# 2019 Chronically Underperforming School End-of-Year Report: UP Academy Holland, Boston, Massachusetts

**Receiver: UP Education Network**

## 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 UP Academy Holland

Throughout the 2019 school year, UP Academy Holland (hereafter, UAH) staff focused on social-emotional learning, specifically the implementation of the new Open Circle curriculum; access for all students through the universal design for learning (UDL); and guided reading. Teachers worked on these priorities collaboratively during daily “drop everything and prep” (DEAP) time or during their additional daily 40-minute planning period that was used for team meetings with their dean of curriculum and instruction (DCI), one-on-one check-ins with their DCI, or collaborating with special education teachers. In addition, staff had weekly professional development and week-at-a-glance meetings every Wednesday, during which teachers planned out the next week’s lessons. Professional development was primarily focused on the three priorities of social-emotional learning, UDL, and guided reading. The structure of professional development varied between whole-school and small-group, grade-specific sessions. Following the weekly professional development, implementation of the week’s topic was monitored through classroom walkthroughs.

The school continued to emphasize the importance of data-driven instruction. School leaders helped increase teachers’ data-use skills by using the Cognitive Engagement rubric for data analysis and providing DCI-led coaching on this rubric. Staff at all levels analyzed data from multiple sources, including interim benchmark assessments, classwork, student referrals, and suspension data. School leaders consistently did a “leadership-level analysis of the data” and then turned over the analysis to the teachers to make lesson plans and progress monitor students, including reviewing daily exit tickets, and then sorting students into skill-based small groups for upcoming lessons.

UAH also continued to have strong evidence of a distributed leadership model and promoted both proactive retention efforts and smooth transitions between roles (e.g., teachers moving into more leadership positions). The DCIs served as instructional leaders in the building and, when the principal announced she was transitioning out of the role for the upcoming school year to a network level position, one of the DCIs was tapped to move into the principal role. Staff were receptive to the February announcement of the leadership change, and onboarding has included weekly meetings between the outgoing and incoming principals. The open DCI role will be filled by a current teacher at the school. UAH also has implemented proactive retention efforts by considering which staff are ready for growth or promotion opportunities, and, as of early May, more than 90 percent of the staff who were invited back have accepted. School leadership has focused on improving hiring practices to bring in people who demonstrate proficiency and meet the necessary qualifications unique to UAH. Finally, school leaders have developed transition supports for staff new to the building to ensure that they are well supported from the beginning of their time at UAH.

## End-of-Year Findings

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

UAH continued to focus on creating a culture of urgency, high expectations, accountability, excellence, and achievement. During the 2019 school year, UAH staff focused on the school’s priorities of “access for all” through UDL and Open Circle. Both of these priorities were chosen to help increase student engagement in school overall, through promoting more appealing and accessible instruction and build relationships between staff and students. During the annual monitoring site visit, one teacher shared that combining the Open Circle and UDL priorities has made the classrooms “a place where more kids want to be, so more kids are staying in the room.”

UAH has continued its commitment to common planning time for teachers. Teachers used the daily DEAP 20-minute period to collaborate within grade levels to adjust the next day’s lesson plan based on that day’s classroom data. Staff also had an additional daily 40-minute planning period that was used either for team meetings with their DCI, one-on-one check-ins with their DCI, individual planning, or collaborating with special education teachers. Most staff members worked with their coaches and DCIs in a solution-oriented way that was focused on improvement. Multiple teachers mentioned that their DCIs asked how they would like to receive feedback and tailored the delivery to their preferences (e.g., discussion, sticky notes, e-mail). One focus this year was on supporting first-year teachers; because fewer teachers left during this school year compared with previous years, school leaders feel like this support has been successful. Teachers also shared successful strategies with one another, through both videotaped lessons and peer observations. In addition, staff had weekly professional development and week-at-a-glance meetings every Wednesday in which teachers planned out the next week’s lessons.

Like collaboration and coaching, professional development was primarily focused on the schoolwide priorities of social-emotional learning and access for all students through UDL, although some weeks were focused on culturally responsive practices or guided reading, as the need was identified. In general, teachers had one hour of professional development each week that was led by DCIs and coaches and conducted in either large or small groups. Small-group sessions were usually divided by grade band so that teachers could focus on more grade-specific content. School leaders intentionally planned professional development to have through lines and follow a logical progression, with sessions building on previous ones as the year went on. Following the weekly professional development, implementation of the week’s topic was monitored through classroom walkthroughs.

School leaders also emphasized a culture of open, two-way communication with staff. Communication structures included weekly e-mails from the DCIs and the principal to share that week’s priority; any relevant feedback from staff and their response to this feedback; and in-person opportunities to communicate during team meetings, individual coaching sessions, and the “state of UAH” communicated in person with the entire staff before Wednesday professional development sessions. The principal also solicited regular feedback from staff through biweekly surveys; office hours during which she invited individual staff members in to discuss how things are going; and “chat and chews,” which were more open feedback sessions. In addition, school leaders kept a Google doc with teachers’ feedback on all topics throughout the year that tracked the suggestion or feedback from the teacher and what school leaders could do or were working on so that teachers knew that their feedback was heard, even if it was not always able to be implemented. Results from AIR’s instructional staff survey, distributed in February 2019, indicated that, on average, instructional staff agreed that systems were in place to foster open communication.

