Linking State and Local School Improvement

The "City of Firsts" Charts a New Path on Turnaround

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OUR APPROACH TO STUDYING THE SPRINGFIELD EMPOWERMENT ZONE PARTNERSHIP (SEZP)

This report is based on a case study of SEZP. In early 2016, we set out to understand the key characteristics of Springfield's turnaround strategy, with a special focus on the advantages and disadvantages compared to other state and local turnaround approaches. Over the course of nine months, we interviewed a dozen officials involved in the design and implementation of SEZP, including state and district administrators, a group of principals working in the SEZP, leaders of a parent advocacy organization and the local teachers union, and representatives from Empower Schools, the Massachusetts nonprofit that helped support the creation of SEZP. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. We also reviewed key documents and student achievement data and tracked media coverage. While this assessment provided us a rich array of information about how SEZP was designed and implemented, we cannot say how it has shaped key instructional practices in schools, which ultimately is the linchpin of any turnaround strategy.

Introduction

In 2014, Springfield Public Schools (SPS) needed a change. The district, located in the western Massachusetts city of Springfield, had tried just about every strategy in the turnaround playbook to improve a set of struggling middle schools. But these efforts failed to generate the desired improvement in student outcomes and left the district at increasing risk of state intervention. District Superintendent Daniel Warwick observed, "We tried everything we could do at the district level [to improve these schools]... We were looking for something different."

Springfield isn't isolated in its effort to improve struggling schools. In recent years, state and district superintendents around the country have turned toward an increasingly diverse array of turnaround strategies and sought to tap capacity in the private and nonprofit sectors. This has included special state-run turnaround districts like Tennessee's Achievement School District, reconstitution efforts like those in the federal School Improvement Grants program, and state takeovers of low-performing school districts in New Jersey and Massachusetts. But success with these efforts has proven uneven at best, and they usually generate significant political pushback.[1]

In 2015, Springfield charted a new path. Drawing inspiration from national efforts to infuse schools with enhanced autonomy and accountability, the district voluntarily ceded operational control of six middle school campuses to the newly formed Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP), an independent nonprofit charged with overseeing the turnaround effort. SEZP offered principals freedom from district rules in exchange for increased accountability for results. These changes, along with a new collective bargaining agreement for teachers working in SEZP and new supports for students and principals, represent a marked departure from Springfield's previous efforts. Their work also stands out among other turnaround experiments being hashed out in legislatures, state education agencies, and district central offices.

In 2016, we set out to understand how SEZP changed the way schools are resourced, staffed, and overseen and how this approach compares to more conventional turnaround strategies such as reconstitution, charter schools, and state-initiated turnarounds. Readers interested in how SEZP was created should read Eric Schnurer's report on this topic.[2]

It is too early to tell whether SEZP will improve outcomes for students, but the model fills a gap for state and district leaders wary of growing conflict over charter schools and state takeovers and looking for new ways to instill transformative improvements in low-performing schools. SEZP offers a "middle way" between previous options: providing more local participation and less controversy compared to either state takeovers or chartering, and committing more deeply than conventional district-led turnarounds to school autonomy, tailored support, and choice of talent. However, all turnaround strategies involve tradeoffs, and SEZP, in offering more compromise and stakeholder involvement, may provide fewer opportunities to carry out the politically difficult changes to schools that some believe will spur good results. And, whether its leaders can make good on their intentions of infusing schools with greater urgency, capacity, and accountability for results depends in large part on the actions they take down the road. Regardless of what happens, Springfield has proven that innovations in local governance can offer new ways for states and districts to come together to support school improvement.

The Origins of SEZP

The history of Springfield, Massachusetts, reads like a classic American story. Like so many cities in the nation's industrial heartland, Springfield was formerly a manufacturing hub, home to Smith & Wesson as well as bicycle, automobile, and motorcycle factories. Like other cities, Springfield's economy struggled in the wake of declines in American manufacturing.[3] As the industrial base left, so did the white middle class; by 2010 almost 40 percent of the city's residents were Latino, compared to less than 10 percent in 1980, and more than a quarter lived in poverty.[4]

But the city also had unlikely assets—namely, a history of pushing the boundaries of what's possible. The first gasoline-powered car and American English dictionary (Merriam-Webster) had their origins in Springfield. This track record garnered its nickname: "City of Firsts."

