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MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
From: Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner
Date: March 14, 2024
Subject: Update on Chronically Underperforming Schools: SY2023-24 Quarter 3 Reports

This is the third of four SY2023-2024 quarterly progress updates to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) on the three chronically underperforming schools' implementation of their school turnaround plans, focusing on activities from January to March 2024. As described in the first two quarterly reports,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 third-quarter updates is the instructional core (curriculum, pedagogy, and assessments). Final annual reviews of the three schools will be presented in June 2024 and will be based on the summative school quality reviews to be conducted in May.

Chronically Underperforming Schools

In the fall of 2013, four schools were designated as chronically underperforming 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.

In September 2022, Commissioner Riley exercised his authority under 603 CMR 2.06 (10)(d) to remove the chronically underperforming status from the Morgan Full Service Community School in Holyoke on the basis of the district's concurrent designation as chronically underperforming.² With this technical change, the ongoing strategic transformation efforts at Morgan are fully aligned with and supported by Holyoke's district turnaround plan. As a result, this update and future quarterly updates include information on the three remaining chronically underperforming schools: UP Academy Holland, Dever, and Parker.

¹ The first two quarterly reports for SY2023-2024 can be found here:

Q1 report: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2024/2023-10/item7.docx>

Q2 report: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2024/2024-01/item6.docx>

² The September 26, 2022 letter announcing the change in designation for Morgan may be found here: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/level5/schools/morgan.html>.

UP Academy Holland, Boston

School Strengths:

Area of Strength #1 Curriculum

Description:

UP Academy Holland (UAH) continues to utilize high-quality instructional materials in all classrooms. Educators focus on lesson preparation and alignment to grade-level standards during collaborative planning time. In lessons observed across grades, teachers enact the selected curriculum and work to focus students on the rigorous tasks provided.

During the fall 2023 School Quality Review (SQR) site visit, teachers in most classrooms were observed providing too much assistance to students during student work time, by providing instructional scaffolds that were not needed by all students. Leaders and coaches recognized that this was because teachers were prioritizing delivering the curriculum with fidelity rather than making choices to spend the most instructional time on areas where students were being asked to do the most rigorous thinking and work. Coaches and school leaders are now supporting teachers in making these decisions, based on student data, to promote rigor and high levels of thinking for all students. Teachers shared that there has been a shift in the use of collaborative planning time to focus on the critical moments in each lesson and to plan backward from those moments. During collaborative planning time, teacher teams also anticipate potential student responses to questions and prepare assessing and advancing questions to push students' thinking further. Leaders and coaches have communicated that teachers must plan for students to grapple independently with content. Across classrooms, students were observed doing so.

Area of Strength #2 Assessment

Description:

Teachers and leaders at UAH continue to use individual student, classwide, and schoolwide assessment data to drive their decision-making in curriculum planning and teacher support and supervision, to continue improving results and meeting student and teacher needs.

UAH continues to utilize a variety of assessment tools to ensure that teachers provide ongoing actionable feedback to students. Teachers use exit tickets to identify common student misconceptions, adjust the next day's lessons, group students, and provide feedback to individual students. Teachers shared that they also use Go Formative (an online assessment tool), ANet data, and MAP data to look for trends in student performance connected to priority learning standards. They then adjust upcoming lessons to prioritize standards that students have not yet mastered.

Teachers also reported using skills data to adjust the scope and sequence of skills instruction for their small-group skills blocks.

A key element of this indicator centers on effective checks for understanding that result in real-time adjustments to instruction, including questioning. A focus of UAH professional development this year has been the strategic design of questions that assess and advance student thinking during teacher monitoring of students' independent work. Teachers shared how they have watched videos to deepen their understanding of effective questioning strategies. They spend time in collaborative planning meetings to anticipate student misconceptions and prepare advancing and assessing questions for each lesson.

