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QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

Norwalk Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Silvermine Elementary School

**157 Perry Avenue
Norwalk
Connecticut
06850**

Principal: Iziar Mikolic

Dates of review: September 19 - 20, 2007

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**Cambridge
Education**

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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

Silvermine is a dual language school that provides a mainstream English language program and a Mano-A-Mano language immersion program in Spanish. Children in the Mano-A-Mano Program, who receive instruction in both English and Spanish in all other subjects from their first days in kindergarten, do not begin formal English language instruction until grade 3, where they split their time between English and Spanish instruction.

The school population of 376 students is comprised of 51 percent Hispanic, 26 percent White, 20 percent African American and 3 percent Asian American students. Thirty percent of the children participate in bilingual education and English second language programs compared to 16 percent in the district and 7 percent in the State. There has been a decline in the white population in the last number of years. Over 50 percent of the families do not speak English at home and many of these families have been in America for three years or less.

The school provides a free or reduced price lunch for 47 percent of its population compared to 37 percent in the district and 28 percent in the state. Compensatory education is provided for 24 percent of its students with block scheduling for the teaching of literacy while special education programs and services are provided for 6 percent of its students.

Attendance rates are at 97 percent, which is in line with both the district and the state.

The school provides a gifted and talented program for 8 percent of the student population, on par with the district but above the state's 2 percent. Although some of the students come from the immediate neighborhood, the majority are transported from other areas within the city of Norwalk.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The principal and assistant principal are building capacity within staff to understand how data can be used to set targets to improve student learning in reading, writing and mathematics.
- Relationships among dual language teachers, mainstream teachers and support staff as well as administration are positive.
- An emphasis on social responsibility, respect and safety is resulting in the development of acceptance for differences in the student population.
- The school has built strong partnerships with community organizations to provide opportunities for enhanced learning.

Areas for Improvement:

- Raise the quality of teaching by:
 - evaluating the impact of teaching on student learning for all subgroups of students
 - focusing staff on the *weaknesses* in student learning in order to set targets for improvement
 - reviewing student progress at regular intervals
 - holding teachers to account for the progress their students make
 - using meetings and professional development to address weaknesses in achievement and students' learning
 - increasing the use of effective instructional strategies.
- Make better use of data by:
 - disaggregating information from assessments by race, ethnicity and gender to determine where there is underachievement
 - ensuring that information on student achievement is used effectively to set relevant and appropriate learning goals for all students
 - analyzing patterns and trends within subgroups to monitor more effectively the progress of students
 - selecting tools and instruments that provide information relevant in reading, writing and mathematics
 - limiting the assessments to those that provide the most useful information
 - following up on students who are absent from school and monitoring habitual absence for its impact on learning
 - setting high expectations for all learners.
- Provide instructional leadership that engages the school staff in improving student learning by:
 - building the capacity of teachers to understand how to use the data to improve student learning
 - focusing the school growth plan on the most important skills in reading, writing and mathematics
 - establishing targets that can be measured at regular intervals
 - examining the practices in other dual language schools where student progress in acquiring English as a second language is higher.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school needs improvement.

The principal has made some positive changes during her seven years at school. These initiatives have started to build staff morale and create a collaborative learning community that focuses on "collective responsibility for all students". Student behavior has improved with a noteworthy reduction in the number of suspensions. The children have understood important concepts related to mutual respect, courtesy and responsibility. Organizations and special programs within the community support the school's programs. It is a warm, attractive and welcoming learning environment that staff, parents and students value. The principal has been successful in bringing the staff together in a more collegial manner but has been less successful in improving student learning.

The school has a long way to go to ensure that all students make sufficient progress. The administration and staff are committed to the school and want to do the best they can to provide the children with the best education possible. .

The school does not use achievement data effectively to drive strategic decision-making or to monitor and evaluate the progress of all students. It has an inconsistent approach to teaching students how to read and write effectively. It lacks a systematic approach to collecting data to drive instruction and to maintain records of student growth. The quality of teaching varies too much from classroom to classroom.

