

IX.A.

Connecticut State Board of Education Hartford

To Be Proposed:

January 3, 2024

Resolved, That the State Board of Education, pursuant to Section 10-223h of the Connecticut General Statutes, approves the continued participation of Michael F. Wallace Middle School, Waterbury, in the Commissioner's Network for an additional and final year commencing July 1, 2024, and directs the Commissioner to take the necessary action, including, but not limited to, expending such funds as may be necessary to execute and implement the foregoing.

Approved by a vote of _____, this third day of January, Two Thousand Twenty-Four.

Signed: _____
Charlene M. Russell-Tucker, Secretary
State Board of Education

**Connecticut State Board of Education
Hartford**

To: State Board of Education

From: Charlene M. Russell-Tucker, Commissioner of Education

Date: January 3, 2024

Subject: Approval of Commissioner’s Network Extension Year 5, Michael F. Wallace Middle School, Waterbury

Executive Summary

Introduction

Public Act 12-116, in part, established the Commissioner’s Network to provide new resources, increased flexibilities, and greater accountability to improve student achievement in some of the state’s lowest performing schools. The Commissioner’s Network is a commitment between local stakeholders and the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) to improve student achievement in up to 25 schools. There are sixteen schools presently participating in the Commissioner’s Network.

The purpose of the Commissioner’s Network is to turn around chronically low-performing schools and improve outcomes for students who attend these schools. Commissioner’s Network Turnaround Plans must include intensive and transformative strategies that are necessary to turn around schools that, to date, have been unsuccessful in their improvement efforts. These plans must reach beyond surface reforms to achieve dramatic and transformative outcomes, address past turnaround efforts, and provide an explanation as to how the proposed interventions will succeed where previous efforts have failed.

Schools are accepted into the Commissioner’s Network for a minimum of three years. Subsection (h) of Section (§) 10-223h of the Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.) establishes that the State Board of Education (SBE) may allow schools to continue in the Commissioner’s Network for up to two additional years if necessary. For the reasons set forth below, Michael F. Wallace Middle School (WMS) in Waterbury is recommended to remain in the Commissioner’s Network for an additional and final year.

Background:

Michael F. Wallace Middle School currently serves 1,062 students in grades four through eight. Eighty-six percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Sixteen percent of the students are identified as needing special education services, and 16 percent are multilingual learners/English learners (MLs/ELs). Approximately 60 percent of the students are Hispanic/Latino, 24 percent are Black, and 10 percent are White.

On April 5, 2019, the CSDE received an *Expression of Interest Form* from the Waterbury Public Schools (WPS), volunteering WMS for participation in the Commissioner's Network. On May 23, 2019, the Commissioner of Education initially selected WMS for possible participation in the Commissioner's Network based on the following factors: (a) the district's expression of interest; and (b) the academic and developmental needs of the school's students and the capacity of the district to address those needs. The school was approved for one year of planning to develop a turnaround plan.

Following the initial selection, WMS and the Waterbury Teachers Association appointed members to serve on the school's Turnaround Committee, and the CSDE conducted an Operations and Instructional Audit on September 23, 2019. The audit revealed several challenges impeding success. The quality of teaching and learning was inconsistent, including a lack of academic rigor, student engagement, high expectations for all students, and inconsistent quality of curriculum. There was a need for a focused mission and strategic direction to improve Tier 1 instruction as well as a need to further develop a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). Family and community engagement was limited and primarily reactive to addressing parental concerns.

During the 2019-20 planning year, the school's Turnaround Committee developed the turnaround plan for WMS in accordance with C.G.S. Section (§) 10-223h(d). The goal of the WMS turnaround plan is to utilize effective strategies, methods, and best practices with the core being the implementation of high quality professional learning, rigorous curricula, and assessments that are aligned with the Connecticut Core Standards, and building and maintaining meaningful and productive relationships between students, staff, and families. Talent is supported through professional learning that focuses on a common vision for rigorous and engaging instructional practices and increasing teacher recruitment and retention by valuing staff input and providing onboarding support to newly hired staff. In academics, the turnaround plan includes the implementation of the new English language arts (ELA) and mathematics curricula, as well as data teams with structured protocols to drive instructional decisions and interventions. Investments in improving the culture and climate of WMS include increased family and community engagement, partnerships, and wraparound services, as well as an effort to improve the school environment.

