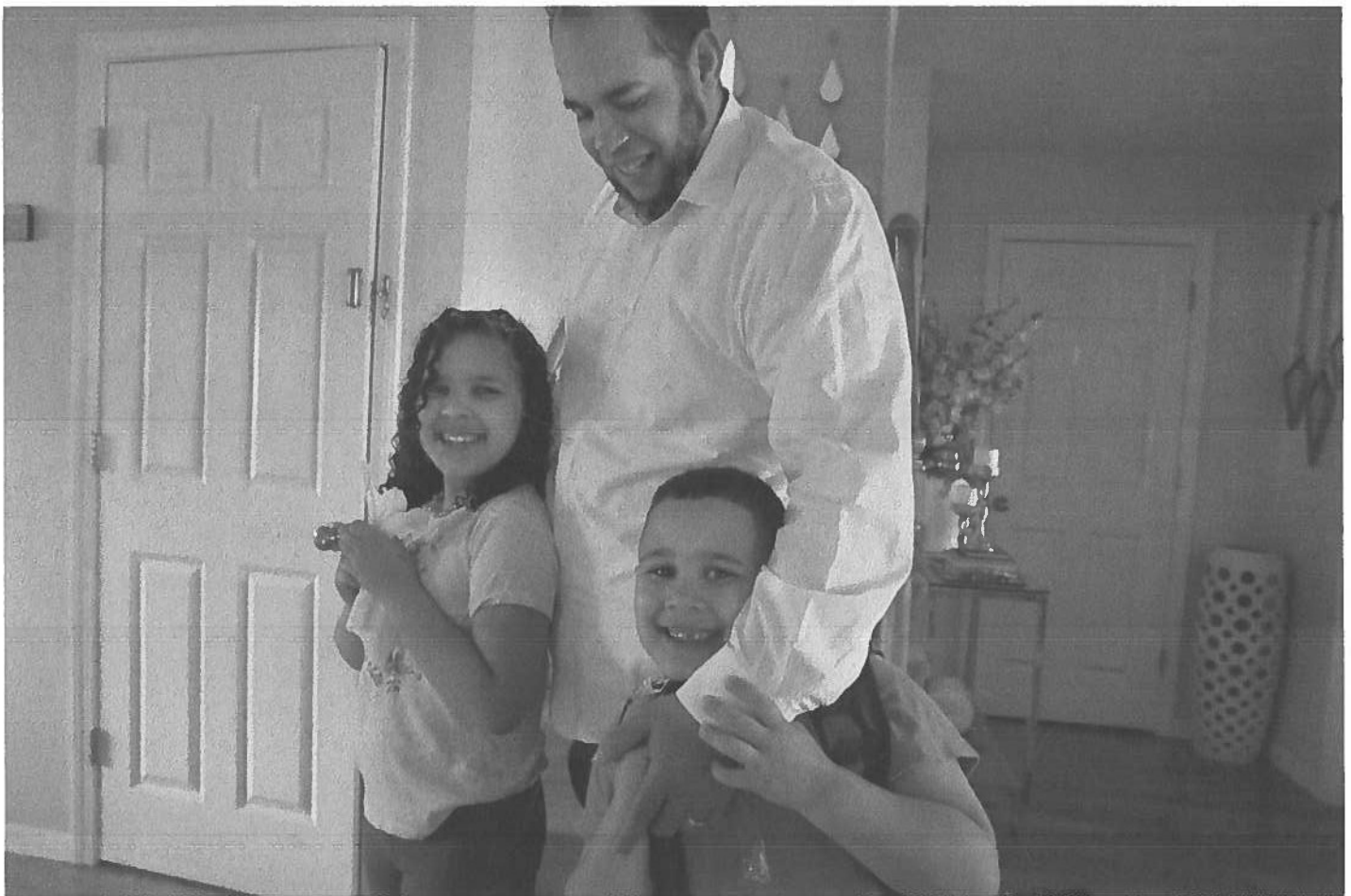


THE GREAT DIVIDE

School takeovers by the state haven't worked, Globe analysis shows

By Bianca Vázquez Toness and Christopher Huffaker Globe Staff, Updated May 15, 2022, 5:03 p.m.



