state laws, and other reports related to school and district turnaround efforts in MA and across the country. I also conducted individual 30-minute interviews with over 25 ESE staff members (See Addendum F). During the interviews, I asked questions related to the individual's background and scope of work at DESE, their knowledge and understanding of the GtA Initiative, their perceptions and opinion's of

DESE's school and district turnaround efforts, and their opinions about how things get done within DESE.

Based on the entry plan process, two main findings emerged, along with clear implications for how I would work to accomplish my strategic project goal. The first finding was that, *in general, the DESE staff members I interviewed did not know about the GtA Initiative*. Given that the GtA Initiative had been in the making for over a year, and the Commissioner and some DESE staff members were involved in the crafting of language for the Gates grant, I was surprised to find that the vast majority of DESE staff I interviewed had either never heard about the initiative, or did not know many important details. This issue was of particular importance because the successful design and execution of the GtA initiative required the input and assistance of some key DESE stakeholder, including the DESE legal team and the Office of District and School Turnaround (ODST). Furthermore, the Commissioner was hopeful that the GtA Initiative could feature in school and district turnaround efforts for the upcoming school year, which was only a couple of months away.

The second finding was that *the GtA Initiative did not figure into ODST's current strategy for district and school turnaround efforts for the 2014/2015 school year*. This finding was not surprising, given the first finding that DESE staff had little awareness of the initiative. Based on individual conversations with ODST staff members, it became clear that awareness of GtA was very limited. Furthermore, in individual and group conversations discussing options for school and district turnaround efforts for the 2014/2015 school year, GtA was never mentioned as an option for consideration. Part of the reason was due to the lack of awareness about the details of the initiative. However,

another reason stemmed from disagreement about whether or not the GtA Initiative, which emphasizes autonomous school models, school operator partnerships, and the emergence of an “Open Architecture” model of district governance, was aligned with ODSST’s current theory of action. An important question that was not currently being discussed broadly in ODSST is how does the GtA Initiative fit within DESE’s broader theory of action for school and district turnaround efforts?

Based on my entry plan findings, I developed a theory of action to guide my work and help me achieve the goals of my strategic project. My theory of action was:

If I ...

- increase awareness and knowledge of the GtA Initiative amongst key DESE staff members and team, with special attention focused on ODSST staff;
- create opportunities for open discussion and debate amongst ODSST staff about the GtA Initiative and its alignment to the ODSST Theory of Action for school and district turnaround;
- embed myself as a member of the ODSST team, so I become a trusted colleague;
- participate in ODSST-led meetings related to developing options and plans for level 4 and level 5 district and schools;
- work to gain buy-in and support for the GtA initiative from key staff with decision-making authority;
- successfully advocate for specific research-based changes to the design of GtA Initiative;
- and ensure that the GtA Initiative helps to solve a real, current problem for the Department:

Then...

- the GtA Initiative will fit prominently within the current strategy and plan for district and school turnaround efforts broadly, and specifically for turnaround efforts for the 2014/2015 school year, which will allow me to achieve my strategic project goals.

In order to achieve my theory of action, I focused on several key actions. The table below captures examples of some of the key actions I undertook to implement my theory of action:

Theory of Action	Key Strategy and Actions
A. Increase awareness and knowledge of the GtA Initiative amongst key DESE staff members and team, with special attention focused on ODST staff;	1. Created and delivered a presentation about the structure and goals of the GtA Initiative to key teams within DESE, including: • The Office of District and School Turnaround • The ESE Legal Office • The Office of Charter School and School Redesign • Deputy Commissioner Ingram’s Leadership Team • ESE Senior Leadership • Influential individuals within DESE
B. Create opportunities for open discussion and debate amongst ODST staff about the GtA Initiative and its alignment to the ODST Theory of Action	2. Facilitated two discussions during ODST monthly meetings focused on high autonomy school models and different examples of districts supporting schools with varying levels of autonomy.
C. Imbed myself as a member of the ODST team, so I am seen as a trusted colleague;	3. Moved my workspace from the Charter School and Redesign side of the building directly into the ODST section. 4. Signed on to help with other ODST projects.
D. Participate in ODST-led meetings related to developing options and plans for level 4 and level 5 district and schools;	5. I obtained permission to attend all meetings between ODST staff and the Commissioner related to level 4 and level 5 decisions for the 2014/2015 school year. 6. Was assigned to the Level 5 Function Leader group, which met weekly to discuss current efforts and progress with level 5 schools.
E. Work to gain buy-in and support for the initiative from key staff with decision-making authority;	7. I scheduled a weekly meeting with Senior Associate Commissioner Johnston and Associate Commissioner Chuang to discuss the design of the GtA Initiative and its role with district and school turnaround efforts. 8. In addition to presenting information about the GtA Initiative to several departments and teams, I also met individually with staff members who I felt could be influential in moving the initiative forward within the DESE.
F. Successfully advocate for specific research-based changes to the design of GtA Initiative; G. Ensure that the GtA Initiative helps to solve a real, current problem for the Department.	9. I spoke regularly with Chris Gabrieli and Empower School staff to ensure a consistent flow of information regarding the design and progress of the GtA Initiative and the needs of DESE. The goal was to ensure that Empower Schools was working to position the GtA Initiative to solve the most pressing needs of DESE. 10. Helped organize a meeting between the Commissioner, ODST staff, and several education reform leaders in Massachusetts to discuss options for DESE’s intervention in several low-performing schools in Western Massachusetts. The GtA Initiative’s general design was discussed as a potential option with the meeting participants.

Table 2: Theory of Action and Key Strategies and Actions

In the Results and Analysis sections, I will expand further on the success and challenges of the key actions I undertook and on the progress I made towards achieving my theory of action. However, it is important to note that by the middle of August of 2014, the GtA Initiative had indeed become a part of DESE's core strategy for school and district turnaround efforts. Specifically, the GtA Initiative's goal of catalyzing a district to embark on a voluntary, aggressive reform strategy, while receiving technical support from Empower Schools, coalesced around a specific concern DESE was trying to address – what to do about 8 low performing middle schools in Springfield, MA. The result, and the first incarnation of the GtA Initiative in Massachusetts, was the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP).

Stage #2 (September – December 2014)
Development and Design of the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP)

Towards the end of August 2014, Springfield Public Schools emerged as the ideal district with which to pursue the GtA Initiative. In 2010, three of Springfield's middle schools became a part of the first Level 4 schools cohort named by the Commissioner based on their student achievement data from the preceding three years. These three schools implemented three-year turnaround plans beginning in the 2011-12 school year designed to accelerate academic achievement and aided by federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) funds totaling more than \$5.4 million. In 2014, three more of Springfield's middle schools were identified Level 4 by the Commissioner. At the same time, the three schools from cohort 1 were under formal Commissioner review (one of the original cohort 1 schools, Chestnut, eventually split into three separate schools). Initial reviews of the cohort 1 schools' Turnaround Plan outcomes did not show trends consistent with schools that were exiting Level 4 status.

Based on the significant underperformance of middle schools in Springfield, and on the guidance provided by several Massachusetts education leaders in late August, in September 2014, Commissioner Chester began to explore options that would allow him to intervene in all 8 underperforming middle schools. Simultaneously, Chris Gabrieli reached out to leaders in Springfield, including the mayor and superintendent, to begin discussing voluntary, aggressive reforms the district could undertake. Gabrieli was in many ways the perfect partner to speak with Springfield, given his strong relationship with Commissioner Chester, previous support of the Lawrence Receivership effort, and his having served as the Chairman of the Springfield Finance Control Board, a state-appointed board charged with overseeing the financial and operations of the city. As a

result of those initial conversations, as well as follow up discussion between Springfield officials and DESE staff, the Springfield School Committee signed on October 9th, 2014 a Letter of Intent (LOI) to explore potential partnership options with DESE and Empower Schools. Per the LOI, the three parties had a 30 day window to “develop and design a plan that would allow the eight Level 4 schools the regulatory environment that they would need to dramatically improve outcomes for students” (Robbins, 2015).

Specifically, the plan called for all 8 middle schools to be placed under the governance of a seven-person board of directors, who would ensure that school maintained a high level of autonomy to make decisions regarding personnel, the school schedule and calendar, student and staff culture, and student and teacher programming. The board of directors, called the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP), consists of four members, including the chair of the board, who are appointed by the Commissioner of Education and three members who are Springfield representatives- the Superintendent, the Vice Chair of the School Committee, and the Mayor or his designee.

In order to facilitate the completion of the steps necessary to formalize the SEZP, I established myself as the DESE point person responsible for making sure that all work streams were completed successfully. Specifically, I first met with Senior Associate Commissioner Johnston to obtain his approval for me to become DESE’s point person on the work. Given my previous leadership of the GtA Initiative, Senior Associate Commissioner Johnston agreed that it made sense for me to take a prominent role with the next phase of the work. Next, I organized weekly meetings of all DESE staff who were working on any of the SEZP work streams. This was done to ensure clear communication and to provide everyone involved a broader perspective of the overall

initiative. These meetings also helped surface any potential problems or issues that needed to be raised and discussed with SPS or Empower Schools. Finally, I attended weekly check-in calls with leaders from SPS, Empower Schools, and DESE intended to monitor progress of the work streams and to trouble shoot any concerns that emerged.

In addition to the DESE and SEZP weekly meetings, I provided direct support to the teams working on the different work streams, including the teams helping with the SEA negotiations, developing the MOU, and overseeing the development of the School Turnaround Plans. For example, I met with the SEA negotiations team to think through developing a new teacher compensation model and to discuss ways to negotiate with the union. When Empower Schools raised concerns about the process for developing school turnaround plans, I brought together parties from all three agencies to discuss the concerns and arrive at an agreed-upon solution. When DESE lawyers voiced questions about different parts of the MOU being developed, I facilitated numerous conversations between them and staff from Empower Schools to discuss and ultimately resolve the issues.

After two months of collaboration between DESE, Empower Schools, and SPS, The Springfield School Committee was scheduled to vote on the final MOU on December 11, 2014. The Board's approval of the MOU would signal the first successful manifestation and adoption of the GtA Initiative within Massachusetts.

V. Strategic Project Results

On December 11, 2014, the Springfield School Committee voted 6 – 1 to adopt the MOU to create the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP). The move followed a vote by the local teachers' union membership two weeks earlier to ratify, by an approval rate of 92%, a new, innovative collective bargaining agreement, which essentially devolves decision-making about working conditions to the school level. The creation of SEZP is ground breaking in Massachusetts, for it allows a district to retain control of its most struggling schools, while at the same time implementing reforms that the Commissioner believes have a strong likelihood of creating significant improvement. In short, the SEZP features many of the interventions that the Commissioner sought in a Level 5 receivership of a school and district, yet the schools remain in Level 4. The creation of the SEZP marks the first successful execution of the GtA Initiative in Massachusetts.

The principle outcome goal of my strategic project this year was to help design and successfully execute the GtA Initiative. This goal was met with the creation of the SEZP. In this section, I will reflect upon two ways in which I played a direct role in helping to achieve the creation of the SEZP and influence several key design features of the initiative.

Defining the Partnership Between ESE and Empower Schools

As stated previously, the GtA Initiative was a partnership between ESE and Empower Schools. However, less clear was what structure the partnership should take. In a meeting early in my residency, the Commissioner made it clear that one of my first priorities was to make a recommendation to him about how to structure the partnership

agreement between DESE and Empower Schools for the GtA Initiative. What would be the advantages and disadvantages, the Commissioner wondered, of having a formalized partnership, versus maintaining a loose affiliation, similar to how the agency works with other groups and stakeholders?

In order to accomplish this goal, I set about researching partnerships between state education agencies and other groups aimed at accelerating school improvement. My initial research led me to focus on several efforts to create state-wide turnaround districts, including The Achievement School District in Tennessee, The Recovery School District in Louisiana, and the Education Achievement System in Michigan. I chose these examples because, in each case, the success of the turnaround district required the presence of high quality school operators to run schools in the turnaround district. And in all of the three cases, the supply of operators had to be increased. This approach was similar to the goals of the GtA Initiative, which sought to increase the supply of operators able to turnaround failing schools. As a result, I wanted to know how the SEAs were working with other organizations to develop the supply of high quality operators. And, critical to the Commissioner's question, how were these SEAs structuring the partnerships with the different organizations?

After reviewing numerous documents, studies, and speaking with officials from the state-wide turnaround districts, I found that, in most cases, the partnerships between SEAs and organizations helping to increase the supply of operators were very informal. For example, conversations with officials from the RSD, New Schools for New Orleans, and New Schools for Baton Rouge revealed to me that while the SEA and the organizations communicated regularly, worked to align goals and efforts, and

occasionally sought grant funding together, the basic structure of the partnership was informal, and not memorialized in an MOU or any other formal way.

Based on my research, I developed the recommendation to the Commissioner that the partnership with Empower Schools not be formalized beyond having a general alignment between DESE's and Empower Schools' goals. I shared this recommendation with Senior Associate Commissioner Johnston, Associate Commissioner Chuang, and several ESE staff prior to presenting it to the Commissioner. The recommendation was well received. Most felt compelled by the notion that formalizing the partnership at this point, when the GtA Initiative was still in development and its application unclear, may have placed unforeseen barriers to the ability to execute the work moving forward by, for example, limiting DESE's ability to procure Empower Schools to complete future work. I presented my recommendation to the Commissioner in early August 2014. After some conversation and debate, he accepted the recommendation. Empower Schools initially disagreed with the recommendation, preferring instead a more formalized partnership (to ensure the work would continue). However, later that month, leaders from Empower Schools vocalized their agreement to not formalize the partnership. This decision proved to be of significant importance with the overall design and execution of the SEZP. In the Analysis section, I will write more about the importance of maintaining an informal partnership between DESE and Empower Schools.

The Role of School Operators and Charter Schools in the GtA Initiative

As initially conceived, one of the central strategies of the GtA Initiative was to facilitate and manage voluntary partnership among ESE, reform-minded cities, and leading non-profit school operators. The theory was that high levels of school-based

autonomy were necessary to increase student achievement, and that non-profit school operators, including charter school operators, were best positioned to leverage the high autonomy and accountability to turnaround failing schools. As a result, the vision was for GtA to incentivize school districts to adopt an Open Architecture district structure, where high quality school operators are empowered to make decisions about staffing, curricula, school schedule, and overall use of resources. The role of the district is limited, but does include ensuring that accountability frameworks are clear and consistently applied, and coordinating centralized services and functions, like enrollment, human resources, facilities, and transportation.

In my RKA, I sought to examine the core theory of the GtA Initiative. As a result of my research, I reached two conclusions. The first conclusion was that, while high autonomy models were a promising and, at times, a necessary ingredient for successful school turnaround, autonomy alone was not sufficient to guarantee success. Instead, the research suggested that most successful turnaround efforts also had an explicit focus on building the capacity of school leaders and teachers so that they were able to leverage the high autonomy into improved student outcomes. As a result, I recommended that the role of the district in the GtA Initiative needed to be more robust than simply devolving autonomy to operators and holding them accountable.

My second conclusion was that individuals (ie principals without affiliation to a school management organization or charter school), with the right level of capacity, support, and training could also be successful in turning a school around. There was no evidence to suggest that school operators or charter schools were better positioned to lead

successful school turnaround efforts. Therefore, I sought to advocate for the inclusion of using individual principals as an option for school turnaround efforts.

Initially, my two conclusions were met somewhat skeptically by leaders at Empower Schools. I engaged in several lively, highly spirited debates with members of Empower Schools, focused particularly around the responsibility of the district to ensure that schools were on a right path to turning around, rather than simply handing autonomy to school operators and then holding them accountable, with the threat of closure (a la The Recovery School District). Based on our conversations, some of my recommendations found their way into the overall design of the SEZP. For example, every school will be required to develop a school operational plan, which lists their goals, core strategy, and plan for increasing student achievement. These plans will be reviewed and approved by the SEZP Board (the SPS district no longer has responsibility for direct oversight of the school, that role has now shifted to the SEZP Board). Additionally, every school is currently receiving support in the form of training and coaching by the National Center on Time and Learning (NCTL) to complete the school operational plans. Moving forward, the vision is for the SEZP Board to ensure that every school has ongoing training and coaching for the school leader and key staff.

