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QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

Norwalk Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Marvin Elementary School

**15 Calf Pasture Beach Road
Norwalk
Connecticut
06851**

Principal: Myrna Tortorello

Dates of review: September 27 – 28, 2007

Reviewer: Roger Fry

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**Cambridge
Education**

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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

The school is situated in East Norwalk and is one of the largest elementary schools in the district. The school has extensive facilities, including a large library, full size gymnasium, open grounds and play areas for students. There are approximately 466 students enrolled from kindergarten through grade 5. The school serves a wide area. Nearly all students come to school by bus or car.

About 33 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price meals, which is a higher proportion than in schools across the state and similar to schools in the district. Attendance is in the range between 95 percent and 97 percent and is similar to state and district figures. Of the students, 44 percent are White, 37 percent Hispanic, 15 percent Black and 3 percent Asian American. A small proportion of learners, approximately 6 percent, require special education. Twenty percent have English as a second language and most speak Spanish as their first language. The proportion of students who speak little English when they join the school is rising. Half the young students in kindergarten have English as a second language this year.

The school receives Title 1 funding.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- Student scores have improved significantly over the last year. Students as a whole made adequate yearly progress (AYP) in 2006-07, from a position the year before when no group of students made AYP.
- Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students made improved progress this year. All student group scores rose significantly in mathematics and students performed well in the science tests.
- Good lessons proceed at a fast pace and teachers are clear about what each student will learn in each lesson. Class management in these lessons is good.
- Student behavior is good. They make the most of what instruction offers them because they concentrate well on their work in lessons.
- The leadership has self assessed the quality of the school accurately. The school is well managed and led by the principal and staff share a commitment to improve further.
- Parents support the school strongly and make a difference by assisting with their children's homework and raising money for the school to use.

Areas for Improvement:

- Improve the achievement of Black students and students with special education needs in reading and mathematics by:
 - differentiating the curriculum for individual students more closely; and
 - using a wider range of teaching methods to engage students effectively in their work.
- Improve instruction by:
 - making it clear in all lesson plans what students will know, understand and be able to do by the end of lessons; and
 - differentiating the work that students have to complete more closely to match their abilities.
- Improve the progress of English as a second language students when they join the school by providing more instruction in their mother tongue and in bilingual groups.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school meets minimum requirements.

As a result of improved instruction, student scores have improved significantly over the last year. Students as a whole achieved adequate yearly progress (AYP) in 2006-07, reaching 'safe harbor' overall. This was from a lower position the year before when no group of students made AYP. Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students made better progress this year because teachers have made a concerted effort to meet their needs. The progress of Black students in reading and mathematics is not as quick as other groups. The instruction does not always motivate Black students to work hard. Teaching methods using students' five senses are not used frequently enough to engage students effectively in their work.

The teaching is proficient. In good lessons, students learn at a fast pace because teachers are clear about what each student will learn in each lesson. They give students time limits to complete work, so there is a sense of pace and that every minute is important. In some lessons, teachers do not make it clear in their plans what students will know, understand and be able to do. This limits student progress because it is not clear what teachers are assessing.

Student behavior is good. The great majority of students make the most of the instruction and concentrate well on their work in lessons. Many students work hard and therefore make the best progress they can. Student personal character development is good because adults enforce school rules consistently. They give students good opportunities to contribute to the school organization, which develops a good sense of citizenship.

School improvement is based on an accurate assessment of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, changes are founded on what will really make a positive difference. The school is well managed and led by the principal. Hence, staff have confidence in what they are asked to do and share a commitment to improve further. The program for English second language students is not meeting all their needs when they join the school. There is not enough instruction in the mother tongue and in bilingual groups.

Parents support the school strongly because communications are good and they feel listened to. Parents make a positive difference by assisting with their children's homework. They regard this as an important opportunity for their children to revise their learning and make better progress. Parents raise considerable funds for the school, which are used to buy important equipment. Therefore, students have additional opportunities to learn new things.

