



CTDOE

QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

Middletown Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Bielefield Elementary School

**70 Maynard Street
Middletown
Connecticut
06457**

Principal: Renata Lantos

Dates of review: October 3 – 4, 2007

Reviewer: Georgie Beasley

Cambridge Education (LLC)



Content of the report

Part 1: The School Context

Background information about the school

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

What the school needs to improve

Part 3: Main findings

Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

Bielefield Elementary School is located in the Middletown district and has an enrollment of 363 students in grades pre-kindergarten through five. The school population comprises 54 percent White students, 29 percent Black students, 13 percent Hispanic students and 4 percent Asian American and American Indian students. The school has identified approximately 10 percent of its population as students with special education needs. Less than 1 percent of students are English language learners, although most Hispanic students speak Spanish at home. Attendance is 97.5 percent, above district and state figures. At 42 percent, more students than district and state schools are eligible for a free or reduced school meal. More students start and leave the school in the older grades than in other district and state schools.

The pre-kindergarten caters for 59 children from across the district. Only a small number transfer to one of the three kindergarten classes in school. The proportion of kindergarten students who have some pre-school experience is about the same as other district and state schools.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The principal articulates clearly and accurately how well the school is doing and what it needs to improve.
- The school has an effective program for developing students' personal character so that students have good attitudes to learning in class, behave well and have positive relationships with each other and with adults in school.
- Improvements in the focused use of data and subsequent quality of teaching and learning are resulting in a steady rise in student achievement each year.
- Creative scheduling has enabled teachers to meet regularly to discuss school effectiveness as measured by student achievement data and to plan subsequent learning collaboratively.
- Strong partnerships with local schools are helping the school to achieve its curricular goals.

Areas for Improvement:

- Utilize data more effectively to identify precisely what, why and how students will learn in lessons and match work more precisely to the different ability and interest levels of learners.
- Establish the school's plans to monitor the quality of all students' learning and the impact of teaching on their progress over time through more systematic and regular classroom observations.
- Work with the district to establish a whole school curriculum that details how students' knowledge and skills will be developed systematically and that builds on the current enrichment activities to add even more relevance and excitement to learning.
- Use the district's professional development, scope and sequence and benchmarking information to develop the school's strategic plan, to include measurable goals, actions and strategies for improving school effectiveness and the school's plans for monitoring and measuring progress towards reaching the goals.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school meets minimum requirements.

The principal has set out in an organized way to bring about necessary change and school improvement. Focusing first on improving the learning climate, she targeted student behavior. Positive and consistent processes for managing and rewarding good behavior have resulted in a conducive learning environment in school. Students move around the building sensibly. They give good thought to their own and others' safety and respect each other's feelings and belongings. As a result, once started, the school runs smoothly most days. The misbehavior of a few students on some buses often interrupts the start of the school day.

Teamwork is building in strength. Staff now work collaboratively to plan learning, develop curriculum planning and evaluate the effectiveness of teaching methods against student progress. Open and honest discussions are leading to higher expectations of what students can do. The school has worked hard in its goal to meet the needs of every student. To this end, it uses data in a more structured and focused way to target resources to need. This has been more successful in some subjects than others. Students make satisfactory progress overall, to achieve proficient levels but there are peaks and troughs. Black students do less well than their peers although they are fast closing the gap in mathematics and girls do better than boys in writing. Support for students with special education needs has been inconsistent across the school but is being rigorously addressed by the school's leadership. Some teachers plan interventions that carefully match task to need, usually in older classes, and so at these times learning is more successful.