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

UAH’s primary instructional foci of guided reading and promoting access for all through UDL built on the previous year’s “brains on” priority. “Brains on” was the expectation that students are actively engaged throughout the lesson, engage with rigorous content, and have frequent opportunities for student discourse. The targeted focus on guided reading stemmed from noticing that many students were entering UAH already lagging behind and needing foundational reading gaps filled. The principal reported that one of the most impactful professional development sessions was focused on guided reading and how to prompt questions when students made errors in responses. Another especially impactful session focused on how to tackle skills related to cognitive engagement as a group. Following each session, data from instructional rounds showed improvement in teachers’ instruction using these skills.

One of the primary levers that UAH used to improve the quality of instruction and develop teachers as instructional leaders were the DCIs. The DCIs served as the lead evaluators for the teachers, conducted regular classroom observations, had regular one-on-one meetings with their teachers, and led common planning time meetings. DCIs held weekly or biweekly individual check-in meetings with each of their teachers. DCIs also identified teachers for additional assistance based on data, including performance in the classroom determined by observations of classroom instruction which take note of the percentage of students on task and student work outcomes. For teachers who received increased coaching, DCIs developed a plan that included a scope and sequence of what teachers would work on throughout the year “so that people can get the right-now view and the longer range view.” This more intensive coaching also included increased practicing and, sometimes, differentiated professional development. Although the DCIs have been an integral part of instructional support at UAH for years, this year the school added two instructional coaches, one focused on reading instruction and one focused on social-emotional learning. These coaches also were classroom teachers and provided an added level of nonevaluative support for teachers as well as performing high-level observations across classrooms focused on the implementation of guided reading and Open Circle.

UAH continued to emphasize the importance of data-informed decision making and refined this process to further support student growth. As in previous years, teachers tracked data from a variety of sources (e.g., STEP literacy data, Fundations, Measures of Academic Progress, and ANet [Achievement Network] assessments, and classwork). Teachers and DCIs at UAH work together to use a variety of data to monitor student progress and determine next steps in instruction to meet student needs. Teachers shared that they feel much clearer this year about how and when to monitor data and understand how their implementation of the instructional expectations are being monitored when the DCIs observe their classrooms. Teachers said that the DCIs and other school leaders also are reviewing their students’ data, such as STEP data, notetaking from guided reading, and ANet. For the next school year, all UP Education Network schools, including UAH, are planning to switch from using STEP data to Fountas & Pinnell for reading. The principal is still determining how this change will impact the school’s ability to assess student needs because, as she reported, the Fountas & Pinnell data are less detailed for phonics than the STEP data.

UAH leaders also determined that the current early grades literacy curriculum needed to be revamped. Therefore, a group of staff, including the current and incoming principals and the first-grade dean, is reviewing the most highly rated curricula and will choose the one that will be the best fit for UAH and the school’s population in the 2020 school year. School leaders decided not to create their own curriculum to ensure higher rigor and sustainability. In addition to this new curriculum, the school will continue to focus on building the skills of all teachers in implementing guided reading and UDL for the next school year.

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

UAH continued to work to ensure that all students received appropriate supports for their learning and success. This year, all students participated in guided reading groups and, depending on students’ individual needs, may have participated in Leveled Literacy Intervention, Just Words or other Wilson Reading System interventions, or Lexia. For mathematics, teachers pulled small groups to work on targeted skills, and some also used online programs for some students, including Khan Academy, MobyMax, and Zearn; however, school leaders noted the need for additional mathematics interventions and indicated that they are in the beginning stages of identifying those. Next year, UAH plans to add a third interventionist, which will mean every grade level will have a literacy interventionist to work with students who need specific supports consistent with Tier 3 challenges.

Multiple UAH teams met regularly to examine student data to determine needed supports or interventions. Students were given Tier 1 supports, including in-class accommodations for approximately six weeks. If progress was not seen, a student was then reviewed at a Tier 2 student support meeting. The student support team looked at referral data to discuss behavioral and academic needs, determine root causes of the identified needs, and review schoolwide trends to problem-solve on a larger level. There were two levels of targeted intervention teams—one focused on Tier 2 supports, and the other on the most intensive, or Tier 3, student needs. Teachers could identify and refer students to these teams, either as a grade-level team during data days or individually, such as during meetings with their DCI. These teams each met biweekly and reconvened every four to six weeks to monitor students’ progress. During this review meeting, staff discussed whether the student achieved the goals, and, if so, the student would be moved back to Tier 1. If the student had not improved, the team moved the student to Tier 3 supports. The teams consisted of culture team members, interventionists, DCIs, and referring teachers.

