



**CSDE**

**QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT**

**Ansonia Public Schools**

# **Quality Review Report**

**Ansonia High School**

**20 Pulaski Highway  
Ansonia  
Connecticut  
06401**

**Principal: Susan McKernan**

**Dates of review: November 13 - 14, 2008**

**Reviewers: Ken Bryan**

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## Part 1: The School Context

### Information about the school:

Ansonia High School has an enrollment of 730 students in grades 9 through 12. The school population comprises 57 percent White students, 23 percent Black students, 18 percent Hispanic students and 1 percent Asian American students. The school has identified approximately 11 percent of its population as students with disabilities. Just 1 percent of students are English language learners and, predominantly, these students speak Spanish. Student attendance stands at 92.8 percent, which is slightly below State figures. Forty-two percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price meals, which is more than the DRG (District Reference Group) and State averages.

Seven percent of students come from homes where English is not the primary language.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well:

- In a very short time, the dynamic and vibrant principal has become generally well liked by the school community and she has a clear vision for the future of the school which is communicated energetically.
- Students in the economically disadvantaged, Black and Hispanic student subgroups have made better progress as the school strives to close the achievement gap.
- The school very effectively develops students' personal character; they demonstrate positive attitudes to learning, the students behave extremely well and have formed positive relationships with each other and with adults in school.
- The teachers support each other and work well together as a team which results in a collaborative and collegial approach to the planning of student interventions.
- The school communicates effectively with parents and it makes good use of its community links which significantly enhance the personal and academic development of the students.

### Areas for Improvement:

- Develop a strategic plan to prioritize initiatives, which sets measurable goals, specifies actions, provides timeframes, identifies responsibilities, provides professional development, includes success criteria and involves all stakeholders.
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning by raising expectations for each student through the consistent provision of challenging activities, rubrics, higher order questioning and the use of open-ended tasks and problem solving.
- Develop the use of data to ensure that tasks set are appropriately challenging and better match the individual needs of the students.
- Ensure that the written curriculum guides instruction and assessment on what the students need to know, demonstrate and understand.
- Develop and support the role of the lead teachers so that they are better able to support the principal and her vision for the school.

## Part 3: Main Findings

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

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

The vision and energy of Ansonia High School's principal lie at the heart of the school. In a very short period of time, since joining the school last year, she has created a professional climate of increased rigor, reflection and evaluation. She, with the support of her administration and the faculty, has the clear capacity and determination to move the school forward as it strives to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in the coming years. Despite making some gains in academic achievement, particularly in writing, the school still needs to demonstrate significant growth in math to close the overall achievement gap. The school, and particularly the principal, is now analyzing data more effectively to better determine how well groups of students are doing and it has clearly identified groups of students who are at risk of failing. Interventions for these students are both well targeted and timely.

Despite the principal's boundless energy and enthusiasm, school leadership at all levels needs improvement. Resulting from the un-phased introduction of many school and district wide initiatives, morale among the teachers is low. The school does not have a strategic plan to manage the implementation of these programs and interventions and it is therefore unable to fully evaluate their impact. In addition, distributed leadership is not well developed and instructional leadership does not impact sufficiently upon the quality of teaching and learning.

The faculty works collaboratively and collegially on an informal basis and is becoming more reflective and evaluative. In addition, the use of data to inform instruction and planning is developing. However, expectations for many students are too low, particularly for the higher achieving students. Moreover, the quality of teaching is inconsistent across grades and departments. Instruction is not sufficiently modified to meet the learning needs of individual students and curriculum guides do not reflect differentiation to accommodate the different levels of learning.

Ansonia High School is a welcoming and inclusive learning community where most students behave well and have formed positive relationships with one another and with adults. Most students demonstrate good attitudes to learning. The school has developed positive relationships with the parents and productive partnerships with local community-based organizations. These significantly enhance the personal and academic development of the students.

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

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

The performance of Ansonia High School students on the 2008 Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) demonstrates slight increases in math and in reading achievement and a significant growth in writing. However, the school failed to achieve AYP. In math, the whole school and economically disadvantaged student subgroups did not meet AYP. Achievement in math continues to be an area for improvement despite there being significant growth for each of the subgroups. In reading, the economically disadvantaged subgroup made good progress.