Lenin Roa, with two of his children, Esmeralda, 8, and Lenin Jr., 5, has been pushing for more local control of schools in Lawrence. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

As Massachusetts considers taking control of Boston Public Schools, evidence suggests the state has failed to make meaningful progress in turning around much smaller districts it currently oversees.

A Globe analysis of test scores, graduation rates, college enrollment, and a dozen other

metrics in Lawrence, Holyoke, and Southbridge shows the state has failed to meet almost all its stated goals for the districts.

There was little or no improvement in English and science scores on the mandated Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exams, or MCAS. Attendance rates have barely budged. Math scores and graduation rates improved in some districts, but only to a point and they still remain below average.

And on measures for which the districts did hit target rates set by the state — students completing state-recommended high school course work, for example — the communities largely were already doing well. And for college enrollment, a metric the state did not set goals for, all three districts saw declines.

“It has not helped us at all,” said Martena Shea, a Southbridge School Committee Member, retired teacher, and former union president.

The state took control of the Lawrence system in 2011, Holyoke in 2015, and Southbridge the following year. And now, years later, families and advocates in all three communities are calling for an end of state control, contending the surrogates running their schools don't respond to parent concerns.

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Based on that experience, and the state's mixed track record of turning around districts,

some experts contend the state is in no position to tackle a much larger system such as Boston, with its longstanding and complex problems.

“The stories of success are few and far between,” said Paul Reville, a former Massachusetts secretary of education who also helped craft the legislation creating the school takeover authority. “Those expecting a miracle from a state takeover in Boston are likely to be sorely disappointed.”

Representatives with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, which is conducting a review of BPS for the second time in less than three years, declined requests for an interview. In a written statement, Deputy Commissioner Russell Johnston, who oversees receivership districts, said the takeover system “has allowed for more comprehensive changes to improve the entire educational system ... by setting metrics, meeting targets, and holding people accountable for making those improvements that ultimately benefit students’ overall learning experiences.”

The Education Department recently gave Boston Public Schools a copy of an initial report based on the review, which is looking at, among other elements, progress overhauling Boston’s special education system, where a disproportionate share of Black and Latino students study in separate classrooms. The review could be used to make the case for receivership.

At least one member of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education has publicly urged the commissioner to intervene. But critics question whether the state has the capacity to take over Boston, with its 49,000 students, strong union, and complicated political landscape.