UAH used a model where English language learner (ELL) students were not always grouped by English language development level or native language, and they also had the opportunity to learn from and interact with students who were at higher language levels or non-ELL students. Students were taught by an English as a second language (ESL) teacher who specialized in their grade level as well as by dually certified teachers. ELL students received either pull-out or push-in services, depending on their English language development level and what other supports they received. ELLs at Levels 1 and 2 received pull-out services whereas Level 3s usually received instruction via push-in ESL. ELLs at Levels 4 and 5 were in classrooms with ESL-licensed homeroom teachers and received their 45 minutes of instruction embedded in their English language arts instruction. Regardless of the setting, ELL students received supports aligned with ESE’s guidance. ESL and general education teachers also collaborated daily during DEAP time about the language objectives and vocabulary to bring in during the upcoming lessons to ensure student needs were being met across all settings.

Students with disabilities at UAH received specific supports that were planned and implemented based on their individualized education program (IEP) goals. UAH continued to increase the school’s inclusion model, moving more students out of substantially separate settings and into inclusion classrooms. They also increased their special education staffing, with the goal of having extra support in the inclusion classrooms. When special education teachers pushed into other classrooms to work with small groups, they would include students who did not have an IEP join their group if the instructional goals for that individual student aligned with the IEP goals of the students already in the group. In addition, school leaders focused on increasing instructional focus and quality in their three substantially separate classrooms for students with low cognitive abilities who were not yet ready for inclusion. To stay on top of emerging special education needs, staff held a weekly special education referral meeting to discuss students whose parents or teachers requested an evaluation and then create immediate action steps. UAH leaders are planning more differentiated professional development for special education teachers next year to continue to increase the quality of their instruction.

### Turnaround Practice 4: School Climate and Culture

School leaders at UAH continued to prioritize social-emotional learning during the 2019 school year. As mentioned in Turnaround Practice 1, UAH adopted a new social-emotional curriculum, Open Circle, to assist in proactively building positive relationships between students and teachers. This curriculum was chosen because it is discussion based and focused on developing skills that people can use at all times, not just when one is in crisis, including developing positive self-talk, interpersonal skills, and what to do when encountering problems. Teachers shared that they saw changes in the students since implementing Open Circle and pointed to specific examples of how students used the skills being taught, such as sharing how they felt, discussing what problems they were seeing in their classrooms, and showing empathy. Teachers implemented Open Circle daily during morning meetings and closing circles. Teachers also received observations and individualized feedback from a coach focused on social-emotional learning. This coach also documented trends in Open Circle implementation across teams or grade levels and shared these data with school leaders so that they could revise professional development plans as needed. In addition, staff received training on how to have restorative conversations to be able to understand underlying causes of students’ behaviors.

This year, school leaders reported a huge improvement in the student culture and a noticeable decrease in student referral and suspension data. The school’s conduct expectations were tied into their core TIGER values: teamwork, integrity, grit, engagement, and respect. Staff at UAH focused heavily on basic Tier 1 management skills. Leaders tracked the implementation of those management skills and shared the results, providing “pictures of excellence” to the staff to show practices their colleagues were using successfully. For the past several years, schoolwide instructional observations conducted as a part of AIR’s Monitoring Site Visit shows UAH scoring in the high range for the negative climate dimension, which means there is an absence of expressed negativity shown by teachers and students. These data support UAH’s goals to improve culture and climate for both teachers and students. During AIR’s Monitoring Site Visit this year, instructional staff survey results indicated that, on average, staff agreed that the school provided clear expectations for student conduct, monitored school climate data, and consistently supported students’ social-emotional development. UAH also offered a variety of interventions and supports for students demonstrating conduct challenges, including Check-In/Check-Out and small social skills groups, which helped students with a variety of challenges, including working on how to use their words to solve problems and be respectful with their behavior, helping students make friends and initiate conversations, how to calm down and recognize feelings, and how to follow general rules and be respectful in the school. In addition, for conduct issues related to self-regulation, the occupational therapist offered students direct support, including the use of a sensory room.

UAH continued to make family engagement a priority by implementing a variety of initiatives to promote family involvement in the school. The family engagement coordinator at UAH continued to be the primary staff member responsible for coordinating family events and overseeing the two family leadership groups—the school site council and the parent council—at the school. These two groups experienced larger and more meaningful participation this year compared with past years. For example, the parent council helped determine that a new vendor was needed to make student uniforms more affordable. UAH also held two feedback sessions for families during the year and conducted monthly family surveys, both electronically and on paper, throughout the year. Some of the family and community engagement activities that UAH hosted throughout the year included the orientation, open houses, potlucks, parent conferences, spirit days at the end of each month, and Black History Month celebrations. Staff also tried holding events at various times of the day to determine if a specific time can maximize family participation.

One of the biggest additions to family engagement this year was the introduction of the ClassDojo application to allow teachers and other staff to communicate directly with their students’ parents. The principal reported that this has been helpful in boosting family engagement in the school because it allows staff to quickly give a lot more positive feedback about students. The application also includes the ability to translate messages automatically, which helps alleviate a potential communication barrier. In addition, UAH used a company called Cross Cultural Interpreting Services that provides interpreter and translation services for any communication the staff were not able to handle in-house. Ten minutes also were set aside daily for “drop everything and call” time, wherein teachers could make and log parent telephone calls, primarily related to attendance.

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)