



**CTDOE**

**QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT**

**Norwalk Public Schools**

# **Quality Review Report**

**Ponus Ridge Middle School**

**21 Hunters Lane  
Norwalk  
Connecticut  
06850**

**Principal: Linda Sumpter**

**Dates of review: September 24 - 26, 2007**

**Reviewer: Cheryl Baker**

**Cambridge Education (LLC)**



**Cambridge  
Education**

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## Part 1: The School Context

### Information about the school:

Ponus Ridge Middle School serves approximately 646 students in grades 6 through 8. Twenty-nine percent are Black, 33 percent are Hispanic, 6 percent are Asian American and 32 percent are White. Approximately 49 percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch costs, higher than that of the district and the state. The school does not receive Title I funds. Thirteen percent are students with special education needs and 13.5 percent are English language learners. Attendance averages 96 percent, on par with the district and the state.

The population of the school has grown by over 3 percent in recent years and the proportion of students eligible for free or reduced lunch costs has nearly doubled. Similarly, the percentage of students with non-English home languages has increased by 11 points. These factors have placed increased demands on the school to address the particular needs brought by these, as well as other, students.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well:

- The principal is dedicated to improving instruction, school climate, and student learning and is tireless in seeking out avenues of support to assist in achieving success.
- Professional development aimed at supporting teachers in implementing standards-based mathematics and a research-based literacy programs has been extensive, sustained and bolstered through in-class support and coaching by consultants.
- The school has succeeded in improving its climate for learning through the concerted and sustained efforts of teachers, administrators and others resulting in an improved reputation within the community.
- Students are afforded a broad and varied curriculum that extends and deepens their exposure to disciplines, broadens their skills and widens their intellectual horizons.

### Areas for Improvement:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of current instructional programs, especially for students with special education needs, to address serious gaps in achievement and deficits in their learning.
- Identify key personnel to form a data team to increase the analysis of all available student achievement data and identify root causes for chronic gaps in learning between and among all subgroups and use this information to develop subsequent interventions or programmatic revisions.
- Increase the overall focus on high expectations for instructional rigor and academic achievement among students, teachers, parents and for the community at large.
- Capitalize on the district's initiative with respect to identifying content benchmarks and common assessments by enforcing the utilization of a common standards-based format for developing lessons and units that are more tightly aligned to district standards.
- Continue to enlist all constituencies in finding creative, powerful and sustainable mechanisms to support students in adhering to the school's expectations for behavior and academic achievement.
- Continue to provide teachers with training, guidance and example in broadening their repertoires of teaching skills to best meet the diverse needs of their students.

## Part 3: Main Findings

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

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

Student achievement in core subjects lags behind the district and the state overall. While there has been recent improvement in mathematics for the school as a whole and for most subgroups, the school has not met its annual yearly progress targets for the last two years. Most troubling is consistently low achievement on state tests for students with special education needs drawing into question the how well the school addresses the needs of its different ability levels.

The school has introduced a research-based approach to literacy instruction as well as a standards-based mathematics curriculum that have been well supported through sustained professional development. Effectiveness of implementation has varied as has its impact on student learning. Overall, the school provides students with a broad and engaging array of curricular and extracurricular learning opportunities that generally interest and motivate students. The use of data to inform teaching is not a regular feature of instruction at the school.

The principal is a dedicated leader who is diligent in finding ways to support the school and its students. She has had good success in garnering recognition and funding for the schools' programs.

The school has made strides in creating a climate for learning that has helped students to behave and understand the consequences of their behavior. Some challenges remain but, in general, students have a positive attitude toward learning. The school's expectation for high academic achievement is implicit rather than explicit.

The school has good partnerships with parents and the community. It values and supports the diversity of its families and works hard to ensure ample communication between school and home. Translations and other outreach efforts demonstrate the school's commitment to increasing its overall parent participation.

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

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

The school's results on the Connecticut Mastery Test for the two recent testing periods indicate that, overall, students at Ponus Ridge perform better than their peers at one middle school, are on par with those at another and perform below students at the remaining district middle school. Ponus Ridge has failed to meet its annual yearly progress expectations for most of its subgroups for the last two years. Scores decreased in most reporting categories for reading in the spring 2007 testing period when the school as a whole did not reach its target in that subject. Conversely, scores in mathematics showed improvement overall and for each subgroup. The whole school met their annual yearly improvement target as did Hispanic and White students. The percent of Ponus students scoring at or above proficient on state tests in 2006 was below that of schools at the district and state levels. Students at grade 8 scored somewhat higher in reading and writing than their district counterparts. The school did not meet goal at any grade level in any tested subject.

