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QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

Ansonia Public Schools

Quality Review Report

John Prendergast Elementary School

**42 Grove Street
Ansonia
Connecticut
06401**

Principal: Louis Puglisi

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**Reviewers: Georgie Beasley
Tim Boyce**

Cambridge Education (LLC)



**Cambridge
Education**

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:

Prendergast Elementary School has 750 students enrolled in grades kindergarten through 2. There is a pre-kindergarten on-site, which is not managed by the school. About 60 percent of students receive some kind of pre-school education before starting in kindergarten.

Student enrollment comprises 53 percent White, 26 percent Hispanic, 19 percent Black and small percentages of American Indian and Asian American students. Around 4 percent are English language learners and receive English as a Second Language services. Almost 12 percent speak a language other than English at home. This is below the State average. The proportion of students with disabilities is 10 percent which is around the State average. Approximately 50 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price meals, which is above the State average. At 95 percent, attendance is equal to the State average.

The current principal has been in the position for just over a year. Previously, the school has had six principals in seven years. The assistant principal has been in her position for five years.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The principal and assistant principal work effectively together to successfully lead improvements in the quality of instruction and to ensure that the school runs smoothly every day.
- There is strong commitment from staff to raise student achievement and accelerate their progress.
- Students' social and emotional needs are met effectively and so students generally behave well and have positive attitudes to learning.
- The inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes builds strong and cohesive relationships between all students.
- Teachers have created welcoming classroom environments that are supportive of learning.

Areas for Improvement:

- Ensure teachers use assessment data consistently to differentiate instruction for all students, especially to provide effective support for English language learners and all students with disabilities and effective challenge for higher achievers.
- Identify more time for teachers to meet in grade and cross-grade teams to discuss student achievement and progress, plan for the continuous development of skills and strategies and observe good practice so that they can learn from each other's expertise.
- Involve parents and staff in implementing an improvement plan that details precisely how the school will raise student achievement, and how and when it will measure and monitor its progress towards reaching long-term and benchmark goals.
- Increase parent involvement by providing more opportunities for them to participate in school decision-making, and by keeping them more regularly informed about the school's work and their children's progress.
- Create and implement a plan to differentiate professional development for all staff, especially in the teaching of reading and math and in the use of assessment data to differentiate learning.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school needs improvement.

Prendergast School is emerging from a turbulent period of constantly changing leadership at school and district levels. A more stable administration team and district supports are resulting in improvement. There is renewed drive and endeavor from administration and staff to ensure that their hard work is more effective in raising student achievement. Some parents are on board but there is more work to do to improve communication and to encourage more parents to support the school in its work. Welcoming and well-organized classrooms give suitable support to learning. Due to the strong focus to improve the school's climate, student behavior and conduct have improved dramatically. Behavior is now good throughout the school and nearly all students have positive attitudes to school and their learning.

The current principal and assistant principal have been working together for just over a year. Their active and focused partnership has been instrumental in building a positive school culture that is promoting higher student academic and personal achievement. The quality of the curriculum and teaching is improving, especially in math. However, the quality of instruction still varies too much from class to class and subject to subject. Not enough thought is given in every class about how to use assessment data to differentiate instruction to meet the full range of learners' needs, especially higher achievers. The school meets the needs of students with disabilities through suitable in-class support from tutors and the special education teachers, although they are not always able to fulfill their role consistently. The curriculum aligns to State and grade-level standards but does not differentiate enough for higher achievers. Neither does it yet reflect the cultural diversity of the school's population because the school does not look closely at whether any differential achievement of ethnic and gender groups is due to weaknesses in curriculum content. Professional development days give some support to teachers, but the time is wasted for many teachers because the content is not matched to individual's needs. The school is now in a position to work with parents and staff to implement a clear and detailed improvement plan about how it plans to improve student achievement.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

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

There are signs that, as the quality of instruction has improved in the last year, so has student achievement. This is especially so in math and writing. In the last year, the school has used its assessment systems more effectively to measure student achievement in reading, writing and math and to check progress. Last year it used the data to identify and successfully boost the achievement of students who showed some risk of failing the grade through small group intervention and summer school. This year it is also focusing on boosting the progress and raising the achievement of students who are most at risk of failing the grade. There is still some work to do to make sure all students are challenged enough, especially those who consistently reach grade standards and who could, with extra input, achieve goal in the grade 3 State tests.

