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QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

Norwalk Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Brookside Elementary School

**382 Highland Avenue
Norwalk
Connecticut
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Principal: David Hay

Dates of review: September 20 – 21, 2007

Reviewer: Jeff Rutel

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**Cambridge
Education**

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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

Brookside Elementary is a pre-school through fifth grade school with an enrollment of 401 students. The Brookside population is very diverse. Over 70 percent of the students are from minority groups. The student population is 28.4 percent White, 22.7 percent Black, 46.9 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent Asian. English language learners make up about 10 percent of the students, and there is a bilingual population of 8 percent. The majority of the English language learners speak Spanish.

Approximately 9 percent of the students receive special education services. Around 46 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch, significantly higher than the district and state figures. Daily attendance averages 97 percent, slightly higher than for the district and state. The school qualifies for Title 1 funds based on the proportion of students receiving free or reduced cost meals. There is a good deal of student mobility during the year.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The principal, assistant principal, faculty, and staff have created a strong positive culture that supports and nurtures academic and emotional development of the students. The principal is an excellent advocate for the school.
- The school has made great strides in meeting the requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and, while still categorized as “in need of improvement” this year, the students are making progress. The literacy coaching component at the school is a strong catalyst for academic growth.
- The school has developed strong relationships with parents, students, and the community at large. Parents are very proud of the school and have a high regard for the principal, staff, and level of education their children receive.
- The entire staff is committed to improving the level of education for all students.

Areas for Improvement:

- Increase achievement by providing more rigorous and challenging instruction.
- Increase staff expectations for the achievement of all sub-groups of students and develop specific strategies and professional support to address the achievement gap between groups of students.
- Provide clear models of excellence for teachers that address the goals in the school growth plan.
- Ensure there are sufficient clear and precise targets by which to measure progress against the growth plan.
- Develop tools for ongoing monitoring, assessment, and accountability to improve the impact of teaching on student learning.
- Increase the impact of teaching on student learning by maximizing instructional time in all lessons, improving the depth and breadth of content and increasing the pace of lessons.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school meets minimum requirements.

Brookside Elementary School has the capacity and resources to improve greatly on student achievement. Progress of sub-groups of students is unsatisfactory and needs improvement. While the school has made strides in meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals, the overall academic performance of the school, particularly in reading, needs to improve.

There is a major focus at the school on literacy using Reader's and Writer's Workshop as a teaching process. Teachers have had extensive professional development and participate in an on-going partnership with Teachers College at Columbia University. A full time literacy coach works with the entire staff to improve the quality of instruction. The school has focused on using the strict workshop model at the expense of concentrating on improving the impact on student learning. The new mathematics program shows promise but the same issues restrict effectiveness as with literacy. There is too much focus on the program and not enough on student learning and rigor.

The quality of instruction varies and is often mechanical and slow paced. Teacher's expectations for all students are too low, and instruction lacks rigor and challenge. There is insufficient use of student-centered strategies to facilitate learning. Teachers are doing most of the delivery and students have too few opportunities to get directly involved in the learning process. "Pair-share," while an effective strategy, is overused. Activities to enable critical thinking and open-ended questioning by teachers are not used sufficiently to increase student engagement and extend their learning. There is a great deal of data collected by the school, but insufficient focus on strategies to improve teaching and learning for struggling students and monitor their progress. The Academically Talented (gifted) program is not sufficiently well resourced and, as a result, is not always challenging enough for all of its students.

Personal character development is good and there is a strong, positive culture in the school. Student behavior is satisfactory and students are attentive in most classes. Teacher management of classrooms is inconsistent and there is too much variation with rituals and routines. Relationships among the staff and between adults and students are positive and nurturing. The atmosphere of the school is warm and inviting. Staff are dedicated and committed.

The school principal and assistant principal are held in very high regard and are poised to take the school to the next level. They have worked hard to improve the image of the school, strengthen teacher morale, leverage parental support and participation, and lay the groundwork for academic growth. There is a strong commitment from all stakeholders to the school. Teachers have time to collaborate and plan. They use this time well. There is a lot of discussion between administrators and staff, and among staff, but there is not yet enough direct monitoring and accountability to ensure that all students are achieving. Data is not used effectively to assess the impact of the school's work on student learning.

The school has done a very good job of gaining the support of parents and the community at large. Minority families do not participate as much as others and the school does not have enough strategies to reach out to these groups.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

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

Improvement in the students' achievement is needed, particularly in the performance of sub-groups of students, where the school failed to meet all AYP targets. Overall, the percentage of students at or above proficiency dropped from 2006 to 2007. In almost all content strands, Brookside scores below the state averages but continues to improve its performance as measured on this test. Last year the school outperformed the district averages in almost every category with the exception of white students in mathematics. This is a strong indicator that the academic program is growing in strength.