The school is faced with the critical challenges in the coming months, of maintaining staff morale and continuity for students while providing specific direction where the emphasis needs to be. There are many competing priorities in the school and no clear strategic focus.

Criterion 1: Improvement in student academic achievement in the core subjects

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

The school is in its second year of not making adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB). In 2005, the school was below both the district and the state goals on the Connecticut Mastery Test for all grades. In 2006, Hispanic and White groups met the goal in mathematics while one group, (White students) met the goal in reading. The AYP goal for writing was also met. The school has not explored sufficiently the underlying causes of these disappointing results. Comparisons are impeded by the fact that the school is unique within the district. However, the school needs to be more proactive in seeking such comparisons or research on dual language learners to improve curriculum planning.

The school has taken some steps to break down the data by grade and to compare mainstream against dual language students. It disaggregates data on students according to race, ethnicity, home language and according to special education needs. The data is not, however, disaggregated by gender and by gifted and talented. The school is too preoccupied with discussions about the accuracy of data and the advantages of administering Spanish versions of the test. The instructional leadership needs to evaluate the trends in the current data to determine patterns in achievement across the subgroups and close the gap with their peers. Better data analysis is needed to monitor more effectively the progress of all students.

A high percentage of students in the subgroups lag behind their peers in reading. The school needs to develop a systematic way to identify and support students who are not achieving well enough in reading, writing and mathematics. Without precise information, it cannot strategically plan for their improvement or continuously evaluate their progress.

The school runs a literacy lab for students and tracks student performance to show its impact on learning over the long term. This data is then used to effect improvement in the classroom. Although there are computers in every classroom, there is little evidence of their use to support or extend learning. Several of the boys commented that they would read more if they had more interesting material such as magazines about sports and motor vehicles. The school needs to broaden the reading resources for boys as part of its efforts to engage both genders in developing as effective readers and writers.

The school is in the second year of using a commercial program in mathematics. Each student has a workbook and whole class instruction is provided. Benchmark data has been collected in two of the grades but more work is needed to make fully effective use of the program.

The administrative team has identified in its School Growth Plan goals in literacy and mathematics as a focus for improving student learning. However, there is no procedure to assess and monitor the achievement of those goals.

The staff is enthusiastic and highly committed to making a difference for students but they need more direction on how their teaching can improve student learning. They are committed to collaboration and professional growth but their discussions require greater focus and direction. They have too little understanding of the differences in the data among the subgroups to tailor their instruction to meet the needs of individual students.

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 quality of instruction varies too much between classes. There are classrooms filled with vitality and enthusiasm for learning while others lack the spark to excite, inspire and motivate students. Teaching generally does not differentiate work for students across the continuum of learning needs. Assigned work is not challenging enough for many of the students, including the gifted and talented, and much time is lost on activities that have little or no value.

There are too few opportunities for students to become independent learners and problem-solvers. This is because teachers over-direct instruction and do not provide for enough interactive engagement. There is no shared vision in the school of what constitutes effective teaching.

In one room, little attempt was made to connect the story being read to an experience all children could relate to. Three boys, sitting at the back of the group, were disengaged throughout the lesson without any comment from the teacher. The teacher called on the same four girls to answer lower level questions while the remaining students just sat. The quality of the teaching, in this instance, had no impact on the children who were uninvolved.

In another class, the students completed the same worksheet in mathematics. The teacher and instructional aides circulated, assisting individual children to complete the pencil and paper activity. No concrete materials or manipulatives were available for students to use although many experienced considerable difficulty because they did not understand the directions. There is insufficient collaboration between the aides and the teacher to address the situation and valuable opportunities are missed. Learning objectives are printed on the board, but few connections are made as to why they are learning the skill concerned.

There is a clear lack of higher level questioning and differentiation of learning for those students who are struggling as well as the students who are gifted and talented. Undemanding tasks such as requiring students to read a book when they complete their work do little to extend their learning. Every classroom had computers but none was in use. The teachers' expectations for student learning are too low.

There are pockets of excellence where challenge and teacher expectations are high. A grade five teacher had small groups of students who engaged with the text and questioned each other about their understanding. The students made connections, predicted, and inferred as they co-operatively read and worked on text and a reading response component. The teacher circulated effectively to check understanding and asked higher-level questions of all her students. Boys and girls were equally focused and actively engaged in their learning.

