



Norwalk Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Richard C. Briggs High School

**350 Main Avenue
Norwalk
Connecticut
06851**

Principal: Alaine Lane

Dates of review: September 17 – 18, 2007

**Lead Reviewer: Trevor Yates
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:

Richard C. Briggs High School is an alternative high school, which provides a small learning community for students aged between 16 and 20 who have experienced academic failure due to poor attendance, social deficits, or poor school engagement. The school also houses an on-site day care center that caters for up to seven babies or young children, aged from 6 weeks to 3 years. This enables their young mothers to continue with their high school education.

Students transfer to the Richard C. Briggs High School, from either of the other two high schools in the town, where they must have attended for a minimum of one marking period. The school has the capacity to take up to 120 students. Two weeks into the new academic year, it has 105 students enrolled, 15 percent of whom are white, 22 percent black and 22 percent Hispanic. Around 8 percent of the students are English language learners and 25 percent of the students are with special education needs. There are 57 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced cost meals, compared to 34.5 percent at district high schools and 22.4 percent for state high schools.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The principal has established a clear direction for the school. Her aims are shared by faculty members and provide a positive steer for the work and development of the school.
- The principal and the faculty in general have a good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement.
- The school has gained a high level of student and parent satisfaction by providing a caring environment. Within this, many students, who have had difficulty performing in large high schools, respond positively to alternative education programs provided in a small learning community.
- The school has developed a co-enrollment program with Norwalk Community College that enables qualified students, over the age of 16 to enroll in college classes while still in high school. It has successfully established scholarships for graduating students to attend College, and full scholarships for students to attend Norwalk Community College.
- The school enables young mothers to continue successfully their full time high school education.

Areas for Improvement:

- Increase student academic success by:
 - improving student attendance, punctuality, engagement and behavior.
 - establishing a clear set of expectations.
 - developing and making wide use of incentive systems to celebrate high attendance, punctuality and improvement.
- Ensure that the quality of instruction is more consistent across the school by:
 - developing systematic approaches to monitoring the students' individualized learning programs and outcomes
 - maximizing the use of district instructional specialists to support the continued improvement of the curriculum content and instruction, especially in the core areas.
- Provide clear support and guidance to all staff by:
 - introducing an instructional leadership team, which places an increased focus on the use of data to drive instruction.
 - enhanced use of paired lesson observations, including opportunities for staff to visit other schools.
- Improve the range, quality, rigor and relevance of the curriculum by:
 - implementing a schedule to ensure that all students have the same instructional hours as in all other high schools in the district.
 - developing "Academy-like" programs for all students, to enhance their readiness for work and post secondary education and opportunities.

- The school and the district need to establish a clear development plan for upgrading the school facilities and assessing the level of resources allocation.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school needs improvement.

The principal has established a clear strategic direction and has prepared the ground well for further improvements. She is extremely well respected by students, staff and parents. The school has started to develop collaborative planning; for example, the two English teachers have assumed responsibility for reading and writing respectively. However, the principal needs to delegate many of the non-instructional responsibilities, which she has assumed, and involve herself much more in the instructional leadership.

Students work in an environment that is free from oppression and where the diversity of the student population is well respected. There are very constructive working relationships between students and adults. This calm working climate has still to impact on overall student achievement, which is in need of substantial improvement. One of the key issues for the school to improve significantly is the attendance and punctuality of students. During the two days of the visit over 30 percent of students were either absent or late. There are also key weaknesses in the quality of the overall curriculum and the instruction, which impact substantially on students' learning and progress.

The school has adopted the district curriculum and its literacy and numeracy policies, but the implementation of these is inconsistent. Professional development needs to be more closely aligned with the school's aims. Curriculum developments, such as the reading initiative, need to become embedded in day-to-day instructional practice. The school's technology resources include a large number of computers, which are old and many are inoperable. This has a negative impact on the ability of teachers to utilize technology to support student learning.

The majority of students attend school from 7:45 am to 1:00 pm. The school offers daily afternoon study hall or tutorial periods from 1:20 pm – 2:30 pm. However, currently, the only students engaged in learning after 1 pm are the 'academy II' students. These students attend afternoon classes at Norwalk Community College. The school makes every effort to include families as partners and the diversity of the community is well respected. However, apart from the excellent link with the local community college, the extent to which community resources support student learning is in need of improvement. The school is very aware of this need and has recently been awarded a 21st Century grant to enable it to enhance vocational and work related activities.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

The students' achievement is below basic level and needs substantial improvement.

Achievement is well below average grade level overall. The school has not met its No Child Left Behind (NCLB) adequate yearly progress goals in the percentage of students scoring at or above proficient for the past four years. The school has a high proportion of students eligible for free or reduced price meals and a high percent of students with special education needs. However, even taking these factors into account, the current achievement in English and mathematics remains well below grade level throughout. Weaknesses and inconsistencies in the curriculum and instruction are slowing the students' overall progress.

