

IX.D.

Connecticut State Board of Education Hartford

To Be Proposed:
May 3, 2023

Resolved, That the State Board of Education, pursuant to Section 10-223h of the Connecticut General Statutes, approves the continued participation of West Side Middle School, Waterbury, in the Commissioner's Network for an additional year commencing July 1, 2023, 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 May, Two Thousand Twenty-Three.

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: May 3, 2023

Subject: Approval of Commissioner’s Network Extension for West Side 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, West Side Middle School (WSMS) in Waterbury is recommended to remain in the Commissioner’s Network for a fourth year.

Background:

West Side Middle School currently serves 901 students in grades six through eight. Eighty percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Twenty percent of the students are identified as needing special education services, and 17 percent are multilingual learners/English learners (MLs/ELs). Approximately 60 percent of the students are Hispanic/Latino, 22 percent are Black, and 12 percent are White.

On April 5, 2019, the CSDE received an *Expression of Interest Form* from the Waterbury Public Schools (WPS), volunteering WSMS for participation in the Commissioner's Network. On May 23, 2019, the Commissioner of Education initially selected WSMS 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, WSMS 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 26, 2019. The audit revealed primarily teacher-led lessons with low levels of rigor, differentiation, and student engagement. Concerns arose about the effectiveness of professional learning along with implementation follow-through and feedback that is provided to teachers. In addition, the learning environment was not welcoming, with little student work or data displayed throughout the school and limited evidence of school branding. Classroom environments did not support collaboration and were devoid of supporting artifacts.

During the 2019-20 planning year, the school's Turnaround Committee developed the turnaround plan for WSMS in accordance with C.G.S. § 10-223h (d). The goal of the WSMS turnaround plan is to improve teaching and learning by implementing research-based, instructional best practices that have proven to be effective in increasing student performance. Specifically, WSMS targeted Tier I instruction by teachers through the use of strategic and specific professional learning opportunities geared toward improving such instruction. Since joining the Commissioner's Network, WSMS has provided high quality professional learning for teachers and administrators to increase rigor and established what high quality teaching and learning looks like. In addition to strengthening Tier I instruction, a tiered system of supports has been implemented. Furthermore, to improve the school climate, WSMS established Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and restorative practices to help establish a common understanding and approach to the well-being of students. Efforts also focused on ensuring WSMS is inviting to students and families, including branding efforts that focus on positive messaging and high expectations. In addition, the daily schedule and school calendar have been redesigned to increase instructional time in mathematics for students and provide increased opportunities for professional learning.

On June 3, 2020, after their plan was approved by the SBE, WSMS 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, WSMS 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 a behavior counselor, ELA coach, and instructional technology facilitator. The school and/or district have aligned funding and expenditures closely with school goals and student needs.

Improvements:

- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2021-22 demonstrates an increase of 6.4 percentage points in academic growth rate in mathematics from 35.5 percent in 2018-19 to 41.9 percent in 2021-22.
- WSMS developed a schoolwide, systematic approach to teaching and learning with clearly defined structures in place that are outlined in their core instructional practice guide. The use of learning targets and success criteria increased Depth of Knowledge (DoK) questioning, and increased student-centered instruction are evidenced during ongoing learning walks and instructional audits. WSMS also engages new teachers in an orientation to familiarize new staff with the instructional framework and expectations for teaching and learning as well as including teachers on learning walks in order to increase their capacity and gather ideas to strengthen their instruction.
- The vision for effective instruction has grown over the past three years with an original focus on core components of instruction and expanding to student discourse and differentiation. Leadership structures, practices, and systems were developed to support this common vision. A distributed leadership model is in place with the school leadership team and content coordinators in order to build leadership capacity among the WSMS faculty.
- Professional development is provided and reflects the needs and areas of improvement that WSMS aims to achieve. Researched-based professional learning is grounded in the following areas: the instructional core and task development; effective questioning techniques; student attendance, engagement, and support; proximity teaching; and differentiation.
- Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) structures and practices have been developed and implemented. Students have access to interventions and teachers have access to supplemental resources and materials as a part of the school wide MTSS program. Teachers have received co-teaching training and coaching to increase their capacity and effectiveness to meet students' varied needs. Afterschool learning opportunities are provided to support student's needs.
- WSMS has created a welcoming learning environment in which there has been improvements to the school building and learning materials. Classroom environments support collaboration, there is a sense of school pride with branding, and spaces such as the media center and science labs have been upgraded to support student learning.

Continued Areas of Focus:

- Continuing to focus on reducing chronic absenteeism through leveraging wraparound services and outreach efforts to families on the importance of regular school attendance.
- There is a continued need to improve instruction in literacy and mathematics and the implementation of tiered interventions and to ensure the curriculum is aligned to the inherent rigor of the Connecticut Core Standards and Smarter Balanced Assessments.
- Continuing to build teachers' capacity to examine data in order to analyze instructional impact on student outcomes as well as using that data to plan for and adjust instruction based on all students' developmental needs through the data team process.
- Expanding supports for MLs/ELs and their families to support academic and social-emotional needs.

Next Steps:

During the 2023-24 school year, West Side Middle School will continue strategies that have shown steady improvement over the past three 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 West Side Middle School enters Year 4 of the Commissioner's Network. The Year 4 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 supporting students struggling with absenteeism and disengagement.
- Creating a teacher leadership academy to support ongoing instructional practice improvements.
- Establishing an instructional practice video library of in-house staff to showcase best practices.
- Implementing lesson study across all departments, including lesson planning and video peer coaching.
- Continuing to revise systems, protocols, and the effectiveness of the instructional data teams in reviewing assessments and using data to drive instruction.
- Continuing afterschool programming to support student need with academics and social-emotional learning.

Recommendation:

The CSDE recommends that the SBE approve an additional year commencing July 1, 2023.

Prepared by:

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Approved by:

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