



Norwalk Public Schools

Quality Review Report

West Rocks Middle School

**81 West Rocks Road
Norwalk
Connecticut
06851**

Principal: Lynne Moore

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Reviewer: Anne Evanoff

Cambridge Education (LLC)

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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

West Rocks Middle School has approximately 700 students in grades 6 through 8. Forty-two percent of students are White, 29 percent are Hispanic, 26 percent are Black, and 3 percent are Asian and American Indian students. The school offers a dual language program and block scheduling for literacy.

Approximately one third of the students are eligible for free or reduced price meals, which is a similar proportion to the district as a whole, but higher than the state. Thirty-four percent of students come from families that do not speak English at home, which is in line with the district but is much higher than the state. The school provides bilingual education and English as a second language services to 11 percent of its school population, which is a little higher than the district and higher than the state. Nineteen percent of the students participate in gifted and talented programs, a similar proportion to the district, but higher than the state. At 11 percent, the proportion of students with special education needs is slightly below that of the district and the state.

Attendance, at just over 95 percent on October 1, 2005, is in line with the district and state.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The principal is providing direction to staff to improve teaching and learning in reading, writing and mathematics.
- Staff members are beginning to examine and analyze achievement data with the purpose of improving student learning.
- Systems are being set up that allow teachers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of students in the core subject areas for planning purposes.
- The climate of the school is warm and welcoming; students behave well and form positive relationships with adults and other students.

Areas for Improvement:

- Create a school wide focus on what effective teaching and learning looks like by:
 - developing a professional development strategy related to assessment, planning, setting targets and monitoring student progress
 - promoting the use of instructional strategies such as effective questioning and higher level thinking skills.
- Increase the opportunities for student success as a whole school by:
 - using baseline data to set targets for each student to improve learning and monitor progress
 - continuing to challenge all students to reach higher academic levels
 - engaging students in meaningful class discussions and tasks.
- Improve the quality of feedback to students in every classroom by:
 - establishing a school-wide set of expectations about the use of feedback
 - consistently articulating high expectations for both staff and students in using feedback.
- Create a long-term professional development plan that builds the capacity of staff to implement a balanced literacy program and raise the profile of reading and writing.
- Establish a forum to include all stakeholders within the school and its community to engage in meaningful school improvement planning that is specific to West Rocks.
- Survey all groups at regular intervals to ensure a high level of satisfaction and resolve concerns. Effectively collaborate with staff, students, parents and the community to build ownership of the school's vision and gather input for further growth and development.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school needs improvement.

The school's results in state tests are broadly in line with those of the district, but below those of the state. However, not all groups of students reach the standards expected and achievement gaps remain. Test results have not improved over the previous five years and too many students do not make sufficient progress during their time in the school. Results are stronger in mathematics than in reading.

There is some evaluation and analysis of data. For example, teachers within the same grade level meet to discuss the data, but feel they need more support to build a learning plan that addresses the problems for students not achieving at either end of the academic continuum. Consequently, differentiation to meet the needs of all learners is limited. Special education resource personnel identify and track students with special learning needs, but there is limited monitoring of those students who are achieving at levels one and two. They are not as flagged for extra support. Similarly, there is limited tracking of students who are gifted and talented. While English language learners are monitored by the specialist teachers, there is insufficient collaborative planning and tracking with regular classroom teachers to have a major impact on learning and student success.

The quality of instruction needs improving. There is some effective teaching, resulting in good learning and student progress. However, this good practice is not sufficiently evident throughout the school. A greater focus on time-management, planning, assessment, and using data to inform instructional practices is required. The principal has the drive to make much needed improvements and is beginning to examine strategies for how to use data effectively to increase student learning and to move the school forward. She has written an appropriate growth plan to address some of the above elements, but she needs to refine it in light of the capacity building required at the school level.

The principal has established five subcommittees in the school to address school improvement initiatives. However, it is not clear what role these subcommittees serve in providing input and taking ownership for the process. More effort is needed to bring all stakeholders aboard in order to build commitment to the school's vision of success for all. Parents and staff would welcome an opportunity to contribute to the vision and plan some next steps for improving the school. All groups articulate a need to continue to create a sense of belonging to the school community and a shared responsibility for improving student learning.

There is a welcoming environment in the school as evidenced by the many positive relationships between students and staff. Through the determination of the principal, policies, procedures and routines have been implemented that ensure student safety and create high expectations for student success. However, the development of student independence, leadership and responsibility remain weaker aspects. Parents celebrate the diversity of the school and the opportunities their children have to engage in additional activities, such as the in arts and sports. The school has won significant awards in music.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

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

The proportions of students reaching the state goal and proficiency levels in the 2007 Connecticut Mastery Tests were just above those of the district in mathematics. Results were, however, below those for the state, at both proficiency and goal levels. Results in reading were also close to those of the district but significantly below those of the state, at both goal and proficiency levels.