Curriculum programs make sure students cover what they should. Where teachers adapt programs to meet learners' varied abilities and interests, progress takes place at a faster rate. For example, practical problem solving activities and investigations in mathematics and science engage students more fully in classes. Not all teachers identify clearly what they want students to learn in lessons, planning instead the task they will complete. As a result, in too many lessons, students complete the same work regardless of their previous knowledge, skills and understanding and so some find it either too hard or too easy. Teachers have not always had the training they need to help them teach what they are asked to teach. The school monitors students' progress through structured and regularly scheduled meetings between teachers and the school's leadership. This year, teachers have completed individual action plans for all students achieving at proficient and below. The principal conducts formal and informal observations and regular walkthroughs in accordance with the district's evaluation plan to ensure the performance of individual teachers has been and is being monitored closely. Regular individual meetings with teachers are ongoing. They have moved to the classroom this year so that the impact of teaching can be more closely measured by students' learning and achievement. This has been very productive. Plans are more clearly defined this year to follow up more rigorously and make sure all staff are implementing agreed improvements.

The school has high expectations for parental support and is successful in getting most families' commitment for its work. Clear communication at all levels is enabling parents to support learning at home. Good partnerships with local community groups and businesses give valuable enrichment for students' learning.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

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

The school has a clear focus and commitment to improving students' achievement. Results in reading, writing and mathematics in grades 3 through 5 are in line with district schools in state tests. They remain below state averages. Interim assessment data shows that results are improving across the school for all student groupings. The school has met its adequate yearly progress (AYP) target for the last two years. Raising the achievement of Black students remains a school priority. As a group, they met their targets in mathematics and writing this year and achieved safe harbor in reading. Girls' achievement in writing is higher than boys'. Prompts and writing rubrics are displayed in classes and are usually in student friendly language. This helps students to structure their writing, evaluate their own learning and improve their work independently.

Students make satisfactory progress overall when compared to their starting points when they enter the school. Some students make good progress but results are not as high as they could be because Black students achieve less well, especially in reading. Teachers assess regularly students' knowledge and skills in reading, writing and mathematics through a range of tests, observations, grading student work, regular reading and writing conferences and individual discussions during classes. The school collates data about student progress onto individual and class sheets so it can track, monitor and compare progress by student, class, grade and subject. It is beginning to utilize this progress record to predict periodic achievement throughout the year, and to identify intervention support for individuals who are in danger of slipping back and inclusion in PROBE, an enrichment program for gifted and talented students held at another local school. The school does not yet utilize the data to set specific class and differentiated grade objectives for achievement. The school achieved its goal to improve overall student performance by 10 percent. This measure followed district guidance rather than one from its own data analysis so the school cannot be sure that the level of challenge is sufficient or too high in every grade and class.

English language learners make satisfactory progress. Students with special education needs make faster progress in older grades where individuals receive more focused and well-planned support in class. While the school follows a multi-dimensional process for deciding whether to retain students each year, too many student retentions are in kindergarten and first grade.

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.

The school's schedule ensures students receive a varied curriculum that includes reading, writing and mathematics as well as weekly art, music, social studies, science, and gym. Teachers plan together to identify some relevant links between subjects and to make learning more meaningful and interesting. However, there is no long-term curriculum plan that details how knowledge and skills will build and develop in all subjects as students move through the grades. The district leadership has identified the need and so has initiated the process of creating a district-wide long-term curriculum plan. The school has sufficient computers to support learning in technology. All classes have a scheduled time and student progress is checked closely. The extra-curricular program gives students valuable support with homework and reading skills in grades 1 through 5. Homework usually links to learning in class and so enables students to consolidate knowledge and skills. Classrooms are bright and welcoming, and most have student work and learning prompts. Some, however, are cluttered and so space for students to learn collaboratively is reduced.

The school reading, writing and mathematics programs enable students to make expected progress. In reading, programs build skills in a satisfactory way. For example, the youngest students learn all about

letters and the sounds they make and so by the end of grade 1, most are able to work out words they have not read before. The reading recovery program is effective in helping students who struggle to learn to read. A varied range of texts meets most students' interests. The school has increased its range of non-fiction books to increase boys' engagement. Students practice their reading and writing skills in some subjects, such as researching social studies topics and writing their responses in reading and mathematics classes.

