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QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

Norwalk Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Columbus Elementary School

**46 Concord Street
Norwalk
Connecticut
06854**

Principal: Marilyn Liberatore

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**Cambridge
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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

Columbus Elementary School serves 356 students in kindergarten through grade 5. Forty-five percent of students are White, 22 percent are Black, 18 percent are Hispanic and 11 percent are Asian. Approximately 7 percent are students with special education needs and nearly 6 percent are English language learners. The proportion of students with free or reduced lunch eligibility is 23 percent and below that of schools across the state. Student attendance is 98 percent, which is higher than elementary schools across the state.

Columbus Elementary is distinctive in that it is a district magnet school. Its students come from all of Norwalk's neighborhoods and they are accepted by application and lottery. The school endeavors to maintain a demographic profile that reflects the district. The school's curriculum is characterized by a social studies based interdisciplinary approach to learning. This incorporates cooperative learning techniques and infuses higher order thinking skills through broad exposure to the arts. The school practices democratic problem solving, encourages parent involvement and incorporates a variety of enrichment opportunities in its instructional program.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The school provides a rich curriculum that motivates students and exposes them to a wide variety of disciplines.
- School leadership provides clear expectations and direction for the delivery of the school's interdisciplinary, theme-based instructional program.
- Teachers are highly engaged and are committed to the school's mission and vision.
- Frank and open collaboration and shared decision-making characterize all aspects of school governance with provision for input from students, parents and teachers.
- The school communicates regularly with its parent community and enjoys their broad support and involvement.

Areas for Improvement:

- Increase analysis of the available student assessment data to diagnose gaps in achievement among and between sub-groups. Utilize this information to develop additional structures and support programs to close gaps while raising achievement for all students.
- Agree a common standard-based format for developing units and lessons that ensures alignment with state and district curriculum frameworks and expands the monitoring of instruction to support continuity in the delivery of the curriculum.
- Develop rigorous grade level benchmarks and assessments that provide common and consistent measures of student achievement in the content areas and inform subsequent instructional modifications.
- Continue to provide professional development and coaching in techniques for differentiating instruction especially as related to student's individual content-specific learning needs.
- Require adherence to established practices aimed at ensuring respectful interpersonal relationships. Enlist students, parents, teachers and support personnel to generate additional strategies to address persistent and challenging student behaviors.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school meets minimum requirements.

Overall achievement on state tests by students at Columbus Elementary exceeds that of many district schools and meets the school's targets for adequate yearly progress (AYP). The progress of ethnic and other sub-groups has not matched that of Asian American and White students. While the school is aware of these disparities, it has not yet taken the measures needed, such as setting goals and benchmarks, to bring greater focus and urgency to improving performance.

Students enjoy a varied curriculum that is rich in the arts and other enrichment activities. Literacy is a focus across the curriculum. Instruction is not routinely informed by a sufficiently deep analysis of assessments. Teachers need continued training in the use of data to differentiate instruction and implement new curriculum mandates.

The school values respect for differences and teaches students how to work together and behave. Student government and whole school meetings create a sense of ownership and celebrate student achievements. Students enjoy school and attendance is above average.

The school administration champions a clearly defined and well-understood approach to teaching. The school empowers all constituencies to work together for the benefit of the school through widespread, shared decision-making. However, the delivery of instruction and the effective use of assessments in planning for interventions and modifications are insufficiently monitored and evaluated.

Students come to Columbus from across the district and parents are proud of their school. They are valued members of the school community and their participation in and support for the school is strong. Communication between school and home is effective and the school enjoys strong relationships with community organizations.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

The students' achievement is at proficient level and meets minimum requirements.

The school has made AYP in reading, writing and mathematics in each tested grade level and for the groups present in sufficient numbers to be included in the calculation, for the last two reporting periods. Columbus is among the two or three highest performing elementary schools in the Norwalk Public School district and the percentage of students scoring above the proficient level on state tests has ranged from 4 to 28 percent over the last two years. Similarly, 2006 data indicate that the overall proportion of Columbus students meeting or exceeding goal on state tests is among the highest of the district's elementary schools. Compared to schools across the state, Columbus students met or exceeded goal in reading at grade 3 and 5, and in writing and mathematics at grade 5.

In reading and mathematics, the proportions of students with special education needs, English language learners and economically disadvantaged students achieving at proficient or above, lags behind that of the school as a whole by 25 to 30 percentage points. The achievements of Black and Hispanic students are also some 25 to 30 percentage points below that of Asian and White students. Overall, boys lag behind girls in reading and mathematics. In spite of these substantial differences within the school, students across ethnicities and genders out-performed their counterparts at the district and state level.

