



Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.
Commissioner

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
From: Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D., Commissioner
Date: January 15, 2016
Subject: Commissioner's Recommendation to Declare the Southbridge Public School District a "Chronically Underperforming" (Level 5) District

At the meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education on December 15, 2015, you received an overview presentation of the Southbridge Public Schools District Review Report, and I indicated my grave concerns about the district's performance, leadership, and governance. This memorandum serves as my formal recommendation for the Board to declare the Southbridge Public Schools a "chronically underperforming" (Level 5) district, thus placing the school district into state receivership under Mass. Gen. Laws Chapter 69, s. 1K, as amended by the 2010 *Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*. Below I outline the context for my recommendation as well as the steps that will follow should the Board vote to accept my recommendation.

Despite significant effort over the past dozen years by educators and students in the district, as well as efforts by the Commonwealth to support educational improvement, low academic performance, low graduation rates, and unstable leadership continue to characterize the Southbridge Public Schools. State law provides important autonomies and authorities to be used in these instances in which low student achievement is pervasive and persistent – and for the express purpose of securing the “rapid improvement of the academic achievement of students in the district.”

We will use our meeting on Monday evening, January 25, to hear from Southbridge town and district officials and members of the public regarding the proposed receivership, as provided by the Board’s regulations:

School district and municipal officials, including the school committee, as well as the local teachers’ union or association president or designee, a representative of the local parent organization, and members of the public, shall have an opportunity to be heard by the Board before final action by the Board to place the district in Level 5. 603 CMR 2.06(1)(f)

The Monday evening session will be held in Southbridge. On Tuesday, January 26, the Board will continue its discussion of possible Level 5 status for the Southbridge Public Schools, although I do not intend to ask the Board to vote at this meeting. The Board meeting on Tuesday, February 23, is the likely date for the Board to vote on this matter.

Student Performance

By far the most concerning factor regarding Southbridge is persistently low student performance as the district is among the lowest achieving and least improving in the state overall and for student subgroups, including students with disabilities and English language learners (ELLs). The highest performing school in the district is at the 8th percentile among schools in its grade span, and all of the schools with available data are in the bottom 10 percent of schools statewide. In 2004, Southbridge was declared an underperforming (Level 4) district by the Board due to its low student performance over several years. From 2012 to 2015, student academic achievement and growth continued to decline in many grades and subjects and remained well below comparable state rates, contributing to a widening proficiency gap.

In addition to the concerning achievement data, the district's on-time graduation rate has trended downward over the past four years and, as of the most recently publicly available data, was more than 23 percentage points below the state rate. As well, Southbridge's out-of-school suspension and in-school suspension rates for all students in the district were almost three times the state rate in 2015.

Alarming performance trends include:

In English Language Arts:

- Only 41% of Southbridge Public School students reached proficiency on the 2015 MCAS, and this represented a decrease from 43% in 2014.
- The district-wide median student growth percentile (SGP) in the district was 34, which indicates that students in Southbridge are not making the same progress as their academic peers statewide.
- Only 32% of Southbridge students in grade 3 scored proficient or higher on the 2015 ELA MCAS.
- Proficiency rates in the middle grades are especially alarming. Less than 33% of students in grades 5 through 7 have reached proficiency on the ELA MCAS.
- Statewide, the proficiency rate for ELA in grades 5 through 8 is more than 30 percentage points higher than in Southbridge.
- 77% of 10th graders in Southbridge scored proficient or higher on the ELA MCAS in 2015; this is 14 percentage points below the state ELA grade 10 proficiency rate of 91%.

In Mathematics:

- Only 32% of Southbridge students scored proficient or higher on the 2015 MCAS, a decrease from 35% in 2014.
- The median student growth percentile in mathematics was 30.
- In grades 5 through 8 and in grade 10, the mathematics proficiency rates were all more than 30 percentage points below the state rate.
- Fewer than 40% of students reached proficiency on the grade 10 mathematics MCAS test.

