



Built to Last

The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, Springfield, Massachusetts

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This article is part of a Bridgespan Group research project that focuses on a new wave of district-led “innovation zones” that holds promise to overcome the challenges of turning around failing schools and deliver significant improvements in student outcomes. This new wave provides a subset of district schools with control over staffing, curriculum, and budgeting. Such autonomy often is guaranteed by a contractual agreement and enabled by state law that can sustain the zone despite potential changes in district leadership. The schools are sometimes operated by a nonprofit that is held accountable to the school district for significant improvement in student outcomes.

Our research highlights the experiences of five school districts that are vanguards of this new wave of innovation zones—Chicago; Denver; Indianapolis; Memphis, TN; and Springfield, MA.

These innovation zones reveal certain design features that place a focus on improving teaching and learning over multiple years—the heart of any successful turnaround effort. Specifically promising innovation zones:

- Set ambitious goals
- Guarantee autonomy
- Improve teaching and learning
- Follow the students
- Are sustainable, scalable, and built to last

The article that follows looks in detail at one of the school districts profiled in the Bridgespan report [A New Wave of District Innovation Zones: A Promising Means of Increasing Rates of Economic Mobility](#).

The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, formed in 2014, demonstrates a collaborative approach to turning around low-performing schools. The state, the Springfield Public Schools (SPS), and the teachers union formed a voluntary partnership that aims to dramatically improve outcomes in a cluster of the district's middle schools.

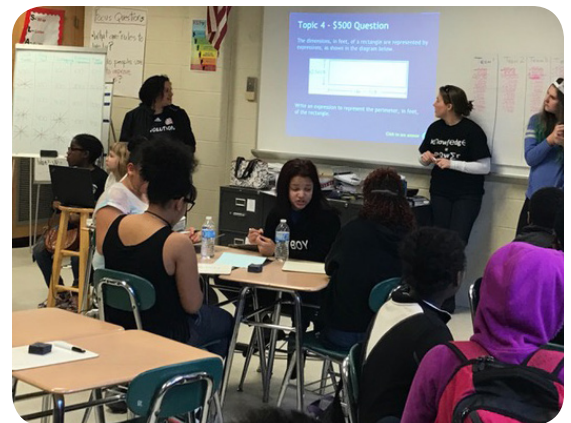
The partners designed the zone with sustainability and accountability in mind. Schools have guaranteed autonomy and a renewable contract with the school district that creates a sustainable funding plan and sets clear accountability goals. As SPS Superintendent Daniel Warwick explained: "What we were doing before was not working for these schools and we needed try something different. We wanted schools to have flexibility and accountability but we needed to do it in partnership with the state, union, and community. And we did."¹

The Context

Although located in the Northeast, Springfield, MA, has many of the characteristics of a Rust Belt city. It was the birthplace of the automotive industry in the United States and, at one time, a hub of precision manufacturing. But for many years now, the city has been struggling to regain its economic footing. Springfield today is one of the largest cities in Massachusetts with a 2014 population of 153,991.

Springfield also is home the second-largest school district in New England, with approximately 26,000 students, about 4,000 employees, and nearly 60 schools. The district has the state's second-highest percentage (87.3 percent) of students receiving free- and reduced-price lunches.

In recent years, the school district has produced some of the lowest academic outcomes in the state. But that picture is changing, due to the innovative efforts of the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP), a collaboration of the SPS, the Springfield Education Association (SEA), and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.



The seventh grade students at Empowerment Academies match wits.

Photo: Empowerment Academies 2017

1 Bridgespan interview with Daniel Warwick, August 4, 2016.

The Road to the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership

SPS's journey toward establishing an innovation zone essentially began in 2011, when the state identified three of its middle schools—Chestnut, Kennedy, and Kiley— as underperforming, “Level 4” schools.² Overall student performance at these schools placed the schools in the bottom 4 percent of schools across the state. On receiving a Level 4 designation, the three middle schools entered into a three-year, state-mandated turnaround period.

