*****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 18, 2024 |
| **Subject:** | Update on Chronically Underperforming Schools: SY2023-2024 Quarter 2 Reports |

This month, I am presenting the second[[1]](#footnote-2) of four SY2023-2024 quarterly progress updates to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) on the three chronically underperforming schools’ implementation of their school turnaround plans, focusing on activities from October to December 2023. 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 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

Teacher Teams and Distributed Leadership

*Description*:

Dever School leaders have established a clear vision for the work of teacher teams. Collaborative planning time (CPT) now includes regular analysis of student work and assessment data with guidance, structure, and purpose. Coaches and school leadership have developed a cycle for CPT meetings that alternates between looking at data and in-depth lesson or unit study. Teacher leaders facilitate these meetings with support from instructional coaches. In a strategic shift, the assistant principal now attends all CPT meetings. This enables school leaders to be more informed about team decisions and actions related to curriculum, pedagogy, and the focus for instruction.

The school also revamped its Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) this year to engage a more diverse group of faculty in key instructional decision-making. The distributed leadership of the new ILT is having a positive impact on school climate.

Area of Strength #2

Positive Learning Environment

*Description*:

School leaders engaged a consulting partner organization to conduct an equity audit, facilitate professional development, lead walkthrough observations, and support the development of the ILT. Teachers report that this professional development has enhanced their understanding of their students and deepened their relationships with other staff members.

The school also has strengthened its Whole Child Support Team (WCST) process by requiring teachers to provide more student data and evidence of pre-referral interventions. While the referral process is more involved now than in the past, teachers report feeling well-supported in meeting the needs of students who are struggling to meet behavioral expectations.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1

Pedagogy

*Description:*

The school has made notable progress in pedagogy in a very short time, particularly in English Language Arts. The schoolwide focus on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has been extremely impactful. With the support of a consultant over the summer, Dever teachers revised ELA curricular units to incorporate SFL strategies. In all ELA classrooms observed, teachers made attempts to enact SFL strategies embedded in the new units.

Instructional practices, however, are not yet consistently effective across classrooms. School leaders will need to support the instructional changes with ongoing professional development and observational walkthroughs to broaden and sustain impact. Coaches and school leaders must use observational data to plan professional development sessions and allocate more support to individual teachers who are struggling to implement the strategies.

There also remains considerable work ahead for teachers to implement the school’s math curriculum with fidelity. This curriculum is highly dependent on teacher/student conferrals during student work time, and this is an area where teachers will require additional training. In most math classrooms observed, teachers circulated among student groups but did not engage them in meaningful conferrals that advanced student learning. It will be essential for coaches and school leaders to highlight exemplary conferral practices and to support teachers who are struggling with diagnosing student misconceptions and conferring.

Area of Focus #2

Assessment

*Description:*

School leaders have established an assessment system that includes common assessments aligned to grade-level standards and curricular resources and dedicated CPT time for teachers to analyze assessment data to inform their instruction.

While CPT is an important venue for teachers to use assessment data, teachers need more time and support to synthesize and fully utilize the data generated by the student assessment system. School leaders must further determine how to utilize professional development and planning time to analyze assessment data to inform instruction and monitor the progress of individual students, subgroups of students, and classrooms.

In addition, daily formative assessment practices are not yet consistently effective across classrooms. Teachers shared some strategies they use in their classrooms to check for student understanding, but they could not articulate any schoolwide expectations for checking for understanding. Expectations for checks for understanding need to be established for the adults to develop a shared understanding of whether instruction meets student needs. Teachers need support in how to gather data and understand student thinking and how to use this information to make instructional shifts for individual students, small groups, and the whole class.

Area of Focus #3

Goals and Action Plans

*Description:*

School leaders and teachers have made progress under the indicator of Goals and Action Plans. The leadership team engaged teachers in the development of the school’s strategic plan. In collaboration with staff, school leaders developed goals with an equity focus. School leaders then allocated resources toward reaching the goals, by engaging an outside consultant to provide schoolwide professional development. Amidst major changes at the school that include a new leadership team, there is clear evidence of a revitalized staff culture and increased staff buy-in.

However, school leaders have not yet established systems for tracking progress toward goals. To maintain staff buy-in and to secure improved outcomes for students, school leaders and teachers must establish progress monitoring systems and adjust course when adequate progress is not being made. Additionally, the progress monitoring should be made transparent to faculty and families so that each member of the community understands not only the goals but also the work necessary to meet the goals.

**UP Academy Holland, Boston**

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1

Leveraging Resources

*Description*:

The UP Academy Holland (UAH) leadership team demonstrated strategic decision-making in choosing to departmentalize the fourth-grade team (students receive ELA instruction from one teacher and math instruction by another) based on the positive impact of departmentalization on teaching and learning, as demonstrated by fifth-grade MCAS scores. The strongest instructional practices observed by reviewers during the fall site visit were in fourth and fifth-grade classrooms. In addition, the fourth-grade teachers expressed feeling empowered and more effective following departmentalization.

Another strategic use of resources was the leadership team’s decision to add a Dean of Student Support (DSS) role to oversee UAH’s multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) and to manage related service providers. This decision has brought greater expertise and structure to the school’s MTSS approach. For example, the DSS has created a playbook and redesigned how teachers code calls for support or intervention. The latter change allows for closer examination of data to understand and respond to classroom calls for support.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1

Curriculum

*Description:*

The school has chosen curriculum materials that are aligned to both grade-level standards and the school’s instructional vision of students carrying the cognitive load in learning. As observed, however, teachers inconsistently enact the curricula in their classrooms.