In one of the Spanish classes, the teacher exuded such passion and joy for learning that the students were sitting on the edge of the seats as she questioned their understanding of a story. They were eager to ask questions.

Relatively few teachers provide quality feedback to the students and many examples of student work have no feedback recorded. Although teachers were in the process of collecting different assessment data, there was no focus on using that data to instruct students, assess whether or not they understood or to determine the next steps in their learning. The "Confidential Kid Files" passed from teacher to teacher each year had little in them that would help a teacher get to know his or her students in September.

Several committees meet regularly to discuss data and student achievement and are currently working through processes to use data more effectively to improve student learning. However, this work is superficial and does not result in actions that significantly close the gaps in student learning. The collection and use of data from the Development Reading Assessment is not monitored effectively and how other informal assessments are used is unclear. Similarly, in writing, standard anchors for different genres are not available to assess student work or expand understanding of what good writing ought to look like.

The literacy program is delivered largely using whole group instruction to students, with all doing the same pencil and paper seatwork. There are no checks to ascertain the quality of students' learning. The literacy coach is committed to providing support to staff. However, with the turnover of staff from year to year, and new teachers requiring support, opportunities to coach are difficult to schedule. The coach also meets with groups of teachers for thirty minutes each week to examine data. There is little focus on what makes a good reading program and how those components can be delivered to have a positive impact on student learning. A high proportion of the coach's time is spent at district professional development activities, further limiting what can be accomplished.

Criterion 3: Students' personal character development

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

The climate in the school is positive. Relationships between students and staff reflect the warm and caring atmosphere. Classrooms focus on order and quiet interaction.

There are very few instances of bullying or racism. Students say there are adults in the building who they trust and feel secure in approaching to talk through a problem. When they report an incident, the students perceive that teachers consistently follow through to find out what happened and take action to address the situation. They commented that they feel very safe and they like coming to school. They feel that teachers really try to help them learn.

The school has implemented a program of social responsibility, focused on active listening and mutual respect. Every staff member, including the custodian, has been trained in it. The program establishes a set of expectations for student behavior that provides for consistency. It also allows for follow through that facilitates effective problem solving and responsiveness. Since its introduction, the number of suspensions for student misbehavior has reduced greatly. Parents however, commented that they were unfamiliar with the program and wanted to know more about its key concepts so they could reinforce them at home.

The school does not grasp the opportunities it has to build leadership skills for all its students and the student council is under-used for improvement planning. For example, the school does not actively

seek students' viewpoints on how well the school is doing or how it might improve or what additional activities might be offered in morning and after school programs. When asked how to better engage boys and girls in reading, the students had no difficulty providing some excellent ideas. Where the school has carried out surveys, as for example with the special program in Spanish, this has not been followed through to become a springboard for ongoing improvement.

The students appreciate the special things that the school provides such as the Arts Guild and the Maritime Center. They express considerable joy at having the opportunity to participate in the "specials" but were not able to articulate how these things connected to their growth and development as learners.

The students also commented that they did not receive written feedback about their work nor were they given much help on how to improve their work. When asked if they felt challenged or whether the work was hard enough, their responses ranged from being bored to really enjoying the activities and projects.

The Wall of Fame displays student excellence and lets the school know about the talent within the building. The school could make broader use of this idea by linking it to the concept of improvement.

The school does not track attendance patterns nor compare them to similar schools. There is no system to check attendance daily with parents and contact is not made with the family until the child is away three days in a row. Parents are asked to leave a message on the school voice mail but do not always comply with this procedure. Instances of prolonged absences are addressed by the school psychologist who also acts as the truancy officer.

Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management

This area of the school's work needs improvement.

The administration has worked positively with staff to build a school environment that reflects a vision of "collective responsibility for all children". It has been the principal's goal to create a sense of community and an improved climate for learning and working. The school is a warm and welcoming place and the sense of commitment and dedication to the well being of the children is tangible. Her successes are also seen in greater collaboration between teachers who now meet regularly to review student data and to plan together as a professional learning community.