The School Growth Plan has set ambitious targets for improved student achievement, especially in mathematics and English. However, there is not a routine practice of analyzing annual test data with respect to these goals and the school does not employ incremental content-based benchmarks and accompanying assessments by which to measure progress towards these stated targets. Annual fluctuations in student performance typically occur among the school as a whole, at grade levels and among and between subgroups,

depending on the quality of teaching. Long-term analysis of cohort data in mathematics, produced by the district mathematics specialist, suggests slow improvement for the school as a whole, at grade levels and within some subgroups. Similar data does not exist for reading and writing. Beyond noting differences among subgroups, which represent a differential range of approximately 20 percentage points, the school does not yet engage in deep analysis to identify causes for differences in the performance of racial, ethnic and economic subgroups.

Students of all abilities are grouped together for classroom instruction, including students with special education needs and English language learners. Teachers are expected to differentiate instruction to meet the range of learner's needs. This expectation is carried out variably from class to class. Sometimes an aide is present to assist the teacher and some students receive supplemental help in small group settings. While students with special education needs did improve their performance on 2007 tests, the disparity in performance compared to the school as a whole is dramatic. Performance of students with special education needs ranged from 44 to 57 percentage points below that of regular education students on tests given in 2006 and 2007. English language learners performed below all categories of English speakers and were twelve to fourteen points below the school as a whole on the 2007 test. The school did not have comparative data demonstrating this group's performance over time. The school does provide classes at grade 8 to accommodate students who are accelerated in mathematics or who are high achievers overall. In addition, remedial classes in reading and numeracy have been introduced in recent years. Analysis of the effect of these instructional settings on student achievement has not been undertaken. Similarly, boys outnumber girls by approximately 6 percentage points but the school has not analyzed the differences in performance by gender.

## **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.**

Students at the school receive instruction in a broad and varied curriculum. This extends and deepens their exposure to various disciplines and widens their intellectual horizons. In addition to instruction in the major disciplines, students may receive instruction in one of three foreign languages, including Japanese. The school also offers instruction in areas such as fine and practical arts, health, physical education, and music. Extracurricular opportunities exist in athletics, clubs and the performing arts. Field trips and team-based projects motivate students and extend learning outside of the school.

The school has placed particular emphasis on using new approaches to teaching reading, writing and mathematics. The school achieves this in conjunction with consultants from the Connecticut Writing Project and the Project to Increase Mastery in Math and Science. To implement these standards and research-based approaches to instruction, teachers have received sustained professional development, lesson modeling and individual coaching. Mathematics teachers have also received content instruction to bolster their subject knowledge. Content area certification in English is high among staff at the school.

Teachers' schedules allow time for content and grade level collaboration. This is highly valued by teachers as an effective avenue for helping each another in planning and implementing the curriculum. Content specialists also assist teachers in adopting the new curriculum. Although 2007 mathematics scores increased overall, it is too early to draw direct correlations between changes in instruction and student achievement. Reading scores did not increase. This may reflect less consistency in implementation. However, anecdotal data and records of borrowing from the library indicate an overall increase in interest and engagement in reading by students.

Teaching is characterized by whole group instruction followed by practice in groups or individually. Grouping does not reflect different abilities and group activity is largely parallel rather than interactive. In the general education classes observed, the needs of students with special education needs were not met through

differentiated instruction. In addition, there was no significant interaction among these students and their classmates.

Students are generally compliant. Visual reminders of behavioral expectations are prominent in each classroom. Teachers are vigilant in redirecting behavior to maintain the momentum of instruction. Students exhibit the greatest engagement in settings where teachers introduce new knowledge or they are able to engage in active learning or product-based practice. In several instances, rigor was not apparent in lessons and students noted that lessons or homework assignments were easy. While the school has placed a recent emphasis on the completion of homework and teachers made a practice of checking for compliance, teachers do not always check homework. This draws into question how it is used to give students feedback on their learning.

Teachers receive state test scores of students at their grade level but do not routinely disaggregate this data to diagnose the specific learning needs of their students. Teachers cite time constraints and the cumbersome nature of the data for this. School-wide analysis of performance on content strands informs adjustments in the curriculum overall. Except for mathematics, teachers do not administer common grade level tests to assess students' work and use data to improve teaching and learning. District initiatives in science and social studies will provide avenues for similarly effective data gathering as the school implements new benchmarks and assessments.

Instructional time has doubled in literacy and teachers enjoy reduced teaching loads to help them implement the adopted curriculum and improve students' skills in reading and writing. The high degree of choice afforded students makes objective comparisons of progress across grades difficult. The school has trained teachers in protocols for evaluating student work samples but this practice is not deeply embedded. Evidence of student achievement on state tests draws into question the effectiveness of arrangements for assessing progress and the use of data to improve teaching and learning.