Over the past five years, the performance of students in mathematics and reading on the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) has varied on a yearly basis. For example, in mathematics, the range is from a low of 15 percent in 2003-04 to a high of 27 percent in mathematics in 2005-06. This

declined to 24 percent in 2006-07. In reading, the range has been from 8 percent in 2002-03 to a high of 28 percent in 2006-07.

In part, this is because students attending Richard C. Briggs High School must have spent a minimum of one marking period in one of the two other high schools in the town. Consequently, the nature and size of its intake varies on an annual basis. Therefore, year-to-year comparison of student achievement has to be set in this context. There are, however, indications that the overall trend in student achievement is showing improvement, albeit from a very low base line. For example, the number of students taking CAPT has increased in the past five years from 8 out of 25, to 32 out of 35 last year. At the same time, the cumulative percentage of students achieving proficiency in mathematics, reading or both subjects, has improved from 25 percent in 2002-03, to 51 percent in 2006-07.

The principal and staff have focused on providing a caring environment within which the students respond positively. The school has not set challenging goals and benchmarks for academic improvement. Given the transient nature of the school population, monitoring the progress of individual students across the whole curriculum needs to be a key focus for all staff. This is an area where the school needs significant improvement. At present, there is insufficient collection and analysis of data to enable the staff to identify the attainment and progress of individual students. Based on the current data, there is a differential between the attainment of male and female students. For example, male students attain lower levels; fewer males successfully complete Academy programs, have lower attendance and withdraw from the school at a higher rate.

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 needs improvement.

There are key weaknesses and inconsistencies in the teaching quality as expectations are not high enough overall and there is a lack of consistency in the effective implementation of school and district initiatives. Nonetheless, the teachers are conscientious, work hard and show good knowledge and care of individual students.

A key feature of the school is that it provides small learning centers for all students, which promote positive relationships throughout. The students are actively engaged in many classes. For example, in an Academy I English class, they were writing a letter in their journals to themselves as a 10 year old child. Scrutiny of their written work showed that the students responded to the teacher's high expectations of writing quality and length.

The school has taken action to improve instruction in several ways. For example, they have initiated a cross curriculum approach to writing and a reading initiative. Block scheduling has been instituted to give more quality, and less interrupted instructional time in a number of curriculum areas including English, algebra, physical science and art. However, there is inconsistency in the effective use of these extended blocks to promote enhanced learning.

If students are to have the opportunity to return to main stream education, the school recognizes that all students must experience the full range of the academic curriculum studied at the two other high schools. It has therefore adopted the district's mathematics and science curriculum. In English it is developing its own curriculum, which is currently less structured. There is a need to develop a scope and sequence supported by an effective mechanism to track both the curriculum followed and the learning of individual students. The school has also introduced co-teaching in English and science to facilitate the inclusion of children with special education needs into mainstream classes. However, at present there is a lack of effective implementation, with the resources teacher mainly providing in class-support as opposed to co-teaching.

In all classes, the majority of students were on task. However, in the majority of classes, the expectations were too low, there was lack of pace and challenge and the instruction was not sufficiently differentiated to cater for the range of ability. The school has placed emphasis on reading and writing across the curriculum. However, apart from the English Academy I class, most teachers elect to read out loud passages of text, thus missing the opportunity for their students to read.

Teachers need to develop further their questioning techniques. They currently tend to use closed questions requiring a 'yes' or 'no' answer or when extended questions are asked, they provide the answer before giving students an opportunity to respond. Teachers also need to be more selective in their choice of assignment, to ensure relevance for all students. For example, in a mathematics class, comprised of Hispanic and black children, the assignment related to a 'tanning salon'; which is something that is not part of the students' culture.

If planned curriculum developments, such as the literacy initiative, are truly to take hold, then all teachers should have ongoing professional development and or coaching by the school system's literacy specialist, or an outsider, and it should be part of every teacher's evaluation goals for the year.

The school has developed a co-enrollment program with Norwalk Community College that enables qualified students, over the age of 16, to enroll in college classes while still in high school. At the college, students undertake placements tests, study English, mathematics and science, and attend summer classes. All students see this as a very positive development.

The school recognizes that it needs to develop a similar program for those students who are looking to enter a post-secondary vocational program and for those students who are looking to enter the work force directly after graduation. The principal has identified the fact that Porter and Chester, an out of district private college, offers free vocational courses, currently attended by schools from surrounding districts. Unfortunately, current transport logistics prevent students from participating. A complementary approach, advocated by students, staff and parents, would be to develop a more relevant curriculum on site. However, the lack of suitable space and resources severely restrict the options.

Criterion 3: Students' personal character development

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

The principal has established a caring environment within which the majority of students respond positively, behave well and have positive attitudes to learning. They form constructive relationships with fellow students, teachers and other adults and the diversity of the local community is well respected. All students work in an atmosphere free from oppressive behavior and feel able to express their individuality.

Students are supportive of the school, including one girl who said that like the school's mascot – a Phoenix - she feels reborn since she started attending the school. Students and parents expressed the view that the school is like a family and the teachers at Richard C. Briggs are different – "They care about you"; "They help you and give you individual time".

