Common Challenge

In 2014, the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP) was created to turn around nine persistently low-performing middle schools. Principals were given autonomy over school design—but this autonomy wasn’t enough without the information and support they needed to make the best decisions for their students.

SEZP’s Approach

The SEZP team collaborated with principals to strategically design an integrated system of supports, tools, and processes that armed principals with the information and guidance they needed to use their flexibilities to best support their teachers, students, and school communities.

SEZP’s Results

Four years later, SEZP schools have dramatically improved school designs and instructional models. Student learning indicators are positive: Three schools increased their state percentile rank for student growth in ELA by 10 or more percentage points, and four schools have accomplished this same feat in math.¹
ERS Districts at Work Series

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**Springfield, Massachusetts**
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**TAKE ACTION IN YOUR DISTRICT!**

**Dig deeper.**
Visit bit.ly/SEZPartifacts or look for the artifact icon throughout this case study to access tangible materials—such as templates and tools—that SEZP leaders created to guide their work.

**Don’t beat the odds—change them.**
Go to bit.ly/snapshotmini to take our System Snapshot Mini, a brief self-assessment tool designed to help your team explore how to take strategic approaches to the work happening in your district.

*What are the gears of change in my district? Where are our gears getting stuck? Where do we need one gear to push another to enable meaningful change?*

**Get support.**
For more than a decade, ERS has worked with school systems to transform how they use resources. We are ready to partner with your school system or connect you with other service providers. Send an email to contact@erstrategies.org to talk to us directly.

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ERS Districts at Work Framework

We studied eight school systems that struggled with the same challenges as many urban districts around the country—and like many others, the eight systems we studied set strategic priorities that they hoped would address their challenges. **What sets these eight school systems apart is that they didn’t stop there.**

Think of these strategic priorities as a gear—without focusing on what is needed to power it, the gear stays stationary. Just setting the right strategic priorities is not enough to produce or sustain the results district and school leaders hope for.

Leaders from the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP) and the other school systems we studied rolled up their sleeves to carefully and collaboratively construct three other gears that effectively powered their strategic priorities. They developed a clear theory of action by identifying: (A) the big changes that schools needed to make to power progress toward the strategic priorities, and (B) how the central office needed to support schools to successfully implement those changes. To power their theory of action, these school systems made tough trade-offs in a series of resource shifts, and they made process shifts to ensure central office management structures enabled schools to efficiently, effectively, and sustainably implement the changes.
SEZP: Strategic Priority

SEZP leaders knew that schools faced common challenges despite different student bodies and needs. For example, all SEZP teachers needed to teach rigorous, grade-level content and meet each individual student where they were—all while implementing new state standards. So, SEZP leaders set one common requirement for all schools: to develop a strategic action plan for how to support students across each of the four Massachusetts Turnaround Practices. Those practices are:

1. Instructional Leadership, Shared Responsibility, and Professional Collaboration
2. Intentional Practices for Improving Instruction
3. Student-Specific Supports and Instruction to All Students
4. Climate and Culture for Students, Families, and the Community

To help schools create and implement these action plans, SEZP leaders identified the following strategic priority:

Support principals to use their flexibility to create inclusive and rigorous experiences for their students.

SEZP principals had significant flexibility to design their schools. For example, they had control over nearly all of their funding; the ability to create new staff roles and responsibilities, and to hire for those roles; and the option to negotiate with staff to develop calendars, schedules, and other working conditions independent of Springfield Public Schools’ collective bargaining process. However, SEZP leaders knew that in many school systems that provided high levels of principal autonomy, school-level practices didn’t improve because principals did not have the training, support, and information they needed to develop innovative school designs. To turn around SEZP schools, principals needed more than just flexibility over school designs—they needed access to data and supports that helped them use their flexibilities wisely.

حسب #1: The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership

حسب #2: On the Right Path: Best Practice Guide for High-Quality Schools

Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership: System at a Glance

In 2014, nine middle schools in Springfield, Massachusetts, were classified as “needing significant improvement” by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Leaders at Springfield Public Schools (SPS) knew that turning around these schools would require significant change, so in collaboration with DESE and the Springfield Education Association (SEA), SPS created the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, which placed the nine low-performing middle schools in an autonomous zone with their own central support team.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged Students (2017-18)²</th>
<th>Black and Latinx* Students (2017-18)³</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Latinx” is the gender-neutral alternative to “Latino” or “Latina,” meaning a person of Latin American origin or descent. Common pronunciation is “lah-TEEN-ex” or “lah-teen-EX.” ERS chose to study districts with high populations of black, Latinx, and low-income students to highlight school systems that are actively addressing longstanding inequities.

