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## School District Turnaround: Learning from Leadership in Lawrence, Massachusetts

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### The Politics of District Takeover and Turnaround

Skim headlines from the press coverage of school districts undergoing state takeover and turnaround and you will find significant signs of public frustration. Although the Newark Public Schools have been under state control since 1995, more recent school turnaround reforms following Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan's \$100 million 2010 gift to the district spurred thousands of Newark students to walk out of school, take to the streets, and block traffic in protest (Wichert, 2015; Russakoff, 2015).

Community resistance has been significant in response to education reforms implemented in New Orleans, Louisiana in the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina disaster (Buras, 2015; Jabbar, 2015). Tennessee's state-run Achievement School District has earned many critics and generated a racially charged debate (Glazer & Egan, 2016). Even in smaller communities, such as Holyoke, Massachusetts, the prospect of state takeover was met by parent, student, and educator protest (Williams, 2015).

In contrast, research suggests that the state takeover and improvement efforts targeting Massachusetts' Lawrence Public Schools generated limited signs of resistance. Lawrence is therefore

a rare positive example of politically viable state-led district-wide improvement that provides lessons for state-level policymakers on how to select districts for turnaround and for district-level leaders on navigating the thorny politics of school system improvement.

This brief summarizes results from a recent study of the political dynamics surrounding the first three years of the Lawrence takeover and turnaround. The goal of the study was to understand why the Lawrence reforms were not more contentious. It suggests that within a local and statewide context that was ripe for change, turnaround leaders improved the public response by employing a "third way" approach to transcending polarizing political disagreements in the education space.

### Lawrence, Massachusetts

Lawrence is one of Massachusetts' "Gateway Cities." These are "midsized urban centers that anchor regional economies," and both, "face stubborn social and economic challenges" and "retain many assets with unrealized potential" (Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth, 2018). Lawrence is widely considered one of the most economically disadvantaged communities in the state. The city is also home to a large Latinx population,

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including many residents who came to Massachusetts from either the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico. The school system enrolls roughly 13,000 students, 90 percent of whom are low-income and 70 percent of whom are learning English as a second language.

Unfortunately, the Lawrence Public Schools have struggled with low academic performance for many years. In 2010-11, Lawrence was rated in the bottom five districts statewide in terms of its students' proficiency on the state's mathematics and English Language Arts assessments. Only about half of all Lawrence students were graduating within four years.

Armed with new authorities granted by the state's 2010 Achievement Gap Act, the state responded to Lawrence's under-performance by placing the district into "receivership," or state takeover, in the fall of 2011. Nationally, state takeover has become an increasingly common response to low-performance. In 2015 alone, eleven states debated or passed laws allowing for the creation of state-run districts. Massachusetts' Achievement Gap Act provides the state with particularly expansive authorities. As a result, receivership in Lawrence shifted decision-making power from a locally elected school board to the state. The state then appointed a "receiver" who was given all the authority that had previously been held by the Superintendent and school board, as well as new authorities to change policy district-wide and even alter portions of the collective bargaining agreement.

### **The Lawrence Turnaround Plan**

In January 2012, the state selected Jeffrey Riley as the district's receiver. Riley is a former teacher and administrator with a reputation for having led a successful turnaround effort of a district middle school in Boston. He eventually took on the role of Chief Innovation Officer for the Boston Public Schools before

being selected for the Lawrence role. After his appointment as Receiver, Riley and his team spent the first five months of his tenure in information-gathering mode, meeting with educators, parents, union leaders, possible partners, and other community members to inform the turnaround plan that would be implemented starting in the 2012-13 school year.

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Ultimately, the turnaround plan that was implemented in the early years of receivership included five key components. The first was an effort to create a culture of high expectations throughout the district with aggressive performance goals. The second component was increased school-level autonomy and accountability, including a reduction in the central office budget and increased school-level funding. Third was a focus on improving the effectiveness of school-based and central office staff through staff replacement and development, and in year two, a new career ladder compensation system based in part on performance. The fourth component was expanded learning time, including an extended school day, greater enrichment offerings, tutoring, and other special programs. The fifth and final feature of the turnaround plan focused on increasing the use of data for instructional reflection and improvement. Interestingly, increases in Lawrence's per pupil spending in

the post-receivership era were no greater than increases elsewhere in the state.