Reading achievement, in particular, is an area of concern for the school with almost 40 percent of the school below proficient on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT). In fourth grade, the percentage of students not meeting proficiency standards in reading exceeds 48 percent. White students across the school, outperform their Hispanic peers in reading by almost 20 percentage points and Black students by just over 20 percentage points. This gap is more pronounced for economically disadvantaged students. Of these students, 64 percent are at proficient or above in reading compared with 89 percent for White students.

The school is taking action to increase overall achievement and to close the learning gap across sub-groups. The school has constructed a growth plan with detailed data analysis and specific goals for each sub-group. Instructional Leadership Teams are in place to address each core content area. The teams comprise a cross section of staff members from all grade levels including content specialists.

The goal setting process is a great step forward in addressing these deficiencies. The school needs to develop success criteria to assess the impact on student learning of all strategies outlined in the plan. The plan for accountability and monitoring needs to be clearer and more precise to ensure continued growth in student achievement. For example, many of the current goals have timeframes listed as "ongoing".

There is insufficient analysis of student work to assess progress accurately. The school has an exceptional literacy coach who is moving the staff in that direction. She does not yet have enough support from the administration to help her make initiatives a permanent part of the instructional process.

Firm data on English language learners is not available for the CMT. Current year placement is based on last spring testing using language assessment tests. During the school year, teachers do not assess the progress of English language learners with sufficient regularity to adjust their teaching and meet the specific needs of the students. Given the linguistic challenges inherent for English language learners in most school-wide benchmark testing, teachers need other methods to assess student progress to have an accurate understanding of what the students know and can do. The district houses an international student welcome center in extra classroom space at the school. The school benefits from the extra resources provided through the center. Academically talented students perform well but need more rigorous and challenging instruction in all core classes.

Students with special education needs are monitored well but teaching often lacks the rigor and consistent high expectations needed to ensure better progress. Two full time resource teachers pull students out of the main classroom for additional help. A full-time speech teacher as well as part-time occupational and physical therapists supports them. Seven paraprofessionals augment the certified staff. A part-time psychologist and a part-time social worker provide additional resources. This team meets regularly with the principal to discuss student progress and analyze their work.

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.

The level of challenge and rigor needs to rise for all students to ensure a consistent level of high expectation from their teachers. Teachers in many classes waste instructional time. This has a direct negative impact on student learning. The slow pace of some lessons leads to off-task behavior and poor achievement. The very short school day (9:20 to 3:15) is insufficient to address fully the needs of the students.

The principal and assistant principal are highly visible and spend a good deal of time "dropping in" to monitor classrooms. The assistant principal attends all grade level meetings.

The school uses Readers and Writers Workshop as its main delivery model for literacy instruction. The administration credits this approach as a pivotal step in shifting staff attitudes at the school and students love the choice and freedom of expression inherent in the model. There is substantial professional development provided and a talented full-time literacy coach on site. There is sufficient quantity of leveled books in classrooms as well as a supplemental book room.

The teachers are enthusiastic about the Workshop model but still focus too much on its specifics and do not spend enough time evaluating the impact on student learning. Mini-lessons are often too long and not particularly rigorous. When mini-lessons run long, this severely compromises the time available for independent practice. This is counter to the Workshop model. There is still too much variability in implementation from class to class, even at the same grade level.

The school uses Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) to assess student progress in reading but this is very time intensive as it requires one on one administration. Combined with in-class conferencing with students, the teachers have a great deal of data about each student's progress. The capacity to respond in a timely and meaningful manner to this data and improve students' learning is still an issue for the staff.

The new mathematics program is promising, but the same issue exists as with English instruction. Instruction is text driven and somewhat mechanical. The staff is overly concerned with moving through the scripted aspects of the program at the expense of higher-level student engagement and original work. There is limited provision for students who have not mastered content before the class progresses to the next topic. Teachers need further professional development with the new mathematics program. There is an after school program that targets students with specific academic needs. The staff analyzed CMT data for each student to identify areas of concern and determine those who would benefit from the program.

Instructional rigor is an issue throughout the school. Teachers are dedicated and most work hard to help students progress. However, the teachers need a clear model of excellence to help them understand where the bar is set. They have too few opportunities to make visits to schools with similar populations that consistently provide rigorous and challenging instruction. The inconsistency of teacher expectations affects the level of instruction in many classes. The students are capable of covering more content and in greater depth. This requires more planning and monitoring, as well as the belief that all students are capable of success. The principal and leadership teams need to give greater priority to setting improvement targets and monitoring progress in this area to raise the achievement of all students.