Preliminary 2007 data suggest similar overall patterns of performance with slight declines in reading and slight increases in the performance of Black students in mathematics.

From 2004-2006, the school has increased steadily, the proportion of students in both reading and mathematics who achieve at proficient levels or above as they moved from fourth to fifth grade. The school measures students' progress in grades by analyzing work collected in portfolios, information from teacher-made assessments and from tasks incorporated into projects and units of study. This results in a good understanding of the progress of individuals. The school has anecdotal information about the success of its graduates in the district's middle and high schools and enjoys a reputation as a school from which approximately one in five students move on to private education.

The school endeavors to meet the needs of various ability groups within the context of heterogeneous inclusive classrooms, each of which is staffed by a teacher and an aide. Cooperative learning techniques integrated in the school's curriculum and instruction provide students of differing abilities with the appropriate level of challenge or remediation. However, the school currently lacks clear, specific challenging learning goals and benchmark assessments to provide objective measures of academic growth. The school looks forward to implementing those recently developed by the district, to help it understand the needs of individuals and of groups and to plan more effective interventions.

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.

The school's curriculum is characterized by interdisciplinary units of study constructed around social studies concepts and is enriched by a purposeful incorporation of the arts. Numerous trips to local arts, civic, business and historical sites reinforce student learning. Students engage in weekly enrichment activities that extend their learning through the artistic, athletic and academic topics offered by teachers and parent volunteers. This rich, varied, project-based curriculum is a significant enticement for parents who chose the school and is a source of excitement for students, many of whom look forward to the activities that have become grade-level traditions.

Whole group instruction followed by small group practice characterizes classroom instruction. Groups of students engage in different activities related to the overall topic of the lesson. Lessons are planned to address different learning styles and incorporate all the major content areas through interdisciplinary themes. The teacher and her assistant monitor student and group progress. They check for understanding and seek to identify students who need re-teaching or extra practice. This is provided within refined small groups in the classroom or through pull-out activities. Some students leave the classroom to receive services related to their identified areas of need. Others may be pulled out for unrelated activities such as instruction in instrumental music. The timing of these pull-out activities depends on the availability of the specialists providing the services. At times, this occurs when instruction in the core content areas is taking place. Teachers and aides are then responsible for making sure that students who missed the lesson catch up in a timely fashion.

The school has instituted a program, TRIBES, designed to create small and diverse work groups within the class setting that have agreed communication and behavior expectations. These groups remain together indefinitely so that students have the opportunity to work co-operatively while getting to know and respect classmates from different backgrounds. Students, teachers and parents readily describe the tenets of this approach to instruction and behavior management. However, full and consistent implementation leading to optimum effectiveness remains a goal. Students are largely engaged and focused on learning. The behavior of a small number of students remains a challenge for the school.

Balanced literacy is at the core of instructional practice. Students read and write daily and are encouraged to share their work through classroom and hallway displays and in weekly all-school

meetings. School publications offer avenues for budding writers. Homework includes the expectation that all students will engage in reading every night. Generally, student performance in reading and writing has exceeded that of most other elementary schools in the district. This year a literacy coach will provide teacher support for refining their delivery of the literacy curriculum. The teachers have implemented a new standards-based mathematics curriculum over the last three years with modest success as shown by the assessments of some students at the early grades. Typically, one teacher at a grade level is trained by the district and in turn, trains her colleagues. Because not all teachers are yet sufficiently experienced in delivering this curriculum, implementation is uneven. Refinement for students at various levels of understanding is not immediately effective. New curricula in science and social studies, based on revised district standards, have been introduced. The teachers express concern about implementing these new curricula as they feel they have had insufficient time and training.

The school has not adopted a common standards-based format for refreshing and developing units and lessons to align practices with state and district expectations. There are insufficient benchmarks and assessments to help teachers plan to meet the needs of the various groups of students of differing abilities. Some training has begun aimed at improving techniques for devising accommodations and modifications for different student groups. This has been insufficient to expand all teachers' capacities to meet the needs of all students within the context of the regular classroom. The school has an experienced instructional workforce that is adept at incorporating new approaches especially in those areas, such as mathematics and science, where content knowledge is essential for successful instruction.

