

# 2015–16 Level 5 School End-of-Year Report Paul A. Dever Elementary School, Boston, Massachusetts

**Receiver: Blueprint Schools 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),<sup>1</sup> 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 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 Paul A. Dever Elementary

- **Leadership.** During the 2015–16 school year, the Dever receiver adjusted the leadership structure to improve support for staff and students by designating three assistant principals who oversee 1) academics and instruction, 2) school culture, and 3) operations. In spring 2016 the principal resigned, and Blueprint’s Massachusetts Network Director took over as interim principal. Blueprint, with support from ESE, has been conducting a search for a new principal for the upcoming school year.
- **Family Engagement and Support.** The community family field coordinator supported family engagement at Dever, with a specific focus on providing support to families in order to engage them in students’ academic success. Activities included cultural

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<sup>1</sup> See Teachstone’s website for more information: [http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/336169/What-is-CLASS\\_Info\\_Sheet.pdf?t=1432824252621](http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/336169/What-is-CLASS_Info_Sheet.pdf?t=1432824252621)

celebrations and academic supports, such as book fairs. Additionally, the school began to offer wraparound services to students' families through a City Connects School Site Coordinator hired in October 2015.

- **Targeted Student Support.** The school uses several strategies to improve supports for struggling students. There is a daily scheduled intervention period during which students receive enrichment, or targeted literacy or mathematics support. Additionally, teachers meet weekly to review student academic and behavioral data, identify students in need of support, assign interventions, and monitor students' progress.
- **Student Behavior.** The school continues to experience challenges related to student behavior. In 2015–16, the school implemented the schoolwide set of behavior expectations. Staff received training in de-escalation strategies. Still, there continue to be a number of disruptions that require leaders and administrators to frequently respond and react to student behavior issues, distracting leaders and administrators from their primary duties.

## End-of-Year Findings

### **Priority Area 1: Rapidly accelerate all students' language development in English and provide families with the opportunity for content-rich Spanish language development for their students.**

English language development for all students is a key focus, and the school has taken a multipronged approach to addressing students' needs. To provide personalized student supports, the school launched a one-to-one laptop program so that each student can access Imagine Learning, an online program that builds students' language and literacy skills through differentiated activities based on students' strengths. Initially the school faced challenges implementing this strategy, but by the second half of the year students were accessing the online program for an average of 100 minutes per week, and initial assessments demonstrated growth in students' reading levels. In addition, the English language arts curriculum has been aligned with the English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum to ensure consistency in the language development strategies for all students. For the first half of the year, teachers received coaching support from the ESL teacher aimed at improving instruction for English learners (ELs). One ESL teacher resigned in February, but the receiver reconfigured staff and schedules to ensure that students continued to receive supports.

Finally, all students participate in the Spanish language program, which offers an average of 30 minutes of Spanish language instruction daily. However, recruiting a Spanish language teacher to support this program was a challenge, and the position was filled by a long-term substitute during the 2015–16 school year. The school has already recruited and hired a Spanish teacher for the upcoming school year.

### **Turnaround Priority Area 2: Improve instructional quality and maximize time for core instruction.**

During 2015–16 Dever continued to focus on improving the quality and rigor of classroom instruction. To support teachers in this effort, two teachers from the prior school year became

instructional coaches who worked with grade-level teams during the year. One coach focused on Grades K–2 and the other coach supported Grades 3–5. These coaches, under the direction of the assistant principal of academics and instruction, focused on modeling lesson planning by co-developing detailed lesson plans aligned with standards with the grade-level teams. Additionally, the coaches targeted support to struggling teachers through six-week observation and feedback cycles. One challenge the school faced is that, initially, Blueprint expected that much of the unit planning would be completed by staff by the beginning of the school year. However, seeing that staff were struggling, the receiver adjusted expectations so that the coaches provided unit and lesson planning support for teachers during the school year. To aid these efforts, teachers participated in three hands-on professional development sessions on deconstructing the standards in order to identify the skills and knowledge embedded in each standard and determine daily learning targets that would lead to students’ mastery of the standard. This supported schoolwide efforts to ensure that lesson plans are effectively scaffolded to support students in reaching the level of rigor of the standard.

Additionally, the 2015–16 schedule integrated a 50-minute daily student intervention period, during which students were routinely grouped based on needs. All students participated, and literacy interventionists, ESL teachers, and special education teachers used this time to differentiate support for struggling students, ELs, and students receiving special education services. Finally, Blueprint continued to offer mathematics tutoring and to provide additional support during the mathematics block to students in Grades 3–5. Due to low mid-year mathematics benchmark assessment scores among Grade 5 students, Dever adjusted this strategy to target Grade 5 students in particular.

### **Turnaround Priority Area 3: Use data to drive instruction.**

Data use to drive instruction and target support for students was a major focus for Dever in 2015–16. Specifically, the receiver made a concerted effort to develop data collection systems and structures and to establish a routine schedule for teachers to use data in grade-level teams. Blueprint focused on improving systems for tracking student data and providing teachers with routine access to student data. For example, they expanded data collection to include student behaviors and implemented Kickboard, a platform for collecting, tracking, and reporting student behavioral data on a real-time basis. The receiver provided teachers with user-friendly academic and behavior student data reports to allow teachers to focus on strategies to support students. Still, while improvements to systems were made, teachers’ capacity to use data to inform instruction remained inconsistent. In response, coaches and assistant principals now provide guidance and support to teachers in data use strategies weekly during grade-level collaborative planning time. In addition, the master schedule was revised to create two 50-minute grade-level teaching team meetings per month, one meeting specific to understanding and utilizing ELA data and the other for mathematics. In addition, one data meeting per month is dedicated to analyzing students’ social-emotional and behavioral data. The school also held an all-staff academic benchmark assessment data meeting at the midpoint of the year. During this time, teachers collaboratively analyzed assessment data with guidance from leaders and coaches and created action plans to target students’ non-mastered skills. Part of the mid-year professional development subsequently focused on developing action plans based on the identified student needs. While there has been an emphasis on data use, according to school leaders there is still room to grow in this area.