### Positive Early Results

Previous research illustrates that the turnaround led to significant and large improvements in Lawrence students' mathematics achievement and more modest improvements in reading by the second year of the reforms. Importantly, the district was able to generate these improvements without any dips in non-test outcomes such as student attendance, grade progression, mobility, dropout, or graduation among 12th grade students. There was also some evidence that the reforms increased the likelihood that high school students progressed on time to the next grade level.

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Notably, roughly half of the gains in math and all of the gains in English were driven by an extended learning time intervention called "Acceleration Academies." (As these programs have spread to other districts, they have sometimes been labeled "Vacation Academies" or "Empowerment Academies").

For these programs, the district recruited teachers who they considered to be high quality and had them work on a single subject with small groups of struggling students over weeklong vacation breaks (Schueler, Goodman & Deming, 2017). Overall, the size of the turnaround effects was substantial—comparable to the effect of implementing the

practices of high performing charter schools into low-performing traditional public schools in Houston (Fryer, 2014).

### Public Response

In addition to the impressive academic results, Lawrence is also a valuable case for study because research suggests that the reforms did not generate the kind of negative public response that have accompanied more typical examples of state takeover and turnaround. A comprehensive review of news coverage of the Lawrence schools from 2007 to 2015 suggests a shift from a negative pre-takeover narrative, focused in large part on allegations of mismanagement and corruption against public officials in Lawrence, to a more positive framing in the post-receivership era, focused on improved academic outcomes and even identifying Lawrence as a national model for district turnaround.

The analysis also involved a review of public documents and secondary sources of survey data, as well as a series of interviews with turnaround leaders at the district and state level, leaders of stakeholder groups including the teachers union, community-based organizations, and local elected officials, as well as a small number of purposefully sampled school-based staff and parents. Although the takeover and turnaround was not uncontroversial, this analysis suggested minimal signs of community resistance and an overall positive response from the general public, parents and educators—at least among those who were retained after the takeover. In fact, the Mayor and Legislative Delegation publicly welcomed the state intervention.

The local teachers union's response was more complicated. The union opposed receivership, arguing that the theory of action behind state takeover placed too much blame on teachers and collective bargaining. The union also had

concerns that state control would undermine local decision-making and representation. However, the union came to view receivership as inevitable and made an active decision to collaborate with Riley and his team rather than resist the changes. Throughout the turnaround, the union and the district had policy-based disagreements, but overall, district-union relations and communication improved from the pre-receivership era.

In 2014, Randi Weingarten, the President of the national American Federation of Teachers, described Lawrence as one of a handful of models of successful union-district collaboration (Education Week, 2014). Given that both state takeover and district turnaround tend to be highly contentious, why didn't the Lawrence turnaround generate more controversy?

### Context Matters

Several features of the local context in Lawrence and the statewide accountability system help to explain why the stakeholder response was relatively mild in Lawrence. At a local level, the district is medium-sized, allowing Riley and his team to get their feet on the ground at each school and tailor reforms to school-level contexts. District enrollment was also growing through the turnaround period, preventing leaders from having to close schools or cut school budgets, two highly unpopular measures. Additionally, in the pre-receivership era, there was a widespread perception of dysfunction and even corruption among public officials given fraud and embezzlement indictments against a recent Superintendent, the firing of three consecutive Superintendents, and campaign finance investigations of the Mayor. This local context made the public more willing to accept state intervention.

Lawrence's organized labor landscape also

helped to improve stakeholder response. Principals are not unionized in Massachusetts, allowing the Receiver to replace roughly half of all school leaders in the first two years of reform. There was no evidence of a strong alliance between the teachers union and parents in Lawrence, making it difficult for the union to mobilize parents against receivership. Finally, union-district relations had been poor prior to the takeover, providing room for improvement. In fact, turnaround leaders perceived the union has having been a force for good in a dysfunctional pre-takeover period, making them more willing to collaborate with union leaders going forward. One district-level leader argued, "for the last 20 years... the union was an incredibly positive force here in the midst of a lot of chaos, turmoil... reformers never think this is a real thing but it literally was the union protecting people from cronyism."

### The third way approach taken by turnaround leaders in Lawrence helped to increase support and minimize opposition to the reforms.

