



**CTDOE**

**QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT**

**Norwalk Public Schools**

# **Quality Review Report**

**Nathan Hale Middle School  
176 Strawberry Hill Avenue  
Norwalk  
Connecticut  
06851**

**Principal: Robert McCain  
Dates of review: September 21 – 22, 2007  
Reviewer: Wally Newberry**

**Cambridge Education (LLC)**



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## Part 1: The School Context

### Information about the school:

Nathan Hale Middle School serves students in grades 6 through 8 and is located in Norwalk, Connecticut. In 2006-07 there were 525 students enrolled, of which approximately 50 percent were White, 25 percent were Hispanic, and 23 percent Black. Thirty percent of the Hispanic families speak only Spanish at home, but just 4 percent of the Hispanic students need bilingual support in school. Students with special education needs represent 17 percent of the school's demographics. The proportion of students eligible for free meals has held steady and is in line with district averages. Student attendance is high and exceeds district averages.

Two years ago, following a period of instability where the school had four interim principals in three years, a new principal was hired. His leadership has positively affected the school in a short period especially in terms of school vision and culture, areas that were in urgent need of improvement.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well:

- The principal has a clear vision for the school and uses multiple strategies, including extensive data analysis, to move the school forward.
- The team leaders are highly effective in facilitating communications between staff and administration.
- The faculty, ably supported by the guidance staff, is committed to the academic and personal development and well-being of all students. The school's culture includes a very safe climate and is typified by the positive attitudes that students demonstrate towards school and learning.
- The administrative team has made significant efforts to create a climate of inclusion for all parents, particularly through its community outreach programs.
- The teachers use data effectively to identify areas of strength and to inform their priorities for student learning. This has resulted in significant strides in student growth.

### Areas for Improvement:

- Put in place the processes needed to allow the team leaders and the guidance staff to track and monitor the impact on student learning of new initiatives and the newly established English language arts block schedule.
- Use the school's professional learning communities to improve students' achievement through continued collaboration on reviewing their work and improved monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning.
- Strengthen consistency in assessment by ensuring common expectations between classes in the same grade and from one grade to the next.
- Provide professional development training that maintains a focus on teacher understanding of data and improves the amount and quality of differentiated instruction to promote student learning.
- Provide students with special education needs small group and one-on-one teacher instructional time that compliments the full inclusion model that exists.

## Part 3: Main Findings

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

#### **This school needs improvement.**

The school is currently meeting basic level and is in need of improvement under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements. The new principal has improved key areas and prepared the ground well for further progress. He has built a leadership team that provides strong support for his school vision. The leadership team, faculty, staff, students and parents embrace that vision. Students' have positive attitudes toward school and the safe environment that now exists. The reduction in student disciplinary issues and suspensions confirm his vision and direction.

The school is in its third year of 'requiring improvement'. State test results this year for mathematics show good improvement. English language arts and particularly reading are still areas of concern and focus. The results for subgroups of students show a significant gain. Reading and writing scores dropped or stayed flat in all grades from the previous year.

Teachers generally have secure subject knowledge but this has too little impact because their lessons need to focus more on differentiating work to meet more precisely the learning needs of all their students. The staff does not currently have all of the skills and techniques to ensure this happens. Professional learning communities should broaden their commitment to review students' work to help improve teaching strategies. The administration has professional development activities planned in these areas to promote improved student learning. There are insufficiently clear processes to allow the team leaders and guidance counselors to track and monitor the impact of student learning resulting from these new programs.

The school works hard to engage the entire community. Parents feel well informed about their school and know what is working and what needs improvement. They are often advocates for the school to the parents of children who will be coming to Nathan Hale. They reassure them that their child will be safe, challenged, nurtured, and successful.

The school structure revolves around five instructional teams and a guidance staff. Each instructional team has a team leader. The teams provide the support to administration to strengthen teaching and student learning and progress. The principal provides extensive student performance data to faculty for analysis. This process translates into the development of programs targeted to specific student populations and needs. However, the impact of these teams and their work is yet to be seen in sustained growth in students' achievements each year. Key weaknesses remain in the quality of instruction, which detract from the quality of student learning and progress.

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

##### **The students' achievement is at basic level and needs improvement.**

The school did not meet its NCLB adequate yearly progress goals for the percentage of students scoring at or above proficient in 2006-07. It did make safe harbor in 2005-06. The school compares well with similar schools across the district. While most students have made satisfactory progress during their time in school, too many have not.