The district, led by Warwick, responded with a number of reforms to better support these schools. For example, during the turnaround effort, the district split one school into three, creating smaller learning communities. It also assigned school leaders with track records of success to deal with the challenge. Although on some measures student performance improved at a higher rate than the state average, the pace of improvement fell short of shaking the Level 4 designation by 2014. That year three more Springfield middle schools slipped into Level 4: Duggan, Forest Park, and Van Sickle.

Warwick and members of the Springfield School Committee—the locally elected school board—knew they had to take drastic action. The schools designated Level 4 serve about 80 percent of the district's middle school students. Slipping another notch to Level 5—the lowest performance tier in the state system—would risk state takeover. (Massachusetts had already shown its willingness to exercise this authority. In 2012, it appointed a receiver to manage the 13,000-student Lawrence school district.) Springfield school leaders vowed they would not let that happen.

To that end, Warwick contacted Chris Gabrieli, chairman and CEO of Empower Schools, a Boston-based nonprofit, to discuss the possibility of collaborating. Empower Schools had a successful track record in turning around underperforming schools in Lawrence and Salem, MA. Warwick hoped it could do the same in Springfield.

Designing the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership

Warwick's initial conversations with Gabrieli moved quickly to include the local teachers union, the school board, state leaders, and members of the community. Out of those conversations emerged the SEZP. Specifically, SPS agreed to work with Empower Schools to launch and manage an in-district innovation zone that would oversee all of Springfield's Level 4 middle schools (which now numbered nine, since several of the schools had been split into multiple academies). These schools, serving approximately 4,000 middle school students across the city, made up the empowerment zone. To oversee the initiative, Warwick and Empower established SEZP as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit led by a seven-member governing board composed of local and state appointees, including Springfield's mayor, Warwick, and Gabrieli (who would serve as chair). The plan called for SEZP to employ a small staff to provide direct support to the schools. For the short term, the district and Empower signed a no-cost contract, backed with philanthropic grants, that engaged Empower to provide strategic advisory services and manage initial implementation.

2 All Massachusetts districts and schools with sufficient data are classified into one of five accountability and assistance levels, with the highest performing in Level 1 and lowest performing in Level 5”, Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/accountability.aspx.

The school committee set SEZP up to operate under a five-year renewable agreement, granting the organization managerial and operational autonomy to the schools in the designated “zone.” In exchange for these freedoms, schools in the zone committed to reaching a median student growth percentile (SGP) of 50 in both English language arts (ELA) and math. That means at least one year’s worth of academic progress at all grade levels in schools that had consistently fallen far short of this mark.³ SPS can terminate the agreement during the five-year term for a number of reasons, including failure to meet multiple goals in the turnaround plans submitted by the schools to the state. If SEZP delivers on those goals, the school board will renew the agreement in 2020. In the long term, the contract can be cancelled if the state and district mutually agree to end the effort.

As part of the agreement, the school committee gave SEZP schools autonomy in several areas. For example, SEZP has authority to select, compensate, evaluate, and dismiss principals. Educators at each school—primarily principals working with teacher-elected Teacher Leadership Teams—have discretion over working conditions, curriculum, scheduling, and professional development. Teachers approved these autonomies in their new collective bargaining agreement.

SEZP schools also have considerable control over site-level budgets, use district buildings, and receive all state and local funding connected with SEZP students. However, SEZP pays some of that money to the district to cover a set of mandatory services such as payroll and facilities maintenance. The district cannot charge more than 16.5 percent of state and district revenue for these services. In addition, each school in the zone has the option to buy additional services, such as special education services and curriculum support, from the district à la carte at a per-pupil cost.

Excited by the potential of SEZP—and wary of state takeover—the Springfield School Committee approved SEZP’s plan in a 6-1 vote. Separately, the SEA took a key step to secure autonomy for zone schools by negotiating a contract that included: increased teacher salaries; lengthened school days and school years, with additional time for teacher professional development; a teacher career ladder that revised traditional teacher compensation and created roles for teacher leaders; and the flexibility for individual schools to set working conditions and further expand the school day or year with fair compensation for teachers. SEZP must abide by state law for teachers with tenure, requiring most schools to complete a time-consuming process to dismiss a tenured



Students work together on assignments during class time.