My second conclusion, that individual principals with no affiliation to a school management organization be considered as turnaround leaders, merged really well with the final design of the SEZP, in many ways because of the political context in Springfield. In general, there is strong opposition to charter schools in SPS, and any initiative built on using charters or school operators was always going to face an insurmountable battle. Additionally, it has proven very difficult to entice current charter

school operators in Massachusetts to enter the turnaround space. Therefore, given the local opposition to charters and the dearth of supply of available school operators, it became clear to leaders at Empower Schools that using individual principals as turnaround leaders was going to be the best option. As noted in my RKA, the strategy of using individual principals to lead turnaround efforts has lead to promising results in Lawrence, Massachusetts only Level 5 district.

VI. Strategic Project Analysis

So why was the SEZP initiative able to successfully launch? And what was my role and impact in the success of the project? In this section, I will provide an analysis of why things played out the way that they did. I will utilize Mark Moore's Strategic Triangle as a framework to analyze the key events and results to date. I will conclude the Analysis section by discussing ways in which the GtA Initiative and the SEZP could be strengthened.

Strategic Triangle

In his book, *Creating Public Value* (1995), Mark Moore summarizes years of research and presents case studies to make a case for how managers of public enterprises can improve their overall performance, and the performance of their organizations. Moore argues that, just as private sector managers are charged with creating economic (private) value for their companies, public sector managers are charged first and foremost with leading agencies that create public value. In order to assist public sector managers in determining what constitutes public value, and how to act to produce it, Moore created the strategic triangle to "focus the attention of government managers on three complex issues they had to have considered before (or, while!) committing themselves and their organizations to a particular course of action" (Moore and Khagram, pg. 2). Moore's strategic triangle asks public sector managers to consider three fundamental questions (Moore and Khagram, pg.2):

1. What is the important "public value" that their organization seeks to produce?
2. What are the sources of "sources of legitimacy and support" that will be relied upon to authorize the organization to take action and provide the resources necessary to sustain the effort to create that value?

3. What “operational capabilities” (including new investments and innovations) will the organization rely on (or have to develop) to deliver the desired results?

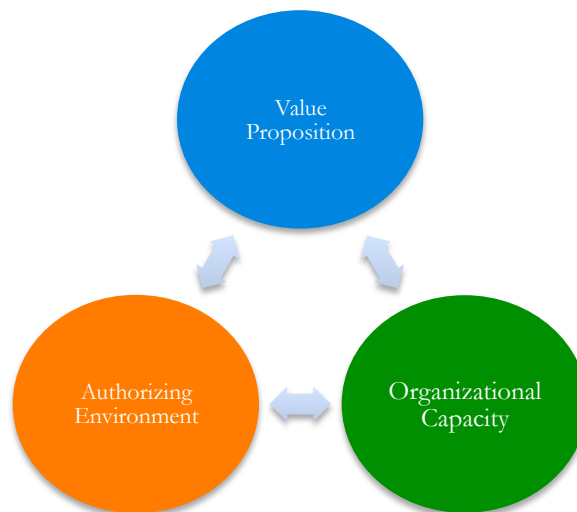


Figure 7: Mark Moore’s Strategic Triangle (*Creating Public Value*, 1995)

Defining Public Value (The Gateways to Achievement Initiative)

The broader public value that DESE seeks to achieve is to ensure that each and every school in the Commonwealth prepares all students, “including students of color, English language learners, students with disabilities, and our low-income population” (DESE Strategic Plan, pg 1), with “the requisite knowledge, skills, and experiences in the academic, workplace readiness, and personal/social domains to successfully navigate to completion an economically viable career pathway in a 21st center economy” (DESE Strategic Plan, pg 1). Standing in the way of DESE delivering on its public value is the fact that many schools in the Commonwealth are not delivering on the desired goal. Specifically, there are hundreds of schools where many students, and particularly those sub groups mentioned above, are not achieving at the desired levels. Additionally, gaps in achievement exist between various sub groups. Therefore, in order to deliver on its public

value, DESE needs to figure out how to dramatically turnaround schools that are dramatically falling short of the desired goal. This is such a priority, that DESE has named turning around the lowest performing schools and districts as one of the four core strategies for the agency.

The 2010 law, *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*, gave DESE significant authority and leverage to focus on turning around the lowest performing schools in the state. Improving the performance of the lowest performing schools helps DESE get closer to the promise of the public value it seeks to deliver. A key part of that strategy, as outlined by the agency's strategic plan, is to appoint receivers to operate chronically underperforming schools and chronically underperforming districts. One challenge that has already been noted is that DESE's organizational capacity to operate schools and districts under receivership is severely limited. Therefore, if DESE is to be successful in its goal of turning around failing schools and districts through receiverships, it requires innovative approaches to ensure that the goals of the receivership are accomplished, while the very real barriers are addressed and overcome.

One of the main reasons that the SEZP was successfully launched is because Springfield Public Schools was, in many ways, the ideal candidate for the GtA Initiative. Springfield had a number of Level 4 schools, many of which had shown years of poor performance. The scale of the challenge in Springfield, and the entrenched nature of the failure, made many schools in Springfield prime candidates for Level 5 receivership. The district, recognizing the very real possibility of having up to 5 of its schools placed in receivership (one of the original Level 4 schools, Chestnut, was split into three different schools in 2014), was eager to engage in conversation to develop solutions that would

meet the conditions of the Commissioner, yet allow the schools to remain outside of state receivership. Therefore, for both the Commissioner and Springfield, the GtA Initiative provided a tremendous value proposition – a way to realize the desired conditions seen in Level 5 receivership, with the voluntary partnership and ownership of local education officials. Given the district's eagerness, and the very real threat of level 5 receivership, the conditions were set for Springfield to become the test ground of the GtA Initiative.

Within DESE, the value proposition of the GtA Initiative, and the SEZP, were not initially embraced by all staff members. While many DESE staff members expressed interest in learning more about the reforms, there was also a healthy level of skepticism. To be fair, much of the skepticism was rooted not in any opposition to the goals of the GtA and SEZP, but rather in an acknowledgment that the team had very limited capacity to support new school or district turnaround endeavors, which require a lot of support to get launched and then also follow up monitoring. Not to mention that these endeavors are expensive! Therefore, the skepticism some surfaced was rooted less in direct opposition to the reforms, but instead driven by concern about organizational capacity.

As articulated in my theory of action, my role was to help explain and advocate for the GtA Initiative within DESE so that it was better received and supported internally. In order to do this, I had to first recognize and accept the notion that capacity was a real issue. Thus, I set about working with Empower Schools to ensure that the first incarnation of the GtA Initiative focused on helping to solve a current challenge for DESE, in a way that alleviated some pressure and reduced the workload, rather than adding to it. One tangible result from this work is that Empower Schools, through early conversations with me and the Commissioner, agreed to focus their efforts on finding a

solution for Springfield, rather than other cities in Massachusetts. Empower Schools would have preferred to stay in Eastern Massachusetts, where it has historically been easier to recruit and attract talent. However, they agreed that addressing Springfield was the best way to ensure that the GtA Initiative addressed a real concern for DESE, and supported DESE's desire to intervene in the district. This decision won over many within the agency, and increased the value proposition of the initiative, especially as other turnaround efforts were proving to be more complicated and required much more of DESE staff's time.

Organizational Capacity

As I have written about previously, DESE staff's capacity to expand school and district turnaround efforts is extremely limited. One of the primary challenges is that there are simply too many schools requiring some form of turnaround effort. As of the 2014/2015 school year, there are currently 293 Level 3 schools and 35 Level 4 schools. Per state law, Level 4 schools that do not make significant progress after three years are candidates to be placed under Level 5 Receivership. The amount of work and funding required to name, support, and launch a Level 5 school or district receivership is tremendous. Relatedly, finding individuals and organization willing and able to serve as receiverships has proved very challenging. These very real challenges have prevented DESE from placing schools into Level 5 Receiverships, even when the schools' underperformance may have warranted it.

Another very serious challenge, as discussed in the introduction, relates to funding to support school and district turnaround efforts broadly, and Level 5 school and district receivership efforts more specifically. As indicated previously, the total budget to

support the four Level 5 Receivership schools for one year is equal to about 40% of the total budget to provide targeted assistance to 332 Level 3 – 5 schools. This funding does not include the financial support DESE provided these schools in the three year prior to receivership. This level of investment in Level 5 Receiverships is not sustainable, given the number of other schools that require intervention and support. The table below shows the total investment that DESE has made in the four schools currently in Level 5 Receivership.

School/Receiver	SIG Funding (3 years)	Planning Grant	Educational Delivery Services	Total
Morgan/ Project GRAD	\$1,275,000	\$300,000	\$470,000	\$2,045,000
Parker/ Pia Durkin	N/A	\$300,000	\$150,000	\$450,000
Dever/ Blueprint	\$2,320,755	\$300,000	\$400,000	\$3,020,755
Holland/ UP Network	\$2,869,384	\$300,000	\$750,000	\$3,919,384
TOTAL	\$6,465,139	\$1,200,000	\$1,770,000	\$9,435,139

Table 3: Level 5 School Receivership SIG, Planning, and Year 1 Operations

As indicated in the introduction, federal SIG funds have decreased by nearly 75% during the past five years. Whereas awards in the past have typically averaged about \$1.5 million per school, the current funding climate will only allow for investments of about \$1 million per school, a 33% reduction. This reduction in funding means that money to support Level 4 schools' improvement plans will not be available for all schools that need it. Additionally, DESE will not be able to fund as many schools as it has in the past. DESE will use a competitive grant process to fund only those schools that submit plans with high likelihoods of success. Of course, an unspoken consequence is that schools that do not receive the SIG funding, and therefore cannot pay for much needed improvement efforts, may become likely candidates for Level 5 Receivership.

Beyond the financial challenges, I also sensed some skepticism from some DESE staff members to the GtA Initiative, and later the SEZP, when they were first proposed. At the time, it was difficult for me to determine what fueled the skepticism. Part of my assessment was that the GtA Initiative, with its initial focus on using school operators and charter schools, went against the ODST team's theory of action, which is all about building district capacity to improve their schools. I now believe that a large part of the skepticism also had to do with a lack of bandwidth, or organizational capacity, to do the work that was required to forward the GtA Initiative, and eventually the SEZP. What surfaced as skepticism was, in fact, an extremely rational and appropriate response to having a lack of organizational capacity to execute the work.

One way in which DESE staff, and particularly those most responsible for designing solutions for level 4 and 5 schools, were hamstrung by a lack of organizational capacity was that there was literally a shortage of staff to help with all of the work necessary to manage existing level 4 and 5 schools. The previous year, four schools had been placed into Level 5 Receivership, which demanded the creation of new systems of monitoring, compliance, and assistance. Additionally, there were several schools that were being run by school operators as part of an earlier compromise with the Commissioner to avoid Level 5 designation. These schools and districts also demanded significant amounts of time and effort. Thus, heading into decisions about Level 5 schools for the 2014/2015 school year, the ODST team was reluctant to recommend Level 5 status for any schools because they recognized that the team did not have enough bandwidth, or organizational capacity, to execute the work at high levels.

Another reason for the initial skepticism to the GtA Initiative may have stemmed from different understandings of the roles and functions of SEA staff. As Brown, Hess, Lautzenheiser, and Owen (2011) argue, the role of SEAs has traditionally focused on compliance. While the duties of a compliance examiner are important, “they are quite different than developing and executing pace-setting, far-reaching initiatives designed to significantly improve teaching and learning” (Brown *et al*, pg. 3) – which is what many SEAs are now charged with. Organizationally, most SEAs, argue Smarick and Squire, were created and structured over decades to do the former, but are poorly positioned to do the latter.

The GtA Initiative, and later the SEZP, were successful because they used “outside of the box” thinking to develop radically new solutions to the problem of how to turnaround failing schools. Designing and executing the initiative required an orientation that embraced creative problem solving, risk-taking, and innovation. Smarick and Squire (2014) argue that SEAs have not historically been very good at fulfilling this function, given that, as public agencies, they have a lower tolerance for risk. However, with the changing role of SEAs, the traits of creative problem solving, risk-taking, and innovation are ones that some agencies are working to develop.

Chris Gabrieli and Empower Schools brought a very different orientation to the work that pushed the boundaries of current practice. Additionally, Gabrieli and his team at Empower Schools have a much higher threshold for risk than DESE, who is ultimately responsible for the success of all schools in the state. As a result, Gabrieli’s orientation is to push innovative, creative solutions, without the same risk as DESE if the initiatives fail. Therefore, Gabrieli and his team were well positioned to propose and develop an

innovative approach to tackling the challenges in Springfield, and were not as aware of the regulatory steps necessary to implement their solutions. In order to do pull off the work, however, DESE staff proved critical in helping to identify regulatory pathways through which the ideas generated by Gabrieli and his team could take hold. In this way, the very different levels of capacity of each organization to do different parts of the work, and the different orientations that DESE and Empower Schools brought, is what eventually made the partnership so fruitful.

Another very important reason why Empower Schools was an ideal partner is because of the resources that they brought to the GtA partnership. As stated previously, federal and state funding to support school and district turnaround efforts is on the decline. Additionally, DESE staff is already stretched thin supporting the many turnaround efforts currently happening across the state. Empower Schools brought with them the equivalent of 3 to 4 full time staff members to work on the GtA Initiative, and later the SEZP. These staff members were funded by a grant Empower Schools received from the Gates Foundation in the summer of 2014. Thus, from a resource perspective, by partnering with Empower Schools, DESE was able to increase its reach and impact. In a climate of decreasing funds to support turnaround efforts, partnerships with organizations that bring with them resources will be key for DESE.

The timing of my arrival at DESE was fortuitous for the success of the GtA Initiative. I began my work in July of 2014, just in time to participate in discussions about Level 4 and 5 school decisions for the upcoming school year. These discussions provided me the insight into what were the biggest challenges DESE was trying to address. In turn, I was able to steer Empower Schools to meet the challenge, and increase the support and

buy-in from DESE staff. Part of the reason for my success was because I had the capacity to help the partnership develop, particularly in the form of time. While many DESE staff members charged with turnaround efforts were consumed by the volume of current work, I was able to spend time with Empower Schools staff generating ideas that could align to the problems that DESE wanted to solve. I then had the time to run those ideas by various DESE staff members to get their input before taking them back to Empower Schools for refinement. The additional capacity I provided DESE to focus on exploring this sort of new, innovative initiative was an important factor, especially since most ODST members were consumed with the large task of monitoring and assisting schools already in level 4 or 5.

Sources of Legitimacy and Support

First and foremost, the SEZP would not have been possible were it not for the strong desire and will of Commissioner Chester to directly engage in the work of turning around underperforming schools and districts through use of receivers. Commissioner Chester's authority for pursuing aggressive turnaround initiatives was provided by state law and regulations. However, having the authority and support of state law was not enough to pull off the SEZP. Because the initiative sought to create voluntary turnaround efforts, the Commissioner would need to gain the support and buy-in of civic, education, business, and union officials in Springfield. If he was unable to gain their support and buy-in, the very real threat existed of having to place the school into receivership. Ironically, Commissioner Chester was able to attain the support of local leaders by sticking to his commitment to name the schools Level 5 if an aggressive turnaround plan was not developed.

The success of the SEZP was in many ways a result of the strong personal relationship between Commissioner Chester and Chris Gabrieli. Gabrieli is a well-known figure in Massachusetts, having twice run for elected office, first as the State's Lieutenant Governor and then as a candidate for Governor. More recently, he founded Mass2020 and the National Center on Time and Learning (NCTL), "a national think tank, which conducts research, supports public policy, and provides direct support to schools across the nation." Specifically relevant to Springfield, Gabrieli served as the Chairman of the Springfield Finance Control Board, a state-appointed board charged with overseeing the financial and operations of the city. Thus, for Springfield officials, Gabrieli was a known quantity, someone who had previously worked in the city and had a grasp of some of the local politics. While initially it was unclear whether or not Gabrieli's background would be an asset or a roadblock, the results were favorable in the creation of the SEZP Board. Therefore, Gabrieli has a significant amount of legitimacy within the state, and amongst local and state officials.