In Science:

- Only 26% of Southbridge students were proficient on the Science MCAS in 2015 as compared to 54% statewide.
- 18% of 8th grades reached proficiency in 2015 as compared to 42% statewide and 44% of 8th graders scored in the Warning category.

Additional achievement and demographic data is available in Appendix B of the Southbridge District Review report.¹

Additional Areas of Concern

The Southbridge Public Schools District Review Report also highlighted significant concerns regarding the leadership and governance of the district. Among other issues, the District Review noted the district's failure to attract and retain school leaders, especially in the role of superintendent. Since 2011, seven individuals have served as superintendent, and there has been a similar level of turnover in other leadership positions in the district. As noted in the October 2015 District Review Report, "inconsistent leadership is at the root of major gaps in curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the district and has contributed most directly to the persistently low and declining level of achievement that mark the district" (Southbridge District Review Report, p. 24). Also very concerning is the District Review's finding that the needs of English language learners are not being met. Two examples illustrate the concern: the district has no director of ELLs to manage the district's ELL program; and the high-school level does not have an ELL teacher or educational aide who speaks Spanish, although 98 percent of the students designated as ELLs in the district are Spanish speakers.

State Partnership and Interventions

In December, I provided you with two documents – "Timeline: Southbridge Public Schools' History as an Underperforming/Level 4 District"² and "ESE Targeted Investments in Southbridge Public Schools"³ – that summarize the accountability and assistance efforts in which the Department engaged with the Southbridge Public Schools. (These documents are attached again for reference.) The timeline outlines the Department's efforts over the past twelve years to conduct a range of data collection and review activities to inform district planning, all intended to lead to significant improvement. The timeline and financial support documents also describe the resources and assistance the Department has provided to the Southbridge Public Schools to build district capacity to implement the planned school and district improvement strategies. At various junctures during these interventions, independent evaluators noted some improved practices that held promise for better student outcomes. However, due to dysfunctional governance and the district's inability to secure and sustain consistent leadership at any level, there has been widespread fragility of a number of key systems and practices necessary to support district turnaround.

¹ <http://www.mass.gov/edu/docs/ese/accountability/district-reports/nolevel/2015-0277.pdf>

² <http://www.doe.mass.edu/boe/docs/fy2016/2015-12/item2-HistoryTimeline.pdf>

³ <http://www.doe.mass.edu/boe/docs/fy2016/2015-12/item2-FinanceSummary.pdf>

Overview of Proposed Next Steps

If the Board votes to designate the Southbridge Public Schools as a “chronically underperforming” (Level 5) district, the Department is committed to making substantial improvements to the educational experience of every student in the district. In accordance with the *Achievement Gap Act* statute and regulations, I anticipate appointing a receiver to lead the district starting in the spring of 2016. The receiver will have the essential vision, experience, and commitment to transform the district and its schools into centers for educational excellence. Once chosen, the receiver will be responsible for working with me to develop the district’s Turnaround Plan that will set out the priorities and strategies designed to “secure the rapid improvement of the academic achievement of students in the district.” The authorities and flexibilities of a Level 5 district designation will enable us to develop a plan that implements ambitious and accelerated reforms.

The development of the plan will be informed by input from the district’s Local Stakeholder Group (LSG), to be convened within 45 days of the district’s Level 5 designation. As set forth in the statute, this group includes teachers, parents, community representatives, and local health, workforce, early education, and higher education representatives with knowledge about the district’s needs and perspectives on its direction. Depending on the timing of the Level 5 designation, we anticipate that the LSG could provide its recommendations to me as early as April so as to inform the receiver’s analysis and strategic planning. Based on this timeline, the Turnaround Plan could be finalized by mid to late May 2016. I will keep the Board informed at all stages of the process.

If the Board designates Southbridge as a Level 5 district, the Department is committed to achieving rapid and substantial improvement in student academic achievement. I will work with the receiver to act decisively, and reinvigorate the district and its schools through a steady focus on strengthening and supporting teaching and learning. The students and families in Southbridge need and deserve a strong educational system, and the current system is not serving their needs.