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 have improved considerably. Student progress across the grades is even. In 2005-2006, scores showed that students did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) and neither did any particular group. This was taken as a spur for further action by staff. The principal believes strongly that no student should be left behind. In 2006-07, the school as a whole achieved 'safe harbor', which means it made sufficient progress towards achieving AYP. White students achieved AYP in mathematics, reading and writing. Hispanic students achieved AYP in mathematics and made sufficient progress towards AYP (safe harbor) in reading from the year before. Economically disadvantaged students reached safe harbor

in reading and mathematics. The overall improvement over the year before has been significant, but is not yet a secure trend.

Mathematics results are a success story. Student scores are much higher this year than previously and meet the state 'goal', a higher standard than AYP. Some groups made a 15 percent or more gain over the previous year. This year students completed the science assessments. Ninety percent reached the standard expected or higher. High achievers have done well in mathematics and science.

The school has helpful sets of test results for all groups, which are used to examine trends in student progress. The school has set higher targets for students to reach next year based on these. It is too early to comment on the progress students have made towards the targets for next year. Data has guided the professional development program for teachers. The improvement in student progress and the proportions of students that are proficient or higher in mathematics are positive features of the school. The improving picture of achievement is the result of better teaching brought about by teachers examining closely what students know or found difficult. They have concentrated extra efforts on helping students learn what they find most difficult.

Some subgroups have less than 40 students between grades 3 and 5. This means that their results are not counted in the overall performance of the school. Students learning English, Black and students with special education needs did not make AYP in reading and mathematics this year. The school has worked out what each subgroup needs to close the gap on AYP further. The importance of the match of tasks to student abilities is one area the school knows where it needs to do better. The school is working to improve the progress of Black students in reading and mathematics by matching the curriculum for individual students more closely to their needs. The leadership accepts that the teaching also needs to improve, to engage students effectively in their work. The school monitors differences in progress for girls and boys and responds appropriately.

When they join the school, the number of teachers and para professionals who can speak Spanish limits the progress of English language learners. There is too little instruction in the mother tongue and in bilingual groups, which limits their progress.

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 has proficiently implemented the district reading and writing workshop approaches for literacy. Guided reading takes place regularly where students in small groups, with or without an adult, come to a greater understanding of what they have read. Last year there was a small improvement in literacy achievement.

Over the last year, student performances in mathematics have increased significantly. This term there is a new mathematics program in place, implemented in grades 3 to 5 at the same time. The program scope and sequence expects older students to have a better grounding in the new ways of working but they do not. Teachers are concerned that the program does not build in time to teach this. For example, in one lesson, the program did not allow time for the teacher to set differentiated tasks matched to student abilities to consolidate learning. Consequently, around one third of the class gained little from the lesson. It is too early yet to comment on whether this program is having an effect on student progress in mathematics.

The new mathematics program does have advantages. Students actively learn how to think about mathematics, find several ways to solve problems and enables a real sense of discovery. Across the subjects teachers work effectively to share information and put into practice what has been learned during professional development and orientation sessions. The sense of overload in terms of change is strong.

Good lessons in all subjects proceed at a fast pace and teachers are clear about what each student will learn in each lesson. Class management in these lessons is good. Teachers show that they have good subject knowledge. They speak coherently to students and have the knowledge to add to the programmed curriculum. Lessons are therefore interesting and easily understood by students. A lesson observed in the kindergarten was very well organized. The teacher ran the lesson at a greater pace than that seen in many other lessons. She involved students in short, sharp activities. She used a lot of questioning to check understanding and to prompt thinking and rewarded students for all their efforts. Students consolidated their knowledge of colors in a wide variety of ways and enjoyed the lesson very much.

In less successful, but nevertheless proficient lessons, students make adequate but slower progress. Teachers do not make enough use of setting time goals within the lesson to improve the pace of learning. The teacher's planning in one instance gave the reader no idea what it was that students would know, understand or be able to do by the end of the lesson. The quality of the input from the para professionals also varies within classes, because some of the work is not planned carefully enough to accelerate student progress.

Behavior management strategies are used well across the school. Students are well behaved and have good attitudes towards their work. The friendly atmosphere in the school encourages students to try new things as it is a safe place to get something wrong and then to put it right. Even in classes where some groups of students are less enthusiastic, good examples were seen where adults gave strong positive encouragement to help students produce more.

