



---

# The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership

Eric B. Schnurer  
January 2017





---

## About the author

Eric B. Schnurer has served in all three branches of the federal government and for numerous state governments, as a speechwriter, policy advisor, prosecutor, general counsel, and chief of staff – and has worked in the private sector as a journalist, professor, business executive, and social entrepreneur. Today, he is president and CEO of a policy consulting firm advising members of Congress, governors, mayors and other officials across the country; a regular contributor on the future of government and public policy for several national and international publications; an adjunct professor of policy at various universities; and a fellow at the Progressive Policy Institute.

Mr. Schnurer is founder and president of Public Works LLC, one of the leading firms specializing in improving government management, policy, and efficiency, including strategic planning with public agencies and the executive branch at the highest levels. Public Works has worked with both state agencies and governors' offices around the country successfully to develop and implement innovative solutions to challenging problems. The firm uniquely functions as an on-going policy office and strategic planners for governors, agency heads, and other chief executives and has served as a policy office for several governors on an on-going, consulting basis. Public Works' education practice has conducted efficiency reviews of school districts in West Virginia, South Carolina, Louisiana and Texas, the state education system in West Virginia and New Mexico, and the higher ed system in Iowa; the firm has also advised the P-20 councils in Arizona and West Virginia and the California State University system on coordination and lifelong learning issues, and helped design early learning programs in Colorado and Washington State, among other projects.

# The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership

JANUARY 2017

Eric B. Schnurer

## INTRODUCTION

Springfield, Massachusetts, is where the United States' one wholly indigenous sport – basketball – was invented. It may soon be known for a completely different innovation.

The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP) is an attempt to create within the public schools the conditions that make charter schools successful, without the poisonous politics that often accompany expanding charters. The school district has contracted with a nonprofit board, a 501(c)3 organization, to oversee struggling middle schools. That board, which acts as a buffer between schools and district management, has empowered nine schools with autonomy and accountability, while bringing in an outside school management organization to run one of them.

These schools – and, in fact, the Zone as a whole – remain part of the public school district, drawing on it for a range of shared services. The teachers in the Zone are unionized; indeed, the union voted for these reforms. But the existing and new principals at the reins are being given authority to choose their own teaching teams, propound a vision for their school, and restructure the school day, curriculum, and budget to achieve it. While teachers cannot be

dismissed at will, principals do receive support to help underperforming teachers improve where possible and to remove them where necessary. And there are real consequences – for principals and teachers alike – for school failure.

The zone launched in 2015 with nine schools, and, after the first year, the worst-performing school was replaced by an outside organization. Meanwhile, at two other schools, the zone recruited new principals – veterans of charter schools – to launch new schools, starting with the 6th grade and growing a grade per year. They were given the opportunity to hire new staffs and design entirely new programs.

Springfield's is one of a small number of similar efforts around the country to create serious autonomy and accountability conditions in district schools. Proponents, in fact, see Springfield's experiment as neither watered-down charters nor charterized public schools, but rather as a "Third Way" that tries to capture

the best of both worlds. In the Springfield model, charter operators and union workforces don't just coexist but cooperate; neighborhood schools attract innovative leaders and teachers instead of families having to go in search of them elsewhere; and educators working in a traditional district with an elected board and collective bargaining agreements nevertheless enjoy some of the freedoms and responsibilities charters experience.

**Springfield's is one of a small number of similar efforts around the country to create serious autonomy and accountability conditions in district schools.**

It's too early to say anything about the results here. But if these "autonomy zone" models work, they could provide districts all across the country with a road map to create high-quality results without the brutal battles that often accompany charters themselves.



## I. THE PATH TO EMPOWERMENT SCHOOL TAKEOVER IN MASSACHUSETTS

Massachusetts has long prided itself on its educational opportunities. It was the site of the nation's first public school, has long been home to some of the world's greatest universities, and possesses one of the most highly-educated populations in the country.

Almost a quarter-century ago, the Massachusetts legislature passed the Education Reform Act of 1993, whose main pillars were standards and high-stakes testing; inter-district public school choice; charter schools; and more equal state financing for rich and poor districts – an ideological mélange sometimes called “the grand bargain.” Over the ensuing two decades, Massachusetts emerged as a leader in K-12 educational quality.

Nonetheless, the results of the 1993 act proved uneven, with heavily minority districts lagging achievement in the state's other districts by widening margins.<sup>1</sup> The 2010 Achievement Gap Act (AGA) was intended to address this situation, classifying all schools into five categories. Schools ranked as “Level 4,” underperforming, are now required to produce three-year turnaround plans and receive some authority to make changes in the district's collective bargaining agreement (CBA). “Level 5” – chronically underperforming – is reserved for those schools that fail to improve adequately. It is essentially a death sentence, leading to state takeover, ouster of the management, and abrogation of the CBA.

The AGA led in 2011 to state takeover of the Lawrence School District, the state's poorest and lowest-performing. The Lawrence schools were placed in receivership, at the request of the mayor but over the strident opposition of

most local political leaders. The receiver, a former Boston school principal, worked with the teachers union but hired a local charter operator, Community Day, and UP Education Network, a Boston-based nonprofit that focuses on “restarting” failing schools, to take over three of Lawrence's low-performing schools.

Scott Given, a former principal of the Excel Academy charter school in Boston, founded UP in 2010. As a principal he had wondered, “How do we take the exciting practices in charter schools and bring them to the [traditional] public education sector?” So he left his job to attend Harvard Business School and develop a business plan. “I knew we needed two things,” he says. “A legislative structure that allowed us to keep all the students in the school but the flexibility to make changes within the school, and, secondly, the political will. We knew that anything we did would be disruptive of the status quo, and so we would need powerful political actors to make this cultural change within the schools.”

When the AGA passed, it created these conditions. Boston Mayor Thomas Menino and the city's school superintendent approached Given to transform a failing school into an in-district charter, with its own board separate from the Boston School Committee. (In Massachusetts, school boards are called “school committees.”)

The state has since taken over two districts in the central part of the state – Holyoke and Southbridge – and several individual schools. “Every district wants to avoid the state putting the entire district, or any one of its schools, into Level 5 receivership,” Given explains, “because it's loss of local control. It's a black mark on the leadership.”



**Boston Mayor Thomas Menino and the city's school superintendent approached Given to transform a failing school into an in-district charter, with its own board separate from the Boston School Committee.**

As the state prepared to take over the Lawrence schools, "Virtually all the [local] energy went into, 'How can we derail this decision by the commissioner?'" adds Massachusetts Commissioner of Education Mitchell Chester. But, after a year, a new paradigm began to gel: "Mayors and others began asking, 'What can we do to avoid the state taking us over and convince you we are making progress?'"

In 2010, there had been 35 schools designated as underperforming under the AGA. After three years, approximately one-third had made significant progress, and another third or so had made some progress but not enough to be released from oversight. "The remaining eight to ten," says Chester, "were still of concern." Three of them were middle schools in Springfield.

Meanwhile, the state intervention in Lawrence began to show impressive results. As you can see from Figure 1, Lawrence moved significantly above its expected performance levels, given its demographics, between 2012 and 2014.

