

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### **State Takeover Gives Mass. District a Fresh Start**



By **Denisa R. Superville**

*Lawrence, Mass.*

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Principal Colleen M. Lennon proudly watched over some of her young charges at the Emily G. Wetherbee School on a recent afternoon in this struggling city of 77,000, seeing students engage in activities that are a given in most middle- to upper-income communities.

They were taking drumming lessons. Fingerknitting. Practicing cheerleading stands. Illustrating a short story. And making fruit salad in a class on healthy eating.

Just four years earlier, such enrichment activities were not the norm in Lawrence's schools, said Ms. Lennon, a veteran school leader. Then the state of Massachusetts stepped in.

In 2011—following years of poor academic performance and weak leadership—state education officials took what was an unprecedented step in Massachusetts of seizing control of the 14,000-student district.

The plan was simple: to provide rigorous academics and a holistic education experience. Less than five years later, positive shoots are sprouting. The percentage of Lawrence students scoring proficient on state math assessments increased from 28 percent in

2011 to 41 percent last year, and those proficient in English/language arts moved from 41 percent to 44 percent. The number of Level 1 schools—those that meet state performance targets and are not among the state's bottom 20 percent—has risen from two in 2011 to six in 2014. And in schools that are labeled as Level 3 or Level 4—still a majority of the district's 33 schools—students are making promising gains in English and math achievement.

#### Video: A Community Fights to Fix Its Schools

The school district is still considered a Level 5—the lowest category in Massachusetts' accountability system—but its steady progress has sparked interest well beyond the state over whether the Lawrence approach to district turnaround holds promise for other urban school systems with similarly daunting challenges. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan paid a visit last fall. And an adviser to New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo has been looking to Lawrence as a model for district turnaround in that state.

By involving teachers and principals in decisions about how to improve achievement for the students in their schools, Lawrence has avoided the common roadblock of imposing a one-size-fits-all strategy, said Sarah Yatsko, a senior research analyst at the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, Bothell. And the district's non-dogmatic view of who is best suited to run schools targeted for turnaround—charter-management organizations, the local teachers' union, and the district itself—are all operating schools in Lawrence—has also been a strength.

"[Lawrence is] looking deeply at performance and data, and they are targeting interventions at the problems," Ms. Yatsko said. "They are unleashing their professional staff in the buildings by providing them with autonomy and coupling it with supports."

The guiding star was a comprehensive **turnaround plan** focused on "how the district is organized, and how to empower our strongest staff, teachers, and administrators," said Massachusetts' education commissioner, Mitchell D. Chester, who recommended that the state board of education approve a state takeover.

"I'd be the last one to say that we have succeeded in Lawrence, but we are succeeding," Mr. Chester said. "It's a work in progress. I am very pleased with the results in the first couple of years."



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Komal Bhasin, left, the principal of UP Academy Leonard Middle School in Lawrence, Mass., rallies with teachers before students arrive.

—Erik Jacobs for Education Week

Lawrence, a former industrial town on the banks of the Merrimack River about 30 miles north of Boston, faces myriad challenges. Ninety percent of the district's students are low-income; about 30 percent are English-language learners. The city has struggled in recent years to combat high crime rates, low employment rates, and pervasive images of urban decay.

Mr. Chester chose **Jeffrey C. Riley**, a former principal and former chief innovation officer in the Boston public schools, as Lawrence district's receiver in 2012. In that role, Mr. Riley has had all the powers of a superintendent and a school board.

### Deft Leadership

The deft way in which Mr. Riley has exercised those powers may be one of the reasons for the emerging turnaround, according to a report released last month by the Watertown, Mass.-based Education Resource Strategies, a school improvement consulting group. The report examines the key strategies Mr. Riley and his team put in action in Lawrence. Among them: an emphasis on creating and supporting strong school leaders; attracting and developing effective teachers; aligning resources to student and teacher needs; and providing both the funding and flexibility to school leaders to design programs that meet their school's unique needs.

Mr. Riley and his team implemented the changes in phases, focusing on actions in the first year that would yield quick results for students, then later turning attention to wider system changes. The timeline had been laid out in the district's detailed transformation plan.

