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Commissioner

Proposed Modifications to the Dever Preliminary Turnaround Plan: Information regarding adopted modifications

To: Superintendent John McDonough
Michael O'Neill, Chair, Boston School Committee
Dever Elementary School Local Stakeholder Group
From: Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D., Commissioner
Date: April 24, 2014

Today, I released my final Level 5 school turnaround plan for Dever Elementary School.

Pursuant to M.G.L. c. 69, § 1J(p), the Superintendent, the Boston School Committee, and the Dever Local Stakeholder Group had the opportunity to propose modifications to the plan. (Proposing modifications was not required.) The Local Stakeholder Group submitted its proposed modifications and Superintendent McDonough provided a letter on April 7, 2014.

I appreciate the thoughtful input from the Local Stakeholder Group and have considered the modifications it proposed. Below, I first provide information about the modifications I have chosen to adopt and where they were incorporated into the final turnaround plan. Second, I indicate those I have declined to adopt and my rationale for doing so. Finally, I address other "clarification" areas identified by the Local Stakeholder Group.

Modifications I have adopted in the final Dever turnaround plan

Priority Area 1:

- *Page 10, regarding substantially separate classroom program: "Emotional Impairment" language should be included here. "Least restrictive environment" should replace "mainstream classroom environments when appropriate."*
 - This language has been incorporated into Priority Area 2, Strategy 4.
- *Page 10, regarding substantially separate classroom program: Specific training for teachers in the Emotional Impairment strand should be a high priority.*
 - This language has been incorporated into Priority Area 2, Strategy 4.

Priority Area 2:

- *Page 22, Restructuring the ELA block: The LSG recommends that Blueprint carefully review how this priority is currently addressed at the school, and provides detailed information about the time allotted to different ELA components.*
 - I agree that the ELD strategy we will use at Dever can be described in more detail. Substantial additional information regarding the ELD strategy is now provided in a new Appendix F.

Priority Area 3:

No modifications were proposed in this Priority Area.

Priority Area 4:

No modifications were accepted in this Priority Area.

Priority Area 5:

- *Strategy 1, regarding hiring high performing and high potential leaders, teachers, and related service providers: If Blueprint will be hiring mostly early career teachers, they should articulate a strong induction and support program in later drafts of this plan.*
 - A support program for early career teachers has been incorporated into Priority Area 5, Strategy 2.

Appendix A:

No modifications were proposed to this Appendix.

Appendix B:

No modifications were proposed to this Appendix.

Appendix C:

No modifications were proposed to this Appendix.

Appendix D:

No modifications were proposed to this Appendix.

Appendix E:

- *Regarding the bar graphs (page 87) depicting 2013 MCAS data for Grade 5 comparing dual language class results to English-only class results: LSG reports there was no dual language class in grade 5 in 2013, only an SEI class.*
 - A new, more clearly labeled version of the graph has been incorporated into Appendix E.
- *Regarding language around the sources of information and data that Blueprint and ESE have reviewed: Bullet 4 could more accurately read: "Information gathered by Blueprint during a site visit conducted on 2/25/14, School Site Council meetings on 2/11 and 2/25, conversations with teachers, parents, and school leaders."*
 - The language of this bullet now points readers to the timing of activities in the list of fact finding activities at the end of Appendix E.
- *Regarding language (page 90) that students whose first language is neither English nor Spanish do not have access to intervention supports for Spanish language development: All instruction delivered in Spanish includes Spanish Language Development Strategies.*
 - This language has been clarified in Appendix E.

Modifications I have declined to adopt in the final Dever turnaround plan

Priority Area 1:

All modifications were accepted in this Priority Area.

Priority Area 2:

- *Strategy 1, Increase Instructional Time: Concerns were raised about the appropriateness of an 8-hour school day for all of the school's student populations. Students in early childhood programs and in the Emotional Impairment strand were of specific concern.*

- I decline to adopt this modification because I believe elementary school students can benefit significantly from an extended school day, if it is structured to provide for students' needs. Other schools have shown that increasing instructional time can lead to academic benefits for all learners when the schedule provides carefully structured learning, enrichment, and break periods that are responsive to students' age and program-appropriate needs.

