



## **Norwalk Public Schools**

# **Quality Review Report**

**Fox Run Elementary School**

**228 Fallow Street  
Norwalk  
Connecticut  
06851**

**Principal: Alfred Treidel**

**Dates of review: September 17 – 18, 2007**

**Reviewer: Roger Fry**

**Cambridge Education (LLC)**



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## Part 1: The School Context

### Information about the school:

Fox Run elementary school is located in the west of Norwalk. There are approximately 420 students enrolled from kindergarten through grade 5. The school serves a wide area, and virtually all students come to school by bus or car.

About 30 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, which is similar to schools across the state and slightly lower than schools in the district. Attendance is between 90 percent and 97 percent and is similar to state and district figures. Of the students, approximately 57 percent are White, 22 percent Black, 17 percent Hispanic and 4 percent Asian American. A small proportion of learners, approximately 10 percent, require special education and 6 percent are English language learners.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well:

- Student scores have improved steadily over the last two years. The school has test data for most groups, which it uses effectively to improve students' growth.
- Mathematics scores, closely followed by those in writing, are subjects where students score best. Teachers give the students a good grounding in mathematics from kindergarten to grade 2 and training has helped teachers throughout the school to teach mathematics and writing increasingly effectively.
- There is a collaborative culture in the school, effectively led by the principal and vice principal. The staff is stable and consequently changes made to the organization of the school are carried through effectively.
- Teachers address the important changes identified by the school to improve student scores with a sense of purpose.
- Student behavior is good and they develop positive and constructive relationships with their peers and their teachers.
- At the invitation of the staff, parents support the school and make a positive difference by assisting with their children's homework. Some parents work in the library and computer lab, which is very well maintained.

### Areas for Improvement:

- Develop the performance of Black boys in reading by creating engaging lessons.
- Improve instruction by making it clear in lesson plans what students will learn, so that teachers can assess student growth and capacity to do the work set accurately.
- Improve instruction by setting targets for the higher achieving students to improve their scores further.
- Improve differentiated instruction so that all students are challenged effectively and regularly experience success.

## Part 3: Main Findings

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

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

The school is led effectively by the principal and the vice principal. Consequently, changes made to the organization of the school have led to an improvement in student scores from 2005-2006 to 2006-2007. The improvement has been based on the school's effective use of test data for most groups. Even though students have improved over time, not all do as well as others. The leadership is aware of the lower performance of Black boys in reading. As a result, students receive a program of extra help in and out of classrooms.

Teachers provide the students with a good foundation in mathematics from kindergarten to grade 2, and as a result, their mathematics and writing scores have risen. In-school training has helped teachers to teach mathematics and writing effectively. Teachers build the agreed changes into their lesson planning effectively, which has led to the quicker progress of students in the last year.

The school is increasingly successful because teachers address the important changes identified to improve students' scores effectively. Teachers have high expectations for the good behavior of students. Students make progress because they concentrate well on their work in lessons. Behavior programs are working well and their positive impacts can be seen throughout the school.

The school has identified that the teaching is not entirely consistent and that there are areas for the school to improve. For example, teachers do not always make it clear in lesson plans what students will learn. This makes it difficult for teachers to assess student growth and capacity to do the work set accurately. The school does not set targets for the higher achieving students so that they can improve their scores further, which limits their progress. The match of work to students' performance does not receive enough attention in some lessons, and as a result, many students in these classes can find their work too difficult or too easy, which limits their progress.

Parents support the school and make a difference by assisting with their children's homework. Students revise their class work and make better progress as a result. Students also know that their parents consider the school is doing a good job, so students are comfortable in school and feel able to contribute to all the school offers. A significant proportion of parents help students with the use of information technology in lessons or work in the library. This contribution helps the smooth running of the school.

This year the school has lost funds from sources such as Title 1. The school has not been able to organize the range of programs both within and beyond the school day to meet the specific needs of small groups of students. This is of concern to parents and the school.

