MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education  |
| **From:**  | Patrick Tutwiler, Interim Commissioner |
| **Date:**  | June 17, 2025 |
| **Subject:** | Update on Chronically Underperforming Schools: SY2024-2025 Quarter 4 Reports |

This month, I am presenting the annual evaluation report for SY2024-2025 to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) on the two chronically underperforming schools and their implementation of their school turnaround plans. This report incorporates information from the final school quality reviews conducted by the School Empowerment Network in May 2025.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Chronically Underperforming Schools**

There are currently two schools 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. As of September 26, 2022 and January 1, 2025, respectively, the Morgan Full Service Community School in Holyoke and the John Avery Parker Elementary School in New Bedford are no longer designated as chronically underperforming schools.[[2]](#footnote-2)

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

**School Strength**

Area of Strength

*Assessment*

Description:

This indicator addresses the alignment of assessments to curricula and the use of ongoing assessment data to inform instructional decisions that promote equity of outcomes for students.

Dever leaders and teachers have continued to focus on the use of data to inform instruction throughout the winter and spring. Most notably, the school now has effective progress monitoring assessments in place for both reading and math.

Reviewers observed evidence of data-informed student groupings across classrooms, both during intervention blocks and in core classroom instruction. Additionally, school leaders launched after-school tutoring in math. Teachers refer students for tutoring based on both benchmark and progress monitoring assessments.

Leaders and teachers use Common Planning Time (CPT) to link assessment to instruction. Teachers and coaches review various sources of formative data during CPT to inform student groupings. Teachers reported that recent professional development sessions have increased the effectiveness of their checks for student understanding during lessons, informed by data.

Leaders and teachers provided examples of how assessment data has informed schoolwide decisions. For example, the schedule was adjusted mid-year to add intervention blocks in both math and ELA for grades five and six, and after-school tutoring was added for grades three through six based on math data analysis.

Area of Strength

*Leveraging Resources*

Description:

This indicator considers strategic organizational decisions about the use of resources to meet the needs of the school community.

Leaders continue to prioritize consistent scheduling of common planning time during the school day. They also protect time in their schedules to observe classrooms. As a result, they have conducted over 200 observations so far this school year. Leaders are increasingly intentional about monitoring the expectation that all staff members in a classroom, regardless of their roles, are actively supporting instruction.

The leadership team’s focus on continuous improvement is evident through the team’s robust and comprehensive approach to using assessment data to make instructional and programmatic decisions that improve student outcomes. Furthermore, leaders are planning for the most optimal staffing structure for next school year and are centering students in their decision-making. The school plans to reallocate positions in order to hire four interventionists and an additional English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. Leaders also plan to strategically use the school librarian’s license in health education and to partner with an outside organization to add a full-time recess coach.

**Area of Focus**

Area of Focus

*Pedagogy*

Description:

This indicator evaluates whether instruction is grounded in a coherent and research-based instructional vision and supports all students to meet grade-level expectations through engagement in rigorous and standards-aligned tasks.

Teachers have continued to improve their co-teaching practices in support of all learners. Reviewers observed paraprofessionals, ESL teachers, and special education teachers leading small-group instruction. Reviewers noted evidence of increased student independence. For example, in a third-grade math classroom, students rotated through four different stations, in groups that were formed based on data and targeted areas for improvement. Across classrooms, reviewers observed teachers working with small groups and circulating to individuals. In many cases, students continued working independently when the teacher stepped away. This reflects progress on a previous focus area related to student independence.

The majority of classrooms observed were either fully aligned or partially aligned with the instructional vision. Moving forward, leaders and teachers should aim for more consistency schoolwide in the rigor of instruction and the higher-order thinking requirements of student work products. In several classes, the cognitive demand of tasks was below grade-level expectations, or students were given extended time to complete tasks that required minimal thinking. For example, in a second-grade ELA classroom, the teacher read aloud a short text that most students were capable of reading independently. Leaders must build teachers’ understanding of the rigor embedded in the standards, such that the tasks and student work products reflect that level of challenge.

In addition, leaders must strengthen intervention instruction. While it is evident that assessment data is being used effectively to form meaningful small groups and that classroom adults are being leveraged to support instruction, a next step is promote interventions that are of high quality. This includes coaching teachers to design purposeful intervention lessons and providing access to materials that align with the intended goals of the intervention.

Area of Focus

*Teacher Support and Supervision*

Description:

This indicator requires that school leaders support teacher development with ongoing cycles of observation and feedback. It inspects whether feedback to teachers is accurate and effective. It calls for decisions about teacher support and development to be informed by observation data.

The school has made progress against this indicator in terms of the amount of time that leaders are spending in classrooms to observe instruction. Most teachers reported being observed every two to three weeks, while some newer teachers shared that they are observed multiple times per week. After walkthroughs and observations, teachers reported receiving feedback in different forms: email, notes left in classrooms, text messages, or verbal comments.

The essential next step is to promote feedback that is high-leverage and consistently focused on improving the rigor of instruction. Feedback examples provided during the teacher focus group and in the artifacts showed a focus on operational elements (such as pacing and student grouping decisions) but did not include feedback tied to student thinking, work products, or cognitive demand. When asked to share examples of feedback that pushed their instruction or rigor, no teachers were able to do so.