**The ERS report** highlights the collaboration between the district's leadership team and the Lawrence Teachers' Union as a key part of the transformation. Though Mr. Riley had the authority to unilaterally change the teachers' union contract, he worked with the union to reach an accord.

The two sides did not always agree—the **union filed complaints** with the state claiming that Mr. Riley had violated state labor laws before the parties reached an agreement. But the contract approved a year later created career ladders for teachers and gave them opportunities to earn more money based on their performance and the leadership roles they embraced in their schools. And Mr. Riley insisted that all teachers, including those in charter-run schools, be members of the local union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers.

Another reason the early results appear promising, Mr. Chester said, is that the turnaround team approached the takeover with a "strong dose" of respect for the adults in the system.

"We did not start with the assumption that the adults were the problem," Mr. Chester said. "We started with the assumption that the system as a whole was broken and needed to be restructured."

Mr. Riley has championed a governance model he calls "open architecture," in which the district consists of a combination of

### Key Turnaround Strategies:

- **Expanded learning time:** Schools added between 200-300 hours annually, allowing time for enrichment programs and interventions. Teachers got collaborative planning and professional-development time.
- **Partnerships:** The district partnered with charter-management organizations and the Lawrence teachers' union to run schools. It worked with Boston-based Match Education to provide math tutoring to high school students.
- **Data:** Boston-based Achievement Network (ANet) has trained teachers and principals to analyze data to measure student progress and improve instruction.
- **School autonomy and accountability:** Successful principals got more authority over calendars, interim assessments, and staffing.
- **Staffing:** A new contract with the teachers' union created career ladders for teachers and provided opportunities to earn more money based on proficiency, performance, and leadership roles. About 50 percent of principals, 20 percent of assistant principals, and 10 percent of teachers were replaced.

Sources: Lawrence Public Schools; Education Resource Strategies

charter-run schools and regular district schools. There is expanded autonomy at the school level and the central office's role is curtailed.

"The problems in urban education are far too big for the civil war that's going on out there today," Mr. Riley said about the debate over charter versus district-run schools.

"We've created a small community where people have been willing to put aside their differences, work under this unified umbrella, and get results for kids," he said.

An example of that "open architecture" system is evident in the district's approach to turning around the low-performing Henry K. Oliver School. The Lawrence Teachers' Union took over grades 1-5 and launched the Oliver Partnership School in August 2013, while the Boston-based UP Academy, a charter-management organization, took over grade 6. That new school is the UP Academy Oliver Middle School.

### 'Acceleration Academies'

Mr. Riley said the opportunities that children now have to engage in enrichment activities have been a critically important piece of the turnaround effort. Through partnerships with the Boys & Girls Club, the Merrimack Valley YMCA, and the district's teachers, students are able to take classes in cooking, karate, theater, swimming, squash, and a host of other extracurricular activities they might not otherwise be exposed to. Increasing parental engagement—the district recently opened a resource center at one of the city's old mills, where parents can get help finding jobs and housing—is also part of the turnaround strategy. "Fundamentally, what we are trying to do here in Lawrence is mirror the suburban experience," Mr. Riley said. "I believe that if my kids get the same experience that suburban kids get, then they would do just as well as, if not better than, them."

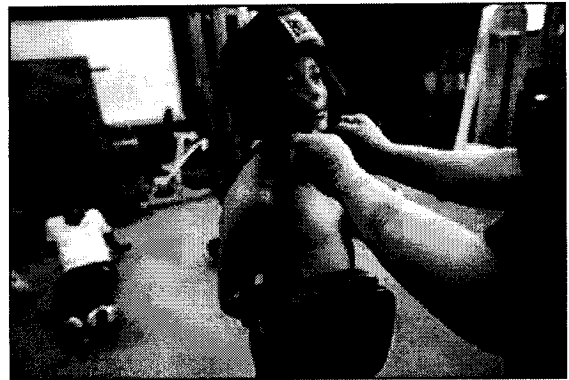
But intensive academic supports for many of the district's struggling students have also been essential to improvement. Students who had been flagged as lagging were selected for "acceleration academies" that provided small-group instruction with high-performing teachers during scheduled school breaks.