Students in the economically disadvantaged, Black and Hispanic subgroups show progress in all areas of the CAPT which demonstrates that the school is narrowing the achievement gap, if only slightly. In addition, the student graduation rate of 88.4 percent met AYP targets, but it is still marginally below State averages. The school is only now beginning to compare itself with similar schools within its DRG but it is

too early to determine the outcomes of any analysis. A scrutiny of year-on-year data shows a fluctuating pattern with little growth in math and accelerated in writing and reading. Proficiency in writing is now close to the State average.

The principal is able to identify differential attainment according to ethnicity and gender through her rigorous analysis of data. Hispanic and Black students make better progress than White students in writing, reading and in science. In math, Black students demonstrate the highest rates of growth. The school also tracks the relative performance of male and female students. Females significantly outperform males in reading and writing. A review of CAPT and class assessment data, student work, instructional strategies and interventions is underway to determine the next steps. The analysis of student data is adversely affected by the large inward and outward mobility rates. One hundred and ten students moved in or out of the school last year.

The school also carefully tracks the progress of students with disabilities and English language learners. It is able to demonstrate that these cohorts make good progress as they move through the school. In addition, the student support team carefully monitors students identified as struggling and in need of further interventions. Case managers rigorously track the progress of students with disabilities and assign them detailed individualized education programs as appropriate. Another cohort, identified by the school, is a freshman cohort which consists of students at-risk of failing. These students benefit from the Freshmen Experience Program, which provides peer mentoring and workshops. These students are now making better progress. The tracking of the relative progress of higher achieving and gifted and talented students is less well developed which results in the school being unclear as to the progress of these cohorts.

## **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 throughout the school is inconsistent, ranging from good to unsatisfactory. In the best classes, students are actively engaged and they make good progress. Modified instructional strategies meet the needs of all students, particularly those in need of special education support. However, too often teachers teach to the center and special education and higher achieving students are not sufficiently supported or challenged. For most teachers their knowledge is adequate to deliver the curriculum but they do not use a range of methods to motivate or challenge each student. The school acknowledges that while there are pockets of effective and inspiring practice the overall picture is one of inconsistency. Lesson planning templates have been introduced to help raise expectations, increase rigor and to improve consistency with regards to planning, differentiation and lesson objectives. The faculty appreciates the purpose and scope of this short-term planning tool. However, its introduction has been burdensome and a lack of phasing has necessitated welcomed modifications. As yet, it is still too early to recognize the benefits of this initiative.

The school is at an early stage in terms of the use of assessment data and the development of common formative assessments. Members of the faculty have received some professional development training relating to data teams and the use of effective teaching strategies. The school acknowledges that capacity needs to be built in these areas through further professional development.

A minority of classrooms are stimulating and highly conducive to learning. In these settings, there is a good mixture of teacher and student created displays, which reflect the taught curriculum. In addition, the use of rubrics encourages high standards from every learner. In one class, the students were encouraged to research using writing lab technology; students then went on to construct models and write poetry of a high quality. Throughout this process, the teacher set very high expectations and the students were fully engaged. Behavior management strategies are used consistently across the school and this is reinforced by the displays of class codes of behavior. The students behave well overall and they have developed good relationships with their teachers. The level of student engagement in their work is

variable, however, due to the differences in the quality of instruction. Too often students are passively involved although in some classes, the students are actively engaged in practical tasks, problem solving activities and they work collaboratively in pairs or in small groups.

The staff is very collaborative and work well together and there is a developing culture of reflection and evaluation. The faculty is now ready to share good practice through peer observations. Teachers effectively turn-key information gained from professional development to other faculty members. Good examples include the faculty focusing upon the better use of data to inform differentiated instruction and the adoption of research-based effective teaching strategies. It is too early to determine the effectiveness of these endeavors. Teachers effectively use scheduled department and faculty meeting times to share and develop lesson plans, review student work and develop summative and diagnostic assessments. The creation of common formative assessments is in its early stages and it is as yet too early to determine their effectiveness in terms of periodic data. Professional development is well targeted to meet the needs of teachers.

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

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

The curriculum is partially aligned with standards. Most of the curriculum documents show some linkage to the State standards or frameworks, but this is usually in a cursory way rather than one in which is useful for guiding instruction. Most of the documents are formatted in a similar way, which aids their usefulness for teachers. Some of the documents have adopted the terminology of Understanding by Design but there is no evidence of this model being implemented in classrooms. Teachers do not apply the standards in the form of essential questions or stated objectives. The curriculum documents do not demonstrate a high level of academic rigor and do not differentiate for the school's four distinct course levels. These shortcomings contribute to a general lack of consistency in instruction.

