*****Massachusetts Department of***

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

### 75 Pleasant Street, Malden, Massachusetts 02148-4906 Telephone: (781) 338-3000 TTY: N.E.T. Relay 1-800-439-2370

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| Jeffrey C. Riley  *Commissioner* |  |

# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Michael Loconto, Chair, Boston School Committee |
| **From:** | Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner |
| **Date:** | April 3, 2020 |
| **Subject:** | Quarter 3 Update on Chronically Underperforming Schools |

The following is the third of four quarterly progress updates to be produced this year on Paul A. Dever Elementary School and UP Academy Holland, as two of the four chronically underperforming schools, and their implementation of their school turnaround plans. The updates in this report are focused on activities from January and February 2020. The narrative for this progress update has been provided by the School Empowerment Network, based on classroom observations (the second in the series of three) led by that group during January and describes progress made since the first set of observations in late October. The focus of these updates is the instructional core (curriculum, pedagogy and assessments). A final annual review is due in June 2020, pending status of COVID-19.

Please share this report with the other members of the Boston School Committee.

**Chronically Underperforming Schools**

In the fall of 2013, four schools were designated as chronically underperforming schools 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, Morgan Full Service Community School (Morgan) in Holyoke, and John Avery Parker Elementary School (Parker) in New Bedford.

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

Narrative Prepared by School Empowerment Network

**School Strength**

Area of Strength   
Curriculum

*Description*:  
Dever school leaders have established a common curriculum at every grade level which is aligned to standards. On a weekly basis, teachers meet in teams with a content lead or instructional coach for English language arts (ELA) and math common planning time (CPT) to collaboratively plan weekly curriculum maps, daily lesson plans, and learning targets. Teachers and content leads devote a portion of this time to refining lesson plans, analyzing student work, developing text-dependent questions and learning tasks. Teachers are developing a shared definition of rigor as well. School leaders, content leads, and teachers are improving processes for planning backward from learning targets and high-quality student work. However, more work, especially in the area of whole staff professional development, is needed.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus # 1

Pedagogy

*Description:*

Since October, Dever school leaders have taken steps to establish a shared set of beliefs about how students learn best. As a result of these action steps and the Dever school community’s renewed focus on instructional beliefs and priorities, school leaders and teachers are now able to articulate those beliefs and priorities. Instructional planning is more tightly focused on ensuring that classroom instruction aligns to both grade-level learning standards and schoolwide beliefs about how students learn best. Key practices aligned to the beliefs are becoming more evident across classrooms.

This common set of beliefs includes the belief that students learn best when they are provided with standards-aligned curriculum and materials as well as when teachers plan toward achieving clear grade-level learning targets. There is room, however, to expand the set further by including beliefs about the teacher’s role in learning and approaching instruction; the necessary level of student engagement in and ownership of learning; the kinds of learning tasks which are most likely to result in learning; and, both the level of thinking and amount of rigor learning tasks must elicit in order to result in learning that *lasts*.

Area of Focus # 2

Assessment

*Description:*

Since October, Dever school leaders and staff have made progress relative to assessment. Leaders clarified schoolwide beliefs about how students learn best and identified checking for understanding and actionable feedback as instructional priorities. School leaders have communicated concrete expectations for the use of learning targets. Assessment for learning has been incorporated into weekly planning meetings and, the Instructional Learning Team (ILT) has conducted learning walks focused on the use of learning targets posted in classrooms.

Teachers now work with instructional coaches to plan backward from grade-level standards and from student work exemplars. Teachers are more effectively assessing for learning strategies in their classrooms using effective checking for understanding (CFU) practices. However, school leaders have not yet communicated concrete expectations for the use of assessment for learning strategies. As a result, CFU strategies are not yet being consistently utilized across classrooms to inform instruction and planning; similarly, students are not yet consistently receiving actionable feedback.

**UP Academy Holland, Boston, MA**

Narrative Prepared by School Empowerment Network

**School Strength**

Area of Strength

Leveraging Resource

*Description:*

UP Academy Holland (UAH) leaders have selected common schoolwide and grade-level assessments and have established an assessment calendar. Assessments (which include ANet math, ANet ELA, Amplify, and curriculum-based interim assessments) are used by UAH leaders and teacher teams to determine student progress to goals. Teachers are aware of key dates of the assessment calendar and plan instruction toward common and interim assessments. In addition, UAH leaders have established a calendar and a set of protocols for analyzing data associated with grade-level and schoolwide assessments. Teachers and leaders know their assessment data well, with teacher teams using the results of common assessments to adjust instruction and intervention. UAH leaders have worked to ensure that teachers’ assessment practices more consistently reflect the use of ongoing checks for understanding (CFUs) so that teachers make effective and timely adjustments to instruction.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus # 1

Curriculum

*Description:*

Since October, UAH leaders and teachers have made progress in the area of curriculum. In particular, teachers in the early grades are utilizing the support structures and strategies embedded in the EL Education curriculum to support English learners (EL) and students with disabilities (SWD). At other grade levels, support for accessing grade-level content and standards has improved but is not as consistent. This support is more dependent on teacher moves than on planned curricular supports for all learners.

A recent professional development session focused on supporting all students to access curriculum. In addition, special educators and paraprofessionals are now more active in their support of all learners. However, it is not evident that UAH leaders have identified a core set of strategies to support students who are below grade level and set clear expectations for general education teachers’ use of these strategies.

Area of Focus # 2

Pedagogy

*Description:*

Since October, UAH leaders and teachers have made some progress relative to pedagogy. Although not yet consistent enough across the school, classroom instructional practice is becoming more closely aligned to the school’s beliefs about how students learn best. Tasks which required higher-level thinking were evident in a number of classrooms during observations.

While students in more classrooms were provided with high-quality tasks and given independent work time to productively struggle, teacher instructional choices and/or lesson plans in a number of classrooms either reduced the rigor of tasks or broke tasks down into sub-tasks which shifted the learning focus from the high-level thinking task to completion of a lower-level sub-task. Students would benefit from more opportunities to utilize sub-skills in concert to address complex, standards-aligned tasks.

UAH leaders attribute some portion of the misalignment between classroom instruction and the school community’s beliefs about how students learn best to shortcomings in the written curriculum that is currently in use. Beginning spring 2020, leaders plan to engage in a process to assess and select new curriculum to help increase alignment of instruction to the school’s beliefs about how students learn best. Also needed are professional development experiences for teachers which focus on identifying the level of thinking required to complete a task and on ensuring that students have daily opportunities to engage with the highest-level thinking in a task.