The school has an excellent relationship with the Human Services Council, which funds the School-Based Health Center, a physician's assistant and a social worker. They provide medical and emotional care and help to keep the students healthy and in school. The school has adopted single sex classes for the teaching of Health Studies. This has proved to be highly effective, enabling issues to be addressed in a more mature and topic directed manner.

The Child Study Group, involving a wide range of staff and school-based interagency practitioners, meets alternate weeks. At this meeting, the concerns, issue and progress of individual students are discussed and action plans are agreed upon. The school also introduced a mentoring program, where

teachers, who mentor up to 10 students, have regular meetings with their group every two weeks. Within this caring environment the staff has skillfully addressed a number of very challenging issues during the past year including, a student suicide and two students awaiting trial for a fatal shooting.

The school uses a wide range of positive rewards. It recognizes students of the week, who receive pens and star certificates. The latter are displayed in the school's main corridor. At the end of each marking period, the school holds a meeting to celebrate attendance, student achievement, honor role, students passing 5 out of 6 classes and the most improved students in terms of attitude and behavior.

The school recognizes that, in order to increase student academic success, it needs to improve student attendance, punctuality, engagement and behavior. Historically, the principal and counselor have been very proactive in making phone calls to track down absent students. Given the extent of the problem, there needs to be a much more concerted effort involving all staff. The mentor's role includes direct responsibility for attendance and punctuality. Other initiatives under consideration include, establishing a clear set of expectations for all students, developing and making still wider use of incentive systems, and celebrating high attendance, punctuality and improvement more widely.

Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management

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

The principal is highly respected by staff, parents and students. She has established a clear direction for the development of the school and she and her staff have a good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement.

The principal and staff perceive the biggest challenges facing the school are getting the students into school, addressing the drug culture and providing relevant vocational options for the large population of students who will enter work or attend vocational training on graduation. Consequently, the school has appropriately focused on creating a caring, welcoming environment, which provides a 'second chance' to succeed in high school. There is now a need to focus on raising student achievement and promoting the academic progress of all students.

This change must be led by the principal who recognizes that there is a need to establish consistency in the quality of teaching across grades, classes and subjects. The evaluation of staff must take on a more formal structure, including beginning and end of year formal evaluation conferences where the principal discusses with each teacher, specific instructional objectives and how they will be measured. This formal and informal monitoring needs to be more precisely geared to the identification of specific aspects of practice or outcome. The school should make enhanced use of paired lesson observations, including opportunities for staff to visit other schools.

In order for this to happen, the principal must delegate more. In particular, she needs to relinquish many of the non-instructional day-to-day management activities, which she has assumed. For example, remotely opening the door for visitors; personally completing the full intake process for all new students; and the routine scheduling of all students.

Individual members of staff have assumed additional responsibility for specific curriculum areas. There is a need to further develop and widen the school leadership team. For example, the school does not have either an Instructional Leadership team or a data team. Consequently, there is insufficient focus on the use of data to drive instruction. The school also needs to develop systematic approaches to monitoring the students' individualized learning programs and outcomes. The school should also make greater use of district instructional specialists to support the continued improvement of the curriculum content and instruction, especially in the core areas.

The school and the district need to establish a clear development plan for upgrading the school facilities and assessing the level of resources allocation. For example, although certain rooms, such as Academy English and one of the science rooms have a good suite of computers, in the majority of classrooms, the computers are old and in some cases do not work. The school experiences difficulty in getting the machines repaired.

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

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

The school actively attempts to include families as partners. At present, much of the focus is on student attendance and punctuality. The principal and other staff frequently phone parents to notify them of student absence. The school counselor is well respected and highly valued by students, parents and other staff and has an excellent knowledge and understanding of the local community, gained from many years of service in the school.

The school has revived the Parent Teacher Organization and officers have remained on post although their children have graduated. Parents, including ex-students, expressed their admiration of the principal and the staff at the school. They noted that there had been significant positive changes, especially in the culture of the school since the principal's appointment. The school needs to build on this positive support to foster the involvement of families. In particular, there is a need to widen the engagement of parents in students' learning on a day-to-day basis.

A number of community groups support the work of the school. For example, local employees have volunteered in the school or painted and purchased toys for the daycare. Students have opportunities to work with professional artists at both the Center for Contemporary Printmaking and the Silvermine Art Guild. The Aldridge and Bruce Museums train students to be docents and there is financial support for busing which allows other students to visit. All of these partnerships improve the school culture, and raise students' self-esteem.

Richard C. Briggs High School has also recently successfully applied for a 21st Century grant. The grant will fund a wide range of activities for the next five years including, after school programming, summer schools and a school-to-career initiative for both students and parents. The grant will also allow for theater, art and music after school. However, the school recognizes that there is a need to strengthen the involvement of the community in the work of the school and it is investigating ways to achieve this, for example, by encouraging community members to work with students and mentors or learning tutors.

The school provides on-site day care for up to seven children of students, which enables young mothers to continue their full time high school education. This resource is highly valued by students, parents and staff, and is seen as one of the strengths of the school.