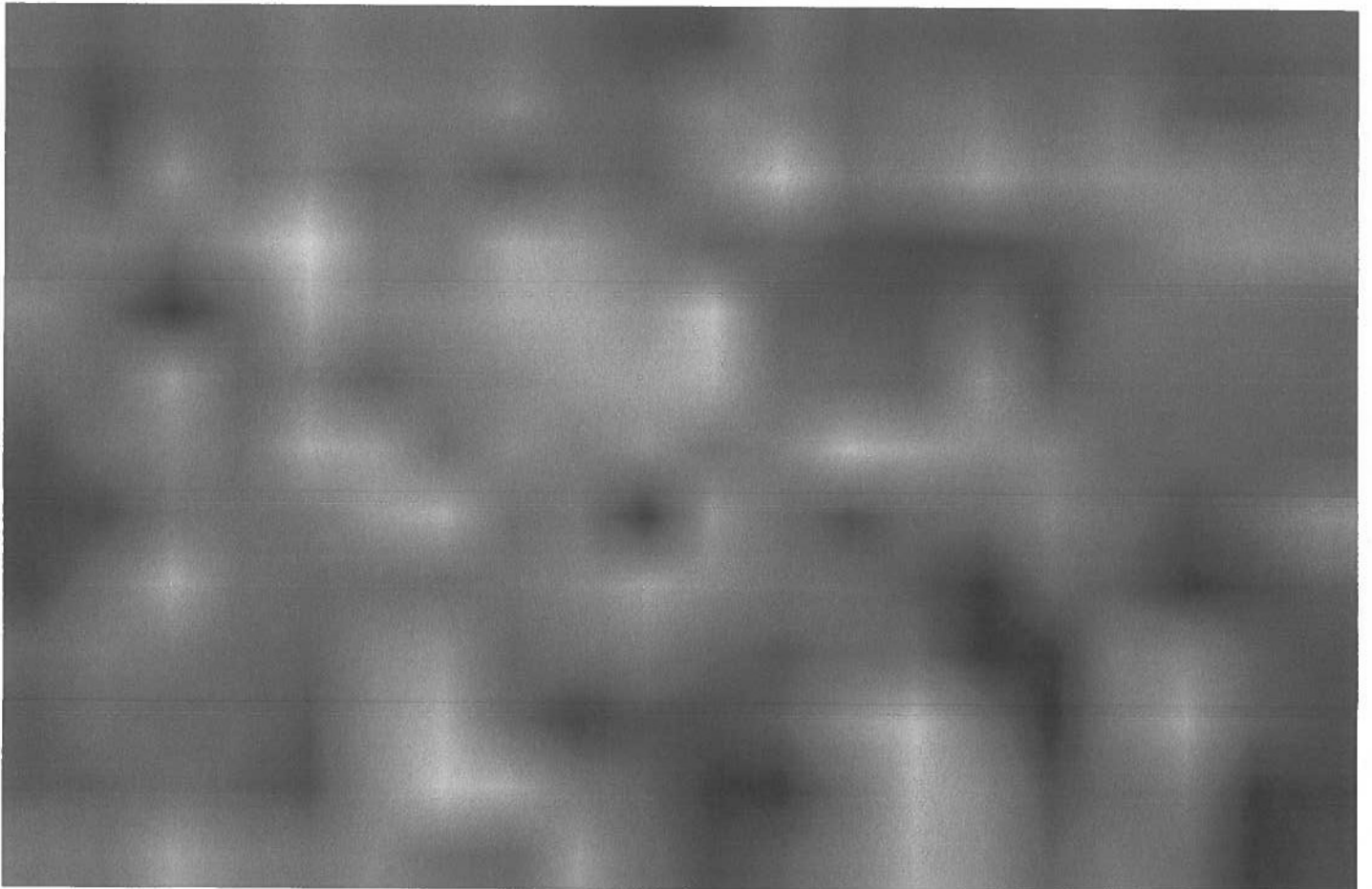
“I’m skeptical,” said Simone Fried, a Harvard postdoctoral researcher who wrote her dissertation comparing state school takeover in Massachusetts and Kentucky. Boston “is way larger than anything they’ve tried to do before. Their formal authority won’t go as far in Boston as it would in a smaller community.”

Boston's leaders are already pushing back.

"It's just not a realistic possibility," Mayor Michele Wu said in an interview Sunday. "It's distracting and too simplistic to focus on rumors of receivership as if there are only two options — keep everything the same or have full receivership. We need the state to be a strong partner for our schools."

The Boston Teachers Union is holding an emergency meeting Monday to discuss what receivership would mean for Boston Public Schools.

When the state voted to take control of Lawrence Public Schools, it was the first time the Education Department would fully exercise extensive new powers granted by the Legislature the year before. The Achievement Gap Act of 2010 gave Massachusetts the ability to suspend teacher contracts, extend the school day, fire underperforming teachers, reallocate budgets, and more, through three-year "turnaround plans."



Many attendees at a Lawrence Alliance for Education meeting spoke out in a continued campaign to end state control of Lawrence Public Schools. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

Under state takeover, the commissioner appoints a receiver who typically runs the schools and acts as the superintendent and school committee. (Lawrence has evolved to have a superintendent who reports to a state-appointed receiver board.)

Receivership districts have received state grants ranging from \$125,000 to \$2 million to pay for professional development and other assistance. The 2021 state budget included more than \$12 million to assist the state's lowest performing schools and districts, including those under receivership.

The current Massachusetts education commissioner, Jeff Riley, previously worked for the Boston Public Schools and then was appointed the receiver in Lawrence in 2012, two years after the previous superintendent was indicted for fraud and embezzlement. Lawrence had been in the bottom five districts based on MCAS proficiency and about half of students graduated in four years. Then-Mayor William Lantigua requested the state step in.

Within a few years, MCAS scores increased about 10 percentage points, catching up to Massachusetts districts with similar demographics. Lawrence schools also made notable progress on graduation rates, to nearly 72 percent in 2015 from 52 percent in 2011, and a handful of other measures also improved over that period. It appeared that Riley was making a difference.

He had replaced more than one-third of principals and dismissed around 8 percent of teachers in his first year, invited charter school operators to run some schools, and extended the school day.

