# **MEMORANDUM**

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Russell Johnston, Acting Commissioner |
| **Date:** | June 10, 2024 |
| **Subject:** | Update on Chronically Underperforming Schools: SY2023-2024 Quarter 4 Reports |

This month, I am presenting the annual evaluation report for SY2023-2024 to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) on the three chronically underperforming schools and their implementation of their school turnaround plans. This report includes references to evidence provided in the three quarterly reports submitted earlier in this school year[[1]](#footnote-2) and incorporates information from the final school quality reviews conducted by the School Empowerment Network in May 2024.

**Chronically Underperforming Schools**

Three schools are currently designated as chronically underperforming: John P. Holland Elementary School (UP Academy Holland) and Paul A. Dever Elementary School (Dever) in Boston, and John Avery Parker Elementary School (Parker) in New Bedford.

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

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1:

Teacher Support and Supervision

*Description:*

Throughout the 2023-2024 school year, Dever’s leadership team has maintained a steadfast focus upon teacher support and supervision as a critical lever in the school with weekly leadership team walkthroughs to ensure calibration of feedback. The frequency of observations varies across teachers, ranging from biweekly to multiple times per week based on tenure at Dever and level of proficiency with the instructional expectations. Teachers receive specific feedback on instructional challenges along with concrete next steps aligned to the research-based framework of the curricular resources utilized in math and English Language Arts (ELA). Teachers reported that the combination of observational feedback, schoolwide professional development, and systematized grade-level team planning meetings has been impactful. Specifically, their work during grade-level team planning meetings on developing effective questioning strategies has shifted their practice to place more of the cognitive load on students instead of leading the questions or doing the thinking for them. The leadership team also emphasized the importance of investing in the professional learning of the paraprofessionals on the team, which is done by supporting their participation in grade-level team planning meetings, facilitating peer observations, and engaging paraprofessionals in shared learning walks centered around the instructional vision.

Other forms of support for teachers included peer observations and video recordings used by teachers to reflect on and improve teaching practices together. One of the priorities of professional development this winter and spring has been focused on putting the primary responsibility for thinking on the students, thereby increasing student voice and decreasing teacher voice during work times. Teachers shared how watching themselves teach clarified for them when they were doing the thinking for students and when they were talking more than their students.

Area of Strength #2:

Teacher Teams and Distributed Leadership

*Description:*

Dever has developed a clear vision for teacher team collaboration that emphasizes shared leadership, using data, and aligning with school professional development goals. Teachers engage in both ELA-focused and math-focused team planning meetings on a weekly basis. Each team planning meeting is directly connected to a focus of schoolwide professional development and is informed by data from schoolwide walkthroughs. Dever School leaders have placed a strong emphasis on distributing leadership roles in teacher team collaboration. The school’s instructional coaches meet weekly with content lead teachers for each grade to prepare for the grade-level team planning meetings. This approach to distributing the leadership of teaching teams has fostered a high level of trust among the faculty. Teachers praised the structures of their team planning meetings as purposeful and supportive of their work with students. These distributed leadership structures have laid a foundation of trust that enhances adult learning, ultimately impacting the quality of instruction within the classroom aligned with the instructional vision. This deep focus on teacher team collaboration is crucial for driving ongoing change initiatives in the school for the upcoming year and beyond.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1:

Pedagogy

*Description:*

Dever’s rating in the indicator of Pedagogy reverted from “Proficient” to “Developing” at the close of this school year. Although school leaders can articulate a clear instructional vision and the school’s curricula align with that vision, the school has struggled to ensure consistent practices across the majority of classrooms in all core content areas. As prioritized at the end of the previous school year, the school has focused on improving the quality of questions planned for student conferrals. However, the impact of these efforts in the classrooms observed was inconsistent; only half of the classrooms observed met the full vision, with slightly more alignment in mathematics than in ELA. While focusing on questioning strategies is essential, more attention also must be paid to establishing clear expectations for exemplary student thinking and output.