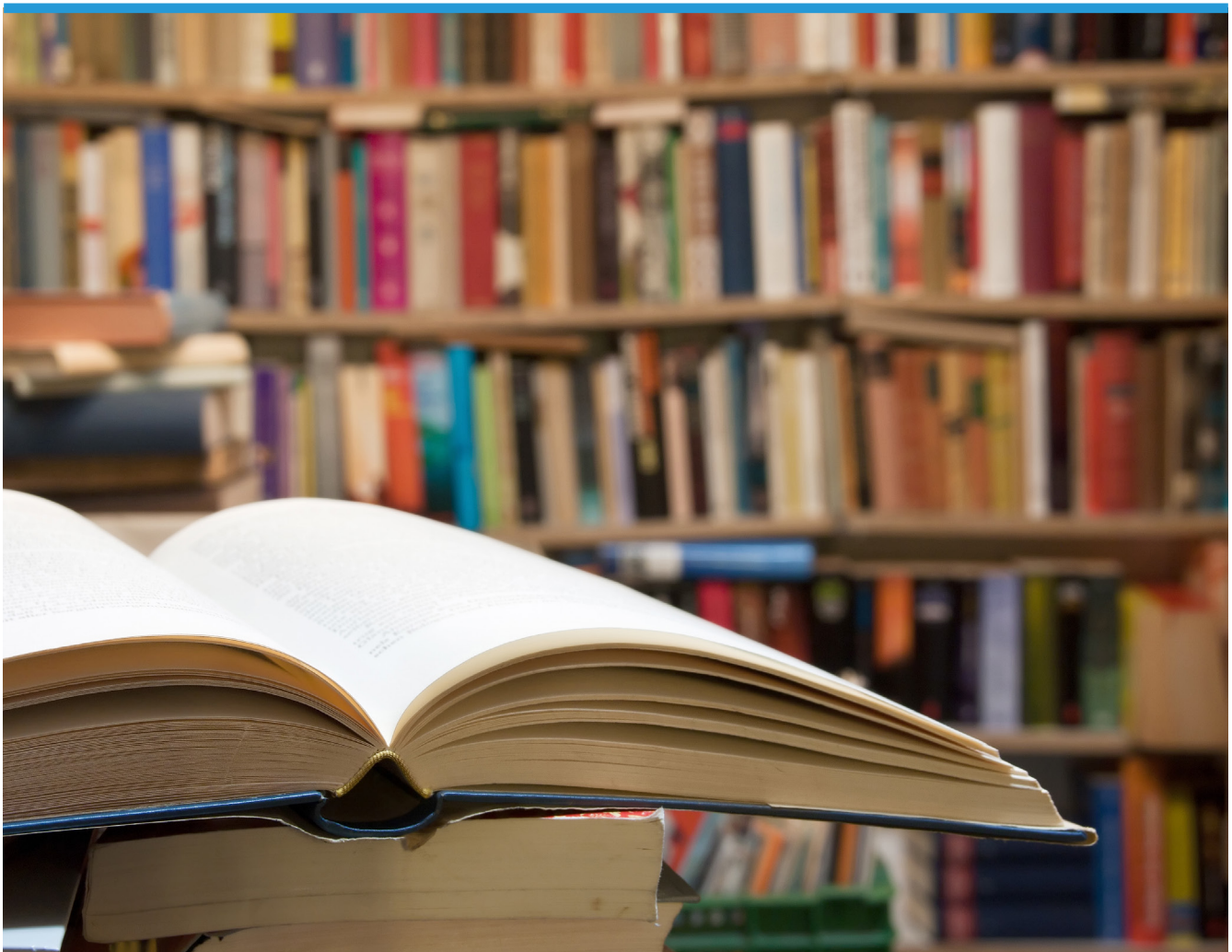
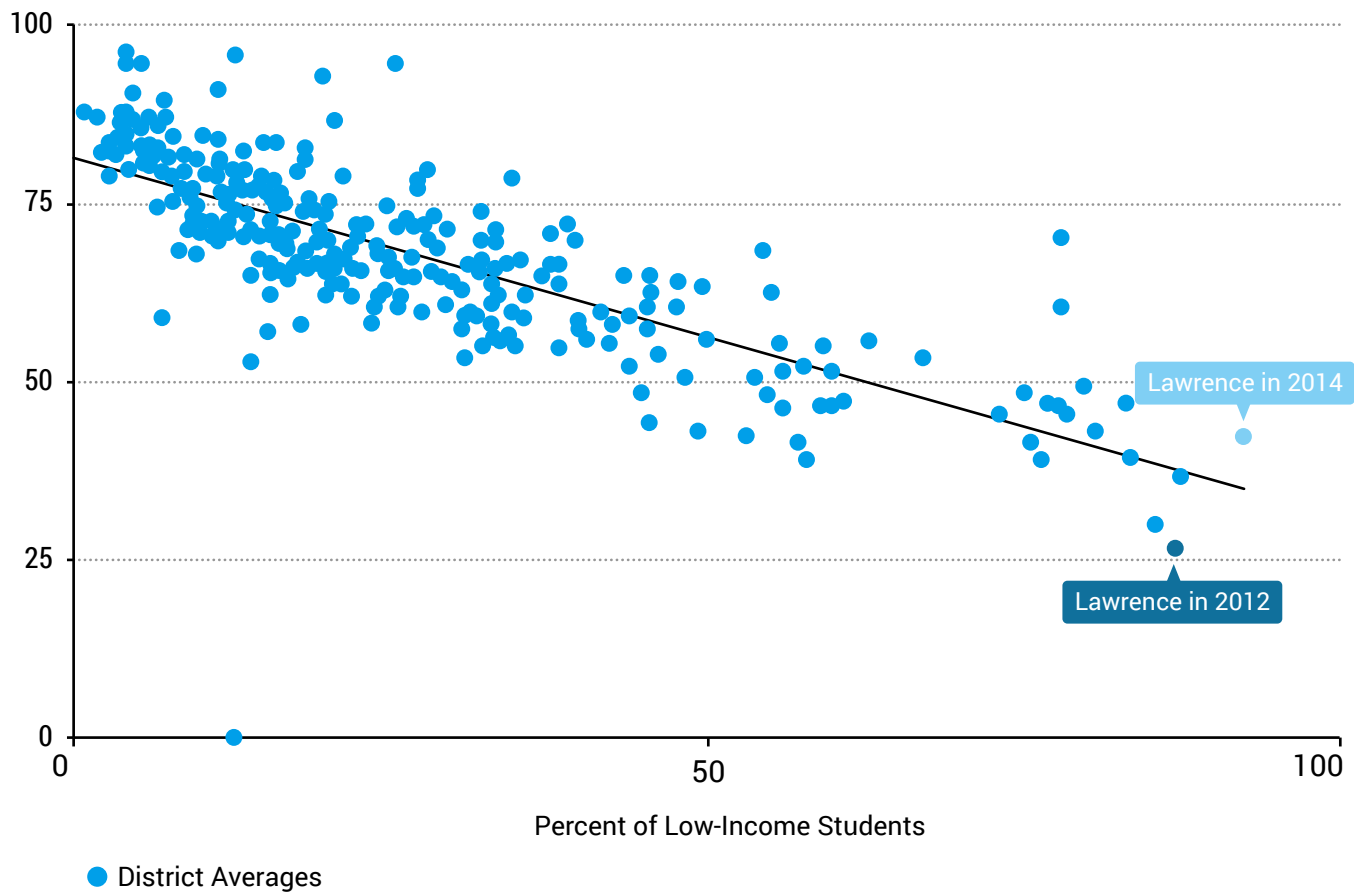


