

## Timeline: Southbridge Public Schools' History as an Underperforming/Level 4 District

2003 – 2009

### Reports/Analyses

#### Southbridge Public Schools (SPS) District Reports warn of seriously low student performance and lack of adequate systems to address challenges:

- **June 2003:** An EQA District Review found that overall, SPS “is marked by significantly below average student achievement on standardized tests.” The district received ratings of “poor” or “unsatisfactory” for most indicators in the domains of Assessment & Evaluation, Curriculum & Instruction, Student Academic Support Services, Leadership & Governance, and Business & Financial Management. ([http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/technical/03\\_0277.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/technical/03_0277.pdf))
- **July 2004:** An EQA District Review reported that student performance had declined. “The majority of the district’s students scored in the ‘Needs Improvement’ and ‘Warning’ categories in both ELA and math.” The report revealed limited capacity and oversight for data analysis, curriculum and instruction initiatives, and financial management. ([http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/technical/04\\_0277.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/technical/04_0277.pdf))
- **April 2005:** The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) placed Southbridge High School “on probation based on significant deficiencies in its adherence to the Commission’s Standards for Accreditation on Curriculum, Leadership and Organization, and Community Resources for Learning.”
- **June 2005:** An ESE District Leadership Evaluation Report noted concerns related to planning, accountability, curriculum, special education, professional development, and student performance in the district. ([http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/evaluation/06\\_SouthbridgeDLER.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/evaluation/06_SouthbridgeDLER.pdf))
- **November 2007:** Two years after a new superintendent was appointed in the district and with the initial implementation of a BESE approved turnaround plan, an EQA Turnaround Report found that the district had made progress toward many of the goals in the Turnaround Plan, with 10 action steps remaining to be addressed. ([http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/turnaround/07\\_0277.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/turnaround/07_0277.pdf))

### Responses/Assistance

#### District Leadership Changes

- **February 2005:** Superintendent JoAnn Austin left the district after serving in this role since February 1993.
- **March 2005:** ESE appointed an interim superintendent, Eugene Thayer, to provide leadership for the district as the school committee conducted a search for a permanent leader.
- **August 2005:** A permanent superintendent, Dale Hanley, assumed leadership of the district and led the development of the district’s turnaround plan, using the findings from the Department’s Leadership Report. She served as superintendent until July 2010.

#### District Accountability Designations and Planning

- **September 2004:** The Board of Education (now the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE))

declared the district “underperforming” as a result of the EQA reviews.

- **December 2005:** BESE accepted SPS’ turnaround plan. The primary initiative described in the plan was curriculum development and alignment. ESE appointed a District Support Team of two retired superintendents to serve as the district’s turnaround partners (Eugene Thayer and Matt George). Their role was to guide and oversee the plan’s implementation by advising and supporting the superintendent, school committee, and other district leaders. The team provided periodic status reports to ESE.
- **2007:** With the stabilization of district leadership, the District Support Team was dissolved and an ESE monitor was appointed (Peter Davies). The monitor submitted reports to ESE quarterly.
- **From 2005-2009** ESE provided a range of additional targeted assistance, including consultants to deliver in-service professional development to teachers and administrators on standards-based teaching and learning and the evaluation of classroom instruction.

### 2010 – Present

#### Reports/Analyses

##### More District Reviews of Southbridge Public Schools

- **May 2010:** An ESE Level 4 District Review noted two remaining systemic weaknesses in the district: a lack of clear performance expectations for the next superintendent (for whom the district was initiating a search) and a lack of community involvement in decision-making. In addition, student performance was not strong enough to indicate a clear improvement trend, and in particular, students with disabilities and English language learners were performing at levels much lower than other students. Moreover, instructional practice at all levels was not yet of the quality to contribute significantly to the improvement of student achievement. ([http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/level4/10\\_0277.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/level4/10_0277.pdf))

#### Responses/Assistance

##### District Leadership Changes

- **July 2010:** Eric Ely was hired as superintendent and served until November 2012.
- **November 2012:** Southbridge Business Manager Terry Wiggins was named as interim superintendent and served until acting superintendent Basan (Buzz) Nembirkow was hired in January 2013. Superintendent Nembirkow served until July 2014.
- **July 2014:** Southbridge Director of Teaching and Learning, Patricia Gardner, was hired as superintendent with a one-year contract.
- **January 2015:** Patricia Gardner resigned and the district’s new director of teaching and learning, Sheryl Stanton, was tapped as acting superintendent.
- **May 20, 2015:** The School Committee received a letter from the Town Council expressing an 8-1 no confidence vote: “Due to an unprecedented failure of leadership, accountability, and instability, in

addition to a lack of transparency or public empowerment, the Southbridge Town Council felt it necessary to take the action of taking a “No Confidence” vote in the Southbridge School Committee.”

