# 2019 Chronically Underperforming Schools Annual Evaluation Report: Paul A. Dever Elementary School, Boston, Massachusetts

**Receiver: Michael Contompasis**

## Introduction

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) contracted with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to collect evidence from each chronically underperforming school on the progress toward implementation of the turnaround plan in Year 5 of chronically underperforming status. ESE facilitated the collection of information from the receiver throughout the year for the quarterly reports, detailing highlights and challenges during the previous quarter and progress toward benchmarks. In addition, in November 2018, AIR staff collected data through instructional observations, using Teachstone’s Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS),[[1]](#footnote-1) and in February 2019 conducted a Monitoring Site Visit that included key stakeholder interviews and focus groups, an instructional staff survey, and a review of extant documentation (e.g., turnaround plan, quarterly reports, and other documents). In spring 2019 subsequent data were collected by conducting follow-up instructional observations and interviews with the school principal. The data collection and analysis processes were developed purposely to ensure that the data were reliable and valid and that the findings were informed by the appropriate key informants. For chronically underperforming schools, data were collected during the Monitoring Site Visit and follow-up activities to inform ESE’s statutory requirement to annually evaluate each chronically underperforming school’s progress toward implementing the turnaround plan. AIR’s chronically underperforming school review process focused on work at each school related to each of the specific turnaround practice areas.

## Highlights of Turnaround Plan Implementation at Paul A. Dever Elementary School

Although Paul A. Dever Elementary School (hereafter, Dever) underwent a change in receiver during the 2019 school year (from Boston Public Schools [BPS] Superintendent Tommy Chang to former BPS Interim Superintendent Michael Contompasis), the leadership at the school remained constant. Dr. Todd Fishburn returned as principal to lead Dever for a third year. In April 2019, the principal hired a chief academic officer to lead instructional work, including supporting coaches, planning professional development, using data to inform instructional decisions, and building the capacity of the administrative team to become instructional leaders.

This year, Dever leaders their focus on the turnaround plan to key two priorities: (a) increase rigor, a continuation from last year, and (b) build the instructional capacity of the instructional leadership team (ILT) to sustain improvement efforts moving forward. Dever’s leaders and staff understood the theory of action driving these priorities, were familiar with the goals and interim benchmarks used to monitor progress, and bought into these priorities. New this year, Dever established a student school site council for fifth-grade students to provide input on Dever’s improvement initiatives.

School leaders continued to emphasize data use, at both the school and classroom levels. Staff reviewed assessment data from ANet (Achievement Network), Fountas & Pinnell, and DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills); discipline data; and attendance data. Dever staff used the data to assign students to need-based groups, determine the standards to focus on during reteaching, identify where the curriculum needs to be supplemented with external materials, and monitor student progress. Dever staff reviewed data weekly during common planning time and professional development sessions.

School leaders continued to prioritize professional development for staff to build their capacity as instructional leaders within their classrooms. Staff new to Dever received 12 days of professional development, and returning staff received 10 days of professional development, prior to the start of the school year. All staff participated in weekly professional development for approximately three hours. These sessions focused primarily on instruction with specific topics determined by administrators, coaches, and the ILT.

School leaders emphasized planning for sustainability this year, both through building teachers’ capacity and creating new partnerships. Dever’s ILT is the primary vehicle for creating distributed leadership at the school and building long-term capacity. Dever partnered with an external improvement consultant from Teachers21 to facilitate and build structures and processes to make the ILT more effective. In addition, Dever has a newly established partnership with the University of Massachusetts–Boston (UMass) with a five-year commitment for $5 million (made generously by the Trefler Foundation) that is intended to build capacity to sustain improvement efforts across six focal areas, including instruction, student wellness, and continuous improvement.

## End-of-Year Findings

### Turnaround Practice 1: Leadership, Shared Responsibility, and Professional Collaboration

This year, school leaders exercised their autonomy to make decisions about key elements of the school day. School leaders used budgeting and staffing authority to hire or reallocate staff to fit the needs of the school, such as moving a coach into a fifth-grade classroom, hiring new paraprofessionals, modifying job descriptions (e.g., community field coordinator, manager of special projects) to fit school needs, and compensating teacher leaders for taking on additional responsibilities (e.g., ILT, teacher mentoring). School leaders also used this autonomy to modify the service delivery for English language learner (ELL) students for the core literacy block to a coteaching model, an approach that is unique to Dever within BPS Students continue to receive push in and pull out supports based on need. (see Turnaround Practice 3: Student-Specific Supports and Instruction to All Students).

The ILT, which consists of administrators, coaches, and 11 teachers representing each grade level, continued to have a significant role at Dever this year. The ILT is supported by an external improvement consultant from Teachers21. Teachers took turns facilitating the ILT meeting, and each teacher had a one-on-one meeting with the Teachers21 consultant to plan his or her facilitation. The ILT participated in learning walkthroughs to evaluate instruction across the school, reviewed student data to monitor school progress, and planned professional development sessions. The ILT also served as a formal structure to encourage two-way communication at the school, with members expected to communicate with their grade-level teams and vice versa. ILT members also led various staff committees, such as the family engagement committee and the student behavior committee.