In the first year of new leadership, student test scores made significant gains. These gains reflected across the school, including the majority of subgroups. Teachers supported the vision and worked collaboratively in initiating new programs and strategies to improve student learning. This resulted in the school improving and making safe harbor in 2005-06. The leadership team worked with faculty to design and put in place quarterly tests to assess learning and inform instruction during the 2006-07 year. The most striking improvements in 2006-07 were in mathematics across all grade levels. This included special education, even though this group of students did not make their AYP target.

All subgroups made progress averaging from 3 percent to 10 percent. This steady progress was not matched in reading, where results showed little improvement on the previous year. The performance of Black students, students with disabilities and economically disadvantaged students all failed to reach the state target, and was significantly lower than other student groups. The school has a small number of students identified under district protocols to take part in programs for gifted and talented students. There are no outcomes available for this group at school level. In class, the higher achieving students need more demanding work and lack of well-differentiated work impacts negatively on their progress.

The principal has set a goal of becoming Connecticut's "Middle School of the Year" by 2010. His leadership team, faculty, staff, students, and parents are 'on board' with his goal. The issue will be moving all subgroups up, with emphasis on their special education population and economically disadvantaged students. The school has 17 percent students with special education needs who are included, in line with district policy, in mainstream classes. While the inclusion policy is intended, rightly, to ensure equal access to the curriculum, in practice these students are disadvantaged because many need more intensive input and small group instruction to meet their needs. Strengthening instructional strategies and designing smaller organizational environments will be necessary to move this group's learning forward.

The improvement in collection and analysis of data have lead directly to better achievement because teachers have a much clearer idea of how well their students are doing. The leadership team must now focus more on where teachers have the most improvement to make to students' achievement. More professional development is needed to implement new techniques and methodology to improve teaching and learning.

## **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 needs improvement.**

Now that the school collects and analyzes information about students' progress, the teachers have a much more secure understanding of where they have made most impact on raising achievement and where they could improve further. The English language arts and mathematics teachers across the grades are leading a concerted drive to raise achievement. They also recognize the need for further professional development.

The administration changed the structure of the language arts classes this year from 45 minutes to 90 minutes each day for all students. This change in structure was designed to improve tests scores, but teachers have had insufficient training in the strategies needed to ensure the full and effective use of this additional time to accelerate student learning. The school needs to evaluate systematically the impact of this initiative on students' achievements. It has insufficient information to adjust or fine-tune this arrangement.

This school has introduced a number of new instructional initiatives to raise achievement. There is a mathematics program which targets those students who are at basic level or only just at a proficient level. A similar program targets students who perform at below or insecure proficient levels in reading. Most of

the targeted students make good progress because of these programs. A 'Lexia' reading program targets students whose reading levels are first grade and below. The school is serving as a "Beta" site for this computer based program and receives the materials and training at no cost.

Each of the five instructional teams is a learning community. The teams examine the test data provided by administration to help them make decisions about students' needs. More work is needed to develop common assessment systems within teams and across grade levels to strengthen teaching and student learning. Teachers plan work that is broadly appropriate to the students' abilities. Some tasks though, are mundane and do not fire the imagination or elicit much enthusiasm for learning from students. In a few instances, students did not engage and little or no learning occurred. Much of the instruction was teacher talk with limited student interaction with peers. However, the science classes, with hands on opportunities, small group work, and peer-to-peer talk excited students. The teachers and learning teams need to focus relentlessly on the quality of students' work and the task they undertake to raise the overall quality of instruction. They need to match tasks more closely to the differing learning needs of the students.

The principal has instituted a prescribed methodology for all teachers to use with each lesson. It requires a plan for learning which builds on students' prior knowledge, steers and scaffolds information, provides active participation for all students in class, teacher models process, and utilizes higher order question techniques. Teachers are starting to use these strategies but the changes they need to make are significant. More professional development is needed to ensure changes are fully embedded into everyday practice and make a greater impact on students' achievements.

The school has a broad curriculum. It includes an arts program, world language, music, art, technology education, family and consumer science, computers, academic enhancement, health, and physical education.

The teachers manage behavior well and the students respond positively in lessons and at passing times. The tightly organized and well-supervised arrangements provide a safe environment for students.