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SEZP leaders didn’t stop after setting the Zone’s strategic priority: First, they identified big changes that schools needed to make to power progress toward the strategic priority. Then, they identified how the SEZP team needed to support schools to successfully implement those changes. Together, these school-level changes and central office supports formed the system’s theory of action. To power their theory of action, SEZP made a series of resource shifts and process shifts that created enabling conditions for principals’ strong decision-making. Going beyond an initial strategic priority by developing and powering this theory of action is what sets SEZP apart.

SEZP’s theory of action was composed of three major parts:

#1 Support principals to link scheduling, staffing, and budgeting decisions to their schools’ academic priorities and to evaluate the impacts of those decisions.

Why?
Principals did not always have the training or expertise to quickly assess their options or the financial and academic implications of their structural decisions. A cohesive school planning process, thoughtful support from the SEZP team, and ideas from other SEZP schools helped principals build this expertise.

#2 Redesign the school planning process to ensure that academic priorities drive decisions around resource use.

Why?
This allowed student learning goals to inform all decision-making, instead of letting budget and staffing allocations constrain the range of design decisions available to principals.

#3 Provide school leadership teams with the data and tools needed to consider various school design options and optimize decision-making processes.

Why?
Without timely and accurate information, principals had to “fly blind” as they tried to reconfigure their school schedules and staffing plans, without full knowledge of the funds, staff, and options available for them to work with. To change this experience, the SEZP team provided principals with up-to-date data aligned to the state’s new accountability system, and included both qualitative measures of school practices and quantitative indicators for student learning.
Support principals to link scheduling, staffing, and budgeting decisions to their schools’ academic priorities and to evaluate the impacts of those decisions.

For principals’ school designs to support student learning, they needed to direct their school’s resources toward their students’ most critical academic needs, and they needed to weigh the pros and cons of various options in terms of the potential impact on students’ learning. Helping principals evaluate the academic impacts of their operational decisions was a key factor in SEZP’s progress toward its strategic priority, and SEZP leaders invested significant time to coach principals on this skill.

Process Shifts

Roles
To balance their commitment to principal empowerment with supporting principals to make the best decisions for students, SEZP hired leaders for the central team who had the expertise to link academic priorities to staffing, professional learning, and budgeting decisions. In combination with the collaborative culture they worked to establish within their team, this wealth of shared knowledge meant the SEZP team was prepared to provide principals with coherent information and to review principals’ school plans with joint problem-solving in mind. Their main tool for problem-solving in collaboration with principals was a coaching style of support based on raising questions and examining data. In typical school systems, leaders might instruct principals to make certain design choices; SEZP leaders left the decision-making to principals but pushed them to think about the implications of each choice. Chief of Instructional Improvement Kelley Gangi described her style of support as “being a mirror” by asking questions that led principals to reflect on their reasoning, and “being a window” by guiding them to think about data they hadn’t yet considered.

SEZP leaders described the same approach when discussing conversations with principals about budgets, student schedules, staffing changes, and teacher tenure decisions. Co-Executive Director Colleen Beaudoin described guiding principals to find alternative ways of solving problems; for example, asking which schedule options would preserve more learning time, rather than scheduling math intervention over a school’s 45-minute math block. Chief of Talent Nicole Christoforo described bringing teacher evaluation data into discussions with principals about offering tenure to teachers, to prompt principals to think about the impact of their decisions on students. In cases where principals didn’t begin with an idea, SEZP leaders supplied a menu of strong options. For example, Chief of Instructional Improvement Kelley Gangi helped a school leader begin the process of choosing curricula by suggesting several aligned curricula that other SEZP schools found valuable.