Priority Area 3:

No modifications were proposed in this Priority Area.

Priority Area 4:

- *Strategy 2, regarding behavior intervention groups: Additional details about the structure and staffing are requested for the behavior intervention groups.*
 - I decline to adopt this modification because the groups' staffing and structure are currently under development and will be tailored to the behavioral needs of Dever's students. Blueprint has been meeting with long-standing Dever partner Wediko Children's Services to understand existing work and identify gaps in this area. The Dean of School Culture will facilitate these groups.
- *Strategy 3, regarding family and community engagement: Parent representatives on the LSG would like to know Blueprint's plan for introducing families to teachers and community.*
 - I decline to adopt this modification because information about the school's orientation for families and ongoing communication with families is already included in the plan. The specifics of the family orientation are under development; more information about the orientation will be provided to families in August.
 - For information about the outreach to Dever stakeholders that Blueprint has completed to date, including outreach to families, please see Appendix E in the turnaround plan.

Priority Area 5:

- *Strategy 1, regarding hiring high performing and high potential leaders, teachers, and related service providers: "High performance and high potential" criteria should be more clearly articulated here.*
 - I decline to adopt this modification because information regarding the competencies and skills possessed by high performing and high potential teachers are included in the "performance-based interviews and evaluations" and "candidate screening" sections of Strategy 1.
- *Strategy 1, regarding hiring high performing and high potential leaders, teachers, and related service providers: The LSG has serious concerns about the capacity of Blueprint to recruit the number of "high quality and high potential" teachers needed to staff the school given the proposed salary structure.*
 - Blueprint has already received applications from candidates who are aware of the compensation structure outlined in the turnaround plan. In School Year 2014-2015, candidates will be paid using the existing Boston Public Schools salary schedule; a performance-based compensation system will be used beginning in School Year 2015-2016. (For more information about Dever's compensation structure, please see Appendix A in the turnaround plan.)

Appendix A:

No modifications were proposed to this Appendix.

Appendix B:

No modifications were proposed to this Appendix.

Appendix C:

No modifications were proposed to this Appendix.

Appendix D:

No modifications were proposed to this Appendix.

Appendix E:

- *Regarding the list of factors contributing to low achievement in Dever's Dual Language Program (page 88): There have been no scheduling challenges in implementing the dual language program. The school has made adjustments to the schedule, with teacher input, to maximize instructional time and time for teacher collaboration.*
 - During ESE's and Blueprint's visits to the school, we have heard from multiple sources that the frequent transitions in the schedule, which involved both switching languages and switching classrooms on a weekly basis, were challenging for some students and some staff members.
- *Regarding the list of factors contributing to low achievement in Dever's Dual Language Program (page 88): There are no criteria for matching student populations with the dual language model of instruction. A thorough analysis of the current research would refute claims that any subgroup is not well-served by this instructional model.*
 - While we have clarified the language in the list of factors, I decline to adopt this modification because the research indicates dual language programs are less likely to have significant impact for students when the student population is highly mobile (preventing them from remaining in the program for the length of time required to see results), and/or when students do not have either of the languages in the dual language program as their primary language.

Response to other "clarification" areas identified by the Local Stakeholder Group

In its proposal, in addition to specific recommendations regarding changes to the plan text, the Local Stakeholder Group included several items it identified as "clarifications," and provided additional data for my review. Below, I have responded to these groups of items.

- *Items expressing 1) concern that ESE is attributing the cause of the school's lagging progress to its dual language program and 2) lack of support for ESE's discontinuation of the dual language program.*

Dever's chronically low achievement is school-wide and is the result of a number of factors and conditions. ESE has not and does not now attribute Dever's low achievement to its dual language program. I am concerned about the performance of all of Dever's students, and am focused on how we can rapidly change the trajectory of that performance. Dever's staff and community have made efforts to build an effective dual language program. However, this instructional approach is not leading to the rapid growth in academic achievement that students need.

