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State Receivership, Collaboration, and the CBA Lawrence, MA

Lawrence Public Schools (LPS), a mid-sized urban district in Massachusetts serving approximately 13,000 students, provides an example of how student-centered contract change can create the conditions for strengthened student learning. In the early 2010s, low academic performance plagued LPS—where more than 40% of students are English Language Learners, 94.5% identify as Hispanic, and 86% are classified as low-income¹—as evidenced by its ranking as one of the five lowest-performing districts statewide in math and English Language Arts (ELA) and a graduation rate of 52%.² A resulting 2011 state intervention led to the design and implementation of a student-centered Turnaround Plan and an aligned teacher contract. By 2019, LPS significantly improved math and science achievement and increased its graduation rates.³

Receivership in LPS

In 2011, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) placed LPS in receivership (sometimes called a “state takeover” or “state intervention”).⁴ In January 2012, the State appointed Jeff Riley as Receiver, granting him authority over district decision-making that is typically afforded to a superintendent and school board/committee.⁵

Two noteworthy approaches during Riley’s tenure as State Receiver influenced the LPS teacher contract that followed. First, despite having the authority to make unilateral decisions as both the superintendent and school board during the receivership, Riley actively engaged the local teachers union, Lawrence Teachers’ Union (LTU), before and during contract renewal. As Paul Reville, the former Secretary of Education, said, “The Receiver didn’t use all of the authority he had. . . . He could have nullified large areas of the teachers’ contract, but he didn’t do that. He brought [the union] to the table. More importantly, he had widespread support. Community leaders welcomed him.”⁶ And as a DESE staff member explained, there was an understanding that progress could only be achieved with district-union collaboration. Second, Riley and his team used the Turnaround Plan as a yardstick to audit and revise the teacher contract to achieve stronger alignment with the Turnaround Plan’s student-centered vision.

Pursuing Collaboration and Achieving Alignment

In the first five months of the state receivership, the LPS team engaged educators, family members, union leaders, potential partners, and community members to shape the state-mandated Turnaround Plan. It focused on school autonomy; partnerships with proven leaders; and a shared commitment to improving student academic growth, proficiency in core subjects, and high school graduation. Specifically, the Turnaround Plan revolved around four key strategies: strategic use of extended time and heightened academic expectations; a dedicated focus on recruiting, retaining, and cultivating exceptional personnel and partners; strengthening support for students beyond academics; and granting schools increased autonomy and accountability to enhance overall student success.⁷

A crucial component of the Turnaround Plan was Appendix A, which set out a number of key policies such as collaborative decision-making and performance-based compensation—considered essential by the Receiver to implement the Turnaround Plan—to be included in the collective bargaining agreement. A DESE staff member recounted the path that led to Appendix A: “[The team] tried to define what . . . the working conditions need[ed] to be to implement the Turnaround Plan. They were a series of ten provisions that were initially developed, [guided by] the idea that . . . Lawrence . . . [needed to have] adequate educator involvement.” In addition to the requirements for school-level collaboration and a performance-based compensation system, Appendix A also included noteworthy provisions on a commitment to high-quality education and principal autonomy in staff selection irrespective of seniority.

“A lot of people were blaming teachers. The thing I’m most proud of is fundamentally, we decided to do this with people, and not to people.”

- Jeff Riley, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education⁸

Building on Appendix A, the teacher contract ushered in many important mechanisms for change. For example, Article 22 of the 2017-20 teacher contract between the Lawrence, Massachusetts School Committee and LTU established teacher leadership teams as “the vehicle[s] for shared decision making at the school level”—reflecting the Turnaround Plan’s emphasis on school autonomy and educator involvement. That Article stated: “The Teacher Leadership Team shall participate in the development and approval of policies set forth in the annual operational plan . . . which appear on the school-based decision-making subject matter list . . . and address teacher working conditions.” That subject matter list includes, but is not limited to, curriculum, professional development, schedule, and class size.⁹

Additionally, a revised salary framework departed from automatic raises tied to years of service and education; instead, teachers advanced along the five-tier career ladder based on their performance.¹⁰ Nearly all educators received salary increases, averaging \$3,000,¹¹ and teachers received higher compensation upon successfully completing a demanding application process to attain the status of Master Teacher.¹² Per Article 66: “A teacher who is newly appointed as a Master teacher will receive an increase to his or her annual salary of \$10,000 or the Master teacher rate, whichever is greater.”

