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**Mr. Anthony Soto, Superintendent/Receiver**

Thursday December 21, 2023

Dear Commissioner Riley,

On September 18, 2023, the Holyoke School Committee submitted a letter to “petition the MA DESE to release the City of Holyoke from State Receivership.” **I recommend that the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary**

**Education (DESE) begin the transition to exit receivership in a careful and highly planned manner.** As the Superintendent and as a long-time community member, I am proud of the collective work that Holyoke students, teachers, staff, and families have done together, and I am excited to closely partner with the School Committee to ensure a highly successful transition to local control.

Before making this recommendation, I reflected on the state of Holyoke Public Schools (HPS) today and the partnership and leadership of the School Committee. I am deeply thankful to have the opportunity to serve as

Receiver/Superintendent in the community I love and that has helped form me into the leader I am today. It is with the core beliefs of “Students are at the center of everything we do” and “Students and staff hold high expectations for themselves and each other” that I write this letter.

As detailed in the [turnaround](https://www.hps.holyoke.ma.us/page/turnaround-overview) [plan](https://www.hps.holyoke.ma.us/page/turnaround-overview), prior to receivership, HPS lacked many instructional and operational systems required to run a district well. Some systematic challenges listed in the findings report included inconsistent instructional quality, incomplete assessment system, challenges at the secondary level, absence of leadership opportunities for teachers and staff, limited school-based autonomy, and outdated technology and data systems. In the early years of receivership, the district focused on redesigning the high school experience to decrease dropout rates and increase graduation rates, introducing standards-aligned curriculum, expanding preschool and dual language, strengthening data systems, and modernizing central office support. In more recent years, the district has strengthened and systematized support to school leaders and teachers to implement strong instructional practices so that students can acquire foundational skills and access grade-level content and learning.

I agree with the School Committee’s acknowledgement in their letter that HPS has made many improvements in recent years, many of which are highlighted on the [HPS](https://www.hps.holyoke.ma.us/page/top-accomplishments) [website](https://www.hps.holyoke.ma.us/page/top-accomplishments). As proud as I am of these gains, however, there are still significant challenges that need to be remedied regardless of the governance structure of the district. As we prepare for the return to local control, the School Committee will have to address these needs in partnership with the superintendent and district/school leaders. This work is underway in Holyoke now, and I am striving to work with the School Committee to help them better understand and champion current improvement efforts.

# Areas for Improvement within Holyoke Public Schools

* **Higher Academic Achievement.** While Holyoke Public Schools is making “moderate progress” on the state’s [accountability](https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/accountability/report/district.aspx?linkid=30&orgcode=01370000&orgtypecode=5&) [system](https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/accountability/report/district.aspx?linkid=30&orgcode=01370000&orgtypecode=5&), overall student achievement and growth on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) continue to fall below the state average. Nine percent of Holyoke students in grades

3-8 and 27% of students in grade 10 met or exceeded expectations in English Language arts, compared to 42% and 58% statewide, respectively. Six percent of Holyoke students in grades 3-8 and 10% of students in grade 10 met or exceeded expectations in Math, compared to 41% and 50% statewide, respectively. Overall, student growth on MCAS was deemed “typical growth—low” in English Language Arts (grades 3-8, 10) and Math (grades 3-8) and “low growth” in Math (grade 10).

* **Community support for strong attendance.** Addressing the high rate of chronic absenteeism (a student who misses 10% or more days of school) needs to be a priority of the School Committee. More support for and education about the importance of consistent school attendance is needed. High rates of chronic absenteeism are strongly correlated with lower grades and lower proficiency and growth on student outcomes.
* **Mental health support for students.** HPS continues to experience high demand for more mental health and social emotional supports for students due to the continued impact of both the COVID-19 pandemic and traumas that many students experience outside of school. Unmet needs are often communicated through challenging student behaviors at school, which has a significant impact on the learning environment for students and working conditions for staff.
* **Coordinated approach to staffing needs.** The tight labor market and more challenging working conditions in HPS has resulted in a significant number of unfilled teaching and staff positions, a less experienced staff, and lower teacher retention rates than the state averages.
* **Support for students with diverse learning needs.** HPS is attempting to make a major shift in the way students with diverse learning needs are educated and supported. Our students with learning disabilities and multilingual learners have not made significant progress and continue to lag behind their peers. More inclusive practices to support these students are needed, despite the staffing challenges that we have experienced and that lie ahead. We are partnering with a consultant to review Special Education services and hope to emerge with strong recommendations for improvements to implement.

To summarize, I recommend that DESE should ensure that the transition to local control is done thoughtfully and in partnership with the School Committee in order to limit disruption to students, families, and staff. Just as the transition from local control to receivership created uncertainty and change, the transition to local control will also create uncertainty for some and may result in significant change.

Below, I recommend focus areas for the School Committee. The focus areas will help ensure School Committee members are prepared to resume their full duties at the end of receivership and ultimately lead to a strong transition to local control. The focus areas should be refined after conversation and in partnership with DESE and the School Committee.

