# Holyoke educators clash with state over school transition plan



Holyoke, Massachusetts — As the Holyoke school district approaches its scheduled end to a decade-long state receivership on 1 July 2024, significant tensions have emerged between local educators and state education officials regarding the terms of the district's transition back to local control. A recently announced exit plan, intended to facilitate a smooth transfer of governance from the state to local authorities, has been met with strong opposition from the Holyoke Teachers Association and the Massachusetts Teachers Association, who argue that key aspects of state oversight will remain in place, limiting genuine local autonomy and the ability to collectively bargain for educators.

The administration of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) unveiled changes to the exit plan that include "exit assurances" designed to safeguard the progress made during receivership. Education Secretary and Interim Commissioner Patrick Tutwiler highlighted that these assurances aim to provide a structured transition while allowing local leaders and stakeholders to better plan for the future. Tutwiler described the measures as a milestone in Holyoke’s recovery, asserting that community input has been incorporated to better address local needs.

Holyoke Mayor Joshua A. Garcia, who also chairs the School Committee, alongside Superintendent Anthony Soto, expressed support for the exit assurances. Garcia underscored the importance of a cautious transition, cautioning against a "sink or swim" approach by the state. He remarked, “In life, there are countless examples that show the dangers of abruptly restoring control without a clear, structured transition. Simply giving something back without guardrails or assurances is a recipe for failure.” Soto added that the collaborative nature of the exit assurances would help minimise disruptions to day-to-day school operations.

Conversely, the Holyoke Teachers Association voiced profound dissatisfaction with the state's plans, characterising the changes as a “major breach of trust” and a setback in achieving true local control of the schools. Nick Cream, president of the local union, criticised the continuation of state authority over critical job-related matters, including staffing and compensation. Speaking to The Republican, Cream said, “We had done so much, and had just been trying to let people know that this should be worked out at the bargaining table as a group of workers and management like any other school district.” He emphasised that the state's refusal to restore collective bargaining rights denies educators a meaningful voice, which he views as essential for retaining qualified teachers.

Cream highlighted long-standing concerns about working conditions, noting that Holyoke teachers currently work significantly more hours than state requirements. The district’s compensation system, which ties cost-of-living raises to performance evaluations rather than granting automatic annual increases, is another point of contention. “If a teacher gets a bad evaluation, they shouldn’t be rehired. But if they are rehired, they should still get a cost-of-living raise,” Cream said. The ability of the superintendent, under current arrangements, to reassign staff or reduce personnel without negotiation further fuels union discontent.

The Massachusetts Teachers Association's president, Max Page, was even more critical of the transition plan. He described the state’s approach as maintaining the "worst elements of receivership" despite the official end of state control. Page characterised the plan as a continuation of the experiment begun in 2015 when Holyoke’s schools were taken over by the state, which he said failed to provide adequate resources or genuine empowerment to educators and the local community. “Instead, in a School Committee meeting devoid of public comment, city and state officials rushed through a set of rules that replaces receivership with … receivership,” Page said.

Page stressed that strong union contracts and collective bargaining are vital for improving schools and working conditions. He asserted that without these rights, Holyoke's educators remain marginalised in decision-making, and true local control has yet to be realised.

In response, the Holyoke Teachers Association has organised a series of May Day walk-ins to protest the exit plan. These demonstrations, scheduled for various schools beginning early on Thursday, 9 May 2024, provide an opportunity for educators to publicly express their objections. Cream noted that union members feel "ambushed and excluded from decision-making," and the walk-ins are intended to make their grievances visible to the public and officials alike.

Key elements of the exit plan remain unchanged from the previous receivership model, including the continuation of strict supervisory authority over personnel and limited collective bargaining. While the title of “receiver” has been replaced with “superintendent” in official documents, educators argue that the substance of state control persists.

The Holyoke school district is slated to regain full local governance on July 1, 2024, an outcome that state officials have framed as a positive transition. However, educators remain concerned that without restored bargaining rights and more authentic local decision-making powers, the district may continue to struggle with teacher retention and morale.

The Republican is reporting that as Holyoke prepares for this critical transition, debates over the nature and extent of local control remain central to the district's future. The contest between state assurances aimed at preserving recent academic improvements and educators' demands for greater agency and recognition continues to shape the discourse surrounding Holyoke’s public schools.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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