## **Turnaround Priority Area 4: Establish a culture of high expectations and college and career readiness.**

The receiver put in place several strategies to foster a culture of high expectations at Dever. These strategies aimed to improve student behavior and grow a positive culture and climate in the school through consistent student behavior expectations and through increased and targeted family engagement. Efforts included continuing to emphasize a set of student behavior expectations; hiring the Assistant Principal of School Culture in November; hiring the Community Family Coordinator, who conducts outreach to community businesses and groups aimed at exposing students to new opportunities; and targeting outreach to families of struggling students.

Blueprint has established a set of student behavior expectations that focus on the five core values: Self-Control, Citizenship, Grit, Respect, and Positive Attitude. In addition, teachers use a “merit” and “reminder” system to monitor positive and negative behaviors, with consistent rewards and consequences across grade levels. Students earn “merits” for positive behaviors and “reminders” for negative behaviors, aligned with the Dever core values. Merits and reminders are calculated into Dolphin Pride Points. Weekly reports are sent home to students’ families to be signed and returned.

Attendance at family engagement events improved during the 2015–16 school year. The Parent Council recruits parents during school events. Many of the events are rewards for students who have demonstrated positive behavior, and the receiver reports that these events and activities are improving family engagement and strengthening the Dever community. In addition, Dever is supporting families in academics through a Scholastic Book Fair, Literacy Week, and PARCC Night. Also, approximately 15 families participated in Tech Goes Home, an initiative that aims to give families the technology skills, hardware, and access needed for 21st century success. The program requires families to participate in 15 hours of training facilitated by Dever’s technology specialist, and provides an opportunity for families to purchase both a new computer and Internet access for \$50.

Blueprint contracted with Boston College’s City Connects to provide a School Site Coordinator, a licensed clinical social worker whose responsibility is to assess the strengths and needs of each student and connect them and their families to a tailored set of supports from within and outside of the school. In addition, Dever has convened a collaborative group of the school’s therapeutic providers, including the Therapeutic Learning Community (TLC) clinician and organizations such as Home for Little Wanderers, Wediko, and MassStart. This group meets monthly to coordinate services and strategize about how to leverage all available resources in support of students’ social-emotional well-being.

Dever leaders and staff continue to struggle with challenging student behavior. This results in school leaders continuously reacting to student behavior and responding to immediate needs—resulting in distractions from their key responsibilities. While Dever is focusing on increasing the consistency of behavior management systems in classrooms throughout the schools, the receiver has established a schedule for leaders to be “on call” for student behavior disruptions, allowing leaders who are not on call to attend to their primary responsibilities. According to the receiver, after reviewing student behavior data, the leadership team created opportunities for teachers who had high rates of discipline referrals to receive further training in de-escalation strategies.

## **Turnaround Priority Area 5: Hire and cultivate high-performing and high-potential staff.**

The receiver continues to focus on recruiting high-potential new staff for next year and building the capacity of existing staff to support students. In terms of building staff capacity, according to the receiver, Dever focuses on empowering teachers who demonstrate exemplary skills to take on leadership opportunities in the school. For example, two teachers were promoted to the position of instructional coach. While these coaches provide consistent support to teachers, the receiver feels there is a need for even more intensive support and capacity building, and thus is restructuring the coaching role into an Instructional Dean position. Instead of two coaches and an Assistant Principal of Academics, there will be three Instructional Deans, each overseeing the implementation of academic and behavioral systems and serving as a direct point-of-contact for teachers at two grade-levels each (K–1, 2–3, and 4–5). This change was based on feedback from teachers.

At the beginning of the 2015–16 school year, the receiver’s human capital team filled 74 of 76 staff positions. The two exceptions were the Assistant Principal of School Culture position (filled in November) and one Spanish language position (filled at the beginning of the year with a long-term Spanish-speaking substitute teacher). Although Blueprint recruits year-round at local and national career fairs, the creation of a formal pipeline of teaching candidates for the Dever began in January, well before formal Boston Public Schools official position posting in March. Additionally, Blueprint is making a concerted effort to increase the number of teachers who are ESL certified to further support efforts to accelerate students’ language development and support EL students in the classroom. As of May 2016, the receiver reported having successfully recruited a permanent Spanish language teacher to support students for the 2016–17 school year. The principal who began at Dever in the 2015–16 school year resigned in March 2016. Blueprint is leading a national search for an executive principal and ESE is participating in the selection process to help ensure that a high quality, long-term leader is identified to support the specific needs of Dever’s students, staff and community.

Overall, the receiver continues to develop systems, structures, and routines that support the turnaround priorities. However, the mid-year resignation of the school principal and student behavior posed challenges to the school this year. To address these challenges, the receiver has developed and is implementing a plan for recruiting and selecting a principal. To reduce the distraction of school leaders by significant student behavior issues, in the second half of the year the receiver developed a schedule for administrators designating specific times during which administrators are on call for student behavior issues. Finally, the receiver has adjusted and targeted support for students—for example, by reassigning the math tutors to support students in Grade 5. The receiver continues to focus on building teachers’ capacity to provide high-quality instruction, and though there is still room to improve, is implementing data use strategies to improve the differentiation and targeting of students’ needs.