### **Massachusetts Department of**

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

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| Jeffrey C. Riley  *Commissioner* |  |

# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner |
| **Date:** | January 17, 2023 |
| **Subject:** | Update on Chronically Underperforming Schools: SY2022-2023 Quarter 2 Reports |

This month, I am presenting the second[[1]](#footnote-2) of four SY2022-2023 quarterly progress updates to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) on the three chronically underperforming schools’ implementations of their school turnaround plans, focusing on activities from October to December 2022. The narrative for this progress update has been provided by the School Empowerment Network, based on classroom observations led by that group during that timeframe. The third quarterly update will be presented in April and a final annual review will come in June.

**Chronically Underperforming Schools**

There are currently three schools designated as chronically underperforming in response to their low performance and lack of improvement while in underperforming status: John P. Holland Elementary School (UP Academy Holland) and Paul A. Dever Elementary School (Dever) in Boston, and John Avery Parker Elementary School (Parker) in New Bedford. As of fall 2022, the Morgan Full Service Community School in Holyoke is no longer designated as a chronically underperforming school.[[2]](#footnote-3)

**Paul A. Dever Elementary School, Boston**

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1

Positive Learning Environment

*Description:*

Paul A. Dever Elementary School administrators and teachers alike have taken steps toward practices that support nurturing school and classroom cultures. School leaders and teachers have prioritized building a more restorative school culture. Ongoing professional development related to responsive classroom techniques, collaborative problem solving, and culturally responsive teaching has resulted in a positive learning environment in which students feel supported and engaged.

All classrooms observed during the School Quality Review (SQR) site visit were warm and focused learning environments. Teachers consistently used language and tone that were encouraging, gentle, and positive. Teachers also spoke of work they have engaged in to build staff culture. Teachers noted that school leaders have elicited their feedback and considered their opinions. School leaders have elevated diverse voices among the staff through opportunities to lead professional development and join the school’s instructional leadership team. Teachers shared that they see a connection between their work to build a stronger staff culture and work that has been done to establish a safe, supportive culture for students.

Area of Strength #2

Teacher Teams and Distributed Leadership

*Description:*

Each teacher participates in a grade-level team meeting twice weekly for common planning. On each grade-level team there is one content lead for English language arts (ELA) and one for math. The content leads are responsible for weekly lesson plans and meet separately with either the corresponding ELA or math coach. The school has implemented team structures supporting educators to effectively engage in data-driven discussions. This is a major shift since the last SQR site visit conducted in the spring of 2022, when data were not referenced during observed teacher collaboration time. As a next step in advancing teachers’ data-driven discussions, school leaders should support the development of processes to calibrate expectations around rubrics, assessments, and grading.

The school has continued to develop teacher leadership structures that give teachers a voice in key decisions. School leaders and coaches shared that the instructional leadership team is focusing on hearing from teachers about their professional development needs. Teachers reported that this effort has elevated historically marginalized voices, citing an example where staff examined and discussed school practices as equitable or inequitable. Teachers’ experiences of feeling heard, valued, and included in key decisions have produced a strong sense of buy-in, ownership, and support for schoolwide success.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1

Curriculum

*Description:*

The school has adopted Zaretta Hammond’s framework for culturally responsive instruction, and teachers are working diligently to apply this framework using the school’s curricular resources. School leaders have introduced Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a supplemental framework this year to ensure that all learners have access to the ELA curriculum. Coaches, school leaders, and teachers alike reported that the “ignite” and “chew” components of Hammond’s framework are a major focus for teaching and learning.

However, in classrooms, there was inconsistent evidence of efforts to activate curiosity or engage students. While student discourse is essential to the Dever instructional vision, there was little evidence of student discourse in classrooms. In many classrooms observed, while teachers were facilitating small groups or circulating among students, students responded to teacher questions but did not speak to one another. Additionally, students were mostly engaged in isolated skills work within their small groups, rather than collaborating on complex tasks. Moving forward, leaders and teachers must analyze how much time students are spending engaged in complex tasks and how much time they are spending on isolated skills work. It is essential to make sure that skills work is tied directly to complex tasks in order to improve the quality of teachers’ implementation of core curricula.

