School Journey Profile: Building Effective Practices with Grant Funding

2026

Peabody: John E. Burke and South Memorial Elementary Schools Use Evidence-Based Practice Grant Funding to Adopt Co-Teaching and Inclusion and Foster High Expectations

Overview of Grant:
This profile showcases work of recipients of the FY26 Student Opportunity Act Evidence-Based Practice Grant (SOA EBP Grant) who, through a competitive grant process, were awarded this performance-based funding to refine effective practices with an eye toward dissemination.

The purpose of this multi-year grant is to address persistent disparities in achievement among specific student groups, improve educational opportunities for all students, share best practices for improving classroom learning, and support efficiencies within and across school districts (Student Opportunity Act, 21st Century Education Program, Section 16A).

Students Served:
Peabody Public Schools proudly serves an increasingly diverse student population of over 5,500 students. Across the district, students identified in the high needs student group (comprised of students who belong to one or more of the following student groups: students with disabilities, English learners former English learners, or students from low income families) account for nearly 60 percent of the student population, a modest but steady increase since the years prior to the pandemic.

At South Memorial Elementary School (South), a pre-kindergarten (PK) to grade five (5) elementary school of 446 students, the high needs population comprises 33 percent of the student body with 22 percent of students in the low-income bracket.

Similarly, John E. Burke Elementary School (Burke), a kindergarten to grade 5 school (K-5) that serves 295 students of which 33 percent are high needs, with 17 percent of students who are low income and 23 percent are identified as students with disabilities with a slow but steady increase of English learners attending the school.

FAST FACTS

Peabody (2025-2026):

Teachers:
469.8

Students:
5,587

Low Income:
44.1%

SWD:
20.7%

High Needs:
58.9%

FLNE:
28%

The Challenge:
Like most schools, both Burke and South suffered academic declines following the pandemic. In 2022, students at South meeting or exceeding expectations on MCAS in ELA declined in the aggregate (all students) by over 10 percentage points (from 48% in 2019 to 36% in 2022). Gaps for student groups persisted with little progress toward closing them through 2024, with the low-income student group lagging behind the aggregate by 12 points in 2023. Students with disabilities were also performing below expectations, with zero students with disabilities meeting or exceeding expectations in ELA in 2022.

At Burke, student performance had also become discouraging. In 2020, Massachusetts accountability system classified the school as “requiring assistance or intervention” due to the low student group performance for their low income (then called “economically disadvantaged”) student group. The school was in the 27th percentile in 2021, with below average growth scores in ELA of 36.6.

The district, led by Superintendent Josh Vadala, reflected on how to improve systems and practices to stimulate growth in student achievement across the district and set goals to address them. The district determined there were several key causes that needed attention to begin the process of positive, long-term change. For one, data analysis was not embedded in the culture of the schools. It did not lead discussions nor guide planning at either school, and teachers had little interaction or confidence with data. The district also identified a need for stronger Tier 1 instruction to better meet student needs with stronger agility, skill, and urgency, keeping students in the classroom with their peers during vital learning time. Additionally, concerns about instructional rigor related to the academic demand in questioning and tasks asked of students emerged. They also determined it essential to provide all teachers with High Quality Instructional Materials and Curriculum (HQIM). Finally, shared ownership of both the data and of *all students,* including students with disabilities, would be a critical component in realizing success. Both the district and the school leaders acknowledged that, while imperative, the work would be challenging, would take several years to establish, and would require patience and persistence.

Key Practice Goals:

- *Stronger Tier 1 instruction build capacity and better target student needs*
- *Build a data-driven professional culture at teacher level*
- *Foster students’ sense of belonging*
- *Increase rigor of instructional tasks and questioning*
- *Bolster shared ownership*

The Turning Point:
Addressing new and persistent student gaps in achievement necessitated a strategic response, so the district launched a multi-year approach to building instructional capacity. Over several years, the district adopted HQIM, introduced it to teachers, then ensured that they used it with fidelity across classrooms. Led by Assistant Superintendent Kelly Chase, the district applied for and was awarded the SOA EBP grant in 2023. The grant required them to adopt and implement an evidence-based practice of their choosing that had the best potential to close gaps for their least well-served students. The district determined that, to close gaps and address the needs of each student, they would implement a co-teaching and inclusion model in tandem with complementary practices such as data-informed planning and strengthening Tier 1 instruction. With HQIM in place, funding for a contract with an education consultant who would provide additional instructional support to teachers, strong leadership at Burke and South, and funding for professional development (PD), the schools were positioned to undertake the challenging work to accelerate student achievement.

