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QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

Norwalk Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Roton Middle School

**201 Highland Avenue
Norwalk
Connecticut
06854**

Principal: Joseph Vellucci

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Reviewer: Peter Lewis

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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

Roton Middle School is located in Norwalk, Connecticut. It serves some 470 students from grade 6 to grade 8. The student population is increasingly diverse. Nearly 30 percent are Black, nearly 33 percent are Hispanic, and just over 35 percent are White. There are a small number of Asian American students. The proportion of students with a non-English home language has increased considerably over time to nearly 37 percent, which is slightly above district, and considerably above state averages. The percentage receiving English language learner support in the school has grown to around 12 percent, which is also above district and state levels. The main second language is Spanish.

The school has a slightly higher proportion of students with special education needs than is found in other district middle schools and higher than the average across the state. The percentage of students who are eligible for free or reduced school lunches, at just over 35 percent, is higher than district and state averages and also reflects an increase over time.

The students' attendance, at just under 97 percent, is slightly above the average for district and state schools.

Organizationally, the school is split into five teams, each of which is overseen by a team leader.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The principal has established a school environment in which relationships are strong and are reflected in the commitment shown by all staff.
- Improvements have been secured over time in student behavior and attitudes to their learning.
- There are examples of good teaching which has a positive impact on student learning.
- Students know that adults in the school care for them and are there to help should they experience any problems.

Areas for Improvement:

- Improve the analysis of data to enable targets to be set for students that reflect an accurate understanding of their past performance and their potential.
- Improve teachers' use and interpretation of data in planning work that is appropriate to students' different needs.
- Refine lesson planning so that it includes a clear objective for what will be learned and the activities that will be undertaken in achieving this.
- Continue to refine the role of classroom aides and paraprofessionals in working effectively with identified groups of students.
- Make better use of monitoring across teams and subjects in evaluating the impact of teaching and the curriculum on student achievement.
- Improve whole school planning so that progress can be measured against clearly stated objectives, timescales for their achievement and procedures of evaluation to enable modification to be taken where appropriate.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school needs improvement.

The school acknowledges that the performance of a significant proportion of its students has not been high enough over the last two years. Although the school compares favorably with other middle schools in the district particularly in reading, it is less successful in mathematics. At the same time, the school's low performance in comparison with schools across the state, particularly for students in key subgroups, has meant that the school has failed to reach its adequate yearly progress targets for the past two years.

School assessments indicate that students with special education needs and those with English as an additional language make good progress in relation to their 'small step' targets largely because of initiatives introduced by the school in collaborative teaching and in taking students' individual needs into account in planning their work. The school has recognized the need to apply these strategies more to other groups of students although, as yet, limited progress has been made in this direction.

The school curriculum increasingly focuses on securing improvement in reading, writing and mathematics for all students. At the same time, the school has begun to analyze student data more carefully to identify gaps in student learning. Although school leaders have a clearer understanding of patterns in students' learning, teachers do not yet use assessment information sufficiently in planning work that meets the full range of students' needs. As a result, lessons frequently involve all students in the same tasks, regardless of their ability. Consequently, lessons do not challenge some students sufficiently, while others struggle to keep up. The school has begun to introduce strategies which have the potential to help teachers in planning lessons that relate more to students' needs and abilities, rather than the demands of the curriculum.

Professional development has introduced the workshop model of instruction, which is beginning to influence practice in reading and writing. In these areas, teachers have begun to use conferencing with students as a way of assessing their understanding. However, this strategy is neither sufficiently consistent, nor used across all subjects. Part of the reason for this is that the school has yet to make its expectations clear in relation to the use of particular lesson styles, such as the workshop model, or in using an understanding of students' different abilities in differentiating instruction.

The principal and the assistant principal have high expectations of themselves, their staff and the students. School development planning identifies challenging targets for student achievement but accepts that these are approximately double the proportion of students likely to reach target levels. Strategies for achieving change, such as the consistent adoption of differentiated instruction, are not communicated clearly enough. As a result, there is no consistent view amongst other leaders or teachers as to what changes are needed or of the timescale within which improvement will be secured.