QUICK FACTS ON SPRINGFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Like other urban districts, Springfield has struggled to adjust to rapid changes in the demographics of the students it serves. As of the 2015–2016 school year, 67 percent of the district's 29,000 students qualified as low income and 16 percent were English language learners, both of which reflect much higher rates than the average in Massachusetts.[5]

The district includes a total of 58 schools:

- 33 elementary schools
- 14 middle schools, 9 of which are part of the SEZP (including two 6th grade academies)
- 11 high schools, one of which will join the SEZP in the 2017–2018 school year[6]

Innovations often have their roots in false starts and growing pressure. For Springfield, the district was in search of a new turnaround solution after years of failed efforts to improve a set of struggling middle schools. And it was under growing pressure as a result of Massachusetts' tough accountability framework, which authorizes the state commissioner to take over schools and districts that fail to improve.[7]

Three of the district's middle schools became at risk of state intervention in 2011 when their performance put them in the bottom 5 percent of schools statewide. The district received additional funding to support a turnaround plan through Massachusetts' School Redesign Grants and was granted exceptions from Springfield's collective bargaining agreement for teachers to extend class time.[8] By 2013, the schools were still struggling and the district sought to jumpstart improvement by partnering with Roland Fryer's EdLabs, a turnaround consulting group that supports school leaders to lengthen their school day, strengthen teacher hiring and professional development, and enhance school culture.[9] But by 2014, the schools remained stuck in the bottom 5 percent, and the progress of three more middle schools had stalled enough to put them at risk of state intervention, too.

As described by Eric Schnurer of the Progressive Policy Institute in a 2017 report, these conditions created a window of opportunity for Springfield.[10] The district worked with partners in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and Empower Schools, a Bay State nonprofit focused on supporting new approaches to district governance, to create SEZP, an independent entity that would oversee and support the turnaround effort. And in late 2014 the local school committee, Massachusetts' version of a school board, voted to voluntarily cede its oversight and operational control of six middle schools to SEZP, a number that later grew to nine as smaller "academies" were created from the larger campuses. The move legally devolved much of the district's authority over the schools to a new nonprofit board charged with overseeing the turnaround effort.[11]

The Building Blocks of SEZP

SEZP brought together both a package of reforms aimed at generating improvement and a new governance model that gives schools much greater freedom to change without needing to ask permission or fear regulatory second-guessing. These pieces work together: bold approaches to turnaround can stall out when confronted with rules and bureaucracy that undermine implementation. Likewise, changes to the rules and structures that surround schools mean little in the absence of new strategies to improve instruction.

SEZP as Turnaround

SEZP brought together both a package of reforms aimed at generating improvement and a new governance model that gives schools much greater freedom to change without needing to ask permission or fear regulatory second-guessing.

SEZP launched a set of turnaround strategies that aimed to improve the capacity of schools to be effective. Schools were granted enhanced autonomy over their operations in return for greater accountability for results. These efforts were buttressed by work to improve teacher and leadership pipelines and offer more tailored support for staff.

As others have observed, teacher and principal capacity is the linchpin of any turnaround effort.[12] Embracing a "build on the best" talent strategy, SEZP launched primarily with existing teachers and principals while actively working to improve schools' access to effective teachers and leaders.[13] The six original middle schools initially retained their existing principals and approximately 80 percent of their teachers.[14]

Increased school autonomy

With the creation of SEZP, principals and teachers gained increased authority over their budgets, hiring, school schedule, curriculum, and approaches to teacher professional development. This reflected SEZP leaders' belief that schools are the "unit of success" and that school leadership teams are better poised to know which people and programs are worth investing in.

This autonomy is captured in three ways. First, schools gained substantial control over their budgets with 80 percent of state per-pupil funding and all federal funds under the discretion of school leadership teams.[15] This meant that schools were no longer required to purchase centrally provided supports, and now had financial flexibility to invest in new curriculum, hire additional staff, or contract with external support providers. Second, schools gained autonomy over key elements of their operations, including the use of time, staff, and materials. School leadership teams gained the freedom to extend their school day—which all did—as well as to adopt new programs for students and staff. Third, with a new collective bargaining agreement in place for SEZP schools, principals gained additional flexibility over staffing, including mutual-consent hiring, an option to provide stipends to teachers who assume additional responsibilities, and enhanced dismissal authority. Principals and district stakeholders in Springfield praised SEZP's commitment to providing schools with more autonomy. As one principal told us, "We have choices that we didn't have before… I don't have to look over my shoulder to make a choice."