A key aspect of this indicator is developing modifications aimed at providing a variety of learners with access and entry points to curricula. In lieu of intentional and targeted modifications, reviewers more often observed teachers over-scaffolding tasks and providing the same scaffold to all students. No student-specific scaffolds nor modifications were observed in core math and ELA classrooms. When asked if they modify curricula, teachers shared examples of modifications made during grade-level planning that simplified a task for the entire class. The rationales for these modifications were neither grounded in data nor made specific for specific groups of students.

Area of Focus #2

Pedagogy

*Description:*

School leaders articulate a vision for instruction that includes prioritizing student thinking and conceptual understanding in lessons; ensuring all learners engage with grade-level curricula; fostering joy and community in classrooms; and utilizing small-group instruction to accelerate learning.

Instructional practices aligned with the instructional vision were observed in the minority of classrooms visited during the school quality review site visit. Even in those four classrooms, missed opportunities to utilize key practices resulted in fewer opportunities for students to engage with rigorous tasks and practice higher-order thinking. Other classrooms observed by reviewers were far from realizing the instructional vision, leaving most students disengaged.

Across the school, few observed lessons aligned fully to the instructional vision, despite high levels of staff buy-in to the core curriculum and the instructional vision at UAH. School leaders must continue to build teachers’ capacity to enact the instructional vision using the selected high-quality curricular materials.

Area of Focus #3

Teacher Support and Supervision

*Description:*

UAH teachers receive observational feedback at least every other week in both formal and informal ways. Teachers were able to share examples of effective feedback they had received so far this school year. At the same time, teachers reported needing more time to apply what they are learning from feedback and in professional development sessions. Most importantly, they expressed the need for more time to plan with their co-teacher to meet students’ needs through the lens of the professional development focus. Due to this perceived need for more collaborative planning time, the leadership team should focus on utilizing existing team planning time more effectively by establishing tighter protocols and meeting structures.

In addition, professional development at UAH is not yet sufficiently differentiated. While the leadership team has begun to disseminate a research-based pedagogical framework to deepen schoolwide instruction, the leadership team is still learning the practices themselves and honing their skills in providing high-leverage feedback aligned to the practices. Some teachers have grown their skills with specific practices, but more differentiation is needed to provide just-in-time support for teachers.

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

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1

Curriculum

*Description*:

Parker teachers consistently use the curricula selected by school leaders to align with the school’s instructional vision. One year ago, the faculty embarked upon intense professional development in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to strengthen student engagement with the school’s ELA curriculum, with a strategic focus on meeting the needs of multilingual learners. Over the summer, Parker faculty collaborated with an SFL consultant to create a tool for analyzing and selecting texts with culturally and linguistically sustaining features. The work of screening texts with an equity lens is a clear example of Parker teachers deepening their expertise with the Tier 1 curriculum to make it more relevant for their students.

Area of Strength #2

Teacher Teams and Distributed Leadership

*Description*:

This year, the school has introduced a new classroom staffing model that enables three grade-level teachers to co-teach across two classrooms throughout the day. School leaders strategically placed teachers on teams to ensure strong peer support for teachers who are new to teaching or to Parker. Teachers feel well-supported by this shift and are particularly enthusiastic about the all-day access to modeling by experienced co-teachers.

In addition to the enhanced support for newer teachers, the team-teaching model also has had an observable impact on students. Teachers shared how they are better able to meet student needs by fluidly grouping students among three teachers during Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction. Teachers further highlighted the benefits of the three-teacher model in collaborative planning meetings. The floating co-teacher knows all of the students in the grade level and thus can support the team in looking at data and making decisions about student groupings and instructional foci.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1

Pedagogy

*Description:*

The Parker leadership team continues to hold a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best, informed by a research-based teaching framework. During the fall site visit, however, more inconsistencies were observed in classrooms as compared to prior years. Student work products and discussions reflected uneven levels of student thinking and participation. A contributing factor to the observed inconsistencies may be that school leaders opted to focus summer professional development on school culture needs rather than pedagogy. Professional development focused on pedagogy is expected to be a focus during the school year.

In some classrooms, while basic components of the school’s pedagogy are present, teacher practices are not yet fostering students’ ownership of their thinking and learning. Reviewers observed instances where teachers missed opportunities to shift thinking to their students or did not provide adequate time or supports for students to complete their tasks independently. Moving forward, school leaders should support teachers in understanding the Parker instructional vision, define what unconditional belonging looks like in a well-run classroom, and leverage the new co-teaching structure to build teachers’ capacity to support diverse learners.

Area of Focus #2

Assessment

*Description:*

The school has taken steps toward developing assessment practices that will inform instructional decision making, with particular attention paid to the needs of multilingual learners. With support from the SFL consultant, the Parker team launched new rubrics for analyzing student writing, organized by language dimensions and genre in alignment with the 2020 WIDA standards. In the grade-level team planning meeting observed by reviewers, teachers referred to the appropriate rubric while planning upcoming lessons but did not utilize recent assessment data to plan for the needs of individual students or small groups.

While the needs of multilingual learners have been an ongoing focus for school leaders, the leadership team will need to build teachers’ capacities to look at data with an equity lens to close the achievement gaps for multilingual learners at Parker. The work should ensure that teacher teams focus on any potential disparities in academic outcomes for multilingual learners during team planning time. Teachers will need support in understanding the why behind these practices, as evidenced in part by their difficulty answering questions about opportunity/achievement gaps.

1. The quarter one Board memo can be found here: [Board Documents: October 2023 - Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2024/2023-10/). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The September 26, 2022 letter announcing the change in designation for Morgan can be found here: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/level5/schools/morgan.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)