



**CSDE**

**QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT**

**Ansonia Public Schools**

# **Quality Review Report**

**Ansonia Middle School**

**115 Howard Avenue  
Ansonia  
Connecticut  
06401**

**Principal: Lynn B. Bennett-Wallick  
Dates of review: November 11 - 12, 2008  
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## Part 1: The School Context

### Information about the school:

Ansonia Middle School provides full time education for 597 students in grade levels 6 through 8. Of these students, 55 percent are White, 22 percent are Hispanic, 21 percent are Black and 2 percent are either Asian American or American Indian. Just over 12 percent of the students come from homes where English is not the primary language, with 13 different languages spoken in these homes. Of these, 3 percent of students are not fluent in English. This figure is comparable with similar schools. Fifty-two percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price meals, which is more than double the percentage found in similar schools in the State. Eleven percent of students have disabilities and are integrated fully into general education classes, which is broadly average when compared with other middle and high schools in the State. Attendance, at 93.5 percent is lower than the State average for middle and high schools in the State which stands at 96.5 percent.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well:

- Staff effectively encourage and enable students to behave well, to form positive relationships with others and to develop positive attitudes towards school.
- Students are provided with a learning environment which is safe and secure and which is generally orderly, supportive and visually attractive.
- The principal and her vice principal provide a clear and positive direction which has had a particularly strong impact on the culture of the school.
- Teachers generally have the desire and willingness to improve their pedagogy and to raise the standards of achievement in the classes they teach.

### Areas for Improvement:

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning by making better use of data to inform the planning of subsequent lessons.
- Ensure that work is better matched to the individual needs of the students, particularly students with disabilities, English language learners and higher achieving students.
- Develop, in collaboration with the district, a comprehensive professional development program that will improve the performance of teachers and will raise expectations of the students.
- Use data more effectively to ensure that all teachers are held accountable for the progress of the students in their charge.
- Rigorously monitor and support the work of all staff to ensure that standards of achievement are raised and that improvement goals are met by all staff and students.
- Form more effective relationships with parents and the community so that more people are actively involved with promoting the work of the school and to further raise standards.

## Part 3: Main Findings

### Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

#### **This school needs improvement.**

The school is at an interesting stage of development having effectively developed a positive culture for learning among the students. This has resulted in a significant improvement in the behavior of the students, the attitudes of the students to their work and the quality of the relationships between all of the people in the building. Now that the climate for learning is much more positive, the scene is set for major improvements in student achievement, which is still too low and has not shown a significant increase apart from some minor gains in math at grade 6. This situation is exacerbated by a raise in the percentage of pupils required to reach proficiency if the school is to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in reading and math.

The school does not make sufficiently effective use of data to accurately identify trends at cohort and classroom level and to take effective action to close the achievement gap. This shows that almost all groups in the school, including Black students, Hispanic students, economically disadvantaged students, English language learners, higher achieving students and those with disabilities are doing significantly less well than the White students. In addition to disparities in the relative performance of different ethnic groups, boys are doing less well than the girls.

Swift action is now required to improve the use of data at classroom level. This is to ensure that work is planned more carefully and is matched to meet the different needs of all the students in the class, not just those middle ability students that make up a small majority in some but not all classes. The school is now waiting for the district to provide professional development in the use of data so that lessons can be better differentiated. However, it is essential that the leadership of the school monitors the quality of teaching and learning rigorously and supports anxious teachers energetically if these much needed gains are to be made. The district has not been effective in providing the school with a comprehensive curriculum and is only just beginning to provide the school with the quality of support that it requires.

The school's links with parents and the wider community are not sufficiently developed and do not make a big enough impact on the learning of the students in the school. Parents are not sufficiently involved in the work of the school and, because communication is relatively weak, they do not know how to help their children to succeed. Several parents who attended the parent group did not know, for example, that students are regularly set tasks to complete at home.