The 2007 result in mathematics was a small improvement on that for 2006, with Black students, Hispanic students and students with disabilities all showing an improvement. Reading results were similar in 2006

and 2007. Test results in mathematics and reading were at a low point in 2004 and the most recent results are an improvement on that year. Nevertheless, while there is recent improvement in both areas this trend is not sufficiently strong to raise results significantly above those for 2002. Test results are not improving at a quick enough rate.

There was little difference between the mathematics results for male and female students in 2007. However, female students performed significantly better in the reading tests than did male students. Black students performed much worse in the 2007 tests than did Hispanic students. White students performed significantly better than both Black and Hispanic students. Students with disabilities, English language learners and economically disadvantaged students also performed less well than students did overall. Not enough students make sufficient academic progress during their time in the school. Consequently, the gaps in the performance of different student groups have not closed significantly over time

The principal has begun to address issues of underperformance but data is not yet used effectively to drive instruction and to meet the needs of different ability groups. Key staff members have analyzed data and broken it down by gender, race and ethnicity. The next step is to identify individuals within those subgroups who require specific support based on the data and then monitor their progress towards the targets set.

The principal has developed a school growth plan that addresses the need to use data to identify learning needs, set targets, plan effectively and monitor student progress. Time from faculty meetings is used to discuss performance targets from the plan and some staff development focuses on the specific skills required for the Connecticut Mastery Test.

Grade benchmarks have been developed in mathematics. Staff look for trends in the data and attempt to teach to those areas where students have not performed well. The school is reviewing the progress of students every quarter to check on improvement in the specific areas. Staff use the test data for reading and writing in similar ways. The school does not track student performance using cohort analysis to compare improvement for the same group of students over grade 6, 7 and 8.

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. In the most effective classrooms, teachers conference with students about their work and discuss how to improve the assignment. They use rubrics to clarify what good work looks like, and some teachers take a lot of time to clarify what they expect of the students. They focus students on the criteria that make a good piece of work better and identify the next steps for improvement, although feedback is usually given verbally. Students have rubrics to help them get a clear picture of what they need to do to get good marks. In the most effective classrooms, teachers also engage students in positive peer evaluation, although students say this is not something they do on a regular basis.

These best practices are not sufficiently widespread across the school. While many teachers write out on the board what the class will be doing for the period, they then make little connection to the objectives with the students. Sometimes, students are required to start work with little or no introduction or explanation from the teacher. Consequently, students do not always understand what they learning, why they are learning it and how it connects to other areas of learning or experience. Nevertheless, students appreciate the way that their teachers offer extra help after school and are willing to explain things in different ways.

In some classrooms, daily plans are not available, although it is an expectation that teachers maintain them. The principal does not monitor this requirement. Engaging the staff in discussion about the importance of daily planning and how this impacts on student progress is a key element in moving the school forward. Inconsistency in the quality of instruction limits the effectiveness of the school's initiatives, especially in literacy.

There is limited use of data and insufficient conversations within the school that focus on what students have achieved and how to move them to the next level. This restricts the range of strategies employed to

enable all students to learn most effectively. A greater focus on students at both ends of the achievement spectrum is required. Teachers have insufficient experience in using data to set targets for students who are not achieving highly enough and in using that data to drive instruction. There is insufficient teaching to the specific skills that students need while assessing and monitoring their progress over short-term intervals. Additional assessment information is necessary to enrich and deepen teacher understanding of the specific skills and strategies students need to acquire in order to improve their learning.

Greater instructional leadership in the area of assessment and the use of data to inform instruction is required. Expectations need to be higher about the maintenance of records. These need to be consistently dated and skill specific so that monitoring can effectively track the impact on learning for individual students. Holding regular grade meetings that focus on data and effective instructional strategies is not a sufficiently high priority. There is exemplary co-teaching in some classrooms where there are students who find learning difficult. However, special education and English language learner staff have too little influence in designing and defining student profiles. Consequently, classroom teachers lack some instructional strategies to help students to learning. The school does not have a professional development plan based on what effective teaching and good planning look like. The literacy specialist works effectively with small groups of students, but this expertise is not shared more widely through systematic peer coaching

The curriculum does not enable students to develop a broad range of skills and aptitudes in a coherent and systematic way. The lack of depth in the curriculum results in some students feeling bored or disengaged. However, enrichment through extra-curricular provision and support for learning outside of the school day makes a positive impact on student motivation and academic achievement. After-school programs at each grade level provide support for students in mastering the state tests. 'Nature's classroom' is a notable, week long, excursion for grade 7 students. Parents consistently praise the outstanding contribution of the music department and the self-discipline that students learn through this experience.

Teachers do not often need to employ behavior management strategies in classrooms, but when they do, they do so effectively. Some parents are concerned with the quality of homework assignments. They believe that most is 'busy work' where the children repeatedly complete the same questions. They see insufficient homework that extends learning or challenges students to think 'outside the box'.