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

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

There is a very positive climate in the school, allowing students to learn and develop as individuals. Relations between the students and teachers are very positive. Students and teachers characterize the school climate as 'a family'. Teachers, guidance staff, and administration support students well. The students feel respected and well supported. Students are friendly with their greetings and confident in themselves. They feel safe in the school environment.

Students know the behavior expectations and strive to meet them. They must have a pass signed by a teacher to be out of their room. Students earn "Gold Cards" for meeting the school's B.A.R.K. criteria (Belief, Awareness, Respect and Kindness). These awards presented to students at assemblies who value them as much as having their names on the honor role.

Guidance staff provide a critical link when behavior becomes a problem. The three guidance staff each support one grade level and follow the students through the three grades. They know the parents and are instrumental in helping resolve student issues early on.

Student and parent survey results reflect that students feel teachers care about them, that students try hard to receive good grades, teachers speak to students with respect, and the school provides students with a safe and orderly learning environment. However, over 70 percent of students feel that students neither respect each other nor help each other to learn. The school is researching best practices around

an advisory program for students and they have begun a peer tutors program to have students help each other with academics.

The atmosphere is free from oppressive behavior, such as sexism and racism. Attendance is just under 97 percent and exceeds district averages for similar schools.

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

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

The principal has turned the school around. In two years, he has influenced every phase of the school. His vision is clear and his message is focused well on raising achievement. He has reorganized the school to ensure that teacher strength aligns with student needs. He manages change by providing data that clearly identifies the changes needed. His leadership and use of data have translated into effective curricula and instructional interventions for many students. His expectations are clear and the school has explicit aims and values reflected in all its work. However, much of this development work is relatively recent and has yet to push through into accelerating the progress that students make and into improved teaching and learning.

He has established a comprehensive leadership team. The assistant principal is a key partner working with the principal to move toward the goal of becoming the "Connecticut Middle School of the Year" by 2010. An extended leadership team includes eight team leaders and the three guidance staff. They are responsible for vertical and horizontal communication with faculty, staff, and parents.

In 2007-08, the district reviewed Nathan Hale's staffing ratios and determined a reduction in staff by five teachers. The principal used the situation positively to reorganize the school from six to five teaching teams. He designed a master plan and presented it to the faculty. They had the opportunity to review his plan and make suggestions. He indicated his openness to modification of the plan as long as it was a direct benefit to students. This new structure was in place for the opening of school. It is too early to determine the impact on teaching and student learning.

Data now drives the school but the impact of this is not yet fully reflected in improvements in student achievement. The leadership team and faculty have started programs to improve student learning based on information from the data. One example is the new literacy programs in mathematics and reading for students who are at basic and low proficient levels. The two teachers in charge are key leaders among the staff in these two core content areas. They share results and information from a range of assessments with the leadership team and faculty. Administration knows that more professional development activities are needed to assist teachers in reviewing students' work to help them improve their instructional strategies and to plan better differentiated teaching methods to promote improved student learning. Administration have yet to put in place processes to enable the team leaders and the guidance staff to track and monitor the impact on student learning resulting from these initiatives.

The principal follows the required evaluation procedures. He walks through classes most every day and has instituted a five-point lesson design to the teaching staff. Teachers are incorporating his lesson design strategies but still with varying degrees of success.

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

### **This area of the school exceeds minimum requirements.**

The parent teacher organization is very active in the school community. They have initiated a new program giving grants to teachers who can demonstrate new and innovative projects. They are on the campus everyday and actively support teachers and children.

The school has a wide and extensive outreach program. This includes regular student guided tours, fifth grade orientation, sixth grade transition night, and visitation to every feeder schools fifth grade classroom. The principal goes to every feeder school and engages the fifth grade students in various lessons while the guidance counselors meet with the students' teachers to help determine appropriate classes for the next school year. The school holds "Open House" nights in local community centers targeting parent populations that find it difficult to make it to school functions. A "Transition Night" is held at the largest Baptist church in Norwalk.

Parents identified community diversity, sense of belonging, high energy of principal and approachable teaching staff as evidence of partnerships between school and parent community. Parents feel informed about their school and know the good, bad, and ugly! They are working hard to engage the entire community. Parents often are positive and active advocates for the school in the community.

Parents feel the principal is open to their suggestions. They would like to see the district change its interim reporting policy from a comments based report to a letter grade based report that would have some meaning in relationship to the regular quarterly reports.