In SY 2024-2025, the school needs to ground its planning for ELA instruction in review and analysis of student work samples with a focus on exemplars and expectations in writing rubrics. In addition, there needs to be a continuation of support for teachers in developing common practices in teaching phonics, phonemic awareness, and fluency. Finally, the team should broaden its work around questioning and conferrals to include planning for small-group instruction within math and ELA classrooms.

Area of Focus #2:

Assessment

*Description:*

At the end of school year 2023-2024, the school quality indicator of “assessment” emerged as a recommended area of focus for Dever. The school has utilized DIBELS as a common reading assessment and piloted DIBELS progress monitoring tools in two grades. There are consistent assessments utilized across grade levels with purpose and connection to the curricula and grade-level standards with increased focus upon analyzing data to inform instruction. The next step for the school needs to be to develop systematic practices for using assessment data to track individual student, class-level, and schoolwide progress towards goals. Further, school leaders should prioritize utilizing data to identify needed adjustments to instruction and intervention when desired growth is not realized.

During SY2024-2025, Dever needs to expand DIBELS progress monitoring to all grade levels. A cycle of progress monitoring in math also needs to be developed to provide needed interventions for students whose conceptual understandings are not meeting grade-level standards.

In regard to the schoolwide professional development focus on student conferrals, reviewers observed teachers providing real-time feedback to students through circulating and conferring, with varying degrees of success at pushing student thinking and clarifying misconceptions. Some teachers are making use of checklists developed in team meetings to plan for questioning, while others are using conferral note sheets to track student thinking. Both systems are being implemented with varying degrees of fidelity, with some teachers approximating the practice (carrying clipboards with checklists on them but not using them), some teachers not using them at all, and some teachers using questioning that differed from what was developed in team meetings. This practice needs more time and focus, with much more attention to impact on student learning rather than compliance.

**UP Academy Holland, Boston**

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1:

Assessment

*Description:*

The UP Academy Holland (UAH) team continues to utilize a comprehensive assessment system to track student growth in math, ELA, and social emotional learning throughout the year in core content areas, guiding decisions on reteaching, interventions, and extensions when needed. All assessment data is stored in a master datasheet, accessible to and updated by grade-level teams and administrators. UAH maintains this assessment system to facilitate ongoing evaluations of student learning outcomes, using the results to adjust instruction and identify the need for interventions. For example, in a recent shift following the mid-year review, the school has increased the focus and time spent on student writing during core ELA instruction, emphasizing more frequent writing assignments. Additionally, the intervention team tracks Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) progress monitoring data, including student goals aligned with specific skills, descriptions of ongoing progress assessments, and student progress on targeted skills post-intervention.

While assessments are a recognized strength at the school, the school continues to focus on strengthening instructional decisions stemming from checks for understanding within the classroom and opportunities for student self-assessment. During the end of year review, observations highlighted an increase in the time teachers spend listening to student group discussions and identifying misconceptions, though the quality of teachers’ subsequent decisions varied. As assessment opportunities have improved, it is essential for school leaders to follow through with enhanced teacher support and supervision of instructional decision-making to fully realize the benefits of the instructional vision and effectiveness of coaching.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1:

Pedagogy

*Description:*

The leadership team discussed efforts to strengthen Tier 1 curriculum and instruction, aiming to build on the progress observed between the fall and winter SQR visits concerning teachers’ understanding and demonstration of the instructional vision at UAH. They highlighted the school’s emphasis on teacher planning sessions (known as Drop Everything And Plan, or DEAP), and began to encourage teacher responsiveness to student needs over rigid adherence to curriculum programs. A new structure was introduced during DEAP meetings to allocate time for interventionists to share customized scaffolds that they had developed for specific students, enhancing access to the Tier 1 curriculum. This approach ensures that scaffolds are tailored based on individual student data, preventing the application of generic scaffolds across entire classes. Leaders also described a strategy to better align teachers with the instructional vision by using coaches for co-teaching and direct instruction in struggling classrooms, coupled with a tight loop of planning, observing, and providing feedback on plan implementation.