In addition to the local environment, there were features of the statewide accountability context that also helped to minimize stakeholder opposition to the turnaround. By granting a receiver broad new authorities, including the ability to alter portions of the collective bargaining agreement, the Achievement Gap Act may have allowed the state to recruit turnaround leaders who would not have agreed to work in Lawrence without these flexibilities. The new authorities also gave district leaders leverage. For example, when negotiating a new contract, teachers union leaders said they ended up agreeing to policy changes they would not have agreed to under different circumstances

because they were aware that the Receiver had the ability to impose those changes regardless of the union's position.

### Lawrence's Third Way

Within a context that was poised for change, the third way approach taken by turnaround leaders in Lawrence also helped to increase support and minimize opposition to the reforms. Political scientists describe a third way as a political position that attempts to reconcile right- and left-wing perspectives (Bobbio, 1996). In education, political opponents do not always fall neatly into traditional categories of left and right. However, recent education policy debates have been marked by polarized disagreements between "education reformers," those who tend to support market-based approaches to educational improvement and alternative teacher preparation routes, and "traditionalists," those who tend to support more traditional educational organizations such as non-charter public schools, schools of education, and teachers unions.

Therefore, in education, the phrase third way is useful for describing efforts to avoid unnecessary choices between the policy preferences of reformers and traditionalists, incorporate elements from the playbooks of both camps, and transcend ideological debates. In Lawrence, this approach was reflected in the Receiver's own rhetoric:

This problem is far too big for a civil war... we've made a decision to tune out that stuff. So, sometimes I take shots from extremists in the traditional union camp. Sometimes I take shots from the extremists in the "charter schools are the only way" camp. We don't need a camp... this third way is what we're about... I've seen many types of good schools and parents don't care. They just want a good school for their kid.

Beyond the rhetoric, the third way approach was also reflected in a number of Riley and his team's policy decisions, illustrated by five examples.

First, the turnaround leaders avoided drawing a false choice between a highly decentralized model of district-school relations, preferred by the education reform audience, and a more traditional uniformly centralized approach. The leaders instead differentiated district-school relations, granting greater autonomy to the higher performing schools. Schools in the middle of the performance distribution were given less autonomy and more hands on supports from the central office and partner organizations. The lowest performing schools were managed by outside operators who were also given substantial autonomy. These supports were part of a shift to a service-based orientation to district-school relations that school-based staff seemed to appreciate.

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Second, Riley and his team diversified school managers. A large majority of the schools remained under district management, but the very lowest performing schools were handed

over to outside operators. These operators ranged from charter management organizations to the local teachers union, signaling that district leaders were willing to work with leaders of organizations on all sides of major education policy debates, and improving district-union relations through collaboration on school management. Importantly, the charter-managed schools were not converted to charter status. They retained neighborhood- rather than choice-based student assignment policies and a unionized teaching force, helping to address the charter critics' main concerns.

Third, turnaround leaders in Lawrence made several strategic decisions regarding staffing that helped to improve the stakeholder response to the reform effort. The Receiver retained several key insiders with institutional knowledge who were able to help the new team avoid potential political pitfalls. Furthermore, although Riley was aggressive in his efforts to improve the quality of school leaders, replacing half of all principals in the first two years of the turnaround, he was less aggressive when it came to teachers. He actively replaced roughly ten percent of all teachers leading up to the first year of turnaround implementation (though overall turnover was higher). This was undoubtedly a painful process but everyone argued it would have been worse had he gone farther. This decision allowed Riley to argue that his strategy was restrained, "The reality is, I could make every teacher in Lawrence, if I so chose, reapply for their job... But I wanted to take a more measured approach." Riley also often publicly credited teachers for the positive results, arguing, "Is there anything more important in a school system than the teachers?," further increasing support among those responsible for implementing his reforms. Finally, he improved the palatability

of the new merit-based teacher evaluation system by raising compensation across the board.

Fourth, the turnaround leaders avoided a false dilemma between increasing academic expectations and a more whole child educational approach by balancing their focus on academic achievement with increased attention to building out the district's enrichment offerings. This sent a strong signal to parents that the team cared about student well being, not just proficiency rates. One leader of a partner organization explained, "[the Receiver] got that intramural sports league going... that was one of the first things

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that happened... It is just a totally different message... than and academic-only, 'I'm here to browbeat you people. Look at these terrible test scores.'" Furthermore, Riley enlisted local non-profit organizations to provide many of these enrichment activities. This generated a new source of support for the reforms among leaders of these community-based groups who had previously felt excluded from the school system and were thrilled with the opportunity to serve greater numbers of students.