The school has identified that the progress of Black students in reading and mathematics is not quick enough and further work is needed to help Black students engage effectively in their work. Students receive extra support in class, through the special education program. Although work is modified to meet their needs, the school recognizes that it needs to be matched more closely. Greater use of multi sensory approaches is a way forward. This means involving students in more practical activities, discussion, turn and talk, using physical objects as often as possible, and generally making use of all their senses to help them learn.

The school provides an exciting and creative curriculum. Students confirmed this when they talked positively about art, music and physical education lessons. The work that the school does to improve student character is effective. Marvin's hope that students will become lifelong enthusiastic learners is well founded. Many students were observed taking an active interest in lessons and showed a thirst for learning.

The school uses all the resources it has to support students with English as a second language. It has developed a Spanish section in the library and has worked hard to involve Spanish-speaking families so they can help their children at home. The English second language staff operate a program of push-ins with differentiated work to help students make progress. There are not enough Spanish speaking staff to meet the needs of English second language students. When they join the school, students do not have enough individualized lessons in the mother tongue and dialects initially, and then bilingual group work. Their progress is slower than it might be initially.

There is an extensive program of out of school clubs in place for later in the year. For example, there will be support for homework and general tutoring after school on a regular basis.

Some teachers are using peer-to-peer evaluations effectively. For example, peer group assessment was used well in a literacy lesson in grade 4. Students discussed the main points of their analysis of a story with the teacher. They listed actions they had noticed and commented suitably on the dialogue. This process raised the level of interest for students and improved their rate of progress and commitment to the task.

Teachers and para professionals in many lessons keep helpful records of how well students have learned ideas in lessons. At a whole school level, assessments have helped to identify the areas to improve in subjects. The result of the consistent use of assessments is that teachers can see the trends in learning. At

classroom level, not all teachers make it clear in lesson plans what students will know, understand and be able to do by the end of lessons. Assessment of what students have learned therefore is more difficult and students' good progress is not assured.

Criterion 3: Students' personal character development

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

In all the lessons observed students behaved well and had positive attitudes to learning. They responded well to teachers' clear directions and expectations. Good behavior and attitudes to work have helped to lift the school's results this year.

The school has adopted the 'Six Pillars' to help develop students' personal character. The Pillars include 'respect', 'trustworthiness', and 'citizenship'. In each of these Pillars, there are expectations and goals for good behavior. Students understand the language used by the school. They know what they can and cannot do clearly. The six Pillars are displayed around the school, each with its own color. If a student misbehaves then the teacher reminds the student or asks about which Pillar he or she should be thinking about. Students are able to do this at an early age. They confront what they have done wrong constructively.

Students form constructive relationships with everyone because that is what is expected. Acceptance and kindness to one another is a very important part of the way that the school works. There is a family atmosphere and the principal leads by example. She has a warm but firm influence on the school. Students report that any unkind behavior is dealt with quickly and does not continue. They enjoy coming to school and the attendance percentages prove this.

Students enjoy school and there is very little that they want to change. They would like more books of their choice in the library. Students would also like to be able to choose books to read from any part of the library. Students enjoy taking a full part in the school's organization. At the time of the review, the school was preparing for elections for the new student committee. Posters around the school about different candidates showed that students had given their candidacy a lot of thought. One message even had a jingle inside it. Student committee members arrange things such as assemblies, spirit days and fun activities. They feel empowered as a result.

In their social studies work, students consider social, moral and ethical aspects of their work. They have a reasonable understanding of matters such as global warming. Students from across the school commented that homework is helpful. Students are responding well to the higher academic expectations placed on them. None complained that work was too easy.

Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management

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

The school leadership ensures a positive direction for the school. The principal has been in the position for three years. She has begun to see the results of what she has put into place this year. There have been significant improvements in student performances. Crucially, the principal's and vice principal's analysis of the school's strengths and weaknesses is correct. They are both realistic but have high expectations for the future. The foundations that have been laid are consistent with a school that has the capacity to improve further.

