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QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

Norwalk Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Naramake Elementary School

**16 King Street
Norwalk
Connecticut
06851**

**Principal: Bob Henry
Dates of review: September 27 – 28, 2007
Reviewer: Anne Evanoff**

Cambridge Education (LLC)



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:

Naramake Elementary School (named after a Native Indian Chieftain) is located in the city of Norwalk, Connecticut. The population of 400 students from pre-kindergarten through grade 5 comprises 56 percent White, 24 percent Hispanic and 15 percent African American. In the last two years, the Hispanic population has increased by 15 percent.

In 2005-2006, 40 percent of the Hispanic population received English as a second language academic support. In 2005-2006, 33 percent continue to receive this support. Almost 10 percent of the students became proficient enough in English to move out of the English as a second language (ESL) program.

The school provides special education services following a collaborative push-in model to less than 7 percent of the student population. The academically talented program provides enrichment support for students in grades 4 and 5. A pullout program is provided for about 7 percent of this group.

A Family Resource Center distinguishes this elementary school. It serves the entire school population pre-school to grade 5 providing before and after school care, parent education and support, and a preschool program for three and four year olds. Forty children are registered in the program, which is coordinated by a director and supported by a parent educator.

The school has an attendance rate of 98 percent. This is slightly above the state average for elementary schools.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The principal demonstrates strong instructional leadership in moving the school forward.
- The staff is committed and dedicated to using data to improve instruction and student learning.
- Teacher planning for student success is evident and there is a strong focus school-wide on the development of literacy and numeracy skills.
- The school is warm and welcoming and the students feel safe and secure.
- Parents are actively involved in the school and highly supportive of staff and administration.
- There is an innovative and effective character development program for all students.
- Naramake has many of the components of a lighthouse school.

Areas for Improvement:

- Examine more rigorously the data on students in small subgroups to check their achievements, determine where there are achievement gaps compared to their peers and address these through even more effective teaching.
- Develop a system to set targets and monitor progress for those students performing at basic or lower in the core subjects to ensure that their learning is ongoing and successful.
- Continue to build the staff's understanding of the characteristics of effective teaching and extend collaboration in the context of a professional learning community.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school exceeds minimum requirements.

The principal and the assistant principal provide strong instructional leadership and have high expectations of the staff. They expect teachers to use highly effective teaching strategies that allow for probing, risk taking and 'thinking outside the box'. As a result, teachers are demonstrating the ability to facilitate learning through effective questioning and skill building. The scaffolding of learning throughout the grades is very secure and the level of student engagement is high. Both administrators engage in regular walk throughs and provide feedback to teachers to help them improve their practice.

The administration of the school is also committed to using data to improve the quality of instruction at Naramake. Staff meet on a regular basis to examine Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) data and information from other assessments. This gives teachers a good overview of the strengths and weaknesses of their students. Closer scrutiny of the performance of students in the smaller subgroups would provide opportunities to address specific learning gaps in reading, writing and mathematics for individual children and help teachers to plan accordingly.

There is a strong emphasis in the school on embedding higher order thinking skills and effective questioning into teacher practice throughout the grade levels. This focus is evident in how the teachers plan and deliver the curriculum especially in English language arts. The integration of literacy skills occurs across the curriculum and the art, music and physical education programs provide a good balance. Plans are in place to move the school forward in science and social studies.

The school climate is positive and proactive. The approach that occurs when problems arise demonstrates that the staff operates as a team. Effective communications among the staff, students and parents mean that students are held accountable for the behavior and their learning. The staff shares high expectations for both learning and behavior. The school informs parents at the first sign of difficulty and as a result, suspensions are rare.

Students like coming to school and parents feel that the school is their 'second home'. They describe the school as a caring, compassionate place that addresses "the needs of the whole child not just test scores". There is a character development program in place for students and the school continues to focus on building self-directed, independent problem-solvers and leaders within the student population. With all of these elements in place, the emotional, psychological, social and academic well-being of the student population is supported well.

The school's ability to link with new families and families new to the country is facilitated by the key staff in the Family Resource Center who run a pre-kindergarten program. With its emphasis on parent education and involvement, the program builds a strong, caring, supportive relationship with each family. This solid foundation provides a positive point of entry for every child who attends Naramake.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

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

Overall, students at Naramake Elementary School achieve at or above basic levels. In 2005-2006, the school met adequate yearly progress (AYP) in all areas with the exception of the economically disadvantaged students in reading. The state's goal of 68 percent reading at a proficient level was missed by 5 percent. The same subgroup performed above the proficiency target in mathematics at 77

percent, 4 percent higher than the state average. In writing, the whole school met the target of 70 percent or above at proficiency.