The fifth and final example of Lawrence's third way approach was the leaders' effort to produce results early while minimizing disruption. In this way, the Receiver skillfully navigated between the kind of disruptive innovation education reformers often argue is necessary

for producing dramatic results and the more measured approach to improving the system from within that the traditionalist crowd tends to prefer. District leaders described having a laser-like focus on generating early academic gains, through programs like the Acceleration Academies, while building out reforms that they believed would pay off in the long run, like increased school-level autonomy. At the same time, there was an intentional effort to avoid any distracting initiatives that the leaders did not believe would generate large dividends for students, such as a potentially confusing school choice process or new school accountability and rating system. As the positive first year results came in, parents began to feel like their children were benefitting, educators felt they were a part of producing positive change, and critics had an increasingly difficult time opposing reform without looking like they were standing in the way of progress.

### Looking Forward

Although the Lawrence turnaround was not entirely without critics, the reforms generated considerably less controversy than state-led turnarounds in places like Memphis, Newark, and New Orleans, among others. This was, at least in part, due to features of the local Lawrence context as well as the broader statewide accountability system giving state-appointed local leaders with expansive authorities in the case of persistent low performance. These findings provide guidance for state level leaders in the process of selecting districts for turnaround reform efforts. For example, large districts with declining enrollment in states where principals are unionized may require a different approach. Additionally, within the Lawrence context, district leaders adopted a third way approach that helped to diffuse polarizing education policy debates and improve the public response

to the reforms.

The finding that expanded state authorities helped to improve stakeholder perceptions of the reforms further suggests that it remains an open question whether the achievement gains and stakeholder response can be sustained with a transition back to local control. In the fall of 2017, Riley announced that he would be stepping down from his post as Lawrence Receiver at the end of the 2017-18 school year. A few months later, Riley was officially selected as one of three finalists for the State Education Commissioner role (and remained under consideration as of this brief's release). In Lawrence, Riley will be replaced by a state-appointed board that will include some local representation, such as the recently reelected Mayor Dan Rivera. In the longer-term, as the state transitions back to local control, leaders would be wise to continue solidifying support for reforms among those constituents who will have greater influence in a more traditional school board governance structure.

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It remains uncertain whether the state can replicate the Lawrence gains in other low-performing school systems. Lawrence was the first district to be placed in receivership since the passage of the 2010 Achievement Gap Act. The state has since taken over two additional districts—Holyoke and Southbridge—and has taken on an increased role in a subset of low-performing Springfield Public Schools.

In Springfield, under the threat of takeover, a partnership between the district, state department of education, and local teachers union was formed and now operates the schools under a board made up of both state and district appointees (Jochim & Opalka, 2017; Schnurer, 2017; Jochim, 2016). Going forward, it will be important to compare both academic results and political dynamics across all of these districts to help the field better understand both the contextual factors and policy choices that predict successful district-wide improvement.

Regardless of these open questions, Lawrence provides a rare case of a leadership approach that resulted in notably impressive academic gains for students without generating the kind of negative response that typically accompanies state takeover and district turnaround efforts. In an education policy arena—and broader political climate—that is often marked by polarization, Lawrence leaders built relationships with stakeholders on both sides of major policy debates and empowered local stakeholders to take ownership of the reforms even in the context of state takeover. The leaders were able to transcend either/or thinking about the preferred policy approaches of the reformers and traditionalists and instead drew on good ideas from both camps.

The district decentralized decision-making, but in a differentiated way, and provided supports to ease the transition to higher levels of school-level autonomy and accountability. School managers included both charter operators and the local teachers union, and charter organizations were asked to serve neighborhood students with a unionized teaching force. A large majority of teachers were retained and leaders maintained a positive orientation toward the educators who ultimately implemented the reforms. Leaders

increased academic expectations but also engaged local partners to flesh out the district's enrichment offerings, and made a conscious effort to produce early results while minimizing unnecessary policy churn. As a result, the third way approach provides guidance for district leaders looking for avenues to implement politically viable school system improvement.

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