FIGURE 1: Average % Proficient and Advanced by District in MA



Source: Empower Schools, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu>

As Table 1 shows, in Year 1 of turnaround, math proficiency rates increased by 10 percentage points, and, by Year 2, the median student growth percentile had increased by nine points in English Language Arts (ELA) and by 17 points in math. The most recent data show that graduation rates have increased to 72 percent

from 52 percent in the year before receivership. The number of Level 1 schools (those that are meeting state performance targets) has increased from two in 2012-13 to 10. Four years into the Lawrence reforms, 46 percent of Lawrence students attend a Level 1 or Level 2 school, compared to only 12 percent originally.

TABLE 1: Progress in Lawrence\*

SCHOOL YEAR	NOTE	GRADUATION RATE	NUMBER OF LEVEL 1 SCHOOLS	NUMBER OF LEVEL 4 SCHOOLS	% OF STUDENTS SCORING PROFICIENT AND ADVANCED		SGP		CPI	
					ELA	MATH	ELA	MATH	ELA	MATH
<b>2010–11</b>	Year that DESE makes decision about LPS receivership	52.3	na	na	41	28	45	39	72.4	60
<b>2011–12</b>	Baseline year. Turnaround plan created, approved. Acceleration Academies happen just before MCAS testing	60.6	na	na	41	28	43	40	71.4	59.7
<b>2012–13</b>	First full year of Receivership and first year that MA uses “school levels”	61.3	2	6	41	38	47	57	71.7	66.6
<b>2013–14</b>	Second year of data	66.9	4	9	44	41	52	57	72.9	69.1
<b>2014–15</b>	Third year of data	71.8	6	9	45	44	49	53	72.6	69.9
<b>2015–16</b>	Fourth year of data (also a transition from MCAS to PARCC)		10	4	36	39	51	49	74.3	71.3
<b>2016–17</b>	Present year – no data yet									

\* Students are categorized based on test scores in two areas – English Language Arts (“ELA”) and mathematics – into four categories: “Advanced,” “Proficient,” Needs Improvement,” or “Warning/Failing.” The designation “% P + A” indicates what percentage of students fall in the top two categories – Proficient (P) and Advanced (A).

A 100-point index that assigns 100, 75, 50, 25, or 0 points to each student participating in MCAS and MCAS-Alt tests based on their performance. The total points assigned to each student are added together and the sum is divided by the total number of students assessed. The result is a number between 0 and 100, which constitutes a district, school or group’s CPI for that subject and student group. The CPI is a measure of the extent to which students are progressing toward proficiency (a CPI of 100) in ELA and mathematics.

A student growth percentile (SGP) reflects how students have performed on tests compared to other students with the same scores in recent years. A student falls either below, at, or above the median of that group. A score of 30 means she scored better than only 30 percent of the peer group.



## HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

Lawrence and Holyoke, objects of the first state takeovers, are two of the three poorest school districts in the state, with the highest concentrations of minority students and the lowest performance on statewide tests.

Springfield is the third. Its school district, the state's second largest, is also the second poorest in the state, with 87.3 percent of its students living in low-income families.<sup>2</sup>

Like almost all the main actors in the unfolding drama, Tim Collins, the local teachers union chief, grew up in Springfield. His father, a union laborer, had served as Springfield city treasurer and head of the School Committee; his brother, a former Springfield Public Schools (SPS) teacher and principal, is now vice chair of the School Committee. "Our human resource pool out here is nothing like the human resource pool in the Greater Boston area," Collins muses. "But we face the same kind of challenges," including poverty, opioid use, an overburdened criminal justice system, and significant numbers of non-English speakers. "It's not an easy environment to be a teacher."

Springfield Public Schools (SPS) Superintendent Daniel J. Warwick has also spent his entire life in Springfield – 40 years of it in the city's school system, as a substitute teacher, teacher, special education supervisor, principal, and, eventually, superintendent. The district had worked hard to improve its middle schools, he says. "We'd had success turning around some low-performing schools, but not the middle schools, so it was clear we had to do something different." Warwick had already begun thinking about what that might be: He had initiated talks with UP Education Network about coming in to run one of the troubled schools; a local foundation was

backing charters in town; and Teach for America had arrived in the city to partner with SPS.

Meanwhile Chester called in Chris Gabrieli, a biotech entrepreneur in his first career, who had previously run unsuccessfully for public office, including the 2006 Democratic gubernatorial primary against Deval Patrick, who had gone on to win the governorship. A child of immigrants, Gabrieli had turned his family's small business into a successful, publicly-traded healthcare software company, and then became partner at a leading global venture capital firm, where he was named one of *Forbes* Magazine's top 100 venture capital investors. With an appreciation for the difference that education can make in a child's life, he had turned to a second career in education policy, forming the non-profit National Center on Time and Learning in 2000 to advocate for a longer school day. He based his runs for public office largely on the issue of education and began to teach as a part-time lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. After his 2006 campaign, he co-authored a book, *Time to Learn: How a New School Schedule is Making Smarter Kids, Happier Parents, and Safer Neighborhoods*.

**With an appreciation for the difference education can make in a child's life, he had turned to a second career in education policy, forming the nonprofit National Center on Time and Learning in 2000 to advocate for a longer school day.**

Chester and Gabrieli had worked together on expanding learning time in schools. They got to know each other better when Gabrieli and Empower Schools co-founder Brett Alessi helped design and launch the Lawrence takeover. In

Lawrence, Gabrieli says, Jeff Riley, the former Boston principal brought in to turn the district around, “made it the non-takeover takeover. He did everything he could to reduce the ‘takeover-ness’” – in particular, collaborating with the unions, even though he didn’t legally need to do so. “So I said, ‘Let’s do more of this.’ And the Commissioner was intrigued by the idea of doing this voluntarily.”

“My sense is, it lit his passion for this kind of change,” says Chester. Just as importantly, Gabrieli knew Springfield: Springfield’s city government had been placed in state receivership in 2007, to stave off bankruptcy. Governor Patrick had appointed a state Finance Control Board and put in charge the man he had defeated in the gubernatorial primary, Chris Gabrieli. Chester now told Gabrieli that, if he were interested, he should “pick up the phone and call Springfield, and see if they want to do something like this.” Gabrieli called Warwick “and he went in a day from ‘what are you talking about?’ to talking to people in Lawrence and checking this out, to seeing this as something positive.”

“We came up with the idea that this could be really useful for a cluster of schools, not just an individual school,” Gabrieli adds. The three Springfield middle schools in the worst shape would be the initial targets, with three more nearly as challenged included as well. This drew in more than 80% of all of the middle schoolers in Springfield – a big enough group to drive large scale impact on the whole system if it worked. Gabrieli asked that his group and Springfield be given some time to put together an alternative plan before the takeover decision occurred. “We gave them a month,” Chester says.