The new collective bargaining agreement between SPS and the Springfield Education Association was critical to providing SEZP schools with additional staffing and operational flexibility.

The new collective bargaining agreement between SPS and the Springfield Education Association (SEA) was critical to providing SEZP schools with additional staffing and operational flexibility. The contract, based on Lawrence Public Schools landmark agreement with teachers, eliminated centralized bargaining over working conditions, which often limits the use of time and school-level staff.[16] Now, teacher leadership teams negotiate with school principals directly over working conditions, which become formalized in schools' operational plans. SPS union head Timothy Collins acknowledged that the threat of state intervention helped motivate a search for a new collective bargaining agreement, but he also praised the contract for "democratizing" the decision-making process in schools and providing teachers a greater voice in the turnaround plan. The SEZP board decides all disputes between teacher leadership teams and principals; thus far, none have arisen.

Strengthening school leadership

Principals have generally welcomed these changes. As one principal told us, "The model… fuels me to want to do this work… If people are telling you what to do… why even do the job? What are you there for?" But some principals have struggled under the weight of the rapidly shifting responsibilities. Principals and other officials told us that principals were learning how to manage budgets, design new programs, and make sure teachers felt included, all while trying to drive improvement in student outcomes—no small task.

Anticipating some of these challenges, SEZP sought to bolster school leadership capacity by directly funding a group of national partners to work with school-level teams as they designed and implemented their plans. Principals were paired with a "chief support partner," such as the National Center on Time and Learning (which SEZP board chair Chris Gabrieli founded) or the Achievement Network, to receive hands-on support as they transitioned into new roles.

But capacity-building can only do so much. SEZP's leadership espouses high expectations for schools, and all school leaders currently operate on one-year contracts, though the board is working toward longer extensions as principals accelerate improvement. Principal replacements are viewed holistically; the board considers both weaknesses in current leadership as well as opportunities to bring in fresh talent.

To build a school leadership pipeline for SEZP, Empower Schools supported the launch of the "Founders Fellow" program in 2016. The program aims to identify promising leaders and support them with a one-year planning grant to develop a new school model. The first cohort of the program brought two new principals to SEZP—both veteran charter leaders—who launched 6th grade programs in two existing SEZP middle schools in the 2016–2017 school year. These programs will grow to serve 7th and 8th graders over the next two years, eventually replacing the former middle school programs.

SEZP has also sought to strategically grow existing staff into more demanding leadership positions. In the 2015–2016 school year, the board supported a current assistant principal to attend the National Principals Academy at Relay Graduate School of Education, an effort they hope will help to prepare him for future leadership opportunities in SEZP.

The SEZP board must approve all leadership replacements. In addition to bringing in new principals for two schools, the board approved UP Education Network, a nonprofit operator focused on in-district turnarounds, to take over the management of a third school which had struggled more than other SEZP schools. The SEZP board unanimously approved all three replacements.

Principals told us that the accountability pressures created a cultural sea change in the schools. As one principal said, "Districts have a hard time making people feel accountable. [SEZP] helped to bring fresh urgency to Springfield."

Building a teacher pipeline

Springfield, like other districts in western Massachusetts, has also faced challenges around recruiting new teachers. In partnership with Holyoke Public Schools, another district in western Massachusetts, DESE, and a collection of charter schools working in the region, SEZP launched Teach Western Massachusetts in an effort to enhance teacher recruitment and effectiveness in SEZP schools. The project, supported by TNTP, offered principals a collaborative recruitment campaign as well as help with the hiring process. Participating schools coordinate internet job postings, engage in university and community outreach, and hold in-person and virtual recruitment events, with the aim of making better use of limited recruitment resources. Schools also partner to share staffing best practices and tools. SEZP used the recruitment campaign to tout leadership opportunities for teachers, which include working as teacher leaders to help design schools' operational plans. In the 2015–2016 school year, all SEZP schools opened fully staffed, compared to dozens of positions left open in previous years.

Tailoring school supports

SEZP also refashioned how schools receive support with a focus on "the right supports, not one size fits all."[17] School leadership teams can opt in to district-provided supports around curriculum and professional development, which some do. But they can also choose external assistance providers. The SEZP board arranges for national partners to provide principals and their leadership teams with academic and operational support as they transition to autonomy, and allocates funding for "Empowerment Academies" that provide high-dose tutoring for at-risk students. The district continues to support schools through a set of "non-discretionary services" that schools must purchase, including facilities, maintenance, transportation, and human resources processing. These expenditures are capped at 16.5 percent of the state allocation to schools, though to date, the district has come in under that mark, returning the savings to SEZP.

