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**Q&A about State Receivership of Southbridge Public Schools**

**January 2016**

**What does it mean that Southbridge Public Schools are in receivership and how will it affect us?**

After careful consideration, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted on January 26, 2016, to place the Southbridge Public Schools into state receivership, known as “Level 5” status. Southbridge schools are now being run by a new leader called a *receiver*, who has the powers of both the school committee and superintendent. In the short term, the receiver is Massachusetts Elementary and Secondary Education Commission Mitchell Chester. In the coming weeks, the commissioner will appoint a new leader as receiver to manage the school district.

The district will have a *three-year turnaround plan*, and at the end of the turnaround plan, the commissioner will determine whether the district has made sufficient academic progress and has the capacity to continue that progress or whether more time is needed.

During the remaining months of the 2015-16 school year, students and teachers should not expect any dramatic changes to their normal school day, or to end-of-year events like prom or graduation. Starting in the summer of 2016, it is anticipated that the receiver will begin to implement changes through the turnaround plan that will provide more support for Southbridge students to achieve their full potential.

Southbridge High School diplomas will continue to be recognized by colleges, and students will continue to be accepted to college.

Schools will continue to retain their current accountability status. For example, Level 3 schools will continue to be Level 3, and can move to Level 2 or Level 1 if they meet those criteria. The Level 5 designation applies only to the district as a whole.

**Why did the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education put Southbridge Public Schools into receivership?**

The Board looked at a range of data, including student data and the findings from a recent district review. By far the most concerning data was the persistently low student performance, as the district is among the lowest achieving and least improving in the state overall and for student subgroups, including students with disabilities and English language learners (ELLs). The Southbridge Public Schools District Review Report also highlighted significant concerns regarding the leadership and governance of the district. Among other issues, the District Review noted the district’s failure to attract and retain school leaders, especially in the role of superintendent. Since 2011, seven individuals have served as superintendent, and there has been a similar level of turnover in other leadership positions in the district.

The state has given significant assistance and resources to Southbridge Public Schools over the past 12 years, but the district-led efforts did not improve student performance significantly. Therefore, the Board voted in favor of receivership and the tools associated with it to dramatically strengthen the school system.

What happens next in the Southbridge Public School System?

The state will convene a Local Stakeholder Group (LSG) that will provide recommendations to the commissioner and the receiver for the district turnaround plan. That group will include representatives of teachers, parents, the community, healthcare, workforce, early education, and higher education, as outlined in legislation. The commissioner and receiver will work on the turnaround plan this spring. It is anticipated that the turnaround plan will be finalized by the end of the school year so implementation can begin during summer 2016. The turnaround plan will include priorities and strategies to accelerate student achievement.

**Will there be changes in teaching and administrative staff?**

The commissioner has said that there will not be mass firings of Southbridge staff. Southbridge's Level 5 district turnaround plan will outline the district’s new priorities and path forward. Evaluating current district staff will be part of that process. Teachers and staff will have the opportunity to reflect on the new approach and determine if it is the right fit for them. In Lawrence and Holyoke, currently the only other two Massachusetts school districts in receivership, most of the teachers stayed, and both the receiver and commissioner encouraged teachers to stay if they wanted to work with the receiver to improve the district. State law allows the receiver to ask all staff to reapply for their positions, but it is up to the receiver to decide how and whether to use that power.

**What progress is being made in the state’s two other Level 5 districts?**

Lawrence Public Schools has made notable progress since its designation as a Level 5 district in 2011. The number of schools meeting performance targets (Level 1 schools) has tripled, student growth on state assessments has increased, and graduation and dropout rates are improving significantly. In Holyoke, which was designated in spring 2015, early signs of progress include the creation of a comprehensive turnaround plan, with clear strategic actions and benchmarks, to guide the district’s improvement efforts.

**Where can I find more information, and how can parents, teachers, and the community get involved?**

The Southbridge Public Schools website (<http://www.southbridge.k12.ma.us>) will continue to be the central location for all communications about the district. The commissioner will be posting memos to parents and Southbridge staff there. Please continue to check that website for updated information. The commissioner will work with Southbridge Public Schools leadership to ensure that parents, teachers, and community members are well-informed of the process and are able to offer input and ask questions. Important communications will be available in both English and Spanish.

The commissioner has staff working in Southbridge several days each week. This team can be reached by email at [receiver@southbridge.k12.ma.us](https://mail.doemass.org/owa/redir.aspx?C=o3HoLkfsH0eBY4yNZOvOGrZZfz8LWNIIBCxogXICV8JT26QArv3giveY7jo6KGLDPd88I-scSP0.&URL=mailto%3areceiver%40hps.holyoke.ma.us) or by phone at (508) 764-5414 ext. 400. The receivership team welcomes the involvement of all community members, especially students and families, in improving Southbridge schools. Please feel free to contact us with information about programs you believe are working well and those that need improvement.

For answers to additional questions, or for more information about receivership and Level 5 districts, please visit ESE's website at: <http://www.mass.gov/edu/government/departments-and-boards/ese/programs/accountability/support-for-level-3-4-and-5-districts-and-schools/school-and-district-turnaround/level-5-districts/>.

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