Criterion 3: Students' personal character development

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

Students perceive a lack of consistency within the school around the enforcement of school rules. For example, the principal, the assistant principals, and a few teachers enforce the dress code while other teachers ignore it. This inconsistency leads the students to believe that adults do not treat all students equally, since some students seem to 'get away with it'. Routines, rules, and guidelines that create a sense of ownership and joint responsibility within the school community have yet to be fully established. More generally, students perceive that the school does not consistently seek their opinions and viewpoints on matters related to school practices.

Procedures are in place to address absenteeism and behavior. Parents are contacted first thing in the morning and attendance is taken at every class. If students get into trouble, parents are called and informed or asked to come to the school. A social worker is involved in cases where truancy is an issue and the school takes appropriate steps to rectify these situations. Students respond well to the school's high expectations for behavior and attendance. The result is good attendance and appropriate behavior. However, there are too few opportunities for students to problem solve and make personal choices to increase their personal responsibility. Students are not sufficiently encouraged to identify the mistakes they made, understand their impact, and consider how to make different choices in the future.

Students like the diversity of their school and have a lot of respect for their principal. They say that the REACH rubric has been "implanted in our brains" forever. Students form positive relationships with their peers and adults around the school. They are able to work in an environment that is free of oppressive behavior. Students all agree that they are 'climbing the mountain to succeed' and that staff and the

principal care about them and the choices they make. A 'pin program' begins in grade 8, where students acquire more freedom if they prove themselves. More generally, however, students perceive that there are limited opportunities for leadership development within the culture of their school.

A reward system for completing work related to aspects of the state tests is a school wide focus. The school is divided into different teams and teachers provide an array of activities where students can earn points. These points can be traded in on special days for items such as soda, pizza, and movie tickets. However, students do not perceive these activities as very challenging and, although they enjoy the prizes, they are uncertain about the value added to their education.

Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management

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

Parents respect the dedication and commitment of the principal and the teachers who they believe work hard to provide a quality education for their children. The principal is in the process of building positive relationships with all staff and collaboratively creating a shared vision for West Rocks. This step is vital in establishing a clear focus for improving teaching and learning and implementing key changes to raise student achievement. However, there is not yet sufficient, regular input from all stakeholders, including students, to enhance the further growth of the school.

The principal has promoted very effectively the notion of "climbing the mountain" with students and reaching higher goals that lead to college. There is a major focus on improving school results on the state tests in the school improvement plan. However, there are also concerns within the parent community about the over-emphasis on the test. They believe that this diminishes the positive feelings their children have about school. A better balance between the focus on test scores and nurturing a natural joy in learning that is active, engaging and meaningful is required.

There is insufficient focus on identifying the learning needs of individual students and meeting those needs in the regular classroom. The administrative team does not monitor the quality of teachers' planning sufficiently to ensure differentiation for students who are not thriving or who require greater challenges. This is a significant gap in ensuring teachers' accountability and strengthening the quality and impact of teaching on learning.

Although assessment strategies are being developed, there are no standard practices, formats or expectations for maintaining student assessment records. Teacher records are not available to demonstrate the collection of baseline data and hence, no opportunity to determine the alignment between the use of data and differentiation in instructional planning. This information is vital in meeting the learning needs of students.

Although the principal and assistant principals engage in classroom "walk throughs", feedback is not provided to staff with a focus on the quality of students' learning. While formal appraisals offer recommendations for improvement, there is no common mechanism in place to provide ongoing feedback to teachers about improving their teaching. There are opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively, such as in some exemplary co-taught classrooms. However, there are limited opportunities for building the capacity of teachers through a coaching model. Staff have insufficient input into identifying the professional development needed to enhance their teaching.

The principal has also created an opportunity to visit a nearby school that has established some high expectations for student learning. She demonstrates a strong commitment to developing similar high standards and expectations at West Rocks Middle School. In order for this school to flourish, staff must commit to becoming instructional leaders in their own right so that a professional learning community grows through partnership. This is not the sole responsibility of the principal.

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

This area of the school's work needs improvement.

Parents are satisfied with the number of reporting periods and the interim reporting that takes place between. E-mail provides parents with the most consistent access to staff and most teachers respond quickly. Parents appreciate that they can call a team meeting to address issues and concerns when they arise. They appreciate the support their children get from the guidance department in discussing problems and concerns.

The Parent Teacher Organization was not as active last year. However, this year, parents are already in the process of planning a variety of special events that will add positive energy to the school. There is a desire to see the development of a more collaborative community, where everyone works together in the best interests of the children. In the past, the principal has made presentations about the curriculum, which were well received. Parents would like to see such forums extended because want to know what their children are learning.

Parents would like to see more information items translated into Spanish and more acknowledgement of the school's cultural diversity. At one of the school bingo events, a parent warmly welcomed the parent community in Spanish. Parents described this gesture as heart warming and inclusive, a good example of how to reach out to everyone in the community that makes up West Rocks. As several parents so passionately articulated, "Diversity is our greatest asset and it is also our greatest challenge. It would be great if we could work together in partnership and in harmony for the best interests of our kids."