SEZP as Governance

Many districts around the country are trying to infuse traditional public schools with flexibility and a culture of continuous improvement, but attaining these goals is made difficult by the need to substantially shift the role of the district central office, as well as to support school principals as they pivot into new roles.[18] Traditionally, school districts are charged with both holding schools accountable for results and managing the many details of their operations. As others have observed, performing these oversight and operational roles simultaneously can create conflicts of interest, as when a district-mandated improvement initiative fails.[19]

SEZP's board has opted to delegate operational control to the schools and focus their work on oversight of school principals and their operational plans. The arrangement offers a new angle on what it means for districts to "steer not row."

Like other districts, Springfield manages most school-level programs and dollars centrally and principals possess little control over their budgets, curriculum, or staff. By legally devolving the district's role in oversight and operation of the schools, SEZP offered Springfield a way to circumvent centrally provided initiatives. SEZP is the legally designated "in-district" receiver for all nine middle schools and empowered to make operational decisions. However, SEZP's board has opted to delegate operational control to the schools and focus their work on oversight of school principals and their operational plans. In this way, the arrangement offers a new angle on what it means for districts to "steer not row."[20]

The SEZP board oversees the schools, coordinates support, and acts as a liaison between schools and the district. SEZP's relationship with the district is legally governed by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between SPS and DESE, which limits the role of the district by codifying financial and operational autonomies. The SEZP board is funded with 4 percent of the state per-pupil aid that SEZP schools receive and one-time planning grants of $1.2 million from the state and from philanthropy.

The new collective bargaining agreement was critical to providing SEZP schools with additional staffing and operational flexibility. It provides principals with more control over hiring and dismissal of teachers and offers a way to extend learning time and retain effective staff by using stipends and bonuses instead of universal salary increases. In turn, teachers bought into a plan that offered them a greater voice in school operations and new opportunities for leadership.

Together, these three elements—independent oversight, the MOU, and the new collective bargaining agreement—established new governance for the schools and set the conditions for autonomy and accountability (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. New Governance Sets the Conditions for Autonomy, Accountability

FEATURE	CHARACTERISTICS
SEZP Board	• 7-person nonprofit board responsible for most regulatory and operational issues affecting schools. • 4 members are appointed by DESE (5-year terms); 3 are Springfield representatives (superintendent, vice chair of the local school committee, mayor or designee). • Board oversees SEZP schools, sets achievement targets, and holds principals accountable for continuous improvement. • Board distributes state/federal funds to SEZP schools; 4% is kept for overhead and third-party supports.

Memorandum of Understanding (DESE + SPS)	• SEZP receives 84% of state per-pupil allocation and all federal funds.
	• All schools receive a facility.
	• Limits role of district central office to non-discretionary services.
	  ▪ Services required from SPS (funded via 16.5% of state per-pupil funds):
	  ▲ HR, facilities, transportation, food service, finance
	  ▪ Optional SPS services:
	  ▲ Custodial, academic supports (Special Ed, ELL, curriculum, PD), IT, etc.)[21]
	• Unresolved disputes are referred to the Commissioner of DESE.
	• Schools remain in SEZP indefinitely, subject to performance-based renewal every five years.

Collective Bargaining Agreement (SEA + SPS)	• New agreement between the Springfield Education Association and SPS for all SEZP schools. • All teachers remain employees of SPS and members of bargaining unit. • All working conditions for teachers (e.g., school schedule, programming) are set between teacher leadership teams and each school's principal. • Disputes settled via non-binding mediation, and the SEZP board has the final say. • Teachers working more than 1,540 hours per year receive stipends. • Principals have mutual-consent hiring authority and control promotion and assignment. • Principals have dismissal authority to full extent of law.[22] • Career ladder-based compensation and additional stipends are available at principal's discretion. • Agreement good through June 30, 2018.

These changes enabled the turnaround strategies embraced by SEZP to take root. And with a broader base of membership on the SEZP board compared to the local school committee, principal evaluations and dismissals could be conducted with fewer political risks, a stronger eye toward outcomes, and better access to qualified replacements than is typical in most urban districts.

