



October 29, 2024

Honorable Mayor Garcia
536 Dwight Street
Holyoke, MA 01040

Anthony Soto, Receiver
57 Suffolk Street
Holyoke, MA 01040

Dear Mayor Garcia and Receiver Soto,

I am writing to announce my provisional decision to remove Holyoke Public Schools' (HPS) chronically underperforming designation at the end of the school year, anticipated July 1, 2025. This decision will be finalized in June 2025 based on the Holyoke School Committee's (HSC) progress toward implementing its capacity building plan.

My provisional decision to exit HPS from state receivership recognizes the significant improvements that the district has made in some of the key areas of concern highlighted in its original 2015 turnaround plan. As a result of the combined leadership of school and district leaders, educators, parents, and students, the district's accomplishments since 2015 include:

- An increase in the district's four-year cohort graduation rate from 60.2 percent in 2014 to 74.6 in 2023, which includes a 23-point gain for English learners and an 18-point gain for students with disabilities over the same time period;
- A reduction of the out-of-school suspension rate from 20.0 percent in 2013-14 to 9.0 percent in 2022-23;
- An increase in the percentage of students in grades 11-12 completing advanced coursework from 39.5 percent in 2018 to 57.0 in 2024; and
- A gap-narrowing increase in the percentage of Hispanic/Latino students in grades 11-12 completing advanced coursework, from 32.2 percent in 2018 to 54.6 in 2024.

Under state receivership, HPS also has deepened its systemwide investments in high-quality curriculum, focused instructional practices, student and family engagement supports, personalized pathways, educator development and leadership development to address the systemic challenges identified in the 2015 turnaround plan. Systemwide accomplishments since 2015 include:

- Consistent implementation of high-quality curriculum materials, observed in 96 percent of HPS classrooms;
- Districtwide implementation of evidence-based early literacy strategies;

- Districtwide professional development for instructional leaders to establish consistent instructional expectations in all classrooms;
- An increase in the percentage of teachers of color, from 13 percent in 2015 to 32 percent in 2024;
- Expansion of the district’s dual language program to serve more than 20 percent of the pre-K-8 student population;
- Expansion of pre-K programming to offer more than 500 seats to families in 2023-24 through either district-operated or partner-operated classrooms;
- Redesign of Holyoke High School to offer a Freshman Academy for a more personalized entry to high school and theme-based academies and career vocational technical education pathways designed to ignite student interest and connect learning to the real world;
- Full enrollment in the career vocational technical education pathways at the Holyoke High School Dean Campus since the 2021-22 school year, after nearly a decade of under-enrollment; and
- The rezoning of the district into separate elementary and middle schools, supported by the construction of a new middle school that is scheduled to open in fall 2025.

While the implementation of these new systems, practices and programs has not yet produced sustained academic gains in state assessment data, I believe that the district has developed a coherent set of strategies for improving teaching and learning outcomes in every classroom, through its inclusive strategic planning process that regularly solicits feedback from all stakeholders. The appropriate path forward is to empower local leadership to oversee the continued effective implementation of these systems and programs.

The Holyoke School Committee will play a pivotal role in continuously improving the district’s development and implementation of its strategic plan. Since March 2024, I have regularly met with the HSC’s Local Control Subcommittee to support its development of a capacity building plan for the HSC. On August 19, 2024, the subcommittee presented that plan to the School Committee and public. This plan focuses on providing the HSC with additional trainings in four key areas of school district governance: Superintendent Evaluation, Superintendent Hiring, Finance & Budget, and Policy Development. I am hopeful that the HSC’s plan for professional development throughout school year 2024-2025 will prepare the School Committee to effectively govern the district moving forward with an unwavering focus on student outcomes. Additionally, for a transitional period after the end of receivership, I may allow the district to continue elements of the turnaround plan and will monitor progress annually, where such elements would contribute to the continued improvement of the district.

I look forward to our continued partnership in facilitating a collaborative transition of Holyoke Public Schools back to local control. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) will continue to support the School Committee in implementing its transition plan throughout the 2024-25 school year. I will remain closely involved in this work by attending meetings of the Local Control Subcommittee on a bimonthly basis. Just as over 1,500 members of the Holyoke community contributed their voices to the current HPS Strategic Plan, I join the School Committee in urging all HPS stakeholders to engage with the School Committee’s work throughout the transition to local control. Through perseverance and commitment, Holyoke’s students,

families, staff, leaders, and partners will continue to make extraordinary change by working together, unified by the belief that proclaims, Juntos Podemos! Together We Can!

Sincerely,

Russell D. Johnston

Acting Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

Cc: Mildred Lefebvre, Vice Chair, Holyoke School Committee
Lauren Woo, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education