Areas of Progress

Area of Progress #1

Teacher Support & Supervision

Description:

Following the fall 2023 SQR visit, the leadership team at UAH took strategic action steps to address identified areas of focus, and these steps have already had a notable and positive impact on pedagogy. To start, professional development (PD) has been differentiated to support teachers at varying skill and experience levels with effective implementation of the instructional vision and curriculum. Each teacher is now assigned to a PD track that matches the teacher's developmental needs. The instructional leadership team also has developed a coaching points menu as a tool for aligning observational feedback to teachers across all developmental levels.

Beyond the content of PD, the differentiation of professional learning supports for UAH teachers also extends to observation, feedback, and planning support. The leadership team is providing extra support to some grade-level teams based on student data, observation, and SQR feedback. For example, in first grade, where leaders observed higher instances of off-culture student behavior, leaders and teachers introduced a weekly gradewide community meeting for students with a different social-emotional learning focus each week. Additionally, a tracking system was put in place to track progress towards the weekly area of focus. In third grade, where there is a majority of newer teachers, the Director of Curriculum and Instruction (DCI) meets with each teacher every morning to look at the previous day's data and support the teacher with that day's plans to respond to student needs.

Teachers and leaders spoke about the impact of more strongly aligning teachers' learning experiences across observation, feedback, professional development, and coach-led collaborative planning meetings. Teachers all described being observed between one to three times per week by a combination of their DCI and school leaders. They shared how DCIs and leaders also are providing modeling, co-teaching, and video examples of the specific strategies they are focusing on to increase student thinking and eliminate overuse of instructional scaffolds.

Areas of Focus

Area of Focus #1

Pedagogy

Description:

While pedagogy remains an area of focus, it is important to note that progress has been made since the fall. Instruction was aligned with the schoolwide instructional vision in more of the classrooms observed during the winter site visit than in the fall visit. Those classrooms that were not meeting instructional expectations were closer to being aligned with the instructional vision than they were in the fall.

One concern observed in pedagogy in fall 2023 was the over-scaffolding of student tasks that effectively limited students' access to the rigor of the curriculum. During the winter visit, rigorous, standards-aligned tasks were observed in many classrooms. Students in many classrooms were being asked to do and show their own thinking rather than teachers telling them what to do or think. Evidence of high student engagement was observed in many classrooms. Students were working productively in groups, partnerships and/or independently. This is evidence that the push for increased rigor and student thinking is having the desired impact.

In all classrooms, teachers were circulating and monitoring while students worked either independently, in partnerships, or in small groups. Some teachers were observed using assessing and advancing questioning techniques as they circulated. This continues to be an important area to focus on since it was noted by DCIs and school leaders that teachers are at different places in their development of how to use questioning and monitoring to give real-time feedback that advances student learning.

Overall, evidence was observed of teachers sending students off to work on a rigorous task with teachers circulating, looking, and listening. There was more evidence of teachers using effective questioning to push student thinking than was observed in the fall. Some teachers were observed taking notes, and some teachers were making strategic decisions about student work, groupings, and sharings to highlight important strategies or student thinking. However, some teachers still need support with this element of the instructional vision. It is essential to continue to show teachers models of exemplary practice and to maintain a tight feedback loop of teachers learning the desired strategies by watching, discussing, planning, trying, and getting feedback.

Paul A. Dever Elementary School, Boston

This report for Paul A. Dever Elementary School (Dever) was written in a different structure. Rather than indicators being named as *either* an “Area of Focus” or an “Area of Strength,” each indicator was named as both an Area of Strength *and* an Area of Focus. The rationale for this decision is that the school-based team has made progress in all three indicators within the instructional core. All three instructional core indicator ratings moved from Developing to Proficient in the winter review. With any new progress, there is always the potential that the gains will not be sustained; therefore it is essential that the leadership and coaches at Dever continue to focus on all aspects of the instructional core.