The collaborative approach was instrumental to getting SEZP off the ground and instilling the effort with, as one official told us, "good karma."

Importantly, these changes preserved a role for the district and local school committee. The SEZP board includes the mayor of Springfield, the vice chair of the local school committee, and the district superintendent, as well as four members appointed by DESE. Everyone we talked with agreed that the collaborative approach was instrumental to getting SEZP off the ground and instilling the effort with, as one official told us, "good karma."

All innovations in governance ultimately hinge on leadership. We cannot say how aggressively the SEZP board will act in the future when it comes to replacing ineffective leaders, or whether principals themselves will shy away from difficult choices around staffing and changes to instruction. SEZP has provided a mechanism for making these decisions, but committing to them depends on the will and capacity of those empowered to act.

A "Middle Way" Between Previous Turnaround Options

SEZP has emerged in a field hungry for new solutions to the challenge of turnarounds. Across the country, state and district superintendents face mounting pressure to take dramatic actions to improve outcomes for students stuck in persistently low-performing schools.

The merits of any turnaround solution are often framed in terms of their impacts on students. The small but growing evidence base on turnaround strategies can point to some successes and some failures, but no reliable scale across state and district contexts.[23]

This lack of scalable strategies is due in no small part to the fact that all approaches to turnaround hinge on good implementation. Any effort to make schools more effective relies on the people working within schools to raise expectations for students, increase the rigor and quality of instruction, and build strong school cultures. All the turnaround approaches reviewed in this study, including district-led turnaround, reconstitution, charter schools, state-led turnaround, and SEZP itself provide mechanisms for enabling these things to happen but no guarantees that they will happen.

All turnaround strategies must also wrestle with a basic fact of politics: any proposal that takes a treasured benefit or tradition away is likely to generate conflict and be subject to renegotiation over the long-term. For those who believe that turnaround requires substantial changes to how schools are staffed and organized, conflict is an inevitable but necessary part of ensuring that all children can benefit from effective schools. And yet, conflict can be the death knell of any turnaround effort if the strategy lacks a strong base of political support. Thus, the likely political and substantive impacts must be weighed when judging the advantages and disadvantages of any turnaround solution.

SEZP's architects sought to carve a path forward on turnaround that borrows parts of alternative strategies while avoiding their points of contention.

Current approaches to turnaround face a variety of challenges (see Table 2). They can be rendered ineffective by the lack of capacity in districts and states to put in place effective incentives, flexibilities, and supports; undermined by political controversies over issues like charter schools, takeovers, and collective bargaining; and destabilized by strong pressures for community oversight. SEZP's architects, led by Empower Schools, Superintendent Warwick, and DESE, sought to carve a path forward on turnaround that borrows parts of alternative strategies while avoiding their points of contention. But all turnaround strategies involve tradeoffs; the SEZP, in offering more compromise and stakeholder involvement, may provide fewer opportunities to put in place the kinds of strategies some argue are necessary to ensure good results.

SEZP's creation grew out of the failures of a district-led turnaround effort at the middle school level, even as Springfield was succeeding in several elementary schools. Like other urban districts, the opportunities for a game-changing turnaround strategy were limited by existing rules around finance, human capital, and oversight. As Superintendent Warwick observed, "There hasn't been any answer to move these schools forward in the present [district] construct." SEZP offered a way to re-engineer how schools were staffed, overseen, and resourced without tackling the far broader and more ambitious effort of reforming an entire district from top to bottom. And it connected the district with external partners who could offer ideas, support, and other resources. But like all governance interventions, SEZP's independent structure could make these changes vulnerable to renegotiation in the future should any of the parties to the agreement change their support.[24]

TABLE 2. Strengths and Weaknesses of SEZP Compared to Conventional Turnaround Strategies