Area of Focus #2

Pedagogy

*Description:*

Dever’s principal and coaches demonstrate understanding that teacher pedagogy must be driven by a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best, informed by a research-based teaching framework grounded in culturally responsive practices. The school continues to remain steadfast in its vision of building student independence. Teachers spoke of the importance of the schoolwide instructional model as a focus for professional development, sharing that they receive feedback on implementation of Hammond’s “ignite, chunk, chew, review” framework in their classrooms.

There is a disconnect, however, between how teachers and leaders say they believe students learn best and the instructional practices observed in classrooms. During classroom visits, student work products and discussions reflected uneven levels of student thought and participation. Students were generally neither engaged in meaningful group work nor in discussions with one another. Instead, students were responding to skills-based questions posed by teachers even when they sat in small groups. In most classrooms visited, students were not asked to grapple with big ideas, show their thinking, apply skills in new contexts, or work with peers to construct new understandings.

Area of Focus #3

Assessment

*Description:*

Currently, teachers are implementing common grade-level assessments and using data from those assessments to inform student groupings. The school’s leader and coaches utilize assessments to identify students who may be at risk of not meeting grade-level benchmarks. Teachers utilize screeners to gain additional insight into skills gaps and to design Tier 2 scaffolds and instructional foci. Collectively, this information is being uploaded to a data hub that is accessible to all teachers, school leaders, and coaches.

Now that the school has implemented common assessments schoolwide, coupled with expectations for entering assessment data into a shared data hub, a next step is to focus on supporting teachers in using that data to inform instruction. In common planning time, teachers are beginning to use data to guide their discussions and additional protocols and practice will support teachers in effectively and consistently using data to inform their instruction.

**UP Academy Holland, Boston**

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1

Positive Learning Environment

*Description:*

UP Academy Holland leaders envision a school culture characterized by warm, safe, and focused classroom learning environments. Reviewers observed this vision being enacted in all classrooms visited. Students followed expected rules and routines with few reminders. All teachers communicated in warm tones while using respectful and encouraging language. Students reported feeling supported and feeling that their teachers care about them. Parents shared a strong belief that all children are treated equitably and respected in school and that their children are well known and cared for by their teachers.

School leaders have continued to develop the school’s restorative approach to culture building. They have ensured that there is dedicated time for repair and restoration in all classrooms. In the classrooms visited, students actively engaged in lessons, attempted academic tasks put before them, and met their teachers’ behavioral expectations.

Area of Strength #2

Assessment

*Description:*

Teachers and teams continue to utilize common assessments to determine student progress toward goals across grades and subject areas. The results are used to make adjustments to curricula and instruction. A school-wide assessment calendar includes time for data meetings between administrators and individual teachers to help teachers use their classroom-level data to identify their next steps for supporting individual students in their classrooms.

Across classrooms, teachers use formal and informal assessments to provide feedback to students regarding their progress and achievements. This feedback is specific, targeted for each individual student, and is expected to be provided during classroom instruction while students are working as a way to observe what students have understood and provide immediate feedback.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1

Pedagogy

*Description:*

Leaders and coaches articulate a clear, concrete vision for common practices across classrooms and are identifying and implementing classroom materials and practices that are aligned to that vision. These practices include implementing Expeditionary Learning (EL) and Illustrative Mathematics (IM) curricula with fidelity; creating meaningful space for student thinking and discourse; moving cognitive lift away from teachers and onto students; ensuring that students are engaged in meaningful and complex tasks; and, leveraging student work time so that teachers circulate and give meaningful feedback. However, reviewers did not observe the vision realized and evidenced in action in most classrooms visited. Instead, teachers consistently over-scaffolded learning for students or did not connect tasks to larger conceptual understandings. There is a significant disconnect between how administrators, coaches, and teachers express their beliefs about how students learn best and what is happening—in the way of instructional moves—across a majority of classrooms. To align instructional vision and pedagogy, leaders must communicate concrete expectations connected to specific instructional practices.

Area of Focus #2

Teacher Support and Supervision

*Description:*

The school possesses well-established systems and structures for teacher support and supervision. Leadership team members are expected to observe and provide feedback to teachers once per week. Leaders have established a process for reviewing observation and coaching data as an academic team, to maintain alignment with professional development expectations throughout the school year.

