



Angélica Infante-Green  
Commissioner

State of Rhode Island  
**DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION**  
Shepard Building  
255 Westminster Street  
Providence, Rhode Island 02903-3400

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**TO:** Members of the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education

**FROM:** Angélica Infante-Green, Commissioner

**RE:** Commissioner's Report and Recommendation on the Turnaround Status of the Providence Public School District (PPSD)

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### **Regulatory Context:**

In Spring 2024, as required by RI General Laws § 16-7.1-5.1, the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education (Council) promulgated *Regulations Governing the Intervention and Support for Failing Schools*, 200-RICR-20-05-6. These statutorily required, statewide regulations govern the process for informing if, how, and when a local education agency (LEA) under state intervention is returned to local control. These regulations were developed in consultation with national experts, and were promulgated after an extensive statewide public comment period.

The Regulations provide that prior to the end of any order of reconstitution and control under R.I. Gen. Law § 16-7.1-5, the Commissioner is required to deliver a report to the Council on the continuation or expiration of an LEA's turnaround status.

The report must include an analysis of two key conditions outlined within the Council's regulations:

1. **Progress:** The degree to which an LEA has made sufficient progress towards achieving the academic and other progress measures identified within the LEA's Turnaround Plan; and,
2. **Capacity:** If the LEA, school committee, and responsible municipal entity possess the capacity and readiness to sustain the LEA's progress if the LEA is returned to local control.

The review of these two conditions provides a helpful framework to identify clear progress made to date, and to identify potential areas of support for an LEA to focus on in future phases of improvement. Furthermore, the review should be contextualized in comparison to other LEAs as well as the underlying factors for which an LEA was originally placed in turnaround status.

### **Overview of Independent Reviews:**

In alignment with national best-practices and informed by comments received during the public comment process, RIDE engaged two nationally recognized organizations – the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Center for Education Policy Research (HGSE-CEPR) and SchoolWorks, Inc. (SchoolWorks) – to conduct independent, third-party evaluations to inform the Commissioner's report and recommendation to the Council with respect to the Providence Public School District (PPSD). The below paragraphs provide an overview of both reviews. A detailed summary of key findings for both reviews may be found in the appendix of this report, and both

reports have been enclosed as additional attachments to this report.

### ***HGSE-CEPR's Review***

RIDE engaged the Center for Education Policy Research (CEPR) to conduct a quantitative analysis of PPSD's academic performance. This work was led by education economist Thomas Kane, the Walter H. Gale Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE). Given the timing of the start of the PPSD intervention with the global pandemic, and the unprecedented impact that the pandemic had on student learning, CEPR's quantitative analysis sought to evaluate:

- 1) How did PPSD's learning loss during the pandemic (as measured from 2019 to 2022) compare to similar districts?
- 2) How did PPSD's post-pandemic learning recovery (as measured from 2022 to 2023) compare to similar districts?
- 3) When considering the whole period, 2019 to 2023, how does the change in achievement in PPSD compare to that in similar districts?

To conduct this analysis, CEPR analyzed RICAS/MCAS and national student assessment data for Providence to comparable urban districts within Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. This analysis aligns to similar research CEPR has conducted on the impact of the pandemic on student learning loss and post-pandemic learning recovery.

### ***SchoolWorks' LEA Review***

RIDE engaged SchoolWorks, a nationally recognized education consulting firm, to conduct an in-depth, standardized review of the PPSD intervention. SchoolWorks has extensive experience conducting similar LEA reviews, including in Massachusetts, as well as experience in Rhode Island supporting school improvement and other Council-required review processes, including school redesign.

SchoolWorks conducted an in-depth review of the PPSD intervention in June 2024. This review included school visits across six schools (two at each grade level), in-person stakeholder interviews with school, district, city, community, and state stakeholders, as well as an exhaustive document evidence review. During the onsite visit, over 280 stakeholders were interviewed, including approximately 85 educators, 40 students, and 40 family/community members. All six schools were previously visited during the 2019 Johns Hopkins University Review, and included approximately 30 randomly selected classroom observations.