One of the most critical components of implementing these changes was teacher buy-in. District and school leadership recognized that the adoption of HQIM along with the shift to co-teaching and inclusion may be daunting for teachers. Adult mindset, building a culture of trust, and making sure teachers were not overwhelmed with multiple initiatives introduced could become barriers to success and could create initiative exhaustion and may result in teachers falling back on assumptions regarding student investment in learning. District and school leaders realized that this work needed to be strategically paced for adults.

For example, they recognized that rolling out HQIM required teachers to adopt a “culture of learning” in tandem with adoption. Leadership noted that students would compliantly perform tasks as requested by the teacher, so shifting to the new materials may be simpler than presumed by teachers. Leadership showed teachers that students would not push back on the new materials nor the rigor that could accompany them because students looked primarily to teachers to guide them - not the materials they used. This was the first step in convincing teachers to use the materials with fidelity. Concurrently, the district invested in commensurate PD in using the new curriculum and materials. In response to their concern for teacher overload, this change was a process that happened over several years with ongoing, consistent instructional support.

In addition to implementing HQIM, both schools began scheduling monthly data team meetings facilitated by the principals or instructional coaches. Not only did these meetings better enable teachers to analyze the data to inform instruction, but they also provided an objective understanding of where there were instructional deficiencies and highlighted the importance of instruction that was inclusive of all learners. These became pivotal in the improvement process and in changing the mindset of some teachers. Principal Jocelyn Sullivan at South explains, "Once we had those meetings, people had deep and uncomfortable conversations. We shifted the conversation from student blame to improving instruction. We have many conversations around high expectations for students."

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>
> *-Jocelyn Sullivan, Principal South Memorial Elementary*

Principal Lacey Becotte at Burke adds that at the onset of the work, adult thinking created a silent separation between the work of general education teachers, special education teachers, and English learner development teachers. Promoting an inclusive environment that encouraged shared ownership for all student learning began with the data. She states, "It was shocking for some at the beginning. . . but now there is a widespread expectation that all kids can learn at grade level. Educators reimagined the tasks they gave students. Is it giving them opportunities for reading, writing, listening, and speaking each day? If not, educators work to improve instruction." Although conversations could often be difficult, they resulted in informed instruction and stronger professional trust among teachers and leadership. The newly cultivated adult mindset resulted in higher expectations of all students and of the instructional delivery coming from teachers. To reiterate, leadership introduced changes gradually. To take root, initiatives needed to be introduced over time, with ongoing professional learning support. Despite the weight that accompanied these changes, of equal importance were celebrations along the way as the work progressed. Superintendent Vadala captures the value of these small celebrations stating, "It's important to celebrate the wins. It helps create psychological safety. We can still celebrate wins and strive for continual improvement."

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> *-Dr. Josh Vadala Superintendent*

Perhaps most pivotal in the process of improvement was the introduction of centers-based instruction and push-in support. As the schools and teachers continued this long-term work, they began to adopt inclusive practices in classrooms that had not been successful or present in the past. Because the data, the PD, HQIM, and the professional trust were in place, teachers felt ready to open their classrooms for co-teaching and push-in instruction rather than pull-out for special education and English language development. Learning to teach as one unit took some work, but teachers saw the benefits of team-teaching and centers-based learning. Not only could it provide more time for small group instruction, but it also allowed teachers to better connect with individual students and more effectively meet their academic needs. Sullivan states, "Our center-based instruction is critical. We have teachers who know students at a much more personal level."