School leaders continued to monitor schoolwide progress, using the quarterly progress reporting process mandated by ESE to examine the school’s progress across time. Some data sources (e.g., ANet, Fountas & Pinnel, attendance, behavioral data) are examined more frequently. The school established benchmarks for each key indicator, and staff were familiar with these benchmarks. The ILT shared responsibility for monitoring implementation and schoolwide progress on a subset of the school’s improvement indicators. For next year, school leaders are planning to place a greater emphasis on data-informed decision making.

Using student data, school leaders identified fifth grade as needing intensive support. Specifically, school leaders noticed an increase in students’ out-of-class time and a decrease in academic performance within the three fifth-grade classrooms. As a result, one fifth-grade teacher was replaced with an English as a second language (ESL) teacher, and one of the English language arts (ELA) coaches transitioned to become a fifth-grade teacher. This transition allowed for an additional classroom to be added, resulting in smaller class sizes of approximately 15 students each.

Next year, Dever will be experiencing some turnover in staff. Currently vacant positions, or positions recently filled for next school year, include a first-grade teacher, a second-grade teacher, a fifth-grade teacher, an art teacher, two ESL teachers, three Therapeutic Learning Community (TLC)/Emotional Impairments teachers, and a literacy coach/reading specialist. To find high-quality educators to fill these positions, school leaders worked closely with BPS staff on recruitment efforts. In addition, Dever participated in the Chronically Underperforming Schools Professional Learning Community, facilitated by ESE, which is focused on diverse and equitable hiring practices. As a result, school leaders are looking for candidates who will not only fit with their grade-level teams but also reflect the larger school community. In addition, the school’s principal and assistant principal have attended the yearlong ESE-sponsored course: Unpacking Cultural Proficiency. These leaders have in turn delivered professional development to the leadership team and staff throughout the school year.

### Turnaround Practice Area 2: Intentional Practices for Improving Instruction

During the 2019 school year, Dever continued to focus on improving the quality and rigor of classroom instruction. School leaders further broke this priority into three instructional strategies: discourse (high-level student discussion), questioning (using intentional questioning to push student thinking), and learning targets (articulating what students should be taking away from a learning activity). Spring schoolwide classroom observations saw an increase in scores in the analysis and inquiry dimension compared with observations in the fall; this dimension assesses the degree to which students engaged in high-level thinking skills. The spring 2019 score was 4.0, compared with the average fall 2018 score of 2.8. Next year, school leaders plan to continue increasing the rigor of instruction.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In addition, staff continued to focus on implementing culturally and linguistically sustaining practices. School leaders continued the book study started last year using the text *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* by Zaretta Hammond (Corwin Press, 2014). School leaders also created a six-session professional development series in partnership with Adam Strom from Re-Imagining Migration. Examples of sessions included (a) Culturally Responsive Approach to Understanding Immigrant-Origin Youth: Community and Classrooms; (b) A World on the Move: A Culturally Responsive Approach to Understanding Immigrant-Origin Youth; (c) Moving Stories: Stories of Immigration, Migration and Belonging, & Imagining and Inclusive School Community. School leaders created a new elective course taught by a culturally and linguistically sustaining practices specialist, and a culturally and linguistically sustaining practices committee is led by two ILT members.

This year, Dever leaders also continued to provide targeted, tiered coaching and feedback to teachers. Coaches provided support to all teaching staff (e.g., professional development sessions, common planning time) and targeted support to new teachers, teachers who were identified as needing support, and teachers who requested assistance. At the start of the school year, all teachers were assigned to one of three tiers based on the level of coaching needed: Tier 1 received coaching as needed, Tier 2 received standard coaching supports, and Tier 3 received intensive coaching. Coaching supports were based on Jim Knight’s Impact Cycle and included videos, coplanning, modeling, observations, and one-on-one meetings. Thirteen teachers participated in the first coaching cycle, and nine teachers participated in the second coaching cycle. A feedback survey was administered to participating teachers following the first coaching cycle, and 87 percent of the teachers rated the coaching supports as beneficial. In the second half of the school year, ELA coaching supports were negatively impacted because of a staff transition (one coach transitioned to become a fifth-grade teacher) and maternity leave. These positions were not filled for the remainder of the school year. To address gaps in coaching supports, the remaining mathematics coach took on an increased coaching role, and the chief academic officer was hired.

Dever also supported inexperienced teachers using a peer mentoring model. Veteran teachers at Dever were paired with new teachers to provide just-in-time guidance and support. Mentors connected with their mentees prior to the start of the school year, to begin building trusting and supportive relationships. Both coaching and mentoring supports were nonevaluative and focused on building the capacity of the classroom teacher.

### Turnaround Practice Area 3: Student-Specific Supports and Instruction to All Students

Using data to drive instruction and target support for students continued to be a major focus for Dever during the 2019 school year. Dever staff used several academic data sources to identify needs and determine supports for students who were struggling, including exit tickets, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, ANet, Fountas & Pinnell, DIBELS, and unit assessments. Staff used these data sources as well as observational knowledge about students to assign students to need-based groups, determine necessary supports, and monitor their progress. Students were placed into one of three need-based groups: (a) intervention, (b) on grade level, and (c) acceleration.