To inform an objective, third-party review, RIDE developed a standards framework for this review with Dr. Kenneth Wong, the Walter and Leonore Annenberg Chair for Education Policy at Brown University. These standards were developed through a review of best practices from Massachusetts and other states, as well as RIDE's own Basic Education Program (BEP), and were designed to be applicable to any future LEA review.

These standards align to the two key conditions to evaluate an LEA’s intervention and potential return to local control:

Key Condition	LEA Review Standards
1. <u>Progress</u> : The degree an LEA has made sufficient progress towards achieving the academic and other progress measures identified within the LEA’s Turnaround Plan; as well as,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standard 1: LEA Progress</li> </ul>
2. <u>Capacity</u> : If the LEA, school committee, and responsible municipal entity possess the capacity and readiness to sustain the LEA’s progress if the LEA was returned to local control.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standard 2: LEA Capacity</li> <li>• Standard 3: School Committee Capacity</li> <li>• Standard 4: Municipal Capacity</li> </ul>

**Commissioner’s Analysis & Recommendation:**

***PPSD’s Progress and Capacity:***

When reviewed together, the reports from HGSE-CEPR and SchoolWorks validate that PPSD has made some key foundational progress throughout the intervention, especially within the context of the global pandemic.

HGSE-CEPR’s analysis makes clear that PPSD both mitigated academic learning loss and accelerated academic learning recovery at rates higher than comparable districts in RI, MA, and CT. Furthermore, RIDE’s analysis of 2023 RICAS results indicates that PPSD’s percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations is now surpassing other LEAs that were performing higher than PPSD prior to the intervention, such as surpassing Newport, in both English Language Arts (ELA) and math, and West Warwick in math. While PPSD’s academic performance has not yet reached the aspirational TAP targets that were established at the beginning of the pandemic and is not nearly at the performance levels we desire for our students, when taken pragmatically within the context of the pandemic, it is clear that PPSD has made key academic progress in both stemming learning loss and accelerating learning recovery. Additional internal STAR interim assessment results from the end of the 2023-24 school year indicate that students have seen more than a year’s growth in reading and math.

This initial foundational progress extends to addressing key findings of the 2019 Johns Hopkins University report that unearthed decades of District dysfunction. PPSD is delivering on its promise to transform crumbling buildings into 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environments through an ambitious facilities plan, so that all students will be in new, or like-new, buildings by 2030. To ensure consistent academic progress, the District now has a unified, high-quality curriculum and has increased planning and professional development time for educators. PPSD’s rollout of student-based budgeting has realized more equitable funding across schools and provides school leaders with increased autonomy over budgetary decisions that will best address their students’ needs. Human Resources systems have been completely revamped, and the percentage of teachers holding and using an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) certification to better serve Multilingual Learners (MLLs) has significantly increased. And significantly, PPSD has focused on addressing student chronic absenteeism, which was significantly exacerbated nation-wide during the pandemic, and achieved a 12.1% point reduction in chronic absenteeism in SY23-24, the largest reduction of any traditional LEA in RI.

Despite this progress, SchoolWorks' review and RIDE's own experiences within the intervention highlight key areas to focus on in the next phase of improvement for the District. While the foundation for academic success has been established through high-quality curriculum, PPSD is developing and needs to implement a clear, consistent vision of high-quality instruction that is operationalized at all levels of the District and within all classrooms, especially for the District's differently-abled students and MLLs. While PPSD has modernized its HR systems, similar to other districts across the nation, PPSD still needs to remain laser focused on increasing the number of educators of color and teachers in shortage areas. In addition, the SchoolWorks review makes it clear that PPSD needs to make further efforts to strengthen collaboration and communication with families, students, educators, community stakeholders, and City officials, so we can collectively deliver on our shared vision of excellence for all of PPSD's students.

### ***Local Governance Capacity and Readiness – School Board and City of Providence:***

This shared, collective vision for Providence's students provides a helpful lens to evaluate the question of if sufficient local governance capacity exists to sustain the progress made to date should PPSD return to local control. The last outcome that any stakeholder desires is a reversion of the District back to the decades of neglect and dysfunction that existed prior to the intervention.

SchoolWorks' findings, however, raise significant concerns that the critical local governance capacity necessary to sustain the District's progress is not yet currently in place.

