*****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:** | April 19, 2022 |
| **Subject:** | Quarter 3 Update on Chronically Underperforming Schools |

This month, I am presenting the third of four quarterly progress updates to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) on the four chronically underperforming schools and their implementation of their school turnaround plans. These updates are focused on activities from November 2021 through January 2022. As described in the first two quarterly reports[[1]](#footnote-1), the narratives for these progress updates have been provided by the School Empowerment Network, based on classroom observations led by that group during that timeframe. The focus of these updates is the instructional core (curriculum, pedagogy, and assessments). A final annual review will be presented in June 2022 and will be based on the summative school quality reviews conducted in May.

**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: Paul A. Dever Elementary School (Dever) and John P. Holland Elementary School (UP Academy Holland) 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**

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1

Pedagogy

*Description*:

Pedagogy has become a strength among the three instructional core indicators. In most classrooms, teachers are enacting the Dever school leaders’ vision for instruction through both the schoolwide instructional model – Ignite, Chew, Chunk, and Review (ICCR) – and teacher actions to support social-emotional learning (SEL).

In the majority of classrooms, teaching aligns with the grade-level curricula. In addition, in most classrooms, instructional practices are culturally responsive. In all classrooms, planned instructional strategies emphasize time-on-task, eliciting student thinking, or building independence. In many classrooms, teachers are fully utilizing these strategies. For example, in a math lesson, one group of students *discovered* that a smaller number in the denominator can actually mean a larger piece of a whole while comparing one-third to one-sixth. These students had ample time to build an understanding of equivalent fractions based upon part-to-whole relationships.

Moving forward, school leaders should continue to make time for teachers to visit one another’s classrooms. School leaders should continue to provide feedback to teachers frequently. They should use the tracker to monitor teacher progress, note trends, and plan professional development priorities.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1

Assessment

*Description*:

Some grade level teams are utilizing common assessments to measure progress toward goals. Teachers administer the common unit assessments embedded in the selected math and English language arts (ELA) curricula. Based on feedback from the previous SQR site visit, leaders developed the “Dever Data Hub,” a dashboard to provide a comprehensive view of student progress over the year. The data hub currently includes MAP assessment data along with data from math, ELA, and science unit assessments. Teachers, however, are not yet consistently utilizing assessment data to drive improvements to instruction. The data hub represents exam scores but not a breakdown of performance by standard. This results in inconsistent use of the data to adjust curricula, instruction, and, in some cases, intervention.

The frequency and quality of daily formative assessment practices (such as “conferrals,” checks for understanding, or exit tickets) vary across the school, as does the analysis of data collected during instruction. In a few classrooms, it was unclear how the teacher was checking for understanding during the lesson. In at least one classroom, teachers missed opportunities to address student misunderstandings. In another classroom, while students worked independently, the teacher circulated but focused on work completion rather than on gauging student understanding.

Moving forward, school leaders should communicate common expectations for formative assessment during lessons. They should build the capacity of every team and every teacher to use ongoing assessment to inform adjustments to curricula and instruction.

Area of Focus #2

Curriculum

*Description*:

The school community has selected core curricula including Contexts for Learning (CFL) in math and Expeditionary Learning (EL) and StudySync in ELA. Daily written lesson plans are beginning to provide diverse learners access to curricula. A new, co-teaching lesson plan template requires co-teachers to identify each teacher’s role and anticipate what students will do in each lesson segment. This approach offers a start to planning for co-teaching, but does not yet include strategic scaffolding for particular students or comprehensive educator support so that all students meet the standards. This level of planning for co-teaching would promote cognitive engagement for diverse learners.

During common planning time, teachers preview upcoming math units and lessons, making adjustments with support from the math coach. By analyzing the beginning of the unit and the number theory involved, some teachers have developed a deeper understanding of the applicable standards. There is greater alignment to standards in math than in ELA.

Currently, the school is utilizing a variety of ELA curricular resources across grade levels. Selecting one common resource would support co-planning and vertical alignment in the same way that the selection of CFL has fostered this alignment in math. Teachers are in the initial stages of implementing the full EL writing program. In ELA settings, teachers use a variety of graphic organizers to support the writing process. In one room students wrote about the procedure they used to build a block structure. They articulated the process verbally but struggled to write about it on their own. Samples of student work in ELA demonstrate varying levels of complexity in both tasks and responses.

