



## **Norwalk Public Schools**

# **Quality Review Report**

**Brien McMahon High School**

**300 Highland Avenue  
Norwalk  
Connecticut  
06854**

**Principal: Suzanne Koroshetz  
Dates of review: September 17 – 18, 2007  
Reviewer: Clive Parsons**

**Cambridge Education (LLC)**

## Content of the report

### **Part 1: The School Context**

Background information about the school

### **Part 2: Overview**

What the school does well

What the school needs to improve

### **Part 3: Main findings**

## Part 1: The School Context

### Information about the school:

Brien McMahon High School has approximately 1,500 students enrolled across grades 9 through 12. Around 40 percent of students are White; just under 30 percent are Black and a similar percentage Hispanic. Approximately 3 percent of students are Asian American and a small proportion are American Indian. Over one third of students have a home language other than English, while just under 10 percent receive bilingual education or English as a second language services. These figures are higher than in similar schools and significantly higher than in high schools across the state. The proportion of students with special education needs, at 10 percent, is about the same as in other high schools.

The proportion of students eligible for free or reduced price meals has more than doubled since 2002. At approximately 25 percent in 2005-6, it was a little higher than in high schools across the state, but lower than in similar schools. Student attendance, at 93 percent in 2005 is similar to that in high schools across the state.

The Center for Global Studies is an inter-district magnet school within Brien McMahon. The Center offers Japanese, Chinese and Arabic language, history, and literature through inter-disciplinary Asian study. There are approximately 300 students, who spend over half their day integrated into classes with their McMahon peers.

The school building is new and provides a superb working environment for students and adults alike.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well:

- The strong and focused leadership provided by the principal has produced a very clear vision for the future development of the school. This is based upon an accurate evaluation of its current strengths and required improvements.
- The school builds successfully upon the diversity of its student body to provide a climate and atmosphere that is caring and supportive and promotes effectively their personal growth.
- The faculty is very willing to work cooperatively and to evaluate critically their own teaching practices in order to strengthen student learning.
- The extensive range of opportunities provided during and outside of the school day is supported well by the broader community and significantly enriches the students' experiences.
- The Center for Global Studies provides a very successful program, leading to good academic and personal growth for students.
- The students respond well to the opportunities offered to them and work supportively and cooperatively with each other and staff.

### Areas for Improvement:

- Fully establish and implement professional learning communities for all faculty.
- Broaden the use of common assessments to provide timely data to drive instruction and further strengthen student outcomes.
- Increase further the use of classroom observations to provide focused feedback and targeted support for teachers to spread best practice more widely.
- Strengthen systems for the early identification of students who are potentially at risk of not making adequate progress and provide more opportunities for differentiated support, guidance and academic intervention.

## Part 3: Main Findings

### Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

#### **This school meets minimum requirements.**

Academic standards are rising and student achievement is above that for the district. Standards are approaching those of the state. Most students make at least satisfactory progress during their time in the school.

Test results for students with special education needs increased significantly last year. The number of co-taught classes has increased substantially over the last few years. The new principal is aware of the general benefits this has brought to the quality of learning in many classrooms. She is also determined to identify precisely what caused the increase in outcomes for these students so that best practice is identified and spread more widely. There are numerous examples of high student achievement across subjects and grades. However, improvement is required for some students. Students in the Center for Global Studies make good progress.

Teaching and learning meet minimum requirements overall and there are examples of very effective classroom practice. However, there are also times when the teacher does most of the work in the classroom and students are not required to engage at a challenging level. Data is used to identify issues and concerns, as well as successes. Strategies are in place to bring about improvements in the curriculum and in the quality of student learning and are having some successes. These include raising test scores for Hispanic students in mathematics, for example. While arrangements for assessing students and their work are sound, the principal has identified two key strategies to improve their impact on student progress. Common assessments are being introduced within subject areas and grades and teachers are being provided with greater opportunities to work collaboratively.

The school provides very well for the students' personal growth. This is supported particularly effectively through the extensive range of additional opportunities, which the school offers. These activities reinforce the very strong sense of community that is evident throughout the school. They also provide opportunities for many students to work collegially and to take responsibility. They help to motivate and interest the students and support the positive attitudes and behavior that is evident throughout the school.

