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QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

Norwalk Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Kendall Elementary School

**55 Fallow Street
Norwalk
Connecticut
06850**

Principal: Tony Ditrio

Dates of review: September 17 – 18, 2007

Reviewer: Peter Lewis

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**Cambridge
Education**

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

The Kendall Elementary School is a well-established school located in Norwalk, Connecticut. There are 485 students enrolled from kindergarten through grade 5. The student population is ethnically diverse. A high proportion, at 46 percent, has a Hispanic heritage, 31 percent are Black, 20 percent White and there are a very small number of Asian students. The proportion of students with a non-English home language is increasing slowly over time and the percentage receiving English language learner support in the school has grown to around 20 percent. At the same time, the proportion of students who transfer in or out of the school at other than the normal times is increasing.

The school has a lower proportion of students with special education needs than is usually found in local and state schools. The percentage of students eligible for free school lunches, at just over 40, is higher than the district average and much higher than is found in the state overall. The number of students who have attended a pre-school prior to entry to kindergarten has increased in recent years and is now above both district and state levels.

The students' attendance, at just over 97 percent, is broadly in line with the average for district and state schools.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- Effective teamwork by the principal and assistant principal, ably assisted by the senior staff, is leading to improvement.
- The use of good levels of subject knowledge at senior levels is effective in raising student achievement, particularly in English and mathematics.
- The strong emphasis on social responsibility and co-operation is resulting in good personal development of the students.
- Behavior and relationships are good throughout the school.
- The school has made a good start in collating and using student assessment data, particularly in English and mathematics.
- Parents feel welcomed within the school and know that it provides a safe environment for their children.

Areas for Improvement:

- Improve the use of data by:
 - setting achievement targets for different groups of students and monitoring their progress towards them;
 - ensuring that teachers make more consistent use of assessment data to plan work that consistently challenges all students.
- Improve monitoring and evaluation by:
 - developing and agreeing the features that constitute good teaching and learning, as the basis of monitoring activities;
 - clarifying the roles of senior staff across the full range of monitoring and evaluation activities.
- Refine school improvement planning by drawing more effectively upon:
 - the information from consistent, focused monitoring of the school's effectiveness;
 - the views of students and parents about the quality of education at the school.
- Improve the consistency with which classroom aides and other support staff provide help to students in lessons.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school meets minimum requirements.

Kendall Elementary School has responded effectively to the decline in its results in the Connecticut Mastery Test and has secured improvements. The principal and assistant principal have been instrumental in this improvement. They have strongly focused on the analysis of student data and the degree to which teachers use the analysis to identify and plan for the students who perform less well.

The school compares well with others in the district, but acknowledges that its performance is lower in comparison with schools across the state. The performance of students who are English language learners and those who are economically disadvantaged has improved considerably. The performance of Black students has improved also, but at a slower rate than other groups. Higher attaining students generally perform well but too little attention is given to their needs and, as a result, they often fail to learn at a rate appropriate to their abilities. In consultation with the district, the school has set itself challenging goals for the improvement of student test scores. Based on current interim assessment data, it is likely to meet them.

The school has carefully staged developments to the mathematics and reading curricula together. These developments, along with the consistent use of the Empowering Writers Program, have contributed to student improvement in these subjects. This level of success, however, has been at the expense of other subjects, particularly social studies and science. Pacing guides have been developed to underline the pattern of learning in these subjects, but opportunities to support and develop students' skills in reading, writing and mathematics have yet to be identified. As a result, opportunities are limited for teachers to respond more flexibly to the variety of learning styles in their classes.

A strong sense of professional commitment is seen through much of the school's work. Students know that their teachers are keen for them to succeed and apply themselves to the tasks that are planned, even when these lack sufficient challenge. There remains too great a variation in the effectiveness of teaching and in the use that is made of the skills of classroom aides. The school has introduced some strategies to improve rigor and consistency in lessons, as for example the morning work that is now expected in all classes. Overall, however, more remains to be done, particularly in developing teachers' skills in planning work to meet the different needs and abilities of their students.