From two prior interventions – the one in

Lawrence and the municipal takeover of Springfield– Gabrieli knew the value of local cooperation. Chester had seen a state takeover when he served for a time in the Philadelphia school district. In that case, the takeover board consisted of three state-appointed members and two appointed by the mayor. Chester thought that served as a good model and decided to utilize it in Springfield. He and Gabrieli crafted a zone board of strong local voices, but with a majority – four of seven – appointed by the state. Gabrieli pitched Chester on some of the specific state appointees – “real reformers,” he says, “six of the seven from Springfield. The mayor, superintendent, and chair of the school board are members of this new board, so they are all in on this.” Gabrieli chairs the board.

**This drew in more than 80 percent of all of the middle schoolers in Springfield – a big enough group to drive large-scale impact on the whole system if it worked.**

Both Chester and Gabrieli also “were very interested in public/private partnership,” Gabrieli adds, so the idea for a new alternative to outright takeover – an independently-managed board – began to take shape. “We have to have open meetings,” Gabrieli notes, “but we’re a nonprofit.” The zone hired two full-time staff, while Gabrieli’s Empower Schools has dedicated three staff full time to Springfield, funded by their national supporters, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. “The Zone is doing this with almost all local public money,” Gabrieli adds. “We’ve raised and spent only \$1.5 million extra.”

The Empowerment Zone board members I spoke with agreed that Springfield’s unique model is working better than the traditional state takeover, because:

- local officials participated in setting up this structure, thereby creating more cooperation and avoiding time spent on negatives, and
- it brings in a multiplicity of actors and stimulates more innovation than a state takeover would.

"It's the mix," Chester commented, "having a state and local governance structure, and one that wasn't imposed on the city but was agreed to."

The extent and nature of "agreement" is still a matter of some dispute, though.

The state, in fact, told officials in Springfield, "These are our conditions for change," Chester says. If city and school district officials – as well as the local union – didn't agree to the terms, a more traditional state takeover of the local schools would ensue. "Sure, they could say, 'The commissioner had a gun to our head,'" Chester concedes. "But they agreed to it. Inertia is a powerful force. And without something to disrupt things, we're never going to get to effective change."

Local officials, including Tim Collins, the union chief, generally agree that having a gun to their heads made the decision easier. "We wouldn't have wanted this, to be honest," says Kate Fenton, the district's chief instructional officer. "But the alternative was far worse."

Superintendent Warwick presents it more positively: "I had worked with Lawrence and could see the success, so [the model] was attractive to me.... I knew Chris's work, I felt he had contacts he could bring to Springfield that we couldn't get otherwise." Gun to the head? "Eh, I don't look at it that way. Frankly, we had tried everything under the traditional way, and clearly

we needed to do something differently. We were failing these kids, so I was excited to try this."

However congenial the initial arrangements were, the key ultimately would be getting the School Committee and the teachers union to agree to this new-fangled approach.

The School Committee was being asked to delegate authority over the schools in the zone, but they preferred that to a state takeover. And most of the teachers, including the union leaders, liked the possibility of greater teacher autonomy, as well as a number of additional features: customized professional development and support, more time for planning and collaboration, and increased salaries for increased time commitments.

**The key ultimately would be getting the School Committee and the teachers union to agree to this new-fangled approach.**

Superintendent Warwick called Collins, the union chief, and told him, "We couldn't negotiate like we usually did." He had two arguments: a carrot and a stick.

"We needed more hours [from teachers] or we wouldn't get the results we want for these kids, but we're willing to pay more money for it," he told Collins. And then the stick: "Otherwise, I think the commissioner will" take over the six schools and charterize them.

Under the new contract, which just covers the zone schools, teachers are required to work a minimum of 1,500 hours per school year – considerably more than what teachers outside of the Zone work. For schools that expand teacher time even more, up to a maximum of 1,850 hours, the district offered \$1,000-\$2,000



more per teacher per year. “The key thing was that we upped the pay-scale,” says Warwick. “We didn’t simply ‘stipend’ the extra time – we increased the whole pay scale significantly, and I think that proved appealing to teachers.”

**For schools that expand teacher time even more, up to a maximum of 1,850 hours, the district offered \$1,000-\$2,000 more per teacher per year.**

In Warwick’s view, the extra pay has been crucial. When the city faced fiscal crisis, it was placed under a state control board. That board had imposed a pay freeze on teachers. According to Warwick, “we lost 1,800 of our best teachers.” Raising pay under the empowerment program “stabilized staff” and stopped the hemorrhaging of teachers. In fact, the district experienced lower summer turnover than usual, which Warwick attributed to “interest in the zone,” particularly the fact that the new pay-scale was also weighted more heavily to first-year teachers, so that many more “stuck around.”

For Gabrieli, the key was not the increased pay levels but rather the rest of the contract, which implemented the same pay structure negotiated in Lawrence: compensation based in part on performance, not just seniority or degrees attained. “As a former principal,” Warwick says, “it would have been my ideal contract.” For many teachers, exactly the same could be said. In addition to more money for longer hours, they got extra time for planning, for professional development, and for kids who were behind. For instance, part of the deal was the addition of a math academy during what



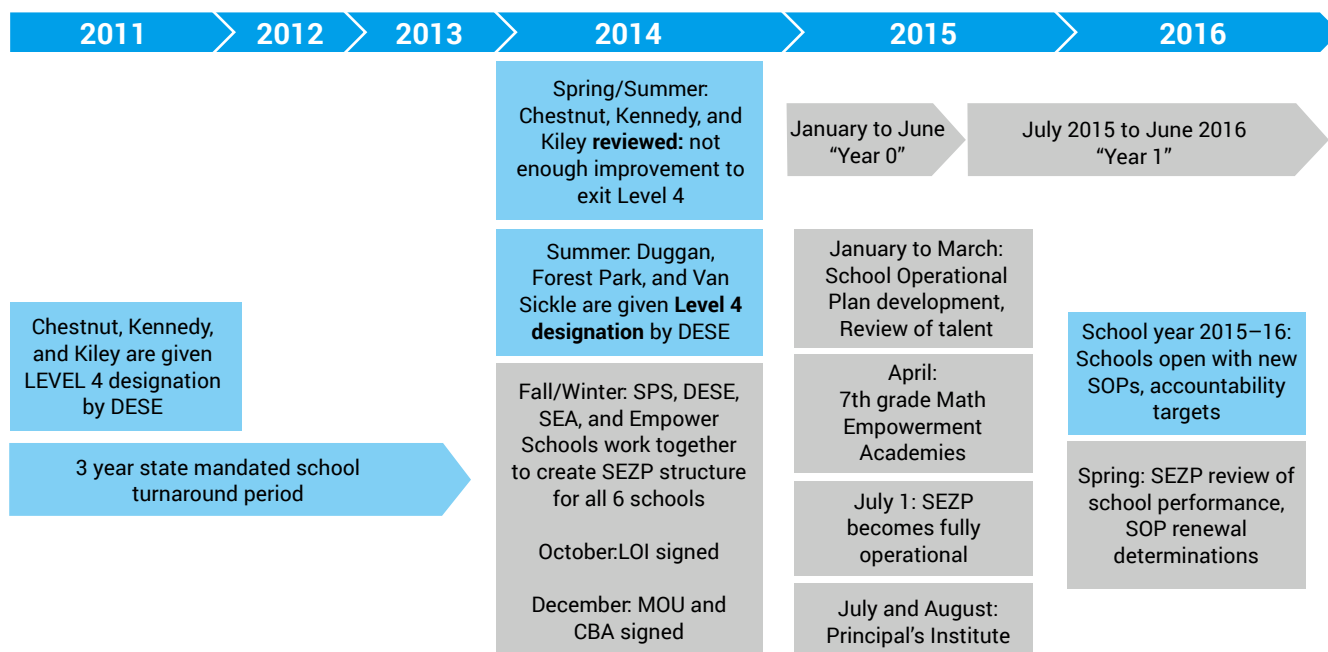
otherwise would be school-year vacation time. The bargain also gave them more input into how the schools were run.

