

# IX.B.

## Connecticut State Board of Education Hartford

**To Be Proposed:**  
February 14, 2024

**Resolved,** That, pursuant to Section 10-223h of the Connecticut General Statutes, the State Board of Education approves the continued participation of Pulaski Middle School, New Britain, 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 fourteenth day of February, 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:** February 14, 2024

**Subject:** Approval of Commissioner’s Network Extension Year 5, Pulaski Middle School, New Britain

***Executive Summary***

**Introduction**

Public Act 12-116, now codified as Section 10-223h of the Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.), 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. C.G.S. §10-223h 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, Pulaski Middle School (PMS) in New Britain is recommended to remain in the Commissioner’s Network for an additional and final year.

**Background:**

Pulaski Middle School currently serves 867 students in grades six through eight. Eighty percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Nineteen percent of the students are identified as needing special education services, and 24 percent are multilingual learners/English learners (MLs/ELs). Approximately 66 percent of the students are Hispanic/Latino, 11 percent are Black, and 17 percent are White.

On April 5, 2019, the CSDE received an *Expression of Interest Form* from the Consolidated School District of New Britain (CSDNB), volunteering PMS for participation in the Commissioner's Network. On May 23, 2019, the Commissioner of Education initially selected PMS 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, PMS and the New Britain Federation of Teachers appointed members to serve on the school's Turnaround Committee, and the CSDE conducted an Operations and Instructional Audit on October 10, 2019. The audit revealed a lack of common vision for effective instruction and schoolwide behavior management systems, a low level of instructional rigor, including higher order thinking and effective questioning techniques, inadequate or ineffective assessment and data collection systems, and the need for ongoing and job-embedded professional learning for teachers in instructional practices, as well as data analysis and data-driven decision making. Upon entering the Commissioner's Network, PMS had declining test scores, with 13.5 percent of students meeting or exceeding the achievement standards in English language arts (ELA) and 4.2 percent in mathematics on the Smarter Balanced Assessment.

During the 2019-20 planning year, the school's Turnaround Committee developed the turnaround plan for PMS in accordance with C.G.S. §10-223h(d). The goal of the PMS Turnaround Plan is to enhance teaching and learning through a student-centered approach. This model emphasizes personalization, high expectations, hands-on learning experiences, teaching of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and opportunities for educators to reflect on their practices. By capitalizing on a student-centered approach, PMS aims to transition students from dependent to independent learners, empower teachers to become culturally responsive educators while addressing the distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations, and cultural backgrounds of students.

The Turnaround Plan includes investments in the areas of talent, academics, culture and climate, and operations to ensure PMS maximizes student outcomes and teacher development. These investments support the transformation into a personalized academic environment where positive relationships between students and teachers are developed and reinforced through instruction that is challenging, relevant, collaborative, student directed and connected to real life situations. PMS recognizes the impact educator preparation has on student learning, and the core talent strategies concentrate on effective instruction through student-centered professional learning opportunities, the implementation of a culturally relevant curriculum based on the New Britain Profile of a Graduate, the development of teacher capacity, and the instructional rounds and data collection.

On May 7, 2020, after their plan was approved by the SBE, PMS 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, PMS has been provided with varied supports by the CSDE. These supports include biweekly 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, the Consolidated School District of New Britain has shared the costs of the instructional coaches and compensation for leadership team members. The school and/or district have aligned funding and expenditures closely with school goals and student needs.

On June 14, 2023, the SBE approved an additional year for the continued participation of PMS in the Commissioner's Network.

On November 14, 2023, SBE members Elwood Exley, Jr. and Donald Harris joined the CSDE Turnaround Office on a site visit to Pulaski Middle School to observe its progress and engage in discussions around next steps.

