



**CTDOE**

**QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT**

## **Norwalk Public Schools**

# **Quality Review Report**

**Norwalk High School**

**23 Calvin Murphy Drive  
Norwalk  
Connecticut  
06851**

**Principal: Leonard Mecca**

**Dates of review: September 27 - 28, 2007**

**Reviewer: Cheryl Baker**

**Cambridge Education (LLC)**



**Cambridge  
Education**

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## Part 1: The School Context

### Information about the school:

Norwalk High School serves approximately 1,561 students in grades 9 through 12. Forty-seven percent of students are White, 23 percent are Black, 25 percent are Hispanic, 4 percent are Asian American and the remaining 1 percent represents other backgrounds. Eleven percent are students with special education needs and 9 percent are English language learners for whom Spanish is the predominant home language. Seventeen percent are eligible for free or reduced meal costs, lower than that of the district and the state. The school does not receive Title 1 funds. Attendance based on 2005-2006 data was 91 percent, below that of high schools across the state. The dropout rate, 2.9 percent, is below that of schools across the state.

The school is undergoing substantial expansion and renovation that will result in upgrades to the infrastructure, enhanced interior finishes and additional classrooms. The work in progress understandably/unavoidable has a negative effect on the learning environment for students and teachers. It has fallen to the recently appointed principal to manage this extensive project while providing leadership and direction for the school.

Norwalk High School has had several principals in the last decade. The current district administrator for secondary education served the school as interim principal for three years, ending his tenure at the school in July 2007 when the current principal assumed the position.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well:

- The curriculum includes an extensive and interesting array of choices in all disciplines.
- The extracurricular program offers a broad range of opportunities for students to explore and expand their athletic prowess, creative talents, intellectual curiosities and civic interests.
- Students are afforded several avenues for developing their leadership skills and contributing to the wider community through clubs, organizations and student government.
- The school has several effective parent groups that are actively engaged in supporting the school's work.

### Areas for Improvement:

- Define the future direction for the work of the school and enlist all constituencies in moving the school forward.
- Utilize current curriculum plans and benchmarks as springboards for ensuring that the written and taught curriculum results in improvements in student achievement.
- Use the available data to determine next steps in improving individual and group performance on all measures of achievement across all content areas.
- Raise the teachers' expectations for their own instructional effectiveness and for students' academic achievement.
- Improve the rigor with which instruction is monitored to ensure greater impact of teaching on students' learning.
- Provide sustained professional development and coaching to help teachers to use data to plan better and improve their differentiation of instruction to meet the differing needs of students.

## Part 3: Main Findings

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

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

Student achievement in the core subjects lags behind that of many high schools across the state on most measures of achievement. Students, overall, are more successful in reading and writing than in mathematics. The school has focused on improving staff understanding of the disparities in the performance of students in subgroups. Staff understanding has been raised but the school's targets and expectations for improvement have not resulted in an improvement in the quality on learning.

The school has a large number of curricular and extracurricular offerings. Much work has been undertaken in recent years to update curricular documents. Less focus has been placed on instruction and its impact on learning. Nor has there been sufficient emphasis on enabling teachers to understand how to use data to plan their instruction to raise student achievement.

Students demonstrate acceptable behavior, overall. They have many avenues for showing initiative, taking responsibility and contributing to the wider community. Many take advantage of these avenues for character development.

Leadership is in transition at the school as the new principal shapes the direction for the school's future work. Few interventions to improve the quality of instruction have been implemented in recent history and there is little evidence of the impact of the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of teaching on learning. Constituent groups express pride in the school and a willingness to collaborate to move the school forward.

Parent groups are plentiful and active in the school community. They contribute to the school's capacity to communicate with families and are significant sources of scholarship funds. They feel well informed regarding their children's progress and look forward to working with the new administration.

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

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

Based on the 2007 state test results, students at Norwalk High exceeded their district counterparts in all four tested areas by a small degree. Overall performance was similar to that in the other large high school in the district. Test trend data reveal modest growth in the percent of students scoring at or above proficient in mathematics and reading over the last five years. However, these scores were below state high school averages for at least the two most recent testing cycles.

The school reached its adequate yearly progress (AYP) target in reading. In mathematics, students in the Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged categories did not reach AYP. Overall, the performance of students fell from 2006 to 2007 in most reporting categories and the gap widened between White students and their Black and Hispanic peers. White students showed modest growth in mathematics and maintained their scores in reading.

The 2007 and 2006 Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) data indicate that the percentage of both students with special education needs and English language learners reaching goal was dramatically lower than any other reporting group and did not exceed 10 percent in any subject in 2007.

Disparities in performance among ethnic groups is mirrored in the AYP report data. The performance of boys diverged from that of girls by approximately 8 percentage points on each test. Boys scored higher in mathematics and science, girls were more successful in English and social studies.

