

School Performance in the Springfield Empowerment Zone

A Research Brief by the AFT Massachusetts Research Department
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Summary and Main Findings

The Springfield Empowerment Zone is a cluster of schools under the primary control of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). The Zone has been touted as an innovative model for school improvement, including most recently at the March 2022 meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

But has the Zone produced results based on the core accountability metric—school percentile—that DESE uses to hold other schools and districts accountable?

According to DESE data, the answer is no. **Zone schools are among the poorest-performing and lowest-ranked schools in the state. Of the 3,904 students who attend eight non-selective Zone schools with school percentile data from 2019 (most recent year of data), 81 percent (3,162) attend schools that DESE ranks in the bottom 5 percent—that is, with a school percentile of 5 or below.**

The fact that DESE continues to tout the Zone, despite the low rankings assigned to Zone schools *by DESE*, calls into question the credibility of the state’s school and district accountability system and how it is used to judge, label, and justify intervention in schools and districts.

Zone Background

Created in 2014, the Springfield Empowerment Zone (SEZ) is a cluster of schools run by a governing board that operates independently of the Springfield school committee and district. The Zone was formed under pressure from DESE, which was threatening full state takeover of nine middle schools that had been designated “underperforming” by DESE in 2010. Fearing such a takeover, City of Springfield leaders agreed to a Zone “partnership” with DESE as an alternative to state receivership. Under this “partnership,” a seven-member board was established, with four members appointed by the state and three by the city—effectively, state control of Zone schools with local input.

Since its founding, the Zone has expanded to include other schools, and several schools have undergone restructurings and name changes, including being divided into smaller schools that exist in the same building. A DESE memo from March 14, 2022, states: “Through school reconfigurations, as of school year 2021-2022, the Empowerment Zone includes fourteen middle and high schools.”¹

¹ See “Springfield Empowerment Zone Update” at <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2022/2022-03/>.

From its inception, the Zone has enjoyed considerable hype as an innovative and promising state—and even national—model for school improvement. For example, a 2017 report by the Progressive Policy Institute posited that the SEZ model, through its efforts “to create serious autonomy and accountability conditions in district schools,” has the potential to “provide districts all across the country with a road map to create high-quality results.” One Zone booster was quoted as saying: “I look at it as a governance structure that enables things to happen that wouldn’t otherwise,” adding that the Zone “will spread voluntarily” after others see its success.²

The SEZ website is equally ebullient, asserting that the Zone “was created to accelerate student achievement in the City of Springfield’s most underperforming schools.” The Zone, the website says, “harnesses the flexibility and innovation of autonomous school models,” guided by the belief this will “usher in innovative and substantive solutions to the perennial challenges that these schools face.”³

And, most recently, the Zone enjoyed a glowing presentation at the March 22, 2022, meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), where praise was heaped on the SEZ by presenters and BESE members.⁴

BESE members heard statements such as:

- “[The Zone] has been a success here in the City of Springfield and we have the stats to back it up.”
- “What a wonderful model for not only Springfield but the rest of the country as well. I think we’re on to something great here.”
- “Our partnership is proving to be an impactful and productive approach for Springfield.”

There is speculation that DESE may be weighing a similar Zone structure for the Boston Public Schools (BPS) as an alternative to full state takeover (receivership).⁵

Core Research Question: Is the Zone Getting Results Based on DESE Accountability Metrics?

Given the high praise for the Zone, and given that DESE’s interventions are designed to raise MCAS scores and school performance ratings per the 2010 Achievement Gap Act that gives DESE sweeping powers to intervene in so-called “underperforming” schools and districts, it is reasonable to ask: Are Zone schools producing results based on the metrics that DESE uses to hold other schools and districts accountable?

This brief provides an analysis of the 14 Zone schools identified in the March 14, 2022, DESE memo, focusing on the core accountability metric used by DESE to judge schools and districts

² Report available at <https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Springfield-Empowerment-Paper.pdf>.

³ See <https://www.springfielddempowerment.org/about.html>

⁴ The entire Board meeting, including the SEZ presentation, can be viewed at <https://livestream.com/madesestreaming/events/10263987>. The Zone presentation starts at about 1:20:00.