TURNAROUND STRATEGY	WEAKNESSES COMPARED TO SEZP	STRENGTHS COMPARED TO SEZP
District-led turnaround: Working with existing staff, schools receive direction and support.	• District may lack capacity to provide flexibility, support, and oversight. • Traditional CBA may limit implementation of turnaround strategies (e.g., use of time, retaining effective teachers).	• Less potential for conflict with parents, staff, union, and school board. • No "exit strategy" required.
Reconstitution: District replaces principals and/or teachers, and new staff are charged with re-missioning the school and improving outcomes for students.	• District may lack capacity to provide flexibility, support, and oversight. • Traditional CBA may limit implementation of turnaround strategies (e.g., use of time, retaining effective teachers). • May generate unproductive staff turnover. • More potential for conflict with parents, staff, union, and school board.	• No "exit strategy" required. • More opportunities to replace ineffective teachers. • "Fresh start" may ease turnaround challenge.
Chartering: District reconstitutes school as a charter school, which typically replaces all staff.	• May result in enrollment changes and student displacement. • May put financial pressure on district due to enrollment losses. • Demands cross-sector coordination to preserve equity. • More potential for conflict with parents, staff, union, and school board.	• Autonomy, accountability codified via charter. • Easier to recruit operators for new schools compared to turnarounds.
State-initiated turnaround: State assumes enhanced oversight of school or district operations, may result in changes to district administration and school staff.	• Demands substantial state capacity. • Provides less voice for locals. • Less sustainable. • More potential for conflict with parents, staff, union, and school board.	• More leverage to put in place controversial changes to school and district practice.

Source: Author analysis of key strengths and weaknesses of SEZP compared to conventional turnaround strategies. Note that in all cases, the limits of any given strategy depend on conditions in a given state/district. Even controversial strategies can be associated with less conflict under some circumstances. Thus, this assessment only suggests where potential liabilities may emerge.

Skeptics of traditional district-led turnaround efforts point to the baggage of working with existing staff to improve their practice, and the challenges of transforming school culture. Reconstitution aims to avoid these issues by starting fresh with new leadership and teachers who can coalesce around new expectations for students. But these efforts have been plagued by controversy; they often involve mass firings of educators and upheaval for families, who are caught up in the disruption that sometimes comes with changes to school culture and staff. SEZP's "build on the best" strategy focused on targeted replacements and improved support rather than wholesale dismissals of staff. This meant that SEZP had fewer opportunities to replace ineffective teachers, possibly making the changes to schools' missions and cultures more incremental than could be achieved with a "fresh start" approach to turnaround.

"I think the answer in Massachusetts can't be a charter for everything. . . We had great support [from the local school committee] for the initiative as something different than charter[s]."

- Superintendent Daniel Warwick

The state and district could have turned to charter schools to fill the gaps in capacity and changed the conditions under which the schools operated, as many cities have done. But there was little appetite in Springfield for doing so given the state's cap on charter school growth, the uneven performance of local charter schools, and the fear of losing funding and collective bargaining rights for teachers. Nor was it clear that there was a significant supply of willing, proven operators who could work in a turnaround context.[25] As Superintendent Warwick remarked, "I think the answer in Massachusetts can't be a charter for everything... We had great support [from the local school committee] for the initiative as something different than charter[s]."

SEZP's designers deliberately sought to borrow elements of chartering, including enhanced autonomy and accountability for school leaders. But they preserved key family- and staff-facing elements of the district such as neighborhood-based assignment, district-provided transportation to schools, and collective bargaining for teachers, which are often lost when districts authorize new schools through chartering authority. Whether SEZP's modifications to a traditional charter model dilute the impact of the strategy remains to be seen. But for the designers of SEZP it offered a way to embrace key elements of charter schools without igniting the controversy that comes with them.

SEZP offered a way to embrace key elements of charter schools without igniting the controversy that comes with them.

State-initiated turnarounds play an increasingly important role in the turnaround landscape. These range from softer-touch efforts that aim to provide enhanced oversight and support to more disruptive options that engage states in the direct management of low-performing schools or districts. State-initiated turnarounds typically demand significant investments of political and technical capacity and almost always generate controversy as parents, community members, the teachers union, and the school board fight efforts by states to assume larger roles in local public schools. But states are sometimes better positioned politically to pursue disruptive and controversial changes to local school systems.

The threat of state intervention in Springfield helped motivate the parties to search for an alternative turnaround strategy, but SEZP offered a far less controversial approach compared to a state takeover. As one principal remarked, "One thing unique about the [SEZP] is that it's a real partnership between the school committee, the state, and community stakeholders... It has also created more investment and partnership with the district." By ensuring that local officials retained a voice in the schools, SEZP also made sure those officials have a stake in their success. As Chris Gabrieli, CEO of Empower Schools and the SEZP board chair, told us, "Nobody wins if it fails."