Ongoing communication between the Commissioner and Gabrieli helped the GtA Initiative take shape and evolve, even as the Commissioner's employees were at times skeptical of the approach. At around the same time that the Commissioner was interested in pursuing some form of intervention in Springfield that tackled the 8 underperforming middle schools, Gabrieli began engaging with Springfield Mayor Domenic Sarno and Superintendent Dan Warwick to discuss potential district-led solutions. The conversations provided the Commissioner with a strong indication of how willing Springfield officials were in finding an innovative, aggressive solution to the challenges of the 8 middle schools. The fact that the mayor and superintendent were both receptive

to the Commissioner's desired Level 5-like intervention provided an additional layer of support to the SEZP idea.

Back at DESE, my job was to help embed the GtA Initiative within the options for school and district turnaround efforts. While I knew that I was executing a strategy that was the will of the Commissioner, I determined quickly that using a strategy of "The Commissioner said it, so why isn't it getting done" would not work. Instead, I set about trying to figure out how I could gain the most support and traction for the initiative.

One of the first things I realized was that Russell Johnston, the new Senior Associate Commissioner in charge of the ODST team, would be a key person to help champion the initiative. Given this positional authority, and oversight of the entire ODST team, his support would be critical to moving the initiative forward. I met with Johnston in early August as part of my entry plan process. During that meeting, it became apparent that he saw the GtA Initiative's potential for providing DESE with another tool to tackle the need for district and school turnaround. As a result of that meeting, I sought ways to enlist Johnston as a champion of the initiative internally. One of the key actions I did was to schedule a weekly meeting with Johnston and Cliff Chuang to discuss the progress of the GtA Initiative. Having the weekly meeting allowed me to keep the initiative fresh on Johnston's mind, and allowed me to talk through some of the current ways in which the initiative was developing. The weekly GtA meetings kept Johnston informed about the initiative and allowed him to speak fluently about it during leadership team meetings and meetings related to district and school turnaround. I knew that if staff heard Johnston, who had significant positional authority, speaking about the value of the initiative, I would then be able to build off of his endorsement of the initiative to move the work

forward. In this way, I sought to use Johnston's support to boost the initiative's legitimacy and support when speaking with DESE employees.

I also undertook other actions to build my support and legitimacy with DESE staff to execute the work. Firstly, I meet with numerous individuals and teams to present an overview of the initiative, field their questions, and help enlist staff in the process of refining and influencing the strategy. In this way, I sought to win their support if they felt that they were helping to influence the initiative. In order to build my on legitimacy with staff, I volunteered to help with different projects that would help provide additional capacity to the team, rather than only being seen as hawking a new reform. In this way, I sought to build some "sweat equity" with folks and to develop trust. I needed folks to see me as respectful and committed to the work of the ODST team. Finally, another action I did was to literally move my office into the ODST work area. Previously, my cubicle had been located in the Office of Charter School and School Redesign area of the building. By moving my desk to the ODST area, I sought to convey the message that I was a part of the team. Having also observed communication patterns during my entry plan process, I was convinced that having my work space in the ODST area would increase the likelihood that I would be included in meetings and informal discussions related to school and district turnaround efforts. I needed to be involved in as many conversations as possible so that I could continue to build the case for the GtA Initiative.

In the absence of positional authority, it is important to note that I did enter my residency with some sources of power that I leveraged to do my work. Firstly, I spent the summer of 2013 working at DESE as a fellow in the Office of Charter School and School Redesign. My work that summer included building alliances between the Office of

Charter School and School Redesign and ODST to support school and district turnaround efforts. A report I produced, aimed at synthesizing the turnaround landscape in the state, was well received and earned me a strong level of respect from members of both offices.

Secondly, my affiliation with Harvard and the EdLD program was important. While it did not necessarily earn me immediate respect, it did position me to have people at least give me the benefit of the doubt, and expect that I may bring something of value to the organization.

Thirdly, I entered my residency with the knowledge that my strategic project was focused on executing a strategy that was the will of the Commissioner. As a result, I was successful in having the Commissioner send an agency-wide email introducing me, and sharing a bit about my area of focus, the day I began my residency. I then leveraged that email to schedule introductory meetings with all members of the leadership team, and several other ESE employees. Even so, I quickly recognized some resistance to the initiative, and knew that I would need to employ a different strategy that, “do this because the Commissioner said so.”

Finally, my role as a resident, with the title of Special Assistant to the Deputy Commissioner, was also helpful. Because the focus of the residency is on learning about oneself and how the agency works, I leveraged the framing to gain access to meetings and conversations I otherwise would have not attended. For example, I attended all senior leadership team meetings at ESE and was invited to attend any meeting or event on the Deputy Commissioner’s calendar. This level of access was beyond what I could have accessed if I had a formal role in the agency, and was a real source of learning. It also

allowed me to maintain a much broader view of the agency and its multiple initiatives, which was helpful when moving forward my specific project.

Expanding and Strengthening the Impact of the GtA Initiative and the SEZP

The GtA Initiative and the SEZP are innovative approaches to help turn around underperforming schools and districts. The reforms are focused on structural elements to facilitate school improvement, like creating district-level conditions for schools to have high levels of autonomy. The GtA Initiative and the SEZP also focus on improving instruction by holding principals and their leadership teams accountable for developing and executing strong plans for their schools. The success of the schools and their leaders will be measured by how well students perform on state exams.

Something that is missing from both initiatives is a strategy that explicitly focuses on addressing non-academic challenges faced by children in high poverty schools. This is especially relevant in the SEZP, which is situated in a school district where almost 90% of students are classified as low-income (DESE, 2014). The failure of either the GtA Initiative or the SEZP to focus explicitly on addressing students' non-academic issues is an area that I believe needs to change.

One reason why neither the GtA Initiative nor the SEZP include specific strategies to address non-academic factors impacting students' academic performance is that those of us working on the initiatives fell victim to a false dichotomy being argued in many education circles. On one extreme, there are those who argue that the root of the achievement gap and low performing schools is the impact of poverty on students and communities. Standardized tests do little other than capture the impact of poverty on low-income students' ability to score well on academic metrics. Rather than focusing on

school accountability and standardized testing, the real focus should be on tackling poverty.

Others argued that poverty, while a real factor impacting students' lives, is not an excuse for low academic achievement, and that there are examples of schools across the country who are demonstrating that high poverty students can achieve academically at high levels. The goal is to ensure that teachers have high expectation for all students and are held accountable for increasing academic achievement, despite students' poverty levels. Strong teacher evaluation systems help identify which teachers are successful, which ones need support, and which ones should be asked to leave the profession.

Like all false dichotomies, the answer lies somewhere in the middle. However, finding the right balance of focusing on academics, while also recognizing and addressing impacts of poverty, has proven to be really difficult for the GtA Initiative and the SEZP. One reason is that tackling impacts of poverty seems to go beyond the scope of what schools are designed to do. To use the language of Mark Moore's Strategic Triangle, schools do not have the organizational capacity to execute on a value proposition that includes tackling effects of poverty. Therefore, many schools, and those of us designing the GtA Initiative and the SEZP, choose to focus on what we believe is in our sphere of influence, namely matters that related to teaching and learning.

But focusing exclusively on academic factors is a mistake. The impact of poverty is real and plays a tremendous role in how well students are prepared to achieve on standardized tests. As I have studied the educational landscape in Massachusetts this year, it has become hard to argue against the strong correlation between poverty and performance on standardized tests. In Massachusetts, there is a 30 point achievement gap

between low income and non-low income students on the ELA state exam and a 32 point gap on the math exam. In science the gap is 35 points. Figure 8 below illustrates the current achievement gap in Massachusetts between low income and non-low income students.

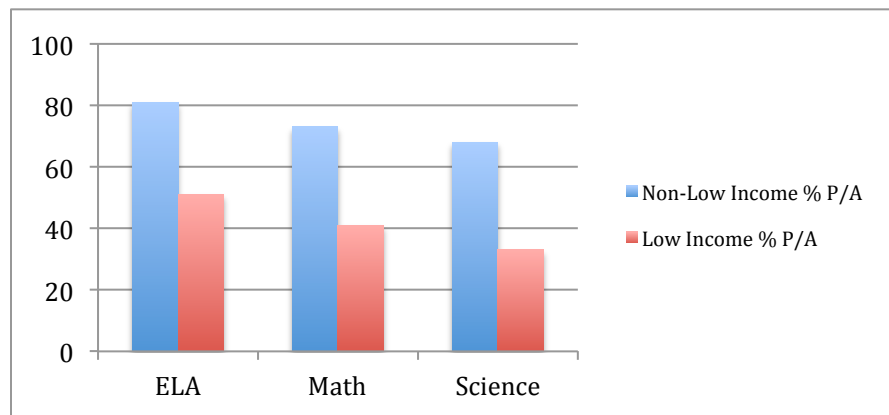


Figure 8: 2014 MCAS Proficient and Advance Rates for Low Income and Non-Low Income Students, Grades 3 – 10.

I have found it hard to ignore the fact that the most underperforming schools and districts in Massachusetts also happen to have extremely large numbers of low-income students, when compared to state averages. For example, while roughly 48% of students in Massachusetts are considered low-income, in Lawrence, the only district currently in state receivership, over 93% of students are classified as low-income. In Holyoke, which the Massachusetts Board of Education is considering placing into Level 5 receivership, 85% of students are classified as low-income. Finally, over 70% of all low-income students in Massachusetts attend one of the 77 districts that are in Levels 3, 4, or 5. The remaining 30% of low-income students are spread out over the 331 districts in Levels 1 and 2 statewide.

To be clear, I am not arguing that low-income students are somehow inherently unable to perform well academically. Nor am I arguing that all low-income students are negatively impacted by non-academic factors that prevent them from performing well on standardized tests. I am arguing that the correlation between high poverty schools and districts and low test scores should not be ignored. If we are committed to helping students from low-income backgrounds succeed academically, we must be prepared to identify and address all factors that are preventing them from doing so, even if those factors are non-academic.

In addition to the recognition that impacts of poverty are real and need to be addressed, I also generally believe that the quality of our public schools, especially in urban areas, can and must be improved dramatically. Addressing academic and non-academic factors is not a “yes-no” proposition, but rather a “yes-and.” The longer we continue to engage in debates starting from extreme positions, the longer we develop strategies that are limited in scope and fail to tackle both the impacts of poverty and the very real ways in which schools must be improved, beginning with the mindset of what is expected of low-income students.

VII. Implications for Self

Through executing my strategic project, I learned many valuable lessons about my leadership. Below I synthesize some of the learning.

A. Sources of Power

Throughout my career, I have worked in schools and organizations that, by virtue of my position, I was granted varying degrees of formal authority. In my most recent role as a school principal, I had the most formal authority in the school, and the most I have ever had in my career. Thus, entering my residency at ESE, it was a good test to work in an environment where I had no formal positional authority, and instead needed to quickly build informal authority to move my work forward.

I entered the residency very familiar with the notions of formal versus informal authority. As such, I was able to recognize right away that I would be operating with zero formal authority, and thus would need to employ appropriate tactics to build my informal authority. This included a focus on build strong relationships with staff, listening attentively, working to understand the problems folks were trying to solve, their incentives, their motivation and fears, and building some “sweat equity” by helping out wherever possible. While I made this assessment fairly early on in my residency, actually executing was a great learning experience. The residency experience confirmed for me that working to build informal authority is one of my strengths, and that I had become lazy in building it as I assumed positions with more formal authority. The residency provided a strong reminder that I need to continue to build and leverage informal authority even as I assume positions with greater formal authority.

B. “Politics with a little ‘p’”

One of my personal leadership goals for my residency was to learn more about the political process in Massachusetts. When I initially set this goal, I assumed that the major learning would be around formal political processes, like working with the state legislature and local elected leaders. And, in fact, I did experience a lot of learning related to formal political processes. However, I also learned a lot from the politics of working in a large bureaucracy, with different individuals and teams that, despite working in the same organization, at times had competing interest and goals. Much of the learning for me this year related to understanding the internal political dynamics of the agency. I then had to determine how to use that knowledge to help accomplish the goals of my strategic project. Relatedly, I had to work to recognize the formal and informal power structures that I needed to access in order to move forward the agenda.

One of the key takeaways for me is that I need to be intentional about working to understanding the political context within which I am operating. Relatedly, I need to use my knowledge of the political context, including the competing priorities and perspectives, to effectively position and accomplish initiatives within the agency. Part of the work here is related to how I build informal authority and trust with different members of the agency.

Another significant learning was that relationships really matter. As stated earlier, the success of the GtA Initiative and the SEZP was in many ways a result of the strong collaborative relationship between Commissioner Chester and Chris Gabrieli. By having been an instrumental partner in the successful launch of the Lawrence receivership, Chris Gabrieli and Empower Schools have developed a strong level of trust with Commissioner

Chester. As such, Chris Gabrieli and Empower Schools at times provide thought partnership to the Commissioner about ways to best support and intervene in the Commonwealth's lowest performing district. While the Commissioner and DESE staff ultimately decided what course of action to take in Springfield, the advice and perspective of Chris Gabrieli and Empower Schools was considered.

My relationship with Chris Gabrieli, developed over three months of consulting work I did for Empower Schools prior to my residency, was also crucial to moving the GtA Initiative the work. Our relationship allowed me to provide feedback about the design and execution of the GtA Initiative that eventually helped create the SEZP. The takeaway for me here is to pay attention to how I am building relationships, and to be more cognizant of how those relationships are actually integral to moving forward important pieces of work.

C. Importance of Advisors

As a resident, I was invited to attend Senior Leadership Meetings. Attending these meetings reinforced for me the importance of building a group of trusted advisors to provide feedback and advice when tackling tough issues. Many of the meetings involved discussion of a potential action the Commissioner was seeking to take. The assembled advisors were central in providing the Commissioner with a broad view of the unintended consequences that might emerge should he decide to take the proposed action. While the group acknowledged the validity of the Commissioner's proposed action and respected that it was ultimately his decision about what action he would take, they were candid and direct with their advice. The reasons the assembled group was so effective in providing solid advice related to their deep knowledge of different parts of the education and

political sectors, their historical knowledge of DESE and MA, and the level of candor and trust they have clearly built with the Commissioner. The Commissioner listened, and as a result of the meeting, often times decided against the course of action he had initially proposed, or significantly modified his approach.

The key takeaways for me are about the importance of building a group of trusted advisors and ensuring that the group has a deep enough level of experience and breadth of expertise so as to provide a broad view of the implications and consequences of different actions. Additionally, I need to pay attention to how I build a climate of openness and honesty within the group, so that I know people are not afraid to provide direct, critical feedback.

D. Multiple Roles of the State Education Commissioner

Part of the benefit of completing my residency at DESE is that I was able to see up close the roles and responsibilities of a State Education Commissioner and his senior staff. The experience left me much better informed about how SEAs work broadly to ensure a strong education system in the state, and how the agency works internally to develop organizational cohesion and a unified strategy to reach the desired results. Specifically, I am also more clearly able to consider the pros and cons of one day aspiring to become a State Education Commissioner. There are a few lessons that I learned from working with Commissioner Chester and his leadership team that I want to capture to inform my work moving forward.

During the Senior Leadership Team meetings, I was struck with how the Commissioner must balance the many roles he is required to occupy. As the state's education leader, he must work to lead a department that keeps the needs of children at

the forefront of everything that they do. The Commissioner works to develop and articulate a coherent vision for how the different work streams of the department fit into the broader goal of improving the quality of education, and life outcomes, for the children in the Commonwealth.