Researchers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education dug into the impacts of the acceleration academies in the tested grades—3-8 and grade 10—in the first year after the takeover and found that they significantly boosted student performance in math.

Their preliminary findings, which have not yet been published, show that, overall, math scores for all of Lawrence's students have improved, but they did so more dramatically for students who participated in the acceleration academies. Between 2012 and 2013, those students, who have historically trailed their peers in other demographically-similar, low-income districts in the state, nearly caught up with their peers in those districts.

"A year is a relatively short period of time to see this kind of impact," said Beth E. Schueler, a doctoral student at Harvard who worked on the study with Harvard professors Joshua S. Goodman and David J. Deming.

The acceleration academies had smaller effects on student performance in English/language arts. The researchers said it was difficult to tease out the specific initiatives that moved the needle for those students who did not attend the academies, but that it was fair to say the "basket" of initiatives put into motion in the first year was having a positive impact.



Second grader Jose Mercedes, 7, prepares to box during enrichment classes at the Emily G. Wetherbee School in Lawrence, Mass. Principal Colleen M. Lennon credits the variety of enrichment activities available to students as an essential part of her school's, and the district's, steady improvements.  
—Erik Jacobs for Education Week

"There is always the question of whether implemented changes are going to sustain themselves or not," Mr. Goodman said, "but at least the short-run effects that we are seeing are in the right direction, and that's not always the case with turnarounds."

But Andy Smarick, a partner at Bellwether Education Partners, a Washington-based consultancy group, said that what's happening in Lawrence is simply a more "muscular" version of state takeovers that have mostly failed over the last 20 years.



Despite the inclusion of charter schools and more autonomy for principals in the Lawrence strategy, Mr. Smarick said the efforts were likely doomed because the initiatives are still part of a traditional school district.

"You can rearrange the seats within the district, you can change the leadership of the district, you can change the reporting structure in the district, but as long as you maintain the district as the dominant system, the efforts are always going to come up short," Mr. Smarick said. "This, in my view, is pushing a state takeover as far as it can go before you admit that no state takeover is ever going to work the way we need it to."

### Major Work Ahead

Lawrence officials say a lot of work remains. While the district's graduation rate has improved, for example, it still lags behind the state's, and all the high school academies, while making strides, are still among the state's lowest-performing.

Julie Swerdlow Albino, the district's chief redesign officer, and Seth D. Racine, the deputy superintendent said this fall, the district's high school campus of 3,100 students, which is divided into six smaller schools, will be redesigned with a focus on successfully transitioning freshmen. The district will create a 9th grade academy across all six schools, and add additional supports, including guidance counselors and advisers, for at-risk students.

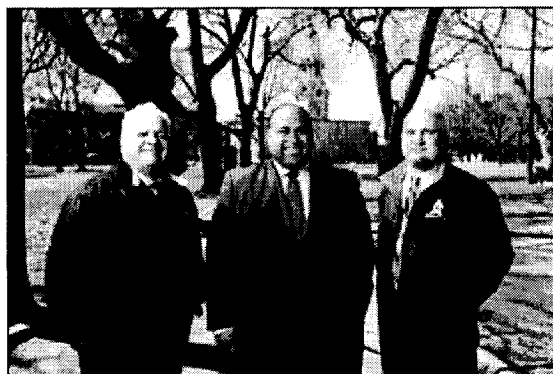
Mr. Chester, who just successfully made the case for the struggling **Holyoke school district to be placed under state control**, said that the Lawrence turnaround effort was likely to continue for "another three years and possibly more" to ensure that the changes are baked into the system.

"I think it would be a huge mistake to end the receivership at this point," he said.

Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, who is generally an outspoken opponent of state takeovers, has been highlighting the progress in Lawrence as an example of transformation that's possible when the union and the district work together.

