

## *Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education*

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January 30, 2012

Mary Louise Francis, Superintendent  
New Bedford Public Schools  
455 County Street  
c/o Paul Rodrigues Administration Building  
New Bedford, MA 02740

Dear Superintendent Francis,

We are writing this letter to inform you that the New Bedford District Accelerated Improvement Plan submitted on November 22, 2011, with additional components submitted December 29, 2011, is not acceptable. We are concerned that the Plan still does not meet expectations even though we have provided many resources to help the district develop an approvable plan—a guidance document, a template, a part-time position to support planning and implementation efforts, and several feedback sessions.

We are deeply concerned about New Bedford's inability to develop a credible strategy for accelerating improvement. At this point, if the district is unable to develop an acceptable District Plan, it risks not meeting the legislative obligation to have a sound Turnaround Plan for the Avery Parker School. As Commissioner Mitchell Chester's May 2011 letter states, the Avery Parker Elementary School Turnaround Plan was approved only through May 2012, contingent on the district's development of a cohesive district strategy to significantly improve central office support for schools.

Through previous communications with the Accountability Office, we have made you aware of our concerns about the draft District Plans that you have submitted for our review. The Plans were reviewed and evaluated by a team of experts in the field, as you know. The team of Accountability Monitors for the ESE and the Associate Commissioner of the Center for District and School Accountability evaluated the Plan to determine whether it provided adequate guidance for systemic change and improved student outcomes. The evaluation was based on the attached Level 4 District Plan Rubric, which simplifies the Plan requirements in the guidance document, with descriptors of the strength in each area on a four-point scale: "Developing," "Emerging," "Ready to Implement," and "Strong." The New Bedford District Plan fell below the "Ready to Implement" standard in four of the five areas shown below.

1. Provides focus: Ready to Implement
2. Quickly targets the instructional core: Emerging
3. Addresses systemic root causes: Emerging
4. Is useful for tracking the sufficiency of progress: Developing
5. Builds long-term capacity: Developing

Attached is a summary of the key concerns about the deficiencies of the New Bedford Plan. In short, the Plan contains some components of work that needs to be done in the district, but does not have a focused and deliberate pathway to enable district initiatives to make an impact at the classroom level. It does not contain sufficient steps to develop instructional leadership throughout the district; to transform central office functions to focus on supporting schools; to set and support high standards for classroom practice; to ensure that leaders are required to monitor instruction frequently; and, to enable the district to ascertain when initiatives are not making the desired impact so that mid-course corrections can be determined.

Therefore, the Plan needs to be revised so that it identifies the pathway by which the initiatives will be implemented in ways that improve instruction in the classroom and learning outcomes for students. The objectives can be used as a framework; however, the action steps need to signal a new day—dramatically changing how business is conducted at the central office level and throughout all schools so that all New Bedford students receive the world- class education that they deserve.

The absence of a credible Plan for turning around the district and Level 4 schools has serious implications and needs to be addressed with urgency. Therefore, we have decided to commit another resource to expedite the development of an acceptable Plan. An additional organization that has been successful in leading the development of an approved plan for focusing staff at all levels to improve educational practices in another Level 4 district will be provided to work with you, your leadership team, and your Plan Manager. We will outline more specifically the next steps for (1) the Level 4 District Plan, (2) the Avery Parker School Turnaround Plan, and (3) the Hayden McFadden Level 4 School Turnaround Plan.

#### (1) Next Steps for the Level 4 District Plan

The district will be led by the organization provided by ESE to strengthen the action steps and benchmarks in the current Plan and begin planning for next year. The revised Plan needs to be submitted by April 2, and should include action steps through August 31, 2012 to ensure preparation for the 2012-2013 school year. A session to discuss the Plan will be held on April 11, 2012 at 1:00 p.m, unless you need to propose another time that will work for those involved in the planning. By May 30, 2012, we require an outline of your District Plan for the 2012-2013 school year (your summary of key issues and objectives and plan summary in sections one and two of the Level 4 district plan template). We are requiring an early outline of the 2012-2013 District Plan before the submission of the fully detailed action plan to accomplish three things:

- 1) The district will receive feedback on the overall strategy before developing detailed action steps and benchmarks.
- 2) ESE can determine whether New Bedford Public Schools can move itself to a stronger place before the start of the new school year with only the assistance provided to a Level 4 district.
- 3) An approved Turnaround Plan for the Avery Parker Elementary School can be in place without interruption, until its exit year of May 2013.

Within the next two weeks, you will receive a *Quarterly Progress Report* on the work New Bedford has done since September towards the strategic objectives in the Plan based on the information you have provided. Associate Commissioner Eva Mitchell and Plan Monitor Peter Davies will present the *Quarterly Progress Report* to the New Bedford School Committee. Subsequent *Quarterly Progress Reports* will be delivered in April 2012 and after the end of the school year.

Submitting an approvable District Plan would be a step toward exiting Level 4 district status. The next step would be to meet or exceed the benchmarks in the Plan. The Plan for the 2012-2013 school year is due July 13, 2012. The completion of your District Plan is not only an important step in the refinement of your strategy for supporting all schools, but particularly for the district's two Level 4 schools. We will next describe the connections between the District Plan and Turnaround Plans for the Avery Parker and the Hayden McFadden schools.

## (2) Next Steps for the Avery Parker School

As mentioned previously, the Avery Parker School Plan does not include the strong district strategy it needs to effectively execute turnaround efforts. We expect the district to meet the deadlines for the District Plan listed above to ensure that the Avery Parker School has a Turnaround Plan that meets statutory requirements.