The school provides enrichment in several areas outside of the core content program. There is a very strong art program with a strong foundation in literacy. The Silvermine Guild Art center provides visiting artists that augment the instructional program. There is a comprehensive physical education program and music students have performed at Carnegie Hall. One of the teachers was instrumental in creating an "outdoor classroom" in a secure courtyard with a pond and butterfly habitat. Furnished through corporate and parent donations, this outdoor area is a great place for science exploration and for reading and reflection.

Criterion 3: Students' personal character development

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

Secure personal character development is reflected in the positive behavior of the students. In most classes, students are on task and need little or no direct intervention. Relationships between students and staff are strong. The diverse populations at the school mix freely, and there is a solid respect level for all members of the school community.

In classes without well-established procedures and routines, behavior is significantly different. While not the norm, students do not focus on their work, there are constant interruptions to teaching and learning, and a significant amount of time is wasted. Staff are somewhat external in their approach to discipline and are too quick to look outside of their classrooms for causality rather than reflecting on their own practice.

Given the disparity in academic performance of sub-groups, the school should examine how inconsistency of expectations for all students affects their behavior. This is critically important for young men of color who make up the majority of discipline referrals.

The principal and assistant principal know all students and are a strong presence in the building. The school is calm and orderly. The front office staff is excellent and spends a good deal of time helping support students and families. The school has an informal mentoring program for students.

Tardiness is an issue at the school despite its high daily attendance rate. A social worker is on site 2 to 3 days per week and is diligent in trying to correct this problem. The district provides few options for the school in dealing with tardiness at the Elementary level.

Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management

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

Leadership and management are effective as a result of the skill and determination of the principal and leadership staff. The principal has made great progress in changing the culture of the school and is focused on building internal leadership across the school staff. This is a change for the teachers and they are very motivated and energized by the opportunity to contribute to the leadership of the school.

Given the school's AYP status, the principal has had to refocus all stakeholders and provide an environment that supports teaching and learning. The leadership of the school actively supports ongoing professional development and encourages creativity among the staff. The principal is seen as open to new ideas and willing to "go the extra mile" for the entire school community.

The schedule is structured to encourage common planning time. The implementation of vertical teams to assist with setting goals for the school involves the entire staff and provides a basis to establish accountability and 'buy in' for all teachers. The school has done a good job identifying opportunities for growth and compiling data.

The leadership needs to foster more direct discussion around student learning and student work. It does not employ enough monitoring and accountability over student achievement. The school has produced a detailed growth plan, but it lacks any measures for school leadership to monitor achievement and does not speak to rigor and differentiation. There is a wealth of data available, but little guidance for teachers on how to use it to improve student learning. The next step is focusing teachers on learning outcomes rather than just teaching inputs, and developing a system for monitoring progress that holds everyone accountable for student learning.

Models of excellence are needed so teachers can fully understand where the bar really is for increasing the effectiveness of teaching and learning. There are talented instructional support content specialists, but without a clear direction from the district to address the issue, the school is left to do the bulk of the intervention alone.

There is strong leadership at the school and great capacity for change and improvement. The staff morale is very high and there is a strong commitment to succeed.

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

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

Partnerships with parents and the community are a strength of the school. Parents are very supportive of the school, administration, and staff. There is an active Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) and parents often volunteer at the school. The principal has worked hard to raise the profile of the school in the community and to dispel negative myths about the capacity for excellence at Brookside. The principal chose to reside in the community and this has had a very positive impact on parents.

Brookside reaches out to neighboring schools to share training and expertise. This is of particular note given that all Norwalk schools are struggling with achievement for minority students. The school has fostered a strong relationship with Teachers College for ongoing professional development in Readers and Writers Workshop.

A significant number of parents find access to the school difficult because of work commitments child-care requirements. The PTO is working to come up with strategies to reach out to all families.

Parents have access to teachers and administrators and are satisfied with the quantity and quality of information sent to the home. The school needs to do more to involve parents of English language learners, as well as other minority families. Many of these families struggle to provide academic support to their children and need additional resources from the school community. While all stakeholders see diversity at the school as strength, the school needs to develop more outreach opportunities to assist minority parents and students. This has a direct impact on achievement as these students do not achieve at the level of the majority population and more time and help to develop skills.

The facility is spotless and well appointed. This is a huge source of pride for the community. Parents indicated that they have a choice where to send their children and are happy with the quality of the school.