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

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

Over the past three years the school community at large has worked diligently and effectively to address student behaviors. Previously, these were serious impediments to teaching and learning and had a deleterious effect on school climate. With the assistance of consultants and the committed efforts of teachers, parents and administrators, the school devised expectations and consequences for behavior. These form the Ponus P.R.I.D.E. pledge to promote perseverance, respect, intelligence, diversity and excellence. Students recite this non-negotiable pledge daily. Teachers apply these consistently throughout the school. Students understand these expectations well. Students, parents and teachers sign an agreement at the beginning of the school year that obligates them to uphold the school's expectations.

Most students comply, behave well and demonstrate positive attitudes towards learning. Most develop constructive relationships with their peers, teachers, guidance counselors and school administrators. Some, however, persist in oppressive behavior such as bullying, teasing and racism. There is a small proportion of students who discourage others from demonstrating their interest in learning. Student organizations concentrate their efforts on planning social events and contributing to food and clothing drives rather than addressing concern such as these.

Students like coming to school and annual attendance averages approximately 96 percent. Good practices are in place to promote attendance and address absenteeism. Truancy is not a problem at the school.

The school recognizes student achievement during morning announcements, by teachers, grade level teams, through awards assemblies and through induction into the honor society. High expectations for academic

achievement are implicit rather than explicit in the school's mission and cultural norms. Rather, expectations are strongly focused on behavior rather than learning.

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

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

The school's principal has dedicated herself to identifying areas for improvement in the school. She aggressively seeks programs, interventions and funding to support change. For example, she captured Comprehensive School Reform funds to hire consultants to work with the school in improving behavior, climate and school culture. Other specialists helped to institute research-based literacy practices and a standards-based mathematics program. The school's success in these initiatives has garnered recognition and further funding as a Connecticut Vanguard school. As a Vanguard school, teachers from Ponus Middle School now share successful practices with another local school. These interventions and innovations have shown positive results in the overall climate for learning. Data is beginning to emerge to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching innovations on student learning. School-based leadership in successfully promoting change has been led internally, with minimal support from the district. The school would appreciate greater fiscal support and recognition for its achievements, however small, from the district.

The school provides good opportunities for shared leadership through structures such as monthly team leaders meetings and through the creation of several leadership positions such as team leaders, content specialists and the dean of students. The school provides effective opportunities for collaboration and reflection through team meetings, grade level meetings and subject area meetings. Ad hoc groups, such as the climate committee, provide additional avenues for participation. The work of this committee and its resulting Faculty Action Plan, framed the aims and values of the school that are widely expressed through the Ponus P.R.I.D.E. initiative. These avenues for deliberation and the overall commitment to improving student achievement provide good support for the school's capacity to improve.

Administrators expect teachers to implement initiatives such as those for mathematics and literacy but provide limited direct oversight of the effectiveness of teaching and its impact on learning in the classroom. Similarly, the school promotes instructional methodologies expected for the effective inclusion of special education and English language learners. However, the delivery of instruction is not tightly monitored. Teachers are required to submit weekly lesson plans to administrators to provide insight into the adherence to instructional expectations. While administrators suggested a standards-based format, compliance varies widely as does close alignment of plans with standards. Therefore, the oversight of instruction is not sufficient to ensure effective, high quality teaching

Administrators also struggle to use the available data to effectively pinpoint causes of underachievement and devise innovations and interventions to improve student learning. Assistance from some district specialists has informed their deeper understanding of trends in mathematics, but fine-grained comparative data analysis of student assessments and achievement are not a routine.

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

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

The school makes every effort to include parents as partners in educating their children. Outreach is through its parent organization, open houses, family nights, newsletters, orientation meetings, e-mail and phone contacts. Publications are professional and informative. Parents find the extensive and detailed orientation handbook most valuable in informing them and their children about the expectations and practices at Ponus. Translations into parents' home languages supports clarity of communication and translators are available at school events. Dinner and free baby-sitting are offered to encourage parent attendance at events. Parents

also sign the home-school agreement to adhere to Ponus P.R.I.D.E. expectations. This reinforces their partnership with the school.

The school communicates ample information about student progress through four quarterly report cards, four interim reports of progress. Bi-weekly progress reports are provided if requested. Parents feel that the team structure is an effective mechanism for supporting their children in small learning communities. They feel well informed by teachers, guidance counselors and team leaders as to progress or problems. Parents feel welcomed and respected by teachers and administrators alike. They appreciate the efforts the school makes to value the diversity of its families such as through interdisciplinary cultural celebrations.

The school enjoys support from community organizations such as the Norwalk Housing Authority that provides supplemental tutoring for Ponus students to good effect. The Norwalk Public Education Fund supports some after school activities that broaden students' experiences. Adult mentors provide supportive guidance for Ponus students. Currently, the school does not provide an avenue for parent participation in school governance. This limits their opportunity to engage in planning for the school's overall improvement.