Looking Toward the Future

Like all reforms, SEZP is dependent on the goodwill and capacity of state policymakers, leaders in the district, and educators who work in schools. Good results aren't guaranteed, but Springfield's approach to improvement has important advantages, including integration into the rest of the district's ongoing problem-solving efforts. In October 2016, the turnaround strategy got a vote of confidence from the local school committee when they added a struggling high school to SEZP.

State monitoring reports suggest the first year of SEZP's operation produced some improvements in school climate as well as in the quality of instruction and academic interventions—the first steps toward generating improved academic outcomes for students. With only one year of data on student achievement trends, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the success of the turnaround effort, but results thus far have been mixed (see Table 3). Six of the nine schools made progress in accelerating growth in English language arts and/or math, the key metrics that the SEZP board has focused on over the past year, but progress in three others remains stalled.[26]

TABLE 3. Results for Student Growth Are Mixed After the First Year of the SEZP Strategy*

	ELA (PERCENTILE)		MATHEMATICS (PERCENTILE)	
SCHOOL	2014–2015	2015–2016	2014–2015	2015–2016
Chestnut North	24.0	22.0	29.0	34.0
Chestnut South	23.0	37.5	22.0	27.0
Chestnut T&G	33.5	40.0	30.5	31.0
Kennedy	24.0	29.0	22.0	22.0
Kiley	34.0	43.0	39.0	35.0
Duggan	40.0	44.0	41.0	42.0
Forest Park	52.0	45.0	51.0	34.0
Van Sickle IB	41.0	32.0	39	24.0
Van Sickle Academy		24.0		13.0

* Shaded boxes indicate progress over prior year.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015 and 2016 Accountability Data, School-Level Reports. Student growth percentiles measure how achievement for a group of students has grown or changed over time. The state benchmark for SGPs is 50, the historical statewide median.

Time will tell whether SEZP's leaders can make good on the early strategies they have articulated. Our conversations with principals suggest that renewed urgency for improvement has accompanied the change in governance. Whether Springfield can retain this focus in the years to come, especially when they involve difficult changes to school leadership, remains to be seen.

There is no guarantee that the reforms put in place as part of SEZP's creation will be sustained through a leadership transition or pressure to return full control to the local school committee.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for SEZP will come when local leaders inevitably transition into new roles. A new superintendent, union head, or school committee could attempt to undermine the partnership that brought SEZP into being. And lessons from other reform efforts suggest that pressure to return schools to the sole oversight of locally elected boards will be strong. There is no guarantee that the reforms put in place as part of SEZP's creation will be sustained through a leadership transition or pressure to return full control to the local school committee.

Even if the Springfield reforms succeed, replication of the model in other districts and states may be difficult. SEZP wouldn't have been created if not for a superintendent who was willing to seek help and partner in something new, a union that was open to negotiation and compromise, a state chief who was willing to act if local reforms stalled out, and a novel nonprofit organization that was built to support innovations in governance.

It is also possible that taking a subset of schools out of direct control of the district will stall progress on Springfield's broader improvement strategy. It remains to be seen whether ideas piloted in SEZP become rooted more broadly in Springfield.

Skeptics of arrangements like SEZP's point to the inherent limits of working with traditional K–12 stakeholders such as unions and district superintendents. By design, their involvement means that the turnaround strategies pursued will be a product of political compromise. But the reality of education governance in states and cities, which rely in one way or another on democratically elected leaders, means that those who want to improve schools must always balance their desire to work on behalf of children with the need to work effectively alongside adults. Springfield has sought to balance these demands by articulating a strategy that changes how schools are overseen and resourced while carefully seeking stakeholder buy-in and support. Whether the compromise-driven solutions pursued result in a watered-down turnaround strategy or instead a politically sustainable path toward improvement will become evident in the years to come.

Districts that embrace the spirit of SEZP's emphasis on empowered educators and accountability for results must develop turnaround approaches that can deliver on those goals. Innovation zones are growing in popularity and grounded in many of the same ideas as SEZP. But these initiatives frequently do little to change schools' access to flexibility, talent, and support. As a result, they run aground when confronted with entrenched central office initiatives that tie up resources and limit flexibility. Unlike these efforts, Springfield has legally and financially committed to providing schools with the autonomy SEZP's designers believe will spur good results.

Perhaps the most promising part of Springfield's story is that it represents a community coming together on the question of struggling schools. In an era of growing political conflict and frustration with top-down, outsider-driven reforms, Springfield may provide a path forward that avoids many of these points of contention. The real test, however, will be in whether the reforms result in dramatically improved and sustained outcomes for students.