Photo: Empowerment Academies 2016

3 The student growth percentile (SGP) compares a student’s score on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) with the scores of all students in the state at that grade level who received similar MCAS scores in prior years. SGPs range from 1 to 99, with 50 being average; higher numbers represent higher growth and lower numbers represent lower growth. An SGP of 75, for example, means the student’s progress is higher than 75 percent and lower than 25 percent of the students in the state with similar prior test scores. School and district growth percentiles represent the growth of the median, or middle, student in the school or district. For additional information, visit <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/growth/>.

teacher. Nonetheless, the contract, approved by 92 percent of the teachers at the affected schools, also provides the SEZP with added discretion over teacher recruiting, hiring, and evaluation processes.

Warwick's comments on the agreement with the teachers' union reflect its magnitude: "We needed something radically different to have the time and flexibility to make radical change...Working with the State Secretary of Education and Chris Gabrieli at Empower Schools, we sat down with teachers to convince them that this proactive action was better than schools being 'charterized,' which would force the union out altogether...We came to the table together. In 40 years, I have not seen a collective bargaining agreement with so few cumbersome restrictions."⁴

Supporting Schools and School Leaders to Accelerate Outcomes

Empower Schools helped to design the zone, forging relationships with key partners to provide schools with autonomy in exchange for increased accountability for improving student outcomes. Yet Empower's Cofounder and Managing Director Brett Alessi knew that autonomy alone would not improve student learning. "Autonomy is a resource that can unlock improved outcomes," Alessi said, "but only if schools and leaders have the support they need."⁵

Accordingly, SEZP focused initially on staffing, relying in part on the nonprofit TNTP, formerly known as The New Teacher Project, an organization dedicated to ensuring that poor and minority students get equal access to effective teachers. SEZP worked with TNTP to recruit and place highly qualified teachers in its schools. As Warwick reflected: "These have been the hardest schools for teacher recruitment and retention...

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With the support of TNTP, we opened schools completely staffed with highly qualified teachers. At the end of the day there's nothing more important than putting a quality teacher in front of kids."⁶ Before SEZP, schools in the zone typically started the year with many unfilled positions staffed by long-term substitutes. In the first two years of SEZP's work, however, schools opened with less than 1 percent of positions vacant or filled in that way.

Concurrently, SEZP began to adapt Empower Schools' collaborative approach to teaching and learning—piloted in the Lawrence and Salem school districts—to Springfield. Teachers at each zone school elected a Teacher Leadership Team to create that school's operational plan. Each plan includes specific student achievement goals and is updated annually, pending approval by the SEZP board.

4 Bridgespan interview with Daniel Warwick, August 4, 2016.

5 Bridgespan interview with Brett Alessi, June 20, 2017.

6 Bridgespan interview with Daniel Warwick, August 4, 2016.

To help with implementation of its operational plan, zone schools worked with a “chief support partner,” a nonprofit that provides coaching. For example, chief support partners—including TNTP and The Achievement Network, an education nonprofit based in Boston—helped school leaders coach teachers more effectively, furnished school leaders themselves with individual coaching and support, and provided coaching for Teacher Leadership Teams.

Empower—and later the SEZP team—also coordinated professional development support across the zone, including a monthly professional learning community meeting for principals. Every other month, Empower staff and SEZP leaders visit each school to track qualitative measures of progress and provide feedback and support to school leadership. School leaders also participate in a regular review of data, such as interim assessment results, attendance, and discipline figures, to ensure that appropriate progress is being made towards the zone’s ambitious goals. Finally, the partnership has taken steps to help students and support teachers in specific content areas. For example, the SEZP has created “Empowerment Academies,” intensive, opt-in programs held during school vacations. These academies are staffed by top teachers who provide focused small-group math support to students. More than 500 students attended these academies in the 2016-17 school year.