At the same time, the Commissioner must think and act as political player in the MA education and broader state political environment. Actions related to the work of the agency must be viewed through the lens of potential political implications for things like the Governor's race. Additionally, it is clear that the Commissioner and DESE are part of a broader political environment, which includes state government more broadly. As a result, the actions of both the Commissioner and ESE must sometimes be coordinated with other state leader, including the governor.

Related to this, the Commissioner and his staff must be very savvy about how to message and communicate key actions to the broader field. For example, the Commissioner must have clarity about the talking points he wants communicated, and then decide which outlets make the most sense to share his message. The outlets can include media, highly-connected individuals, or other sources. Again, even choosing the right outlets depends on political considerations. There are times when having the Commissioner be the person delivering a message are key, yet sometimes it seems more important to include specific thoughts into the broader narrative, whether or not it is the commissioner who takes the lead. This sort of decision-making process is but a part of the broader political considerations that are inherent in the job of Commissioner.

E. Leadership Really Matters!

Making the observation that “leadership really matters” seems rather obvious. However, having had the opportunity to witness many meetings with the Commissioner and his senior staff, I have begun to appreciate this rather obvious statement in new ways. The experience this year also left me wondering how best to leverage my experience and skills so that I can make important contributions to whatever organization I join next. I also am left with ideas about how to build a strong, diverse team to help an agency achieve ambitious goals.

First off, there are incredibly talented, experienced individuals leading, and working in, every team at the Department. This ensures that the recommendations and work product that make their way to the Commissioner are of the absolute highest quality. Sitting around the table in the Commissioner’s conference room, seeing the many accomplished leaders overseeing distinct pieces of the agency’s work, is humbling and truly remarkable. The quality of the individuals working at DESE, and serving as advisors, is a huge benefit to the Commissioner, as it ensures that the quality and sophistication of their counsel is extremely strong.

At the same time, while the department leads head up the work of their staff, the final decision with key parts of the agency’s work rests squarely with the Commissioner. I did not realize how hands on the Commissioner would be with making some decisions. In many instances, I have observed how the work of a team is to develop a focused set of recommendations to the Commissioner, whose job, in turn, is to ask tough questions about the recommendations and push the staff to come up with new ones. All of this is done in service of the Commissioner having a clear understanding of the issues so that he

can make a final decision. It is a delicate dance, because the Commissioner clearly values the work and input of his teams, and yet his role requires him to be the final authority and public face of the decisions of the agency. The advisors to the Commissioner clearly understand this dynamic as well, which sets up clear expectations that a team's recommendations may not always be adopted. As a strong leader, the Commissioner does not shy away from the responsibility of his role, but rather seems to embrace it.

Working with the leadership team this year made me think a lot about ways to identify needed skill sets in an agency, and then how to work to recruit and hire people who possess them. I also thought about how to help senior leaders, many of whom have overseen entire districts, to focus on only a specific piece of the agency's overall improvement strategy. This can be challenging, I know it was for me, since I generally lean towards leadership positions where I am able to focus on the broader goals and vision for the organization. However, my residency provided an example of how to connect senior leaders to the broader agency goals and strategy, and yet help them focus on a particular piece of the work. Striking this balance is critical if the agency is to attract accomplished, senior leaders to support the many important pieces of its strategic plan.

VIII. Implications for Site

Recommendation #1

Revise the Office of District and School Turnaround's Theory of Action so that it reflects the actual strategies currently being employed to turnaround the lowest performing schools and districts in the state.

The GtA Initiative was built on the premise that high autonomy school models, and district systems redesigned to support schools with high levels of autonomy, are a promising strategy to help turnaround low performing schools. The initiative was built based on the "Open Architecture" strategy employed in Lawrence, the state's first and only Level 5 school district. For example, the role of the central office in Lawrence has been transformed to "support" schools that have a high level of autonomy to make decisions that historically rested with the school district. The approach has required a fundamental shift in the role and staffing of the central office, from being dominant to being supporting.

The focus on granting high levels of autonomy has also been the approach employed by DESE and the Commissioner's to address the four individual schools named Level 5. Upon Level 5 designation, each of the schools was assigned a receiver, who has a wide range of autonomy to run the school. In every case but one, the receiver has been a school management organization.

However, based on my entry plan and the past eight months working to execute my strategic project, my assessment is that the focus on highly autonomous models and Lawrence-like "Open Architecture" districts is not yet fully embraced by all staff within ODST. Furthermore, the strategy in fact is viewed by some within the agency as running counter to the current theory of action for ODST, which states "If the district uses a

continuous cycle of improvement to turn around their lowest performing schools, the district will strengthen its systems of support necessary to continuously improve district and school performance” (DESE Website). Unlike the “Open Architecture” approach, this model seems to maintain the role of the district as “dominant”; that is, the district maintains a high level of control over the schools that it oversees. The tension is that some within ODSST do not see naming a receiver to run a school as in any way building the district’s capacity to improve its schools.

An important step will be for DESE to develop a theory of action for its turnaround work that is inclusive of the current strategies being employed to turnaround the lowest performing schools and districts. This revised theory of action must include a shared definition of what it means to help “build district capacity.” Additionally, beyond merely re-writing an updated theory of action, work must be done to ensure buy-in from current DESE staff directly responsible for supporting turnaround efforts.

Another component of the current strategy that should be better clarified is the focus on who is granted high levels of autonomy. In Lawrence, the Receiver, Jeff Riley, developed and embraced the “Open Architecture” model. As the Receiver, he had the autonomy to develop the specific strategy that he felt would help the district improve. However, with any potential future District Receivers, it is unclear if they will have the same autonomy Jeff Riley did to develop district solutions, or if he/she will be required to implement the “Open Architecture” model.

In many ways, examining and evaluating the current theory of action and the approach with level 4 and 5 schools and districts has already begun, driven in large part by Senior Associate Commissioner Russell. For example, each three of the ODSST team

meetings in 2015 have focused on discussion of some aspect of this tension. However, despite these promising early conversations, there has not been an explicit decision to formally review and, if necessary, revise the theory of action guiding the school and district turnaround work. My belief, however, is that this is something that Senior Associate Commissioner Johnston wants to pursue.

Recommendation #2

Determine if DESE Should Increase Internal Capacity for Developing and Executing Innovative Turnaround Strategies

As stated previously, the current capacity within DESE to support new and innovative school and district turnaround options is limited. The current staff is kept busy managing the existing level 4 and 5 schools, which includes systems of monitoring, compliance, and assistance. Additionally, the orientation of many staff members in the ODST team is understandably rooted within the legal and regulatory constraints that guide the work of DESE. Therefore, the ability to develop and execute “pace-setting, far-reaching initiatives designed to significantly improve teaching and learning” (Smarick and Squire, Pg.4) is limited. With the GtA Initiative, Empower Schools, who has a much higher threshold for risk and is not initially bound by the same considerations for legal and regulatory barriers, was best positioned to provide the innovative ideas that eventually became the SEZP. Because of Chris Gabrieli’s previous experience in Springfield, the organization was also best positioned to execute the plan. In order to pull off the work, however, DESE staff proved critical in helping to identify regulatory pathways through which the ideas generated by Gabrieli and his team could actually happen.

A question for DESE leaders to consider is if they want, or need, to bring some of the capacity for developing and executing innovative solutions to pressing school and district turnaround challenges within the organization, or if they are comfortable accessing that expertise as needed from external partners.

Several other states have decided to bring in-house the expertise for developing and executing solutions for its lowest performing schools. For example, The Recovery School District (RSD) and the Achievement School District (ASD) are both SEA-led efforts to turnaround the lowest performing schools in Louisiana and Tennessee, respectively. Both state-wide districts were created so that the SEA had a direct role in not only identifying struggling schools, but also in operating them. The RSD accomplishes this by partnering with charter school operators to run the schools on its behalf. The ASD follows a similar strategy, but also directly runs some of the schools itself.

Should Massachusetts develop an SEA-led initiative similar to the RSD and ASD? If so, what could the initiative look like? One advantage of creating a structure similar to the ASD, which directly runs some of the turnaround schools, is that it would help DESE avoid the mad scramble that usually ensues to find a school operators willing and able to operate a level 4 or 5 school. With an ASD-like structure, school operators could still be partners to run schools, but DESE would not be beholden to finding one in order to execute its strategy of taking over a level 5 school. To be clear, the work of identifying school operators is currently happening in DESE, and the efforts have borne some positive results. However, it is clear that there are currently not enough school operators to meet the actual need.

What could it look like for DESE to build an ASD-like structure? While some DESE staff would need to remain focused on accountability, compliance, and monitoring, a new team could focus on creating new partnership opportunities between districts, operators, and non-profits, and on directly running schools. The goal is for some of the current level 4 partnerships to continue, since the schools remain under district control and could avoid becoming level 5. The unit running schools would play some of the traditional functions of a school district, like selecting school leaders or operators, approving budgets, and setting overall policy. This unit should have a direct reporting line to the Commissioner, similar to a Level 5 receiver. This would ensure that the unit has the necessary freedom and political cover to execute its work.

There are also several reasons to keep the expertise of identifying innovative solutions and directly running schools outside of DESE. One is that it allows DESE employees to focus on what they do best, and limits the potential for role confusion. DESE could look to different partners when it needs to develop innovative solutions, and have the benefit of sourcing different ideas from multiple sources. Additionally, DESE can leverage the expertise of partners like school operators who have much more experience and capacity with regards to operating schools. This has, in fact, been the current strategy employed by DESE. While the lack of available school operators has in some ways limited the number of schools named level 5, this may in fact be a positive thing, as it requires DESE to pursue a conservative approach and not take on more than it can handle.

Recommendation #3

Prioritize and Incorporate Strategies into School and District Turnaround Efforts that Attempt to Address the Effects of Poverty on Students

As stated earlier in my Capstone, one of DESE's core strategic priorities is to turnaround the state's lowest performing schools and districts. One of the objectives listed as part of this strategy is to "Address students' non-academic barriers to learning" (DESE 2012). One specific strategy utilized by DESE is the Wraparound Zone Initiative (WAZ). Under the initiative, which has been implemented in 33 schools in Massachusetts since 2011, schools implement:

"a proactive system of identifying student needs in key academic and non-academic areas, customizes interventions for high risk students by integrating a range of resources to tailor the student services from both within the school and the larger community, monitors school program effectiveness, integrates in-school social workers with school-wide practices, and connects families to the services of relevant agencies and organizations" (DESE Strategic Plan, pg. 10).

A recent study of Wraparound Zone initiatives in Massachusetts (Ghandi *et al*, 2015) shows that the intervention has had a statistically significant impact on student achievement. The report finds that students in schools participating in the WAZ initiative demonstrated stronger increases on MCAs scores when compared to students who attended schools that did not participate. The increases were seen in performance on both the math and ELA exams. Figures 10 and 11 below illustrate the findings.

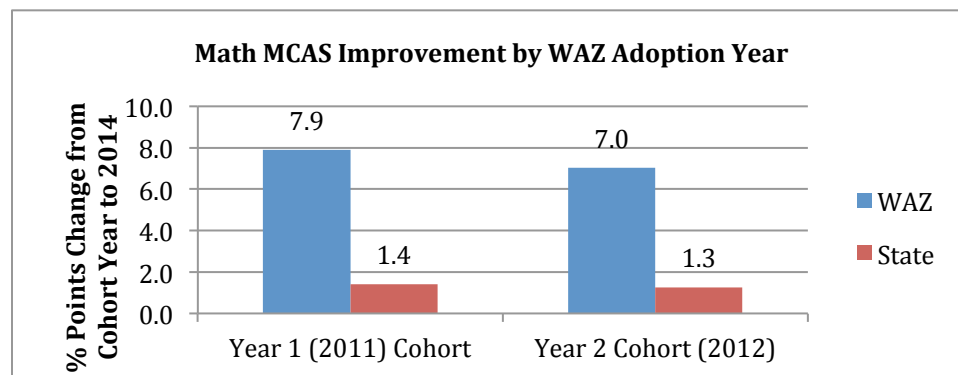


Figure 9: Math MCAS Improvement by WAZ Adoption Year (Ghandi *et al*, 2015)

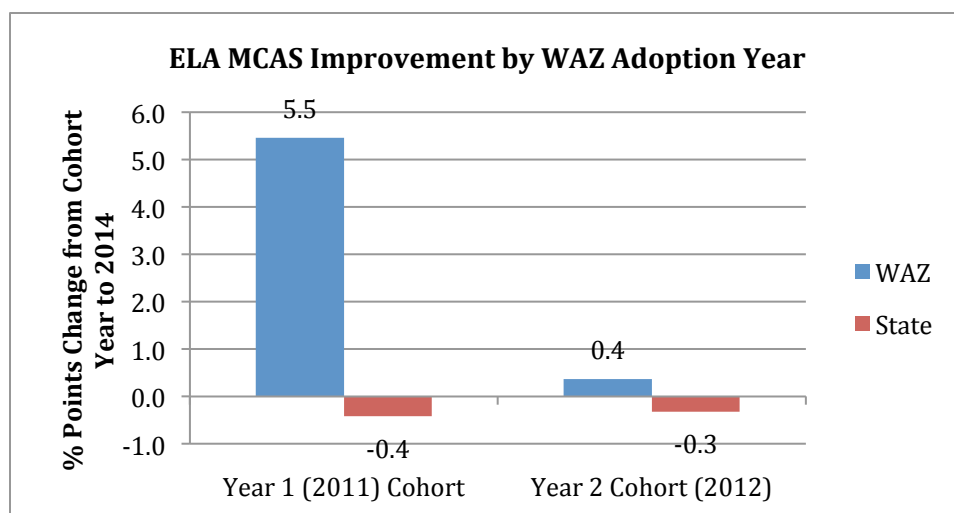


Figure 10: ELA MCAS Improvement by WAZ Adoption Year (Ghandi *et al*, 2015)

However, despite these promising early results, funding for the WAZ Initiative is running out. The reason is that the program was funded by Race to the Top funds, which are ending. My recommendation is that DESE prioritize funding for the WAZ Initiative so that it can be utilized in more districts and schools across the Commonwealth. Doing this will require making the program a part of core operating expenses, rather than programs supported by federal funds.

A related recommendation is to insist that the WAZ Initiative, or a program similar to it, be used in schools and districts in levels 4 and 5. In the SEZP, for example, there are currently no comprehensive strategies or programs like the WAZ Initiative in the 8 zone schools to address the non-academic factors that may be impacting students' ability to success academically. By insisting that level 4 and 5 schools and districts utilize the WAZ Initiative DESE would be signaling that it is committed to tackling the effects of poverty that at times are barriers to students academic success.

IX. Implications for Sector

My residency and Capstone experience have generated many questions and additional areas of inquiry. In this section, I will capture a few.

Recommendation #1

To Ensure the Sustainability of Efforts, SEA-led School and District Turnaround Efforts Must Be Incorporated into SEA's Core Budgets

As I have written about earlier in this paper, while SEAs did occasionally intervene in low performing schools prior to NCLB, the passage of the reform greatly accelerated intervention efforts. For the first time, access to federal funds, which has been the traditional role of SEAs, required a commitment to implement various reforms related to collecting data about schools and students, and on working to improve or restructure struggling schools. The passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), and its revamped School Improvement Grant (SIG) program, placed added pressure on SEAs to aggressively turn around underperforming schools. The Race to the Top (RTTT) Initiative also strongly incentivized SEAs to focus efforts on school and district turnaround efforts, and on other actions aimed at speeding up the pace of education reform, like increasing the cap on charter schools.

Many SEAs have readily accepted the new mandates of intervening in low performing schools, and well as the accompanying federal funds. However, as RTTT funds dry up, many SEAs are face with difficult decisions about how to sustain the work absent the infusion of federal funds. Many states are finding that they will need to cut positions created using RTTT funds, and the fear is that school and district turnaround efforts will thus slow down dramatically. In order to sustain the work, SEAs will need to

figure out how to incorporate the expenses into its core operation funds, which will most likely mean cutting other functions.