The principal and assistant principal have a sound understanding of what the school does well and where it needs further improvement. While this is particularly well informed by the analysis of student data, the monitoring of teaching, learning and the curriculum is comparatively underdeveloped. There is no widely shared view of the features that characterize the best instruction. Consequently, school development planning is insufficiently focused on those aspects of classroom practice that need improvement. Staff members are similarly uncertain about which aspects of their work need to change, or when those changes are expected.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

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

The school failed to meet the state targets for adequate yearly progress (AYP) in the two academic years from 2004 to 2006. However, largely because of the strong focus placed on data and strand analysis in reading, writing and mathematics, it secured an improvement to safe harbor for the academic year 2006 - 2007. The latest overall school results are broadly similar to those for the district, although to a slightly lesser extent in reading than in mathematics. However, the test results for most student subgroups were above those for the same groups across the district.

In the previous year, the school's results compared well overall with others schools in the district, but student performance in both reading and mathematics was still lower than in schools across the state. This was the case for the school as a whole and for each of the subgroups of students. In comparison with the previous academic year, all the groups in greatest need of improvement made gains particularly so for the students with economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The school is rightly pleased with this achievement but recognizes that it needs to improve further.

The school has improved its analysis of the students' achievements and increasingly shares the data with staff to build their understanding. The data for mathematics shows that all subgroups have made gains over the last two years with the exception of Black students, for whom there was no change in the percentage scoring above proficiency. In contrast, the performance of English language learner and economically disadvantaged students (the lowest performing subgroups from the year 2005 – 2006) showed considerable gains. The improvement made in reading has been more mixed and in general is at a slower rate.

The school met its AYP targets in all subgroups with the exception of students with economic disadvantage, where it achieved safe harbor. However, the students' progress between grades and in aspects of English and mathematics showed considerable variation. The school gained statewide awards for its improvements in achievement across the last two years. These awards are well merited, but school leaders need to re-emphasize a continuing need for improvement.

The students who are English language learners receive effective support and make good overall progress in relation to their targets. The same is true for the students with special education needs because of the increased emphasis upon meeting their needs. As with English language learner students, the comparatively small number of students in this group means that comparative data is not available to help the school in deciding whether they are doing as well as they should.

The school focuses strongly on strategies to address the needs of the lowest achieving pupils, but the lack of disaggregated data for different groups hampers the identification of patterns and trends. This is also the case for higher attaining students, although evidence from teachers' planning and observations shows that challenge for this group of students is low. As a result, they fail to make the progress they are capable of.

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 places considerable emphasis on developing its mathematics and reading curricula. It has made very good use of the expertise of the principal and assistant principal to stage the introduction of the new strategies to ensure progression in the content. They have supported teachers well in planning to meet the new curriculum requirements. The teachers plan within grades and value this joint planning

time. The school recognizes that there is too little time available to enable planning of the quality and at the level that school leaders require for sustained improvement to take place.

The introduction of Voyager Math has been extended this year to include the older grades, following the school's evaluation of its success in kindergarten through grade 2. The school sees the successes with the Empowering Writers Program, used in grades 1 through 5, as the reason for the improvements in state tests. The school has not looked closely enough at the reasons behind the comparatively lower rate of attainment in reading.

Overall, the school's analysis, interpretation and communication of data is improving, particularly in helping teachers to focus their teaching on those aspects of the mathematics and reading that are least successful. This emphasis and improved focus on the lowest achieving students has had a positive impact on students' learning. This is seen in the improvements in student results in mathematics and to a lesser extent, in reading.

The strong emphasis placed upon raising student attainment in areas measured through the Connecticut Mastery Test has restricted the emphasis on science and social studies throughout the school. There are pacing guides to help teachers know what should be taught and when, in reading, writing and mathematics. There are no links across subjects to enable students to use knowledge and skills more widely. The introduction of 'morning work' has brought an increased sense of purpose to the start of each day. School leaders are still working to ensure consistency and effectiveness in the program.

The teachers are committed to their students and want to see them do well. Relationships are good, and students know they are respected. However, the variation in the quality of teaching across the school is too great. For example, some teachers make good use of classroom aides help students in discussion and in the activities planned. On many occasions however the role played by these staff in supporting learning is too limited. There are examples of teachers engaging in discussions with class groups and individual students, which are probing and closely focused on what is to be learned, but this is not yet consistent practice across all classes. As a result, in the less effective lessons, students' often respond in short sentences or with one-word answers. Students generally have a good understanding of the tasks that they are expected to complete but across the school they do not have a clear enough understanding of how well they are doing, what they have learned or of the steps required to reach the next level.

The school leaders have a good understanding of data and of the improvements that it shows are needed. They accept that more needs to be done to help teachers to make use of this information. The recently introduced assessment journals have the potential to address some of these issues.

