

# **Southbridge Public Schools Level 5 District Turnaround Plan**

## **Executive Summary**



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Southbridge is a community that is rich in diversity, history and resiliency. Its children deserve access to a world-class education that leverages these assets and prepares students for a future full of possibilities. For over a decade, the Southbridge community has been underserved. The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) first identified Southbridge as an underperforming (Level 4) district in 2004. Since that time, it has been unable to meet the state-approved benchmarks in its improvement plan in a timely manner. Since 2010, ESE has provided the Southbridge Public Schools (SPS or Southbridge) with targeted assistance funds to support instruction and data analysis as well as funds to hire a staff member to support district level improvement. These supports, however, proved to be no match for the challenges this community has faced with regard to leadership and governance. In the six years since 2010, the district has had seven superintendents and seven high school principals. During this time, a total of 43 individuals have moved in and out of the nine top school and district leadership positions. In addition, over time the school committee has adopted incoherent and unproductive approaches to the roles and responsibilities that are characteristic of high performing policy bodies. Such conditions made it extremely unlikely that the school district would achieve the significant improvement gains this community deserves unless there were some dramatic changes.

Following the Southbridge District Review conducted in October 2015<sup>1</sup>, the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education made the strong recommendation that the SPS be named a “chronically underperforming” (Level 5) district, allowing the leadership and governance of the district to be directed by a receiver. A receiver has the authority of both the superintendent and the school committee, and reports directly to the commissioner. This recommendation was accepted by a vote of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in January 2016. On May 2, 2016, Dr. Jessica Huizenga became the Receiver for SPS. Over the course of 19 years in education, Dr. Huizenga has worked in several states and in both urban and suburban districts in Massachusetts. She was most recently the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment in the Cambridge Public Schools.

Dr. Huizenga began her work by meeting with students, families, educators and community members, reviewing reports and analyzing the strengths and challenges of the district. The recommendations of the Local Stakeholder Group (LSG), which convened representatives from teachers, parents, town government and the community, as well as local health, workforce, early education, higher education and other stakeholders, were especially important<sup>2</sup>. (See Appendix D to review the LSG recommendations.) From this rich input, a new vision for the Southbridge Public Schools was crafted:

**In the Southbridge Public Schools, ALL students will experience a world class education, and will graduate as engaged citizens who demonstrate the essential skills required for success in college and career.**

This high and worthy vision requires a strategic plan. The system—including structures and culture—required to make this vision a reality does not currently exist in Southbridge. This Turnaround Plan, which draws upon a variety of research-based resources and guidance about best practices, establishes such a system.

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<sup>1</sup> Center for District and School Accountability, MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2015). *District Review Report (DRR), Southbridge Public Schools*. See:

<http://www.mass.gov/edu/docs/ese/accountability/district-reports/nolevel/2015-0277.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See M.G.L. c. 69, §1K(B): <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter69/Section1K>

In order to achieve dramatic improvements to the educational experience of students in Southbridge and to attain the district's vision, all Southbridge educators and staff will be called upon to focus their efforts and collaborate in five priority areas:

1. Ensuring an inclusive and supportive school community with high expectations and rigorous, equitable, and personalized instruction for all students, including students with disabilities (SWDs) and English learners (ELs)
2. Developing a professional culture district-wide of highly effective teaching and leadership
3. Creating the conditions to enable and apply evidence-informed decision-making
4. Establishing systems and processes to cultivate and leverage family engagement and community partnerships, and
5. Organizing the district and reallocating resources to ensure high quality management, accountability, system-wide coherence and sustainability.

Each of these priorities has associated benchmarks that have been designed to help the district set priorities and measure progress. These benchmarks also serve as milestones that allow the community to hold the district responsible for timely progress and to celebrate successes along the way.

The five priority areas outlined here represent a significant departure from current practice. After more than ten years of underperformance, we cannot expect dramatically different outcomes without dramatically different approaches. Students, families and educators alike should expect the district and their involvement with it to be different.

#### What will be different?

- Clearer and higher expectations for academics and behavior of all students, as well as more systematic monitoring and supports for achieving these high standards
- Application of new approaches for reducing the opportunity and achievement gaps between special populations (ELs, SWDs) and general education students
  - Student-specific targeted interventions
  - New instructional approaches
- Develop a cohesive curriculum and coordinated instructional practices to ensure an equitable education for all Southbridge students
- Revision of special education systems to ensure strong connections with general education teachers and programs and enhanced opportunities for student with IEPs
- Increased attention to and shared ownership of students' socio-emotional well-being and engagement
- New and strengthened wraparound services to support the health and emotional well being of students and families
- New system-wide routines for collecting, managing and using data
- New expectations around communicating with families
- New approaches for welcoming, educating and engaging all stakeholders, particularly parents and family members
- Extended school day and/or school year in order to create more time for both student and educator learning
- New possibilities for grade configurations, pathways, and programs offered in each school
- Increased teaming and collaboration among educators

- Professional development, including mentoring, that is effective and strategically-designed to build the capacity of educators and administrators so that they can be more empowered to effectively lead their schools
- Supervision and evaluation system for teachers and leaders that supports educators' growth and recognizes areas of expertise, and with an expedited review process for those not demonstrating effectiveness and growth
- Differentiated roles that tap teachers' specific areas of expertise as assets for school and district improvement
- Reallocation of central office services and resources, based on priorities
- Changes to collective bargaining agreements, for example, to ensure the receiver can hire, retain and assign the most effective staff where their expertise is needed and to ensure that a new fair and transparent dispute resolution policy is in place and clearly articulated

These changes represent structural shifts as well as cultural shifts. Embracing them will not be easy at first, and in fact, is possible only if we do it together. Guided by a shared commitment to Southbridge students' right to a world-class education and with a shared sense of responsibility for bolstering the five priority areas that anchor this improvement system, we will be able to strive together, may occasionally falter together, learn together and, ultimately, succeed together.

The approach taken in this turnaround plan focuses on developing coherence within and among schools so that together, teachers and administrators establish a new baseline understanding of high quality instructional approaches and curriculum expectations. As schools demonstrate the ability to provide a high quality program of instruction that serves all students well, the turnaround will shift from primarily district-orchestrated decision making to greater school level empowerment and accountability.

Taken in its totality, this plan serves as the vehicle for initially creating a shared baseline of excellence and ultimately creates the conditions for school level empowerment. The relatively small size of Southbridge is ideal for quickly establishing system-wide cohesion and for the receiver to monitor each school's progress toward the ultimate goal of greater empowerment for all administrators and educators. In each building, changes such as enhanced professional development, differentiated roles for educators, extended time for student and teacher learning, improved routines for learning from student data, and ultimately, improved student academic outcomes, will be among the leading indicators for a shift to increased school level autonomy.

Dr. Huizenga looks forward to including the voices of students, educators, families, community and all relevant stakeholders throughout the receivership to learn more about what is working well and what needs improvement in the schools.