The principal has introduced staff and student surveys and many strong efforts to increase parent involvement. Information sessions for parents have covered current initiatives in school improvement and how to help their children learn at home. The teachers now outline curriculum expectations, instructional topics, a Parents' Corner and key vocabulary for use at home and school in weekly newsletters.

The administration has set some goals for reading comprehension and mathematics in the Silvermine Growth Plan. It has also outlined strategies for professional development for all staff in reading and mathematics and using data analysis to improve student achievement and a greater focus on non-fiction reading materials. There are benchmarks set for reading and mathematics that align with the CMT. Work is planned on improvements in instruction and accelerating students' learning. There are plans for mathematics intervention clubs with specific objectives for learning.

These initiatives demonstrate the school's commitment and focus on continued professional development and learning. They also demonstrate that many of the ingredients for effective improvement in student learning are already present. What is lacking is a focus on teaching and learning as the major priority and a plan that incorporates those components. This plan will require more precise targeting of the core subject skills and how these will be assessed and monitored over time. The plan will also need to set out the strategies the school will use to ensure that what is taught is learned. The students need more opportunities to hone the skills that will empower them to become independent, responsible learners capable of self-evaluation and problem-solving. The work teachers plan for the students needs to be more interactive and interesting.

The district's demands on its school leaders detract from the time needed to provide effective instructional leadership. Currently, the instructional leaders do not have enough time to monitor teaching effectively and provide the direct feedback to staff that is necessary to ensure a rapid improvement in student learning. The school leaders need more time to ensure that teachers' expectations are raised about what students can achieve and then to provide them with the support necessary. The school needs to pay particular attention to expectations, instructional strategies and other support needed for lower achieving subgroups.

A better planning template is needed to ensure the school meets its collective responsibility to students. Under the current leadership and with further continued efforts, Silvermine is strategically positioned to head in the right direction.

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

This area of the school's work needs improvement.

The school has made many attempts to increase opportunities for parent involvement in the instructional programs. It has run information sessions for parents about current initiatives in school including how to support children at home. The principal reviews classroom newsletters prior to sending them home and expects teachers to outline curriculum expectations and instructional topics. However, these newsletters frequently lack sufficient direct information about how parents can help their children at home. The school is a warm and welcoming place and the sense of commitment and dedication to the well being of the children is tangible.

Parents are generally pleased with the schooling their children receive. They appreciate the curriculum in both the Mano-A-Mano and the Mainstream Programs and feel that some individualization occurs. Parents believe that the teachers treat the children as if they were their own. Reporting to parents on the progress of their children occurs formally but informal opportunities are not as great as parents would like. For example, they would like to know early in the year how well their children are progressing rather than later when often it is too late to help. The parents indicate that their children say they are bored at school. They are indifferent or lacking in excitement about what they are working on. In some cases, children tell their parents that the work is too easy.

Parents know that the quality of instruction varies significantly from teacher to teacher. Others commented that since the language coordinator left, the quality of teaching in the school has deteriorated. Concerns about the level of communication between home and school also exist. Parents feel they do not know enough about what is going on in the school. They want the information to be meaningful and relevant to the education of their children as opposed to simply information about the CMT scores and NCLB legislation. They identify several key areas where they need further information with high priority on more workshops on the curriculum to better help their children at home. Parents are concerned that a sense of a neighborhood community has been lost. They want to dispel some of the misperceptions about the school since they are generally pleased with the education it provides. The positive links established with community organizations such as the Art Guild and the Maritime Centre are viewed very positively. There is an active Parent Teacher Organization, which organizes special events on a regular basis.

Parents acknowledge that the School Growth Plan was sent home via the children. However, more meaningful engagement on something that is so critical to the success of their children is needed. There have been no surveys about what needs improvement in the core subject areas or in the school as a whole. Spanish speaking parents want workshops with teachers in Spanish so they can understand the school and what it is providing in the way of an education for their children. As parents aptly put it, "We are more than half of the equation, so we need to know what and how well our children are learning. We need to know how to help our kids. Then, we can do our part better too."