Dever School is well-positioned to take the next steps to advance in this indicator. The structures for observation and professional development are in place and functioning regularly. The focus now should be on sharpening the quality of feedback and coaching cycles to consistently target rigorous, standards-aligned instruction.

**UP Academy Holland, Boston**

**School Strength**

Area of Strength

*Teacher Teams and Distributed Leadership*

Description:

This indicator focuses on teachers engaging in structured professional collaboration using a team-based, data-driven approach that promotes improved student outcomes.

Teachers and school leaders report that ongoing Drop Everything And Plan (DEAP) team meetings are positively impacting teachers’ classroom practices. Teachers reported making decisions about student groupings and looking deeply at lessons so that they understand the standards being addressed, the conceptual understandings needed and the work done to anticipate misconceptions and address trends. Reviewers observed a third grade DEAP meeting in which the math coach led the team through an upcoming lesson. There was a clear protocol in place and a team member took notes to track the instructional decisions made. These decisions were incorporated into planning documents. Teachers carefully analyzed the standards so that there was shared understanding and then went on to examine each segment of the lesson with an eye toward how their students would experience and benefit from that segment. Teachers anticipated misconceptions and planned for them. This collaboration was powerful, as teachers shared important thinking and ideas that would benefit students in all classrooms.

**Area of Progress**

Area of Progress

*Teacher Support and Supervision*

Description:

This indicator requires that school leaders support teacher development with ongoing cycles of observation and feedback. It inspects whether feedback to teachers is accurate and effective. It calls for decisions about teacher support and professional development to be informed by observation data.

Leaders visit classrooms to observe instruction and consistently provide feedback after the observations. Teachers reported that they are observed one or more times a week. After walkthroughs, teachers receive written feedback on forms. The forms contain checkboxes that identify the current school instructional and cultural priorities and provide space for brief written feedback. Teachers also shared that they have in-person meetings to discuss their instruction with coaches at least every other week.

Moving forward, leaders should continue to use the existing structures to track progress towards the instructional vision, to think about trends, and to plan professional development. At the same time, leaders should provide feedback to teachers that is consistently high impact and actionable.

**Area of Focus**

Area of Focus

*Pedagogy*

Description:

Instruction in six of the ten classrooms visited during the SQR was fully or partially aligned to the UAH instructional vision.

In one notably effective fourth grade ELA lesson, students engaged in literary analysis of a text. In this classroom, reviewers observed teachers using data to inform their instruction and differentiation, allowing all children access to the rigorous task. There were clear criteria for success, all students were on task and all were engaged in rigorous, standards-aligned work. Both the ESL teacher and classroom teacher provided small groups with differentiated materials and the classroom teacher circulated to check in with students working in partnerships.

In four classrooms where instruction was partially aligned to the vision, students were provided with standards-aligned tasks, and teachers clearly attempted to differentiate instruction to provide access points for multilingual learners and for all learners. Leaders and teachers in these classrooms have an opportunity to continue to improve co-teaching practices so that all children are appropriately supported with resources that meet their specific learning needs.

Reviewers observed four classrooms in which instructional practices were far from meeting the instructional vision. Reviewers noted a lack of rigor, student output, and student thinking. In all of the classrooms not meeting the instructional vision, teachers were doing thinking for students or putting a task in front of students that did not place significant cognitive demands on students.

Teachers need different levels of support in order to understand and enact the instructional vision. Some more effective teachers could be empowered to provide professional development and models for other teachers. Some teachers need more practice, clear models, and feedback focused on differentiation, increasing student thinking, and rigor. Some teachers need clear and direct feedback on leaders’ non-negotiable expectations.

Area of Focus

*High Expectations*

Description:

This indicator assesses how school leaders communicate schoolwide expectations to the school community, and how these expectations impact student achievement. UAH leaders consistently communicate clear instructional expectations for staff through multiple channels. Teachers are aware of the instructional expectations. Moving forward, leaders should reinforce with all staff that they should consistently communicate high expectations for all students. Students were not provided opportunities to engage in grade-level work in some of the classrooms observed. Additionally, teacher feedback to students in some classrooms focused on compliance and/or completion of tasks rather than on specific qualities of student work.

It is not clear that leaders have communicated culture expectations or an approach to achieve the cultural expectations as clearly or consistently as they have promoted instructional expectations. All of the classrooms observed during the site visit, with the exception of one outlier classroom, were orderly and focused. Students in all but the one classroom were engaged in academic tasks with little to no off-task behavior. However, teachers used a variety of strategies to communicate expectations, engage students, and manage classroom procedures. Not all of these strategies supported student focus and learning. Moving forward, leaders have an opportunity to clearly define and communicate culture expectations and classroom management strategies that align with or support the schoolwide instructional expectations.

1. The first three quarterly reports for SY2024-2025 can be found here:

<https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2025/2024-10/item5.docx>

<https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2025/2025-01/item9.docx>

<https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2025/2025-03/item9.docx> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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>. The December 17, 2024 letter announcing the change in designation for Parker may be found here: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/level5/schools/john-avery-parker.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)