

Hampden County Schools: A Policy Brief

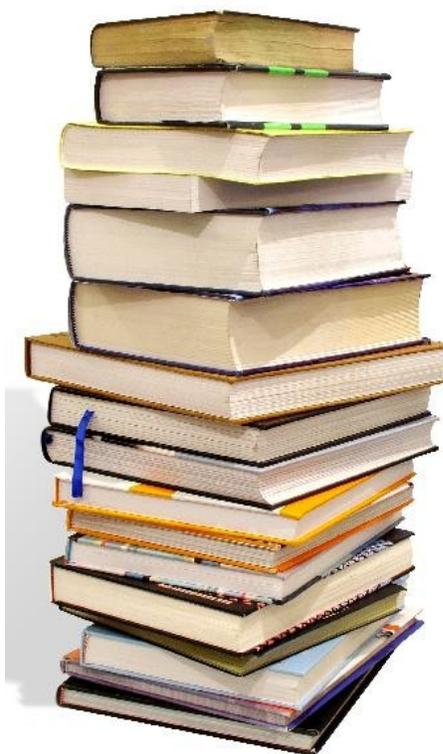


GOAL: TO CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN EDUCATION FOR SPRINGFIELD STUDENTS.

Scope of the Problem:

The Springfield School District has over 25,000 students, half of which are enrolled in pre-school through 5th grade. The district is 54.8% Hispanic and about a quarter African-American.¹ Overall Springfield, the fourth largest urban area in New England, has 39 of 44 schools on the state's "In Need of Improvement" list and only 29 percent of students who demonstrated MCAS performance that was proficient level or above in 2008-2009.² The Springfield district has a four-year cohort graduation rate of 54.4%.³ In the North End, the low performing Gerena and Brightwood schools feed students into the equally low performing Chestnut Street Middle School.⁴ MCAS performance

in the district is perennially low, with over 25% of students failing in reading and math, more than double the number in MA as a whole. In the Old Hill, Six Corners, and South End neighborhoods, over 80% of students are on free or reduced lunches, being below the poverty line, and only 27% and 13% of elementary school students are proficient in English language arts and math respectively.⁵ Furthermore, many children have achievement language gaps, which begin by age two, and then continue not to learn adequately when in school. Consequently, they face likely school failure, continued poverty, and lack of English language and literacy competence. This is an insufficiently addressed crisis.



General Springfield Background:

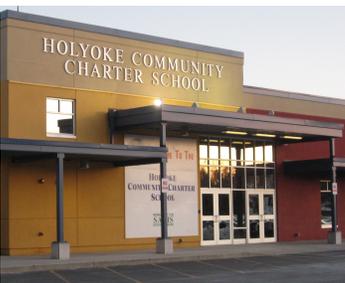
Springfield is not providing the educational means for students to ultimately break the poverty cycle. Parents are often overwhelmed by necessary efforts to survive financially and cannot attend actively to learning needs of their children. As one community member has said, "Expectations are lower. Opportunities are lower. Discipline is a priority as opposed to enrichment."⁶ In Springfield in 2008-2009, 77.8% of the district was low income, 23.7% reported that English was not their first language, and 12.7% reported limited English proficiency.⁷ In high poverty areas, there are problems with gangs, drugs, unemployment, affordable housing shortages, and unmet medical and dental needs for children, resulting in high rates of obesity and asthma. Also post-traumatic stress disorder problems can affect children's capacities to sit calmly, focus, learn new material, remember, and access language to speak.



Related Milestones:

The stakeholder advisory group, the Springfield Promise Neighborhood Steering Committee, is looking at the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) model run by Geoffrey Canada to possibly apply to Springfield, MA. The HCZ also had devastated neighborhoods but developed a pipeline to success for children, with programs from early childhood to college. HCZ does "whatever it takes" to eliminate the achievement gap, including parenting classes, high quality schools, social service and health programs, and community building initiatives.^{8,9}

In Massachusetts, the legislature has now passed an education reform bill to expand charter schools in underperforming areas and to promote innovative approaches to education in district public schools. Charter schools and pilot schools in the state have shown some initial successes, and increasing the number of such schools across the state is mandated in the new reform bill. For schools in districts like Springfield that score in the lowest 20% on MCAS tests, charter school spending will rise from 9% to 18% of net school spending. Although the majority of charter schools in the Springfield area are running and performing well, a recent high profile exception has been the Robert M. Hughes Academy Charter School, which will have its charter revoked this June.



Looking back at the past and forward towards the future

Current Options:

Commonwealth Charter Schools, for example the Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School for Excellence (MLK Jr.), have both financial and academic accountability to the state, having to make annual reports and apply for renewal of charters every five years. They are also required to spread best practice innovations to district non-charter schools. They have their own Boards of Directors and school principals. These schools provide a culture of success grounded in more autonomy for teachers and administrators.

There are also Commonwealth Charter Schools, which use the resources of a private educational group, for example the SABIS approach at the Holyoke Community Charter School, and at the Springfield SABIS International Charter School.

These Commonwealth Charter schools have organized core curricula and regular evaluations of student progress in areas of need.

Another key option is that of Pilot Schools. Pilot Schools within the district public schools, for example The Renaissance Pilot School, have more flexibility than general public schools regarding the use of finances for extracurricular programs, length of the school day, and academic programming. For instance, the Renaissance Pilot School has an affiliation with the Outward Bound Program. Such pilot schools may become the innovative wave of the future for improving education district-wide since they work within the public school system, do not take funds away from other district schools, and have the potential to serve much larger numbers of students than charter schools, with less family frustration about long waiting lists.

End Notes

1. Springfield Public Schools, strategic plan, 2010, p. 10.
2. Springfield Public Schools, strategic plan, 2010, p. 10.
3. Springfield Public Schools, strategic plan, 2010, p. 10.
4. Massachusetts School and District profiles, Springfield, Selected populations, 2009. Reported at <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx>.
5. Federal Reserve Issues Study on Concentrated Poverty, "The Enduring Challenge of Concentrated Poverty: Case Studies from Communities Across the United States," Springfield, p. 138.
6. Ibid. Aimee Munnings, Executive Director of New England Black Chamber of Commerce, Inc., personal interview, p. 138.
7. Massachusetts School and District Profiles, Springfield, Selected populations, 2009. Reported at <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx>.
8. The Harlem Children's Zone: Breaking the Cycle of Poverty, at <http://www.hcz.org>
9. Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change America, Paul Tough, Mariner Press, New York, 2009, 310 pps.



Observations and Recommendations:

Many key features of the Harlem Children's Zone can be applied to schools in Springfield, including charter schools and pilot schools:

- A "pipeline" of excellent schools and school services from birth through college, with a special emphasis on early intervention for language acquisition and literacy.
- High expectations for student achievement, college goals, social behavior, and good character.
- More time to learn, with an extended school day, week, and year. Summer learning opportunities to sustain gains.
- Opportunities to learn both Spanish and English, beginning with pre-school.
- Excellent teachers and co-teachers, who have high ideals, energy, competence, availability to students, and who support each other.
- Strong administrative leadership. (This existed at all schools we visited-- MLK, Jr; Renaissance Pilot; Holyoke CCS; and Hilltown Cooperative CS).
- Parent involvement with students' educations and school functioning. Parents need to hear "good news" and not only about problems.
- Community involvement for neighborhood safety and improvements.
- Services for parents and children, including in-school medical and psychological help for students.
- Sharing what works with public district schools (HCZ now does this nationally).
- Private business and foundation funding to help with special programs, facilities, and teacher pay for longer hours.
- Teaching "the whole child," while maintaining a focus on core subjects.