The school is a learning community where the focus is on teaching and learning. There is a program of regular checks on classroom practice. The principal knows the school well and teachers receive helpful feedback

about how they can improve and what they do well. The checks on teaching have led the school into developing a program of push-ins rather than pull-outs of students during lessons to support their needs. This good decision based on what will help students learn faster has the agreement of teaching staff. Students benefit from listening to all the introductions and closures in lessons, but also have work that is guided by other adults in the room, which is matched to their needs.

The school leadership have spent time and energy improving the consistency of the objectives teachers prepare for lessons. In some classes, lesson objectives explain very clearly and succinctly what students will learn by the end of the lesson. In others, there is very little written down. Checks on teachers' planning are not thorough enough to eradicate this inconsistently.

Planning and reflection is shared. The leadership team includes teachers from every grade, plus representatives from special education, English language teaching and the literacy team. They all contribute to the growth plan. It is a good three-year document, which maps out how reading, writing and mathematics will be organized. There are clear targets for student improvement. In the literacy element of the plan, there are some good references to additional teaching tactics that teachers will need to explore further in the coming year to boost student progress.

Many meetings are held with the full faculty team. The principal believes that everything should be transparent and open to all. The effect of this is that all staff feel involved in decision-making and know what is going on. Grade meetings also help to guide the work of the school effectively. Teachers record what they have decided for the principal. They comment on how well initiatives have worked and what the next step is. This process is helping to raise student achievement by improving teaching. The pupil personnel team works effectively to meet the needs of students with special educational needs. These meetings include the psychologist and social worker. Observation of this group showed that it soon finds helpful ways forward for students in greatest need.

The school uses data effectively. Staff know how well different groups are performing, such as girls and boys. This positive work has helped the school improve over the last year. Some data that the school holds has not been analyzed fully and some time was spent during the review working out the rate of improvement for the smaller groups within the student body.

The school's aims are clear. The school is working towards high academic results, where students achieve much of their potential. Much of what is taught is dictated by the district and the school follows the expected time proportions for each subject each week. All subjects have had a new curriculum in recent years. However, the most important issue facing the school as a result of the district's work is the overload of curricular changes. The school feels a sense of being overwhelmed by the pace of change and lack of time to consolidate new ideas and embed new ways of teaching. Despite this, the school has a positive relationship with the district. Teachers speak well of the support that they have had for several initiatives to improve student performance.

The leadership is tied to certain staffing levels in each of its departments by the way that the school is funded. It is unable to respond quickly to the needs of, for example, the influx of young Spanish-speaking students, because it is unable to change its staffing structure to account for their needs.

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

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

Parents report that the staff welcome them warmly and that there is an inclusive feel to the school. They say that their children are doing well and that discipline is good. They report that the school makes considerable efforts to stop any student 'falling through the cracks'. Parents like the Six Pillars discipline code, because it

has meaning for students. Their children try better because of it. They also said that communication is good and that they the parents are part of the learning process. One parent commented that she feels that that the school is one big family.

There is a growing population in the school of English language learners who have Spanish as their mother tongue. Parents expressed concern that there are not enough members of staff to give students the help that they need, especially when they are either young or first join the school.

Parents approve of the homework regime. They accept readily that their children need to practice what they have learned during the week and many parents, if they have the skills, help their children at home.

The open door approach to parents means that they have ready access to reports about how well their children are performing. Parents confirmed that the regular report cards, open-house meetings and parent conferences are giving them the information that they need about their children's progress. The school benefits from having a psychologist and a social worker attached to the school for a considerable time each week. Expert staff, such as the social worker, liaise closely with families and bring those with difficulties through the open door so that they can take a fuller part in their children's education.

Many families participate regularly in school events. The committee of parents that runs events is active. This weekend 600 parents and students are expected at a school picnic provided by the parents' committee. The committee has also raised many funds for the school, sometimes for things that no other source will buy for the school. For example, the parents are about to pay for a climbing wall in the gymnasium.

Marvin has many community resources that it can use. It is close to the beach so studies in science benefit from this close proximity. The aquarium is also nearby.