All classes at Dever had structured intervention time (referred to as need-based group time) built into their schedules, with 45 minutes each for ELA and mathematics, to deliver supports to individual students and groups of students. ELA interventions included Leveled Literacy Intervention, Lexia, Reach, the Wilson Reading System, and Raz-Kids. Although no formal intervention programs were in place for mathematics, teachers pulled resources from Do the Math, Khan Academy, EngageNY, and Zearn to focus on skill gaps. Students in the intervention group, or those students with the most significant needs, received pull-out supports from specialists or support staff. Next year, school leaders have modified the job description for the literacy coach to include reading specialist responsibilities to better support students in need of reading interventions.

Dever continued to implement a student support team (SST) structure to identify and respond to the needs of students who are struggling. The SST was led by the student support coordinator (from external partner City Connects), and the team included the school nurse, a special education teacher, administrators, and instructional coaches. The SST met with a different grade-level team during common planning time each week. For each student, the team convened to discuss the student’s strengths and challenges and developed a plan for interventions and supports. The team then reconvened to monitor the student’s progress on a six-week cycle. By of the end of the third quarter, 72 students went through the SST process compared with 10 students during this same period last school year (2018). Of these 72 students, 36 were referred to the SST because of academic concerns, and 26 students were referred because of social-emotional concerns. Students received a variety of supports, including testing for special education services, speech screenings, school-based therapy, school-based group counseling through MassStart, testing accommodations, and check-ins with the City Connects student support coordinator.

Dever continued to offer the Spanish Strand for ELL students and the TLC for students with disabilities. There was one sheltered English immersion classroom per grade level that serviced ELL students at Levels 1–3. In these classrooms, ESL teachers cotaught with general education teachers for 2.5 hours each school day for the core literacy block. The coteaching model was new to Dever this school year. Students continued to received pull-out or push-in services depending on their needs. The TLC program continued to be a substantially separate setting within the school that serviced students with emotional impairments. Class sizes were small, limited to no more than 10 students. The TLC program was supported by a full-time clinical specialist. For students with disabilities outside the TLC program, Dever employed a special education teacher to provide pull-out or push-in supports. This year, the TLC program was no longer supported by Wediko Children’s Services, impacting data entry and case conferencing supports.

### Turnaround Practice Area 4: School Climate and Culture

Dever staff continued to grow their positive behavioral interventions and supports implementation during the 2019 school year. Core values were clearly defined through the “Dever Way” (self-regulation, respect, citizenship, positive attitude, and grit) and “Dever Style” (expectations for student behavior across the school). Students received merits for displaying positive behaviors and reminders for behavior that did not align with the behavioral expectations. All teachers used the Kickboard application to track merits and reminders. At the beginning of a week, all students started with a set number of merits; if they accumulated a threshold number of merits by the end of the week, they were rewarded with community time, where they could engage in special activities (e.g., games, robotics). Students who had not accumulated enough merits would spend that time in the reflection room, where they reflected on the week and received supports from staff.

School leaders continued to focus on student attendance rates this year. School leaders had weekly attendance meetings with teachers and weekly attendance meetings with the attendance supervisor. All students were eligible to receive incentives for strong attendance, such as participating in a dance for 100 percent attendance. In the third quarter, students with fewer than three absences were entered in a raffle to win a Chromebook. Students who struggled with attendance received calls home, home visits, and individualized attendance contracts (as defined by BPS).

Dever continued to focus on increasing family outreach and engagement. The school had a full-time community field coordinator who was devoted to family engagement, including hosting events for families, serving as a point of contact for families at the school, creating a monthly newsletter, working to identify student attendance issues, and connecting families to wraparound supports. Dever also had a staff-led family engagement committee that planned engagement events and activities (e.g., movie nights, fall festival, literacy barbecue). Dever continued to have a parent council that is open to all Dever parents and a school site council, a smaller, official decision-making group with parent representatives. This spring, Dever administered the BPS Climate and Culture Survey to parents during a family engagement event to encourage participation and aimed to get a completion rate of 30 percent or more.

New this year, Dever and UMass are committing to a five-year partnership, although both stakeholders view the partnership as ongoing. As part of this partnership, UMass, in collaboration with the Trefler Foundation, has committed to a $5 million grant that will include supports in six key focal areas: ELA instruction, early college and career readiness, physical activity, proactive health, tutoring and mentoring, and evidence-based continuous improvement. School leaders are currently meeting with representatives from UMass biweekly to develop a work plan to ensure that the partnership is productive and beneficial to students.

1. See Teachstone’s website for more information: <http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/336169/What-is-CLASS_Info_Sheet.pdf?t=1432824252621>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a comparison of fall and spring observation scores for school years 2018 and 2019, see <https://docs.google.com/document/d/168viMAwC94ZiFeevK3D1YXi0Gh_1zv4WxsRDpjN9R6E/edit>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)