



CTDOE

QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

Norwalk Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Rowayton Elementary School

**1 Roton Avenue
Norwalk
Connecticut
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**Principal: Sara Reilly
Dates of review: September 17 – 18, 2007
Reviewer: Jeff Rutel**

Cambridge Education (LLC)



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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

Rowayton Elementary School is a kindergarten through grade 5 school with an enrollment of 423 students, most of whom live in the immediate neighborhood. About 20 percent attend from outside of the immediate attendance area. Rowayton is a “choice” school meaning students from other schools that are considered “failing” may choose to attend Rowayton as an alternative. The district administers the guidelines and process around school choice.

The student population is 60 percent White, 20 percent Hispanic, 16 percent African American and 4 percent Asian American. There is one American Indian student. English language learners make up 6 percent of the students and the special education population is 10 percent. There are three self-contained units housed at Rowayton. Fifteen percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, about 12 percent lower than the district but in line with the state. Daily attendance exceeds 97 percent, about the same as the state and district averages for elementary schools.

The current principal is beginning her third year at Rowayton. The instructional assistant principal is in her fifth year at the school.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The principal, faculty, and staff have created a strong culture that supports and nurtures academic and emotional development of the students.
- The school has developed strong relationships with parents, students, and the community at large. Parents are very proud of the school and have a high regard for the principal, staff and level of education their children receive.
- Student behavior is exceptional and daily student attendance is excellent.
- The entire staff is committed to improve the level of education for all students.

Areas for Improvement:

- Increase the impact of teaching and learning by:
 - maximizing instructional time in all lessons
 - increasing the depth and breadth of content delivered
 - increasing the pace of lessons.
- Increase achievement by providing more rigorous and challenging instruction to all students.
- Reduce the achievement gap between White students and Black and Hispanic students, particularly in literacy and mathematics by:
 - developing and applying specific strategies to address the issue
 - developing tools for ongoing monitoring, assessment, and accountability for the progress of minority-group students
 - increasing staff expectations for the achievement of all student subgroups.
- Provide clear models of excellence for teachers that address goals in the school growth plan along with clear, robust targets for improvement. Develop specific criteria against which to monitor progress with the plan.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school needs improvement.

The school has the capacity and resources to greatly improve student achievement. The majority population continues to achieve and meet proficiency requirements but the progress made by Black and Hispanic students needs improvement. Scores in grade 5 dropped last year in mathematics and reading. Mathematics achievement overall meets the adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets, but is inconsistent across grade levels and is not satisfactory for minority students. There is a newly adopted mathematics program this year but it has yet to make an impact on students' achievement.

There is a major focus at the school on literacy and the use of Reader's and Writer's Workshop. After several years, there is still weak performance in reading among minority students, and writing scores in the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) have leveled off. Teachers have had extensive professional development and participate in an on-going partnership with Teachers College. The school has focused on using the workshop model at the expense of concentrating on effective student learning.

The quality of instruction varies and is often mechanical and slow paced, especially in literacy classes. Learning can be greatly improved by raising expectations for all students, providing more rigorous and challenging instruction, and using more student centered strategies to facilitate learning. Teachers do most of the delivery and there are few opportunities for students to get directly involved in their learning. "Pair-share", while an effective strategy, is overused. Activities that allow opportunity for critical thinking and open ended questioning would help increase student engagement and extend the learning process.

There is a great deal of data collected by the school, but there needs to be more focus on strategies to improve teaching and learning for struggling students and to monitor their progress. The academically talented (gifted) program is not sufficiently challenging for all of its students. In spite of some mundane teaching, the student behavior is excellent. The teachers' manage their classrooms extremely well. Transitions between lesson segments were seamless in most classrooms. Behavior around the entire campus is excellent, even in less structured locations such as the cafeteria. Personal character development is a strength of the school. There is a popular, school-wide character education program, which the students enjoy. Relationships among the staff and between adults and children are positive and nurturing. The atmosphere of the school is warm and inviting. Staff are dedicated and committed.