Leaders communicated to teachers that it was important to foster student ownership discourse for students to do the cognitive lift. This was also an adjustment. Teachers had to allow students to struggle without stepping in too soon. This would be the way to prepare students to take ownership of their work and engage in high-level discourse in independent small groups with and without a teacher present and driving the discussion.

> *Multi-Step Process in Multi-Year Work*
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> *Step 1: Using the materials of HQIM*
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> *Step 2: Using high-leverage, rigorous questions and tasks*
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> *Step 3: Promoting student ownership of work*

The Impact on Instruction and Outcomes:

South and Burke are seeing that the systems they have built with their teachers and the district are starting to work. At South, small group instruction is delivered seamlessly and teachers have developed a stronger understanding of their

students and their needs. Also, given leadership's expectation that HQIM be used with integrity, teachers are implementing with more ease, having had the support to do so. The investment in data and assessment has not only been embraced by teachers but has extended to students who now conference with teachers to review their individual data. "Now we have kids much more engaged and wanting to know how they are doing. They will ask 'how did I do on that assessment?' as soon as they complete it," says Sullivan. The school's 2025 MCAS shows that South is in the 55th percentile with progress toward meeting or exceeding improvement targets at 77 percent and growth scores in all student groups in both ELA and math above 50. Since receiving the grant, students meeting or exceeding expectations in ELA have steadily increased, most notably among students with disabilities who have gone from 0 students meeting or exceeding to 26% meeting or exceeding with a consistent increase each year since 2022. The school's student group performance illustrates gap closing in ELA for several student groups such as high needs, low income, and students with disabilities since receiving the grant in 2023 (Figure 1). In math, progress in meets and exceeds has slowly but steadily trended upward in the same student groups, including the aggregate (Figure 2):

Figure 1:
South Memorial Meets and Exceeds (ELA) 2025

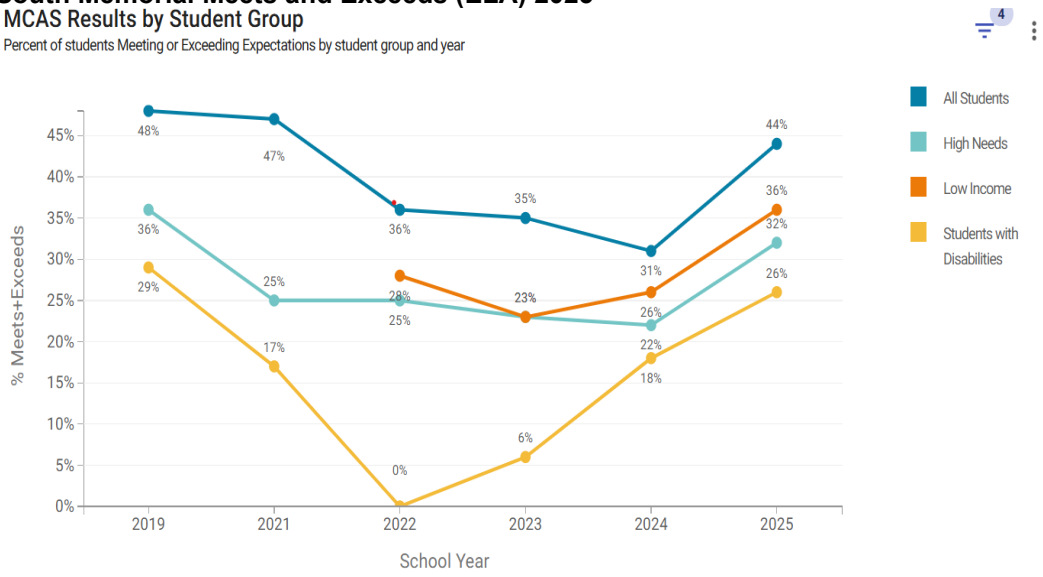
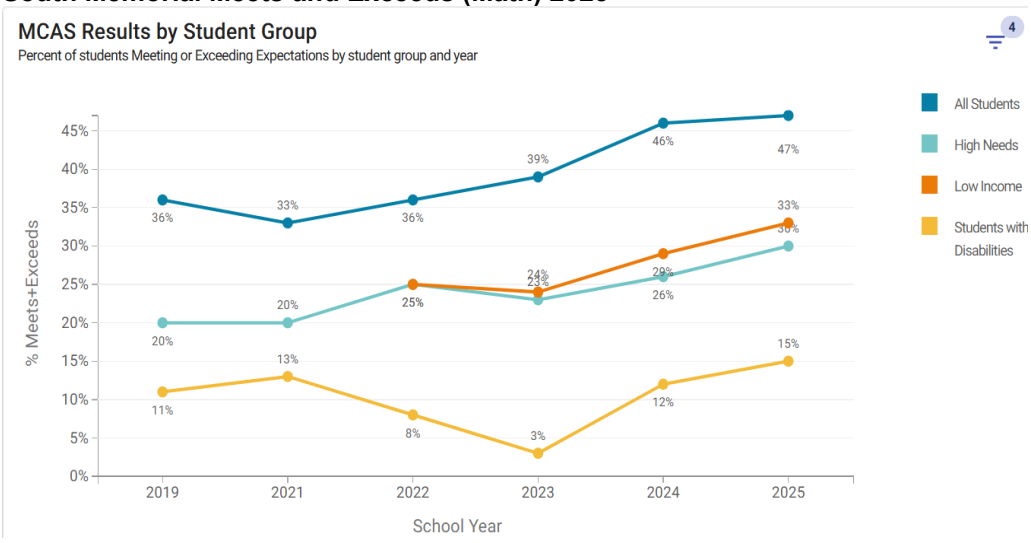