Areas of Strength and Focus

Area of Strength and Focus #1

Indicator 1: Curricula

Description:

At Dever, both the mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA) core curricula provide rigorous tasks and higher-order thinking opportunities for students when enacted proficiently. During this visit, reviewers noted evidence of the intended rigor of the curricula taking hold in Dever classrooms. Students were observed engaging in all aspects of the inquiry-based math curriculum, from demonstrating their thinking and understanding of complex problems to participating in a whole-class math discussion where they needed to share their thinking and answer questions from the work they prepared in advance of the discussion.

Teachers, coaches, and leaders reported that student discourse and output in writing have increased significantly. Reviewers observed evidence of this increased discourse and writing output across classrooms. During past observations, Dever classrooms had often been devoid of student-to-student discourse, even though this is an essential feature of the school’s chosen curricula. By contrast, during the winter visit, students were actively engaged in the discourse protocols that were provided across classrooms.

Teachers and coaches demonstrated increased buy-in and understanding of the school’s chosen curricula. Teachers could speak in detail about the most impactful elements of both. Coaches also have deepened their understanding of the curricula. As a result, the coaches are now able to identify instructional strengths that align with the curricula and to plan impactful feedback when alignment is lacking. The ELA coach and teachers have engaged in walkthroughs, feedback sessions, and professional development sessions with an outside staff developer. These have been highly impactful. On the mathematics side, teachers spoke at length about the positive impact of attending external summer PD institutes focused on the school’s inquiry-based curriculum. They further emphasized ongoing support provided by instructional leaders that has given them a clearer understanding of the math curricula.

Area of Strength and Focus #2

Pedagogy

Description:

There has been notable progress made in the very short time between the fall and winter reviews in both ELA and math curriculum implementation. Teachers' unit planning work with an external staff developer has given them more insight into and comfort with implementing these units. The structure of collaborative planning time has also supported teachers in their implementation of curricula. ELA teachers are coached during collaborative planning time to look at student work, compare work across classrooms, and choose exemplary pieces as models. Then teachers create student groupings and design lessons based on what they notice in the student work. In math collaborative planning time, teachers view videos of expert educators conferring with students. After carefully analyzing the questioning used in these videos, teachers have refined their own questioning strategies. Additional professional development time has focused on listening to assess what students understand and designing questions to advance students' thinking.

The work outlined above has impacted instruction observed in math and ELA classrooms. Some exemplary practices were observed that are instrumental to the effective implementation of both the ELA and math curricula. Teachers across classrooms were observed providing effective instruction that yielded high-quality student work. Appropriate instructional scaffolds were provided across classrooms to enable students with varying support needs to access the full rigor of the curriculum.

There continued to be some unevenness observed in instruction, as some teachers were struggling with foundational elements of both the ELA and math curricula. In some classrooms, students were off task in their independent work and needed teachers to step away from small groups to check in and redirect them back to the task. This was especially true in classrooms where computers were used for independent work time—students were either not on the correct program or they were not using the program as designed.

Area of Strength and Focus #3

Assessment

Description:

Since the fall 2023 SQR site visit, the school has initiated many action steps to strengthen assessment practices schoolwide. These include the following: dedicating biweekly collaborative planning time to analyzing student work and creating targeted instructional plans; focusing on improving teacher conferrals with students during independent work time and making the expectations for conferral explicit. Teachers reported that their collaborative planning time work has helped them better understand the linkages among assessment, planning, and instruction. They also find the modeling of and feedback on conferral practices to be supportive.

Teachers, leaders, and coaches highlighted the use of early literacy assessments and progress monitoring tools as a very impactful way to identify students in need of literacy intervention.

Leaders and coaches also highlighted that literacy assessment data was used to redesign the intervention block in sixth grade. The redesigned intervention block resulted in the provision of more reading support using a newly adopted reading intervention program.

Moving forward, leaders should ensure that teacher teams continue to use collaborative planning time in two-week cycles of looking at student work and planning based on what is seen in student work. They should continue to develop instructional tools that support teachers in advancing student learning through the school's inquiry-based curricula. Finally, they should continue to use multiple data points to triangulate data and understand student progress to design and implement appropriate interventions.