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

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

Student scores in the Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMTs) as a whole have improved between 2005-2006 and 2006-2007. In 2005-2006, scores showed that the school did better than most schools in the district, but did not meet state averages overall.

In 2006-2007, overall the main student groups achieved adequate yearly progress (AYP). The majority of students made AYP in mathematics and writing. In reading, students who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunches and Black students did not achieve AYP, but did make better progress than the year before and achieved Safe Harbor. The overall improvement has been significant. The school has a

comprehensive set of test data for the main groups, which it has used effectively to improve students progress. This data has guided the professional development program for teachers. The improvement in student growth generally and the proportions that are proficient or higher are positive features of the school.

The school has identified differences in achievement by students of different ethnic groups. For example, the performance of Black boys in mathematics is not at a high enough level. The school is addressing their needs with support for students from the mathematics coach and additional learning activities in push-in and pull-outs.

The progress of English language learners and students with special education needs is less clear as the school does not have 2006-2007 data in a form that can be interpreted easily. However, using 2005/6 scores, English language learners met the district averages and students with special education needs exceeded them.

The leadership sets challenging goals to improve the performance of lower achieving students. The school does not set targets for the more able students to reach goal or above goal and, as a result, they are not always challenged sufficiently. Although there is a program for the more able, targets are not used well enough in whole class activities. A key area for development is for students of differing abilities to be challenged with work that matches their next stage in learning. Although it is entirely valid that all students listen to the same introductions to lessons, and the same key teaching points, it is not appropriate to set them all the same work, because some struggle and some find it too easy, which limits the progress and achievement of both of these groups.

Student progress over time through the grades is relatively even. Just occasionally, such as in grade 4 last year, students did not progress as well in reading. This pattern is the exception rather than the rule. Student progress in IT is well supported by the modern computers in the lab.

## **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.**

Important changes identified by the school to improve student literacy scores are a focus of attention. Key areas for development, such as improving reading scores, are based on a clear rationale and a good understanding of data. Teachers build the necessary changes into their lesson planning effectively. To improve reading and writing scores teachers are frequently and explicitly connecting what students know and understand with the text they are using, so that they understand their work better. They then develop this skill further by asking older students to make connections between different pieces of text. This insightful work about how to improve learning is based on helpful research carried out by the vice principal.

The use of methods that enable all students to learn effectively varies in the school. Some teachers make it very clear in their planning what students will learn by the end of the lesson. Whereas in other classrooms, the objectives are not clear making it difficult to assess what the students have learned.

One of the school's areas for improvement is reading. In a grade 3 lesson, one of the teacher's objectives was, 'Discuss and respond to a text by making text to text connections.' The teacher used a familiar text, Cinderella, and an unfamiliar but similar story, Adelita. Students had a good chance of reaching the objective because the teacher was very clear what students were to learn in her planning. The teacher was able to assess how well students had understood their work by looking at the similarities and differences they had recorded between the stories.

An example of a less well written lesson objective is, 'Develop fluency and understanding of the relationship between adding and subtracting.' This mathematics lesson objective is much more general

and might feature in many mathematics lessons. It is much more difficult to measure the progress that students have made using this objective.

The teaching of mathematics has been relatively successful for a number of years. Students receive a good grounding in basic skills between kindergarten and grade 3. The school has changed the mathematics scope and sequence plan. The new curriculum is based more on identifying student understanding rather than simply the teaching and learning of techniques to find answers. This initiative helps students develop a greater understanding of key ideas in mathematics, such as that there are often several ways to reach an answer.

The school has a stable and loyal group of teachers. The professional development programme is well supported because teachers stay long enough to put the changes into practice. The leadership and teachers are adept at identifying areas where students are not learning as well. They make changes to the way they work so that improvement occurs. The improvement in test results last year indicates that the professional development programme is making a positive difference.

