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# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:**  | Russell Johnston, Acting Commissioner |
| **Date:**  | March 18, 2025 |
| **Subject:** | Update on Chronically Underperforming Schools: SY2024-2025 Quarter 3 Reports |

This month, I am presenting the third[[1]](#footnote-2) of four SY2024-2025 quarterly progress updates to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) on the two chronically underperforming schools’ implementations of their school turnaround plans, focusing on activities from October 2024 to January 2025. The narratives for this progress update have been provided by the School Empowerment Network, based on classroom observations led by that group during that timeframe. A final annual review will be provided in June.

**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-3)

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

**School Strength**

Area of Strength

*Curriculum*

Teachers across classrooms at Dever are using high quality instructional materials from the selected, standards-aligned curriculum. School leaders and teachers have prioritized that the curriculum is both accessible and engaging for all students. For example, school leaders have engaged a professional development consultant who is supporting teachers to implement strategies for providing multilingual learners with access to the selected curricula. This consultant has facilitated teacher team planning of English Language Arts (ELA) units; evidence of the value of this work was observed across ELA classrooms.

School leaders have supported lesson and unit planning by establishing a definition of quality planning and providing teachers with planning templates for the year, the unit, and the daily lesson. They also have established processes for continually refining plans during collaborative planning time (CPT). Faculty, coaches, and school leaders all reported that CPT is driven by protocols and rooted in the careful examination of student data. Data analysis conducted during CPT enables teachers to create modifications and scaffolds for individual students and groups of students. Data analysis by Dever teachers also informs their student groupings; reviewers noted evidence of intentional, data-informed student grouping across classrooms.

**Area of Progress**

Area of Progress

*Assessment*

School leaders have implemented two key new assessment strategies aligned with recommendations provided by reviewers during the last site visit. First, the leadership team selected a progress monitoring assessment for foundational math skills and has provided training on its use to all teachers. Teachers expressed excitement about the potential of this new tool to help them understand their students better and design instruction to meet their needs. Secondly, the math coach has developed daily exit tickets for the upper grades, to provide teachers with daily formative assessment data that they can use to make adjustments to the next day’s lesson. Teachers reported that they use exit tickets to inform student groupings for the next day. Students shared that teachers return graded exit tickets quickly so that students can “learn from their mistakes.”

Teachers have made some progress in their use of a variety of strategies to check for understanding at least once per lesson. However, school leaders have not yet established expectations for teachers’ use of ongoing checks for understanding (CFU). Moving forward, leaders must set clear expectations for teachers’ feedback to students, including feedback from CFUs. It is essential that teachers understand these expectations and are provided with clear models of strategic feedback to individuals, small groups, and the whole class.

Moving forward, leaders and teachers should synthesize the data from assessments, progress monitoring tools, CFUs, and exit tickets, to analyze trends in student outcomes and identify next steps for attaining more equitable outcomes and improved outcomes for all students.

**Area of Focus**

Area of Focus

*Pedagogy*

While pedagogy remains an area of focus, school leaders and teachers have made progress in the time since the last site visit. The leadership team has forged stronger connections across multiple levers of their instructional leadership work: classroom observations, data-informed collaborative planning time (CPT), differentiated coaching, and differentiated professional development. For example, the leadership team has continued to prioritize classroom walkthroughs and had conducted 130 walkthroughs by the time of the site visit. As a result, leadership team members demonstrated a clear understanding of current trends in instruction across the school, including bright spots to build on and challenges to address. The leadership team is using data gathered from walkthroughs to inform professional development planning, to inform coaching cycles, and to identify teachers who need additional support. Leaders also have identified several exemplary classrooms where teachers’ instructional practices routinely meet or exceed expectations. Teachers who are struggling with a specific element of pedagogy visit these classrooms with leaders and then reflect on the effective practices they observed. Leaders then support the visiting teachers to implement these practices in their own classrooms.

During this visit, observers rated seven out of ten classrooms visited as aligned with the school’s instructional vision. In these classrooms, reviewers noted strategic grouping of students, learning partnerships, and high levels of student engagement. All adults in these classrooms – including paraprofessionals, special educators and teachers of multilingual learners – worked together strategically to meet the needs of students and the lesson objectives.

Moving forward, school leaders and teachers must focus on increasing instructional rigor across classrooms. Reviewers observed classrooms where teachers did not consistently ensure that all students engaged in high-level tasks and/or were held accountable for showing their thinking in rigorous ways. Leaders and teachers must prioritize writing in response to reading and writing to demonstrate thinking.