#### **Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects**

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

Ansonia Middle School is in year 4 of needing improvement having failed to make AYP in both reading and math in 2007-08. The school met its AYP target for writing. The results for 2007-08 do not appear to be as good as those achieved in 2006-07 when overall, the students at the school achieved AYP in both math and reading. White and Hispanic students exceeded the expectation for math and for reading while insufficient numbers of Black students, students with disabilities and economically disadvantaged students reached proficiency. In real terms the percentage of students reaching proficiency increased slightly from 2006-07 to 2007-08, but as the expectations for meeting AYP were raised, the school's scores failed to keep pace with the increased demands of the No Child Left Behind legislation. When compared to similar schools across the State, the scores gained in standardized assessments are below average and require improvement.

In both reading and math, the only subgroup within the school that reached AYP in 2007-08 was the White students, who exceeded the required levels. Hispanic students achieved better than Black students, which is contrary to State trends. The figures for Black students and students with disabilities were particularly disappointing and were much lower than the figures usually found in middle schools across the State. Science achievement in grade 8 is below the State average. Performance differences between girls and boys were minimal. Scores for Black students were very low, with Hispanic students achieving better and White students close to the State average.

The overall progress made by students in the school is insufficient and requires improvement. There has, however, been an improvement in the standards in math among the students in grade 6 as a result of the good work done the previous year in elementary school. Cohort matched growth in both reading and math slightly exceeds the State during the last three years. However, it is insufficient to close the achievement gap. White students make satisfactory progress in both reading and math, but the progress made by Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students is not good enough and requires improvement. The progress made by Black students, English language learners and those with disabilities is considerably lower than it should be and requires significant improvement. The same is true of higher achieving students, whose needs are not met well enough because teachers do not analyze data sufficiently well either to identify them with sufficient consistency or to plan lessons that challenge them. The progress made by boys is not as good as that made by girls, the difference in performance is greater than in most other schools and the achievement of both gender groups is disappointingly low.

## **Criterion 2: The quality of teaching, learning and the use of assessment data**

### **This area of the school's work needs improvement.**

The overall quality of teaching spans the range from good to very poor and requires improvement because there is too much inconsistency. Too much of the teaching is not well enough matched to the individual needs of the students and fails to challenge enough of the students. This is because teachers do not make sufficient use of data when planning subsequent lessons. As a result, students are not sufficiently challenged to be highly motivated and enthusiastic learners and many groups of learners do not achieve well enough. The leadership of the school is aware of this problem and they are hoping that planned professional development will solve many of these problems. Professional development has been sadly lacking to date and many teachers need considerable support before they will be able to provide well constructed differentiation in their lessons.

Teachers generally have at least a proficient command of the subjects that they teach and in many cases know their subjects well. They organize their classrooms well and in almost all classes learning is supported effectively by the consistent use of learning aims and objectives that are shared with the students at the start of the lesson. In one good math lesson, the teacher took great care to have as much information as possible available on the walls in the classroom to support learning without having so much that the message became confused. As a result, students knew the purpose of the lesson and concentrated their attention on the main issues. Many teachers make good use of rubrics to remind students of the quality of the work that is required to achieve higher levels.

The introductions to lessons are generally quite interesting but the tasks set in many are of a very variable quality. In too many classes all students are expected to complete the same task whatever their prior performance. The ends of lessons often lack sufficient structure and not enough lessons end with the teacher drawing together the strands of the lesson and summarizing what has been achieved. Most teachers use questioning reasonably well to illicit understanding and to revise prior learning but in one very poor social studies lesson, the quality of questioning was very weak and required one word answers to questions with almost no thought or consideration.

Most teachers manage their students well, and very little time is lost dealing with disruptive behavior. This is a major strength. Teachers use a limited range of instructional strategies and the needs of particular

groups are not met well enough in many classes. This is particularly true of English language learners and students with disabilities, who often receive insufficient support. The needs of average or higher achieving students are not sufficiently provided for in most lessons since expectations are far too low. Assessment procedures are generally weak and require considerable improvement. Assessment in math is generally of a higher standard than it is in other subject areas but even here, insufficient use is made of common formative assessments to plot the progress that students make or to set challenging goals for the future.