#### ***School Board Capacity and Readiness***

If returned to local control, within the City's current governance model, the PPSD School Board would assume oversight responsibilities for PPSD consistent with R.I. General Laws § 16-2-9, which, unless otherwise delegated, vests "the entire care, control, and management of all public school interests" in the "school committees of the several cities and towns." *Id.* at (a). However, SchoolWorks' findings indicate that the Board has a limited focus on improving outcomes for students, does not establish a culture of collaboration, and does not adequately fulfill applicable legal and fiduciary responsibilities. These findings were based, in part, on direct statements from Board members themselves.

Board members directly expressed mixed opinions about their own readiness to resume full governance responsibilities should PPSD return to local control. School Board members further shared that they do not have an aligned, shared vision of governance and that mistrust exists among members and across entities. Based on SchoolWorks' stakeholder interviews and evidence review, which included directly reviewing video of School Board meetings, SchoolWorks also found that the School Board does not consistently act as a single cohesive body.

In addition, according to SchoolWorks, School Board members, District leaders, and City leaders collectively acknowledged that a return of PPSD to local control would require an engaged school board with a strong governance model, and that currently, learning and system building opportunities are not being maximized by the School Board. SchoolWorks notes that Board members cited various barriers to the Board's readiness to resume governance of PPSD. PPSD, the Board, and City officials should work together as a future area of improvement to address and remove these barriers.

That being stated, SchoolWorks further identified that the new hybrid board structure, while well intentioned by the City Council, has caused discord and concern about ensuring that the School Board will have sufficient experience and capacity. These findings align with concerns raised by previous School Board leadership and City officials when the hybrid board plan was originally

introduced. This lack of current capacity from the existing Board and unknown capacity from a new board significantly elevates the risk that the District will backslide should it return to local control, especially if the student-centered systems and structures to build and sustain board member capacity are not in place.

#### *City of Providence Capacity and Readiness*

Furthermore, when evaluating municipal capacity, SchoolWorks' review does not clearly indicate that the City of Providence has provided adequate and legally mandated funding for Providence's students and is only at the beginning stages of readiness work to resume local control of PPSD.

The Crowley Act provides in clear, unambiguous language that a municipality must fund a school district subject to intervention "at the same level as in the prior academic year increased by the same percentage as the state total of school aid is increased."

While the City of Providence committed, in writing, to providing the fiscal resources legally required by the Crowley Act at the beginning of the intervention, aid from the City of Providence has been nearly flat over the past decade (average annual increase of 0.4%), making it difficult to keep up with cost-of-living changes and increased student needs, which were only exacerbated by the pandemic. For example, from FY22 to FY25, the annual costs to serve high-need differently-abled students PK-12 has increased by over \$18.4M.

The lack of a clear local commitment to provide increased, equitable, and sustained funding to Providence's students, commensurate with the increased needs of students as a result of the pandemic, as well as increased costs due to inflation, poses significant risk to the future success of the District if it were to return to local control.

#### ***Commissioner's Recommendation:***

RIDE's charge since the beginning of the intervention has been to: a) fundamentally transform a broken school system that has failed students, families, and community members for decades; and, b) ensure a strong enough foundation, at all levels, that enables a return of the District back to local control.

In review of the key questions raised within the Council's regulations to evaluate both progress and capacity, the independent reports make clear to me that, in spite of the global pandemic, and albeit imperfect at times, PPSD has made initial foundational progress. This initial foundational progress must be amplified, sustained, and accelerated in the next phase of improvement for the District, regardless of the District's governance structure.

However, SchoolWorks' review also makes clear, unfortunately, that the local governance capacity and readiness that is necessary and critical to sustain this progress does not yet currently exist at this moment. Based on every conversation I've had with national experts on school governance, returning any district back to local control without the clear, stable governance capacity in place poses significant risk for the District to backslide, and in this case, revert to the dysfunctional practices that previously plagued the District.

From the beginning, we made a commitment and promise to PPSD's students and families that we would fix a broken system, and then return the District with a strong foundation that would ensure students' long-term success.

Given the information provided in these reports regarding the District's initial progress as well as the inadequate current local governance capacity and readiness to sustain progress, and with

fidelity to the commitment and promises we made to PPSD's students and families, I therefore cannot make a recommendation that PPSD initiate a transition to local control at this time.