"Lawrence is succeeding because of the work between people—including the superintendent, the teachers, and parents, and now, the city administration," she said. "Let me be really blunt. Anybody who thinks that it's structure rather than human capital will make a huge ... policy mistake."

Frank McLaughlin, the president of the Lawrence Teachers' Union, praises the gains and Mr. Riley, though he credits strong leadership and an infusion of resources for the positive momentum, not the state takeover itself.



Lawrence Teachers' Union President Frank McLaughlin, left, Mayor Daniel Rivera, center, and Superintendent Jeffrey Riley have worked together to improve schooling in the city.

The district receives about 95 percent of its annual \$190 million budget from the state, and that contribution level has not changed under the takeover. —Erik Jacobs for Education Week

However, some schools received an extra \$500,000 annually over three years through the Massachusetts school redesign grants, the state's version of the federal School Improvement Grants.

### 'A Positive Shift'

Inside the Wetherbee School, an impressive brick building, Ms. Lennon, the principal of the 700-student school, said the state takeover was the "best thing" to happen to Lawrence.

Wetherbee has progressed to a Level 1 from its Level 3 designation when Mr. Riley first arrived in 2012.

Under Mr. Riley, principals and teachers are expected to know the proficiency levels of every student in their schools, Ms. Lennon said. Students are also keenly aware of their scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS, what they need to do to reach proficiency, and how much their schools are expected to grow annually, Ms. Lennon said.

For her school's progress, Ms. Lennon also credits professional development for teachers, giving them latitude to collaborate with their peers on classroom strategies, and creating leadership teams that rely on their expertise.

"He knows that [teachers] are the people doing the work every day, and they are the ones solving the problems," she said of Mr. Riley. "And the fact that he could gather information from them, and say to them, 'What are some ideas that you have at the school level that's going to impact students?' That's a positive shift."

At UP Academy Leonard Middle School, Principal Komal Bhasin says the dedicated planning time that teachers get each Friday has been powerful. Working in cohorts, teachers spend 2½ hours on Fridays reviewing student data, revising curriculum, sharing successful teaching strategies, and setting goals for the school on a range of issues such as school climate or support for special education students.

### Defying Negative Views

Ms. Bhasin's school, a high-energy, structured environment, emphasizes a college-going culture: Every classroom bears the name of a university as an overt reminder of what the students are working toward. Teachers must call parents multiple times a week to discuss their children's progress.

"They really push you," 13-year-old Nalleli Nuñez, a 7th grader at UP Academy Leonard, said recently as students queued up at the beginning of the school day to be greeted by Ms. Bashin. "And they would do anything—literally anything—to get you higher [scores] on the MCAS."

Nalleli, who called her school "awesome," described her teachers' spending extra time with newly arrived immigrant students who may be struggling with English, and pulling aside lower-performing students at the end of the day to focus on remedying their weaknesses. And students who are doing well are asked to help others, she said.

"I like that because it gives everybody an opportunity to get good scores on the MCAS, ... not just a group of people because they are more advanced than others," she said.



Maria Lopez, left, fills out paperwork at the Family Resource Center to register daughter Arleni Rodriguez for classes in the Lawrence school district last month.

—Erik Jacobs for Education Week

Thirteen-year-old Kiaya Fernandez said she has noticed how much her teachers care about how she's doing inside, and outside, the classroom.

"Everything is so organized here, and the passion for teaching is phenomenal," Kiaya said. "They don't just care about being teachers, but also about getting to know us and how we feel about school. "

Kiaya said it took her some time to get used to the school's system of merits and demerits, but she appreciates the emphasis on discipline.

All of these changes bode well for the future of the school system and the city, said Mayor Daniel Rivera, who was elected last year and also serves as the chairman of the school board.

Mr. Rivera sees what's happening in the schools as part of a citywide transformation. In 2012, *Boston* magazine called Lawrence "the most godforsaken place in Massachusetts."

These days, the mayor said the city is defying such negative viewpoints.

"We're not supposed to have a functioning government. We are not supposed to attract businesses or fight crime or fight poverty, and kids aren't supposed to be doing well in school. And what we are finding is that we can."

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