### **Criterion 3: The effectiveness of the curriculum to meet the needs of the students**

**This area of the school's work needs substantial improvement.**

The school lacks a curriculum in all content areas. English language arts has developed an informal curriculum in an attempt to align with the State framework and is supported by a district wide literacy coordinator. However, application has been inconsistent due to multiple changes in personnel and so has not made the potential impact. There is no written curriculum for math; however, teachers receive support from a building based instructional resource coach. Teachers have begun to explore grade level equivalency documents developed by the State Department of Education, but these have yet to be systemically implemented in the school. Due to the lack of an aligned curriculum, teachers develop lessons based on the strands assessed in the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT), which often lack coherence and make it difficult for the students to understand why particular work is being covered. Teachers are supported to a satisfactory extent, however, by the literacy coordinator and the instructional resource coach to ensure that they develop lessons in a logical sequence.

Lessons cover the required content and most are sufficiently relevant to meet the needs of most students. In the better lessons seen, there were activities that involved group interaction, hands-on experiences such as building a cube, and questioning that forced students to apply learning in the real world such as "How would you do this if you were in the store?" This is not the case throughout the school and in most classes there was an overuse of worksheets and teacher directed instruction.

The curriculum is not modified sufficiently to meet the needs of English language learners, students with disabilities or higher achieving students, nor does it reflect or respect the cultural heritage of major ethnic populations. While there is support from classroom tutors, paraprofessionals and special education teachers, the content of lessons are not generally designed to address different learning abilities or styles. The homework most often assigned is in the form of worksheets, and there is no evidence of extension activities outside of learning in the classroom.

### **Criterion 4: Students' personal character development**

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

Students behave very well and develop very positive attitudes to their learning, mainly because of the very strong relationships they form with their teachers, the administration and their peers. These relationships are based on mutual respect and many students report that they like their teachers and can approach them with confidence if they require academic or emotional support. The interactions between staff and students reflect the positive atmosphere that has been established. In this way students develop a clear understanding of the difference between right and wrong.

Students do not report any instances of bullying or harassment. They state that if any type of inappropriate behavior were to occur, there are adults in the building who they trust and feel secure in approaching to talk with about the situation. The number of incidents resulting in out-of-school suspension has decreased because of the new administration working with staff on student behavior

issues. Students indicate that they feel safe at school and they enjoy coming to school. Parents also agree that the school is a safer place under the current administration.

Although they are given few opportunities in school to demonstrate personal maturity and independence, students respond very well when such opportunities are given, working well either alone or small groups where they develop a commendable sense of community. Students do not have sufficiently high expectations of their own achievement, or that of their peers. Attendance is below the State average and this has a negative impact on the progress of those students that do not attend with sufficient regularity.

## **Criterion 5: School Climate**

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

The school is a warm and welcoming place and the sense of commitment and dedication to the well being of the students is evident. School rules are consistently posted along with posters promoting character development. The school has implemented several measures to effectively address aspects of personal character development. Character count modules that establish a set of expectations for student behavior are completed weekly and communication of behavioral expectations to parents and students is consistent. Guidance initiatives deliberately support character development and grade teams draw behavioral expectations from the school behavioral plan. The school sets suitably challenging personal goals for students and has reasonably high expectations that they will be achieved.

There are limited opportunities provided for students to build leadership skills. The school does not take advantage of the leadership opportunities that exist in student council. The only opportunity to participate in the student council is at the grade 6 level. Any opportunities at the grades 7 or 8 levels to build leadership skills typically occur when students initiate it. The school does not actively seek students' viewpoints on how well the school is doing, how it might improve or what additional activities might be offered in morning and after school programs. Parents indicate that they would like their son or daughter to have more opportunities to participate in activities that allow them to interact with other students outside the classroom.

The school has a suitable system in place to contact parents any time a student misses the entire day or skips a class; however, more could be done to encourage good attendance. Parents indicate that they have been contacted each time their child is absent. The amount of communication between the school and families has improved regarding these issues. Systems include data collection procedures that track repeated behaviors including monitoring data for students' attendance patterns. The school also has an effective in-school suspension program that is full time staffed to closely monitor and to identify repeat offenders.