For 2005-2006, in grades 3 and 5, the proportion of students meeting goals for proficiency or better in reading and writing exceeded state goals and was at least equal to district goals. In mathematics, the picture was similar with neither grade dropping below state or district goals.

In grade 4, the pattern was similar with achievement matching or exceeding district and state goals, except in reading, which matched the district goal but was substantially short of the state goal.

In 2006-2007, the whole school met AYP in reading, writing and mathematics. The school has examined the data to determine overall trends in its performance. It is in the process of identifying specific skill areas where individual students do not succeed, in order to improve instruction and increase student success. The school does not explore the data in sufficient depth to determine particular areas of under-performance. For example, in mathematics, the White student group performed at 96.4 percent at or above proficiency. In reading, the same group performed at 88.9 percent at or above proficiency. This suggests strongly that other groups performed significantly less well as the overall average is significantly lower than these figures. Nor does the school compare the performance of grade 4 students in 2005-2006 to the performance of grade 5 students in 2006-2007. A more detailed cohort analysis of this sort would increase the data needed to steer improvements in instruction.

It is recommended that the school examine the data for smaller subgroups, (African American, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged), to identify specific areas of strengths and weaknesses in mathematics, reading and writing for individual students within each subgroup. This would help the teachers plan for all students and extend the opportunities for the school to close the learning gap

A system to track the performance of students would facilitate the setting of targets for individuals and of the subgroups for core subjects. It would enable the school to monitor more closely, each student's progress.

For students who performed at basic or below levels, the school is developing a process to incorporate relevant data into an Individual Student Plan (ISP) to address specific learning needs. The ISP will be a vital tool for the student response team. This expanded process seeks to ensure the involvement of parents and resource staff and will require specific time frames and the identification of outcomes for students.

There is a demographic trend towards an increase in the Hispanic population at Naramake. The school needs to consider the implications of this trend to plan for the long term and organize necessary professional development to enhance the teaching of English language learner in mainstream classes.

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 exceeds minimum requirements.

The school displays student work in a way that is artistic and creative. Many varied examples of what good work looks like are posted throughout the school. Students and staff stop to examine it and point out strengths.

The overall quality of instruction in the school is high and consistent from classroom to classroom. There are several reasons why quality of instruction is good and makes a difference for students. Key among these are detailed attention to planning, common scheduling of teachers within the same grade, the use of data and the quality of feedback to students.

Many staff use their day plans as good working documents with comments, observations and sidebars in the margins that point to next steps and modifications for future instruction. Teachers use these notes to reflect on their practice and make informed decisions in planning to meet student needs. This information is critical to staff who set specific goals within their daily planning to differentiate learning opportunities for students who struggle.

The literacy coach is involved in staff and grade level meetings, modeling and coaching regularly to demonstrate ideas and techniques. Teachers examine students' work together to identify strengths and weaknesses, revise lessons and revisit instructional strategies accordingly. They are dedicated in their efforts to involve parents in what students are learning and keeping them well informed through classroom newsletters, email, phone calls and daily written communication in the 'blue folders'. Parents are invited into the school, as partners, to share strategies and work with the staff to address academic and behavioral concerns. This coordinated effort results in positive action being taken to support and enhance student achievement.

Teachers analyze the CMT data in mathematics and English language to identify the patterns and trends related to subtest skills such as estimation, vocabulary, reading responses. English as a second language and special education resource staff work in classrooms and co-teaching is a common practice. There is a high level of collegiality and collaborative planning and sharing. There is good use of instructional aides to ensure that students are actively engaged in their learning and receive feedback. Staff maintain good assessment records that track students' learning, for example, anecdotal records, observation notes, and reading levels.

Work that is displayed in the hallways identifies specific strengths and lists the next steps for improvement. Students get very clear directions on how to make their work better. The use of criteria and rubrics provide learners with effective guidance and opportunities for students to self-evaluate their work. This practice results in students having a well-developed picture of whether or not they are meeting the expectations for a high level of performance.