The application of the curriculum is insufficiently consistent across the school and thus continuity from one grade to the next, with negative impact on student learning and progress. While many teachers attempt to collaborate informally, because of the discontinuity, this collaboration is not as effective as it could be.

The faculty has received very scant training in differentiated instruction. Insufficient planning and professional development did not support the rushed implementation of a co-teaching model for students with special education needs. Co-teachers do not have common planning times and therefore are unable to design effective modifications. The school has very few English language learners but the curriculum is sufficiently modified to meet the needs of these students, who make good progress. The school has recently made great improvements in the quantity of advanced placement courses and is therefore improving its ability to meet the needs of higher achieving students. While this school has a notably diverse student body, this range is not explicitly acknowledged in the curriculum documents. The curriculum is not sufficiently broad or balanced to adequately meet the needs of all learners.

Homework activities mostly require lower-order thinking skills and factual recall. This is parallel to most classroom activities. Lower level course classes rarely receive homework. In higher level courses, homework most typically involves reading for understanding, doing problems from the book and other rote learning tasks. These activities provide an insufficient level of challenge for many of the school's students.

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

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

Students behave well and interact with their peers in a respectful and courteous manner. Students demonstrate polite behavior and respond positively to their teachers and they show good attitudes to learning. Teachers encourage students to work together and provide them with opportunities to work independently. As a consequence of a proactive stance on student behavior and improvements in relationships, after school detentions have decreased from 81 in 2007 to 38 during the first five weeks of the new school year, and in-school suspensions dropped from 120 to 83 during the first quarter of the year. Students are expected to read the student handbook and to be responsible for adhering to the school's code of conduct, which is posted throughout the school. Most students are proud of their school.

Students participate in school initiatives, clubs, activities and athletics and participation rates are high. These significantly enhance the academic and personal development of the students. The newly formed Human Relations Club has sponsored a "prejudice reduction" conference that was received most positively by the school community. Students participate in school and class government opportunities and undertake such initiatives as canned food drives, The Giving Tree and Toys for Tots. They are also encouraged to participate in peer tutoring and mentoring when possible. Students respond well to any opportunities to work collaboratively or independently, although these are few.

The attendance policy is strictly adhered to by the school administration. Attendance last year was at 92.8 percent, close to the State average, and tardiness to school for the first month of this year amounted to 83, down from 120 for the first month last year.

More students participate in advanced placement classes this year as the result of an increase in offerings from one to six courses. They also participate in college credit courses sponsored by Housatonic Community College. This provision sets higher expectations for the students.

## **Criterion 5: School Climate**

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

The principal begins each year with grade level meetings to encourage high academic achievement and good behavior, and student successes are celebrated at end of year awards assemblies. Advanced placement courses have increased from one to six as a result of the school's participation in the Project Opening Doors which have led to higher expectations of student achievement. However, individual student learning goals are not sufficiently challenging for all students. Good opportunities for gaining college credit also exist through the University of Connecticut Early College Experience program and the Housatonic Community College Prep program. A four-part seminar for seniors to assist with college transition will occur yearly which will result in many students securing places. The principal has initiated interventions for seniors who fail two or more courses and specific action plans for grade 9 at risk students are effectively developed in cooperation with their parents or guardians.

The well communicated and consistently enforced discipline policy has had a positive impact on in-school suspensions and after school detentions. The school effectively develops a culture which does not tolerate sexism, racism and oppressive behavior. Students feel that their teachers care about their well being, both academically and socially/emotionally. The principal meets monthly with the student council to address issues of concern and to develop proactive solutions to emerging problems. Students feel safe and secure in the school, and while there are instances of inappropriate behavior, they are dealt with promptly and fairly. In class, students are not given sufficient opportunities to work in pairs or in small groups, as the instruction is often teacher centered.

The school provides ample opportunities for student involvement in activities which engender responsibility and independence. Student Government, Big Brother/Big Sister and peer tutoring are such examples.

The attendance policy is applied consistently and is effective in reducing truancy and promoting good attendance.