Teachers tend to teach so that the greatest proportion of students reaches AYP. The greater focus is on the students who need to catch up to this point. Those who are more able are not so well challenged, which limits their progress. Teachers are not setting enough targets for the more able students to improve their scores further. Neither is the leadership doing so at a whole school level in the Annual Growth Plan.

In a lesson, the teacher taught the same information to students of all abilities. When she tested what had been learned, a small proportion of more able students had all the answers right, a similar proportion of less able students got most wrong and a significant group needed adult help to make progress. Those in the middle got some answers right and some wrong. The task for students to complete was not well matched to their varying abilities. The progress of more than half the class was too limited.

Teachers have high expectations of student behavior. In lessons, the great majority of students make the most of what is taught by giving lessons their best attention. In this way, they make good progress. Teachers know how to motivate students, for example, by rewarding them for good behavior, speaking in a lively way and often making lessons interesting. Occasionally in lessons, students with special education needs are not given sufficient responsibility for getting on with their work, which slows their progress towards better self motivation and capacity to work on their own.

The curriculum provides opportunities for students to develop a broad range of skills and aptitudes. Students say they enjoy many lessons. Physical education is popular, because students perceive that it is fun to work hard and learn new skills. This reflects the good quality of teaching where students are active at all times. Students are constantly given different small challenges to complete and receive lots of rewards for doing their best.

Some teachers are using students' capacity to evaluate and assess their own work and that of their peers effectively. Peer group assessment was used well in a literacy lesson in grade 5. Students discussed how correctly they had predicted what was going to happen in the story. This process raised the level of interest for students and improved their rate of progress and commitment to the task. Teachers keep helpful records of how well students have learned in lessons. At a whole school level, assessments have helped to identify the areas to improve in subjects, such as reading. The result of the consistent use of assessments is that teachers can see the trends in learning. Individual teachers are doing the same things in their classes, but there is scope to improve the match of work to students' abilities.

Teachers set regular homework, but occasionally students find it either too easy or too difficult. There is scope again to match better the tasks given to students' abilities. There is an extensive programme of clubs in place for later in the year.

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

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

The school climate is good, yet teachers in their self evaluations feel strongly that student behavior could be better. During the period of the review, it was very clear that the vast majority of students behave well, are courteous and concentrate hard in lessons. Little time was wasted. The concerted efforts made by the leadership and teachers to improve student behavior have worked. 'Student of the Week', 'Good as Gold' and other rewards have had a positive impact on students' attitudes about school. The school self-evaluation indicates that there is still more work to do to improve the mutual respect shown between different student groups. There was no sign of any issue of disrespect or racism during the review.

In a small minority of cases, Black boys do not concentrate as well as their peers. This has a negative effect on their progress. Some of this group of students participate little in lessons and wait for adults to motivate and organize them. The school is well aware of the weaker performance of this group in reading. It has, for example, identified that more individualized support in class and parent-student activities help the personal growth of this group of students.

Students think homework is a good thing because it helps to reinforce learning. Sometimes they say it is very interesting to find out more about a subject. They like to know how well they are getting on and teachers tell them this information. Most enjoy the teacher-parent conferences, which give students an opportunity to talk about what they have done in lessons. Students say that rewards motivate them and that they are fair. They particularly like the Student of the Week award. The student council gives further good opportunities for students to have a say in aspects of the way the school is run.

An important feature of the school is students' social, moral and cultural development. The school prides itself on having an international outlook, amongst other features. Students consider ethical issues. This area of activity is covered well in such events as International Day, fund raising for Hurricane Katrina and the school's continuing support for a child in Africa.

In all lessons observed, students showed that they had formed constructive relationships with one another and with the adults in class there to help them. Very few wasted the opportunity when they needed to work in small groups or in pairs. This level of maturity helps students make quicker growth and progress faster with their work. Teachers have high expectations of student behavior and they respond well to this. Students know right from wrong.