While parents and students feel that the school is doing a good job, this view is not without reservations. Students, for example, describe occasions when their work is too easy, and when they have to wait for others to 'catch up'. Parents regard the school as being very concerned for the welfare of their children but are less certain that their children are doing as well as they could.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

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

In the Connecticut Mastery Tests for both 2005/06 and 2006/07, the school failed to make its adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets. Although there was some improvement between the two years concerned, this was slight. The school recognizes that more is required, particularly from certain subgroups of students. For example, Black and Hispanic students' scores in mathematics declined slightly between the two years, and the same was true of students counted as economically disadvantaged whose results in both mathematics and reading showed a decline. While the school achieves the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) AYP target as a whole, only the White students reached state targets. The school's results over the last two years have been well below state averages in all subjects and across grades.

In comparison with schools across the district and, particularly, the three other middle schools, the picture is more complex. In reading, the school's results were broadly in line with the district middle school average but were below in mathematics. A similar pattern existed for the key subgroups of Black and Hispanic students and those with economic disadvantage and for English language learners. In general, the school compared better in reading with other middle schools than in mathematics. Equally, the school's results for White and for students with special education needs were higher than in other middle schools. The proportion of students reaching a proficient level or above exceeded whole school targets in mathematics and reading.

The school has begun to analyze data more carefully, both in setting targets and in starting to look for patterns of student performance between subjects and grades. This process is not yet sufficiently rigorous. In response to the district requirement to set targets, the school has asked each of its five teams to identify 10 students performing within level two who have the potential to reach level 3. This reflects the school's stated belief that all students can succeed, but is weakened by the fact that the school feels that only half of these students realistically have the potential to reach these targets. As a result, the school acknowledges that it is unlikely to achieve adequate yearly progress in the current academic year. While the school believes that it may reach Safe Harbor status, its assessment records are insufficiently precise to identify which subjects or groups of students this may apply to.

It is clear that school leaders and individual teachers have a good knowledge of what students know and where their learning needs to improve, this information has yet to be collated and used in setting targets for students that are based on an accurate analysis of their potential.

Much of the school's effort focuses correctly on improving the progress made by lower achieving students. Some successes have been achieved in, for example, beginning to establish collaborative teaching for students with special education needs and in ensuring gains are made by English language learners who are at an early stage of English acquisition. Good tracking of the progress made by these groups of students helps the school in ensuring that they are making planned gains in their learning, despite not achieving AYP.

Assessment of the gains made by students in other groups is less precise and too often relies on the results of tests designed to assess their competence in answering questions aligned with Connecticut Mastery Testing. This reflects in questions that are both retrospective and insufficiently linked to students' understanding of concepts. As a result, the school does not plan subsequent interventions in relation to an accurate understanding of student potential. This particularly impacts on the progress made by higher attaining students and is reflected in the very low proportion of students scoring at advanced level.

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.

In collaboration with district staff, the school has moved effectively in developing its mathematics and reading curricula. The school has begun to look at ways of developing instruction to meet the needs of students more precisely. School leaders acknowledge the need to move through the curriculum is the main driver for teaching, rather than planning that is set against an understanding of student need. Together with focused professional development, monitoring and guidance by team leaders is beginning to ensure that there is consistency in the way in which teachers make use of new methodologies in their lessons. Through the introduction of the readers' and writers' workshop, for example, teachers are making more use of conferencing to assess student achievement and to plan interventions. In reading and writing, this strategy is beginning to achieve success. This, however, is at an early stage and is not yet consistent across the school. Students acknowledge that teachers are talking with them more often about their work in English language arts, and appreciate the guidance that staff provide.

Teachers collaborate effectively in sharing successful strategies, but the lack of regular and focused cross-team meetings means that inconsistencies exist from one team to another. One example of this is in the variations in the homework that is set across subjects and from team to team. As yet, leaders have not agreed expectations for differentiated instruction. This, together with the lack of data use made at classroom level to inform instruction, means that this aspect of development is slower than the school would wish.