The school principal is held in very high regard and is poised to take the school to the next level. She has improved teacher morale, leveraged parental support and participation, and is very visible throughout the day. There is a strong commitment from all stakeholders to the school. There is not enough time for teachers to collaborate and plan. More creativity with the schedule is necessary to grasp every opportunity to engage the staff. There is much discussion around "courageous conversations" between administrators and staff, and among staff, but more direct monitoring and accountability is necessary to ensure that all students are achieving. Data must be used more effectively to assess impact on learning.

The school has done a very good job of increasing the support of parents and the community at large. Parents are very involved at the school and support the school financially as well as by volunteering in classrooms. Communication with families is done in a variety of ways through e-mail, phone calls, and newsletters. There are efforts to reach out to families that live outside of the immediate neighborhood to increase their involvement at the school. More needs to be done to ensure that all students have access to extra curricular activities and opportunities to extend learning beyond the regular school day.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

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

Overall achievement scores for the school meet adequate yearly progress targets (AYP). While the majority students continue to show progress, minority students lag behind. To date, the enrollment numbers of Black and Hispanic students have not met the minimum threshold for inclusion in school data. In third grade mathematics, for example, over 40 percent of Black and Hispanic students score at basic or below on the CMT. In fifth grade, the numbers are even greater, with over 60 percent of Black and Hispanic students scoring at basic or below. In third grade reading, over 70 percent of Black students have scores at basic or below. The school has identified this achievement gap as a significant weakness and addressing it is a major goal in their growth plan.

The numbers of students in subgroups have not yet had a direct impact on the AYP calculations for the school. However, demographics are changing at the school and these scores are likely become a direct part of the annual school AYP assessment. As numbers in subgroups increase, the school is likely to struggle to retain its AYP status if their achievement does not improve significantly.

The school has done excellent work disaggregating and analyzing all student data. Specific students in need of more intensive support, including students with special education needs and English language learners, are identified for targeted services. While intervention strategies are discussed and implemented by staff, there is not a formalized system for analyzing the impact of these strategies on student learning and achievement. The school growth plan has specific goals for subgroups, but this has not translated to higher expectations from staff or instruction that is more rigorous. Additionally, this data has not been used to adequately plan for differentiated instruction, thus limiting impact on achievement. There is not an accountability plan to monitor adequately the school's progress towards the identified goals.

The school is using a new mathematics program as well as workshop models for literacy. Teachers and students are particularly excited about the writing program.

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 school has expectations for minority learners, which are too low. The slow pace of lessons, lessons that lack rigor and too much emphasis on teacher-centered instruction detracts from the quality of instruction. Additionally, lessons for the academically talented classes are not rigorous enough, nor are instruction and the use of data.

The quality of instruction varies from class to class and by grade level. Lessons are often mechanical and too closely tied to moving through a proscribed model rather than focusing on learning outcomes for students. The new mathematics program exacerbates this issue, as teachers are fearful to deviate from the "script" to fill in gaps for students or to use strategies that are more creative.

Outside of the writing lessons, much of the student work is worksheet driven and lacks any reinforcement of higher order critical thinking or original thought. There is an over use of "pair share" in lessons, limiting its effectiveness. The Teachers College Reading and Writing Workshop models are good platforms to address deficiencies in achievement.

Teachers are delivering most of the instruction rather than using more open-ended questions to increase student engagement and reach more learners. Some lessons were slow with little or no impact on student learning. In the best lessons, there was strong management, seamless transitions, good modeling and some differentiated instruction. There is a good deal of data available for teacher use, but there is a limited focus on how instruction affects student learning.

Student behavior is exceptional in all areas of the school. There is little off task behavior and students are eager and prepared to learn. In less structured areas such as the cafeteria, behavior remained very positive with little need for adult intervention.

Professional development for teachers is extensive and well received but focuses what to teach and how, rather than student learning. The partnership with Teachers College is beneficial and popular. Tailoring on-going professional development to address the needs of the school subgroups is a logical next step. Teachers are making strides to actively collaborate even without a common planning time. A focus on analyzing the quality of students' work is needed to facilitate these discussions. There is little student work posted in classrooms.

An honest discussion among staff around expectations for students is necessary. Some staff make excuses for poor results based on students' socio-economic status. Planning and executing rigorous, challenging, and engaging lessons will help the school to close the gap between White and minority students.