Overall, the selection of a high-quality math curriculum has begun to offer all students access to grade-level content. In ELA, the implementation and use of curricular materials varies more widely by grade level.

**UP Academy Holland, Boston, MA**

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1

Assessment

*Description*:

Assessment continues to be an area of strength for the school. School leaders and teachers have developed progress-monitoring tools and protocols for triangulating data. Teachers are knowledgeable about student performance levels. The team has deepened this work by exploring the purpose of current assessments, analyzing performance data, and determining the impact on student achievement.

Common literacy assessments include Expeditionary Learning (EL) skills inventory, EL unit assessments, and DIBELS. Math assessments include Illustrative Math (IM) unit and pre-assessments and AIMS web. ANet and MAP assessments are administered in upper grades only.

Most teachers are utilizing the data from common assessments to adjust curricula and instruction. Teachers review microphase data, pinpoint where their students fall on the continuum of skills development, and determine foci for future lessons. Teachers use a template to document which students have early, middle, and late skill levels. In several classrooms there was evidence that teachers analyze the growth between microphases and plan lessons and groupings based on student progress.

Across classrooms, teachers consistently utilize checks for understanding and student self-assessment. Teachers make adjustments to meet students’ learning needs. Teachers have improved their planning for the critical moments in the lesson by checking for understanding and taking time to revisit the learning target. Furthermore, the selected core math and ELA curricula include opportunities for peer-to-peer feedback referencing rubrics and self-assessment checklists. Teachers are beginning to connect these practices to setting goals for discrete skill development.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1

Curriculum

*Description:*

The school team has selected high-quality curricula for math (Illustrative Math) and ELA (EL Education Curriculum). Teacher teams prepare to deliver the curriculum through Drop Everything and Plan (DEAP) protocols, including analyzing the important task of the lesson and determining engagement strategies to be utilized.

Written lesson plans guide daily classroom practice; however, some lessons showed gaps between planning and implementation. In some rooms, teachers consult the written plan as they move through the lesson. In other classrooms, teachers do not utilize the higher-order questions in the lesson plan. As a result, in one classroom for example, the questions assigned during the turn-and-talk time required lower-level depth of knowledge (DOK).

Teachers and teams do not consistently refine all lesson plans utilizing student work and data, leading to uneven access to the curricula. The selected curricula include suggestions for scaffolding skills. While there is evidence that teachers plan for scaffolds, teachers’ success in implementing them varies across classrooms. In some rooms, scaffolds lower the rigor of the lesson and result in students copying rather than engaging in their own thinking.

While curricula and academic tasks align with end-of-course assessments and emphasize rigorous habits and higher-order thinking skills, teachers are still doing the majority of the thinking or not providing enough time for students to grapple with concepts. Student discussion and work products should demonstrate the habits of listening for understanding, problem-solving, applying past knowledge to new situations, and making connections. The curricular materials selected promote these habits. Beyond short turn-and-talk discussions with a partner, teachers are not fully leveraging the opportunities provided by the curriculum for students to engage in extended, rigorous discussion and grapple with standards-aligned tasks.

Area of Focus #2

Pedagogy

*Description:*

Leaders and teachers share a vision for instruction. This vision includes the beliefs that students learn best when they engage with rigorous content; when teachers ensure a positive learning environment; when students do the heavy cognitive lifting themselves; and when there are opportunities for student-to-student discourse.

Despite these beliefs, the pedagogy in classrooms is still teacher-controlled. Opportunities for higher-level student thinking and rigorous discussion are both rare and short. For example, a task in one math lesson asked students to create part-to-whole relationships with fractions, but the teacher guided them through a single way of finding equivalent fractions rather than providing time for them to develop independent strategies and share them with one another.

Teachers are not employing consistent approaches to monitoring student thinking during the lessons, particularly during independent and group work time. Most monitoring focuses on time-on-task. One educator in an upper-grade classroom awarded points for high-level student thinking, suggesting a model for others to follow. However, across classrooms visited, most teachers spent between three and five minutes monitoring students as they worked. Most lessons did not provide time for students to chew on the work and make meaning for extended periods.

Moving forward, school leaders should continue to support teachers in prioritizing and enacting rigorous thinking tasks.

