# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Russell D. Johnston, Acting Commissioner |
| **Date:** | November 12, 2024 |
| **Subject:** | Update on the Holyoke School Committee Capacity Building Plan |

This memorandum provides an update on the Holyoke School Committee’s plan to build its capacity to resume local control of the Holyoke Public Schools at the end of the 2024-25 school year.

**Background**

Holyoke Public Schools (HPS) has been in state receivership since April 28, 2015, when the Board of Elementary Secondary Education (Board) voted to place the district in chronically underperforming status.[[1]](#footnote-2) On September 18, 2023, the Holyoke School Committee submitted a [petition](https://www.doe.mass.edu/level5/districts/2023-0918garcia-letter.docx) to then Commissioner Jeffrey Riley, requesting that he consider removing the district’s chronically underperforming designation on the basis of the district’s accomplishments under receivership. On February 2, 2024, Commissioner Riley issued a [response](https://www.doe.mass.edu/level5/districts/2024-0202holyoke-commissioner-response.docx) to the petition in which he deferred a formal determination on the petition, in order to allow the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to confer with HPS Receiver Anthony Soto and the Holyoke School Committee about the steps that would be needed to sustain the district’s progress throughout and beyond a planned transition to local control.

On March 25, 2024, in my role as Acting Commissioner, I met with the Holyoke School Committee’s Local Control Subcommittee and subsequently the full Holyoke School Committee (HSC) to affirm DESE’s commitment to supporting HPS and HSC in developing a clear path to exiting receivership. Between April and August 2024, I met with the Local Control Subcommittee seven times to support their development of a transition plan for HSC that would prepare it to resume full governance of HPS with demonstrated capacity to sustain the district’s continuous improvement.

On August 19, 2024, the HSC unanimously voted to adopt a [capacity building plan](https://core-docs.s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/documents/asset/uploaded_file/3179/HPS/4752140/Holyoke_School_Committee_Capacity_Building_Plan_Final_8-26-2024.pdf) that outlines concrete action steps and benchmarks for the HSC to pursue during the 2024-25 school year in core areas of school governance that are described in the next section of this memo.

At the October 29, 2024 Board meeting, I [announced](https://www.doe.mass.edu/level5/districts/2024-1029holyoke-exit-announcement.pdf) that the Holyoke Public Schools will provisionally exit chronically underperforming status anticipated July 1, 2025, contingent upon the Holyoke School Committee making satisfactory progress toward implementing its Capacity Building Plan.

**Plan Overview**

Building upon the collaborative discussions in Holyoke that I have led with our DESE team, the HSC’s Capacity Building Plan outlines a core set of governance activities that the HSC will develop in the 2024-25 school year, with targeted trainings to support their professional learning. The governance activities and training supports are organized into four major areas:

* Superintendent Hiring
* Superintendent Evaluation, with a focus on Continuous Improvement and

Collaboration

* Finance and Budget
* Policy Development

These core areas of school district governance were selected to align with the statutory responsibilities of the HSC pursuant to [M.G.L. Ch. 71 sec. 37](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71/section37) and the performance indicators in DESE’s [District Standards and Indicators](https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/district-standards-indicators.docx) document.

Within each of the above areas of governance, the plan specifies concrete steps and detailed timelines so that the HSC is continuously building and demonstrating its capacities to govern throughout the transitional period leading to the district’s exit from receivership.

**Community Engagement**

A key priority for the HSC is to foster a culture of collaboration with HPS and with community stakeholders in its governance of the school district. Toward this goal, the HSC’s Capacity Building Plan includes the creation of an ad hoc Community Advisory Team to promote robust community engagement throughout the transition to local control. The focus of the Community Advisory Team’s work during the 2024-25 school year will be to support the HSC’s planning and implementation of its superintendent hiring and evaluation processes.

**Plan Monitoring and Support from DESE**

At its August 19, 2024 meeting, the HSC voted to submit progress reports on its implementation of the Plan to me every two months. In support of this resolution, I have agreed to continue to meet with the Local Control Subcommittee on a bimonthly basis.

At the Board meeting on November 19 in Holyoke, Holyoke’s Mayor Joshua Garcia, School Committee Member Dr. Yadilette Rivera Colón, Receiver Anthony Soto, and Lauren Woo, DESE’s acting chief of staff, will present on the progress the HSC has made in implementing the Plan and answer your questions.

1. Additional information on the district’s Turnaround Plan and journey in chronically underperforming status can be found at [Chronically Underperforming Districts (mass.edu)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/level5/districts/level5districts.html). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)