Mindsets
To provide more avenues for schools to learn and improve, SEZP facilitated opportunities for schools to learn from each other. For example, after two schools successfully used an intervention program to improve students’ reading skills, Chief of Instructional Improvement
Kelley Gangi and Co-Executive Director Colleen Beaudoin connected the successful schools to other schools that were considering their own choices of intervention programs.

Members of the SEZP team were committed to a mindset of doing whatever was needed to support their schools. In addition to providing strategic support to help principals reach their goals, SEZP leaders actively took on administrative burdens that otherwise fell on to principals’ plates. This freed up principals’ time to focus on strategic school design issues. For example, SEZP talent team members Christina Harbour and Nicole Christoforo ensured that the hiring process flowed smoothly between SEZP schools and the SPS central office. The talent team, rather than principals, translated each school’s staffing plans into the job descriptions and hiring criteria that the SPS system required. Chief Operating Officer David Tilton spent time translating district requirements to schools; for example, he coordinated procurement with the SPS finance team.

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**Resource Shifts**

**People**

In recent years, SEZP principals used a combination of their flexibility and new tools and supports to change the SEZP student experience in key ways; for example, one school used the increased flexibility in SEZP’s teacher contract to create a new dean of intervention role. The dean of intervention spends some time in classrooms working with small groups of students, and the remaining time making sure the teachers who lead intervention respond to data about student learning.

**Time**

To work toward the Student-Specific Supports and Instruction to All Students category from the four Massachusetts Turnaround Practices, SEZP schools extended the school day to 7 ½ - 8 hours to give students more time to learn, and all schools extended their teachers’ days to allow for more teacher professional learning time. In addition, all schools changed their class schedules to make time for academic intervention during the school day. Principals and teacher leaders made these decisions through consensus and written agreement.

“

My job is to support you [principals] to be successful in your goals.

“

-Colleen Beaudoin, co-executive director
Redesign the school planning process to ensure that academic priorities drive decisions around resource use.

In many school systems, the school planning process and the budget process are decoupled—finance offices make budget decisions independently of academic strategies—which leaves principals trying to retrofit academic designs into budgets, instead of the other way around. To better support principals as they aligned resources to academic priorities, SEZP leaders designed the Zone’s school planning process to be an opportunity to coach principals; the process begins with academic needs that get reflected during decision-making around scheduling, staffing, and budgeting. This way, principals receive support to align resources to their academic priorities.

**Process Shifts**

**Timelines**

**Identifying Academic Needs**

To help principals make annual planning decisions based on students’ academic needs, SEZP shifted the timing of its School Quality Reviews to earlier in the school year. The School Quality Review shows principals the results of a third-party observation of their school’s progress toward the four Massachusetts Turnaround Practices. During the 2018-19 school year, SEZP moved the School Quality Review from March (in the middle of the school planning process) to December (before the school planning process), so that principals could use details about their school’s strengths and needs to inform their planning.

Artifact #3: School Quality Review Sample Executive Summary

**School Operational Plan**

Earlier access to School Quality Review data gave principals the opportunity to consider that information within the context of SEZP’s existing School Operational Plan (SOP) process and to choose strategies for the upcoming school year. To complete their SOP, principals described their school’s most pressing academic needs and the actions they planned to take to address those needs, organized by the four Massachusetts Turnaround Practices. For example, a principal whose students were struggling with ELA detailed a plan within the Intentional Practices for Improving Instruction category that included frequent, aligned formative assessments; a peer coaching program for ELA teachers; and a pilot version of a Writer’s Workshop model in select eighth grade classrooms.

The decision to begin the planning process with academic needs allowed principals to better use existing SEZP budgeting, scheduling, and staffing processes; for example, an academic decision to add time to the school day required both reorganizing the school’s schedule to best use the time, and adding pay for teachers’ longer hours. With expert support from SEZP leaders, principals were able to address budgeting, staffing, and scheduling in a single integrated process.

Artifact #4: Sample School Operational Plan

Artifact #5: School Planning Timeline Overview
**Mindsets**

SEZP maintained a consensus-building process among principal and teacher teams to build buy-in for schoolwide scheduling choices. After each school identified goals and actions in their school operational plan, each principal gathered with school administrators and their school’s teacher leadership team for the teacher leadership team to vote on the school’s calendar, the length of its day, and other working conditions. For example, a school that planned to provide reading intervention for students discussed adding time to the school day so students could receive both classroom instruction and intervention. This consensus-building process helped create buy-in across the school for key initiatives.