**In addition to more money for longer hours, they got extra time for planning, for professional development, and for kids who were behind.**

The school committee voted 6-1 in favor of the Empowerment Zone, and 92 percent of the teachers at the eight schools that would become part of the zone voted in favor of a new, streamlined contract.

“This is the most peaceful takeover substitute in America,” Gabrieli says.

FIGURE 2: Timeline of Events (2011–2016)



Blue boxes above represent school accountability check points, grey boxes represent Empowerment Zone operations.

Source: Empower Schools.

## AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The Empowerment Zone provides principals with more flexible relationships both downward, with teachers, and upward, with central office administration. Chris Sutton, principal at M. Marcus Kiley Middle School, says, "I told my staff that what we were doing wasn't working, so we had to do something different. We had to think outside the box. But, if you're part of a system and you try to do something different, you get pushback. Now I don't have to worry about pushback from the district."

Other principals agreed: Instead of dealing with a complicated district bureaucracy involving multiple approvals, now all principals require for their plans is approval by the SEZP Board. "Communication is important between principals and the board. They have been very good in this model", says Sutton.

That's because the board understands that principals and their teachers need to make the operational decisions at their schools, Gabrieli says. "We don't know the answers, and that's something new for people in education policy to say. Our theory is: The people closest to the kids will have the best ideas about what to do."

One of the crucial elements is the mandatory institution of teacher leadership teams, which provide a "teacher's voice" in running the school. Four teachers elected by their colleagues and one appointed by the principal meet each month to act as the voice of the school's teachers. Each spring they work with the principal to develop a School Operational Plan for the coming school year; principals must agree with these plans or the dispute goes to the SEZP Board. So far, all principals and their teams have come to full agreement, so the board has simply ratified their plans.

"This is not a top-down model," insists Tom Mazza, principal of Forest Park Middle School. "This is a side-to-side model, and that's why this works."

**Each spring they work with the principal to develop a School Operational Plan for the coming school year; principals must agree with these plans or the dispute goes to the SEZP Board.**

"It's not one-size-fits-all," adds his deputy principal, Ervin Santiago. "That gets the teachers involved. And that gets teacher buy-in."

A group of teachers at Forest Park reflects the same view. "When you have teachers' voices heard, you have more buy-in," one says. "And that can only help the students."

"We're on our own," adds Mazza. "That has enhanced our closeness, enhanced our culture." The teachers agree: not having to answer to the district for everything has opened them up to new teaching resources and options, they say.

The teachers union chief, Tim Collins, also welcomes this autonomy – particularly the extent that authority was pushed downward to teachers. As Collins puts it, "Our schools in this city that are successful are those that have leaders who are successful at distributed leadership," in "empowering the people who actually have the responsibility. The key is, when people believe their voice is being heard and they can see their concerns in the solutions being implemented, that's when you see the needle start to move."

Mike Calvanese, the principal at John J. Duggan Academy, echoes this point. "Part of it is, get teacher ownership over the program," he says.

"The people who are implementing something have to buy into it."

But empowerment can't just provide autonomy in a vacuum. Autonomy to do what you want – whether in running the school or running an individual classroom – has to mean accountability for the decisions you make with that autonomy. These are two sides of the same coin. Accountability isn't just a punitive concept, as it's often presented; it's also an empowering one. In most public schools, principals and teachers don't feel (and aren't) accountable, because the key decisions – budget, personnel, curriculum, schedule – are made downtown. In the Empowerment Zone, adults in the school decide those matters. Actors outside the school are no longer much of a constraint. But that also means they are no longer much of an excuse. Principals and teachers bear, and must accept, the responsibility.

**In most public schools, principals and teachers don't feel (and aren't) accountable, because the key decisions – budget, personnel, curriculum, schedule – are made downtown.**

"That's the way it should be," says Calvanese. "If you had the prior [school] leaders here they'd probably say, 'Yeah, but we didn't have autonomy.' That's why I like this model: If you have autonomy, you can't point fingers." He tells his teachers, "If we don't fix it, we're going to have charters in here, or we're going to be taken over."

"What I like about autonomy," adds Ashley Martin, a Springfield assistant principal who assumed the principalship of the new UP Academy this school year, "is it makes



people – it makes me – tap into responsibility, because you have to own decisions.” Combining autonomy with accountability “shakes people out of their feeling that they’re at the bottom, they’re ‘the victim.’”

What exactly does accountability mean?

Ultimately, it means you’re rewarded for success and penalized for failure. As we’ve already seen, the teachers’ contract bases compensation not only on seniority or automatic “step” increases but on teaching evaluations, student outcomes, and the assumption of added responsibilities. But what about consequences for failure?

All principals were clear from the start: They were to meet the performance goals or face the consequences. And sure enough, not all schools thrived. “Some schools went south,” one principal says. “There was a lot of pushback from the union [at those schools], and that fed into it.”

One zone school was replaced after the first school year by UP Education Network. At two more schools, new principals were brought in to start new programs, beginning with sixth grade, that will replace the existing schools within two years. In all three cases, the new principals could hire their own staffs.

So everyone knows that new leaders or outside, private management could replace traditional public school principals at other schools – if necessary all of them, eventually. “We are agnostic about who can do the best job,” says Alessi, Gabrieli’s Empower Schools co-founder.

Scott Given, UP’s founder, describes his model as a school “restart.” The school’s existing teachers are invited to apply but not guaranteed a job. In fact, “We typically only rehire one or two

out of a staff of sixty,” he says. “We work hard to find the best teachers and leaders we can.” When they took over their first school in Boston, they had 4,000 applicants.

“The [teaching] talent is the crucial part of it,” says Anna Breen, principal of RISE at Van Sickle Academy, recruited to start a school over by phasing in one grade at a time. Breen is a 17-year veteran of the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) network of schools; she led KIPP’s flagship Massachusetts school in Lynn to the top 15 percent in the state despite a largely poor and Latino population. “I don’t believe there is any way you can take the same teachers and turn around the school,” she says. “You have to have the ability to hire your own staff.”