In most lessons, students start at the same point, undertaking the same activity at the same time. Students describe lessons in which they finish a particular task, but still have to wait for others to 'catch up' before they can proceed to the next part of the lesson. This indicates both the degree to which teachers do not yet make best use of student data, and the range of understanding that exists of differentiation strategies matched to student need. In contrast, in collaborative team teaching classes, there are good examples of teachers planning well together so that interventions focus more accurately on students' needs and abilities. As a result, even though students are still engaged on the same task, targeted individual and group interventions have a positive impact on their learning.

The school rightly acknowledges that more use could be made of classroom aides in supporting lower attaining and students with special education needs. In an 8th grade science lesson, for example, a classroom aide was moving from one side of the class to another to assist targeted students. This is an identified area in the school's development planning but there is little indication of what precise improvements are sought. In a similar way, although the school recognizes that it needs to improve teachers' discussion skills with groups and individuals, development tends to take place on an individual level following observation rather than through a planned whole school strategy. As a result, there is inconsistent practice across the school.

Although the school has an appropriate and developing focus on developing student learning through reading, writing and mathematics, it nonetheless strives to maintain a broad curriculum. While the school establishes some links between subjects, such as in the support provided by the Planetarium program and social studies, these are, to a degree, informal. Particularly in the arts and sciences, the school presents opportunities that students enjoy but many say that expectations could be higher. Extra-curricular provision and enrichment is achieved well by the school.

Although they are occasionally bored, students demonstrate positive attitudes to their learning in their concentration in the majority of lessons, even when their work is mundane. However, the lack of regular opportunities for active learning means that many tasks are focused on listening, reading and recording. Student engagement in these lessons tends to be passive. The school has recognized this and is beginning to work towards moving teachers beyond the belief that the principal perceptively describes as, "quiet children are learning".

Criterion 3: Students' personal character development

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

In class and around the school, student behavior is good. They are considerate of their peers and respond well in class, particularly when the level of challenge is appropriate or high demands are set. As a result, many are self-confident and articulate, and take part in class discussion thoughtfully on those occasions when teachers ask probing questions. The school has worked hard to ensure that behavior does not act as a barrier to learning.

The school does not routinely communicate high expectations to the students. As a result, students are rarely aware of the level at which they are working or of the steps that are needed in order to progress. In part, this is a product of the lack of clear identification of what students will learn in lessons. Instead, teachers tend to focus on the sequence of activities that will take place.

Through the development of its assertive discipline plan, there is now greater consistency in the way in which teachers set expectations and respond both to positive and negative aspects of behavior. While this strategy has achieved success, for example in reducing the number of suspensions, the school acknowledges that it still needs to do more and is working to ensure that it reduces the over-representation of some student subgroups. The senior staff support the principal well in recognizing that this cannot take place in isolation but that looking more closely at the ways in which different groups of students are taught has the potential to make a strong contribution to positive attitudes. Overall, students feel safe in the school, and know that guidance councilors and their teachers will help should they experience problems in their relationships or their studies.

The school has created some opportunities, which the students value, to develop independence and to contribute to their community. For example, although teachers select its membership, students see the student council as a valuable social and fund-raising opportunity. Both those students who have been trained and those who have benefited from access to peer mediators see the peer mediation program as being a positive aspect of the school's provision. Because of the generally good relationships that prevail within the school, most students are confident in expressing views and opinions to staff at all levels. They know that they adults listen to them and take their opinions seriously. There is, however, no formal mechanism by which student opinion can be canvassed which limits the school's ability to use a full range of information in evaluating its effectiveness. Senior staff, for example were not aware of the fact that too many students regard some lessons and styles of teaching as dull and lacking in challenge.

The school has effective strategies to promote good attendance.

Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management

This area of the school's work needs improvement.