Observations at the end of year showed less consistent alignment of classrooms with the instructional vision compared to the winter SQR visit. Among the ten classrooms observed, only four exhibited strong practices aligned with UAH’s instructional vision and curriculum enactment to meet all students’ needs. In particular, alignment with the instructional vision in ELA was notably weak. Overall, while there were pockets of effective practice, the majority of classrooms observed showed a need for greater alignment with the school’s instructional vision, particularly in enhancing rigor and ensuring that curriculum modifications are thoughtfully implemented to support all students effectively.

For SY 2024-2025, the school should return to implementation of the core curriculum with fidelity, ensuring that teachers make modifications only when they clearly preserve the lesson’s goals and rigor. School leaders should provide targeted professional development on engagement with a mindset towards inclusive classrooms. The school has recently joined the “All Means All” network, and this training should be leveraged to enhance teachers’ abilities to include and engage struggling students effectively. Further, the MTSS team should be leveraged to observe and analyze classroom dynamics, focusing on students whose needs are unmet to provide feedback on inclusive strategies based on these observations.

Area of Focus #2:

Teacher Support and Supervision

*Description:*

This indicator remains a priority for the leadership team at UAH. Leaders have reported that since the winter SQR visit, school leaders have modified the coaching model to include more in-classroom time, featuring co-teaching and immediate feedback. Additionally, teachers have been categorized into tiers based on their needs and alignment with the instructional vision. Based on tier, teachers receive a combination of supports including co-teaching with a coach, peer observations of model teaching, observations and feedback, with varying frequency. School leaders use teacher observation data to design and facilitate professional development, positioning their classroom observations as the primary source of planning information. However, teachers have reported mixed feelings about the connection between observations, planning, and professional development, indicating a lack of clear correlation and coherence. Leaders are aware of the need to clarify these connections and to focus professional development to enhance teacher understanding.

Leadership feedback to teachers needs improvement to effectively advance teachers’ capacities within the research-based teaching framework utilized by the school and network. Although there is a system for frequent classroom visits, the feedback from leaders has not yet effectively promoted higher levels of student thinking. Some classrooms show significant teacher growth, while others show minimal changes. This variance underscores the need for more precise coaching practices that more directly align with and promote the instructional vision during the 2024-2025 school year.

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

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength #1:

Leveraging Resources

*Description:*

Throughout SY 2023-2024, the Parker leadership has strategically leveraged resources aligned to both the priorities of the school’s strategic plan and the ongoing needs that have arisen across the year. For example, significant staffing shortages have emerged since the midyear review, including administrative vacancies. The school’s Receiver has leveraged the remaining staff to minimize the impact on classroom instruction, by adjusting staff assignments to support areas with the greatest need. Teacher strengths have been elevated and utilized to support colleagues through structured coaching opportunities, such as experienced teachers providing peer facilitation of team meetings at other grade levels. Veteran Parker teachers also have provided informal mentoring to novice teachers or paraprofessionals who have filled classroom teacher vacancies. In addition to peer support from teacher colleagues, other staff including paraprofessionals, school counselors, and afterschool staff have strategically supported classrooms to limit the impact of staffing and leadership shortages on student learning and staff expectations.

Staff collaboration structures have sustained the focus of teacher team time on the work of improving instruction. Both grade-level teams and schoolwide leadership teams have continued to meet regularly despite staff shortages. The latter include the Instructional Leadership Team, Family/Community Engagement Team, and New Teacher Mentor Team. In addition, the Whole Child Support Team continues to serve as a key resource for supporting students’ social emotional growth in partnership with families.

The school plans to continue utilizing a three teacher per grade level model to support targeted instruction and planning for all students, though this model did not reach full implementation during SY 2023-2024 due to staffing shortages.

