

2015–16 Level 5 School End-of-Year Report UP Academy Holland, Boston, Massachusetts

Receiver: Unlocking Potential (UP) Education Network

Introduction

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) contracted with American Institutes for Research (AIR) to collect evidence from each Level 5 school on the progress toward implementation of the turnaround plan in Year 2 of Level 5 status. AIR facilitated the collection of information from the receiver throughout the year for the quarterly reports detailing highlights and challenges in each priority area over the previous quarter and progress toward benchmarks. In addition, during a two-day Monitoring Site Visit, AIR staff collected data through instructional observations using Teachstone’s Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS),¹ key stakeholder interviews and focus groups, an instructional staff survey, and a review of documentation (e.g., turnaround plan, quarterly reports, other documents) in December 2015. In spring 2016, subsequent data were collected through a review of documents and through follow-up instructional observations and interviews with the school principal and receiver. The data collection and analysis processes were purposely developed to ensure that the data are reliable and valid and that findings are informed by the appropriate key staff. For Level 5 schools, data were collected during the Monitoring Site Visit process and follow-up activities to inform ESE’s statutory requirement to annually evaluate each Level 5 school’s progress toward implementing the turnaround plan. AIR’s Level 5 school review process focused on the specific turnaround priorities and subpriorities from each school’s turnaround plan.

Highlights of Turnaround Plan Implementation at UP Academy Holland

School leaders at UP Academy Holland (UAH) prioritized the intellectual preparation of teachers and a growth mindset for teachers. Throughout the school year, professional development focused on training teachers to build student inquiry and incorporate exploration in their classrooms through facilitation of instructional dialogues with students. The school also transitioned to new English language arts (ELA) and mathematics curricula and benchmark assessments developed by the UP Network. All teachers participated in full-day data examination and analysis sessions (“Data Days”) following benchmark assessments to support data use and the development of data-based action plans. Throughout the school year, UAH staff also focused on developing and implementing a consistent behavior management system through

¹ See Teachstone’s website for more information: http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/336169/What-is-CLASS_Info_Sheet.pdf?t=1432824252621

school leaders providing teachers with live coaching and individual feedback, training on strategies to engage with escalated students, and establishing refined criteria for suspensions. The school also plans to hire a board-certified behavior analyst for the upcoming school year to better support students. In addition, as they hire new staff, the school and network leaders are looking for individuals who have worked with populations exposed to trauma and who have a strong command of social-emotional learning. Finally, UAH made family engagement a priority this year with multiple initiatives, including the successful launching of a cell phone app that incentivizes parent involvement at the school. The Dean of Family and Community Relations was also available to connect families to resources, and teachers regularly made phone calls home to engage families in their students' learning.

End-of-Year Findings

Priority Area 1: Transform the culture of the school into a culture of urgency, high expectations, accountability, excellence, and achievement.

School leaders understood the importance of high expectations, and implemented several strategies to support goals in Priority Area 1. Specifically, they focused training and professional development on creating a culture of urgency, high expectations, accountability, excellence, and achievement. For example, teachers participated in a full-day training and weekly professional development sessions emphasizing the school's social-emotional curriculum. School leaders also conducted walk-throughs to provide live coaching and measure the use of the social-emotional curriculum. Staff orientation training focused on improving instruction by moving teachers from a mindset of *delivering* instruction to *facilitating* learning. Throughout the school year, training focused on teachers facilitating discussions and building student inquiry and exploration. Following each training, the principal and Deans of Curriculum and Instruction (DCIs) monitored implementation and assessed the impact of the trainings through classroom observations and debriefing with teachers. Responses to AIR's instructional staff survey indicated that there was sufficient time for professional development. School leaders worked with the DCIs to promote schoolwide consistency in the implementation of these initiatives, and leaders ran spring professional development sessions addressing specific areas in which variability was noted, such as teachers' use of data systems and acceptable student behavior.

To further transform the school culture, school leaders implemented strategies to improve the management of student behavior, including staff orientation training, school leaders providing teachers with live coaching and individual feedback, training on strategies to engage with escalated students, and establishing refined criteria for suspensions. In addition, staff participated in perspective training to better understand students' mindset when they are exhibiting escalated behavior, and they received an extended guide building on what was discussed during this training. Finally, the school leaders and staff refined the criteria for suspensions. Classroom observations conducted by AIR for external progress monitoring showed improvement in behavior management system implementation this school year, and UAH leaders are working to hire a full-time board-certified behavior analyst for the next school year to further support students. Despite these improvements, some of the observed classrooms showed room for improvement, scoring in the middle range for behavior management.

Family responses to a survey administered by UAH showed positive parent opinions about school safety and the school community. In addition, UAH received a tremendous amount of support from students' families following media coverage of their suspension practices, with more than 350 families signing a petition supporting UAH, and 30 families attending a hearing in support of the school—with 10 speaking in support of UAH and another five writing letters.

Priority Area 2: Enhance the rigor of the curricula, improve the effectiveness of instruction, and strengthen the utilization of assessment data.

UAH worked to improve instructional effectiveness and the rigor of curricula during the 2015–2016 academic year. The UP Network developed new ELA and mathematics curriculum units, and UAH became the model for cognitively guided instruction (CGI) on mathematics within the network. UAH provided targeted professional development and coaching for CGI mathematics instruction, and data from AIR site visits showed that there were clearly articulated instructional expectations focused on Common Core State Standards. School leaders received training on implementing Data Days, and they implemented both general and content-area Data Days following benchmark assessments to support data use and the development of data-based action plans. Evidence from site visits showed that student data were consistently reviewed and used by teachers and school leaders to address individual student needs, make schoolwide decisions, and inform classroom practice. School leaders also met at least biweekly to monitor progress toward goals. This information was shared by DCIs with their grade-level teams and through weekly emails discussing the priority areas, current evidence of progress, and next steps.