On June 3, 2020, after their turnaround plan was approved by the SBE, WMS officially entered the Commissioner's Network. As noted, schools are accepted into the Commissioner's Network for a period of three years, and pursuant to C.G.S. 10-223h(h), the SBE may allow such schools to continue in the Commissioner's Network for two additional years if necessary.

Since joining the Commissioner's Network, WMS has been provided with varied supports by the CSDE. These supports include bi-weekly walkthrough visits by CSDE consultants with school and district leadership, the provision of professional learning sessions multiple times per year through a Netstat Learning Series, and the facilitation of Principal Roundtable discussions with other Commissioner's Network leaders. Additionally, technical support and planning meetings are provided around budget development and implementation, including necessary revisions. Finally, a mid-year audit is conducted each year to provide progress updates and recommendations tied to the approved turnaround plan.

Under the Commissioner's Network Grant, Waterbury Public Schools has shared the costs of the literacy facilitator, behavior counselor, instructional technology coach, and two social-emotional learning (SEL) counselors. The school and/or district have aligned funding and expenditures closely with school goals and student needs.

October 5, 2023, SBE members Erin Benham, Elwood Exley, Jr., and Donald Harris joined the CSDE Turnaround Office on a site visit to WMS to observe their progress and engage in discussions around next steps.

Improvements:

- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2022-23 demonstrates an increase of 8.7 percentage points in the On-Track to High School Graduation Rate, from 77.1 percent in 2021-22 to 85.8 percent in 2022-23.
- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2022-23 demonstrates a decrease of 8.5 percentage points in the Chronic Absenteeism Rate, from 37.1 percent in 2021-22 to 28.6 percent in 2022-23.
- The suspension rate demonstrates a decrease of 3.5 percentage points from 24.8 percent in 2021-22 to 21.3 percent in 2022-23.
- WMS provides support to teachers using science and mathematics fellows and content area leaders to increase academic rigor. The selected mathematics and science teachers and content specific leaders are helping to facilitate professional development with school staff to provide job embedded coaching, as well as attending monthly collaborative sessions with other educators to learn about innovations shown to improve student outcomes.
- WMS provides professional learning to teachers and staff to promote a positive, growth mindset, and classroom management. Social-emotional learning (SEL) counselors use the Panorama survey data to work with groups of students to support student behavior and the learning of SEL competencies.

Continued Areas of Focus:

- Continuing focus on reducing chronic absenteeism through leveraging wraparound services and outreach efforts to families on the importance of regular school attendance.
- Developing learning tasks and success criteria that reflect higher Depth of Knowledge levels.
- Providing professional learning that is focused on instructional planning, coaching, and data-driven decision-making.
- Providing feedback to teachers through learning walks.
- Strengthening the schoolwide behavior management system and the consistency in routines, expectations, and consequences between grades.

Next Steps:

During the 2024-25 school year, Michael F. Wallace Middle School will continue strategies that have led to improvement over the past four years, abandon those that have not, and target areas requiring further growth and development. The CSDE Turnaround Office will provide intensive monitoring and support as Michael F. Wallace Middle School enters Year 5 of the Commissioner's Network. The Year 5 plan will prioritize the following:

- Decreasing the chronic absenteeism rate through a multi-tiered systems approach. Attendance will continue to be monitored weekly through data and attendance team meetings. Members of the attendance team should participate in statewide trainings on the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP) approach to support students struggling with absenteeism and disengagement.
- Creating a teacher leadership academy to support ongoing instructional practice improvements.
- Establishing an instructional practice video library for in-house staff to showcase best practices.
- Implementing lesson study across all departments, including lesson planning and video peer coaching.
- Continuing afterschool programming to support student needs with academics and social-emotional learning.

Recommendation:

The CSDE recommends that the SBE approve an additional year commencing July 1, 2024.

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