*****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:** | June 22, 2022 |
| **Subject:** | FY2022 Quarter 4 Report for Chronically Underperforming Schools |

This month, I am presenting the fourth 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 May and June 2022. As described in the first quarterly report[[1]](#footnote-2), 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.

**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**

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1

Pedagogy

*Description*:

The Dever School has shown significant growth in developing teacher pedagogy from a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best. Teachers and administrators share an instructional vision that is informed by the research-based, culturally responsive teaching framework of Zaretta Hammond. Teachers are planning and enacting lessons that center student work, not teacher talk. They are designing learning experiences that prioritize relevance and real-world application, student interest and student choice.

The commitment to student investment in learning is part of the school’s larger vision of building student independence using Hammond’s framework. Dever teachers are intentionally focusing on students’ “learning to learn,” in addition to learning content. For example, in multiple classrooms observed, students engaged in small group collaboration, with structures and tools designed to build discourse skills. In other classrooms, students analyzed each other’s work and sometimes gave each other feedback using a rubric. As a result, students in all classrooms showed high levels of engagement in their learning.

Finally, pedagogy across all Dever classrooms reflects a belief in rigorous learning for all students, supported by differentiated access. In virtually every room observed, teachers carefully differentiated student tasks and their instructional moves based on student needs. Further, the school has worked to establish a small group instructional model to provide differentiated supports within the classroom. This shift toward small group instruction aligns with the schoolwide shift to co-teaching implemented this year, with a focus on the purposeful use of all educators in the classroom.

Area of Strength #2

Positive Learning Environment

*Description*:

A positive learning environment continues to be an area of strength for the Dever community. Families express how safe they feel sending their children to school, and how welcome they and their children feel when they enter the building. Students share that they feel safe in school and that mutual respect exists between teachers and students and among students. Administrators have articulated a clear vision for school culture and a set of expectations around supporting students by any means necessary.

The school has established structures to ensure that each student has a trusting relationship with at least one adult who helps to support attendance and social-emotional learning. These relationships serve as the foundation for accelerated social-emotional and academic growth. When asked how many adults in the building know them personally and serve as their champion, all students shared that there were five or more adults in the building that met this profile. Several families who have been longtime members of the community reported an increased level of communication from teachers this year about their children’s social emotional and academic growth. Other key structures include the wraparound coordination meetings and the schoolwide collaborative problem-solving approach.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1

Assessment

*Description*:

Assessment has been identified as an area of focus for the school in all three school quality reviews conducted this year. School administrators provided a series of professional development sessions this spring, focusing on checks for understanding and effective feedback during instruction.

During classroom visits, teachers demonstrated varying levels of skill in implementing these practices. In some classrooms, teachers asked rapid fire questions of students while allowing insufficient time for students to think and for teachers to capture the student thinking. In other rooms, teachers had collaboratively planned questions to monitor student thinking, but individual teachers did not consistently utilize those questions nor did they systematically capture student data for further analysis.

While the observed plans for teacher team meetings included data analysis, Dever teacher teams do not yet have a consistent system for administering common assessments, analyzing data collaboratively and planning instructional responses. As the teams develop more consistent practices of using data from formal, aligned assessments, they also will have more tools with which to develop students’ independent learning skills, including goal-setting and self-assessment.

Area of Focus #2

Teacher Support and Supervision

*Description*:

At the beginning of the year, Dever school administrators and coaches created structures to ensure that each educator in the building would receive observational feedback at least every two weeks.

Since the midyear review, the school has begun to capture the observational feedback in a tracking document shared among the administrator team. The observation tracker is organized around the school’s research-based instructional framework and schoolwide social-emotional learning structures. The administrator team has engaged in learning walks to calibrate their feedback to teachers, and teachers are able to identify action steps resulting from recent observations that have positively impacted their practices. In addition, the frequency of classroom observations has increased throughout the year, such that most teachers report that they are visited at least once a week. Coaches also have increased their side-by-side coaching supports by engaging targeted classrooms in coaching cycles.