Figure 2:
South Memorial Meets and Exceeds (Math) 2025



At Burke, co-teaching has been fully implemented in grades 4 and 5 and in half of the classrooms in grade 3. Collaborative planning time is sacred and dedicated to instruction, planning, and data discussions with all administrative housekeeping designated to email rather than taking from valuable teacher time. Here, kids are also "partners in data" and have learned the value of understanding and tracking their own data to set goals

and celebrate improvement. Principal Becotte also notes that there is no pull-out instruction during ELA or math. She is also proud that the focus on Tier 1 instruction has reduced unfounded referrals to special education, a result of strong practice empowered by shared ownership. Says Becotte, “Everybody knows that it’s all hands-on deck for all students. Every student engages in grade level content.” Despite being a school requiring assistance or intervention in 2020, the school was designated a “School of Recognition” in 2025 for demonstrating progress toward annual accountability targets[1]. The school is now in the 51st percentile with progress toward improvement targets at 64 percent and making substantial progress. Growth scores have also increased, with most student groups above 50 in math and ELA with students with disabilities and low-income close behind[2].

"Changing hearts, minds, and culture takes time and can't be accomplished in one year. Implementation was a significant lift and required our leaders and teachers to learn with and from one another. We actually did see a dip at first, and had to work together to push through that to see the big gains like we've had at the Burke and South. We are grateful for the trust, commitment, and hard work of teachers and leaders who have shown the perseverance needed to work through challenges and see success become reality."

-Dr. Kelly Chase
Asst. Superintendent

There is much to celebrate for these schools, particularly their commitment to long-term work that has taken time and persistence. As Chase explains, “Changing hearts and minds and culture takes time. You can’t do it in one year. If you adopt a new curriculum and a teaching model, those are major changes. They (teachers) need to experiment and learn the new system. We actually did see a dip at first, and had to work together to push through that to see the big gains like we’ve had at Burke and South. . .You need to give it time, otherwise you just look at the dip and think the intervention isn’t working.”

[1] As part of its annual accountability reporting process, the Department identifies a small number of *Schools of Recognition*. These schools demonstrate progress toward annual accountability targets, with an emphasis on improved achievement in ELA and math.
[2] On the 2025 MCAS in ELA, Burke’s SWD growth was 47.3 and low-income 49.4. In math, Burke’s SWD growth was 48.1 and low-income at 47.1.