Instead, anchored in what I believe is in the best interests of students, I am recommending that PPSD's turnaround status and the Turnaround Action Plan be extended. This extension will be for three years, with the ability to recommend an early return to local control before this three-year term expires.

Being explicitly clear: it is the mutual goal of all stakeholders, including RIDE, for PPSD to eventually return to local control. It is not the desired intent of RIDE to indefinitely maintain care and control of PPSD.

This extension, rather than initiating a return and transition at this moment, should provide clear stability for the District to build off its foundational progress in this next phase of improvement, and provide a clear runway and notice for local governance entities, including both the existing and the new hybrid school board, to build and demonstrate their readiness and capacity to sustain the District's progress.

Sufficient local governance capacity, as well as sustained progress, are critical conditions for this return to happen. If the sufficient progress and necessary local governance capacities are in place, my hope is that this return occurs at the expiration of this three-year period, if not earlier.

To help this hope become a reality, I am providing a roadmap for this potential return with two key, parallel activities for continuing the District's progress and enhancing local governance capacity.

First, to build upon the District's initial progress, I am charging the PPSD Superintendent to continue to review the reports' findings in-depth, conduct extensive external engagement, and develop robust, concrete initiatives that will inform PPSD's next steps for continued improvement. Reviewing and updating a strategic plan after the plan's initial duration, such as the Turnaround Action Plan, is a consistent best-practice in any continuous improvement, strategic planning cycle.

The District is presently reviewing the SchoolWorks report and has begun to implement some plans to address the areas cited for improvement. Including external voices in this continuous cycle is also critical, and those voices should include students, families, community members, educators, School Board members, and municipal leaders. In reviewing potential updates to the TAP, the Superintendent and his team should also identify the additional resources and supports they need to ensure the sustained improvement of the District.

I am asking that the Superintendent return to the Council to provide an update on the outcome of this requested action item no later than the December 2024 Council meeting.

Secondly, to strengthen and solidify the local governance capacity at all levels, I am requesting that the key governance stakeholders - PPSD, the School Board, City Council, Mayor and Mayor's office - work together with RIDE to develop, and ultimately implement, a robust transition plan.

Currently, laudable efforts are underway to improve governance capacity within each of these respective stakeholders, but they are all happening separately. In hearing feedback from the community and key stakeholders, and simply put, we need to work together as partners to build a strong future foundation for Providence's students, or we risk returning Providence back to the dysfunctional, disjointed governance conditions that paralyzed the District prior to the intervention.

To ensure a strong foundation, the transition plan must address the key local governance issues raised in SchoolWorks' review, including, but not limited to:

- 1) Providing adequate and equitable funding for Providence's students;
- 2) Revitalize school facilities to ensure that all students are in 21<sup>st</sup> century facilities;
- 3) Strengthening School Board capacity aligned to governance and school board best practices;
- 4) Continuing the District's progress with a focus on teaching and learning, aligned to the TAP; and,
- 5) Establishing effective systems and structures for cross-governance collaboration and communication.

In alignment with the consultation provided by the School Board and consistent with applicable Regulations, this transition plan shall incorporate meaningful community input to guide the transition process, ensuring that the perspectives and needs of the District's stakeholders are considered and addressed throughout and after the transition period. Furthermore, the transition plan may include a designated transition period during which the School Board may assume certain oversight responsibilities, while maintaining appropriate state guidance to ensure continued improvement and stability for the District, at the discretion of the Council's approval.

Similar to the above timeline, I am asking that these stakeholders begin to work together on this effort, and that an update be provided to the Council by the December 2024 Council meeting. Furthermore, once a robust transition plan is ultimately developed that satisfies the above intent and ensures a strong foundation to sustain progress for Providence's students, then, consistent with the Council's regulations, I will submit the transition plan with my recommendation to the Council for their consideration and final approval.

Through the above, parallel action items during this three-year extension period - reviewing, updating, and implementing the Turnaround Action Plan while simultaneously building a long-term transition plan - we all can collectively deliver on the promises made to Providence's students, families, and community members: to fundamentally and permanently transform PPSD into the world-class school system we know that it can be.