The GtA Initiative provides an example of a strategy SEAs may want to consider to incentivize dramatic reform, in a climate of diminishing federal financial support. The GtA Initiative utilizes the SEA's threat of level 5, or receivership, to create action within a district. A partner, like Empower Schools, can then take on the task of providing direct support to the district to develop an aggressive reform strategy that will satisfy the conditions set forth by the SEA. This strategy is effective because it achieves the Commissioner's desired interventions, while not placing the direct burden, or cost, on the SEA for turning around the school.

The GtA Initiative, however, is not without costs. In this case, Empower Schools bore the brunt of the cost, in the form of staff members to interact with DESE and Springfield partners to design and execute the work. The Gates grant of \$650,000 funded the majority of the work. DESE bore some costs, mostly in the form of a DESE Liaison to Empower Schools (I filled the Liaison role), and the time and effort of DESE lawyers and other staff. Much of the work, however, could have been much more efficient; given that newness of the initiative, there were probably more conversations involving multiple DESE employees that may actually have been needed. Moving forward, a team of 2 -3 DESE staff members could handle the majority of the work of generating new turnaround initiatives, while at the same time communicating with other DESE teams.

Recommendation #2

The Federal Government Should Commission Additional Research to Examining the Promise of “Open Architecture”-like District Structures on School Turnaround Efforts

A central finding of my RKA is that, while autonomous school models are a promising ingredient for school turnaround efforts, they are by no means a guarantee of success. The research instead pointed to a more important factor – the leader’s ability to utilize the autonomy to drive results. In many cases, effective leaders lacked formal autonomy over key areas, but found work-arounds to achieve their end goals. Also, some schools with high levels of autonomy, including some charter schools, did not produce improvements. The capacity of the school leader, and the work to develop that capacity, were key levers.

Similarly, it is debatable if districts that prioritize high school autonomy actually generate greater achievement in school turnaround efforts than more traditional districts. Again, while the school-based autonomy may be more present in a Portfolio District, the school leader’s ability to use the autonomy to drive results was still the key factor. Thus, the effort to use school operators to turnaround struggling schools is not always a guarantee for success.

There is an added dimension that I also believe warrants further research. Many states, including Massachusetts, are seeking to give school operators the autonomy to make key decisions about their schools. In the GtA Initiative, the theory was that those who are closest to students are best positioned to make key decisions to address their needs. However, some operators who run multiple schools end up centralizing many functions and actually transfer very little autonomy to the school site. For example, many leading charter school operators, including Mastery Charter Schools and UP Education

Network, have very centralized systems that can be seen in all schools that they operate. Other charter networks that have traditionally favored strong school-based autonomy, like KIPP, are actually moving more in the direction of centralized systems around things like curriculum and instruction. However, these partners are still some of the most sought-after to help turnaround struggling schools.

So why is it that some SEAs, who believe strongly in school-based autonomy, partner with operators that actually transfer very little autonomy to the school site? After all, isn't the centralized approach the same model of a traditional district, which initiatives like GtA seek to disrupt?

My hypothesis is that SEAs care much more about what schools or operators have autonomy from, than whether or not the specific autonomy lies at the school or CMO/EMO level. When a school is failing, the typical calculation is that: 1) The district is dysfunctional and cannot support its schools; 2) The School Committee is dysfunctional and prevents the schools from operating effectively; or 3) The teachers' union is a major roadblock to change and effective practices at the school level. Thus, when naming a receiver, SEAs are seeking to eliminate, or greatly reduce, the influence of the School Committee, District, and/or union on the management of the school. Once removed from the control of these three factors, the SEA has less concern whether the autonomy is shifted to an individual school leader or an operator that manages multiple schools. For many reasons, the operator, with experience running multiple schools, may be a more favorable option to an individual school leader.

X. Conclusion

In many ways, it makes a lot of sense for State Education Agencies (SEAs) to be responsible for turning around the lowest performing schools and districts in a state. After all, SEAs are responsible for the overall quality of education students receive. However, the responsibility, which picked up dramatic speed and importance with NCLB, ARRA and the RTTT Initiative, also demands that SEAs utilize skill sets that they have not necessarily developed over their existence. Additionally, turnaround efforts require funding and support from SEA staff that is already stretched thin. Finally, the scale of the challenge in most states, including Massachusetts, is way too large for one agency to handle alone.

My Capstone documented a particular approach that holds some promise to how SEAs may achieve the goal of dramatic turnaround for schools and districts, while also being very aware of the financial, staffing, scale, and political challenges associated with the work. In a time of diminishing federal and state funds to support turnaround, partnership models that share the financial, staffing, and political burden of such reforms may hold a lot of promise.

However, despite the promise of partnerships like the GtA Initiative, and the support given to it by the Commissioner, it will require some work for efforts such as these to take root in SEAs. When I first entered DESE, I found that many in the agency did not know about the initiative, or did not embrace it because of its perceived conflict with a theory of action that prioritized building district systems and capacity. Additionally, creating and disseminating these sorts of partnerships requires an investment of time, energy, and effort that many SEAs simply do not have. My residency

created the opportunity for someone to have the time to develop the GtA Initiative. Thus, I had the time to ensure that the GtA “solution” was well understood within the agency and that it actually supported real challenges that DESE needed to solve. Some of my specific strategies included:

- Increasing awareness and knowledge of the GtA Initiative amongst key DESE staff members and teams by creating and delivering presentations about the structure and goals of the initiative;
- Imbedding myself as a member of the ODST team and participating in ODST-led meetings related to developing options and plans for level 4 and level 5 district and schools;
- Working to gain buy-in and support for the initiative from key staff with decision-making authority;
- Speaking regularly with Chris Gabrieli and Empower School staff to ensure that the GtA Initiative aligned to DESE’s current priorities.

The results of my Strategic Project were promising, as the initiative eventually was successfully applied to launch the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP). However, despite the successful application of the GtA Initiative, it remains unclear how this approach to turnaround, and indeed the Level 5 Receivership model, fit within the agency’s approach to school and district turnaround more broadly. The SEZP and Level 5 Receivership models emphasize high levels of autonomy for school leaders and receivers, while the Office of District and School Turnaround’s (ODST) theory of action favors a stronger role for the central district. DESE will need to confront and successfully weave these different approaches so that there is greater clarity and buy-in

from staff members, and the schools and districts that they serve, about the agency's strategy and approaches to turnaround.

There also remain many questions for DESE about how it can most effectively tackle the challenge of school and district turnaround. While the GtA Initiative is a potential model, it may not be enough to address the scale of the challenge. Also, it is unclear how much of a factor Chris Gabrieli's specific history in Springfield was in the successful creation of the SEZP. In other words, in places where Chris Gabrieli or Empower Schools do not have strong history, will other efforts similar to the SEZP be able to successfully launch? Finally, DESE will need to determine if it wants to increase its internal capacity to develop aggressive, innovative efforts like the SEZP, or continue to rely on partners, like Empower Schools. Some SEAs have created separate units to directly assume this new function, with varying degrees of direct intervention in schools. Whether or not these sorts of initiatives make sense for Massachusetts, however, are open to debate.

One unique feature of the SEZP that is worth highlighting is that, unlike other school turnaround efforts in Massachusetts, school operators and charter schools are not a main part of the strategy. Instead, individual principals, with elected teacher leadership teams, are responsible for developing and executing the school turnaround plans. There is a lot of promise for using this type of strategy, as it leverages local resources and strengths. One benefit is that it addresses the very real political challenges encountered by approaches that rely heavily on school operators and charter schools. Additionally, the SEZP's principal-led effort is rooted in a strong research base that shows individual leaders can be successful if they have high levels of autonomy and support.

While using a principal-led strategy for turnaround is supported by research, a question remains if the SEZP will be able to provide the level of training and support principals need to effectively use the autonomy to drive improved student achievement. The SEZP Board is currently pursuing a structure that utilizes Chief Support Partners, non-profit education organizations, to provide much of the day-to-day support to school leaders. The model has a lot of promise, and allows individual schools to select a partner that brings expertise that the school most needs. However, as with any new, innovative endeavor, it will be critical for the SEZP Board to measure the effectiveness of Chief Support Partners and figure out ways to get support to leaders if the partners cannot.

Finally, a point I want to emphasize is that we do not have to choose between tackling the effects of poverty on kids on the one hand, and working to improve academic achievement and school quality on the other. The real answer is that we need to do both. Poverty impacts millions of children in the U.S. in deep and meaningful ways. However, adults should never set low expectations of what kids are able to achieve based simply on the child's economic class. There are countless examples of children born into poverty who received tremendous support and encouragement to persevere and achieve multiple definitions of success. However, there are also many more examples that show how difficult it is to escape from the grips of poverty. The paradox is that receiving a high quality education, and graduating from college specifically, has the strongest statistical likelihood of allowing a person born into poverty to access the middle class. Therefore, if we are serious about tackling poverty, we must be equally serious about improving our schools and working to help students graduate from college.

DESE must ensure that Level 5 Receiverships, and efforts like the SEZP, remain committed to improving schools while at the same time tackling ways in which poverty negatively impacts students. The Wraparound Zone (WAZ) Initiative in Massachusetts has demonstrated early promising results. DESE should seek to broaden the WAZ efforts, starting by incorporating such efforts into all Level 5 and SEZP-like partnerships moving forward.

The residency year was one of immense learning. While I am very proud of successfully executing the GtA Initiative and the SEZP, I have many questions about the SEZP moving forward. Perhaps the biggest question is: how well will the reform actually be implemented? While there has been a tremendous amount of work and effort to create the structural components of the SEZP, its ultimate success will be measured by how much student achievement increases in the schools. As such, the promise of the SEZP must be matched by improved outcome for students. And the results must come quickly, in order to buy the SEZP the time, political and community support to continue to operate.

XI. Bibliography

- Abdulkadiroglu, Atila, Joshua D. Angrist, Susan M. Dynarski, Thomas J. Kane, and Parag A. Pathak. 2011. Accountability and flexibility in public schools: Evidence from Boston's charters and pilots. *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126(2): 699–748. doi:10.1093/qje/qjr017
- Aladjem, D. K., Birman, B. F., Orland, M., Harr-Robins, J., Heredia, A., Parrish, T. B., et al. (2010). *Achieving dramatic school improvement: An exploratory study*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from: <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/other/dramatic-school-improvement/exploratory-study.pdf>
- American Institutes for Research. (2011). *School turnaround: A pocket guide*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from: http://www.air.org/files/0669_PG_SchoolTurnaround_Online_d41.pdf
- Brinson, D., & Rhim, L. M. (2009). *Breaking the habit of low performance: Successful school restructuring stories*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation and Improvement. Retrieved from: http://www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/Breaking_the_habit_of_low_performance.pdf
- Brown, C., Hess, F., Lautenheiser, D, Owen, I. (2011). *State Education Agencies as Agents of Change: What Will It Take for the States to Step Up On Education Reform*. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from: <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2011/07/pdf/sea.pdf>
- Brownstein, A. (2012). *Which Way Up? What studies say about school turnarounds*. Washington DC: National Education Writers Association. Retrieved from: <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Policies/Which-Way-Up-At-a-glance/Which-Way-Up-Full-Report.pdf>
- Calkins, A., Guenther, W., Belfiore, G., & Lash, D. (2007). The turnaround challenge: Why America's best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies in our worst-performing schools. Boston: Mass Insight Education & Research Institute, School Turnaround Group. Retrieved from: http://www.massinsight.org/publications/turnaround/51/file/1/pubs/2010/04/15/TheTurnaroundChallenge_MainReport.pdf
- Center for Collaborative Education. (2001). *How Boston pilot schools use freedom over budget, staffing, and scheduling to meet student needs*. Boston, MA.
- Center for Collaborative Education. (2004). *How are Boston pilot schools faring? An analysis of student demographics, engagement, and performance*. Boston, MA.
- Center for Collaborative Education. (2006a). *Progress and promise: Results from the Boston pilot schools*. Boston, MA.

- Center for Collaborative Education. (2006b). *The essential guide to pilot schools: Overview*. Boston, MA.
- Center for Collaborative Education. (2007). *Strong results, high demand: A four-year study of Boston's pilot high schools*. Boston, MA.
- Clark, Damon. 2009. The performance and competitive effects of school autonomy. *Journal of Political Economy* 117(4): 745–783. doi:10.1086/605604
- Cotton, K. (1992). *School-based management: Topical synthesis No. 6*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Education Laboratory.
- Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform. (2002). *Comparing Oakland Unified School District new small autonomous schools to traditional schools*. Oakland, CA: Mills College.
- David, J. (1989). Synthesis of research on school-based management. *Educational Leadership*, 46(8), 45-53.
- Dee, T. (2012). *School turnarounds: Evidence from the 2009 stimulus*. (NBER Working Paper 17990). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w17990>
- De la Torre, M., Allensworth, E., Jagesic, S., Sebastian, J., Salmonowicz, M., Meyers, C., et al. (2013). *Turning around low-performing schools in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. Retrieved from <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Turnaround%20Report%20-%20Long%20Version%20FINAL.pdf>
- Gandhi, A., Slama, R., Park, S., Russo, P., Bzura, R., Williamson, S. (2015). *Evaluation of the Wraparound Zones Initiative Report Four Supplement: Impact Findings for Year 1 and Year 2 Schools*. Waltham, MA: American Institutes for Research.
- Hansen, Janet S., and Marguerite Roza. 2005. Decentralized decisionmaking for schools: New promise for an old idea? RAND Corporation Occasional Paper No. OP- 153-EDU.
- Hanushek, Eric A., Susanne Link, and Ludger Woessmann. 2011. Does school autonomy make sense everywhere? Panel estimates from PISA. NBER Working Paper No. 17591.
- Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., Redding, S., et al. (2008). *Turning around chronically low-performing schools: A practice guide* (NCEE 2008–4020). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice_guides/Turnaround_pg_04181.pdf
- Hess, F. M., & Gift, T. (2009, February). *School turnarounds: Resisting the hype, giving them hope*. Number 2. American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.

Honig, M. I. (2009). *The “autonomy” in new small autonomous schools initiatives: Promises and pitfalls for school district central office administrators*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.

Honig, M.I. (2013). *From Tinkering to Transformation: Strengthening School District Central Office Performance*. American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. Retrieved from: https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/-from-tinkering-to-transformation-strengthening-school-district-central-office-performance_132121762693.pdf.

Kowal, J., Hassel, E. A., & Hassel, B. C. (2009). *Successful school turnarounds: Seven steps for district leaders*. Washington, DC: Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. Retrieved from: <http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/CenterIssueBriefSept09.pdf>

Kutash, J., Nico, E., Gorin, E., Rahmatullah, S., & Tallant, K. (2010). *The school turnaround field guide*. Boston: FSG Social Impact Advisors. Retrieved from: http://www.fsg.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/PDF/School_Turnaround_Field_Guide.pdf?cpgn=WP%20DL%20-%20School%20Turnaround%20FULL

Lawrence Public Schools (2014). *Our Way Forward*. Retrieved from: http://www.lawrence.k12.ma.us/users/0files/flyers/140919_LPS_2014_Performance_Results_vF_Review_9-19.pdf

Lawrence Public Schools Teachers' Union Contract (2014).

Lehigh, Scot (2014, September 25th). Mitchell Chester's Drive for Better Schools. *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved from: <http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2014/09/24/education-commissioner-chester-school-improvement-quest/eMWSgXxNOi1SgpobUWZnKO/story.html>

Malen, B., Ogawa, R., & Kranz, J. (1990a). Site-based management: Unfulfilled promises. *The School Administrator*, 47(2), 30-59.

O'Brien, Eileen M. & Dervarics, Charles J. (2013). *Which Way Up? What research says about school turnaround strategies*. Center for Public Education, National School Boards Association. Retrieved from: <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Policies/Which-Way-Up-At-a-glance/Which-Way-Up-Full-Report.pdf>

Office of Planning, Research, and Delivery Systems (OPRDS) (April 2014). *ESE Strategic Plan*. Retrieved on January 12, 2015 from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Web Site: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/StrategicPlan.pdf>

Ouchi, William G. (2004). Academic freedom. *Education Next* 4(1): 21–25.