"The school district was on life support" before receivership, said former Lawrence mayor Dan Rivera, who took office in 2014 and worked closely with Riley. "No one was focused on teaching and learning," he said. Receivership brought "discipline and rigor" to

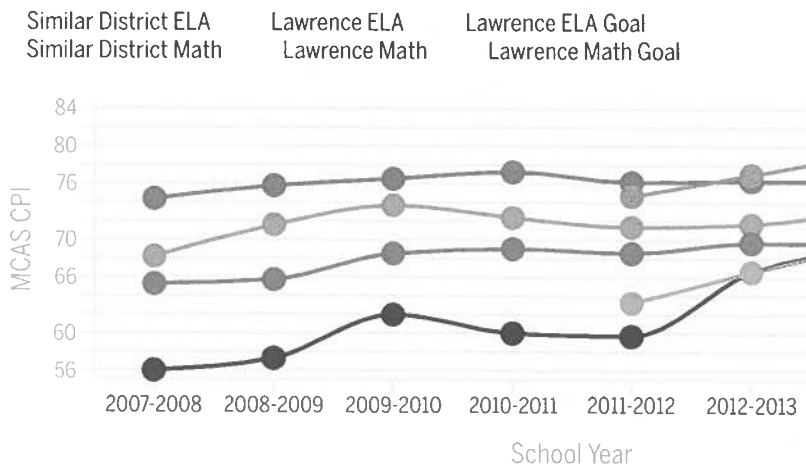
running the schools.

Lawrence seemed to be a rare example — at least initially — of a successful takeover; researchers dissected Riley's actions and determined that “acceleration academies” drove many of the academic improvements in those first few years.

These are special boot camps held during February and April vacation for students to bone up on math and English language arts with specially-chosen highly effective teachers. Those boot camps accounted for half of the gains in math scores and all of the gains for English Language arts, according to a 2017 paper by Beth Schueler, an assistant professor of education at the University of Virginia.

Lawrence MCAS Scores Versus Goals, Comparison Districts

After the state takeover in 2011, Lawrence closed the gap with comparison districts in math scores, but it continued to trail in ELA scores. In neither subject did it reach the goals set out by the state.



✿ A Flourish chart

But those early results appear to be the limits of improvement during the state's oversight.

Math scores have not budged higher. The graduation rate also didn't rise after its initial surge ended in 2015 — until the pandemic, when schools all across Massachusetts largely declined to fail students. Lawrence's graduation rate has been lower than Boston's every year since 2015.

The impact of takeovers appears even more limited in Holyoke and Southbridge.

Math MCAS Scores Have Not Improved In The Three Districts Over The Last 5 Years

Compared to Boston and other demographically similar districts, the three districts under receivership have shown no progress on math standardized tests since the new MCAS was introduced in the 2016-2017 school year. The spring MCAS exams were not administered in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Average In Similar Districts Boston	Holyoke	Lawrence	Southbridge
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Source: [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#) • Receivership began in 2012 in Lawrence, 2015 in Holyoke and 2016 in Southbridge. Similar districts selected using the state's District Analysis and Review Tools.

✿ A Flourish chart

Students in those districts continue to score below the average in comparable districts in both math and English language arts. In Holyoke, as in Lawrence, there were early gains in the graduation rate, but they stubbornly remained below state averages. In Southbridge, graduation rates have declined under the state's stewardship.

Graduation Rates in Boston, Districts In Receivership And Similar Districts

In Lawrence and Holyoke, graduation rates surged when receivership began, but soon leveled off. In Southbridge, meanwhile, graduation rates have fallen under state control. Receivership began in 2012 in Lawrence, 2015 in Holyoke and 2016 in Southbridge.