Endnotes

1 Ashley Jochim, *Measures of Last Resort: Assessing Strategies for State-Initiated Turnaround* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).

2 Eric Schnurer, *The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership* (Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute, 2017).

3 Paul N. Foster, et al., *A Demographic and Economic Analysis of the City of Springfield* (Springfield, MA: Regional Information Center, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, 2006).

4 "Census 2000, 1990 Socio-Demographic Trends," Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services, accessed April 7, 2017.

5 "School and District Profiles" (Springfield), Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, accessed April 7, 2017.

6 "Schools in our District," Springfield Public Schools, accessed April 7, 2017.

7 In Massachusetts, all schools and districts are rated on a scale of 1 to 5 by their effectiveness in closing gaps and accelerating improvement in student achievement. Schools and districts that receive a "Level 5" rating are eligible for state receivership. In the case of "Level 4" schools, the district is required to collaborate with the Massachusetts DESE to develop and implement a three-year school redesign plan. For more information, see "Framework for School Accountability and Assistance," Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, August 2012.

8 Schnurer, *The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership*.

9 Carolyn Robbins, "Springfield turnaround school mastermind Harvard EdLabs ends partnership with city," MassLive.com, July 10, 2014.

10 Schnurer, *The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership*.

11 Legally, the board acts as a nonprofit in-district "receiver" for the schools, which is allowed according to the Massachusetts Achievement Gap Act of 2010.

12 Anthony Bryk, et al., *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

13 Empower Schools, *Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership: Overview, Strategy, and Implementation*, (Boston, MA: Empower Schools, 2016).

14 Historically, new hires in the SEZP's schools have ranged between approximately 16 and 18 percent of all teachers. Per the terms of the MOU, SEZP is liable for the costs of any teachers displaced who cannot find a position elsewhere. Through its two years of operation, just one displaced teacher has not secured a position and SEZP board bears the associated salary costs.

15 It is worth noting that this is the highest rate of budgetary autonomy that we have observed in any urban district.

16 See "Lawrence Public Schools Tentative Collective Bargaining Agreement," Lawrence Teachers' Union, accessed April 7, 2017; and "Agreement Between The Springfield Education Association and The Springfield School Committee for the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership Schools," Springfield Education Association, accessed April 7, 2017.

17 Empower Schools, *Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership: Overview, Strategy, and Implementation*, (Boston, MA: Empower Schools, 2016).

18 Betheny Gross and Ashley Jochim, *Incomplete Reform in Baltimore* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).

19 David Osborne and Will Marshall, "To Reduce Inequality, Reinvent Public Schools." Political memo sent to United States presidential candidates from the Progressive Policy Institute, March 9, 2016.

20 David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1992).

21 Costs for any out-of-district placements are borne by the district. The district also provides liability insurance for all SEZP schools in the same fashion it does for other SPS schools.

22 Under Massachusetts state law, teachers awarded "professional status" or tenure cannot be dismissed without just cause and removal requires a hearing. Lower standards of proof apply for "Level 4" schools, a status all SEZP schools currently possess.

23 Supporters of charter schools can point to evidence of improved effectiveness and scale over time. But there remains substantial heterogeneity in their results across state and district contexts with implementation factors (e.g., authorizing, philanthropic support, and availability of high quality providers) enabling or inhibiting the effectiveness of the sector.

24 The MOU between DESE and SPS has a five-year term and is auto-renewed as long as SEZP schools meet performance benchmarks. In that sense, institutional stability is high. However, politics can put pressure on policymakers to revise (or renege) on their agreements. Thus, all institutions are premised on sustainable political support for their existence.

25 Charter schools play into the turnaround context in two ways. One possibility is to leverage charter schools as a strategy for growing the number of quality seats in a city. This enables individual students to gain access to better educational opportunities, but it does little to address the instructional challenges in the city's lowest-achieving schools. The second possibility leverages charter schools to manage whole-school turnaround in a neighborhood school context, sometimes via a restart where the operator phases in one grade at a time. This is the strategy used in Tennessee's Achievement School District. Very few of the nation's charter schools operate in the latter context.

26 We can't attribute the progress or lack thereof to the reform strategies put in place under SEZP as these data do not account for changes in school demographics.

About This Report

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