The school should continue to prioritize teacher support and supervision in the upcoming school year and continue to refine practices in this area. Coaches will need additional support and feedback on their embedded coaching in classrooms to support the school’s ongoing pedagogical shifts. The leadership team’s observation tracker is still in its infancy, and the data can be used more effectively to inform priorities for professional development. Finally, the school needs to leverage its observational data to increase the impact of highly effective educators and teams by creating more opportunities for peer leadership and collaborative learning across grade levels.

Area of Focus #3

Teacher Teams and Distributed Leadership

*Description*:

The school holds a clear vision for teacher teaming structures, which includes weekly common planning meetings and schoolwide instructional leadership, culture and wraparound teams. These teams utilize clear structures such as collective agendas, facilitation by team lead or coach and time for feedback from participants. Teachers have meaningful voice in these meetings, with the Instructional Leadership Team playing a particularly important role in providing feedback on schoolwide professional development sessions to refine the implementation of practices.

To deepen the work of the teams, the next steps may include developing teacher teams to facilitate their meetings more independently. Teacher teams will benefit from using data more systematically to improve their practices and target the specific needs of student groupings.

**UP Academy Holland, Boston, MA**

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1

Teacher Teams and Distributed Leadership

*Description*:

Teacher teamwork is guided by clear goals and processes and supported by established structures for collaboration. Teachers, coaches and school administrators all articulate that teacher collaboration currently is focused on increasing student thinking. During teacher team meetings that are facilitated by coaches, teams consistently look at data and use protocols to review lessons and units to identify possible student misconceptions and the most worthwhile tasks in the curriculum. Coaches and school administrators describe how coaching and observational feedback help determine the focus of team meetings.

Moving forward, school administrators should ensure that teachers are learning how to facilitate their collaborative planning meetings more independently. This will be an important topic for the Instructional Leadership Team to grapple with: What will be the evidence that teacher teams are taking on more of the cognitive lift and transferring skills to their independent planning practices?

Area of Strength #2

Teacher Support and Supervision

*Description*:

The UAH team has developed clear systems and cycles of teacher support and supervision. Administrators have established the expectation that each teacher receive observational feedback at least biweekly, while teachers identified as needing accelerated growth receive weekly observations and feedback. Teachers uniformly attest to receiving meaningful feedback, including clear next steps framed as “grows” alongside their “glows.” One teacher articulated that feedback always includes what she did well, what she could improve upon, and why this improvement will be impactful.

The coaching team reviews observation data once a week, and school administrators share schoolwide trends on a weekly basis either through the “State of UAH” email or during staff meetings. In addition, school administrators and coaches use teacher observation data to inform their planning of professional development. The current focus on student thinking emerged directly from classroom observations, in which coaches and administrators noted trends of over-scaffolding and of teachers prioritizing task completion over student thinking. School administrators and coaches then moved to leverage coach-supported team meetings to focus on increasing student thinking using a facilitated planning process. Moving forward, administrators should consider how to provide teachers with the space and supports to pursue this instructional priority more independently.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1

High Expectations

*Description:*

In the area of high expectations for staff within this indicator, teacher reflections during the visit revealed that some key underpinnings of the school culture are not clear enough to teachers. For example, teachers had a hard time articulating the school’s beliefs about how students learn best. Teachers also described uneven behavioral expectations for students across grade levels and in different parts of the school day, specifically during lunch, recess and the “encore” block. They also shared that as the school culture transitions from a “no excuses” model to a more restorative approach, the staff needs the new expectations to be communicated clearly to both staff and students. Students also spoke about a lack of respect shown by some students toward teachers and peers. Classroom observations confirmed that teachers did not reinforce basic behavioral expectations consistently for all students.

In the area of high expectations for students within this indicator, students were not able to clearly describe their progress on their assignments, their areas of strength or areas for growth. They did not understand how teachers gave them feedback or possess clear ideas about where they needed to improve in any content area.

Area of Focus #2

Pedagogy

*Description:*

School administrators and some teachers articulate a clear, concrete vision of schoolwide instructional practices and a new focus on increasing student thinking during instruction. While it is very evident that school staff have embraced student thinking as a priority, the majority of classroom observations still did not show evidence of increased student thinking. There were a few noteworthy exceptions in which teachers pushed for more student thinking. For example, during an English language arts block, students engaged in partner discussions to construct the meanings of certain photographs, using evidence from the photographs. The teacher communicated the expectation for students to elaborate their thinking both within their partnerships and when sharing with the class.