Ouchi, William G. (2006). Power to the principals: Decentralization in three large school districts. *Organization Science* 17(2): 298–307. doi:10.1287/orsc.1050.0172

Ouchi, William G., and Pete Goldschmidt (2009). A national study of school district decentralization and student performance. Unpublished paper, University of California- Los Angeles.

Peck, Craig & Reitzug, Ulrich C. (2013). School Turnaround Fever: The Paradoxes of a Historical Practice Promoted as a New Reform. *Urban Education* 49:8. Doi:10.1177/0042085912472511. Retrieved from: <http://uex.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/01/28/0042085912472511>

Robbins, Carolyn (2014). *Springfield moves to place 8 struggling middle schools under 'empowerment zone'*. Masslive. Retrieved from: http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2014/10/springfield_proposes_to_place.html.

Sartain, Lauren, Raymond McGhee, Jr., Lauren Cassidy, Maria I. Abasi, Viki M. Young, Susan E. Spote, and Patrick M. Shields (2009). *High school reform in Chicago public schools: Autonomous management and performance schools*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

Smarick, Andy, "The Turnaround Fallacy," *EdNext*, Winter 2010, Vol. 10, No. 1.

Smarick, Andy, Squire, Juliet (2014). *The State Education Agency: At the Helm, Not the Oar*. The Fordham Institute. Retrieved from: <http://edexcellence.net/publications/the-state-education-agency-at-the-helm-not-the-oar>.

Stuit, D. A. (2010). *Are bad schools immortal? The scarcity of turnarounds and shut-downs in both charters and district sectors*. Washington DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

Terry, David (2010). What's Possible: Turning Around America's Lowest-Achieving Schools. Retrieved on January 14, 2015 from US Department of Education Web Site: <http://www.ed.gov/blog/2010/03/whats-possible-turning-around-americas-lowest-achieving-schools/>.

Viadero, D. (2009, August 4). Research doesn't offer much guidance on turnarounds. *Education Week*, 28 (37). Retrieved from www.edweek.org

Wohlstetter, Priscilla, and Susan A. Mohrman (1996). *Assessment of school-based management*. Available www2.ed.gov/pubs/SER/SchBasedMgmt/index.html. doi: Accessed 10 February 2013.

APPENDIX A: Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership Letter of Intent

A copy of the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership Letter of Intent can be retrieved from the following website: <http://seateachers.com/HTMLobj-2329/Level4LetterofIntentNovember2014.pdf>.

APPENDIX B: Memorandum of Understanding Among The Springfield School Committee, The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, INC., and The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING AMONG THE SPRINGFIELD SCHOOL COMMITTEE, THE SPRINGFIELD EMPOWERMENT ZONE PARTNERSHIP, INC., AND THE DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION FOR THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

This Memorandum of Understanding (“MOU”) is effective as of December 11, 2014 (the “Effective Date”) by and among the Springfield School Committee on behalf of Springfield Public Schools, a Massachusetts public school district and the Superintendent of the Springfield Public Schools (“Superintendent”) (Springfield School Committee, Springfield Public Schools and Superintendent collectively “SPS”), Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, Inc., a Massachusetts nonprofit corporation (“SEZP”), and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (“DESE”) (collectively, SPS, SEZP, and DESE are referred to herein as the “Parties”).

WHEREAS, in October 2014, SPS, DESE and Empower Schools, Inc. entered into a Letter of Intent (“LOI”).

WHEREAS, as of the LOI, DESE had designated as underperforming in accordance with Massachusetts General Law, Chapter 69, §1J the following eight (8) middle schools in the Springfield Public School District: Duggan, Forest Park, Van Sickle, Chestnut TAG, Chestnut North, Chestnut South, Kennedy and Kiley (collectively, or as subsequently modified pursuant to the terms hereof, the “Target Schools”).

WHEREAS, since entering into the LOI, SPS has bargained in good faith with the Springfield Education Association (“SEA”) in order to enter into a restated collective bargaining agreement substantially similar to that adopted by the Lawrence Public Schools.

WHEREAS, as set forth in the LOI, the parties to the LOI have agreed to a plan of shared action to jointly ensure rapid improvement in educational opportunity and achievement for students who attend the Target Schools.

WHEREAS, on November 13, 2014, SEZP was formed as a non-profit Massachusetts corporation.

WHEREAS, Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter, 69 §1J(i) gives the Superintendent the power to select and appoint a non-profit entity who shall have full managerial and operational control of a school designated as underperforming.

WHEREAS, Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 69 §1J provides that the non-profit entity “selected by the Superintendent to operate a school shall have full managerial and operational control over the school as provided in the turnaround plan.”

WHEREAS, as set forth in the LOI, the Superintendent will create and submit to the DESE Commissioner for his approval turnaround plans for all Level 4 Target Schools (as these may be amended or extended from time to time, the “Turnaround Plans”).

WHEREAS, the Superintendent has selected and appointed SEZP to have full managerial and operational control of the Target Schools, as provided by Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 69 §1J and, as such, SEZP shall be accorded all the rights and privileges applicable to SEZP with respect to, arising out of, or in connection with, the Target Schools, the Turnaround Plans, and/or SEZP’s activities as the non-profit entity with full operational and managerial control of the Target Schools, to the fullest extent provided by law.

WHEREAS, the Parties, intend to comply with all existing Massachusetts law and statutes and are desirous of delineating their respective rights and responsibilities to the extent not fully described by the laws of Commonwealth of Massachusetts and to comply with said standards and procedures.

NOW, THEREFORE, in consideration of the mutual covenants contained herein, the Parties hereto agree as follows:

1. Operation under MGL c. 69, §1J of SEZP.
 - a. SPS acknowledges that SEZP has full managerial and operational control over the Target Schools pursuant to M.G.L. c.69, §1J, the Turnaround Plans, and this MOU, as applicable, that SEZP has authority over decision-making for the Target Schools, and that SEZP is responsible for implementing the Turnaround Plans and meeting the goals in the Turnaround Plans.
 - b. SPS will continue to be the Local Education Agency (LEA) for the Target Schools, except as provided in the Addendum A to this MOU.
2. SEZP Annual Budget.
 - a. SPS agrees to provide an allocation to SEZP for the Target Schools (“Target Schools Allocation”) on an annual basis during the term of this MOU.
 - b. The Target Schools Allocation shall be calculated based on a per pupil model agreed upon by SEZP and SPS as described in Appendix A and

applied to future-year projected enrollment of the Target Schools. SPS will use the same formulas and processes to determine the projected enrollment of the Target Schools that it uses for other schools in the district.

- c. SPS will also include in the Target Schools Allocation Title I, IDEA, Title II-A, and Title III funding each year as described in Appendix A. The amount of funding will be determined through a method substantially similar to the model in Appendix A, and will be determined each spring for the following school year through good faith negotiations between SPS and SEZP; if SPS and SEZP are unable to reach agreement in future years, the matter may be resolved as described in Section 17 herein.
- d. *Non-Discretionary Services*: SEZP will purchase services from SPS as identified in Appendix B, and as may otherwise be agreed upon by SPS and SEZP. In addition, SPS will provide transportation and food services to the Target Schools. SPS and SEZP will meet each spring to review the type and extent of non-discretionary services to be provided by SPS during the following school year.
- e. *Discretionary Services*: SEZP will have the option to identify discretionary central support services that the Target Schools will purchase from SPS as identified in Appendix C. The cost of SPS's discretionary central office services shall be based upon the actual cost to SPS of providing those services or a per-pupil rate determined from the total cost of providing the service across the district. SEZP and SPS will annually collaborate on the implementation of Appendix C and shall mutually agree on the use of actual costs or a per-pupil rate for each discretionary service. SEZP and SPS may in good faith adjust this per pupil amount downward if SEZP elects to use only a portion of a service.
- f. The Target Schools Allocation shall not be reduced because of SEZP's receipt of additional funds from sources independent of SPS. SEZP agrees to operate within its Target Schools Allocation plus any other funds that SEZP may receive independent of the SPS, less services purchased from SPS.
- g. Each fiscal year SEZP shall adopt annual operating budgets for the Target Schools as SEZP deems appropriate. In accordance with the requirements of all SPS schools, SEZP shall deliver the plans for how each Target School intends to use its operating budget to the Chief Financial Officer of the SPS (the "CFO") in such form and time frame as s/he may reasonably specify, with a copy to the Springfield School Committee, in no case later than February 1. During the first year of the MOU, SPS and SEZP agree to work together to create operating budgets within a reasonable timeframe for SPS, but no operating budgets shall be required by February 1, 2015. Both SPS and SEZP recognize that changes in the amount of state aid may affect the Target Schools Allocation.
- h. If requested, SEZP shall provide the CFO with copies of a Target School's annual budget and any amendments and modifications thereto, and any

financial data that SPS needs for its financial reporting. The CFO may also request, and SEZP shall provide in response to any such request, additional documentation to support a Target School annual operating budget or any amendments or modifications to its budget. The CFO and SEZP will use their best efforts to resolve any budget disagreements by February 1 of each year.

- i. At the close of the fiscal year, SPS will retain any SEZP surplus funds which will be used to support programs district-wide and in SPS schools that are not Target Schools.

3. Operating Account and Expenditures.

- a. By July 1 of each year, the CFO shall establish one or more operating accounts for SEZP, as agreed upon by SPS and SEZP, in the amount of the Target Schools Allocation (collectively, the “SEZP Operating Account”). Only SEZP and/or its designee(s) shall authorize expenditures from its operating accounts and SEZP may freely move money between its accounts.
- b. Expenditures from the SEZP Operating Account shall be made in accordance with all applicable laws, ordinances, and regulations. In addition, SEZP agrees to comply with all applicable laws and regulations regarding the requirement to expend or encumber all SEZP Operating Account funds by the close of the fiscal year.
- c. SEZP agrees to establish sufficient internal controls governing expenditures from the SEZP Operating Account to eliminate the risk of possible fraud, waste or abuse of funds.
- d. With appropriate documentation, SEZP shall be reimbursed from the SEZP Operating Account for expenses incurred in connection with the implementation of this MOU and/or applicable Turnaround Plans. Such expenses may include salary and benefits for SEZP staff.
- e. All procurement services requested by SEZP will be provided and shall meet all business, operational, and management needs. This is to include processing requisitions, conducting all procurements, processing and executing all contracts and contract amendments (including contracts with school operators and managers), and taking whatever other measures are necessary to expeditiously enable SEZP and Target School purchasing. SPS shall promptly provide technical assistance and advice to enable SEZP cooperation in meeting all procurement requirements.
- f. SEZP shall follow all applicable procurement laws, and SPS shall not refuse reasonable SEZP procurement requests, with all requests given the presumption of reasonableness. If SPS deems a procurement request unreasonable, the Parties agree to an expedited dispute resolution process. If five (5) working days of discussion do not result in agreement, SEZP may appeal the SPS decision to the Office of the Inspector General, whose decision shall be binding.
- g. SPS will provide prompt service in responding to all procurement requests as soon as practical, which generally shall be within one (1) business day

but no more than three (3) business days. SPS shall respond to all requests in the same manner that SPS responds to requests from other SPS schools. SPS agrees to expedite its own procurement processes upon reasonable request in extenuating circumstances and agrees to assist SEZP in its procurement requests to other departments in the City of Springfield.

4. Facilities.

- a. In the same way it does for every school in the district, SPS will work with the City of Springfield to ensure that an adequate facility is available for each Target School and SPS will maintain an adequate facility for each Target School. The Target Schools are currently located at 355 Plainfield St, 1015 Wilbraham Rd, 46 Oakland St, 1385 Berkshire Ave, 180 Cooley St, and 1170 Carew St, Springfield MA. No changes shall be made to the location of the Target Schools without the consent of SEZP and SPS.
- b. SPS shall ensure that the site and facilities for Target Schools comply with all federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and codes and shall be responsible for all costs associated therewith, including utility charges, and will be responsible for performing building maintenance, and when appropriate promptly recommend any capital repairs requested by SEZP.
- c. SPS has processes in place to prioritize maintenance and capital requests from SPS schools. Facilities work requests from SEZP shall be considered promptly and prioritized according to need, using the same criteria as with any other SPS-owned facility. SPS and SEZP will meet each school year no later than December 31 to review any capital and other facilities improvement requests for the Target Schools.
- d. Capital and other facilities improvement requests from SEZP will be prioritized according to need, using the same criteria applied to any other SPS-owned facility. SPS agrees to complete all mutually agreed upon facilities improvements within a reasonable timeline, subject to available funding.
- e. SPS will obtain SEZP's written permission before moving an SPS School which is not a Target School or school program into or out of a facility used by SEZP and before moving a Target School or Target School program to another facility. At all times, SPS shall provide the Target Schools with sufficient facilities to support the full enrollment of all students assigned to Target Schools. SPS will provide appropriate substitute facility(ies) during the renovation of any facility, housing any Target School and Target School students. Following renovation of its original facility, the Target School and its students shall be returned to the appropriate renovated facilities.

5. Special Education and English Language Learners.

- a. SEZP will manage all aspects of special education and specialized language instruction consistent with federal and state statutes and regulations.

- b. SEZP will have the option to purchase from SPS special education and specialized language instruction services, if desired. Subject to applicable federal and state special education statutes and regulations, SEZP will have autonomy over budget decisions regarding staff and services in these areas.
- c. SPS maintains the right to assign students with disabilities and specialized language instruction needs into appropriate programs available at a Target School. However, in the event of any changes to the status quo with respect to special education or other assignment policies or programs, or the implementation thereof, SPS will consult with SEZP and obtain SEZP written consent, given the significant programmatic changes that would be required to implement changes to the status quo. Consistent with federal and state special education statutes and regulations, SPS shall provide SEZP with sufficient notification prior to assigning a student with a high-severity disability at a Target School in order to provide the school with sufficient time to plan to best meet the student's needs. SEZP shall not eliminate any special education or ELL program without the consent of SPS.
- d. As discussed in section 5(e) below, SEZP will coordinate with SPS and may send students with specific special education needs to an SPS School which is not a Target School that has a more appropriate program available. In addition, SEZP may assign students with specific special needs to any Target School if that school has a more appropriate special education program for the identified student.
- e. SEZP retains budgetary autonomy regarding special education staff and programs. In the event that a student with disabilities attending a Target School may need placement out of a Target School (including an out-of-district placement) as determined by his/her IEP team, at least five (5) school days prior to the meeting of the placement team SEZP must issue a written invitation to the appropriate SPS special education department supervisor or director to send a representative as a member of the placement team. SEZP will not finalize such placement decisions without the approval of the SPS special education representative, subject to state and federal requirements. In the event that an IEP team is expected to consider the placement within a Target School of a student with disabilities attending an SPS school which is not a Target School, SEZP will be invited to the student's IEP team meeting. As SPS bears the sole responsibility for funding any out-of-district placements, SPS will have final approval for an out-of-district placement, subject to state and federal requirements.
- f. SEZP shall comply with any and all state and federal laws and regulations regarding the provision of services to English Language Learners.
- g. *Alternative School Placement.* Any SPS student assigned to a Target School can be placed in an SPS alternative school through a process similar to the process used for all other students in the district. SPS and SEZP will work in good faith to implement this process fairly and effectively.