# Focus Areas

* **Utilize DESE’s** [**District**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/district-standards-indicators.pdf)[**Standards**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/district-standards-indicators.pdf)[**and**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/district-standards-indicators.pdf)[**Indicators**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/district-standards-indicators.pdf)as a foundational guide for understanding effective school district policy and practice. The six standards and their 21 related indicators were developed based on research and on input from school-, district-, and state-level stakeholders about policies, systems, and practices, which, if implemented well, are likely to lead to improved student performance, opportunities, and outcomes. I recommend that the School Committee utilize the Leadership and Governance: School Committee Governance section as a foundation for a School Committee assessment and multiyear professional development plan. (See additional benchmarks for more detail.) Additionally, in the coming year, I will write a reflection on HPS’ progress on the remaining [District](https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/district-standards-indicators.pdf) [Standards](https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/district-standards-indicators.pdf) [and](https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/district-standards-indicators.pdf) [Indicators](https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/district-standards-indicators.pdf), so that the School Committee has a more comprehensive summary of the district’s improvement efforts over the past nine years.
* **Create a professional development plan for the School Committee**, in coordination with the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, and with input and review from the Commissioner and Superintendent. The professional development plan could include training in specific areas, conference attendance, retreats, and observations and conversations with other high-functioning school committees. This plan and progress towards this plan could be shared with the Commissioner as an important accountability measure. I want to commend the School Committee for engaging in some professional development this past year and encourage them to further develop a comprehensive plan that helps them better prepare for local control with a strong focus on better outcomes for students. The comprehensive plan needs to include a thorough understanding of Holyoke’s areas for improvement, including efforts to-date and the strategy going forward.
* **Review and understand all of the existing collective bargaining agreements and the major changes that have occurred over the last nine years.** Negotiating collective bargaining agreements is a major role that the school committee will play, and it is very important that prior to any engaging in new negotiations they need to understand these better. This could likely be a part of the professional development plan mentioned above.
* **Review and understand all School Committee and District policies.** The policy review should first focus on their role in the school district. I acknowledge and commend the School Committee for their intention to soon review and potentially revise the policies in [Section](https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/holyokeset/holyoke/z20000015) [B:](https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/holyokeset/holyoke/z20000015) [Board](https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/holyokeset/holyoke/z20000015) [Governance](https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/holyokeset/holyoke/z20000015) [and](https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/holyokeset/holyoke/z20000015) [Operations](https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/holyokeset/holyoke/z20000015). The School Committee may consider adopting, as part of their policies or as an additional supporting document, specific language focused on communications and “ways of working” norms, expectations, and/or best practices. Two strong samples are: a [2012-13](https://www.masc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NormsandProtocolsAnnotatedRev2012.pdf) [sample](https://www.masc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NormsandProtocolsAnnotatedRev2012.pdf) [from](https://www.masc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NormsandProtocolsAnnotatedRev2012.pdf) [MASC](https://www.masc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NormsandProtocolsAnnotatedRev2012.pdf) and a [2023-24](https://drive.google.com/file/d/19LOrDSoiy_h3jne9DA2j1AQW4ZnW9lz8/view) [sample](https://drive.google.com/file/d/19LOrDSoiy_h3jne9DA2j1AQW4ZnW9lz8/view) [from](https://drive.google.com/file/d/19LOrDSoiy_h3jne9DA2j1AQW4ZnW9lz8/view) [a](https://drive.google.com/file/d/19LOrDSoiy_h3jne9DA2j1AQW4ZnW9lz8/view) [district](https://drive.google.com/file/d/19LOrDSoiy_h3jne9DA2j1AQW4ZnW9lz8/view). Documents such as these can help define the type of governing body the Holyoke School Committee strives to be and how their work supports better outcomes for students and families.
* **Partner with the Superintendent and community to address the areas for improvement identified earlier in this letter**, within the powers and duties definition in [BBA](https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/holyokeset/holyoke/BBA/z2Code_BBA) [-](https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/holyokeset/holyoke/BBA/z2Code_BBA) [School](https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/holyokeset/holyoke/BBA/z2Code_BBA) [Committee](https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/holyokeset/holyoke/BBA/z2Code_BBA) [Powers](https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/holyokeset/holyoke/BBA/z2Code_BBA) [and](https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/holyokeset/holyoke/BBA/z2Code_BBA) [Duties](https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/holyokeset/holyoke/BBA/z2Code_BBA) including:

policymaking, provision of financial resources, public relations, and education planning and evaluation. I suggest the areas for improvement noted above be key topics discussed during School Committee meetings, subcommittee meetings, and community conversations following a thorough understanding of our efforts to-date.

I look forward to partnering with DESE and the Holyoke School Committee to strengthen governance and ensure a strong transition from receivership to more local control. It is my sincere wish that the transition be done in a way that values our history, appreciates notable improvements that have occurred, recognizes that significant growth is still required, and honors all stakeholders—students, families, teachers, staff, leadership, and community members—involved. Together, we can work to achieve the vision of Holyoke Public Schools being “a high-performing school system where students reach their full potential, educators inspire, families are partners, and the community thrives.” Juntos Podemos | Together We Can,

Anthony Soto

Receiver/Superintendent