In every classroom, teachers demonstrate a high degree of competency in consistently setting the context for learning and actively engaging the students in meaningful experiences. Like coaches, the teachers provided ongoing feedback, encouraging students to self-evaluate and critically think about their work. In a variety of different lessons, teachers consistently developed a model with students, and engaged students in analyzing it to identify what worked about the piece and what did not. Staff also used these examples to develop frameworks with students who, in turn, used them to develop their own work. Teachers and students consistently went back to these reference points while they were working. The relationship between effective teaching and its impact on students' learning is strong.

The staff selected a process workshop approach to develop competency in reading and writing. The program is predicated on writing as a process, with distinct phases, and that all children, not just those with innate talent, can learn to write well. A similar workshop approach is used in reading. Staff commitment to this curriculum model is evident in every grade and the model is consistently used.

Teachers have considerable expertise in observing student behavior and taking advantage of 'teachable moments'. In a grade 1 classroom where the children were working on a piece of writing based on a mini-lesson about Small Moments, the teacher and students developed a clear set of precise steps as a guide for writing. While students were busy with the task, the teacher circulated among the children, conferencing with individuals and encouraging others to think and share. At one point, she stopped the class, checked for eye contact, and then asked the child she was conferencing with to repeat a comment that he had just made. He said: "I was just wondering about what the reader would think if I wrote my story a certain way and so it made me think about the words more and how I might say it". The teacher asked the students to think about the comment and asked them what they thought this child was doing. A student replied, "He's thinking about the people who are going to be reading his story". The teacher then said, "That's exactly what writers do. So keep that in mind as you write your stories, class. Think about the reader." Similar examples of high quality interaction were found in every classroom. The staff has managed to embed these effective instructional strategies into their everyday practice.

Homework is used appropriately. The students know that if they do not get their homework done, that the next day, they will have to do it during recess. Most students said they do their homework at the after school program because staff are available to help. They can also get help from a tutor who comes to the school.

Teachers' dedication also extends to writing their own lesson plans across grades where none existed in some of the units of study. Lessons are freely shared with one another. In the past, this staff took the initiative and wrote science lessons, which were posted online for other schools to use and extend. Such professionalism is yet another example of why Naramake is strategically positioned to become a lighthouse school in Norwalk.

Criterion 3: Students' personal character development

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

Most students are clear about what makes the school special to them: friends, teachers, the instructional aides, the principal, music, art, gym, sports, library, computers, and so on. They articulated, "There is a lot to learn and no time to waste". The students share in a common belief that they are fortunate to come to a school like Naramake. The school pledge and its focus of taking personal responsibility for actions, words, and deeds set the context for student success.

The students feel safe. They feel comfortable in going to a number of people on staff and sharing things that might be bothering them. The students said that there were staff members they trusted and felt they could talk to about their problems. They also reported, "Not many kids get into trouble."

Students commented that when an issue had come up with other students, they could "count on the staff to help them sort it out". Some of the students recalled that some teachers help them examine their thinking to decide on next steps. Helpful prompts such as "What was the problem? How did you contribute to it? What are some things you could do to fix it? What are some ways you can work out a good solution for everyone? Is an adult needed to resolve this problem?" This process is an excellent way to help students take some responsibility in resolving day-to-day issues that may occur in any school setting.

There is an innovative and effective character development program for all students. Teachers and students decided on twenty character traits they want to explore during the school year and that particular traits are embedded into everything they do. Each character trait is represented on a door in the school. The doorway becomes a metaphor for the way to achieve personal success.

The students are actively involved in a range of activities and events that have a positive outcome in the school and the community. However, there is no student council and the school is missing an opportunity to capitalize on the strong community spirit that exists and to develop further the students' confidence and abilities to take responsibility.

Several young people indicated that they did not always feel challenged enough and would like the work to be harder. The school might want to reflect on how they could empower this group of students to take more responsibility not only for their learning but also for the acquisition of some key attributes related to leadership development.

When students are absent from school, the parents phone to leave a message at the school or the office calls home in the morning to follow up. One ongoing issue related to attendance is the practice of parents removing children for extended periods to go overseas. The school does not provide work for the children during these absences.

Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management

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

During his 15 years of tenure, the principal has very successfully built a vision that focuses on the well being and academic success of students within the school community. He has become an instructional leader by engaging in professional development as a life long learner and agent for change. He believes in the continuous growth and refinement of skills and knowledge that an educator must develop, to provide a quality education to students. He would not ask his staff to do anything that he would not do himself.