6. Staffing.
- a. *Autonomies.* Target Schools shall have the hiring, staffing, and other talent-related autonomies articulated in the Turnaround Plans as well as those delineated in this MOU.
 - b. Target School employees are solely and exclusively employees of SPS. Target School employees shall not be considered employees of SEZP for purposes of workers compensation, notwithstanding anything in this MOU to the contrary. The sole and exclusive remedy of all Target School employees for any work-related injuries shall be pursuant to M.G.L. Ch. 258 and M.G.L. Ch. 152, §25B, but that such remedy shall not be afforded to employees of SEZP, who are entitled to remedies pursuant to Massachusetts Workers Compensation law at Massachusetts General Laws, Ch. 152.
 - c. *Selection and hiring.* SEZP has the sole discretion to select, retain, and renew the staff for any and all positions at any Target School (including but not limited to faculty and support staff). The selection of staff members shall be in compliance with the applicable federal and state laws and municipal ordinances. SEZP shall determine the appropriate staffing levels in the Target Schools, including the addition of any part-time staff for a Target School.
 - d. The Principal of a Target School will abide by the restated collective bargaining agreements approved by SEZP and in effect during the term of this MOU (the “Target School CBAs”), when selecting staff including, but not limited to, staff for SEA, Administrative Union, and other Union positions, and shall not be subject to the collective bargaining agreements that apply to SPS schools that are not Target Schools, unless SEZP in writing indicates that a specified employee or position (e.g., a centralized SPS employee whose services are purchased by one or more Target Schools) is not subject to the Target School CBAs, in which case the specified employee or position may be subject to an otherwise applicable collective bargaining agreement. SEZP may formulate job descriptions, duties, and responsibilities for any and all positions in Target Schools. SEZP may make adjustments to any of the foregoing each year. Within a Target School, the Principal may unilaterally move staff to other positions within the school if the staff members are properly licensed and certified for those positions.
 - e. Employees at all Target Schools shall continue to be members of their local collective bargaining unit, and are subject only to the Target School CBAs except as provided in Section (d). If a Target School employee is compensated above the standard SPS salary scale, the employee would revert to the SPS contractual salary scale based on experience and academic credentials if that employee leaves a Target School for another position within SPS.
 - f. Teachers in Target Schools may participate in the Springfield Public Schools

transfer process as defined by SPS in consultation with SEZP; Target Schools will also participate in the transfer process with full discretion to accept or reject transfer requests. All SPS teachers are eligible to participate in the transfer process.

- g. During the transfer process, Target Schools may hire, as teachers, Springfield Public Schools teachers who are not providing services at one of the Target Schools at the time of hire. During other times of the year, Target Schools will only hire, as teachers, Springfield Public Schools teachers who are not providing services at Target Schools with the written consent of the SPS Superintendent.
- h. SPS may not place any staff member in a Target School without the consent of SEZP.
- i. In the event that there are any staff displacements due to reorganizations or other changes within any one or more Target Schools, SEZP and SPS will make best efforts to create a process that prioritizes the needs of both SPS and SEZP students and staff members.
- j. *Management and evaluation.* SEZP has full managerial and operation control of the Target Schools. Target School staff is subject only to the Target School CBAs, and, except as provided in Section (d), is not subject to the collective bargaining agreements which apply to SPS Schools that are not Target Schools. Each Target School will have a School Operational Plan document outlining the working conditions and expectations at the school. SEZP may develop its own staff observation and evaluation guidelines for any or all Target Schools consistent with state requirements, and may also develop hiring, induction, professional development, and teacher advancement expectations and processes, school and organizational structures, and a code of conduct for all staff in accordance with all current laws and regulations. SEZP shall provide SPS with any staff observation and evaluation guidelines prior to implementation. As educators will be SPS employees, SEZP agrees to provide SPS, when requested by SPS for the purpose of filing required reports, with educator ratings via the district's online Educator Development and Feedback System (EDFS) for formative and summative evaluations based on the deadlines set forth by SPS.
- k. *Displacement and dismissal.* Target School teachers are subject to the displacement and dismissal processes defined in the Target School CBAs, and shall not be subject to any similar provisions in collective bargaining agreements which apply to SPS schools that are not Target Schools, except as provided in Section (d). SEZP may choose not to renew any SEA or non-SEA staff member consistent with federal and state law and municipal ordinances. SEZP agrees that the dismissal of Target School staff shall be done in accordance with federal and state law and municipal ordinances. In dismissing staff, SEZP shall be bound only by the practices

or procedures established in the Target School CBAs, and shall not be bound by any collective bargaining agreements which apply to SPS Schools that are not Target Schools, except as provided in Section (d). Any dismissal by SEZP of staff shall be a dismissal of such staff from SPS. SEZP shall issue discipline, up to and including termination, to employees in accordance with applicable federal and state laws and municipal ordinances. SPS's Human Resources must be notified of any dismissal prior to action toward the employee.

1. *Processing and notification regarding staff.* SPS agrees that any and all hiring and dismissals of staff for a Target School will be processed in a timely manner through SPS's Office of Human Resources. SPS will aim to ensure all candidates recommended for hire by Target Schools will be fully on-boarded and hired into the SPS system in a timely manner upon receiving all necessary paperwork from SEZP or the pending employee, including the receipt of a satisfactory response from the Department of Criminal Justice Information Services and the national criminal history check. Furthermore, SPS shall be responsible for all aspects of payroll and benefits administration for all staff hired by SEZP to work in the Target Schools, in accordance with federal and state law, and municipal ordinances. SEZP shall provide SPS's Office of Human Resources and SPS's Business Office with timely notification of any staffing changes for the subsequent school year. Such notification shall be in writing. SPS will also coordinate all other applicable Human Resources activities, including tracking and updates of educator certification and timely applications for any relevant state waivers for educators.
- m. *Working Conditions.* The provisions in any collective bargaining agreements except for the Target School CBAs that address working conditions shall not apply to employees at Target Schools. Each Target School will create a School Operational Plan ("Plan") prior to the beginning of each school year. The Plan will be consistent with the applicable Turnaround Plan, if any, and will detail the working conditions for school employees, including but not limited to expected work hours per day and number of work days per year. The Plan shall not be subject to approval by the applicable collective bargaining unit or the Springfield School Committee.

7. Compliance with Law.

- a. SEZP agrees to comply with all applicable federal, state, and municipal laws, rules, regulations, and codes, including, but not limited to: the applicable provisions of the Uniform Procurement Act, M.G.L. c. 30B, M.G.L. c. 71, and 603 CMR §1.00 *et seq.*; the applicable federal, state and municipal laws relating to diversity of students, teachers and other staff; the applicable federal, state and municipal laws protecting the rights and interests of students and staff; the applicable federal, state and municipal laws relating to the expenditure of public funds; and the applicable federal, state and municipal laws relating to education reform. SEZP also agrees to

comply with the civil rights policies of SPS. Students who have special needs or are English language learners will be appropriately identified, assessed, and served in accordance with federal and state requirements. Without limiting the foregoing, SEZP agrees that it shall, in carrying out its responsibilities under this MOU, comply with every provision of M.G.L. c. 268A (the Conflict of Interest Law), M.G.L. c. 30A, §§18-25 (the Open Meeting Law), and M.G.L. c. 4, §7 and c. 66, §10 (the Public Records Law) to the full extent of the applicability of said provisions. SEZP's failure to comply with all material legal requirements may result in termination of this MOU to the extent provided in Section 16.

- b. SEZP agrees that all employment decisions will be made in compliance with applicable federal and state laws.
- c. For purposes of applicable privacy laws governing student and family privacy, SEZP shall be deemed an educational agency or institution subject to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, 20 USC s. 1232g and 34 CFR Part 99. Further, SEZP shall be deemed a "school committee" and its employees as "authorized representatives" for purposes of the Massachusetts Student Records Law, 603 CMR 23.00, et al.

8. Governance Structure

- a. All Target Schools shall be wholly operated and managed by SEZP.
- b. SEZP is accountable to the Superintendent and the Commissioner for the operation and management of the Target Schools and for meeting the obligations set out in the Turnaround Plans. SEZP shall provide timely reports to the Superintendent and Commissioner regarding its implementation of the Turnaround Plans and its operation and management of Target Schools.
- c. SEZP shall be operated and managed by its Board of Directors and shall be independent of SPS and the Superintendent, and exempt from SPS policies as set forth in the Turnaround Plans, as applicable, except as explicitly provided herein. The Board of Directors shall include the Mayor or designee, the Superintendent or designee, the Vice-Chair or designee and four individuals, including the Board Chairperson, selected by the Commissioner.
- d. SEZP shall provide information regarding the implementation of the Turnaround Plans to SPS, as reasonably requested by SPS. Such information shall include progress on meeting annual goals in the Turnaround Plans and shall enable SPS to provide an annual review of the Target Schools detailing whether they have met the annual goals in their Turnaround Plans. The review will be in writing and will be submitted to the Commissioner and the Springfield School Committee no later than June 30 for the preceding school year.

9. Hiring, Evaluation and Dismissal of Principal(s).

- a. SEZP shall select and hire the Principal(s) and set the salary for the Principal(s) of the Target Schools subject to the appointment and salary approval of the Superintendent.
 - i. For a Level 1, 2, or 3 school, the Superintendent shall not unreasonably withhold, condition, or delay appointment of the Principal(s) or approval of the salary set for the Principal(s) by SEZP.
 - ii. For a Level 4 school, the Superintendent shall not withhold, condition, or delay appointment of the Principal(s) or approval of the salary set for the Principal(s) by SEZP.
- b. SEZP shall evaluate the Principal and will submit its evaluation regarding the Principal(s) to SPS's Human Resources for the purpose of record keeping.
- c. SEZP shall have the discretion to dismiss the Principal(s), provided that dismissal of one or more Principal(s) shall be based upon a recommendation submitted by SEZP to the Superintendent.
 - i. For a Level 1, 2, or 3 school, the Superintendent shall not unreasonably withhold, condition, or delay termination in the event that a dismissal recommendation is submitted by SEZP. To the extent that the Superintendent has independent authority, by law, to dismiss the Principal(s), such actions shall be taken by the Superintendent only pursuant to a recommendation from SEZP.
 - ii. For a Level 4 school, the Superintendent shall not withhold, condition, or delay termination in the event that a dismissal recommendation is submitted by SEZP. To the extent that the Superintendent has independent authority, by law, to dismiss the Principal(s), such actions shall be taken by the Superintendent only pursuant to a recommendation from SEZP.

10. Program Coordination with SPS.

- a. *Operations.* SEZP and SPS shall coordinate in the development of operational guidelines relating to Target School staffing (including, among others, adherence to civil service requirements and fair labor practices); budgeting (including, among others, timely submission of annual operating budget in order for it to be approved at same time that SPS budget is approved by the School Committee); student assignment; technology and IT services; facilities; transportation; and business purchasing, and such other operational guidelines as reasonably determined by SPS and SEZP. Such coordination shall be conducted on an on-going basis, as reasonably determined by SPS and SEZP.
- b. *Transportation and School Schedule.* SPS will provide transportation to the students of the Target Schools in a manner similar to how it provides transportation to SPS schools. By the first week of April each year, SEZP will provide SPS with any proposed changes to the Target Schools' schedules, including school start and end times, in order to assist SPS with

identifying effective means of transportation, including late buses and additional bus routes, as requested by SEZP. SEZP and SPS will meet by January 15 of each year beginning in 2016 to discuss Target Schools' starting and ending times in order to assist SPS with identifying effective means of transportation, including late buses, reimbursement for public transportation, additional buses, additional bus routes, or other forms of transportation, as requested by SEZP. SPS recognizes that Target Schools may have longer school days or school years and will accommodate SEZP transportation requests unless they are manifestly unreasonable or financially impractical.

- c. *Technology.* If SEZP purchases from SPS technology services and equipment, SEZP and Target Schools can access SPS' internet services, wireless capacity, and be part of the SPS network. All technology equipment that currently is at facilities used by Target Schools – such equipment including fiber wiring, classroom wiring, racks in closets, copiers, printers, classroom computers, and projectors - will remain where it is and can be used by SEZP, and SEZP shall maintain computers and similar equipment in the same manner as other SPS schools. SPS will support SEZP in removing any technology or other equipment at a Target School that SEZP does not want to use, as SPS would for any other SPS school.
- d. *Curriculum Materials.* SEZP will have the opportunity to perform an inventory of all curriculum materials and associated equipment located in facilities used by the Target Schools. SEZP will have the right to retain possession of any curriculum materials and associated equipment located in the Target Schools. SPS will remove, at no cost to SEZP, any curriculum materials SEZP does not identify to be retained.
- e. *District-wide Activities.* SEZP students will be eligible to participate in district-wide programming and activities, including intramural and interscholastic activities, provided that SEZP coordinates with SPS and that SEZP pays appropriately for access if there are associated costs.

11. Policy Coordination with SPS.

- a. SEZP and Target Schools will comply with all federal and state laws and regulations but are not bound by any SPS policies unless explicitly stated otherwise in this MOU and as set forth in the Turnaround Plans, as applicable. SEZP may adopt SPS policies on matters such as student discipline, school safety, bullying prevention, and staff conduct, or may create separate protocols that meet all legal requirements.
- b. SEZP agrees to submit to SPS a final and approved copy of Target Schools' policies regarding student conduct prior to the start of each school year. SEZP will communicate with SPS regarding any situations that might lead to expulsion of a student.

12. Student Enrollment, Recruitment and Retention.

- a. The Target Schools will be included in all major SPS student recruiting materials, websites, and events on an equivalent basis as any other SPS school. SEZP shall follow the enrollment, recruitment and retention processes currently in place in SPS. Students will be assigned to Target Schools consistent with the district's assignment processes on an equivalent basis as any other SPS school, pursuant to current SPS policies. In the event of any changes to the status quo with respect to enrollment, recruitment, retention or assignment policies or programs, or the implementation thereof, which may impact the Target Schools, SPS will consult with SEZP and obtain SEZP written consent before making the change. SPS acknowledges that SPS intends to enroll eighty percent (80%) of its middle school students (grades 6, 7 and 8) in the Target Schools, with such percentage to be adjusted proportionately to the extent that the number of Target Schools changes because of the formal addition of one or more SPS schools as Target Schools subject to the terms of this MOU, or the withdrawal or termination of one or more schools as Target Schools subject to this MOU.
- b. Any reconfigurations of the Target Schools (e.g., subdivision of a school into smaller schools) will not reduce the number of students who would have been assigned to Target Schools prior to the reconfigurations and will minimize any change in the enrollment zones that feed into Target Schools. SEZP will work with SPS to ensure that the assignment of all students attending Target Schools reasonably minimizes required transportation.
- c. SEZP and SPS will work collaboratively in determining a target enrollment for the Target Schools for each year. Specifically, each year prior to SPS developing its projected student enrollment for SEZP, the SEZP will meet with SPS to review the "target enrollment" for SEZP by grade and school for the following school year and the rationale for such target enrollment. SPS will incorporate this rationale into developing enrollment projections for SEZP as it would for any other SPS school.
- d. SEZP and SPS staff will regularly share data regarding students who have been assigned to SEZP. Specifically, SPS will provide updated lists of students assigned to SEZP on at least a bi-weekly basis.

13. Information Requirements.

- a. SEZP agrees to submit forthwith any information or data relative to its operation and functioning, as reasonably requested and required by SPS.
- b. SEZP agrees to utilize the SPS Student Information System to report student attendance on a daily basis. Target Schools also agree to utilize the SPS Student Information System to report discipline incidences and to update this information on a regular basis.
- c. SPS will provide SEZP staff with access to SPS data systems and will respond to requests for changes in permission levels in a timely manner.
- d. SEZP is not required to implement district-wide predictive assessments that SPS requires of other schools serving the same grade levels. SEZP

has the option of accessing these and any other district-wide assessments (including, but not limited to, mid-year and end-of-year course assessments), but is not required to do so.

- e. Questions as to whether SEZP should report data to DESE separately or as part of SPS that are not answered under this MOU will be answered and agreed upon during the semi-annual review of this MOU.