Much of the teaching is driven by the curriculum rather than by students' identified learning needs and expectations are generally not high enough. Whole-class activities predominate and higher attaining students are not always sufficiently challenged. Many students refer to work as too easy and the tendency of teachers to allow students who finish allocated tasks to read, finish other work or to assist others, compounds the problem. The low emphasis on teachers planning lessons thoroughly or monitoring the outcomes for students of their planning hampers school leaders in identifying why practice may be more effective in some classes than in others.

Criterion 3: Students' personal character development

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

The school has built a safe community by setting clear expectations and boosting students' self-esteem. It is a calm and stimulating environment in which courtesy and mutual respect predominate. The school has reduced suspensions and teachers have greater confidence to manage the students' behavior in class and around the school.

There is much evidence of relationships that reflect warmth and mutual respect and help students to develop independence, consideration for others and self-esteem. The senior staff members model this very well and students talk enthusiastically about the extent to which they are listened to and considered. They confirm that they feel cared for, safe in the school and know that there is always an adult to whom they can turn for help should difficulties arise. Ensuring that attendance rates remain high is a clear priority for the school. The school has good systems to check and report absences. It operates these consistently and continues to make a positive impact.

In class, the behavior of the great majority of students is good. They concentrate and apply themselves well. They are often proud of their work, particularly when they feel they have put considerable thought or effort into it. A high degree of student engagement characterizes the best lessons. In contrast, there remain lessons in which the activities planned for students are mundane or repetitive and provide little challenge or stimulation. Even in less challenging lessons, student attitudes are positive and their efforts remain high.

There are some opportunities for students to take responsibility and develop initiative through lessons but too few opportunities for this within a wider context. Students are not, as a matter of course, asked their views about lessons or the curriculum. Although many say they would value the opportunity to participate, there is no student council within which their independence and ability to contribute to the community could develop.

Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management

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

The school has successfully raised student achievement. It has raised the profile of reading, writing and mathematics through the introduction of new curriculum aspects and the increased understanding of data. These measures and the information provided by the principal and assistant principal have helped the school to focus more on the needs of the lowest achieving students.

The principal and his assistant principal have not been able to observe teaching as often as they would wish. The school recognizes the need to sharpen its monitoring procedures to check the impact of developments on students' learning. Administrators work hard to establish a consistent pattern of student-centered learning. Their initiatives are hampered by the lack of a clear agreement on how data should be used and a shared understanding of what constitutes best practice in the classroom. Senior leaders have a broad understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their staff; this is not sufficiently precise to ensure that their needs are identified with sufficient accuracy.

The school's planning for improvement follows the district model and focuses on improving students' test scores as its main objective. It accurately identifies the need to raise student achievement further but the plan lacks precision about what needs to improve. This prevents the school from developing clear effective evaluation strategies for improvement. Priorities within the plan lack clear success criteria, timescales for completion or an identification of responsible personnel. This makes it difficult for the school to determine its progress towards its strategic goals and to modify actions where necessary.

Senior staff share the principal's vision for the school's development and have made a good start in helping teachers to understand new curriculum programs and make better use of students' achievement data. However, the strength of purpose, which the principal strongly articulates, is not set out as a clear school vision, plan or set of expectations. The staff are unclear about where the school is going, what needs to change in order for it to reach its goals and their part in securing improvement. Discussions at senior level are generally well focused but the school's ability to provide support to those teachers who most need it is limited. The district's lack of evaluation of the school's effectiveness exacerbates the situation. Centrally provided professional development too frequently targets the introduction of initiatives across the district rather than the specific needs of the school.

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

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

In discussion, parents are supportive of the school. They say their children enjoy coming to school and that they are cared for and well supported. They are pleased with the accessibility of teachers and with the information that they receive from some teachers. They also say that they would value information about the level at which their children are working and what they need in order to progress to the next level. Although the school has not systematically sought their views about its effectiveness, all are pleased with the degree to which the principal demonstrates respect for parents. They say they are listened to and problems resolved swiftly. The diversity of the school's community is respected, which parents feel is particularly important as the demographics of the area change.

Curriculum events are valued by parents. They cite the recent mathematics evening as one which provided valuable information and which was well received by those who attended. The school acknowledges that, although some partnerships exist within the community, such as the established extended day program, there is considerable scope to develop this aspect further. It plans to raise the attendance at curriculum workshops through better information, as well as by providing meals and childcare.