For the schools in need of the most help, SEZP has pursued more intensive approaches. In 2016, for example, it contracted with the UP Education Network, a nonprofit education management organization that had partnered with Empower in Lawrence and operates some of the highest-performing schools in terms of student growth, in Massachusetts. In Springfield, UP Education Network operated Kennedy Middle School, hiring a new principal as part of that process.

SEZP also launched the “Founders Fellow” initiative in 2016 to recruit leaders to found, design, and lead new middle school models that will phase in grades beginning with sixth grade. Two Founders Fellows launched sixth-grade programs during the 2016-17 school year and are planning to include seventh graders in 2017-18.

Finally, to ensure continuity and consistency in the turnaround effort overall, members of the Empower team have provided ongoing strategic and operational support, including coaching school leaders and teachers in developing their school operational plans and budgets, helping school leaders select their chief support partners, and helping SEZP schools and the district work effectively together. Toward the end of the 2016-17 school year, the SEZP board hired two co-executive directors and began building a small SEZP team as Empower decreased its direct support.

Progress to Date and the Path Forward

The SEZP demonstrated progress in its first year. The Massachusetts Composite Performance Index shows the extent to which students are progressing towards proficiency. Based on tests conducted in the spring of 2016, the zone schools’ performance on this metric increased to 70.3 percent in ELA (from the previous year’s 68.2 percent) and to 53 percent in math (from 51 percent).

At the same time, the zone schools have room for improvement on a different measurement scale: median SGP, a measure of change in student achievement over time. SEZP set an initial two-year goal of having a median SGP of 50 in both ELA and math. After one year of operation, the median SPG for SEZP-managed schools was 38 in ELA, up only a point from 37 in 2015. In math, the SEZP-managed schools achieved a median SPG of 30, down from 36 in 2015.

SEZP continues to make the kinds of contextual changes necessary for ensuring an environment in which improvements in student learning and educational outcomes can become the norm over the long term.

SEZP responded to these results by broadening the role of the most successful chief support partner and making significant changes at three of the schools with the weakest performance outcomes—contracting with UP Education Network to manage one of these schools and placing Founders Fellows at the other two. In the 2016-17 school year, the nine schools managed by SEZP realized notable progress in school culture and climate, suggesting that

SEZP’s approach is beginning to establish the norms in Zone schools that are critical to academic progress. With this foundation in place, SEZP hopes for significant academic improvement over the next two years.

SEZP continues to make the kinds of contextual changes necessary for ensuring an environment in which improvements in student learning and educational outcomes can become the norm over the long term. Recognizing that data analysis and effective use of data are core needs, the partnership is exploring ways to build these capacities, including adding a position dedicated to that purpose. It also continues to invest in the instructional supports that proved most effective in its first two years of work, while eliminating efforts that did not pan out, and continually seeks new and better ways to support teachers and leaders.

Superintendent Warwick expresses optimism about SEZP’s progress and believes that the organization will provide benefits to the district as a whole. Based on the promise of new practices piloted by the district in zone schools, other schools have now been granted additional budget flexibility for extended learning time and additional control over their professional development calendars. Warwick is committed to scaling “what works” to the broader district. For example, SPS now follows the zone’s lead by moving up its hiring timeline and, in its latest contract, the district dramatically increased teacher compensation.

At the same time, the teachers union and School Committee have shown an interest in continuing to grow the zone. Springfield has already expanded the zone to include its first high school, the High School of Commerce. The teachers’ union leader testified in support of the move and the School Committee approved the expansion by a vote of 6-1.

While Empower Schools and its partners in the SEPZ have not yet met the Zone’s performance goals, they remain excited and convinced of the promise in their approach.

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As Warwick put it, “We’ve charted a new course for the district, and we feel that this path forward will turn around our schools to become great schools.”⁷



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7 Bridgespan interview with Daniel Warwick, August 4, 2016.

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