The school's SAT verbal scores increased slightly from 2005 to 2006 and fell slightly in mathematics. The school's averages in both tests are below state averages by nearly 20 percentage points. The average percentage of students attaining a score of 3 or more on Advanced Placement tests remained at approximately 56% from 2005 to 2006, over 15 percentage points below the average for state high schools.

Cohort data revealing the progress students have made during their time in school is not a focus for the school. Graduation rates and the percentage of students pursuing post-secondary education both exceed state averages. This indicates that the school has the capacity to prepare students well for their next steps.

The school's growth plan, along with department smart goals and power standards, specify goals for annual increases in performance on CAPT tests. Goals vary in challenge, with lower expectations set for lower performing sub-groups. Most academic departments track their annual performance and calculate the difference between the targets and the attainments. However, recent declines in scores for most groups draw into question the impact of these goals.

The school has endeavored to address the needs of different ability groups by offering three or four instructional levels for most courses. Students with special education needs and English language learners receive instruction in the regular education setting and are provided supplemental services based on their diagnosed needs. Study centers, tutoring and courses specializing in building skills for struggling learners have been expanded recently. Higher achieving students receive greater challenge in honors or Advanced Placement courses. The school does not analyze the performance of students relative to placement levels or their progress over time and test data draw into question the impact on achievement of current groupings. It is also evident that ethnic sub-groups are not proportionately represented across the ability groupings.

## **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.**

The development of the curriculum, in concert with the district's revised and updated content standards and the requirements of decennial accreditation, has been a focus of the school's academic departments over recent years. This has resulted in extensive and effective written curricular documents. The school's curricular and extra-curricular offerings and opportunities are broad and extensive and provide students with interesting choices with respect to their academic, artistic, athletic and civic interests. Elective courses expand upon the core curriculum and add breadth to an already wide array of academic choices. The recent move to an eight period day has resulted in an increase in the number of course offerings further increasing student's ability to satisfy their intellectual curiosities. Teachers are generally well prepared to teach their assigned courses as evidenced by the percent of those carrying advanced degrees and holding appropriate certifications. Activities and clubs extend learning especially in the arts and government. Homework policies set out clear expectations for the quantity of reinforcing activities that students should expect as well as defining expectations for their completion of assignments.

The school's English curriculum reflects a traditional approach. The discipline incorporates some of the qualities of the literacy initiatives being implemented in the district's elementary and middle schools. While somewhat below state averages in attainment, CAPT scores in reading and writing meet adequate yearly progress targets, verbal SAT's increased slightly and students have and good success in Advanced Placement Literature and Composition. Similar good performance in social studies

assessments suggests an effective crossover of reading and writing skills across the curriculum. While the mathematics curriculum has undergone recent refinement and its implementation is closely monitored by departmental and district personnel, students have not performed as well as in other disciplines overall.

Instruction in the school is largely teacher centered, except in subjects that naturally lend themselves to engaged student participation, such as in the arts. Whole class instruction followed by individual or small group practice is the norm. Differentiated instruction is not a common feature of most classrooms, except where special education teachers are modifying instruction for students with special education needs who are included in the regular education setting. Instruction is focused on pace, keeping all students relatively at the same place at the same time. Most class settings feature neat rows of desks, with attentive and compliant students listening to lectures, following the solution of a problem or observing instructional materials displayed on an overhead projector. Passive, rather than active learning is the norm. The use of instructional technology for direct instruction in the classroom is limited. However, departmental research centers, stocked with content-related print material and modern computers provide students and teachers access to a broader array of instructional options. Professional development in instructional techniques such as those related to differentiating instruction or using instructional technology has not been a strong enough focus of the school. Nor has the use of data to drive instruction.

The school has well defined curricular expectations, particularly with the identification of 'power standards'. These are aimed at ensuring the teaching and learning of key concepts. In some disciplines, the practice of administering common assessments is providing information regarding the performance of students across a grade or subject. For example, mathematics and science teachers across the school and district can compare student performance in algebra or biology. Teachers can also reflect on necessary changes to the taught curriculum based on the analysis of assessment data. These practices are not fully embedded across all disciplines and the focus of results is less on individual students than on course content and goals. Teachers routinely use test, quiz and other assessment results to measure students' learning, sometimes taking time to re-teach a concept to the whole class that was not well understood by some students. Others expect students to come to them to ask for additional help when their work does not evidence learning. Some students seek out help through avenues provided by the school, while others receive help from families, friends or private tutors. Students' standardized test results are not widely available to teachers nor routinely utilized by them to gain insights into students' particular and individual learning needs or strengths. The school has not yet fully realized its capacity with respect to the analysis and use of all forms of assessment data to improve teaching and facilitate improvement in learning for each student.