While all of the above speaks to important structures for feedback and coaching, there is a need to adjust aspects of the feedback system to ensure that all feedback to teachers effectively moves teachers and classroom practices toward fulfilling the school’s instructional vision. The evidence from classroom observations and teacher reports suggests that feedback has been inconsistently effective and has not yet led teachers to deeper understandings of how to implement the instructional vision within a given curriculum.

Area of Focus #3

Teacher Teams and Distributed Leadership

*Description:*

Leaders have shifted one weekly common planning meeting to after school hours as a way to allow teachers to be more focused, on time, and able to participate. However, the impact of this shift has not yet been observed in classroom instruction. Most teachers are neither implementing curricula as designed nor shifting cognitive lift onto their students. While reviewers did see potential for multiple ways to engage students (i.e., hand signals, Turn and Talks), increased student thinking was not evident in classes visited.

**John Avery Parker Elementary School, New Bedford**

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1

Leveraging Resources

*Description:*

School administrators have made strategic decisions to utilize resources that promote student

learning and positive outcomes for students. Many Parker teachers are new to the school this year. School administrators anticipated their needs and leveraged experienced faculty members to provide new teachers with push-in support regularly throughout the first three weeks of the school year. Leaders also adjusted the school-wide schedule to provide additional planning time for educators. In addition, Parker leaders hired another instructional coach to allow for more instructional support of teachers and students alike.

The “Leveraging Resources” indicator has moved from Proficient to Well Developed at Parker. This is a result of leaders’ strategic decision-making which centers student outcomes and continues to prioritize building the instructional capacity of the teaching staff.

Area of Strength #2

Teacher Support and Supervision

*Description:*

All elements of this indicator are in place and well-leveraged at Parker. This indicator was rated as Proficient in the spring of 2022 and is now rated Well Developed.

In alignment with the school’s instructional framework, school leaders have developed a continuum of teacher practices document that serves as the foundation for creating differentiated professional development for teachers. Teachers reported that school leaders visit their classrooms weekly and provide in-the-moment feedback framed as “glows” and “grows.” Teachers also reported that weekly learning walks conducted by leaders are aligned to the focus of the given week’s professional development. School leaders distribute a weekly email to staff that includes schoolwide instructional trends aligned to the instructional vision, identified during walkthroughs.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1

Curriculum

*Description:*

The “Curriculum” Indicator is currently rated as Proficient at John A. Parker Elementary School. The schoolwide instructional planning model centers complex tasks and questions and requires all educators to develop a deep understanding of the standards to which these tasks must be aligned. In addition, the school’s workshop model of instruction pushes educators to think about each individual learner’s current level of mastery and how it can be pushed to the next level in a given curriculum. The school’s recent focus on increasing student discourse has resulted in many observed examples of increased dialogue between students through Turn and Talks and small-group work in both ELA and Math lessons. In mathematics, teachers use “mini math congresses” to allow students to support each other in undoing misconceptions and provide time for students to revise their thinking. Reviewers observed students internalizing revised thinking and applying it to their work.

To move from a rating of Proficient to Well Developed in this indicator, the school team must develop a process for assessing the impact of selected curricula on outcomes for all students. The team needs to closely monitor student achievement data throughout implementation, make shifts where the impact is not as positive as expected, and keep doubling down where impact is proven positive.

Area of Focus #2

Teacher Teams and Distributed Leadership

*Description:*

During the observation of teacher collaboration time, all participants were highly engaged. There were multiple times in which team members shared ideas specific to their areas of expertise with their peers. The administration’s move to include both English as a Second Language and Special Education teachers in common planning time is now supporting seamless integration of those teachers within the classroom instructional model. Further, the schoolwide model of instructional planning is becoming internalized by teachers, with the instructional coach providing embedded coaching during team meetings to develop the capacities of the teacher leaders. However, there was evidence of the teacher leader over-scaffolding the planning process for the team, which resulted in a loss of critical learning for less experienced team members.

To move from Proficient to Well Developed in this indicator, teachers at Parker will need to fully assume responsibility for critical planning processes, including unit planning and weekly team meetings, and devolve some responsibility from the school leaders.

1. The quarter one board memo can be found here: [Board Documents: October 2022 - Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2023/2022-10/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The September 26, 2022 letter announcing the change in designation for Morgan may be found here: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/level5/schools/morgan.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)