*****Massachusetts Department of***

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

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| Jeffrey C. Riley  *Commissioner* |  |

# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner |
| **Date:** | March 14, 2022 |
| **Subject:** | Update on Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership |

At the meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) on March 22, the Co-Executive Directors for the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, Inc. (SEZP), Colleen Curran and Matthew Brunell, will provide an update on SEZP’s governance structure, the overall student progress to date, including graduation, attendance, and progress on core academics, and the successes and challenges of the model.

**Introduction**

SEZP was created in 2014 as an innovative, voluntary partnership between Springfield Public Schools (SPS) and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), in close collaboration with the Springfield Education Association (SEA). The goal of the partnership was to rapidly improve the educational opportunities and outcomes for students in a subset of Springfield’s middle and high schools, which had been designated as underperforming schools. Originally, SEZP was created to manage eight schools. In the fall of 2017, the High School of Commerce, an underperforming high school, joined the Empowerment Zone. Through school reconfigurations, as of school year 2021-2022, the Empowerment Zone includes fourteen middle and high schools, many of which are small, specialized schools that have replaced the original large middle-school model. The Empowerment Zone schools are listed in Appendix A.

**Key principles**

Since its inception, SEZP has spearheaded a model that utilizes school-level autonomy, a diverse set of management approaches for the individual schools, and joint state/local governance. School leaders and educators at each school are empowered to make key decisions on resource allocation, staffing, scheduling, curriculum, and professional development. In addition, each school has a Teacher Leadership Team that is tasked with creating the School Operating Plan. This distributed leadership model gives teachers input on key school strategies.

SEZP staff members support operational and instructional needs of the schools in the Empowerment Zone and enhance the capacity of school leaders to make effective use of school-level autonomy to improve equitable outcomes for students.

**Background**

The SEZP board, which includes three city and district representatives and four representatives appointed by the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, oversees the Springfield Empowerment Zone. The local representatives are Mayor Dominic Sarno, School Superintendent Daniel Warwick, and School Committee member Chris Collins. The Commissioner’s appointees are John Davis, senior trustee of the Springfield-based Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation, DESE Chief of Staff Leldamy Correa, Board of ESE Vice-Chair James Morton, and Board of Higher Education Chair Chris Gabrieli, who chairs the SEZP board.

Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 69, §1J(i) permits a superintendent to select a non-profit entity to operate a school designated as underperforming. The non-profit entity has full managerial and operational control of the school. Consistent with this statutory provision, the Springfield superintendent appointed SEZP to manage the schools. The Springfield School Committee ratified the superintendent's selection of SEZP in 2014 through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with SEZP and DESE.

Through the MOU, SPS has delegated full operational and managerial control of the schools in the Empowerment Zone, and direct control of about 85 percent of all per-student funding for those schools, to the SEZP board. SPS provides facilities and key operational supports in areas such as human resources, student enrollment, transportation, and facilities maintenance, and delegates educational and programmatic decision-making to the SEZP board and its schools.

Additionally, the SEZP board has negotiated a separate collective bargaining agreement with the SEA. The agreement provides for working conditions to be set at the school level by the principal and the Teacher Leadership Team working collaboratively, establishes an extended school day, and creates a performance-based career ladder that includes teacher leadership positions.

**Key Ongoing Initiatives**

SEZP’s work is focused on three key priorities:

1. **Teacher and Leader Diversification**

From its inception, SEZP has believed that its schools must be places where students *see* educators and leaders whose backgrounds and life experiences mirror their backgrounds and life experiences. Animated by this priority – and fueled by significant funding from DESE’s teacher diversification pilot grants – SEZP has worked to increase the percentage of educators who identify as persons of color, from 26 percent to over 40 percent, in the last five years. Similarly, through SEZP’s intentional leader recruitment and development efforts, the percentage of leaders who identify as people of color has more than doubled, from 20 percent to 52 percent, in the last five years.

While these results are promising, SEZP is resolute that more needs to be done. During the presentation to the Board, the SEZP co-executive directors will present on the Equitable Pathways to Leadership (EPL), a program funded by the Student Opportunity Act and the generosity of the Barr Foundation, which seeks to develop each of the three tiers of leadership: building administrators (existing principals or those on the cusp of the position), emerging leaders (newer leaders in schools), and lead learners (educators with longer-term aspirations to lead).

1. **Early College**

SEZP has prioritized early college, beginning four programs designed to enable students to earn college credits while still enrolled in high school. During the presentation to the Board, the co-executive directors will present on two of the four programs. The first is the Commerce Early College Scholars Program. The second is the launch of a wall-to-wall early college high school – Discovery Early College High School for Teaching and Industry – which seeks to help address the racial equity gap in the Springfield workforce for education and industry.

1. **Integrated Exceptional Learning Initiative**

Directly before as well as during the pandemic, SEZP leadership worked closely with the SEA, SPS special education department leadership, and DESE to strategize on how SEZP could build more capacity for its students with disabilities, especially in teacher development aimed at improving student outcomes and school level systems. SEZP’s working theory is that the gaps in performance between non-special education and special education students, on nearly all social-emotional and academic measurements, stem from the lack of highly-qualified and licensed special educators or clear strategies for developing the educators. Simultaneously, SEZP seeks to increase access to inclusive environments and high quality, grade level aligned curriculum.

During the Board presentation, the SEZP co-executive directors will share more about SEZP’s multi-year Integrated Exceptional Learner initiative that aspires (1) to coach teachers to improve teaching skills that support learning for students served by individualized education programs (IEPs), and (2) to support the development of specialized approaches to family empowerment that enable parents to become partners in the special education process and learn related advocacy skills with a goal of college/career readiness for their students with disabilities.

Springfield Mayor Dominic Sarno and Superintendent of Schools Daniel Warwick, both of whom serve on the SEZP board, will join SZEP co-executive directors Colleen Curran and Matthew Brunell and Lauren Woo, DESE’s Director of Strategic Transformation, for the presentation and discussion on March 22.

Enclosure:

Attachment A: Springfield Empowerment Zone schools

Academy at Kiley

Chestnut TAG

Commerce High School

Duggan Academy

Emergence Academy

Forest Park Middle

Impact Prep

Kennedy Middle

Kiley Middle

Kiley Prep

Lyceum College Prep

Rise Academy/Rise Prep

Springfield Realization

Van Sickle Academy