**Morgan Full Service Community School, Holyoke, MA**

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1

Assessment

*Description:*

Morgan school leaders name *daily formative assessment* as an instructional priority, both for the school and for the Holyoke Public Schools (HPS) district. School leaders have more clearly communicated their expectations that teachers utilize two key formative assessment strategies – academic monitoring and exit tickets – to monitor each student’s progress. They have also supported teachers in planning adjustments to instruction based on formative assessments, with the goal of meeting all students’ learning needs. As a result, teachers in five of the six core content lessons visited were using one of the two formative assessment strategies to monitor student progress or to adjust instruction. For example, a first-grade team planned a math lesson specifically to address student misunderstandings evident in exit ticket data. In a second math lesson, a teacher monitored student independent work using a clipboard and monitoring sheet. When she noted that many students had not successfully solved the practice problems, she reviewed a strategy with the class. She then inserted two additional practice problems into the lesson and asked students to complete them using the strategy. In general, while there is still room for increasing the consistency of the practice, teachers are using the “aggressive monitoring” strategy more frequently and with greater fidelity than was observed in the fall.

School leaders have incorporated formative assessments into their teacher coaching system. Lesson feedback sessions with teachers now often include a review of exit tickets or other student work to determine the success of the lesson. This practice is focusing staff members’ attention on the results of their instruction in a way that is new for the school and that holds great promise for driving student achievement.

School leaders and teachers use assessments to group students for academic interventions. While teachers are enacting interventions with varying degrees of effectiveness, they are allocating more time to evidence-based small group work than reviewers have observed in the past.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1

Pedagogy

*Description*:

Morgan leaders have not communicated a consistent instructional vision over the last three years. They have recently identified a set of classroom look-fors. The set includes both new look-fors and look-fors that have been previously communicated to teachers. Among the look-fors are: students having “pen to paper” within the first few minutes of the start of each lesson; extended independent work time; every student engaging with standards-aligned texts and tasks; teachers engaging in “aggressive monitoring” of student progress; the use of daily “exit tickets” in math lessons; targeted small-group work; and strategies to provide all learners with access to rigorous, grade-level curriculum.

Leaders are more consistently checking to verify that teachers are enacting the look-fors. As a result, teacher teams are enacting some of the look-fors consistently across classrooms. Students do engage with standards-aligned tasks, content, and/or texts. Most teachers ensure that students quickly put “pen to paper.” In most classrooms, students have sufficient independent practice time. Teachers are utilizing the aggressive monitoring strategy.

Beyond the articulated classroom look-fors, lesson enactment continues to be inconsistent. In several classrooms, lesson pacing lacked urgency. Some lessons included more frontloading of content than necessary, resulting in lost practice time for students. Frequently, teachers miss opportunities to increase the number of students actively engaged in thinking (the “ratio”). And across classrooms, teachers miss opportunities to increase student participatory engagement in lessons.

Moving forward, school leaders should build teachers’ capacity to leverage those misconceptions they identify while using “aggressive monitoring.” They should develop, communicate and model look-fors related to ensuring that teachers maximize the level and amount of cognitive work every student is doing during each lesson.

Area of Focus #2

Curriculum

*Description***:**

Morgan school leaders and teachers have selected high-quality curricular materials for use across classrooms. EngageNY is the selected curriculum for math from pre-kindergarten to fourth grade. ELA teachers use EngageNY (PK), Making Meaning (K-2), and Expeditionary Learning (3-4), along with several supportive curricula such as West Virginia Phonics and SEEDS.

Every Morgan classroom includes a diversity of learners with varied needs. Students are engaging in small-group work and, when enacted effectively, the small-group instruction does support student learning needs. However, during core instructional blocks teachers are not yet consistently employing strategies for ensuring that every learner has access to the curricula and is cognitively engaged. As a result, in many classrooms students lose valuable instructional time. In some cases, students who do not have the supports they need to access the rigor of the curriculum lose time waiting for a teacher’s assistance. In other cases, students who have already mastered skills lose time waiting when they have completed tasks ahead of their classmates.

School leaders should continue to focus on ensuring that teachers understand school-wide expectations and consistently utilize research-based strategies so that every learner has access to the curriculum and is cognitively engaged. Similarly, it is essential that as school leaders communicate expectations, they make a clear distinction between “just-in-case” learning scaffolds (i.e., “over-scaffolding,” which is not beneficial) and “just-in-time” learning scaffolds (which are beneficial).