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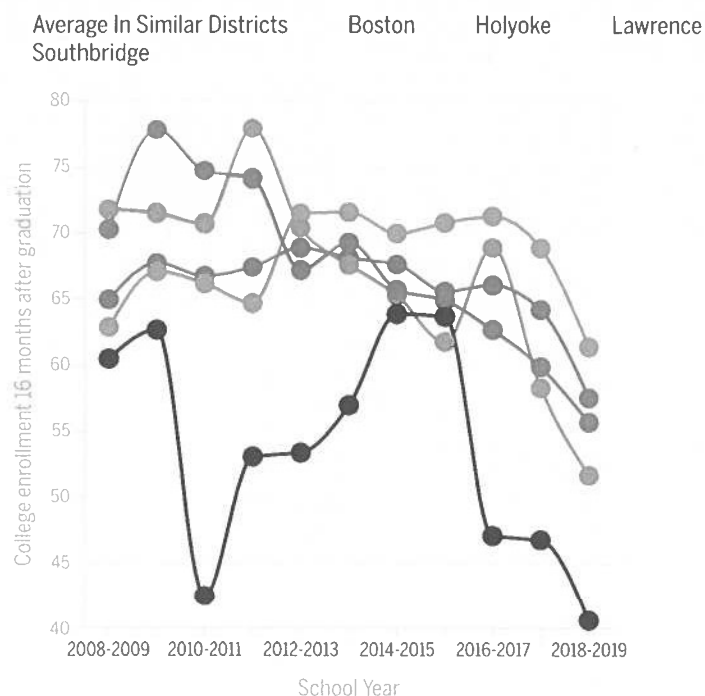
Source: [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#) • In the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, graduation rates rose across most of the state, as certain requirements were waived in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Similar districts selected using the state's District Analysis and Review Tools.

✿ A Flourish chart

In fact, for every area with signs of improvement, another shows signs of decline. In all three districts, college enrollment fell in the years following the state takeover. Before the pandemic, chronic absenteeism was becoming more common in Southbridge and Lawrence. Fewer students are taking Advanced Placement tests in Lawrence and Southbridge, and in Holyoke and Southbridge those who are taking the tests are performing worse than before.

College Enrollment Fell In Districts Under Receivership

College enrollment has fallen in all three districts since receivership began. Receivership began in 2011 in Lawrence, 2015 in Holyoke and 2016 in Southbridge.



Source: [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#) • In the 2019-2020 and 2020-

✶ A Flourish chart

In a follow-up 2021 paper, Schueler looked at Lawrence, Holyoke, and dozens of other districts around the country and concluded, “We find no evidence that takeover generates academic benefits.”

She points to the Lawrence acceleration academies to make a point: It doesn’t require a takeover to create more time for studying during the February and April vacations.

“You could theoretically implement a lot of the reforms that were implemented in Lawrence without a takeover,” she said in a recent interview. “It’s not clear to me that takeover was the key ingredient.”

Boston already offers its own version of acceleration academies at some schools; Riley