Nevertheless, principals in the established schools in the zone not starting from scratch do not have the ability simply to clean house. They have to follow normal state law for teachers with tenure, which allows them to fire for “inefficiency, incompetency, incapacity, conduct unbecoming a teacher, insubordination or failure on the part of the teacher to satisfy teacher performance standards...or other just cause.” That process is time consuming and lengthy, and local unions often contest it. But the zone does give principals support, so they have more capacity to run a thorough and fair dismissal process.

Tom Mazza, the principal at Forest Park, noted that “the difference is the level of support Empowerment provides us” in helping underperforming teachers write improvement plans to move them to higher performance – or providing the documentation necessary to get rid of them when they don’t. “I’ve non-renewed eleven teachers in two years here,” he says. “Teachers know,” as a result, that his

sole objective is to “put the best teaching corps before the students.”

But at least one zone principal, Daisy Roman-Davis, principal of the Van Sickle International Baccalaureate Middle School, would “like empowerment schools to have more autonomy in firing.” Some teachers have asked for transfers or resigned since she took over. “I’m okay with that,” she says. “The ones who are staying know what our vision is for moving forward.”

Tenured teachers who transfer or are moved out when an outside operator like UP comes in are guaranteed pay but cannot be forced on any other school, cannot be sent outside the zone, and cannot “bump” less senior teachers in the zone. This is in stark contrast to what has happened in the past. One of the turnaround models instituted as part of the 2010 state law required districts to remove 50 percent of the

teachers at underperforming schools if they wanted state turnaround money. Springfield moved them elsewhere, and “we have data that shows that where the preponderance of them landed – those were our next Level 4 schools,” says Pat Roach, the district’s Chief Finance and Operations Officer.

**One of the turnaround models instituted as part of the 2010 state law required districts to remove 50 percent of the teachers at underperforming schools if they wanted state turnaround money.**

The challenge of managing tenured teachers guaranteed ongoing pay falls to the zone’s management, which has been able so far to solve the dilemma either by finding a voluntary placement at another school or working to find new directions for the teachers. As Gabrieli notes, this limits the rate at which schools can be “restarted.”

## BUDGET AUTONOMY

Mazza cites three elements “crucial to empowerment.” As noted above, one is teacher voice in running the school; closely related to that is “curricular flexibility.” But, says, Mazza, “First and foremost is the budget autonomy. With budget autonomy, I was able to hire a reading coach for every team in the building. It’s like Fantasy Football – you get to build your own team.” In the past, Mazza says, he had discretion over how to spend approximately \$350,000 of the school’s budget; now, he has control of – and responsibility for – the entire \$8.7 million operation. “That allowed me to choose: ‘I really don’t need those services – so what can I use that money for?’ Every decision counts here.”

The district keeps only 1 percent of federal funding, for the grant-writing overhead needed



to bring in those federal funds. It is allowed to retain up to 16.5 percent of the state funding for “non-optional services” – collective or legacy costs such as building maintenance, transportation, utilities, and the human resources department. The district calculates those costs, and, for year one, set their “price” at only 15.5 percent of per-student funding. That fell to 14 percent for the current school year – which “shows the good faith of the District,” according to Matt Matera, Empower Schools’ program director in charge of the zone. Matera calls this “a ‘high-integrity’ move by the district. It’s one of the best indicators of what good partners the district has been in this.”

**It is allowed to retain up to 16.5 percent of the state funding for “non-optional services” – collective or legacy costs such as building maintenance, transportation, utilities, and the human resources department.**

The zone keeps about 4 percent of the overall funding to pay its lean staff and cover overhead. The school receives the remainder of the funds and can use them as it sees fit: to hire additional teachers, counselors, or educational specialists or to purchase equipment or “optional services” like professional development. They can buy such services from the district or from other providers. “That required them to put together a cost for every item, but they did it,” says Calvanese. “I’ve got to hand it to them.”

Zone schools have “complete freedom to spend dollars how they want,” adds Warwick, but “many are buying central services because they’re pretty good.” He cites professional development for teachers as one example. Nevertheless, “it’s a competitive environment – [district] people

realize the services have to be good to get the schools to buy them.”

“When I was in a charter, we were always pitted against the district,” adds Ashley Martin, the UP Academy principal. “With this, it’s cooperative and communal – so much better.”

But there’s one problem everyone in Springfield seems to recognize about budget autonomy: “staff aren’t used to so much autonomy,” in Warwick’s words. “The strong ones are okay. The weaker ones, not so much.”

For example, says Collins, “No-one puts subs in the budget – so, if someone is out sick, collaboration time goes.”

“You can’t just give people responsibility for details they’ve never dealt with,” says Martin. To make things easier, the district’s business office is giving principals a menu of options to choose from, but, for those unaccustomed to doing the purchasing, there is a learning curve.

This leads to an important consideration in any autonomy zone: It turns out that management of a school requires a lot of, well, management. “Managing 100 people can be exhausting,” one principal observes.

To help, the zone allows each school to choose its own “support partner,” a nonprofit that helps and coaches principals. “It used to be the case that someone was brought over to contract, and I had to work with them,” says Sutton. Now he can choose. This approach – allowing each school to make its own decisions and providing assistance in doing so – allows for experimentation, communication about what works and what doesn’t, and, as result, learning and adaptation, he says.



"I've done turnaround, and you can't do it alone," adds Martin. "I'm so glad I have a team to support me. It was smart to pair schools with outside support partners."

"I don't know how I was a principal before empowerment," Mazza chimes in. "This is the future of education – it's the way it should be everywhere."

## II. A MODEL FOR ELSEWHERE?

The Springfield Empowerment Zone launched its second school year in August 2016. It's too early to draw conclusions about whether it represents a model for school reform elsewhere. But it raises a number of questions worth considering as the experiment continues.

## DOES IT WORK?

The most important question for any proposed educational reform is whether it improves educational outcomes for students. The first-year test scores under the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, just reported last month, were mixed. As Gabrieli himself wrote to interested parties, they "both reflect modest gains and highlight continued challenges." The tables below show the performance of each zone school on two scores: composite performance index (CPI) and student growth percentile (SGP).

TABLE 2: School Year 2014-15 and 2015-16 SGP by School in ELA and Math

SCHOOL	ELA		MATH	
	SY 2014-15	SY 2015-16	SY 2014-15	SY 2015-16
CHESTNUT NORTH	24	22	29	34
CHESTNUT SOUTH	23	38	22	27
CHESTNUT TAG	33.5	40	30.5	31
DUGGAN	40	43	41	42
FOREST PARK	52	45	51.0	34
KILEY	34	43	39	35
KENNEDY	24	29	22	22
VAN SICKLE ACADEMY	41	24	39	13
VAN SICKLE IB		32		24
SEZP	37.0	38.0	36.0	30.0

TABLE 3: School Year 2014-15 and 2015-16 CPI by School in ELA and Math

SCHOOL	ELA		MATH	
	SY 2014-15	SY 2015-16	SY 2014-15	SY 2015-16
CHESTNUT NORTH	52.1	51.7	33.5	41.5
CHESTNUT SOUTH	52.5	65.5	36.4	44.3
CHESTNUT TAG	87.2	87.8	76.8	81.4
DUGGAN	74.6	73.7	56.6	58.8
FOREST PARK	75.4	74.1	59.0	58.1
KILEY	69.6	71.6	55.1	56.0
KENNEDY	55.8	60.0	40.9	39.5
VAN SICKLE ACADEMY	73.6	64.2	52.0	39.9
VAN SICKLE IB		75.6		52.5
SEZP	68.2	70.3	51.0	53.2

In writing to the zone board, Gabrieli summed up the data this way: “On three of the state’s primary measures, including percentage of students meeting standards, composite performance index (CPI), and student growth percentile (SGP), the majority of our schools show modest improvement over the previous year. However, [after one year] none of our schools reached our two-year goal of 50 median SGP in both English Language Arts (ELA) and math.”