There were still challenges in addressing this priority area at UAH, including limited coaching capacity, constraints on staff time, and the need for additional intellectual preparation. UAH leaders are considering changing the structure of coaching in 2016–17 to have more parity regarding the number of staff each DCI manages. In addition, leaders are examining other occurrences (such as behavior incidents) that take DCIs away from coaching duties and day-to-day management and development of teachers, and are considering implementing a different response plan that does not include DCIs.

Priority Area 3: Expand the school day and school year, build in time, deploy resources, develop programs, and create identification and tracking systems to ensure that all students, especially students with disabilities and English language learners, receive the academic and other supports they require to learn and succeed.

UAH worked to ensure that all students received appropriate supports for their learning and success—particularly students with disabilities and English learners (ELs)—although further training and resources are still needed. The school hired a new Dean of Special Education in the 2015–16 academic year, and used data to more appropriately group students in substantially separate special education classes. In addition, the Dean of Special Education provided direct instructional support to students as well as coaching support to teachers of special education students. Even with these enhancements and the hiring of the new dean, responses to the AIR instructional staff survey showed that staff did not feel that there were enough resources and

supports for students with disabilities at UAH. Further, although teachers were trained on the response to intervention (RTI) approach, implementation was inconsistent and resources were sometimes lacking.

EL students were supported through the school's grouping of these students by ELD levels, within grade level classrooms, and by schedule adjustments that allowed for more collaboration between EL and grade-level teams. Further, UAH retained a high number of SEI-endorsed (sheltered English immersion) teachers and leadership is prioritizing SEI-endorsement for all new teachers next year.

Priority Area 4: Recruit and hire extraordinary leaders, teachers, and support staff, and build and utilize systems to evaluate, develop, promote, reward, and retain these staff over the long term.

UAH has recruited and hired high-quality leaders, teachers, and staff. Two new DCIs were hired, and the leadership team and student-facing positions were fully staffed. When the social worker had to leave the position suddenly, the school was able to quickly hire and onboard a new social worker. One paraprofessional position remained open, however, and due to high teacher absenteeism, paraprofessionals were frequently used as substitutes, often preventing them from being in their assigned classrooms. In 2016–17, UAH is planning to use four fellows working to earn their master's degrees in education to provide coverage for absent teachers in place of pulling the paraprofessionals from their assigned classrooms. These fellows will receive coaching from the DCIs and will be paired with a host teacher when not providing coverage. School leaders are also reviewing data and thinking critically about strategies for increasing staff attendance. They have begun communicating with staff regularly about school data showing a relationship between staff absenteeism and student behavior issues, and plan to continue these communications from the start of next school year along with DCIs meeting with teachers to proactively address any emerging staff attendance issues. To build teacher capacity, DCIs also shifted to more of a support role in grade-level teacher learning committees over the course of the year. The teachers took on increased leadership roles and led the learning committees, in which they shared lesson plans and received peer feedback. The teachers then implemented revised lessons and discussed the implementation at the next meeting.

From the 2014–15 to 2015–16 school year, the staff retention rate was 80 percent, and staff responses on a survey administered by UAH regarding support and feedback were positive. Ninety-one percent of staff² received some form of recommitment letter, with a percentage of these offers conditional upon obtaining appropriate certification or licensure. In hiring for all open positions, UAH is looking for individuals with strong professional work habits, openness to coaching and feedback, and the ability to build strong relationships with students. The school is also looking for individuals with experience working with populations that have been exposed to trauma and who have a strong command of social-emotional learning. UAH is also adding a board-certified behavior analyst to the school in 2016–17 to better serve students demonstrating a level of need that the current staff have not been able to address.

² Does not reflect how many staff members will be returning for the 2016–17 school year.

Priority Area 5: Fully engage all of the school’s families in the learning of their children.

UP Academy Holland made family engagement a priority by implementing a variety of initiatives to promote family involvement in the school. One challenge has been onboarding families to a new style of behavior management and the specific expectations for student behavior at UAH. To address this challenge, UAH provided families with information about UP’s approach to behavior management to help them understand the difference in expectations between UP and the previous Holland School. In addition, following negative media coverage about suspensions at UAH, the school received a tremendous amount of support from families, including signatures from more than 350 families on a petition showing support for the school.

Additional initiatives UAH implemented to engage families this school year included a family orientation in August 2015, the establishment of a vocal parent Site Council, a schoolwide attendance initiative in which parents signed an attendance pledge, the piloting of an iOS app (in partnership with Union Capital) to monitor and incentivize parent involvement, and the establishment of a partnership with Connecting Families to Schools to address absenteeism. UAH had a Dean of Family and Community Relations who was responsible for connecting families to resources and providing awareness training for staff. In addition, teachers regularly made phone calls home to families to engage them in their students’ learning.

Despite these efforts, there are still approximately 20 students who are chronically absent, and the school is in need of more resources for translation and interpretation to improve communication with families that do not speak English. Leaders are also prioritizing better tracking of teacher–parent communications in the next school year. In addition, the school hopes to create opportunities for parent Site Council members to become more involved with the school.