

Springfield high school, middle school removed from underperforming status

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Math teacher Brian Damboise teaches an afternoon math class at Van Sickle Middle Academy in Springfield.

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SPRINGFIELD — Two schools that have struggled for years were removed from the state’s underperforming list, bringing celebrations and confirmations that strategies to improve education are working.

The High School of Commerce and Van Sickle Academy were removed by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education on Tuesday due to increasing test scores, improving graduation rates and declining absentee rates.

“Our strategy is to create smaller learning communities to ensure kids are cared for and known and have their needs met,” said Matthew Brunell, one of the executive directors of the [Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership](#) which oversees the two schools.

The empowerment zone works to ensure students, especially those in high school, feel what they are learning is relevant by offering dual enrollment classes with colleges and a lot of courses focused on their future career interests, he said.

The vote to elevate the schools from the underperforming category was taken at the same meeting where the Board of Education agreed to remove [Holyoke schools](#) from receivership.

That left some officials questioning if it is time to begin removing Springfield schools no longer considered underperforming from the Empowerment Zone, a unique alliance between the Springfield Public Schools, the teachers' union, nonprofit agencies and the state, formed to remake a group of underperforming middle schools.

The plan, created in 2015, gave teachers and school leaders more autonomy when it comes to scheduling and redesigning the schools. The original Empowerment Zone covered eight middle schools — some of which have since been divided into two or more smaller academies. Commerce was added in 2017.

The agreement that created the Empowerment Zone is currently under review. In the most recent meeting, there was little appetite to make big changes in the structure, Brunell said.

“There is a desire right now to continue to build on the progress made,” he said. “Essentially the feeling was if it isn't broken don't fix it.”

But School Committee member Barbara Gresham said she would like to see schools that are no longer underperforming eventually removed from the Empowerment Zone.

“I'm hoping they could be part of Springfield Public Schools again,” she said.

Sonia Dinnall, who took over as superintendent in July, said she still has a lot of listening, looking at data and research before discussing if there should be changes to the Empowerment Zone.

“It is a premature conversation,” she said.

Dinnall said she is pleased to see students at the two schools are seeing successes and said she hopes that will spark even more improvements, especially in some academies at Commerce that still need some attention.

“It is exciting news. It reflects a lot of hard work and effort and the implementation of new strategies with fidelity,” she said.

State Education Secretary Patrick Tutwiler said he is less concerned about who is leading the schools as he is about seeing students do well.

“I just want good schools,” he said. “The Empowerment Zone Partnership is going well. I think they have the recipe for success.”



A hallway inside Van Sickle Academy in Springfield. (Don Treeger / The Republican) 10/30/2024

Commerce has nearly doubled its graduation rate in a decade from 44% in 2014 to 86% in 2023. The graduation rate dipped a little to 80% so educators are tracking data to figure out why it decreased, Brunell said.

Right now, 41% of students head to college after graduation but educators are working hard to increase that to the state average of 61%, he said.

Some of that will increase in time with the state now offering free community college to all students. In addition many students at Commerce are already taking college classes so they are well prepared and have the confidence to continue their education, Brunell said.

“Absenteeism we have seen decreasing. Part of it is giving students classes where they see a connection and relevance to what they are learning,” he said.

One of the things the Empowerment Zone has done is reduce the size of schools by breaking them into smaller learning communities which each have their own focus. At Commerce the about 1,400 students are grouped into one of five different pathways that are treated as individual schools.

Three focus on early college career pathways in different subjects including science, technology, engineering and math; teaching; health sciences; digital media; business; early childhood education and media production.

Another educates students interested in advanced manufacturing and the honors academy is designed for students interested in pursuing four-year degrees immediately after graduation.

Nearly all students are involved in some type of early college or dual enrollment program starting from their freshman year. Last year, the student body as a whole earned more than 2,000 credits from six different colleges many of them from Springfield Technical Community College, Brunell said.

There is so much focus on early college learning the high school changed its schedule to fit with traditional college classes. Now Commerce students, for the most part, spend Monday, Wednesday and Friday at their school studying high school core classes.

On Tuesday and Thursdays, many of the student body spreads out to at least 10 college campuses that range from those close by in Springfield to as far away as Worcester State University depending on the unique offerings each school has, he said.

The school also has an innovative pathway program focused on bringing up students who may be severely credit deficient or are returning to school after quitting. That program offers a variety of different ways students can attend class.

“Aspire was created out of need. We wanted to create a different type of learning environment so we applied to the state for a waiver of required learning time hours,” Brunell said.

The teens are not completely locked into their chosen school or pathway and there is frequent crossover into other programs if a student is interested in taking a class offered in a different pathway, he said.

The original Van Sickle Middle School was also split into Van Sickle Academy and Van Sickle Prep, which each have between 250 and 300 students.

One of the reasons Van Sickle Academy has moved out of underperforming is due to its leadership team. Now, Academy Principal Robert Francesca will oversee both schools to bring in his strategies and innovations to his sister school, he said.