⁵ <https://schoolyardnews.com/a-look-at-springfields-empowerment-zone-is-this-the-future-for-bps-bb87e9d15b4a>

across the state: school percentile.⁶ Per DESE, the school percentile metric measures the performance of a school compared to other schools in the state that serve similar grade spans. The metric is derived from an algorithm that incorporates an array of indicators, with substantial weight given to MCAS achievement scores. A school percentile is reported from 1 to 99, with 1 being the lowest possible score (i.e., performance is in the “bottom one percent” of schools) and 99 being the highest possible score.⁷

It is important to note that many researchers, educators, and advocacy organizations, including AFT Massachusetts, have criticized the school percentile metric as a measure of school quality. Critics like AFT MA argue that the metric is biased and inaccurate, given its heavy reliance on MCAS achievement scores, which are strongly linked to students’ socioeconomic status.⁸

Nevertheless, school percentile is the crux of DESE’s accountability regime and the primary basis for how DESE judges and labels schools, including whether and how to intervene in “underperforming” schools and districts. For example, a recent DESE review of the Boston Public Schools made a point of saying that, “in 2019–2020, approximately one-third of district students—16,656 students in 34 schools—attend a school that is among the lowest performing 10 percent of schools in the state.”⁹ That is a reference to school percentile. Given the central role of school percentile in the DESE accountability system and its high-stakes use in policy decisions, it is therefore reasonable to apply the same standards to the SEZ schools that are effectively under DESE control: **Are the Zone schools moving the needle on school percentile?**

Furthermore, it should be noted that this analysis uses school percentile data from 2019, the last year that school percentiles were calculated by DESE. MCAS was canceled entirely in 2020, and 2021 scores are not being used for accountability purposes because the 2021 MCAS was administered during the pandemic and the scores, per DESE, are considered unreliable. AFT Massachusetts agrees with DESE that 2021 MCAS scores should not be used for any high-stakes policy decisions.

Key Findings

According to Table 1, Zone schools are not living up to their promise of improving student performance according to the core metric—school percentile—used in DESE’s accountability regime:

- Five of the 14 schools have no 2019 school percentile data because there have been so many school reconfigurations and “restart” schools within the Zone. However, a close

⁶ School percentile is also referred to as accountability percentile, and the terms are used interchangeably. This brief uses school percentile throughout.

⁷ A full explanation of accountability/school percentile can be found in DESE’s publication, *School Leader’s Guide to the 2019 Accountability Determinations*, available at <https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/lists-tools/default.html>.

⁸ For example, see AFT MA President Beth Kontos’ recent public comments on this topic at <http://ma.aft.org/news/aft-ma-president-beth-kontos-criticizes-dese-continuing-biased-and-inaccurate-school-rating>.

⁹ See *Boston Public Schools District Review Report 2020* at <https://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/default.html>.

look at the schools’ histories suggests that the reconfigurations were often a direct response to poor performance in the previously named and configured schools (e.g., Kiley Middle and Chestnut Middle). Four of the five schools without 2019 school percentile data do have 2021 MCAS data, but those results are not reported here due to the unreliability of 2021 MCAS scores, per above.

- **Nine of the 14 Zone schools do have 2019 school percentile data. Of these nine schools, seven have school percentiles of 5 or less—that is, seven of the nine are in the “bottom five percent” of schools statewide that serve similar grade spans, according to DESE.** Of the remaining two, one has a school percentile of 15, and the other is a gifted and talented school (Chestnut Accelerated Middle School) with a highly selective admissions process and is therefore excluded from the analysis. (To be admitted, a student must already have good MCAS scores. It is not surprising then that the school has a relatively high school percentile, since the metric is derived primarily from MCAS scores.)
- **Excluding the gifted and talented school, the Zone enrolls a total of 3,904 students who attend 8 Zone schools with 2019 school percentile data. Of those 3,904 students, 81 percent (3,162) attend schools that DESE ranks in the bottom five percent—that is, with a school percentile of 5 or below.¹⁰**

Table 1. SEZ Schools with 2019 School Percentile Data, Where Available

	School Name	Grade span/ enrollment ¹¹	Notes about school ¹²	Performance Data ¹³
Kiley Middle School Cluster				
1.	M. Marcus Kiley Middle School	221 students, grade 8 only	Identified as “underperforming” in 2010; school is being phased out and closed	2019 school percentile: 1
2.	Kiley Academy	211 students, grades 6 to 7	Newly configured and named middle school; an offshoot of the M. Marcus Kiley Middle	No school percentile data; 2021 MCAS data are available
3.	Kiley Prep	171 students, grades 6 to 7	Newly configured and named middle school; an offshoot of the M. Marcus Kiley Middle	No school percentile data; 2021 MCAS data are available

¹⁰ See calculation following the table.