In most classrooms observed, however, teachers over-scaffolded tasks, did the thinking for students, or did not require high-level thinking at all. For example, in one classroom a teacher asked students to support reasoning with evidence from a text. Before posing questions to the students, however, the teacher had already recorded reasons on a chart, had placed stars next to reasons that had supporting evidence in the text, and directed students to use the chart and her stars – thereby removing much of the thinking from the task for students.

Area of Focus #3

Curriculum

*Description:*

Both school administrators and teachers believe in the importance of rigorous curriculum. Teachers define rigor as “high quality grade-level content or above, putting thinking on the students and having them do the heavy lifting with support, and thinking critically – not just answering a question but thinking deeply.” While teachers are motivated to elevate student thinking and are utilizing rigorous, standards-aligned curricula, they are not yet able to consistently enact the curriculum in ways that give students rigorous thinking opportunities. Classroom observations revealed a variety of missed opportunities to push for more student thinking, including teachers prescribing certain methods of solving problems; not requiring students to use grade-level academic vocabulary; or cueing students to select correct responses.

There is some evidence of teachers beginning to plan intentional supports for student thinking, such as planning for “why” questions and creating more time for students and teachers to listen to student thinking. Principal Thompson has identified a necessary shift for teachers to move away from “feeling successful if students can complete a task versus feeling successful because there is evidence of kids doing the sticky thinking.” As teachers become more comfortable allowing students to purposefully struggle with learning, they will become more adept at avoiding the pitfalls of over-scaffolding tasks for students. One teacher was able to articulate this shift as follows: “In Expeditionary Learning, they get many at bats with one [concept]…[so] that I don’t get too stressed if the first time they don’t understand….I know the next lesson will give them [another] chance and by the fourth lesson I will have good data to step in and use appropriate scaffolds based on what they are understanding and what they are not.”

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

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1

Teacher Support and Supervision

*Description:*

Morgan Elementary School administrators observe and coach teachers frequently and provide tangible and actionable feedback. Teachers report that observation with coaching occurs once per week. They can provide concrete examples of meaningful feedback they have received for improving their practices. Teachers also report frequent instructional walkthroughs conducted by members of the administrator team. After these walkthroughs, school administrators share data and feedback focused on “academic monitoring,” which is a current schoolwide instructional priority.

An Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) comprised of administrators and coaches meets regularly to review observational data. Administrators can provide examples of adjustments they have made to their supervision and coaching supports to meet a specific teacher’s needs. Administrators also identify concrete examples of how they have used observational data to inform professional development planning aligned with instructional priority areas.

Teachers express high levels of trust in and respect for Principal Moguel and the administrator team. They report that they feel highly supported by school administrators and that the feedback they receive does not feel threatening, but instead is helping them grow.

Area of Strength #2

Leveraging Resources

*Description:*

Morgan School administrators make strategic decisions about their use of resources, including how they use funding, time, and space in pursuit of schoolwide goals and initiatives. In January 2022, for example, the ILT proposed a revised school-day schedule in order to leverage more time for professional development and instructional planning. A shortened teaching schedule on Wednesdays now affords uninterrupted blocks of time for professional development and planning while students receive additional enrichment classes. Teachers, coaches, and administrators spoke about the positive impact of this change. For example, teachers shared that this dedicated planning time allows for grade-level teams to collaborate with special education and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, thus giving the grade-level teams access to the specialist teachers’ expertise while planning supports for all students.

Administrators identify strategic resource decisions they have made to increase reading intervention supports, including consolidating two prekindergarten classrooms and reassigning paraprofessionals to provide small-group and individual reading interventions in other grade levels. Coaches also have influenced resource allocations to better align resources to school instructional goals. For example, the kindergarten through grade 2 literacy coach made a decision to purchase content-rich, decodable texts aligned to the school’s phonics curriculum when teachers noted that there were not enough high-quality decodable books in their libraries. Similarly, the math coach was able to purchase supplementary materials in support of small-group instruction.