Student attendance at school is similar to the district and state. Very few students have a poor record of attendance and the vast majority of students gain positively from learning consistently every day.

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

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

Discussions with teachers confirm that the school leadership has established a sense of collaboration amongst all staff and of common purpose. This common purpose allows initiatives to grow and make a positive difference to student growth. The work of the literacy coach and initiatives such as the 'A.M. Reading Academy' and 'Reaching Up' have had a positive effect on student scores. Decision-making is shared effectively across the school. The faculty advisory consists of one teacher from each grade. This group of teachers meets regularly to help organize the school. Overall, the leadership has promoted better achievement among students in the last two years. There is a sense throughout the school of a capacity to succeed in raising achievement further.

The vice principal has carried out important and helpful research into the 'metacognitive' approach to learning. One of the key purposes of this research was to develop students' capacity to learn more quickly. Key areas, such as, "Thinking about your own thinking", use of questioning and students

visualizing ideas in their minds have been developed. The impact of this work shows in the way that teachers are developing reading. Clear evidence was seen in lessons of students linking together ideas from their own experience and with book texts. Some good use of questioning by teachers was also observed to prompt student learning.

The school's work in developing whole school targets for all student learning is less well developed. The main target in this year's School Growth Plan is to reduce by 10 percent those students below AYP. This target in itself is suitable and relevant. The school is judged on the proportions of students who reach AYP or not. There are no targets for students of higher ability. Therefore, their progress is not monitored to the same extent. This is an area for development.

The principal and vice principal carry out regular lesson observations. Teachers report favorably about the advice they receive. Even so, there are some variations in the way that teachers teach. The quality of teachers' targets for lessons and the degree to which they set work that matches the abilities of all students varies from in need of improvement to exceeding minimum requirements.

The staff shares the aims of the school. There are some strengths, such as the determination of all to ensure mutual respect between students, good behavior in classrooms and to address the issues in reading that hold some students back. The principal and staff gather considerable amounts of data about student growth and achievement. Much of this data has been analyzed usefully. Teachers therefore know in which areas they need to make extra efforts to improve student growth. The school is still engaged in analyzing the latest performance data and some of the information about certain groups is not yet available to teachers.

The district has had some positive influence on the school. The school reports that the support staff visit the school to develop programs, such as for science and mathematics, which help the school move forward. It is clear from discussions that this is not uniform across all subjects.

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

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

The school has a genuine 'open door' policy for parents. All the parents present at the meeting held during the review spoke highly of the school and about how pleased they were with so many aspects of it. Several spoke of how the school had supported their families at different times in previous years.

The Family Resource Center provides valuable pre-school and after school clubs for students. Parents appreciate this and the extra programs for English language learners and for students with special education needs. They are also concerned that the Title 1 monies have been cut. The school will not be able to provide as many programs as it did last year to meet the varied needs of students in the school.

Parents' satisfaction with the school rubs off on their children. One reason why students behave well and concentrate hard in lessons is that they know that the school has the support of their parents. This helps their positive growth. Students are happy at school.

The school checks regularly with parents that they are satisfied with what is happening. Parents like the regular contact that they have with all teachers. There are formal parent-teacher conferences three times a year. Changes in the curriculum, how parents can volunteer to help in the school are explained at these meetings and during parent workshops. Weekly newsletters from the principal also keep them very well informed about what is happening. Parents are always welcome to visit the school at any time and teachers readily make themselves available.

A dedicated group of parents helps regularly in school. They provide extensive support for in-class information technology activities. Between them they staff the library to ensure that it is kept in tiptop order and that students always have someone to ask if they have a question. This excellent support from

these parents makes a real difference to students' growth. Students have extra pairs of the ears to talk to about their work and how they can find answers to problems.

The school is also aware that parents from Hispanic backgrounds are less likely to have regular contact with the school. This is an area that the school is working towards improving by contacting parents regularly and communicating in Spanish.