**RECOMMENDATION: THAT, the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education approves the Commissioner’s recommendation to renew the state intervention in the Providence Public School District pursuant to RI General Laws § 16-7.1-5.1 and the Regulations Governing Intervention and Support for Failing Schools, 200-RICR-20-05-6, subject to the following conditions:**

- **That the state intervention and PPSD’s Turnaround Action Plan be extended for three (3) years, through October 15th, 2027;**
- **That the Commissioner and PPSD Superintendent be authorized to amend the existing Turnaround Action Plan during this extension; and,**
- **That the Commissioner perform all legally-mandated reviews and recommendations during this extended period and at any point may, at the Commissioner’s discretion, recommend to the Council that PPSD exits turnaround status and returns to local control.**

**Appendix - Key Findings from CEPR & School Works Independent Reviews:**

The SchoolWorks Report and CEPR Report are the two main analyses that informed the Commissioner’s decision on the turnaround status of PPSD. As mentioned in the enclosure memo above, these reports were conducted by independent third-party evaluators, consistent with best LEA review practices. The key findings of each report are detailed below.

<b>HGSE-CEPR Report - Key Findings</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Between 2019 and 2022, PPSD saw less learning loss in reading compared to the comparison groups in all three states: mean reading achievement in comparison districts in RI, MA, and CT declined by .05, .04, and .16 standard deviations more than in PPSD, respectively. In math, PPSD experienced less learning loss compared to MA and CT comparison districts (.02 standard deviations and .015 standard deviations, respectively), and the same amount of learning loss as the RI comparison district average.</li><li>• In the first year of post-pandemic recovery (from 2022-2023), reading achievement was larger in PPSD than in the RI, MA, and CT comparison districts by .011, .05, and .05 standard deviations, respectively. In math, PPSD experienced greater gains in achievement compared to the RI and MA comparison districts (.05 and .04 standard deviations, respectively) and equivalent gains to the CT comparison districts.</li><li>• Furthermore, while post-pandemic performance is still below pre-pandemic levels for PPSD and all the comparison districts, PPSD’s current performance levels for both reading and math are closer to 2019 levels than in each of the three comparison groups. In reading, the losses in Providence were .06, .09 and .21 standard deviations smaller than losses in the RI, MA and CT comparisons, respectively. In math, the losses in Providence were .05, .06, and .15 standard deviations less than the RI, MA and CT comparisons, respectively.</li><li>• When comparing the changes in scores between 2019 and 2023, Providence saw smaller losses than the RI Comparison districts and the MA comparison districts in both math and ELA among Black students, Hispanic students, students with disabilities, and low-income students.</li></ul>



- During the pandemic (2019-2022), Providence saw less ELA learning loss among MLL students compared to Massachusetts but more than Rhode Island comparison districts. In 2022-2023, Providence was the only district to improve in ELA among MLL students.
- While these results suggest PPSD is moving the right direction in terms of mitigating student loss during the pandemic and increasing learning recovery post-pandemic, HGSE-CEPR cautions from drawing definitive conclusions at this time about the efficacy of PPSD’s reform efforts for two key reasons: 1) only two years of reliable post-pandemic test data were available analysis; and, 2) the potential impact that decreased PPSD enrollment throughout the pandemic might have on PPSD’s results. HGSE-CEPR suggests further studies when further data becomes available, as well as analyzing deeper with longitudinal student-level data to account for possible shifts in Providence school populations.