Area of Strength #3

Goals and Action Plans

*Description:*

Morgan administrators maintain a concise list of clear, focused, school-level goals and action plans. Administrators and teacher teams monitor their progress toward goals and make adjustments in response to their progress measures. Recent goals have centered around academic monitoring, positive learning environment, and data meetings. The ILT and teachers report that professional development, team planning time, and leadership observations and feedback are currently focused on academic monitoring. Active academic monitoring was observed in five out of seven classrooms visited by reviewers.

Teachers and administrators monitor academic data at regular intervals, as evidenced by an extensive list of assessment data tracking documents. Teachers and administrators both provide examples of concrete actions taken in response to regularly reviewing data. For example, the literacy coach related a process for reviewing DIBELS data that led teachers to identify a gap in fluency and to incorporate instructional resources specific to targeting fluency.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1

Pedagogy

*Description*:

School administrators have identified a set of classroom look-fors in the “Morgan Instructional Vision” document. As noted above, teachers in five out of seven classrooms observed during core instruction implemented the academic monitoring strategy. In both classrooms where academic monitoring was not taking place, the teacher was actively facilitating small-group instruction. However, some look-fors were not observed in any classroom. While teachers and administrators spoke about using student work exemplars to guide the backward design of lessons, there was no evidence of teachers using exemplars for modeling nor as a support for academic monitoring.

The school’s next steps in improving pedagogy will include building teachers’ capacities to leverage student misconceptions and to appropriately differentiate student tasks. Planning for student misconceptions will enhance the impact of academic monitoring by enabling teachers to respond to misconceptions in the moment. More purposeful use of academic monitoring data will enable teachers to differentiate tasks to meet diverse student learning needs. In five out of the seven classrooms observed during core instructional blocks, students were all doing the same work in the same way, and all students received the same scaffolds or supports. Additionally, the observed academic monitoring focused more on task completion than on quality of work or identifying misunderstandings.

Area of Focus #2

High Expectations

*Description***:**

Morgan teachers and administrators articulate a shared belief in high expectations for all students. Following the master schedule change, teacher teams now have ample time to plan their common expectations for grade-level work. Families report that they receive clear communication from the school about their children’s progress in relation to grade-level standards, which represents a major improvement in communication since the beginning of the school year. While Morgan staff have made concrete shifts to communicate high expectations for students to engage with standards-aligned tasks, the majority of classrooms observed did not show consistent evidence of rigorous, standards-aligned tasks being assigned to students.

Furthermore, the academic monitoring that was happening in the majority of classrooms focused on compliance and task completion rather than on quality of work. During academic monitoring, students receive feedback in the form of coded symbols, e.g., a check mark for task completion or a circle indicating that the teacher will circle back to them. While these symbols represent a start to providing students with timely feedback, they do not provide rich enough feedback to push student learning, thinking, or work output.

Across classrooms visited, students were not producing high-quality work nor engaging in meaningful student discourse. More time must be spent on developing student work exemplars, and even more importantly, on exemplary student tasks that require deep critical thinking and communication. In three out of seven classrooms visited during core instruction, it was unclear whether teachers were using materials from their district-approved curricula or were supplementing curricula with other resources of lower quality.

Area of Focus #3

Curriculum

*Description***:**

In order to strengthen curriculum implementation, Morgan administrators must ensure that teachers are providing students with high-quality, standards-aligned tasks. This is an established priority for the school community, and the school has selected high-quality curricular resources. It is essential that Morgan now continue to support teachers with clear and high expectations around enacting these curricula. In order for students to experience the depth and rigor of such curricula as Eureka, Making Meaning, and Expeditionary Learning (EL), these curricula must be enacted as designed. School administrators must establish expectations for lesson planning that ensure that any modifications do not reduce rigor nor eliminate the higher-order thinking opportunities afforded by these curricula. In many classrooms observed, teachers had modified lessons from the curriculum resources, substituted materials, or missed important curriculum-embedded opportunities to promote higher-order thinking.

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

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1

Positive Learning Environment

*Description:*

Since the first school quality review in the fall, Parker School has shown significant growth in establishing and maintaining a positive learning environment. In the fall, classrooms featured uneven engagement and inconsistent classroom cultures, with off-task behaviors left unaddressed in almost all classrooms. During the spring school quality review, teachers consistently utilized collaborative problem solving and responsive classroom approaches to support students who were struggling to meet behavioral expectations.