Professional development activities do not meet teachers' different needs sufficiently well. Training is not always made available to help teachers implement the programs they have been asked to teach. Achievement remains lower in reading and writing because some teachers have followed the program rather than using it as a resource. More focused analysis of data and recent school-led professional development are resulting in teachers adapting the materials more effectively, to target skills to each student's different learning needs during independent work. Identical worksheets and cloze passages to record ideas and thoughts are overused in the reading program, and so do not target work to the different ability and interest levels in class. Library sessions are for the purpose of exchanging books only and are too short for students to engage in library instruction. Achievement is higher in mathematics because lessons focus around investigations, which require students to solve problems practically and explain the strategies they used. A clearly defined curriculum, consistent resources and common assessments have supported teaching effectively.

Teachers' expectations for students' achievement vary and are inconsistent across classes and grades. Teachers vary in their knowledge about using data to differentiate instruction. Not all teachers communicate specific objectives to students. While some teachers are more successful than others, planned work is not always matched sufficiently well to students' different ability and interest levels or to students' preferred learning styles. As a result, work is often too hard for students with special education needs unless they receive considerable support and direction, and too easy for more able students who sit for too long not fully engaged in learning. Lesson planning does not identify learning clearly enough and too often focuses on the activity or task students will complete rather than the knowledge they will gain or the skills they will develop. When learning and skills are identified, these are often too general to guide learning at different ability and interest levels.

Effective incentives and rewards result in students' positive attitudes to learning and good behavior in class. Students try hard to stay in the green, to get a glass ball for the jar or receive a blue star, all of which build to a special treat or event. Students like lessons that are practical and fun. They particularly like science "when we get to do investigations". Computers are another favorite because they can research topics. Some students "wish we had health in all grades to help us understand others' feelings".

Teachers meet regularly to share ideas and plan learning that ensure students cover the required curriculum. They look carefully at assessment data to identify aspects of reading, writing and mathematics that require additional teaching or intervention strategies for students who need additional support in developing skills. As yet, the school has not responded fully to data analysis to identify precisely why Black students achieve at lower levels than their classmates. It has a number of hypotheses but these have not yet been tested out sufficiently well to raise their achievement and accelerate progress.

Criterion 3: Students' personal character development

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

There are effective programs for building students' personal and social development and positive attitudes to school. The number of referrals to the principal for misbehavior and the number of suspensions have reduced as a result. The ROARS (respect, organization, acceptance, responsibility and safety) program gives students positive feedback and guidance about their social skills and behavior. Students know the rules and most take full responsibility for their actions. Nominated by fellow students and adults for their

achievements, weekly ROARS rallies celebrate and reward those students who demonstrate one of these characteristics during the week. Classroom rules, rewards and consequences support the program well. As a result, although a small number of students still misbehave on some buses, nearly all students behave well in school.

The school has comprehensive procedures for encouraging good attendance and so most students come to school on time everyday. As a result, attendance is above average. A small number of students arrive late and this means they often miss valuable learning.

Students have positive relationships with each other and with teachers and other adults. They enjoy being given responsibility although opportunities are scarce. They talk animatedly about the student council that enables them to make a positive contribution to the school and wider community. Unfortunately, this is not in place this year because there is no member of staff to lead it. In some lessons, teachers enable students to use their initiative and take responsibility by involving them in assessing their own and each other's work. At times, students plan and carry out investigations, and solve problems independently and work collaboratively to discuss and share ideas, and make group recordings of their decisions and thinking. On these occasions, students develop important social skills of debate and negotiation. Students rise to any challenges presented, relishing the opportunities to work together on shared tasks and group activities.

