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QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

Norwalk Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Wolfpit Elementary School

**1 Starlight Drive
Norwalk
Connecticut
06851**

Principal: Frances Mahoney

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Reviewer: Roger Fry

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**Cambridge
Education**

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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

The school is situated in Norwalk and is the smallest elementary school in the district. The school has extensive facilities, including a very large library, open and wooded grounds, play area for students and a modern computer lab. There are 293 students enrolled from kindergarten through grade 5. The school serves a wide area, and virtually all students come to school by bus or car.

About 30 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price meals, which is a similar proportion to schools across the state and slightly lower than schools in the district. Attendance ranges between 95 percent and 98 percent and is similar to state and district figures. Of the students, approximately 50 percent are White, 24 percent Hispanic, 22 percent Black and 4 percent Asian American. A small proportion of learners, approximately 7 percent, require special education and about 6 percent have English as a second language. They speak Spanish.

The school has an extra program for five students with more extensive special educational needs. These students are drawn from schools across the city. The school receives Title 1 funding.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The school is one of the best performing in the district and achieved adequate yearly progress (AYP) this year. Hispanic students and those who qualify for free or reduced cost lunches, made good progress and met the targets for AYP this year.
- The school has comprehensive test data for all student groups, which it uses effectively to improve students' growth. The wide range of student support programs to help groups is having a positive impact.
- Most teachers match the work they give to students accurately and challenge students of differing abilities well. Class management is good, as is students' behavior, and so many students make good progress because they concentrate well on their work in lessons.
- There is a collaborative culture in the school, effectively led by the principal and vice principal. Training has helped teachers throughout the school to teach mathematics, reading and writing increasingly effectively.
- The annual growth plan contains all the school needs to guide its work for the next year at a strategic level, and includes suitable targets for student scores in 2008. Leaders have a good knowledge of what the school needs and express it clearly.
- Parents support the school and make a positive difference. A significant proportion helps raise funds.

Areas for Improvement:

- Improve the performance of English language learners by developing their reading comprehension.
- Improve the performance of Black students by encouraging their greater motivation in lessons and using all students' senses in lessons to improve learning.
- Improve the performance of students with special education needs by working more closely with parents so that everyone works towards the same agreed goals. Move students' understanding of their work beyond the factual in lessons.
- Improve the instruction by ensuring that all teachers use differentiated tasks for students in lessons across all grades. Further the use of verbal interactions between students as a way of improving learning.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school meets minimum requirements.

The school is one of the best performing in the district because it is well managed and led. The school achieved AYP this year because of the positive attitudes of students to their work and improved instructional techniques. Hispanic students and those who qualify for free or reduced cost meals met the targets for AYP this year because these groups were consistently identified and supported in classrooms. The leadership has identified that English language learners, Black students and students with special education needs are making increasingly good progress. It has also determined the school needs to improve interventions further for these groups to all reach AYP.

Most teachers match the work they give to students accurately and challenge students of differing abilities well. The working atmosphere in classrooms is good. These features lead to students' good progress in most lessons. Their progress is slower where the instruction is not well enough differentiated in lessons and verbal interactions between students are limited. Students make slower progress in these lessons and do not enjoy learning so much. The computer-based method of assessing students' knowledge and skills is effective. Students have a better knowledge of how well they are performing, which helps them take responsibility for their learning.

Students' behavior is good and many students make better progress because they concentrate well on their work in lessons. Students are proud of their achievements and they respond well to the high expectations that the school has of them. These positive aspects to student character development mean that they make the most of what the school has to offer and very many students make every effort to do their best and progress well in their work.

There is a collaborative culture in the school, effectively led by the principal and vice principal. The use of data by senior staff has revealed trends in student progress. Subsequent interventions have been well targeted and the two groups that were targeted have scored particularly well this year in state tests. The leadership is shared, and all staff have a realistic view of their school. Consequently, teachers' knowledge of what they need to do next is accurate. Training has helped teachers throughout the school to teach mathematics, reading and writing increasingly effectively, which has assisted students' better recent progress.

Parents support the school and make a positive difference. They have constructive views of the school, which help their children to feel settled and to make their best efforts during lessons. A significant proportion of parents help raise funds, which go to enhance the books and equipment that students have to use in class.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

The students' achievement is at proficient level and meets minimum requirements.