- **July 2015:** Several members of the School Committee stepped down, including Chair Lauren McLaughlin and Vice Chair Kara Donovan. Scott Lazo was elected Chair.
- **July 22, 2015:** Steven Bliss was named as interim superintendent
  - Sheryl Stanton resumed her previous position as director of teaching and learning. Bill Lataille, a principal who had stepped up to serve as acting director of teaching and learning, became the director of finance because, in part, his former position as principal was no longer available to him. Another principal had been named for the school.
- **September 22, 2015:** Steven Bliss was named permanent superintendent, one week before the posted end date of the search.
- **October 6, 2015:** Steve Bliss went out on medical leave, and stepped down on October 14.
  - Sheryl Stanton once again stepped in as acting superintendent while also serving as the primary contact and coordinator for the district review that took place October 19-22
- **November 3, 2015:** School Committee appointed Timothy Connors as interim superintendent after having interviewed him in open session on October 27.

#### **Actions in Southbridge Public Schools (SPS) as a Result of an Act Relative to the Achievement Gap<sup>1</sup>**

- **April 2010:** SPS was “grandfathered in” as a Level 4 district under the new *Framework for Accountability and Assistance*. Key interventions and benchmarks have included the following:
  - **2011-present:** As a result of the 2010 review, ESE required SPS to write an **Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP)** for the 2011-12 school year that would replace the previous turnaround plan. The AIP was developed to respond to the findings in the 2010 District Review and other strengths and challenges identified by the district. Available documents:
    - Year 5 AIP (approved July 2015)
    - Year 4 AIP (approved August 2014)
    - Year 3 AIP (approved March 2014)
    - Year 2 AIP (approved November 2012)
    - Year 1 AIP was not approved despite significant ESE feedback and support.
    - Year 1 Level 4 Monitoring Summative Report (2011-12) (ESE did not continue the practice of summative reports after 2012.)
  - **ESE’s assistance and accountability offices** have supported the district by hiring a 0.5 FTE **Plan Manager** to support the district with the development and implementation of the AIP, and a **Plan Monitor** (2-4 days/month) to determine the extent to which the district has met its AIP targets and to provide regular reports to the superintendent and school committee. Over the course of these past four years, ESE assistance assignments and resources have adjusted to each new

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<sup>1</sup> In April 2010, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted comprehensive new regulations for underperforming schools and districts consistent with the January 2010 *Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*. The *Framework for Accountability and Assistance* placed districts in underperforming status as a result of (1) systemic *district weaknesses* identified by a district review, and/or (2) inadequate *school performance* – having at least one school that is placed in Level 4 because of low levels of absolute achievement, annual growth rate, and/or improvement trend. Southbridge’s underperforming status, Level 4 schools, and weaknesses identified by district review led to its Level 4 status.

leadership context.

- Since spring of 2014 the district has had two plan managers working as a team.
- Despite the targeted supports, for the first several years of the AIP process the district had difficulty developing AIPs that could be approved by the start of the school year. The 2014-15 AIP was the first one approved prior to the start of a school year.
  - The **2015-16 AIP** was approved in early July, allowing for implementation to begin during the summer months.
  - The **2015-16 AIP** included a requirement for the School Committee to establish a goal. ESE offered to provide support for this work once a permanent superintendent was named.
- **January 2015:** At the request of School Committee Chair Lauren McLaughlin and Vice Chair Kara Donovan, Brooke Clenchy, Russell Johnston and Rob Curtin provided to the school committee during a regular, open meeting and provided an overview of the state's accountability system, district review process, and the district's accountability results.
- **October 2015:** ESE conducted a comprehensive District Review October 19-22. Anticipate final report will be available in December.

#### **Additional Supports**

- ESE has provided additional **targeted assistance funds** to the district for consultants specializing in instructional leadership and special education.
- ESE helped the district with funding to hire a partner selected by district leadership, Focus on Results, to support district and school improvement
- The district has at various times taken advantage of the regional **District and School Assistance Center (DSAC)**, but has not leveraged the full extent of the services available.