There is an after school program initiative that has shown some progress. The school reports that students attending the program showed increases of at least one level on the CMT. The program is very expensive and parents have raised funds to cover the cost of supporting the program. Most of the students who live out of the immediate attendance area, are from minority groups. Participation in after school events and transportation for this group is an issue. A "teacher buddy" program for struggling students is very well received by staff and students.

Criterion 3: Students' personal character development

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

Student behavior throughout the school is excellent. Students are polite to each other and to teachers. The school has a character development program with a monthly word focus, which changes each month. Other programs such as TRIBES, Marshall's Classroom Management, and Responsive Classroom are used to help underpin personal development. Students are given leadership opportunities through student council and they often lead whole school assemblies. There is a lot of trust between students, parents, and staff. This contributes to the positive learning environment and to the warm atmosphere of the school.

Students come to class eager to learn. Given the good behavior of the children, there is an opportunity for teachers to employ more group activities in lessons.

Daily attendance is very high reflecting the strong relationships between home and the school. The principal personally calls students who are absent to ensure constant communication. The school has a volunteer teacher-student mentoring program. Teachers work one-on-one with students who need extra support and continue working with the same students in successive school years. Teachers report that this has had a positive impact on the students' academic achievements and attitudes towards school.

Given the achievement gap between the subgroups and the majority population, the school should look at the impact of adult expectations on student learning. While many students are continuing to progress, the lack of growth for minority students is a cause for concern.

Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management

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

Through diligence and a strong administrative team, the principal has made great progress in changing the culture of the school. Staff morale is high and Rowayton is a school of choice, with more applicants than seats. The leadership is held in very high regard by all stakeholders.

The administrative team has an awareness of the issues restricting student achievement and is actively working to close the achievement gap. The principal supports ongoing professional development and has encouraged teacher leadership throughout the school.

The principal and assistant principal are highly visible and spend a good deal of time in classrooms. There is a good deal of informal discussion around teaching and learning. The teachers have a strong commitment to the students and a great capacity to move the school forward. Better schedule is needed to enable teachers to have common time for structured collaborative planning.

The leadership needs to foster more direct discussion about student learning as well as employ more monitoring to raise student achievement. The school has produced a detailed growth plan, but it lacks any metrics for school leadership to monitor achievement and does not speak to rigor and differentiation. There is a wealth of data available, and this is commendable, but not much guidance for teachers on how to use it to improve student learning.

Models of excellence are needed so teachers can fully understand where 'the bar is set' for increasing the effectiveness of teaching and learning. This requires a broader perspective, such as visits to schools outside of the immediate area. The district as a whole has made inadequate progress with subgroups. There are talented instructional support content specialists, but they lack a clear direction from the district to address the issue. The school is left to do the bulk of the intervention alone.

The leadership is very open to feedback and change, and is willing to take the steps necessary to move the school forward. There is great capacity for positive change and improvement.

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

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

This is a strength of the school and parent involvement is substantial. Parents take an active role in fund raising, volunteering in classrooms and throughout the school, in Parent Teacher Organization programs, and in providing outreach to school families in need.

Communication from school to home is by e-mail, newsletters, and phone calls. The school holds parent-teacher conferences at regular intervals, and parents report that teachers routinely call them about student progress, even if there are only positive aspects to report. Parents would like progress reports to contain more strategies for assisting students at home and would like academic progress information earlier in the year. Parent meetings are scheduled in the mornings to better accommodate working parents. The school does not currently do an annual parent survey and an opportunity is missed to gather useful information for school improvement.

Further development of strategies to assist minority parents and students is needed. The after school program was underwritten by school parents but is becoming a financial burden. The need for this program is great, especially for struggling students who need additional academic support. Diversity at the school is seen as a positive aspect by parents, staff, and administration. Many of the minority families do not live in the immediate community and participation in and access to after-school activities and

support services is limited. This has a direct impact on achievement for students who need more time to develop skills and are not achieving at the level of the majority population.

Rowayton has become a partner with a neighborhood school to take advantage of that school's Reading Strategy Workshops and professional development for teachers. The other school has had good achievement results with similar subgroups and this relationship should be explored to help support Rowayton's academic goals. A local business, Graham Capital, has helped the school with emergency evacuation plans. The school is working on a campaign to obtain public library cards for all students. A local design institute participated in pro-bono redesign of the lower floor of the school and this space is now renovated and ready for student use.