Student scores in the Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMTs) as a whole have improved between 2005-2006 and 2006-2007. In 2005-2006, scores showed that the school did not make AYP, but it was improving. In 2006-2007, the school as a whole achieved AYP. This puts the school in the top quarter in the district. All the larger groups of students made AYP in mathematics, reading and writing. The school is rightly pleased that the economically disadvantaged student group achieved AYP. The overall improvement over the year before has been significant, but is not yet a secure trend.

The school has comprehensive test data for all groups, which it uses effectively to improve student progress. The school sets high targets for students, but it is too early to comment on the progress towards the targets. Accurate data has guided the well-targeted professional development program for teachers. The improvement in student growth and the proportions that are proficient or higher are positive features of the school. Hispanic students and those who have free or reduced cost meals have improved and achieved AYP this year.

The school believes passionately that no student should be left behind. Some subgroups have less than 40 students between grades 3 and 5. This means their results are not counted in the overall performance of the school. Nevertheless, the performance of these subgroups receives close attention from the school. Students learning English, Black and students with special education needs did not make AYP this year. Nevertheless, they are making steady progress and Black and English language learners are catching up with the standards required.

There is an anomaly with the special education group. Their test scores include the results of most of the students who have more severe and complex special needs from across the city. The school is nevertheless compared with schools that do not have this program. Therefore, the school's special education scores are slightly lower than would have been the case if results were disaggregated.

The leadership sets challenging goals for more able students to reach the state's target of 'goal' or above goal, which is a higher standard than AYP. Most achieve these targets. Student progress over time through the grades is relatively even. Just occasionally, such as in grade 4 last year, students did not progress as well because of staffing changes.

The school has diagnosed clearly and accurately what each subgroup needs for students to close the gap on AYP further. Improvements, such as developing the reading comprehension of English language learners, increasing the self-motivation of Black students in lessons, and further enhancing the progress of students with special education needs' understanding of ideas, have been identified by the school. The importance of the match of tasks to student abilities and better use of ways of getting students to interact and engage are prominent in the annual growth plan for next year.

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 meets minimum requirements.

Teachers implement literacy initiatives effectively. They meet regularly to discuss school policies and translate them into effective lessons. The literacy coach mentors teachers' work well. She gives teachers across the school the benefit of her experience. The 'growth' committee' discusses new developments, ensuring that, for example, literacy initiatives reach all classes. An important impact of this work is that students receive a consistent curriculum and the improvements in scores are evidence of its success.

The school has recently taken on a new scope and sequence in mathematics. Teachers are still getting used to a different way of working where students discover more for themselves rather than just learn techniques for working out answers. In the lessons seen, this new initiative is being put into action well, though all admit that they are at an early stage of learning how to teach this new curriculum.

Teachers commented that their professional development programs are working well and has brought about a greater consistency of teaching standards. They feel that the school's work in developing new initiatives is particularly effective, whereas the input from the district varies in quality from good to unsatisfactory. Teachers collaborate closely in a variety of settings, such as at meetings between different grades, where they discuss in detail, the finer points of their teaching and consequent students' learning.

In the lessons seen, the majority of teaching exceeded minimum requirements. In one lesson with young students, the teacher provided a range of interesting resources for them to look at and sort. There was a good link between a visit the class was about to make and mathematics. Sorting of basic shapes, for example by color, turned into sorting of living creatures that lived in the sea or not. Students found this really interesting and made good progress with their knowledge of shape and of sea creatures. The teacher also varied the activities in such a way that students were not always sitting. She got the students to sort themselves in various ways and to stand in different parts of the classroom. This successful lesson brought about good learning.

In another successful lesson, the teacher identified very clearly, what students were to learn. This clarity guided her assessments of how well students learned. In a further lesson, the teacher explained, a key component of good writing. That is, good writers are skilled at developing 'small moments' into significant parts of their stories. She continued with a number of examples and gave students plenty of opportunities to explore this before they had a go. Students made good gains in detailing small moments in their lives, so giving the reader a greater insight into their experiences.