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

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

The school promulgates clear expectations for student behavior through its well-understood code of conduct. Consequences for non-compliance are clear and enforced. Students are well behaved, overall, and display a positive attitude towards learning, particularly in the more challenging instructional settings. The school's mission and expectations statements, included in the student handbook and the course catalogue, list academic, social and civic behaviors that the district and school have set as goals for students to reach by graduation. These set minimal skills necessary to succeed in the world beyond high school rather than setting ambitious goals for academic achievement. It appears that, in general, students respond to the expectations that have been communicated to them.

The school is rich in avenues for students to develop leadership skills and contribute to the community at large. Numerous clubs and organizations dedicate some of their efforts to reaching out to the community through food and clothing drives and in providing entertainment to the elderly and others. Student successes in these and academic endeavors are recognized and celebrated.

The student body is diverse ethnically and economically and appears to have learned how to appreciate and value each others differences. In certain instances students do need to be disciplined, however, school climate is not fraught with behaviors that inhibit students or interfere with learning. Clubs, activities and athletics provide an especially useful avenue for students to find common interests and build friendships. Students and teachers display mutual respect for one another and many students develop bonds with adults in the building. Students are enthusiastic about their new principal who has made an effort to get to know as many of them as possible in his short time in the school.

The school has clear policies and procedures for attendance in school and in class. Recent efforts to reduce tardiness and class cuts have sent a message to students that infractions will not be tolerated. This resulted in a decrease in these actions. Attendance data for the preceding year were not provided but the school has put measures in place to increase attendance to within state averages.

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

##### **This area of the school's work needs improvement.**

Since assuming leadership of the school on July 1, 2007 the principal has engaged housemasters in professional development that included opportunities to build common understandings of the needs of the school. Establishing a common baseline of expectations for instructional practices and instituting practices to increase the oversight of teaching and learning have been significant foci of their work together. The principal's interest in closing the achievement gap is closely linked to his desire to ensuring high quality instruction. While this overall direction has been implicit among members of his administrative team, explicit communication to department heads, teachers, parents, students and others had not taken place at the time to the quality review visit. Under the previous administration, much of the work of the school reflected aims and values regarding curriculum revision that was well understood by all constituencies. Now complete, the school is ripe for future direction with good capacity to improve.

Previous school leaders delegated classroom observations and judgments about the quality of teaching to four head masters. Principals rarely looked at teaching. Written observation reports suggest very good instruction by the vast majority of teachers with little history of widespread interventions to improve teaching and learning. The recent development of a district-wide protocol for evaluating instruction brings welcomed structure and clarity of expectations to those charged with carrying out this responsibility. The current principal intends to be an active participant in this process that promotes high standards for the quality of teaching resulting in subsequent improvements in learning. Similarly, the use of available data has been largely focused on placement of students in learning levels, identifying students for remediation, and identifying subgroups who need to improve so that the school can obtain its adequate yearly progress targets. Little interrogation of data, even that readily available on the state website, has been undertaken by the leadership team.

Teachers, department chairs, headmasters, students and parents express a great deal of pride in the school. There is good documentation and anecdotal evidence to suggest that there is widespread commitment and capacity to working hard for improvement. The school's governance structure includes many sub-divisions that, in the past, have been engaged in collaborative planning with administration.

The school appreciates the district's creation of kindergarten – grade 12 instructional specialists in most of the core disciplines. However, those subjects that do not enjoy support from individuals in such a position, such as world languages, physical education and health, the fine and performing arts, business, guidance and others, feel at a distinct disadvantage. Leaders of these departments cite difficulty in ensuring continuity of the curriculum across grades and schools and between the elementary, middle and high schools. Access to professional development is also seen to be more limited and the distribution of funding among the district's schools and subjects is perceived to be inequitable.

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

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

The school is fortunate in that it has many long-standing active parent groups that provide representation for special interests, such as music and the performing arts, ethnic groups, and others. These groups perform typical fundraising functions but also provide rich sources of information for the parent community especially through the publication and distribution of highly informative newsletters. Parent and community resources have provided scholarship funds in excess of half a million dollars for Norwalk graduates.

While the school does not provide a direct avenue for parents to participate in school governance, the previous administration was a strong proponent of parent involvement and sought the consult of some group leaders. Parents feel generally well informed about the school and their children's progress. They receive information through teachers, housemasters and guidance personnel and feel welcomed to engage in dialogue about their children with school personnel. Generally, they express satisfaction with the overall quality of the school's curriculum and the instruction that teachers' provide, especially for high achieving students. The school produces informative high quality documents, such as handbooks and course catalogues that help parents and students to be well informed. The school's website and teachers' web pages provide additional sources of information about the school. Guidance personnel provide plentiful information to help students chart their futures in higher education, the military or the world of work.

Parents describe pride in the school's diverse population and feel that various groups demonstrate mutual respect for one another. Groups are appreciative of the efforts that the current principal has made to reach out to various parent constituencies and they look forward to his direction for the school's future.