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

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1

Curriculum

*Description:*

Parker school leaders have selected curricula that are very well-aligned with the school-wide vision for instruction. These include the Contexts for Learning mathematics curriculum and the Wit and Wisdom ELA curriculum.

In order to support teacher planning, school leaders have provided an instructional planning framework called the Planning for Learning Cycle. Teachers have grown in their capacity to plan instruction with the Planning for Learning Cycle framework. As a result, lesson enactment more consistently aligns with the instructional vision. ELA lessons emphasize inquiry—a key component of the instructional vision—more consistently. In addition, school leaders have introduced an enhanced writing component to supplement the ELA curriculum. This has resulted in students spending more time on whole, complex writing tasks across grades.

The Planning for Learning Cycle requires teachers to think about and plan for “just-in-time” scaffolds and extensions to accelerate learning for all students. In addition, leaders and teachers have made use of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) “Acceleration Roadmap” to guide planning. As a result, across classes, teachers plan and enact strategies to support diverse learners in accessing the curriculum.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1

Assessment

*Description:*

School leaders and teacher teams have established a schoolwide assessment structure that includes common assessments across grades and classes. Teacher teams use common assessment results to determine student progress toward goals. Data from common assessments are available to staff members in a “data hub” that is updated regularly. In addition, teacher teams use assessment data to identify students in need of academic interventions.

There is limited evidence of teachers using assessment data to plan core instruction. For example, teachers stated that they have relied on formative assessments when selecting sample student work to be reviewed with the class. However, student work products and assessment data are not yet consistently centered in the instructional planning process. As a result, teachers may miss opportunities for re-teaching content or addressing students’ incomplete learning.

School leaders and teachers demonstrate an awareness of best practices in daily formative assessment. When speaking about expected assessment practices, for example, school leaders and teachers identify the use of entrance and exit tickets as an expectation. However, in classrooms visited teachers did not consistently use entrance and/or exit tickets in their instruction.

Similarly, school leaders articulate a vision for daily formative assessment. This vision is rooted in the construct of the “landscape of learning”—a spectrum of performance levels or skills development that children may demonstrate during a lesson. A landscape of learning for a mathematics lesson, for example, may begin with less-efficient strategies (like “counting up”) and continue through more-efficient strategies (like “counting by tens,” or finding “near doubles”). In this vision of assessment, teachers “confer” with students to gauge and record where on the landscape of learning a student is currently performing. This information allows them to determine prompts or tasks to use to move the student up the landscape. This vision for assessment, which has great potential for impacting student learning, has not yet produced consistent practices across classrooms. As a result, in many classrooms, teachers miss opportunities to adjust core instruction to support students.

Moving forward, school leaders should support teachers to enact their vision for daily formative assessment.

Area of Focus #2

Pedagogy

*Description:*

Practices related to this indicator were newly evident during this site visit. The impacts of these new practices on the quality of learning opportunities provided to students, particularly in ELA lessons, are also newly evident. School leaders should continue to focus on pedagogy to establish more deeply the practices discussed in the paragraphs to follow. Leaders should aim to sustain consistent practice through the remainder of the school year and into the next.

Parker school leaders began the year with a goal of elevating the quality of instruction in ELA to be on par with the quality of instruction in math. They derived this goal from student performance data, in particular data related to student comprehension in ELA. School leaders have continued to support teachers in shifting their pedagogical practices. They have engaged an outside consultant who has introduced an approach to ELA instruction based on Maria Estela Brisk’s work, *Engaging Students in Academic Literacies* (2015). This approach encourages sentence-level attention to complex text and the construction of genre-based writing.

As a result, ELA lessons align more closely to the school's instructional vision. Across classrooms, there is more evidence of students working on complex whole tasks. There is also more evidence of students engaging in collaborative “investigations” in ELA, similar to the authentic investigations students have frequently engaged in during math lessons over the past few years.

This evidence points to both clear progress *and* a continued need to stay focused on this area.

1. The first two quarterly reports for FY2022 can be found here:

   Q1 report: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2022/2021-10/item9.docx>

   Q2 report: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2022/2022-01/item8.docx> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)