Leadership has put into place the prerequisites to enable and support good student growth. The new principal has identified quickly and effectively, the key areas to accelerate this further. The programs and strategies being introduced already demonstrate some successes. The principal's commitment to students is evident to all and she has the support of the whole community in her determination to take Brien McMahon to the next level of effectiveness. She is well supported by the team of housemasters, who share her vision, commitment and determination. She successfully disperses leadership more widely, with some effective practice evident from department chairs, for example.

Partnerships with parents and the wider community are fundamental in supporting the school's work and its growth. The principal demonstrates her commitment to involving parents, from all parts of the community, to be as active partners as possible. Productive partnerships are especially supportive of the school's enrichment program.

#### **Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects**

##### **The students' achievement is at basic level and needs improvement.**

Most students make at least secure progress during their time in school in most subject areas. Overall test results are above the district level and approaching those of the state. However, improvements are

required for some students. The performance of Black students in mathematics is a particular weakness, despite much activity by the mathematics team. These actions have seen the performance of Hispanic students improve, but that of Black students remains too low.

Results for the proportion of students reaching proficiency or higher in state tests in 2007 were just above those for the district in mathematics and reading but just below those of the state. Overall performance was similar to that in the other large high school in the district. Results in mathematics have risen each year since 2003. Reading results also show an upward trend. Consequently, the gap between the school's results and those of the state has closed significantly since 2003.

There is significant variation in the performance of students from different ethnic groups within the school. White students' achievement was much higher than other students in mathematics and reading in the 2007 tests. Black students' achievement was much lower than that of other students in mathematics. Nevertheless, the proportions of Black, Hispanic and White students reaching proficiency were higher than across the state in mathematics and reading. However, the proportion of students reaching the higher levels of goal and advanced was significantly below those of the state in each subject. The principal has identified the need to provide a more consistent challenge for all students, including those capable of performing at these higher levels. She is taking appropriate action. Students in the Center for Global Studies make good progress in lessons. The performance of male and female students is broadly equivalent.

Students with special education needs and English language learners make secure progress during their time in school. Some effective co-teaching between a subject specialist and a special education teacher makes a good contribution to the progress of these students. The performance of students with special education needs improved in the 2007 tests and was just above that of their peers in the district and broadly equivalent to those across the state. English language learners performed just below those in the district and the state.

A more extensive lesson observation schedule by the new administration, coupled with rigorous interpretation of the available data, is beginning to identify individuals and groups of students who are potentially at risk of not making adequate progress. However, the quality and range of data available is not yet sufficient to help the school to make timely and targeted interventions. This includes evaluative data and information on incoming grade 9 students. Similarly, the data is not sufficiently robust to be able to determine the impact on student achievement of the school's actions, nor to pinpoint the precise causes of improvements in students' performance. Consequently, the principal has introduced requirements for common assessments in departments. She is also establishing professional learning communities amongst the faculty to enable them to discuss the resulting data and students' work, and to spread best practice more widely.

The new administration team has started the process of formulating a growth plan for the school. This is a collaborative activity, with contributions made from the faculty, for example. The plan will articulate the challenging goals, expectations and strategies that are required to continue to drive student performance upwards and to eliminate achievement gaps between different student groups.

## **Criterion 2: The quality of instruction through teaching, learning and curriculum, and the use of data to promote learning**

**This area of the school's work meets minimum requirements.**

Teaching and learning are proficient. Sometimes the quality of instruction is good and results in good student progress. There are times, however, when the quality does not reach an acceptable standard. The teacher doing most of the work in the class characterizes these classes and individual students are able to get by with minimum input or activity.