The school recognizes that "wellness is a part of success" and so organizes a range of activities and events that help develop students' awareness of how to lead healthy and fit lives. Students reflect carefully about any unacceptable behaviors and have good opportunity to discuss social and moral issues in health, social studies and science classes. Learning about the school's diverse cultures is built into the school's music, art, literacy and health programs. Students study topics at each grade which enable them to learn about the cultures of different peoples of the world.

Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management

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

The principal articulates her vision for school development clearly and has initiated many positive and effective improvement strategies. She has raised teachers' expectations of what students can do. Although expectations remain inconsistent, teachers use data more regularly to drive decisions about instruction. Staff made valuable contributions to a recent presentation, which set out the school's aims and values for the coming year resulting in full support and commitment to school improvement.

A formalized team structure evaluates all aspects of the school's work. The building instructional team meets weekly to identify key strengths and areas for improvement. By reorganizing the schedule, teachers have regular time to discuss student achievement and progress in various team meetings, and so evaluate the ongoing effectiveness of their work. The four-step team meets regularly to monitor the progress of students with special education needs and plan relevant interventions and support. Each grade team records their end of year evaluations to inform the school's goals for the following year. The child study team meets weekly to conduct case reviews of students with special education needs and review strategies of students who have not made sufficient progress on the first two steps of the four step process.

The school has not yet formalized this information into a long-term strategic plan. Goals and objectives in the plan do not respond precisely enough to students' expected achievement. The subsequent action and strategies required to bring about successful change and improvement are not identified in sufficient detail. The school does not formally schedule monitoring activities that enable it to know it is on track to meet its goals and that teaching is bringing about effective learning. The principal leads evaluative discussions among staff that have brought about increased expectations and improved the quality of teaching and subsequently learning. She looks closely at students' work to evaluate gaps in knowledge

and skills, and shares her findings about strengths and weaknesses in learning with staff. As a result, several improvements have taken place. However, the quality of teaching is still inconsistent across the school. Checks to make sure that agreed improvement strategies are actually taking place in all classes and for all students are not yet regular or rigorous enough. Constant interruptions to her day detract her from her role as instructional leader.

The staff team is committed to ensuring that students get the best education while in school. However, the district does not give the school sufficient leadership and support for it to be fully effective. There are not enough resources to enable the principal to fulfill her role as instructional leader or to support school improvement initiatives. For example, the principal often writes correspondence, newsletters and data entry herself because there is only one member of staff in the school office to serve as receptionist and provide clerical support for the whole school. Good support from literacy and mathematics coaches has guided teachers' work in the past. However, teachers have not always had the training and support they need, especially when asked to implement new programs.

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

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

Parents value the opportunities to come into school to talk about their children's learning and progress. They appreciate being able to contact teachers by email or to talk to them in person if they wish. They are confident that the school contacts them straightaway with any concerns including any risk of their children slipping back or lapses in behavior. There is always a good turnout for parent teacher conferences.

Communications with parents are good. Parents welcome the progress reports sent home three times a year. Reports contain sufficient information to tell parents how well their children are learning and include some targets of detailing what they need to improve. The school sends home a weekly newsletter which gives good information about class and school events. A parent and student handbook gives detailed information about the school's academic and behavioral expectations and procedures, including ROARS and expectations for homework support. A range of family events celebrates the school's diversity and builds respect within the whole school community. These include cultural sharing days, literacy nights and information evenings for parents to learn about Connecticut Mastery Test. The multicultural evening invites parents to join with their children to enjoy dance, music and food from the country being celebrated. The school recognizes there remain a few parents who do not always support their children's learning at home as much as it would like. Consequently, increasing parent involvement in the school's work including governance is a key goal this year.

Partnerships with other district schools and local community groups support school improvement effectively. The YMCA supports the after school program and the school's continuing drive to improve students' health and fitness by organizing sporting clubs and physical activities. The Wesleyan University provides tutors to lead 'ASCEND', an outward-bound physical education program for elementary students. Mentors from the local Chamber of Commerce visit their student partners regularly to give much needed support for the development of personal and social skills.