Over the last decade, the school has been transformed. From a chaotic and combative environment with a high turnover of administrative staff, where discipline was poor, behavior problems rampant and no communication between home and school, the school is one that now receives frequent requests by outside families to register their children.

The principal has achieved this by focusing on the needs of the community as a whole. The Family Resource Center was built through a grant to provide early contact with parents and children. A pre-kindergarten class provides a program for forty children and training is provided to parents to support their children's growth and development. The resource center effectively coordinates the before and after school programs and provides support for form tutors and volunteers.

There are positive relationships between staff, students and parents. The school responds well to parents and students and uses a variety of different avenues to get to know people. He acknowledges that his staff works very hard to build a positive, warm and welcoming climate in the school.

The principal requires all staff to be familiar with a variety of data such as CMT, Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) as well as other formative and summative sources of information. Almost all meetings focus on some aspect of data and how it must be used to drive instruction. Teachers reinforce high expectations for teaching. They modify learning expectations with the support of instructional aides for students who have special needs and extend learning for those students who need more challenge.

The district has provided several new curriculum documents. At times, the sheer volume of new initiatives leaves the staff feeling overwhelmed and overworked. Professional development at the district level is sporadic and is usually a 'one shot' deal. As a result, the staff has developed relationships with each other that are supportive and focused on strategies and approaches having a high impact on student learning.

Most teachers incorporate the Readers and Writers Workshop approach into their daily literacy blocks and support the program with unit lessons they write for their own use. These ideas are shared with all staff. The literacy coach plays a key role in providing support and modeling instructional strategies that make a difference.

The principal and the assistant provide ongoing feedback to staff about their daily practice through walk through activities and a formal appraisal process. Recently, for some teachers, the focus has been on deeper probing with higher level questioning techniques. For others, it has been on how to use an instructional aide effectively. The principal is keenly aware that effective teaching and practices are only effective if they have a positive impact on student learning.

Although a professional learning committee was established in the past, it is not active. This would be an opportune time for staff to revisit the vision for the school and plan some next steps. It would also be a good forum in which to review and refine the School Improvement Plan. This is a very detailed plan that focuses on a wide range of issues. For the plan to be the compass by which the school will measure its success, then, it will take a whole school of instructional leaders to make that happen. The challenge for the principal will be to facilitate this growth within his staff and empower them to take the lead.

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

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

The principal has been at the school for 15 years and knows the school's families very well. Every day, he greets parents and their children, asks about their families and takes an interest in their lives. He shares positive things about the children and notes their progress. He knows his community so well because he collects information in these face-to-face meetings and has done for a very long time. Parents support his leadership enthusiastically: "We are one big family here". "There is a sense of community at this school". "We had a loss in our family and the whole school rallied around us. We were supported".

Parents in this community trust the school. Many parents have stories about the first time they came to Naramake. They paint a vivid picture of how they were welcomed and accepted even when some of their children had significant problems. Parents are highly appreciative of the ways in which the staff worked through these challenges with them in a supportive, caring way. Parents also give full credit to how their children have improved socially, emotionally and academically at the school.

Communication between home and school is ongoing and positive. Teachers send classroom newsletters home on a regular basis often with ideas on how parents can make a difference in their children's learning at home. Some teachers supplement these with classroom websites. E-mail or phone calls are exchanged between teachers and parents to enhance communications where necessary. If a meeting is needed, it is initiated by either the parent or the teacher. Parents are provided with a Team Meeting Handbook to help them use the process effectively.

There is an issue of having school and classroom newsletters translated into Spanish. The district is not able to support the school in timely translation services because of the volume of requests for such services. With an ever-increasing Hispanic population, it will be imperative to find ways of communicating that serve the needs of this population.

This school has an active Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) that publishes a regular newsletter and posts it on the school website. The PTO hosts a variety of social events such as Welcome Back BBQ, Open House, Ice Cream Social, Pride Day, Holiday Concerts and a Junior Achievement Program K-5. These are well attended by the community. At Open House each September, teachers share an overview of the curriculum that will be covered. Parents are invited to volunteer and participate in as many ways as possible in the life of the school.

Parents also celebrate how responsive the school is to the community. For example, the Family Resource Center sent home a survey and based on the information that was collected, workshops on parenting and literacy were provided.

Parents commented that they are well informed about how their children are progressing. The three report cards that go home each year are further informed by daily updates from teachers to parents through the "blue folder". When parents were asked to identify one word that characterized Naramake, the consensus was the high quality of teamwork. "Everybody works together here for the sake of the children."