## **Criterion 6: Effective Leadership and Management**

**This area of the school's work needs improvement.**

The principal and the assistant principal have worked extremely hard to improve the culture of the school and have been largely successful. Developing the school climate, raising student attendance and improving the quality of behavior were three major priorities for the current administration when they set out their short to mid term vision. The purpose for focusing on these areas was to create a sense of community and an improved climate for learning. These goals have largely been achieved and it is now time to establish new goals, which concentrate on raising student achievement by improving the quality of teaching and learning and raising expectations, which are currently too low throughout the school. The school's leadership is aware of the need to make these improvements, some of which are detailed in the school improvement plan. The leadership structure is not clear with regard to the math/achievement

coach and this is a source of ongoing concern to certain staff who do not fully understand exactly who is responsible for certain decisions made in the school.

Some improvements have been made in raising standards in math, particularly in grade 6 where the good work started in the elementary school has been built upon to a satisfactory extent, but much more remains to be done to raise standards across all areas of learning. Insufficient use is currently made of data to consistently improve learning at all levels within the school. The leadership of the school does not pay sufficient attention to the trends in learning demonstrated by key groups within the school, particularly for English language learners, students with disabilities and higher achieving students. Not enough is being done to close the widening achievement gap between the White students and the Black and Hispanic students.

Through its regular monitoring of teaching, the leadership of the school has a reasonably accurate insight into the quality of teaching and to a lesser extent, learning, throughout the school. They have yet to take all of the action required to eliminate the inadequate teaching that exists in some classes resulting in low expectations and poor progress. Most teachers are keen to improve their professional practice but there is a small group of staff members who are not fully committed to improving the achievement of the students, resist change and do not see the correlation between the quality of their teaching and the limited outcomes of the students. The school is working, within the limitations of the union contract, to provide better opportunities for staff to meet together to discuss the needs of some of the school's most vulnerable students as well as to mark work and plan lessons.

## **Criterion 7: Partnerships with Parents and Community**

**This area of the school's work needs substantial improvement.**

Only a small number of parents and community agencies have a strong connection with the school. The Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) is primarily a fundraising body and does not participate in academic aspects of the school. The school communicates the achievement or progress of students through parent teacher conferences and report cards. There is some teacher directed communication to individual parents, such as e-mail and notes home; however, as these are not always two way, parents are unable to contribute fully to their child's learning. The school website has not been updated for the 2008-09 school year. While there is a student newspaper that is distributed almost monthly, there is little communication to families from the administration or school staff. The website contains past newsletters, the attendance policy, and a recent letter from the administration regarding Parent-Teacher night, but is not updated on a regular enough basis and it is not linked to specific teachers for communication.

The school building is welcoming, but does not address different community languages. The bulletin board posted outside the main office is directed towards parents in understanding the CMT and healthy study habits. The building is clean and orderly, easy to navigate, and calm and although welcoming, there is little evidence of the school recognizing the diversity of the local community.

There is no school governing body for parents to participate in. The Boys & Girls Club holds an after school program that is both academic and recreational, in which a larger number of students participate. This program assists in promoting study habits, providing academic assistance around homework and social experiences such as playing basketball or arts and crafts. There are limited community resources that further support the achievement of students. Supplemental educational services and school choice are not offered in the district.

## **Criterion 8: The role of the district in the work of the school**

### **This area needs substantial improvement.**

The administration of the district has a very clear understanding of the strengths and the areas for improvement that exist within the school. However, this regime is relatively new, having only taken over control 15 months ago. Although there has definitely been some improvement, it is too early to judge whether these efforts will have a lasting impact on the work of the school and develop a coherence that will be helpful to the school. The district does not have a functioning curriculum and does not therefore make any particular curricular demands on the school except for some discreet aspects of reading and math. The district is not able, as yet, to provide the school with the data that it needs to raise standards of achievement.

The school is held accountable for the achievements of the students but there is not a clear correlation between the areas identified as whole school goals and the annual review of performance. There has not been an effective district led program of professional development for several years and as a result the school's use of data, for example, is way behind where it should be. The district is working very hard, within limited resources to provide much needed professional development but there is a long way to go before this will have a direct impact on student performance.