Criterion 3: Students' personal character development

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

Students behave well and have positive attitudes to learning. Many feel that they are in a unique school and take pride that they were selected to attend Columbus Elementary. Students come from all of Norwalk's neighborhoods and the student population is, by design, representative of Norwalk's diversity. Students in the upper grades speak warmly of the friendships they have made at Columbus and of the caring relationships they have with their teachers. The TRIBES program is an effective mechanism for supporting the development of respectful and constructive relations among and between students and for ensuring an atmosphere free from oppressive behavior, sexism and racism. It also provides a context for reinforcing the school's promotion of principals of acceptable behavior and distinguishing right from wrong. Hiring practices incorporate mechanisms to ensure that teachers and others bring the attitudes of respect for the diversity of the student body that is at the core of the school's mission. The program is used effectively in most, but not all instances.

The democratic process is deeply embedded in the culture of the school. Respectful discourse and shared decision-making are natural components of the school's social studies approach to instruction. Fourth and fifth grade students elect representatives to the student council. This group is empowered to work with the school administration to identify school-wide issues and contribute to solving problems that affect the school and the wider community. Thus, students have age-appropriate opportunities to show initiative and take responsibility.

The curricular focus on the student's place within the context of their home, school, neighborhood and the world at large supports their understanding of the social, moral and ethical implications of their actions. All school meetings allow every student the opportunity to contribute to and share with the school community. Students respond to the school's celebration of individuals' unique achievements by giving audience to writers, dancers, singers, poets and others who submit proposals through the 'magical mailbox', a repository and distribution point for students' creative endeavors. This is also the context for recognizing and celebrating exemplary student achievement and encourages students to respond to the school's expectation that all students will do their best to achieve at high levels.

Students and their families have chosen this school and, in spite of some lengthy commuting distances, attendance is higher than most district and state schools. Children like to come to school. The school employs effective measures such as calls to the home and mandatory written explanations for absence, to enforce attendance expectations.

Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management

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

The principal is widely recognized as the standard-bearer for the continuance of the school's status as a magnet school. She is an advocate for its interdisciplinary, arts-infused, project-based social studies framework for instruction. She provides clear direction and support for teachers as they incorporate the various programs and approaches that make Columbus unique. These approaches and the specific philosophies and actions that underpin them, are clearly set out in the school's publications. They are reflected in all aspects of the school from hiring and professional development to classroom instruction and school governance. Especially effective is the administration's practice of collaborative leadership and shared decision-making. Teachers, parents and students have structures within which they participate in leading the school. They feel empowered as professionals and respected as contributors. Teachers, especially, exhibit a shared commitment to work together to provide a rich, varied and challenging learning experience for students.

The administration and teachers acknowledge that there has been a decline in the frequency of direct monitoring of instruction. As a result, the ability of the administration to judge the impact of teaching on student learning is limited, especially in the case of teachers who have developed reputations as effective instructors. Lesson and unit plans are rarely collected and evaluated. Interventions to improve the quality of teaching and learning are mostly directed at teachers new to the school and are often related to training in the programs that characterize the school's approach to learning. Recently, the principal has participated in creating a new district-wide tool for evaluating instructional effectiveness and looks forward to implementing it along with instructional 'walk-throughs' aimed at increasing teachers' understanding of highly effective instruction.

State testing data is mostly used to identify weaknesses in student achievement in specific content strands and to modify instruction to effect improvements. This has met with varying success due to the annual changes in test items. The school has done little to go beyond content-related modifications. While it recognizes disparities among and between sub-group populations, it has not constructed programs or other interventions to improve these groups' performance. The school relies heavily on teachers to develop individual student plans to address specific needs. Trend data draws into question the effectiveness of this strategy overall. The school has no other objective sources of data about student learning in the content areas.

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

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

This aspect of the school is a strength. The school's full-time parent coordinator is a very effective liaison between the school and its parent community. She works with the administration in producing exemplary documents explaining the special qualities of the school and managing the application process. The process itself, honors and respects the diversity of the local community and ensures a demographic balance in the school that reflects that of the district overall. Created as a model of desegregation a quarter century ago, maintaining this balance is a cornerstone of the school culture as is the extent to which community resources support learning. In addition to the YMCA, which provides supplemental activities and academic support outside of the regular school day, the curriculum routinely brings students

into the community. Visits to local businesses, arts, civic and historical organizations add relevance to the learning experience and build students' appreciation for the local environs.

Communication between home and school is seamless. Parents feel well informed about activities and events as well as the performance of their children. Parents commit to participating in the school when their children are accepted through several options such as serving as classroom assistants, participating in the enrichment program, joining groups for supporting the arts or in school governance. The high level of parent participation in these various structures is particularly noteworthy in that Columbus is not a neighborhood school.

Parents feel welcome to collaborate with their child's teacher in fostering academic and social success. Many teachers reach out to parents to keep them informed about their children's progress. These informal avenues of communication supplement the typical array of events such as 'back to school night' designed to inform and engage parents.