John Avery Parker Elementary School, New Bedford

School Strengths

Area of Strength #1 Curriculum

Description:

The John A. Parker Elementary School (Parker) community continues to focus on ensuring that curricula are aligned with appropriate frameworks and standards. School leaders shared that the school's instructional planning guidelines had been underutilized by both leaders and teachers at the beginning of SY2023-24. To reset planning expectations, leaders facilitated a series of professional development (PD) sessions designed to build teachers' understanding of how the instructional planning guidelines connect to the schoolwide vision for "unconditional [student] belonging" and "joyful instruction." Teachers shared that this PD motivated them to center joyful instruction in their planning. The impact of this work was evident in increased levels of student engagement across classrooms.

School leaders have engaged an external staff developer with expertise in integrating knowledge of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) into the implementation of the school's ELA curriculum. Through coaching and professional learning sessions provided by the staff developer, teachers have continued to build their capacity to skillfully embed SFL content in the school's chosen ELA curriculum. As a result, across classrooms, reviewers observed evidence of SFL-aligned practices being implemented with fidelity and in ways that prioritized complex tasks.

Continued work on the school's inquiry-based math curriculum has also been a focus since the last SQR site visit. School leaders visited another elementary school to observe strategies to support teachers' practices of conferring with students during math instruction. Following the visit, Parker teachers utilized external video resources to focus on questioning strategies in their own in-house PD. This work continued into collaborative planning time, where teams planned possible conferral questions to advance student learning. In all math classrooms observed, teachers implemented the inquiry-based curriculum with fidelity and students grappled with rigorous tasks and higher-order thinking opportunities.

Overall, a reinforcement of the school's instructional planning guidelines coupled with continued refinement of curricula were evident in classrooms observed. As a result, levels of student engagement were far higher than those observed in Fall 2023.

Areas of Progress

Area of Progress #1 Pedagogy

Description

In seven of the ten classrooms observed, instruction aligned with the school’s shared instructional vision. In all seven of those classrooms, all students were engaged in a complex task, classroom discussion, and/or targeted skills work with partners, in small groups, or independently. Teachers in these classrooms were using appropriate questioning and were also listening carefully to student thinking to advance students to the next level of understanding. While this is evidence of progress, there are still classrooms where instruction does not align with the vision. Some teachers do not yet consistently uphold the rigor of written lessons. Others have not yet developed the skill to consistently support diverse learners with appropriate scaffolds to access the school’s high-quality instructional materials.

When teachers described how they used their collaborative planning time, it was clear that there is not yet a strong connection between student outcomes and planning. Teachers and leaders alike struggled to answer questions about how they are using assessment data to inform planning and instruction. To continue to make progress in pedagogy, it is of paramount importance for the school to return to structures for collaborative planning time that center on looking at student work and assessment data to plan for instruction.

Areas of Focus

Area of Focus #1 Assessment

Description:

Parker school leaders report that they use “street data”—the real-time experiences of students, staff and families in classrooms, teacher planning time and support team meetings—to inform their planning of PD sessions for teachers and feedback to teachers. Moving forward, school leaders and teacher teams should focus on using a variety of data to determine student progress toward goals and to plan Tier 1 instruction. More specifically, the next step is to ensure that student work and classroom-level data are a focal point of instructional planning for both grade-level teams and the school as a whole. School leaders shared that their annual strategic plan contains a strategy to develop a protocol for teachers to present their data. This could begin in collaborative planning time and move on to larger presentations in PD settings. The work to use data strategically to inform planning should also be done in conjunction with ongoing work on curriculum. Teachers described their professional learnings of SFL content as having immediate impact on their daily teaching practices. The next step is to connect the teachers’ new learning to student outcomes by having a consistent collaborative process in place for analyzing student work aligned with the SFL content. The leadership team should collaborate closely with teacher leaders to define the protocol

used to analyze student work and assessment data to inform planning before rolling it out as an expectation for collaborative planning time.