14. Term of MOU.

- a. The initial term of this MOU is the period from December 11, 2014 through June 30, 2020, unless earlier terminated in accordance with Section 16 of this MOU. Thereafter, this MOU shall renew automatically for five (5) year terms unless terminated in accordance with Section 16 of this MOU.
- b. For so long as this MOU is in effect, SPS agrees to use best efforts to negotiate agreements materially similar to the Target School CBAs, with respect to each Target School not currently subject to the Target School CBAs, and to negotiate new agreements to be effective upon termination of the Target School CBAs and any materially similar agreements, and any successors thereto. SPS agrees not to enter into any collective bargaining agreement with respect to any Target School without the consent of SEZP, which shall not be unreasonably withheld, conditioned or delayed.
- c. During the period from the Effective Date through June 30, 2015, the Parties agree that SEZP is authorized to undertake planning and other preliminary work to enable to begin operations hereunder as of July 1. During the period from the Effective Date through June 30, 2015, SEZP shall have the ability to exercise final authority on evaluation of teachers, principals and other staff of the Target Schools, shall have final authority for solicitation, interview, promotion, and hiring of staff for the Target Schools, and shall evaluate the current Target School facilities. In addition, SEZP shall have full access to visit the Target Schools, meet upon request with principals, teachers and staff, and review all records pertaining to the Target Schools and students at the Target Schools, including such documents as student achievement data and Individualized Education Plans, to enable such planning and preliminary activities to begin. SEZP shall also have full cooperation from SPS authorities and full access to Target School staff and facilities if implementing Acceleration Academies, extracurricular programming, or other supplementary activities between the MOU's Effective Date and June 30, 2015.

15. Insurance.

As long as this MOU is in effect, SPS shall continue to self-insure the Target Schools and all SPS employees providing services at the Target Schools for any claims and/or liabilities arising out of school operations, which would include, without limitation, self-insurance for liability claims made with respect to Target Schools (including but not limited to liability

arising out of or related to the status of SPS as employer or property owner), for employee injury losses, and for property losses to Target Schools facility, including its contents owned by the City of Springfield. Liability of SPS is governed and limited by M.G.L. Ch. 258, and SPS is exempt from state insurance requirements for workers compensation under M.G.L. Ch. 152, sec. 25B. SEZP will endeavor to obtain appropriate insurance coverage for SEZP employees.

16. Termination.

- a. If after sixty (60) days from the Effective Date of this MOU, SPS and SEA have not executed a restated collective bargaining agreement as contemplated in Section 1 of the LOI, any Party may terminate this MOU upon written notice to all Parties.
- b. This MOU may be terminated upon written agreement of all the Parties. From the date of final termination, SPS shall have full control of all SPS-owned or leased facilities housing Target Schools.
- c. In the event that SPS fails to make payment as required hereunder, SEZP may terminate this MOU upon thirty (30) days' written notice to SPS, if SPS does not cure the nonpayment within the thirty (30) day period.
- d. SPS may terminate this MOU for cause subject to the provisions of subparagraph (d) below. For purposes of this provision, "for cause" shall mean:
 - (i) SEZP has substantially failed to meet multiple goals in the Turnaround Plans;
 - (ii) SEZP has failed to manage the Target Schools on a financially prudent basis by operating within the constraints of SEZP's funding;
 - (iii) SEZP has violated any material provision of law with respect to the Target Schools from which SEZP was not specifically exempted and which resulted in material adverse consequences to a Target School; or
 - (iv) SEZP has materially breached any of the material terms and conditions of this MOU.
- e. Prior to exercising its right to terminate this MOU, SPS shall give SEZP and DESE written notice of its basis for terminating the MOU. The written notice shall specify the section of the MOU that SPS is relying on for termination and the requirements for correction of the breach. Upon receipt of the written notice, SEZP shall have sixty (60) business days to remedy the breach.
- f. SPS and SEZP shall have the right to dispute the existence of the grounds for termination of this MOU, and shall have the right to dispute whether any asserted breach has been cured, in each case through the dispute resolution processes described in Section 17.

17. Good faith resolution of disputes.

- a. SPS and SEZP agree to work cooperatively in all actions relating to this MOU, and generally to attempt to avoid disputes. Nevertheless, SPS and SEZP recognize that concerns may arise from time to time relating to the

implementation of this MOU. SPS, at any time, may document any serious concerns that may arise about SEZP's actions that may be limiting progress towards the goals set forth in the Target Schools' Turnaround Plans. SEZP will have thirty (30) days to submit a response in writing to SPS. SEZP, at any time, may document any serious concerns about SPS's actions that may be limiting progress towards the goals set forth in the Target Schools' Turnaround Plans, if such concerns have arisen. SPS will have thirty (30) days to submit a response in writing to SEZP. SPS and SEZP agree to use their best efforts to resolve such disputes in a fair and equitable manner.

- b. *Mediation.* The Parties recognize the importance of promptly resolving disputes. In the event that any dispute arising out of or relating to this MOU is unable to be resolved by the Parties, then either Party may give written notice to the other of a demand for non-binding and confidential mediation. If the Parties cannot agree on a mediator, then the American Arbitration Association shall designate a mediator. If the dispute has not been resolved within sixty (60) days after the effective date of the written notice beginning the mediation process (or longer period, if the Parties so agree in writing), the mediation shall terminate. Written notice of mediation shall toll any action or timeframe described in Section 16.
- c. *Appeal to Commissioner.* After the mediation process or, by written agreement of both SPS and SEZP without first undergoing the mediation process, SPS or SEZP may submit an unresolved dispute to the Commissioner for resolution, with written notice to all Parties. Written notice of submission of an unresolved dispute to the Commissioner shall toll any action or timeframe described in Section 16. SPS and SEZP may present their positions to the Commissioner through witnesses, and documentary and other evidence. Following the presentations, the Commissioner will issue a written decision that will be presumed to be final for all Parties, subject to the right of each of SPS and SEZP to appeal to the Superior Court of Hampden County by bringing an action which identifies the basis for the complaint within thirty (30) days following the Commissioner's issuance of a written decision. There shall be attached to such complaint a copy of the Commissioner's written decision. In the event of a dispute, Massachusetts law will apply.

18. Notices.

All notices, requests, and other communications given to or made upon the Parties hereto, except as otherwise specified herein, shall be in writing and shall be delivered or mailed, postage prepaid, to such party at:

- a. In the case of the SPS:
Superintendent Daniel Warwick
Springfield Public School Department
1550 Main Street
P.O. Box 1410

Springfield, MA 01103

- b. In the case of SEZP:
Christopher Gabrieli
Chair
Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, Inc.
24 School Street Suite 300
Boston, MA 02108
- c. In the case of DESE:
Commissioner Mitchell D. Chester
Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
75 Pleasant Street
Malden, MA 02148

Any Party may, by written notice to the other Parties, designate another address. Any notice to be given under this MOU shall be in writing and shall be considered given when mailed by certified mail, return receipt requested, or by express courier with signed acknowledgement of receipt to the other party.

- 19. Counterparts.
This MOU may be executed in any number of counterparts, each such counterpart shall be deemed to be an original instrument, and all counterparts together shall constitute but one agreement.
- 20. Severability.
If any provision of this MOU or the application thereof is held invalid, the invalidity shall not affect other provisions or applications of the MOU, which can be given effect without the invalid provisions or applications, and to this end the provisions of this MOU are declared to be severable.
- 21. Amendments.
This MOU, and the appendices hereto, or any part of the foregoing, may be amended from time to time hereinafter only in writing and executed by SPS, DESE, and SEZP following good faith negotiation.
- 22. MOU Review.
DESE, SPS, and SEZP agree to a semi-annual review process of this MOU to identify issues that need to be addressed and determine whether amendments need to be made to this MOU.
- 23. Cooperation.
For any grant opportunity identified by SPS or SEZP for itself or a Target School, SEZP will

prepare the grant application and SPS will provide any requested information or data to help support the application. For any grant for which SPS must submit the application, SPS will submit the grant application upon the request of SEZP.

24. Authority of DESE.

Nothing in this MOU should be understood to limit any authority, including any statutory or regulatory authority, provided to DESE or the Commissioner. Following consultation with SEZP and SPS and sixty (60) days written notice to SPS and SEZP, DESE may adjust its participation as described in this MOU upon its determination that such changes are required in light of DESE's statutory and regulatory obligations.

25. Conversion to Level 1, 2 or 3 Status.

In the event that any Target School ceases to have a Level 4 state accountability and assistance designation and becomes a Level 1, 2 or 3 school, SEZP shall continue as governing entity with full managerial and operational control of the Target School pursuant to the terms and conditions of this MOU rather than under the statutory authority of M.G.L. c. 69, §1J. Except as otherwise specifically provided herein, this MOU shall continue to apply to SEZP as manager of a Target School pursuant to this Section. SPS agrees that the continuation of the MOU in these circumstances shall be a component part of the assurances that it will propose pursuant to 603 CMR 2.05(10). During the first renewal term of this MOU, the Superintendent, the School Committee, and SEZP shall meet to discuss and attempt to reach consensus regarding the continued status of any Target School that has become a Level 1, 2 or 3 school.

26. Addition and Withdrawal of Target Schools.

- a. This MOU is intended to govern the relationship between SPS, and SEZP, regardless of how any Target School is restructured, including through integration or affiliation with another school or subdivision. In addition, from time to time, SPS and SEZP may mutually agree that SEZP will have full managerial and operational control pursuant to Massachusetts General Laws Title XII, c. 69 §1J, and pursuant to this MOU, of one or more additional Level 4 schools, and full managerial and operational control pursuant to this MOU of one or more Level 1, 2 or 3 schools. Any such additional schools shall be considered to be Target Schools hereunder.
- b. The Superintendent may in his discretion recommend to SEZP that any Level 1 to 4 SPS school be added as a Target School subject to SEZP governance with full managerial and operational control pursuant to the terms of this MOU, to the full extent permitted by law. Such recommendation must be approved by the Springfield School Committee and SEZP. The Superintendent may in his discretion recommend to SEZP

that any Level 1 to 4 SPS school be withdrawn or terminated as a Target School subject to this MOU. During the first renewal term of this MOU, the Superintendent, the School Committee, and SEZP shall meet to discuss the continued status of any Target School that has become a Level 1, 2 or 3 school.

27. References to Level 1 to 4.

All references to Levels 1 to 4 in this MOU shall refer to the state accountability and assistance designations in effect in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts on the date hereof, and such successor designations as may be implemented from time to time.

28. Entire Agreement.

Except as explicitly provided herein, this MOU and any appendices constitute the complete and entire agreement of the Parties and supersedes, as of the Effective Date, all prior or contemporaneous representations or agreements or undertakings.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the Parties have executed this MOU under seal.

SPRINGFIELD SCHOOL COMMITTEE

On behalf of the Springfield Public Schools and its Superintendent

By: _____
Name: _____

By: _____
Name: _____

By: _____
Name: _____

By: _____
Name: _____

By: _____
Name: _____

By: _____
Name: _____

By: _____
Name: _____

SPRINGFIELD EMPOWERMENT ZONE PARTNERSHIP, INC.

By: _____ Date: _____
Christopher Gabrieli, Chair

COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

By: _____ Date: _____
Mitchell D. Chester, Commissioner

**ADDENDUM A
TO
MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING AMONG THE SPRINGFIELD
SCHOOL COMMITTEE, SPRINGFIELD EMPOWERMENT ZONE
PARTNERSHIP, INC., AND THE DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY AND
SECONDARY EDUCATION FOR THE COMMONWEALTH OF
MASSACHUSETTS**

This Addendum A (“Addendum”) to the Memorandum of Understanding (“MOU”) among the Springfield School Committee, Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, Inc., and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is entered into by and among the Springfield School Committee on behalf of Springfield Public Schools, a Massachusetts public school district and the Superintendent of the Springfield Public Schools (“Superintendent”) (Springfield School Committee, Springfield Public Schools and Superintendent collectively “SPS”), and Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, Inc. (“SEZP”) (collectively, SPS and SEZP are referred to herein as the “Addendum A Parties”). Effective as of December 11, 2014 (the “Effective Date”) in order to set forth their agreements regarding the operation of the MOU in connection with the conversion of any one or more of the Target School to Horace Mann Charter School, Innovation School, or other school status, as follows:

1. Submission of Horace Mann Charter School prospectus, Innovation Plan, or Similar Application.

In the event that SEZP submits a Horace Mann Charter School prospectus or Innovation Plan, or similar application for any Target School for approval by SPS, approval by SPS shall not be unreasonably withheld, conditioned or delayed. So long as this MOU is in effect, SPS shall not approve a Horace Mann Charter School prospectus, Innovation Plan, or similar application for any Target School submitted by any other party without SEZP consent.

2. Conversion to Horace Mann Charter School, Innovation School, or other School Status.

- a. In the event that SEZP submits a Horace Mann Charter School prospectus or Innovation Plan, or similar application for any Target School for approval by SPS, approval by SPS shall not be unreasonably withheld, conditioned or delayed. SPS shall not approve a Horace Mann Charter School prospectus, Innovation Plan, or similar application for any Target School submitted by any other party without SEZP consent.
- b. In the event that any Target School is converted to a Horace Mann Charter School, upon approval of a Horace Mann Charter School application by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, this MOU shall function as an MOU A with respect to such school, upon counter-signature by the board of trustees of the Horace Mann Charter School, subject to the following modifications, and any additional modifications agreed in

writing by the Parties, and such school shall be considered to be a Target School hereunder:

- i. The Horace Mann Charter School shall be an independent Local Education Agency (LEA).
 - ii. The Board of the Horace Mann Charter School shall select and hire the Building Administrator and set the salary for the Building Administrator, subject to the approval of the Superintendent. The Superintendent shall not unreasonably withhold, condition, or delay his/her approval of either the Building Administrator or the salary set for the Building Administrator by the Board of the Horace Mann Charter School. The Board of the Horace Mann Charter School, or representatives of any management organization selected by the Board of the Horace Mann Charter School, shall evaluate the Building Administrator and will submit its recommendations regarding the Building Administrator to the Superintendent in the form of an evaluation, in accordance with all relevant state regulations. Any termination of the Building Administrator, shall be based upon a recommendation submitted by the Board of the Horace Mann Charter School to the Superintendent.
- c. In the event that any Target School is converted to an Innovation School or other school status, this MOU shall function as a management agreement with respect to such Innovation School or Target School operating in such other school status, and the Innovation School or Target School operating under such other school status shall continue to be considered to be a Target School hereunder.

3. Defined Terms.

All capitalized terms not defined in this Addendum shall have the meanings ascribed to them in the MOU.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the Addendum A parties have executed this MOU under seal.

SPRINGFIELD SCHOOL COMMITTEE

On behalf of the Springfield Public Schools and its Superintendent

By: _____
Name: _____

By: _____
Name: _____

By: _____
Name: _____

By: _____
Name: _____

By: _____
Name: _____

By: _____
Name: _____

By: _____
Name:

SPRINGFIELD EMPOWERMENT ZONE PARTNERSHIP, INC.

By: _____ Date: _____
Christopher Gabrieli, Chair

ADDENDUM C: Agreement Between The Springfield Education Association and The Springfield School Committee for the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership Schools. July 1, 2015 – June 30, 2018

A copy of the Agreement Between The Springfield Education Association and The Springfield School Committee for the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership Schools (July 1, 2015 – June 30, 2018) can be retrieved from the following website: http://www.seateachers.com/HTMLobj-2331/Level4Tentative_AgreementNovember2014.pdf.

ADDENDUM D: Various Newspaper Articles About the SEZP

Several articles related to the formation of the Springfield Empowerment Zone

Partnership (SEZP) can be found at the links below:

Springfield moves to place 8 struggling middle schools under 'empowerment zone' (October 09, 2014)

http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2014/10/springfield_proposes_to_place.html#incart_story_package

Chris Gabrieli, former head of Springfield Finance Control Board, makes return to city as founder of Empower Schools (October 14, 2014)

http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2014/10/chris_gabrieli_founder_of_empo.html#incart_story_package

New Authority To Operate Springfield Middle Schools (Dec 12, 2014)

<http://wamc.org/post/new-authority-operate-springfield-middle-schools>

Springfield Empowerment Zone board has first meeting slated in mission to help turn around failing middle schools (February 09, 2015)

http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2015/02/springfield_empowerment_zone_b.html

Vacationing with math? Springfield students give high marks to special classes (April 23, 2015)

http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2015/04/springfield_empowerment_zones.html#incart_related_stories