Teachers are knowledgeable in their subject areas and routinely demonstrate a confident and assured presentation with their classes. This often results in students being challenged and required to think at a high level. In an advanced placement Japanese class, the teacher used the simple stimulus of a teapot to draw out ideas and possible scenarios from the students with great skill. There are occasions however, where activities require too little thinking from the students and are based on recall and repetition, rather than understanding and application. There are good examples, as in a co-taught science class, of teachers using technology, such as data projectors, to engage students and provide interesting, visual stimuli. In the same lesson, the teachers also used real objects for the students to see and touch, capturing their interest and motivation. The students' attention was further strengthened as the teacher demonstrated setting fire to a cloth soaked in an alcohol and water mix! Overt behavior management strategies are rarely necessary, but are effective when required.

Students respond well when given the opportunity to work in small groups, as in a US history class. Here the teacher established what the students already knew about the Constitution, before moving on to consider what they might want to know and finally review what they had found out. This experience was personalized for the students because they had their own mini copy of the constitution to interact with, and the teacher consistently drew them back to its implications for their own lives. There are sufficient opportunities for students to practice and reinforce key skills through subject areas, including mathematical skills in science and literacy skills in social studies.

Students understand the school's grading policies. They recognize that there are differences in the weightings given to different aspects of different subjects and between grades and course levels. While this variation is acceptable, they also feel that occasionally there is significant variation between teachers with equivalent classes. At times, too much credit is given for minor successes such as bringing the required equipment to school and too much time is spent in following up on these minor details in class. Students believe that they receive sufficient feedback from their teachers, formally through interim record cards as well as informally through feedback and guidance in class. The principal has recognized the benefits of using common assessment pieces in subjects and work on this has started in earnest.

The principal acknowledges the need for teachers to work more collaboratively, to review data and student outcomes collectively and to act upon their discussions. Professional learning communities are thus becoming established. Positive outcomes, such as increasing the consistency of student experiences are already evident in some areas. Department teams have been evaluating the data available and making any necessary changes to pedagogy. The science team has for example, examined strand data and the performance of different classes to identify possible causes. Much work has also been undertaken by the mathematics team in response to the weaker performance of some students. The curriculum has been aligned from one grade to the next and there is more focus on the skills and content required in the tests. Pacing has been adjusted to emphasize quality rather than quantity of work.

An extensive range of opportunities is provided to students, both during the school day, but especially outside of classes. The principal rightly remains concerned that some students have too many slots in their schedule that are spent in the study hall. She has identified the need for more electives, especially of a hands-on nature, to increase motivation for some students. The students respond very well to the variety of extra-curricular provision as it enables them to engage in activities in which they can excel. They provide opportunities for students to mix with others outside of their academic settings and a vehicle to induct new students into social aspects of the school. Students within the Center for Global Studies as part of their studies, undertake an exchange with foreign students. They thoroughly enjoy this experience.

### **Criterion 3: Students' personal character development**

**This area of the school's work exceeds minimum requirements.**

There is a strong sense of community and belonging throughout the school. Students behave well, both in class and in other areas such as corridors and the lunchroom. They are mostly polite and courteous, to

both each other and to adults in the building. There is little tardiness to class and students are very much aware of the consequences of being late. They are well informed about the expectations and requirements for attendance and the school's procedures should absence occur. Students respond well to the school's promotion of good attendance and the elimination of truancy, as well the high expectations for their achievement. The school is quiet and purposeful when classes are occurring and orderly and well organized between times. The dean of students provides an effective filter for minor misdemeanors before the involvement of housemasters.

Parents and students welcome the positive impact of the student-run freshman orientation held during the summer. The extensive range of additional activities provides many opportunities for students to show initiative take responsibility and contribute to the community. Further opportunities are provided through active class organizations. The importance of civic responsibility is reinforced well through social studies classes. Students respond very well to the opportunities offered, with good attendance across the range of activities and programs. Numerous awards have been achieved as a result, reinforcing the overall sense of achievement and pride in the school. Most students balance the school's academic demands with their interest and participation in clubs and activities. However, some parents remain concerned that this is not always the case and that academic progress can be adversely affected at times.

Relationships across the school are very positive and characterized by mutual respect. Consequently, the school climate is very conducive to learning. Students work in a caring and supportive environment that is free from oppressive behavior. They highlight the diversity of the student body and the way that this contributes positively to the sense of community evident throughout the school. They report that there are both formal and informal routes for them to discuss issues and difficulties with adults or other students should the need arise.