*Artifact #6: Sample Teacher Working Conditions (Page 4 of School Operational Plan)*

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**Resource Shifts**

**Time**

The SEZP team dedicated additional time to assist each principal individually with connecting resource-use decisions to academic priorities. Each principal had weekly meetings with leaders from SEZP’s academics and human resources (HR) teams. Beginning in 2017, the SEZP team also held an optional half-day budget retreat for principals to discuss how elements of their schools’ budgets—such as staffing and nonprofit partners—could be used to help students accomplish their learning goals. As they worked together, principals and SEZP leaders realized that they needed to be able to quickly compare options for staffing, scheduling, and budgeting in their schools. SEZP turned to its school planning tools (see pages 10-11) to make that work easier.

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“We don’t spend time making decisions for principals and then explaining the rationale for those decisions. Instead, I spend the same amount of time with principals, but our time together allows for principals to share their decisions and supporting data. Change happens because they’ve been involved in the thinking behind the change.”

-Colleen Beaudoin, co-executive director
#3

Provide school leadership teams with the data and tools needed to consider various school design options and optimize decision-making processes.

Even with supportive coaching and a logical planning process in place, principals often find it challenging to experiment with school structures—such as reconfiguring schedules or reassigning staff—which can make it difficult to implement the changes needed to drive student outcomes. For example, students who enter middle school several years behind need more than one period per day of math or ELA to catch up, and their teachers need more time with their colleagues and instructional experts to effectively incorporate more rigorous college- and career-ready standards into their practice. But if principals lack research-based options for schedule changes, or the time and tools to examine those options, they will be unlikely to experiment with scheduling, budgeting, and staffing to identify an alternative model. To help principals consider more innovative options for how to use their resources, SEZP leaders invested in a suite of software tools that reduced the amount of time principals spent on administrative tasks, therefore freeing up their time to explore strategic questions with their teams about other possible school designs.

Process Shifts

**Data & Tools**

SEZP invested in three tools to help schools experiment with various school design options and to optimize decision-making processes:

**Data Analysis Tool**

To help principals analyze student data, SEZP turned to **Tableau**, a software tool that allowed principals to see multiple years of any data in the school performance framework, including student and teacher attendance, interim assessment scores, out-of-school suspensions, survey data, and more. When SEZP first formed, principals worked with static data that did not necessarily correspond to the school performance framework. With Tableau, principals gained access to up-to-date data organized in alignment with the school performance framework, and they were able to distill this data all the way to the student level to quickly understand which students were making progress and who needed intervention. Principals also received data support from the SEZP team; for example, when a principal had a new data question, Analytics Manager Adam Kishel used Tableau to quickly produce a customized report. Once the report was ready for one school, other SEZP schools could use Tableau to see the same data set for their school. Principals used this detailed student data to design SOPs around their students’ learning needs that they referred to throughout the year.

**Budgeting and Staffing Tool**

SEZP began using the software tool **MyBudgetFile** to support principals as they considered different budgeting and staffing options at their schools. MyBudgetFile allowed principals to make real-time changes to their staffing allocations and see the implications on the rest of their budget. SEZP customized MyBudgetFile to help principals make informed decisions about
which services they wanted to purchase from SPS. The SPS and SEZP finance teams worked together to identify a suite of services that schools could “buy back” from SPS. They clarified what schools would receive if they bought those services and calculated the cost—for example, how much custodial services would cost a school if purchased from the district—and included all this information in MyBudgetFile so principals could make informed choices about which services were difficult to replace on their own and which they would opt to procure elsewhere.

SEZP also used MyBudgetFile to provide principals with a reminder of the need to draw connections between academic needs and financial choices. Within the tool, the SEZP team added categories in principals’ budgets to detail the academic nonprofit partners their school worked with to prompt principals to think of the budget as part of academic improvement. Co-Executive Director (at the time of this study) Julie Swerdlow Albino, described this design as part of SEZP’s integrated planning process, stating that system leaders “made sure the principals see a puzzle they’re trying to solve all together in one go.”