¹¹ All student enrollment data can be found at the DESE website, <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>.

¹² For DESE’s list of schools that have been designated “underperforming,” including the year designated, see *List of Underperforming Schools* at <https://www.doe.mass.edu/turnaround/level4/about.html>. Note that “underperforming” schools were formerly referred to as “Level 4 schools,” a term no longer in use by DESE.

¹³ All school percentile and MCAS data can be found at the DESE website, <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>.

Chestnut Middle School Cluster				
4.	Impact Prep at Chestnut	208 students, grades 6 to 8	School is an offshoot of the former Chestnut Middle School, identified as “underperforming” in 2010	2019 school percentile: 1
5.	Lyceum Academy	413 students, grades 6 to 8	School is an offshoot of the former Chestnut Middle School, identified as “underperforming” in 2010	No school percentile data; 2021 MCAS data are available
6.	Chestnut Accelerated Middle School (Talented and Gifted)	301 students, grades 6 to 8	This school is a selective admissions school , as described here: https://www.chestnuttag.com/	2019 school percentile: 65
Van Sickle Middle School Cluster				
7.	Rise Academy at Van Sickle	273 students, grades 6 to 8	Formerly Van Sickle Academy, identified as “underperforming” in 2014	2019 school percentile: 5
8.	Van Sickle Academy	278 students, grades 6 to 8	Formerly Van Sickle International Baccalaureate, identified as “underperforming” in 2014	2019 school percentile: 2
Other Middle Schools				
9.	John F. Kennedy Middle	420 students, grades 6 to 8	Identified as “underperforming” in 2010	2019 school percentile: 1
10.	Forest Park Middle	480 students, grades 6 to 8	Identified as “underperforming” in 2014	2019 school percentile: 2
11.	Springfield Realization	70 students, grade 6 only	New dual language school created in 2021, located in the same building as Forest Park Middle	No school percentile or MCAS data
12.	Emergence Academy	45 students, grades 6 to 8	New school created in 2020 for students with limited or interrupted formal education	No school percentile data; 2021 MCAS data are available
Middle-High and High Schools				
13.	Commerce High School	1282 students, grades 9 to 12	Identified as “underperforming” in 2010	2019 school percentile: 3
14.	Duggan Academy	742 students, grades 6 to 12	Formerly Duggan Middle School, identified as “underperforming” in 2014; became a grade 6 to 12 school starting in 2014-15	2019 school percentile: 15

Calculation: Percentage of Springfield Empowerment Zone Students Attending a School Ranked in the “Bottom Five Percent” by DESE

Schools with 2019 School Percentile Data (excluding the talented and gifted school)	2019 School Percentile of 5 or Less?	Number of Students Enrolled, 2021-22
M. Marcus Kiley Middle	Yes	221
Impact Prep	Yes	208
Rise Academy	Yes	273
Van Sickle Academy	Yes	278
Kennedy Middle	Yes	420
Forest Park Middle	Yes	480
Commerce High	Yes	1282
Subtotal		3,162
Duggan Academy	No	742
Total		3904
Percentage of SEZ Students Attending a “Bottom 5%” School		81.0%

Conclusion

According to DESE’s core accountability metric—school percentile—SEZ schools are struggling. In fact, they are among the poorest-performing and lowest-ranked schools in the state.

Therefore, it’s fair to say that DESE-run Zone schools are not living up to their promise of improving MCAS-based student performance, which was the primary intent of the 2010 Achievement Gap Act that gives DESE sweeping powers to identify and intervene in so-called “underperforming” schools and districts.

Based on the analysis in this brief, it is also fair to conclude that simply giving schools “autonomy with accountability”—the signature “reform” of the Zone by all accounts—is insufficient to improve standardized test scores.

That said, there may be wonderful things happening in the SEZ schools that are helping students learn and thrive, and that are simply not captured by the DESE accountability metrics. For instance, it was intriguing that DESE chose to showcase and celebrate the Zone at the March 2022 BESE meeting, despite the generally low accountability ratings assigned to SEZ schools by DESE. Perhaps this is an indication of DESE’s interest in finding new ways to measure school quality and give credit to schools that serve large numbers of English learners, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities. If that is the case, it would be a welcome shift in policy that many critics of the current broken accountability system would embrace.