But he also stressed the changes the zone is making: “We placed two new promising leaders and an operator at three of our most challenged schools and are increasing the use of the school supports found to be most effective in year one.”<sup>3</sup>

“They’re not what I would have wanted to see in year one,” Gabrieli concedes in conversation. “Still, these are tough schools at the bottom of the heap, so any gains are good. But I have very high expectations for year two.”

## WILL IT LAST?

When I met with him, Tim Collins, the local union leader, said to me, “People wonder, is this just another new thing that’s going to change again? Because, in this city, we did use to have the Flavor of the Month.”

This is a valid concern anywhere. Advocates may well ask: Can this experiment survive changes in leadership at the state, local, or zone levels to achieve success? And, if it does succeed, will it then go away, leaving the system to return to its prior state? Past efforts to create “autonomous schools” in other cities have often been neutered over time. This is one of the biggest questions about autonomy zones: Can they withstand the bureaucracy’s tendency to resent special privileges given to a few and take them away at the first opportunity?

In the short term, the zone concept is locked in place. As a legal entity, the zone has a contract with SPS for five years, renewable based on achievement of the performance targets established in each school’s turnaround plan approved by the state. In the longer term, too, it can be cancelled only if both the district and the state agree to abandon the effort. “There’s no schedule or commitment to ‘return’ the schools,” says Gabrieli. “The Zone exists until the district and the state jointly agree to kill it.”

**As a legal entity, the zone has a contract with SPS for five years, renewable based on achievement of the performance targets established in each school’s turnaround plan approved by the state.**

“The idea,” says Gabrieli’s colleague, Sarah Toce, “is that autonomy is necessary for schools in turnaround mode – as they all are

right now – but also for schools to maintain their performance. That means that the zone governance will continue to grant these schools autonomy and protect that autonomy until it is proven that autonomy isn’t working.”

At the moment, the zone appears to lack any significant opposition. Gabrieli’s team responded to my repeated requests to identify opponents by insisting there aren’t any. One can search the press reports in vain for any consistent criticism. Both teachers and school board members approved the new contract by overwhelming margins; I encountered only mild criticism from groups of teachers at two of the schools.

**Both teachers and school board members approved the new contract by overwhelming margins.**

But, if the zone board continues to replace schools with outside operators, which reject more teachers, will the union balk? And will that result in the zone paying so many “excessed” teachers that the model becomes either unscalable or unsustainable? And will that then induce the Springfield School Committee to try to take back schools’ autonomy to hire and fire – or over operations more generally?

“The two biggest constraints” on school reform, cautions the district’s CFO, Pat Roach, “are the union contract and the School Committee, who are elected officials who view their constituency as being adults.”

Gabrieli isn’t worried about the union, because the zone empowers teachers in a way the union has long wanted. As for the School Committee, the fact that it retains its historic control over the vast majority of Springfield schools is, to Gabrieli, the “one thing that makes this more tenable: it’s only 16 percent of the kids. For



84 percent of the kids, the School Committee can still meet, the district can still do its thing. Maybe this is applicable to more schools down the road, but right now this isn't a threat to anybody."

If the Empowerment Zone expanded, however – became not a "zone" but an entire system – it would profoundly change the role of the School Committee and central administration, diminishing their power over operational decisions at schools. If that happens, Warwick says, his role "will have to be more of a facilitator, less that of a dictator. Sure, you're giving up power in a sense – but what we were doing wasn't working."

As education reform expert David Osborne observes, the School Committee and superintendent "would have to steer, not row. And that would be far more effective. When superintendents have to row – operate schools – they typically don't have time to steer." Will school boards and superintendents be willing to make that shift?

### **DOES SPRINGFIELD REPRESENT A THIRD – AND BETTER – WAY?**

Massachusetts already has some experience with semi-autonomous schools. As in the rest of the country, the results have been mixed. In Boston, where most of the initial experimentation has occurred, charter schools have outperformed the traditional public schools by leaps and bounds, but a variety of semi-autonomous models have not fared as well.<sup>4</sup>

Around the country, most autonomy zone experiments have also disappointed. The most notable exceptions are Los Angeles and Memphis. In Memphis, "innovation schools" have succeeded in part by taking the best principals and teachers out of other schools – many of

which have then declined in performance.<sup>5</sup> More promising is Los Angeles, where former Mayor Anthony Villaraigosa created the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools in 2007: a nonprofit organization with a five-year, renewable agreement with the school district. Since then, two other nonprofits have signed partnership deals, and there are about 30 network partner schools – all of which began as turnaround schools. At least two of the networks have impressive results. New versions of autonomy zone have sprung up in Denver and Indianapolis over the past two years, with their own nonprofit boards designed to ensure school autonomy. But all-charter models such as New Orleans and Washington D.C.'s Public Charter School Board have produced far better results than most semi-autonomous schools.

**But all-charter models such as New Orleans and Washington D.C.'s Public Charter School Board have produced far better results than most semi-autonomous schools.**

Where does the Springfield experiment stand in relation to these other models? As in Memphis, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, and Denver, Springfield's model was brought into being not by state fiat but through voluntary, if grudging, agreement of local leaders.<sup>7</sup> As in Los Angeles, Indianapolis, and Denver's new zone, schools report to a nonprofit board, not the district, so they have greater autonomy than many such models and a buffer against micromanagement by the district. (The latter two models have even more autonomy, because their schools are not unionized.) As in Memphis, where "innovation schools" were given significantly more money, increased funding was also an important part of the equation in Springfield.



Where Springfield really stands out is in making schools accountable for their performance. In Memphis, innovation schools can be taken over by the state's Achievement School District and handed over to charter operators if they fail, but none have yet. And in Denver, the school board is on record supporting the same accountability for its innovation schools as for charters, but it has not yet closed any of them. Nor have Boston's or Los Angeles's pilot and partnership schools had to deal yet with the threat of replacement. Boston's own "turnaround schools" come closest to Springfield's in accountability: Of the dozen first identified in 2010, two have been closed. But even that pales beside Springfield, which

replaced the leadership and many teachers in three of its nine schools after one year. That kind of accountability should light a fire under all the other principals and teachers in the zone.

**Where Springfield really stands out is in making schools accountable for their performance.**

Springfield differs from true charters in several ways. First, since all zone schools remain in the union, though under a separate contract from the rest of Springfield's schools, the union retains significant political leverage. Second, tenured teachers have fairly secure jobs; standard state procedures protect them.