## SchoolWorks Review - Key Findings

### **Standard 1: LEA Progress**

- Based on SchoolWorks review of the most recent school year with comprehensive data, school year 2022-23, when compared to the trajectory set for TAP Goals by school year 2026-27, 75% of *Engaged Communities* TAP metrics are either on-track or have their goal fully met, 32% of *Excellence in Learning* TAP metrics are either on-track or have their goal fully met, 60% of *World Class Talent* TAP metrics are either on-track or have their goal fully met, and 67% of TAP metrics for *Efficient District systems* are either on-track or have their goal fully met.
- An extensive document review of existing data indicates that PPSD has made notable progress in addressing each priority challenge. In the area of *Engaged Communities*, the LEA has increased the number of families who have positive perceptions and interactions with their individual schools, and the number of students who feel a sense of belonging. Regarding *Excellence in Learning*, the LEA has implemented activities and interventions in an attempt to improve scores on standardized state assessments, and increased the number of multilingual learners (MLLs) in advanced academic courses. In addressing *World Class Talent*, the LEA has strengthened the presence of teachers in school buildings, increased access to job-embedded professional development (PD) for teachers, improved the quality of school leadership, and increased the percentage of teachers holding and using the English as a Second Language/ Bilingual Dual Language (ESL/BDL) Certification. Lastly, in *Efficient District Systems*, the LEA has increased funding available for school-based decision making, streamlined the process of working with contractors, and increased access to district resources for school leaders.
- While notable progress has been made, the review of documents also indicated areas that need improvement. In the area of *Engaged Communities*, despite the increase in the number of families who have a positive perception of their individual schools, the number who have a favorable perception of the district has decreased. In *Excellence in Learning*, although activities and interventions to improve standardized test scores have increased, there is still work to be done to improve the percentage of students meeting and exceeding expectations on all assessments. In the area of *World Class Talent*, despite efforts that have been put in place through revamped HR systems, fully staffed classrooms, qualified external applicants, and the number of teachers of color are still below the identified TAP goal. Finally, in *Efficient District Systems*, the number of school leaders who have a favorable perception of the PPSD has decreased.

### **Standard 2: LEA Capacity**

- Standard 2.1 (Leads the Focus on Learning and Achievement): The LEA provides some onsite direction that guides site-based leadership. However, the LEA does not yet consistently identify expectations and accountability for implementation of proven practices and has only addressed some barriers to implementation of identified educational goals.
- Standard 2.2 (Recruits, Supports, and Retains Highly Effective Educators): The LEA has developed some new systems to support the recruitment, identification, mentorship, support, and retention of effective staff. However, the LEA has not yet built the capacity of staff to meet organizational expectations, and they are in the beginning stages of providing job-embedded PD based on student need.
- Standard 2.3 (Implements high quality curriculum materials and instruction): The LEA selected curriculum based on data and is beginning to focus on data driven instructional strategies. The LEA is also beginning to focus on job embedded PD, culturally responsive practice, and the implementation of formative and summative assessments.
- Standard 2.4 (Uses Information for Planning and Accountability): The LEA is beginning to develop and implement proficiency based comprehensive assessment systems. The LEA is also beginning to distribute the results of measured school progress and student performance and beginning to develop responsive informational systems.
- Standard 2.5 (Engage Families and the Community): While the LEA is beginning to implement effective family and community communication systems, it is not yet engaging families and the community to promote positive student achievement and behavior. Additionally, the LEA is beginning to provide some adult and alternative learning opportunities that are somewhat integrated with community needs.
- Standard 2.6 (Fosters Safe and Supportive Environments for Students and Staff): While the LEA has a plan that is beginning to address the physical, social, and emotional needs of all students, this work has not yet resulted in the perception of entirely safe school facilities and learning environments for all students and staff. However, students have at least one adult accountable for their learning.
- Standard 2.7 (Ensures Equity and Adequacy of Fiscal and Human Resources): The LEA identifies resources to meet student needs but does not provide requisite resources to fully meet those needs. The LEA is beginning to allocate fiscal and human resources based on student need by implementing systems to overcome barriers to effective resource allocation at the school level.

### **Standard 3: School Board Capacity**

- Standard 3.1 (The School Committee Focuses on Improving Outcomes for Students): The School Committee has a limited focus on improving outcomes for students.
- Standard 3.2 (The School Committee Establishes a Culture of Collaboration): The School Committee does not establish a culture of collaboration.
- Standard 3.3 (The School Committee fulfills legal and fiduciary responsibilities as defined in Rhode Island state law): The School Committee does not adequately fulfill legal and fiduciary responsibilities as defined in Rhode Island state law.

### **Standard 4: Municipal Capacity**

- Standard 4.1 (Ensure Fiscal and Legal Compliance): While the municipal entity fulfills most of its legal responsibilities, in accordance with Rhode Island state law and regulations to support the success of LEAs, it is unclear whether it fulfills its fiscal responsibilities to the LEA.

- Standard 4.2 (Demonstrates Community Leadership): The municipal entity is beginning to provide value-added leadership in galvanizing community and municipal assets to effectively support the LEA.