Parents also spoke about how the school has partnered with them to support their children to meet behavioral expectations and how they are using some of the school strategies at home. Teachers described the school as having a shared language and approach to supporting social emotional learning, which administrators have cultivated through social emotional learning walkthroughs, professional development, and peer learning opportunities. Students also identified concrete strategies they have learned to use when they are experiencing difficulties. Most importantly, students talked about feeling close to their teachers and that their teachers know them really well.

Area of Strength #2

Teacher Teams and Distributed Leadership

*Description:*

The quality indicator of teacher teams and distributed leadership continues to be an area of strength in the Parker community. Administrators state that “collaboration is necessary to work in this building and be successful; we lead by example; we do not make any decisions unless as a team.” School administrators use multiple teams to strengthen teacher capacity and coherence and drive progress toward school goals. These teams include a culturally responsive teaching team, mentor leadership team, social emotional learning leadership team, instructional leadership team, and family and community engagement team. All teachers participate in weekly teacher collaboration team (TCT) meetings for 90 minutes, and team practices reflect the type of collaborative thinking and learning that teachers expect of students in the classroom. Teams regularly analyze student work with a focus on eliminating gaps in student learning.

Teachers have a voice in the key decisions that impact student learning in their own classrooms and across the school. While the observation and feedback cycles of school administrators drive schoolwide decision-making processes, input from educators in the community helps shape the decisions that are implemented across teams. Further, teams utilize touch points with educators and other surveys to elicit teacher voice and input into the self-identified areas of growth. These teaming structures will continue to drive improvement across the school and support growth in prioritized areas of focus.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1

Pedagogy

*Description:*

Parker School has achieved significant growth in the area of pedagogy over the course of the school year. At the beginning of the year, school administrators identified discrepancies between the school’s instructional approaches in math and English language arts (ELA). School administrators engaged teachers in professional development to analyze the differences between the instructional models. School administrators then identified a consultant to support the school’s efforts to align their ELA instructional model more closely with the math instructional model. Since January, the school has pursued professional development focused on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a theory of language centered around the notion of language function to improve language arts and students’ performance in writing. Administrators have engaged in the professional learning alongside teachers and conducted walkthroughs, observations and feedback aligned with the current content of the professional development.

In the spring school quality review, classroom observations found evidence of the new approach to ELA instruction in multiple classrooms. Students worked in partnerships or small groups to make meaning of rich, grade-level texts. Students often probed each other’s thinking and took other students’ thinking into account. Teachers expressed excitement about the new SFL approach, including its alignment with the WIDA standards and benefits to writing instruction.

Since the SFL initiative is still in its infancy, the school will benefit from continued focus on this instructional lever, including moving into all genres of writing as a community next year.

Area of Focus #2

Assessment

*Description:*

Educators utilize common assessments to triangulate student progress every six weeks using summative assessments in ELA and math. Following each assessment, teachers design student groupings for the intervention block in which students receive targeted intervention in their identified areas of need.

In the area of daily formative assessment, teachers utilize landscapes of learning in math as the framework for ongoing formative assessment. During math instruction, most teachers use a graphic organizer during student groupwork time to monitor student thinking and plan for math congress. The school has recently established a goal of developing a similar approach to ELA formative assessment using their SFL learnings. School administrators point to the key roles of math congress and ELA Socratic seminar in highlighting student misconceptions through student debate, to deepen students’ grasp of the grade-level standards.

In addition to planning for math congress or ELA Socratic seminar, teachers know that they are expected to utilize checks for understanding (CFUs) throughout their lessons and to provide feedback to students through venues such as data folders, conferencing and rubric-based discussions. In the classrooms observed, while teachers listened to student thinking and asked students questions, many teachers waited until the math congress or Socratic seminar to provide feedback to students. Students need feedback throughout the lesson and using CFUs more deeply throughout the lesson will support students in developing their own understandings of how they are performing.

1. The first three 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>

   Q3 report: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2022/2022-04/item9.docx>

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)