### **Improvements:**

- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2022-23 demonstrates an increase of 1.6 percentage points in PMS' performance index for mathematics for all students, from an index of 40.5 percent in 2021-22 to 42.1 percent in 2022-23.
- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2022-23 demonstrates an increase of 3.2 percentage points in PMS' performance index for mathematics for high needs students, from an index of 39.4 percent in 2021-22 to 42.6 percent in 2022-23.
- There is a commitment to improving instruction through the increase of two ninety-minute periods each week dedicated to collaborative content planning, professional learning sessions, weekly classroom walkthroughs and feedback sessions, and coaching cycles.
- Coaches provide targeted support for teachers in the areas of classroom structures and routines, unpacking curriculum and assessments, lesson design and modeling lessons. Coaches also participate in weekly meetings with the administration to monitor progress on coaching cycles and building teacher capacity.
- All four academic content areas have implemented standards-based curricula.
- The multi-tiered supports for academics have been expanded by hiring a Read 180 teacher who provides Tier 2 interventions.
- Academic support and acceleration in the areas of literacy and mathematics is provided through the What I Need (WIN) block one day per week for each content area.
- The schedule has been restructured to include academic and social-emotional intervention time three times a week using the Second Step curricular resource.

## **Continued Areas of Focus:**

- Continuing to improve the quality of instruction with a focus on intentional instructional planning that emphasizes student-centered learning and increasing levels of rigor, differentiation to support individual student need, and increasing levels of student discourse through higher order questioning and problem-solving tasks.
- Continuing to provide professional learning and coaching to support teachers in planning for, and utilizing, strategies for increased cognitive engagement, including meaningful peer-to-peer discourse that incorporates multiple learning styles, and providing ample opportunity for productive struggle.
- Continuing professional learning to build teacher capacity in differentiating instruction, engaging students in discourse with higher order thinking questions, providing students with clear instructions around procedural and content-based matters, and classroom management.
- Providing mentoring to teachers new to the district and/or the profession through assigned mentors and monthly meetings devoted to professional learning on high priority topics.
- Continuing to provide feedback from the principal to teachers three days per week to ensure fidelity of implementation of professional learning and adherence to the instructional vision.
- Analyzing and revising systems, protocols, and effectiveness of instructional data teams in reviewing benchmark assessments and utilizing common formative assessments to drive instruction and supports.
- Expanding the tiered intervention approach to meet the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of struggling students.
- Implementing a sustainable model of support and discipline wherein staff, students, families and community members are aware of and understand the behavioral expectations of the school building and the processes within. This includes re-evaluating and strengthening the schoolwide behavior system by implementing clarifying procedures for in-class and office referrals within the multi-tiered system of supports. This model should also include implementing restorative practices to address student behavior and equip students with strategies that will assist them in developing positive relationships with peers.
- Continuing to expand positive interactions and engagement opportunities with community, family, and school by aligning teacher participation in attendance matters and reinforcing positive behavior with students and families.
- Continuing the leadership team consisting of administrators, teacher representatives from each content area, multilingual department, and special education that will continue to meet, learn, plan and implement strategies in the Turnaround Plan.
- Continuing to focus on reducing chronic absenteeism for all students through weekly monitoring meetings and leveraging wraparound services and outreach efforts to families on the importance of regular school attendance. Chronic absenteeism increased from 40.0 percent in 2021-22 to 43.2 percent in 2022-23. As of November 2023, the current chronic absenteeism rate is 32.6 percent, well above the state rate of 19.01 percent.

**Next Steps:**

During the 2024-25 school year, Pulaski Middle School will continue strategies that have shown 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 Pulaski Middle School enters Year 5 of the Commissioner's Network. The Year 5 plan will prioritize the following:

- Continuing to provide mentoring to teachers new to the district and/or the profession through assigned mentors and monthly meetings devoted to professional learning on high priority topics.
- Building the capacity of teachers to implement research-based instructional strategies that require academic discourse among students, through professional learning, walkthroughs, and data analysis to monitor implementation and effectiveness.
- Improving tiered instructional practices to ensure increased student readiness, academic performance, and overall student outcomes. This includes providing in-depth training for ELA teachers on the use of diagnostic assessments to refine instruction and assign students to intervention.
- Improving the data culture around the effectiveness of Tier 1 instruction through data teams with a focus on common end-of-unit assessments and analyzing student work samples to inform instruction.
- Decreasing the chronic absenteeism rate through a multi-tiered systems approach, including the expansion of afterschool programming to include additional activities like boxing and chess.

**Recommendation:**

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

Prepared by:

Margaret M. Hughes, Associate Education Consultant  
Turnaround Office

Reviewed by:

Jennifer Webb, Bureau Chief, Turnaround Office

Approved by:

Irene E. Parisi, Chief Academic Officer