Through increasing the emphasis placed upon reading, writing and mathematics, the school has demonstrated its shared determination to raise student achievement. Plans to make better use of student data and to make teaching more effective, which the school accepts are in their early stages, have the potential, when consistently implemented, to bring about further improvements.

School improvement planning follows the district model but lacks clarity about aspects of the school's practice that need to change or the timescale within which improvements will be in place. The school sets goals for student learning but they are not derived from an accurate assessment of student potential in relation to their past achievement. Plans do not contain clearly stated objectives, timescales for their achievement or evaluation methods. As a result, progress towards their achievement is difficult to track so that modifications can be made when appropriate.

The principal and assistant principal undertake monitoring activities regularly. They use information gathered from these to inform discussion with team and subject leaders who also have a view as to what works and where improvement is required. This range of activities and discussion provides leaders in the school with an appropriate picture of strengths and areas for development in teaching and in the curriculum, which they use in assessing effectiveness. However, at present, the school places too little emphasis on the impact of different styles of teaching on student learning, or in exploring the reasons behind the comparatively low performance of subgroups within the student population.

Teachers say that the principal and assistant principal are visible through the school but are much less certain of the outcomes of monitoring visits, unless they are part of the formal monitoring process. In other words, teachers are often as uncertain as many students about what they are doing well, or what steps they need to take in order to improve. For example, while teachers know that the school has an aim of placing greater emphasis on differentiated instruction, they have no consistent view as to what this will look like, or the necessary changes to their practice in order to achieve the school's aim.

As the school is large, it is split into five teams, each of which is overseen by a team leader. Team leaders describe their role as being one of setting the standard academically and pastorally. In parallel with this organizational model, subject leaders have been established who see their role as being the conduit by which district policy is disseminated. Although these leaders demonstrate a strong commitment to their students, their lack of involvement in evaluating the effectiveness of their accountability areas hampers them in ensuring improvements in practice. In the same way as teachers are uncertain of the different ways in which lessons should be planned according to the needs of different students, so there is a range of opinion among staff in leadership positions. As a result, while staff across the school recognize that improvement in student achievement is required, they are uncertain about their part in securing improvement.

The school values its liaison with, and the impact made by district instructional specialists. Teachers and school leaders describe the positive changes made in both the English language arts and mathematics curricula as a result of these central staff working alongside teachers and subject leaders and in leading professional development. In contrast, the school views district involvement at a strategic level as very limited. No senior district staff have visited the school in two years which limits the degree of challenge posed to the school in ensuring that its evaluations and planning are accurate and appropriately focused.

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

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

Senior staff and teachers are accessible to parents and they are often proactive in making contact if students are experiencing problems with work or emotionally. Parents confirm this view. At the same time, parents acknowledge the impact of the good relationships present in the school on their children's developing self-esteem. In particular, those parents interviewed recognize that the school provides a safe environment in which their children are safe and cared for if difficulties arise.

The school provides adequate information about student progress which parents find useful. Despite the information provided, parents are not certain about how well their children are doing at school, specifically, of whether they are doing well enough. In this, they echo comments made by students that, without targets set for their learning, it is hard for them to know whether they are succeeding according to their potential or simply in relation to curriculum benchmarks.

The school provides a range of useful information to parents through, for example, the school website and the 'homework hotline' that support work at home. For example, parents of English language learner and students with special education needs are full of praise for the range and helpfulness of the contact that they have received, and feel that it has helped their children to make good progress. Although generally positive about the information that they receive from the school, parents also refer to some perceived inconsistencies. One

aspect, for example, is that the amount of homework is perceived as being inconsistent between teams. This reflects concerns expressed by students, that some teams, for example, the gold team, receive more homework than others do. Parents are not aware of details in the school's improvement planning.

The school has worked hard to be seen as part of its diverse community and sees this as particularly important as so many of its students travel considerable distances to attend. Community resources support student learning effectively. Principal advisory meetings reinforce parents feeling of belonging to the school while other meetings about curriculum matters are valued for the quality of information that they provide. Students who are selected to participate in sporting events at other middle schools, value the opportunity of being 'ambassadors' for their school.