Some teaching is less exciting. There were moments in lessons when the concentration of the teacher was so great on the process of teaching valid points to students, that any fun element of learning was lost temporarily. Occasionally, students that are more able are not sufficiently challenged by their work, because they have to complete everything that everyone else does before they receive a task that is more difficult. This slows their progress. Not all teachers use the interaction between students that can be a powerful tool for confirming learning as well as others. The school is working on these aspects of teaching and there has been steady progress towards making them consistent across the school.

Behavior management is a strength of the teaching. Teachers have good relationships with students and this means that the great majority of them make the most of what happens in lessons. Students know what is expected. When they sit on the carpet, they know they have to listen. If they have an answer, they put their hand in the air and do not just call out. On occasions, students return from pullout groups in the middle of lessons. They do this quietly and efficiently. They waste little time in settling into the lesson. The Project Excel support staff work effectively. They help lower achieving students in order to boost their progress. This program is successfully helping students to learn faster.

The curriculum follows the guidance laid down by the district. Students meet a broad range of subjects. They commented about their likes and dislikes and that often they enjoyed homework about science, writing and other subjects. Students find many lessons interesting and so are motivated to learn.

Some teachers use student on student evaluation. In a mathematics lesson, students chose a number and had to write four facts about it. They produced large posters to help explain their answers to their fellow students. Students were not only learning by discovering about numbers, they were learning presentation skills. This method raised the level of interest for students and their commitment to the task.

Teachers keep thorough records of how well students have learned in lessons. At a whole school level, assessments have helped to identify the areas to improve in subjects. A result of the consistent use of assessments is that teachers can see the trends in learning. A key recent development in assessment is the computer-based program to test students' knowledge. Classes have regular times in the computer lab and this method of checking students' understanding in reading comprehension and mathematics is already showing signs of improving their progress.

Criterion 3: Students' personal character development

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

The school climate is a strength. Teachers' vigilance and willingness to supervise students at all times during the school day ensures that the school day runs smoothly. The leadership's and teachers' concerted efforts to maintain good student behavior is effective. Students behave well, are courteous, concentrate hard in lessons and usually make good progress. Little time was wasted and virtually all students were productive in all that they did. Just occasionally, Black boys do not concentrate as well as their peers. Their occasional lack of self-motivation has a negative effect on their progress.

Rewards of all kinds have a positive impact on student attitudes to school. Students say that rewards motivate them and that they are fair. The school self-evaluation indicates that there is still more work to do to improve the kindness that a small minority of students shows to one other. There was no sign of any racism or anti-social behavior.

Students form constructive relationships with one another and with the adults who help them in class. Very few wasted the opportunity when they needed to work in small groups or in pairs. This level of maturity helps students make quicker growth with their work. Teachers have high expectations of student behavior and they respond well to this.

Teachers strive to make matters better and wish to develop the self-motivation of students to a higher level. The school growth plan describes how this will happen through, for example, the greater use of 'turn and talk' activities. Students have increasingly frequent opportunities to discuss what they are doing with a partner. They make decisions about how they will complete their work so they reach a point of greater engagement.

Students think homework is a good thing because it helps to reinforce what they have learned that day or during the week. They like to know how well they are getting on and teachers give them this information. Teachers use a valuable computer program to help prepare students for the Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMT). The spin-off for students is that they are able to see instantly where the gaps are in their knowledge and how well they have completed various tasks. The program asked them a question and gave students a choice of answers. The computer marked their work and told them how well they had performed. This method strongly helps students take responsibility for their progress in learning and for working out what they do well and what they need to do to improve their knowledge and skills. Students respond well to the expectations that teachers have that they should make good progress.

Student attendance is similar to the district and state. Very few students have a poor record of attendance, and the school follows up any periods of unexplained absence.

An important feature of the school is students' social, moral and cultural development. The school prides itself on having a social outlook, amongst other good features. Students consider ethical issues, such as fund raising for victims of Hurricane Katrina and supporting cancer research. The school spirit days are very important. Students dress in blue and red and the school celebrates the good things that students have done. There is an active human relations committee, which helps the local community. The 'read-a-thon' was very successful earlier in the year; students read a combined total of several thousand books in a short period.

Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management

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

The school leadership has established a sense of collaboration and of common purpose amongst all staff. This common purpose allows initiatives to grow and make a positive difference to student growth. The principal has a very good knowledge of teachers' work, based on regular observations of lessons and of how

well staff members work on other duties, such as in meetings. She assigns her staff with skill. For example, the good skills that the vice principal has in analyzing data are utilized to the full. The school growth plan contains all that it needs on targets for next year. The school is clear about how to reduce the gap between some subgroups' lower performance this year and AYP in the future. The principal is skilled in knowing what needs doing next and in predicting what effects initiatives will have.

The vice principal and principal are a good team. Their skills complement one another. They have an accurate understanding of the quality of what happens in classrooms and where there are areas for improvement in teaching. The vice principal has a very good grasp of how to plan for the growth of the school and student performance. He has written a series of plans in conjunction with staff, which realistically assess the position that students are in now. He has recorded what the school is doing to improve their growth, so that all groups have the best chance to meet AYP or beyond in future. The school has identified all the areas for improvement in the annual growth plan.

Decision-making is shared effectively across the school. Three committees, composed of one teacher from each grade, discuss the main areas of the school's work. These groups of teachers meet regularly to help organize the school. The committees have promoted better achievement amongst students in the last two years. There is a sense throughout the school of a real drive to reach state goals consistently in student achievements. There is a clear capacity to succeed in raising achievement further.

The school growth committee is very important. The CMT results are discussed and the performances of subgroups of students. This group processes new ideas and works out whether, for example, a new system might be more successful than what is presently in the school. The work of the committee has an impact upwards to the principal and vice principal and downwards into classroom practice. All teachers are successfully involved in the management of the school.

Grade teams use their meetings to set targets regularly for their students. By doing this, the leadership ensures that all teachers have a clear focus on the groups that need closer attention because they are not growing as fast as other groups. Teachers ensure that they are 'on the same page' in each grade and they discuss, for example, individual students and modeling of teaching techniques. This process has had successes. The free and reduced school meal group reached AYP this year.

The work of the literacy coach has had a positive effect on student achievement. She passes on crucial teaching tactics, ways of organizing lessons and knowledge of the finer points of literacy education to grade meetings to good effect. Literacy teaching is improved as a result. Teachers know better what to teach and when because of this work.

The school's vision and mission statements complement one another very well. They are an accurate reflection of what is happening in the school. The staff shares the aims of the school. There is determination from all to ensure mutual respect between students, good behavior in classrooms and to address the issues that hold some students back.

The district has had a positive influence on some aspects of the school. The school reports that the support staff visit to help develop programs, such as those for science and mathematics. These help the school move forward.

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

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

The school offers a wide range of activities for parents. There has recently been a back-to-school barbecue, 'open house' and explanation of the before and after-school programs. The parents speak highly of the school and about how pleased they were with many aspects of it.

Parents talked openly about the growth that they see in their children, both academically and in character. Parent perception of teachers is that they know their children very well. Parents appreciate the effort that goes into homework programs. They confirmed that this extra revision of work done in lessons helps their children make better progress.

The school checks regularly with parents that they are satisfied with what is happening in school. Parents like the regular contact that they have with all teachers. There are formal parent-teacher conferences twice a year, where the teachers explain how students are performing, changes to the curriculum and how parents can help. Very frequent e-newsletters and flyers also keep parents very well informed about what is happening.

All staff make themselves available at the beginning and end of the day to talk to parents as students arrive and leave school. Parents appreciate this informal contact. The school has a genuine 'open door' policy for parents. Teachers readily make themselves available to parents at short notice for longer meetings.

The school has an active set of governors who are deeply involved in organizing fundraising, enrichment programs and social events. They also communicate regularly with parents. This work enhances significantly, what the school offers. The school makes good use of the local community to develop the curriculum. For example, students in kindergarten are about to visit the aquarium as part of their work in science.

Parents' satisfaction shows in their children. One reason why students behave well and concentrate hard in lessons is that they know that the school has the support of their parents. This support from home helps their growth. Parents appreciate the extra programs for English language learners and for students with special educational needs.

The school is also aware that parents from Hispanic backgrounds or those who are economically disadvantaged are less likely to have regular contact with the school. This is an area that the school is seeking to improve by making more regular contact with families.