

September 18, 2023

Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner

Massachusetts Department of

Elementary and Secondary Education

75 Pleasant Street

Malden, MA 02148

Receivership of the Holyoke Public Schools

Dear Commissioner Riley:

As Chairman of the School Committee of the City of Holyoke Public Schools, and approved by the duly elected Holyoke School Committee at a publicly posted meeting on September 18, we write to petition the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to release the City of Holyoke Public schools from State Receivership.

As you are aware, Pursuant to MGL 69 Section 1K, (i)…at any time after chronically underperforming district has been placed in receivership, the school committee of the district may petition the commissioner for a determination as to whether the turnaround plan adopted under subsection (b) should be modified or eliminated and whether the school district shall no longer be designated as chronically underperforming. The decision of the commissioner shall be based on regulations adopted by the board. A school committee may seek review by the board of elementary and secondary education of an adverse determination.

As a way of background, the City's schools were placed in receivership in 2015. Since that time, our Holyoke team is proud of its accomplishments working together with our state appointed receivers, specifically the following which can be found on the Holyoke Public Schools webpage:

**Turnaround Accomplishments**

We are creating learning opportunities that nurture, engage, and ensure that Holyoke students are poised to excel in college, career and community leadership. Since the beginning of the turnaround efforts, signature initiatives include:

* A full school day with more enrichment, academic and social/emotional opportunities for students in Pre-Kindergarten through 8th grade.
* High School Redesign which includes a Freshman Academy for a more personalized entry to high school and theme-based academies and career vocational technical education designed to ignite student interest and connect learning to the real world.
* Expansion of programs to provide students and families with more choice for their education, including dual language program, dual enrollment, and early college opportunities for high school students.
* Enhanced standards-based curricular resources in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.
* Breakfast in the Classroom to ensure students have a healthy start to the day and are ready to learn.

**Top accomplishments since the start of receivership:**

* HPS has seen a nearly 15-point increase in the graduation rate, reaching 74.9% in 2021-2022 o Graduation rates have significantly increased for students who are English Learners (30-point increase) and students with disabilities (27-point increase).
* The district has seen a 15-point increase in hiring teachers of color, reaching 28% in 2022-23.
* There has been a significant increase in the number of students enrolled in the Dual Language program, with almost 700 students in grades PreK-8 now enrolled in the program (representing almost 20% of all students).
* Enrollment in advanced coursework (including advanced placement and dual enrollment courses) reached 53% of students in grades 11-12 during the 2022-23 school year.
* HPS has made $20+ million investments in the physical infrastructure of our schools.
* From the SY 13-14 to SY21-22, there has been a 59% decrease in out-of-school suspensions and a 64% reduction in days lost to suspension.
* In 2019, all elementary and middle schools with publicly available data made at least moderate progress towards improvement targets, with E.N. White, Kelly, Lawrence and Metcalf "meeting or exceeding" their targets, on MCAS (last year available).
* HHS Dean has seen enrollment growth over the past several years, reaching and maintaining full enrollment consistently since the 2021-22 school year after nearly a decade of under enrollment. HPS continues to invest in improving the shop classrooms to modernize them.

**Top accomplishments from the 2022-23 school year**

# **Early Literacy**

* Improving literacy is at the forefront of our efforts, since reading with ease and fluency is a fundamental component of nearly all learning. We are in the process of implementing an early literacy plan that includes a high-quality curriculum, effective teaching strategies; and development of deep early-literacy content knowledge.
* We have nearly doubled access to pre-kindergarten with nearly 500 seats now available. Nearly all the expansion was due to adding a full-day PreK option, which is the most sought-after opportunity for our families. Our data shows that students enrolled in full-day PreK have stronger attendance in PreK and are more successful in kindergarten.

**Learning Experiences**

* Our graduation rate continues to increase, most recently to 74.9%. In the last seven years, we have seen a 32.2 point increase in graduation rates for students who are English learners (EL) (67.7% in 2022) and 28.6 point increase for students with disabilities (SWD) (60.7% in 2022).
* We continue to broaden access to advanced coursework, including dual enrollment and early college, Currently, 53% of our grade 11 and 12 students are enrolled in advanced coursework. Holyoke also opened access and actively recruited more students, especially students of color, to participate.
* We engaged in a comprehensive and inclusive process to move from a system of K-8 schools to separate elementary and middle schools by fall 2023 in order to customize the student learning experience, provide more support, and •reduce inefficiencies. More than 2,000 people had a voice in the decision process.
* We are increasing the relevance of learning, especially in high school, with the development of theme-based academies at Holyoke High School North, greater enrollment in career vocational and technical education programming at the HHS Dean Campus, and alternative pathways at Opportunity Academy. We strive to connect what is taught in the classroom to real world learning and field experiences.

**Inclusion**

* We are continuing to champion biliteracy and biculturalism and a supportive learning environment for multilingual students through our dual language program. Almost 700 PreK-8 students, representing nearly 20% of students, are enrolled in the dual language program, which is now expanding to the high school. Eleven graduated last year with a Seal of Biliteracy on their diplomas, while this year eight graduating seniors have earned a Seal of Biliteracy.
* Select schools have piloted more inclusionary practices, and the staff mindset around inclusion has shifted in positive ways. Additionally, there has been a reduction in students with emotional/behavioral disabilities in sub-separate classrooms, with more of a focus on meeting their needs in the general education setting.

# **Whole Child**

* We supported strong family partnerships and communication through expanding our language access department, which provides interpretation and translation services for families and supports districtwide bilingual communication.
* We invested more than $20 million in improving the physical infrastructure of our schools, including new doors, windows, air conditioning, flooring, lighting, secure entrances, etc.
* Based on Panorama survey results, 83% of students reported there are adults in the school they can go to for help, and 52% of students report a sense of belonging at school (this increases to 78% if the category of "somewhat belonging) is included.
* We have embraced partnerships to meet students! needs, including early college partnerships (Holyoke Community College, Westfield State, UMass-Amherst), mental health partnerships (River Valley), and other community-based organizations that offer students academic support and enrichment opportunities (Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, Homework-House, ENLACE, the South Holyoke Safe Neighborhood Initiative, Girls Inc, Play Ball, GEAR UP, Eagle Eye, and more)

**Educator Development**

* We are working towards becoming a coherent school system rather than a system of schools. In partnership with Relay and the Barr Foundation, school leaders' professional development has provided a strong foundation for increased alignment. Leaders and educators believe that we are on the path to implementing strong instructional leadership practices, with a focus this year on lesson planning, weekly data meetings, and academic monitoring in response to feedback.
* We continue to recruit and retain teachers of color, with a 15-point increase in the percentage of teachers of color, from 13% in 2015 to 28% in 2022. Research shows that students of color experience stronger academic performance, have improved graduation rates, and are more likely to attend college when they are taught. by teachers of color.
* All staff members had an opportunity to engage in professional development focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion as we strive to recognize our individual biases and the impact that racism and other forms of oppression have on our institutions. Then, we must work as individuals and as a community to actively combat injustices.

Most importantly, we are proud of our functioning government system that has worked together to make responsible decisions to take care of the needs of our school district. We are also very fortunate to have an incredible partnership with the community who show up to help respond to our school needs. For all of these reasons, we write to you to formally petition the Department of Education to consider removing the Holyoke public schools from State Receivership.

Respectfully,

Joshua A. Garcia  
Mayor & Chair of the Holyoke School Committee

Cc: Governor Maura T. Healey

Lieutenant Governor Kimberley L. Driscoll Representative Patricia Duffy

Senator John Velis