himself introduced them when he was with the district before taking over in

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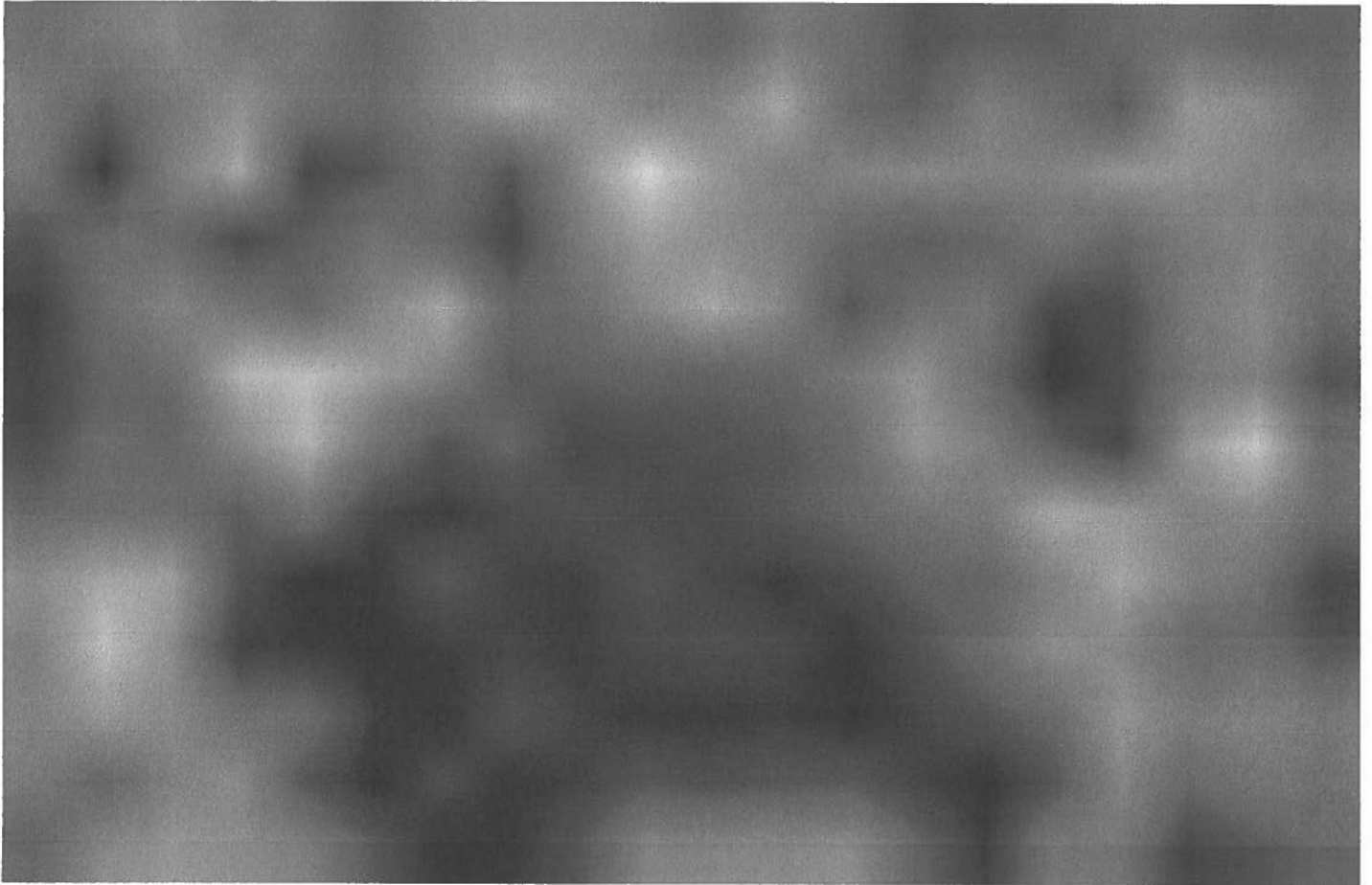
Particularly galling to local leaders is that under the state law, there's no clear trigger for ending a state takeover. Without clear signs schools are improving, some in Lawrence are growing impatient, especially those who say state control is hurting their schools.

Lenin Roa's oldest son started prekindergarten in Lawrence in 2015, and quickly Roa felt uneasy about his son's new school. His son was having problems with other boys at school, but when Roa reached out to the teacher to learn more about what was happening, he said, the school was reluctant to share any information.

"I felt dismissed," he said.

It's gotten worse as his children have gotten older. Roa contended there is a culture that "normalizes" violence and bullying at school. His son has been punched, pushed, and called names. This year it's gotten so bad his son didn't want to attend school for a few weeks. Roa said he worries how much worse the school violence may get in upper grades.

Roa, who was elected to the School Committee last fall, sees receivership as the source of the problem. Under receivership, the committee has no authority, while the state officials in charge, he said, do not respond to parent concerns.



Lenin Roa, an elected School Committee member, spoke at the in-person meeting of the Lawrence Alliance for Education, the state-appointed board helping to oversee Lawrence Public Schools under state receivership. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

“There’s a lack of empathy,” he said. “Most of them don’t live here. They don’t understand who we are.”

Lawrence Public School representatives say they’ve taken parent concerns seriously. “LPS puts the safety of students and staff first, responds as quickly as possible to any concerns brought to the district’s or a school’s attention, and works to meet behavioral health and social-emotional needs in a systematic, comprehensive fashion,” spokesman Chris Markuns wrote in an e-mail.

Community leaders complain that receivership does little to address the underlying

inequities in Lawrence, Southbridge, and Holyoke, among the state's poorest cities, such as a weak tax base and entrenched poverty.

And the stigma of receivership drives some families away, which further destabilizes the school system.

"It's a vicious cycle," said Erin DeMelo, a Southbridge School Committee member. "A lot of folks who care about their kids' education who have resources don't want to put their kids in a school that's under receivership. ... The only way to get other kids to come back is getting off of receivership."

Leaders in Lawrence, Holyoke, and Southbridge have become more aggressive, publicly calling for an end to receivership. Even those who are pleased with specific initiatives by the receivers — such as a new dual-language program in Southbridge — criticize the system as flawed because it creates no path back to local control.

"There's no way out," said Holyoke School Committee member Rebecca Birks. "Schools belong in local control. Nobody knows your district like you know your district."

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