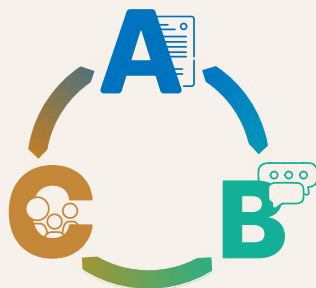
Appendix A not only demarcated the contours of the original teacher contract borne out of the receivership, but also endured as a touchstone for future teacher contracts and the process used to build them. A DESE staff member described the ongoing audit process: “Every three years, when the [teacher] contract was up, [we] took the existing contract and redlined it against Appendix A and the Turnaround Plan. . . . Where the Turnaround Plan is silent, we usually kept the . . . existing provisions in the contract. [But] where the Turnaround Plan speaks to any aspect of the [contract], we revised [its] terms so it was in alignment with the Turnaround Plan.”

The values underpinning the Turnaround Plan are now enshrined in the CBA’s preamble, which both acknowledges historic challenges—“[i]n the past, common terms and conditions of employment have been centrally negotiated and uniformly applied, regardless of each school’s unique needs”—and articulates the common vision for the future: “Central to the vision of the Lawrence Public Schools is the empowerment of individual schools in a decentralized district environment.”¹³

The ABCs of CBAs in Action

CPRL and E4E’s research “Designing Contracts for the Modern Classroom: The ABCs of CBAs” explores what is possible when teachers contracts—both what they contain and how they are built—are aligned to the modern classroom such that they are motivated by a shared, student-focused purpose; leverage flexible, transparent design; and enable authentic stakeholder participation.

What are the ABCs of CBAs?



Agreements that are backed by research, keep students at the center, and promote shared decision-making and problem-solving.

Bargaining, both formal and informal, that encourages transparency, collaboration around shared interests, joint problem-solving, and building stronger relationships among people working together to educate students.

A **Collective** that is inclusive, supported, and strategically engaged through a diversity of opportunities for participation in the building, implementation, and improvement of teacher contracts for the modern classroom.

LPS’s approach to the design of its teacher contract, its approach to negotiations, and the engagement of its stakeholders exemplify the framework in action. Its contract establishes policies focused on improving student achievement and promoting school-level flexibility; it memorializes these shared purposes in its text. Despite having no obligation to do so (given its receivership status), LPS’s leadership actively and

collaboratively engaged with union leadership to reach agreement on contract terms—building the trust and capacity needed for successful adoption and implementation of educational policies in the process. And, it treated the collective of stakeholders as partners in its mission to empower students, teachers, and schools, wby recruiting them to help create the Turnaround Plan.

To read more about the ABCs of CBAs, [click here](#).

LPS Results

Between the time LPS was placed under receivership in 2011 and 2014, the percentage of students scoring proficient or above in math in Lawrence increased from 28 to 41 percent, and in ELA from 41 to 44 percent.¹⁵ By 2019 science and math scores had more than doubled,¹⁶ and by 2022, the graduation rate had risen to 82.4%, an increase of more than 30 percentage points since 2011.¹⁷ Though, like in the vast majority of districts across the country, student achievement in LPS dipped during the pandemic and has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, the enduring focus of the Turnaround Plan on great teaching and learning provides a coherent vision for the future.

Looking Ahead

As LPS looks towards a post-receiver world,¹⁴ the district actively participates in ongoing discussions with LTU, particularly during the triennial contract renewal periods. And importantly, as a DESE staff pointed out, the provisions in Appendix A remain largely unchanged since 2012. Despite tweaks and amendments, the principles of the Turnaround Plan that underlie the teacher contract have, so far, withstood the test of time.

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Endnotes

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