Area of Strength #2:

Teacher Teams

*Description:*

Grade-level team planning is a foundational structure for professional collaboration and shared leadership at Parker. During the end-of-year SQR visit, reviewers observed a grade-level team planning meeting of a team comprised of a novice teacher, a paraprofessional filling in for a veteran teacher on leave, and a vacant position. As described above, an experienced teacher from another grade level joined this team in a peer coaching capacity to provide additional support. The experienced teacher facilitated the team’s discussion of a professional development video on the school’s core math curriculum, focused on analyzing student work. As a result of the resources leveraged by the school to sustain the grade-level team planning meetings, all teachers interviewed during the visit described these meetings as meaningful collaboration time where they have the opportunity to apply new professional development learnings to benefit their students.

Beyond the grade-level team planning meetings, the school’s Instructional Planning Team, Whole Child Support Team, and New Teacher Mentor Team have continued to support classroom instruction through schoolwide professional development, intervention planning and support, and novice teacher development, respectively. These teams will continue to be a critical lever for the leadership to utilize in the planning and execution of improvement in the areas of focus below for the 2024-2025 school year.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus #1:

Goals and Action Plans

*Description:*

This school quality indicator centers on the leadership practice of developing and monitoring a short list of data-based goals that are understood and supported by all stakeholders. The staffing shortages at Parker have made it extremely difficult to focus on big-picture goals, as leadership attention instead has been dedicated to maintaining the high functioning of the school with so many key positions unfilled. As this is understandable, the high-leverage goals and action steps for the 2024-2025 school year should be mapped out this spring and summer to ensure that the school is prepared to implement and monitor its strategic action plan, course correcting along the way.

First and foremost, the school needs to focus on attaining full staffing with highly qualified educators. Teachers at Parker exhibited extremely high morale at the close of the 2023-2024 school year and provided many examples of stepping up to fill the gaps created by staffing shortages. These highly motivated teachers need to be empowered to support their school community with recruitment and retention strategies.

Next, it is essential that the school leadership return to the goals that were established for the 2023-2024 school year, and to make data-informed decisions about which goals continue to offer the highest leverage for school improvement. Leaders should carefully consider how to deploy high performing, instructionally aligned teachers to create the strongest grade-level teams possible. Leaders should continue the work that they have begun to set differentiated goals and progress measures for teachers at varying levels of experience.

Area of Focus #2:

Assessment

*Description:*

The school has made progress in implementing common assessments aligned with learning standards and the school’s chosen curricula. During SY2023-2024, the school’s English Language Arts curriculum units culminated in rigorous writing assignments, and teacher teams used protocols and common rubrics to calibrate on their scoring of student writing. Teams also continue to use common, standards-aligned unit assessments in mathematics to determine student progress toward learning goals. However, Parker teachers inconsistently use the data from these unit assessments to adjust their curricula, instruction, intervention, and enrichment strategies. Teachers currently are more focused on knowing their students well and how to increase student engagement by leveraging students’ interests. They currently demonstrate less familiarity with responding to specific pieces of academic data at the classroom or grade level.

Furthermore, classroom assessment practices at Parker currently demonstrate inconsistent use of checks for understanding and student self-assessments, resulting in inconsistent adjustments of instruction to meet student learning needs. Since the midyear review, teacher teams have prioritized planning for student conferrals and monitoring student work during instruction. However, during classroom observations few teachers utilized the conferral sheets that were planned to track student understandings. As a result, there was not a systematized structure observed for teachers to capture student progression of learning, to produce trends that could be analyzed across a grade level or at a schoolwide level. In regard to social emotional learning data, a similar need exists for the school’s Whole Child Study Team to formalize a process of analyzing trends in critical data measures.

It is imperative for the upcoming school year that the school systematize its data collection processes to ensure that leaders and teachers can identify trends across grade levels and within subgroups of students for immediate interventions.

1. The first three 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>

   Q3 report: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2024/2024-03/item5.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)