Should you decide to pursue School Redesign funding for the Avery Parker School, you would be expected to refine the Turnaround Plan for the Parker school so that it meets the expectations for this highly competitive grant. The Redesign Grant RFP release is scheduled for March 12, 2012, and the application is due April 24, 2012. Awards will be announced mid-May. If you receive the grant, the new Redesign plan will replace the School Turnaround Plan. We are open to a conversation about the connections between the objectives in your District Plan and the Redesign grant application for the Avery Parker School. We expect that new plans for Level 4 schools will clarify which components of your District Plan, once revised, will be applied, differentiated, or amplified to support turnaround at that school.

Whether or not you decide to apply for Redesign Grant funding, the annual Monitoring Site Visit for the Avery Parker School is scheduled for May 2012. As you know, all Level 4 schools are monitored by the Department through annual site visits, leading to a report that describes the district's and school's progress in implementing the School Turnaround Plan to establish key Conditions for School Effectiveness. Sustaining these Conditions is a requirement for exiting Level 4 school status.

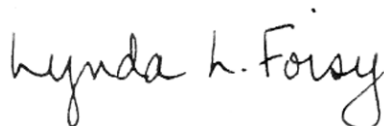
(3) Next Steps for the Hayden McFadden School

As indicated previously, we expect your Level 4 District Plan to support new plans for Level 4 schools. Again, the district portion of your plan for the Hayden McFadden School should explain which components of your District Plan will be applied, differentiated, or amplified to support the school's turnaround efforts.

In summary, submitting an approvable District Plan is the first step toward the district exiting Level 4 status. This work is important. Our research-based theory of action is: *if a Level 4 district can define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning, execute well-defined initiatives with a relentless focus on implementation, and systematically monitor the impact of those initiatives to make mid-course corrections, outcomes for students will be dramatically transformed.*

We will be carefully monitoring New Bedford's work to develop and implement a clear pathway for accelerating improvement throughout the district and your Level 4 schools. To date, we have seen our work with the district as an investment in the future of New Bedford Public Schools, but in the next phase, it will be critical for New Bedford to demonstrate greater capacity in the development and implementation of a clear educational course using a sound Accelerated Improvement Plan to transform education in the school system.

Sincerely,



Lynda Foisy, Senior Associate Commissioner  
Division of Accountability, Partnerships, and Assistance

enc: Level 4 District Plan Rubric  
Summary of Key Concerns about the Deficiencies in the New Bedford Plan

cc: Mitchell D. Chester, Ed. D., Commissioner  
Eva Mitchell, Associate Commissioner, Center for School and District Accountability  
Peter Davies, New Bedford Monitor  
Lise Zeig, Associate Commissioner, State System of Support  
Amy Liszt, Ed. D., Level 4 District Project Manager  
Renee Perdue, New Bedford Plan Manager

## Summary of the Key Concerns about the Deficiencies in the New Bedford District Plan

- The set of **activities** in the Plan do not sufficiently:
  - Demonstrate that the district's core activities are focused on a selected number of practices most important for New Bedford classrooms based on an assessment of the current state of practice.
  - Demonstrate a clear, core focus on ensuring content rigor and excellent instructional practice in all classrooms. In order for instruction to be improved, all teachers and administrators must be clear about the district's expectations for curriculum implementation and the classroom practices of focus.
  - Lay out the steps for building the capacity of all teachers (not just a select group), including ongoing, embedded professional development, frequent classroom monitoring, quality written and verbal feedback by district and school administrators, instructional modeling, close district oversight and monitoring of each building's practice, the development of staff ownership and understanding, and a strong system of supervision and support for administrators and other staff to ensure teachers receive quality support and feedback.
  - Provide a proportional amount of support and oversight given the number of initiatives and skills teachers are expected to demonstrate. With more complex and numerous teaching skills being introduced, more support and oversight are needed to strengthen the district staff's ownership of these skills and ability to ensure faithful oversight, execution, and coherence, especially once key partners have disengaged. The District Plan does not provide teachers with a high quality program of professional development that is based around district priorities for improvement. And, the Plan does not sufficiently take into account the steps needed to build teacher capacity in all schools. For example, all teachers do not have regular, guaranteed, directed time to effectively implement district strategies for curriculum implementation and student assessment.
  - Show how the district is dramatically changing expectations for central office leaders, principals, and instructional staff to focus on the key instructional practices that will exist in every New Bedford classroom. There are insufficient requirements for district and school leaders to regularly observe classrooms and provide feedback to teachers. And, there are insufficient requirements for central office leaders to observe principals in practice and provide feedback.
  - Lead the consultants and organizations working with the district. Although professional development programs and instructional models used by the district may identify a number of educational practices, New Bedford must lead the way in defining its own approach and implementing the approach vigorously through action steps that transform practice.
  - Demonstrate how the district plans to increase the responsibility of district staff, decrease and shift the responsibilities of external organizations and consultants over time, and, prioritize the development of coherent district teaching and learning systems — rather than external programs.

- The **benchmarks** for *Early Evidence of Change, Short-Term Outcomes, and Final Outcomes* do not:
  - Provide clear information to the District and ESE on the extent to which Plan initiatives are creating the conditions necessary to dramatically improve teaching and learning.
  - Require the district to collect and assess sufficient information about what is happening in classrooms and what leaders are doing to support changes to practice. Such benchmarks are necessary to provide information needed to make mid-course corrections.
  - Contain aggressive targets that dramatically change expectations and ways of working. For example, the district should identify ambitious goals for the percentage of quality classroom practices observed, frequency/numbers of classroom observations, and the percentage of teachers and administrators training/participating in professional development. Further, the district should identify ambitious student achievement goals for formative and MCAS assessments. Benchmark data will be used to determine whether adjustments need to be made to the specific strategy or its implementation.