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

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

The principal and her administration are highly accessible and visible to all members of the school community. The principal has a clear vision for the school and articulates this with passion and commitment. The school's leadership has high expectations for its staff and students but these good intentions do not yet permeate consistently throughout the building, particularly in the quality of teaching which is too variable. The principal has developed a leadership style which is hands-on and revolves around her drive and enthusiasm, talents and energy. She appreciates that a more devolved form of leadership is required to ensure continuity, consistency and accountability, particularly in the area of the quality of instruction. The school acknowledges that the development of lead teachers as instructional specialists is essential to enable them to monitor classroom practice informally and to provide constructive feedback. The monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning by the administration is frequent but it does not sufficiently impact upon student achievement and progress. The focus for these classroom visits is often vague and the feedback non-developmental.

The school improvement plan is undeveloped. It lacks the intrinsic capability to adapt to and accommodate the numerous initiatives being rolled out into the school. As a result, many staff feel overwhelmed and morale is deteriorating. The school recognizes the need to develop a strategic plan to prioritize initiatives, set measurable goals, specify actions, provide timeframes, identify responsibilities, provide professional development, include success criteria and involve all stakeholders. The plan will also help the school evaluate the effectiveness of the many initiatives through the use of intrinsic data. The ownership of this strategic plan is crucial to the successful future of the school.

There is a developing commitment among the staff and many demonstrate the clear ability to improve the quality of teaching and learning given clear and unambiguous guidance. The school recognizes the need to demonstrate its effectiveness through data walls, which graphically summarize how well the school is doing and what it needs to do to improve. The school's administration does not focus upon summative whole school, cohort and trend data. The use of data does not impact significantly upon student achievement because data collection, analysis and interpretation are not sufficiently devolved for data teams to present to lead teachers, grades or departments. The school sees this area as a work in progress.

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

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

The school has positive and productive links with parents and with the local community. Parents value the many opportunities to contact the school regarding the personal and academic development of their children. Good home-school links have been established with the parents; teachers will frequently contact the home through letters, phone calls and by e-mail in addition to quarterly reports on academic progress and achievement. The guidance department and other support services effectively monitor students at risk of failing and parents are notified immediately of any concerns. The school is welcoming and provides good support for Spanish speaking parents through its translation services. The school has well established systems to inform parents about the school. The informative website contains school

calendars, a virtual tour of the school and celebrates the achievements of its sportsmen and women and honor roll students. This benefits the students and the parents in terms of communication, celebration of achievements and it reinforces the school's identity.

The Parent Teacher Organization works effectively in partnership with the school. It seeks to promote educational interest in the school through the provision of events, by ensuring good communication and by encouraging participation. In this regard, it has been partly successful as parental attendance fluctuates. Through its work, the parents commented that they felt well informed about the school and involved in the community life of the school. There is no whole school event or program that celebrates the school's diversity and the school is examining ways to accomplish this.

The school has very good links with community based organizations. These include partnerships with local organizations such as the Rotary Club, Senior Citizen Outreach, the Youth Leadership Council, the Big Brothers and Big Sisters initiative and the school career program among others. The students gain significantly in terms of confidence, a sense of community service and duty and vocational guidance. This is a strong feature of the school.

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

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

The district administration takes an active approach to the development of this and all other district schools. The superintendent and assistant superintendent actively investigate the school's practices and needs and attempt to positively support them. They take an active and appropriate interest in the performance of the school. The superintendent frequently visits the school and performs classroom walkthroughs, giving her a very accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. The district has provided, for many teachers, participation in training linked to the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative.

Currently, the district administration does not regularly hold the school principal accountable for reporting data on student achievement. While this is planned for the district through its partnership with the State Department of Education, it is currently happening at a too low level to support school improvement. The district is not able to adequately support the school's need for useful data. The school does not have a live, online grading system, which leaves only progress reports and report cards as data points for student performance. Because the data connected to progress reports is "wiped out" when report cards are generated, the principal does not have the opportunity to use this data for longitudinal analyses.

The curriculum work completed to date has not been sufficient to support school improvement. The curriculum documents are adequate in their presentation of scope, sequence, suggested activities and suggested assessments. The school appreciates that this area is in need of strategic support and development by the district.

The district has transmitted many initiatives to the school's faculty and this has contributed to a sense of fatigue and lowered morale. The district administration has not yet collaborated with the principal to prioritize these initiatives and to assign each one a timeline, assessment protocol and an alignment of resources.