I reached the decision to place the Dever into Level 5 due to the persistence of unacceptably low achievement rates, despite its status as a Level 4 turnaround school since 2010. Dever is providing an ineffective instructional program, the result of which is unacceptably low student academic performance. For example, on the 2013 MCAS:

- Only one-in-seven (14%) of Dever students scored proficient or advanced in English language arts.
- Less than one-third (31%) of Dever students scored proficient or advanced in Mathematics.
- Only 1% of Dever's 5th grade students scored proficient or advanced in Science.

The school and district had significant authorities and opportunities to improve during the three years that the Dever was designated as underperforming (Level 4). The school has failed to implement a coherent and well-aligned curriculum in grades K-5 that is necessary to accelerate learning and significantly raise achievement for all students. Despite the efforts of the past number of years, the majority of students are still achieving below grade level expectations in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. This is not a matter of moving an adequate school program to good or great levels of performance. Our first job, as this school enters receivership, is to secure the basics of a sound literacy program, mathematics program, and a well-functioning academic curriculum. We need to establish an adequate instructional program and quickly move it to higher levels of functioning.

It is clear that many members of the Dever community strongly value the cultivation and development of multi-lingualism of their students. At the same time, we have encountered parents who are not sure why their children are experiencing Spanish as part of their instruction and who did not volunteer for a dual language program. Therefore, as part of the turnaround plan, we will offer a content-rich Spanish language instructional program to Dever families that want this instructional approach.

We recognize that some Dever families are native Spanish speakers who want their students to have an opportunity to further their Spanish language development and pursue a curriculum that honors their heritage. Other Dever families are not native Spanish speakers and may want their students to learn Spanish as an additional language. For all interested families, the Dever turnaround approach will offer a content-rich Spanish language program that will incorporate multicultural history, geography, literature, arts and music into language instruction.

For parents who are interested, Dever will provide daily Spanish language instruction to students. Students will be grouped for this instructional block according to their Spanish language proficiency. Dever is employing Spanish speaking teachers for this component of the program. Dever's Spanish program will be developed to meet the expectations of the Massachusetts Foreign Languages Curriculum Framework and include best practices and strategies used in exemplary programs currently being implemented state-wide and across the nation.

In future years, as students' foundational language skills become embedded, Blueprint and ESE will examine the feasibility of transitioning to an alternative language acquisition program (e.g. transitional bilingual education, dual language/two-way immersion) if such a program could further advance students' language skills. Transitioning to such a program would be contingent on the establishment of conditions such as policies to maintain students in the program for multiple years; practices to require proficiency in both languages for students entering the program in later grades; structures to support students who do not speak the language(s) of instruction; and development of above-grade level course work so that advanced students can remain at Dever.

- *Items regarding previous or new data submissions*
The Local Stakeholder Group has provided data for ESE and Blueprint to review, both accompanying its submission of recommendations in January, and again with the submission of its modifications proposal. Both ESE and Blueprint appreciate receiving all of the data that have been submitted, and have reviewed all of the materials provided by the LSG. As we looked across all data sources, we have not seen the level of rapid academic improvement that is needed in order to turn around Dever Elementary School.
- *Items regarding review of existing Dever materials, structures, and programs*
In addition to our consideration of the data submitted by the Local Stakeholder Group, Blueprint has been present at the school, looking extensively at the academic program and gathering evidence to help formulate our strategies for the turnaround plan. The strategies utilized by high-performing, urban, high-poverty schools, incorporated throughout the Level 5 turnaround plan, are not currently being implemented to maximum effectiveness at Dever.
- *Items comparing strategies in the preliminary turnaround plan with work currently or previously underway at Dever*
In its proposal, the Local Stakeholder Group indicates that some of the strategies in the Dever preliminary turnaround plan sound like work currently or previously conducted at the school (e.g. data strategies, ELD strategies). If you read the turnaround plans from Level 4 schools, you will find some of these same strategies. What we have learned over the past few years of turnaround (and captured in our *Emerging Practices Report*, available at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/turnaround/default.html>), is that intense focus, consistent implementation, and effective execution of similar strategies has made the difference for schools exiting from Level 4 status. Over the period of the receivership, I will work with Blueprint to concentrate our efforts on achieving this same high level of focus, implementation, and execution at Dever.