Third, parents don't get to choose their schools, as some (but not all) do in other autonomy zones. Choice gives schools an advantage, because students' parents – having made an active choice – tend to be more committed. The schools also have more freedom to create unique, innovative programs to meet the needs of their students, since no one is forced to attend. On the other hand, Gabrieli argues, choice brings complexity and transportation costs, and many parents just want a good school in their neighborhood.

**The schools also have more freedom to create unique, innovative programs to meet the needs of their students, since no one is forced to attend.**

In sum, Springfield has created the conditions for adoption of an autonomy zone system in a cooperative and virtually universally-supportive environment; placed that system under a nonprofit board to ensure true accountability and to insulate it from central district control; and provided needed supports and incentives for performance. And, unlike most other models, Springfield's zone has proven that it will create serious consequences for school failure.

**Springfield has created the conditions for adoption of an autonomy zone in a cooperative and virtually universally-supportive environment.**

#### **CAN – AND WILL – IT BE REPLICATED?**

The importance of the Springfield model comes down, ultimately, to whether other SPS schools and other districts will embrace it. Warwick's Chief Instructional Officer, Fenton, points out that Warwick has already taken steps in this direction with his other schools. "The Superintendent would say it's 'earned

autonomy,'" Fenton says. The district has given more budget control to non-Zone schools, funding for extended learning time if they wish, and expanded release time for teachers to engage in the planning and collaboration, from four days per year to seven.

"Some of the autonomies we've given to the Zone principals, we're trying to give out to the other schools," says Warwick. "Everything we find here that works, we're going to try to cascade out to the rest of the system."

"Our theory of change," Alessi adds, is that "other principals will want to get into the Zone." Zone principals point to at least one other Springfield principal, Kristen Hughes at the White Street School – not part of the zone – who has "stood up to" the central administration to do her own thing and demand a similar sort of autonomy. Not only has she succeeded – making her original school the only Massachusetts school to leap, during her tenure, from Level 4 to Level 1 status – but Warwick has entrusted her with the unique responsibility of running another school simultaneously.

And SPS recently approved transferring the High School of Commerce, a struggling high school, into the Zone next year. Teachers' union leader Tim Collins testified in favor of the transfer, the School Committee voted for it (again, 6-1), and even Mayor Domenic Sarno, a Commerce graduate, supported it as a member of the Zone Board, expressing his belief that this was the best path for his own alma mater.

So the model is spreading in Springfield. Gabrieli believes it can be useful in many places. "I look at it as a governance structure that enables things to happen that wouldn't otherwise," he says. He sees what he calls three "use cases":



- Driving change in low-performing schools where “something has to happen.”
- The opposite, and “equally interesting,” case of places – like Denver – that have high-performing schools “that want the same authority as charters.”
- Places that are launching new schools and want new design models such as blended learning for them. “We’re starting to see more interest in that,” Gabrieli says.

In all cases, though, Gabrieli sees the model as a partnership arrived at from both sides. “Everyone has to come together to make it work,” adds Warwick. Do you need a hammer – the threat of takeover – to do that? “Well, if others see it works, hopefully they’ll choose to go this way voluntarily.”

“I was hoping these would become proof points,” adds Chester – “that other districts would consider these changes without the threat of state receivership. Hopefully, there’s a tipping point. We’re not there yet.”

### “Everyone has to come together to make it work.”

Denver school officials visited Springfield and are emulating it with their own zone, consisting of four schools and a nonprofit board that has a three-year agreement with the Denver school board. Principals of “innovation schools” that were frustrated with only partial autonomy initiated it and sought out Gabrieli’s organization, because of its work in Springfield. And another challenged Massachusetts school district – in New Bedford – has voted to explore the same model for three of its middle schools, without any state pressure to do so.<sup>8</sup>

Gabrieli believes the Empowerment experiment will work – and that it will spread voluntarily because of that success. Only time will tell if he is right. But, if he is, Springfield will add another important invention to its list – right after basketball.

---

# Endnotes

All quotations not attributed in an endnote are from interviews with the author.

- 1 "A Roadmap to Closing the Proficiency Gap," *Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education*, last updated April 2010, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/boe/news/0410PGRoadmap.pdf>. Fox, Jeremy C., "Mass. Students are again tops in national testing," *Boston Globe*, last updated October 28, 2015, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/10/27/mass-again-tops-national-test-student-achievement/8RrxW2veaCO6nGxJHxsUEO/story.html>
- 2 "Springfield middle schools falling behind: 3 face state takeover," *The [Springfield] Republican*, published September 25, 2014.
- 3 Gabrieli, Chris. "Memorandum To: Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership Board of Directors, Subject: School Year 2015-2016 PARCC Results Summary." (September 25, 2016).
- 4 Abdulkadiroglu, Atila, Josh Angrish, Sarah Cohodes, Susan Dynarski, Jon Fullerton, Thomas Kane, and Parag Pthak. *Urban Charter School Study: Report on 41 Regions Indiana* (Stanford, Ca.: Center for Research on Educational Outcomes, 2015); *Informing the Debate: Comparing Boston's Charter, Pilot, and Traditional Schools* (Boston: Boston Foundation, 2009). There are only six in-district charters and eight innovation schools, several of which are very new, so it's difficult to generalize about their performance with any accuracy.
- 5 Buntin, John, "Changing a Culture Inside and Out of School," *Governing*, January 2015.
- 6 "LAUSD Ranks Near Top in 2013 API for Urban Districts in California," Los Angeles Unified School District, Aug. 29, 2013; "Graduation Rate for Partnership for LA Schools More Than Doubles to 77%," Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, Dec. 17, 2015; and LA's Promise, <http://www.lapromisefund.org>
- 7 Osborne, David, "A 21st Century School System in the Mile-High City," *Progressive Policy Institute*, published May 2016, "An Educational Revolution in Indianapolis," *Progressive Policy Institute*, published December 2016.
- 8 Barnes, Jennette, "Big changes could be coming to New Bedford middle schools," *South Coast Today*, last modified November 15, 2016, <http://www.southcoasttoday.com/news/20161114/big-changes-could-be-coming-to-new-bedford-middle-schools>.



---

The Progressive Policy Institute is a catalyst for policy innovation and political reform based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock.

Founded in 1989, PPI started as the intellectual home of the New Democrats and earned a reputation as President Bill Clinton's "idea mill." Many of its mold-breaking ideas have been translated into public policy and law and have influenced international efforts to modernize progressive politics.

Today, PPI is developing fresh proposals for stimulating U.S. economic innovation and growth; equipping all Americans with the skills and assets that social mobility in the knowledge economy requires; modernizing an overly bureaucratic and centralized public sector; and, defending liberal democracy in a dangerous world.

---

© 2017  
**Progressive Policy Institute**  
**All rights reserved.**

---

**Progressive Policy Institute**  
1200 New Hampshire Ave NW,  
Suite 575  
Washington, DC 20036

---

**Tel** 202.525.3926  
**Fax** 202.525.3941

---

**[info@ppionline.org](mailto:info@ppionline.org)**  
**[progressivepolicy.org](http://progressivepolicy.org)**

---