Scheduling Tool
Most recently, SEZP introduced a scheduling tool to help three schools with particularly complex scheduling needs. The three schools shared a building and participated in a dual-enrollment community college program that created a set of scheduling constraints that proved too challenging to address using sticky notes, whiteboards, and spreadsheets. During the 2018-19 school year, these three schools piloted scheduling software from Always Be Learning to handle logistical scheduling challenges. They found that having the ability to simplify the schedule-creation process gave them more time to experiment with various scheduling options and to design one that best fit students’ learning needs.

“\nWe wanted schools to spend zero time on analysis and all of their time on ‘What do we do now that we know this information?’”

-Julie Swerdlow Albino, co-executive director

Resource Shifts

Money
SEZP maintained the central team’s spending below 3 percent of the overall Zone budget (less than the allowed 4 percent). To do this, they made strategic decisions about which uses of available funds were most helpful to students across the Zone and prioritized these investments. The cost of MyBudgetFile and Tableau are about $10 per student each year. The three schools that use Always Be Learning incur an additional cost of $13 per student each year for that tool.
**Results: Changes to Student Performance and Experiences**

As SEZP principals use their flexibility and accompanying tools and supports to redesign the student experience in their schools, student performance has improved. In the last year, three of the original nine middle schools made significant gains in the state’s accountability system. The remaining six schools also improved in smaller steps. Comparisons to the start of SEZP are imprecise due to changes in the state’s standardized test and the configuration of SEZP schools—however, in this time frame, three schools’ state percentile ranking for student growth in ELA increased 10 or more percentage points, and four schools’ rank increased 10 or more percentage points in math.

**Results: Changes to the School Leader Experience**

The flexibility and support that SEZP offers helped attract and sustain strong leadership; schools that have stable, strong leadership increased student growth as described above. SEZP’s improved school planning process helped principals plan more strategically—with timely, relevant data about their students and schools, a flexible system for exploring the staffing and spending decisions that best meet students’ needs, and opportunities to learn from peer principals and the SEZP team about how to choose options that suit their schools. After the SEZP team’s adjustments to the school planning process, it is easier for principals to align their operational decisions with academic goals.

**What’s Next for SEZP?**

With three schools showing high levels of improvement in student growth, SEZP leaders are now thinking about how to expand the lessons learned at those schools to other schools in the Zone. Co-Executive Director Matthew Brunell and the rest of the team are considering strategies to retain successful leaders, build the bench of school leadership, and share great results. The principal of one successful middle school will start an SEZP high school during the 2019-20 school year. SEZP leaders are also considering an “executive principal” role for two more strong principals to support one or two other schools’ efforts to build academic systems and student supports while continuing to lead their own schools. SEZP leaders hope that this type of mentorship structure can expand the reach of successful leaders and serve more students.

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“Technical details can make or break the work you’re doing on adaptive change.”

-Kelley Gangi, chief of instructional improvement
Sources

1 Email from Co-Executive Director Colleen Beaudoin, referencing the improvement of student outcomes on state exams in the time period just prior to the creation of SEZP (2015 data) until the end of the third year (2018 data). The test changed multiple times over the years (MCAS 1.0, PARCC, a mixture of PARCC and MCAS 1.0, then MCAS 2.0). Additionally, SEZP experienced school configuration changes during this time period.

2 Email from Co-Executive Director Colleen Beaudoin.

3 Email from Co-Executive Director Colleen Beaudoin.

4 Emailed draft comment from Co-Executive Director Colleen Beaudoin.

5 Emailed draft comment from Co-Executive Director Colleen Beaudoin.

6 Emailed draft comment from Co-Executive Director Colleen Beaudoin.

7 Emailed draft comment from Chief Operating Officer David Tilton.

8 Email from Co-Executive Director Colleen Beaudoin. Improvement of student outcomes pre-Zone (2015 data) until the end of the third year (2018). The test changed multiple times over the years (MCAS 1.0, PARCC, a mixture of PARCC and MCAS 1.0, then MCAS 2.0). Additionally, SEZP experienced school configuration changes during this time period.

Note: Most of the content featured in this case study comes from interviews and email correspondence with SEZP leaders. Unless otherwise noted, all facts and data points are drawn from this qualitative data set.

Photos courtesy of the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership.

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Every school. Every child. Ready for tomorrow.

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