There is a team of core academic teachers for identified grade 9 students in recognition that some freshmen find the transition to high school more challenging. Other programs are also used to provide a positive influence for groups of students, such as Emerging Scholars working with Black students.

#### **Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management**

##### **This area of the school's work meets minimum requirements.**

The new principal demonstrates a very high level of leadership and is ably supported by her team of administrators. The impact of this is already evident in many aspects of the school's work. However, her very short time in post means that initiatives and changes have not yet had the time to impact significantly on student achievement.

The principal has very quickly gained the respect of the whole school community. Central to this has been her high visibility around the school and at functions and events. Students and staff articulate an increased rigor and expectation within the building, coupled with a realism of where the school actually is and where it needs to be. The respect that the principal has gained is therefore coupled with trust, and the faculty is committed to supporting the vision and direction that she has quickly established. She demonstrates to all a commitment to the welfare and progress of every student that maximizes their academic and personal growth and hence their life chances. This embodies the school's aims and values well.

The principal is ably supported by her team of housemasters. Collectively they demonstrate a vision and a clear and realistic process for achieving it. At the heart of their work is the transformation of teaching and learning. This process has already started through the establishment of professional learning communities and common assessments. To support this, the administration team has quickly and accurately evaluated the quality of the school's current offerings and outcomes. Student achievement data has been used effectively, coupled with direct observations of students and teachers at work. The faculty was especially appreciative of the principal leading professional development to evaluate test data.

Some department chairs demonstrate a willingness and capacity to engage in critical review and analysis and this too is affecting the quality and consistency of student experiences. Including department chairs on the leadership team has been a positive step in disseminating leadership and responsibility more broadly. The positive tone and supportive atmosphere means that the staff are very willing to work cooperatively and collegially to improve student outcomes. The principal is determined to increase the administrative time for classroom observations to support this process further by providing focused feedback and targeted support for teachers. There is a very good capacity for the school to succeed in moving to the next level of effectiveness.

The district has a secure understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. There is also good coherence between the district's strategies for moving the school forward and that of the principal. The school appreciates the support and guidance offered and the professional development provided, such as in science and mathematics. The positive working relationship between the district and the principal resulted in the appointment of effective new housemasters and the retention of the existing 'interim' housemasters. This has been very influential in providing additional capacity for improvement as well as continuity in systems and procedures.

### **Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community**

#### **This area of the school's work meets minimum requirements.**

The strong sense of community and belonging throughout the school includes parents and the wider community. The principal's willingness to meet and engage with parents and others who have a stake in students and their learning is recognized and welcomed by the school community.

Many families are directly involved in the life of the school, especially through the many additional opportunities offered to the students. Specific parent groups provide effective support for individual school activities such as the band and other musical activities. The principal has already recognized, however, that some parts of the community are less likely to attend functions such as open house. Two additional sessions, targeting Spanish and Haitian Creole speaking families, are therefore planned to try to overcome this. Invitations have been translated, home phone calls have been made, refreshments will be offered and translators will be present. This ambitious plan demonstrates the principal's commitment to engaging families as fully as possible. The principal is also committed to ensuring that contact information is accurate and updated and that teachers have greater access to making contact with families.

Information for families is of good quality overall. There is a parent/student handbook and a well laid out website where active involvement is further encouraged. Information concerning student achievement and progress is clearly communicated at regular intervals. The parents' club is active and provides a forum for discussing school issues and hearing from the administration and teachers. The site committee comprises teachers, students and parents, as well as administrators and is actively involved in helping to shape the future direction of the school.

The schedules of guidance counselors are full. Some parents are concerned that this results in some discussions not being followed through or in limited impact for their child. It is evident that sometimes this is not the case, but time limitations have resulted in some parents not being informed of actions and successes in a timely manner. Students generally feel well supported with, for example, effective college preparation.

The school is actively engaged in a good number of partnerships with the community that directly benefits student academic and personal growth. Partners include local businesses, higher education and community agencies. The school-based health center provides readily accessible support for students and anger management classes are supported by local youth services.