The following overview lists the anticipated next steps if the Board votes a designation of “chronic underperformance” for Southbridge in February. This timetable is subject to change:

- From date of Board vote – March 2016: Transition of Authority and Receiver Identified
 - The Commissioner will serve as receiver on an interim basis
 - Commissioner names receiver, implements transition plan, defines roles and responsibilities on governance and operations
- April 2016: Receiver Assumes Full Authority
 - Receiver begins working in the district, and assumes all the authority and responsibility of the superintendent and school committee for the Southbridge Public Schools
- March to May 2016: Planning and Engagement
Receiver gathers and analyzes data to determine the framework for a rigorous and realistic Level 5 District Turnaround Plan

- **Local Stakeholder Group** convenes to develop recommendations for the content of the district Turnaround Plan (per M.G.L. Chapter 69, s. 1K(b))
 - **Community Conversations** are convened to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of the district and answer questions about receivership
 - **Analysis of Assets and Challenges** is performed to prioritize strategies and inform Turnaround Plan content
 - **Framework for Level 5 District Plan** is drafted
- **Beginning June 2016: Approval and Implementation of District Turnaround Plan**
 Receiver aligns governance structure, budget development, plans for staffing, and instructional supports to implement the Turnaround Plan and create the conditions for accelerated student achievement.
 - **Level 5 District Turnaround Plan** is approved by the Commissioner and released to the public. The plan includes district priorities (with implications for human resource and budget decisions) and strategies to accelerate student achievement. The plan also sets benchmarks and the results for which the receiver will be held accountable.
 - **Implementation of Turnaround Plan**
 - **Aligning Human and Fiscal Resources** to priorities in District Turnaround Plan.
 - **School Level Plans developed and implemented** with input of teachers, parents, and administrators
 - **Ongoing Parent and Community Participation**
 - **Quarterly Updates** to the Board, school committee, and public

Activities Under Way

I am actively considering all potential options for receiver should the Board designate Southbridge as chronically underperforming. Additionally, I have posted a Request for Responses (RFR) solicitation for receiver candidates,⁴ which invites proposals from qualified non-profit organizations and individuals. This RFR closes on February 1, at which point I will review and consider the submitted proposals.

A team of Department staff, led by Russell Johnston and Lise Zeig, has been planning for possible Level 5 district intervention in light of our experiences in Holyoke and Lawrence. They are also considering potential partners to assist the receiver with the development and implementation of a Level 5 District Turnaround Plan.

Conclusion

Ultimately, our goal is to ensure that students educated in the Southbridge Public Schools are prepared for success at the next level (i.e., pre-school students for success in elementary school; elementary students for success in the middle grades; middle grade students for success in high school; and high school students for success in college and careers). While there are some skillful Southbridge educators and pockets of strong instruction, Southbridge has been plagued by inconsistent leadership and ineffective governance for too long. Southbridge students are as

⁴ <https://www.commbuys.com/bso/external/bidDetail.sdo?docId=BD-16-1026-DOE02-DOE01-00000006544&external=true&parentUrl=bid>

capable as students anywhere in the Commonwealth, but the district is falling well short of its responsibility to provide them with an effective education.

I believe receivership provides the best opportunity to transform the school district into one where excellence is the rule rather than the exception. In the absence of receivership, I have little confidence that Southbridge will realize a path of continuous improvement. The authorities and flexibilities of the Level 5 designation will allow us to initiate an ambitious and accelerated education reform agenda on behalf of all of Southbridge's students and their families.

Russell Johnston, Robert Curtin, and others will be available to answer questions at the Board's January 26 meeting regarding this recommendation and next steps.

Enclosures:

Timeline: Southbridge Public Schools History as an Underperforming/Level 4 District
Southbridge Finance and Activity Summary FY2004-FY2015
Southbridge District Review Report