**UP Academy Holland, Boston**

**School Strength**

Area of Strength

*Assessment*

Reviewers have identified assessment as a strength at UP Academy Holland (UAH) on multiple occasions. During this visit, reviewers noted significant progress in the use of assessment data to guide instruction.

School leaders and teachers use common assessments to track student progress toward academic goals. Reviewers found clear evidence that leaders and teachers alike are deeply familiar with achievement data for classes, student groups, and individual learners. This was particularly evident in discussions about how assessment data inform instructional decisions.

UAH’s leadership team has strengthened its capacity to identify classrooms and student groups in which performance is lagging and to understand barriers faced by students. School leaders collaborate with teachers to develop targeted plans to support those students. For example, school leaders had noticed a significant difference in assessment data between two classrooms at the same grade level. To address this, leadership added a weekly team planning meeting and additional coaching time to support the teacher whose students seemed to be struggling.

The leadership team further highlighted a gap in performance between special education and general education students. School leaders’ acknowledgment of this gap, along with strategic efforts to ensure equitable access points for all students, has driven a new approach to professional development in which leaders and coaches use student achievement data to target support for individual teachers. A key tool in this effort is a newly adopted student assessment data platform that is accessible to teachers, school leaders, and students.

In addition, the leadership team has made "criteria for success" and "checking for efficacy" key components of the UAH instructional vision. Across classrooms, reviewers observed that teachers communicate clear and measurable criteria for success at the start of each lesson. While reviewers observed some teachers checking for understanding by using a variety of strategies, this is an area that continues to have room for growth.

**Area of Progress**

Area of Progress

*Teacher Support and Supervision*

Progress in teacher support and supervision since the last site visit is positively impacting pedagogy and increasing the number of classrooms aligned with the UAH instructional vision.

Leaders have established separate professional development (PD) for special education teachers (SPED) and teachers of multilingual learners (MLL) with a focus on specific strategies and materials to meet the needs of these student groups. MLL and SPED teachers alike spoke highly of this differentiated approach to PD and expressed gratitude for leadership’s recognition that their students’ specific needs require dedicated time and focus. Additionally, leaders have taken steps to increase these teachers’ involvement in lesson planning and in instruction to ensure that their students have access points within the curriculum. Reviewers noted evidence of tightly integrated planning among SPED, MLL, and general education teachers during lessons. Across classrooms, reviewers observed MLL and SPED teachers supporting small groups of students. Reviewers also saw evidence of lesson and task modifications creating access for MLL and students with disabilities within the ELA and math curricula. Reviewers cited the differentiated small-group instruction by MLL and SPED teachers as exceptional and attributed this improvement in part to the targeted PD delivered to those teachers.

Teachers reported that they are receiving differentiated levels of support with lesson planning. School leaders’ careful analysis of student data has enabled them to provide teachers with individualized levels of coaching and observation. Less proficient teachers reported that leaders observe their classes daily and provide feedback on the same day, while more proficient teachers reported being observed and receiving feedback every other week. Teachers also highlighted meaningful work being done in team planning meetings to center "criteria for success" in every lesson.

**Area of Focus**

Area of Focus

*Pedagogy*

During this visit, reviewers observed more classrooms in which instruction aligned to the UAH instructional vision than they had during the previous visit. Of nine classrooms observed, seven demonstrated either partial or full alignment to the instructional vision. A key improvement observed in pedagogy across the school was increased effectiveness of small group instruction, particularly among MLL and SPED teachers.

Reviewers observed instruction that aligned fully to the instructional vision in three classrooms. In these fully aligned classrooms, reviewers found clear evidence of meaningful differentiation, high levels of student engagement, and rigorous thinking.

In addition, four classrooms demonstrated partial alignment to the instructional vision. In contrast to the partially aligned classrooms identified during the previous site visit, these four classrooms were close to attaining full alignment with the instructional vision, with only minor adjustments needed to reach this goal. This shows significant progress in schoolwide pedagogy in a short period of time.

Instruction in a small number of classrooms (two of nine visited) is not yet effective and remains far from alignment with the instructional vision. Even so, the school leadership team has made substantial progress on this indicator in just a few months. This growth is largely due to the focused attention given to teacher support and supervision, as well as the effective use of resources at UAH. To continue this trajectory, the same level of attention should be maintained for these areas moving forward.

1. The quarter two Board memo can be found here: [Board Documents: January 2025 - Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2025/2025-01/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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-3)