The school checks the progress of students with disabilities closely and makes sure that any supports identified in individualized education programs are in place to meet their learning needs. This is especially so for students with complex learning needs. Although improving this year, those with behavioral difficulties have not been supported well in the past and so their achievement is not so high. The support for English language learners is less well targeted. The school does not analyze its data to evaluate whether some ethnic and gender groups achieve better than others. This diminishes its ability to evaluate rigorously the quality and impact of its work and whether any changes are required to curriculum

and instruction to meet different cultural and learning needs. The school compares its performance with its District Reference Group of schools and has started to compare how well it is performing with schools in another district with similar student demographics. It has not yet started to use the data to identify subjects where student achievement is higher in some of those schools and the reasons why, so that it can learn from their good practice.

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

This area of the school's work needs improvement.

The quality of teaching is improving but still varies too much across the school, especially in reading. Teachers who are now starting to use more hands-on, practical and interactive learning are finding that student engagement is higher and learning increased. In some classes, teachers use "think, pair, share" as an effective strategy for students to express their views, offer their ideas and rehearse their thoughts. In addition, some teachers give their students opportunities to work collaboratively on group tasks and this helps them to share ideas and consolidate their understanding more effectively. However, some teachers still rely on whole-class rather than targeted group teaching and direct learning too much. As a result, some students flounder while others find the work too easy. Students have too little opportunity to think things through for themselves and to organize their own work. Others use too many worksheets for students to complete individually which limits opportunity to share. This lowers engagement and limits the rate of learning.

The use of data to focus instruction is improving but is not yet consistent in all classes. In reading, data is not used sufficiently well to target the needs of some student subgroups, especially English language learners, some students with emotional needs and higher achievers. This is partly due to a lack of resources, teachers not being given the data with enough consistency, and partly because some teachers do not plan the specific supports or challenging enough work for all students in their class. In math, most teachers use data effectively to plan needs-led targeted small group teaching that focuses on specific skills and strategies. Teachers plan reading centers thoughtfully to include a varied practical range of activities that engage student interest. These are not always differentiated suitably to extend and challenge the learning of higher achievers or to give students enough time to read independently at their level. Often students choose books that are too easy. While this is acceptable on occasion, it is important that they read more challenging materials if they are to achieve a higher level.

The quality of teaching in math has improved this year. Practical activities engage student interest and motivate them to find solutions to problems. There has been particularly good improvement in grade 2 where students are challenged more this year. The assistant principal from the Mead School has given good support to grade 2 teachers' more effective use of math assessment data to match learning to student need. Teachers have higher expectations of what students can learn and so challenge them more to think. As a result, students are better prepared for learning in math in grade 3.

Teachers are always open to suggestions, eager to improve their craft and to make a difference to student learning. They attend workshops when required and meet in grade level data teams to discuss student progress. Professional development is not always differentiated enough to meet individual teacher's needs. As a result, teachers are not receiving the targeted support they need from the school and district training. Instructional Resource Teachers give good guidance and ideas to teachers to support learning in class, which is beginning to result in higher achievement and faster progress.

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 aligned to State standards and so ensures students study a broad and mostly relevant

curriculum. Subjects are aligned to grade level standards although teachers rarely plan for students who are capable of achieving higher than these. Students receive daily classes in reading, writing and math and weekly classes in physical education, library, art and/or music. Students do not study Social Studies and Science as often as they should. As a result, the curriculum is not sufficiently balanced. Some project work and regular field trips add interest to students' learning. The school has only just started to look at ways to adapt the curriculum more effectively for higher achievers, students with disabilities and English language learners, and to reflect students' cultural heritage.

Teachers meet in grade teams to look at student work and assessment data, and adjust the curriculum accordingly. This has been particularly successful in math where new assessments guide the skills and strategies that students will learn in each cycle. The school continues to look for ways to increase the time for teachers to meet and to plan a reading curriculum that builds student skills systematically from class to class and grade to grade. Currently, the reading curriculum does not build on students' prior learning sufficiently well. New assessments are starting to inform open-ended questions and so improve the level of curriculum planning. The work has now started to extend the planning of curriculum content beyond the grade level for higher achievers. Pacing guides in writing introduced this year are beginning to guide lesson content effectively and to build student skills systematically over time. There are enough resources to teach the agreed curriculum programs.

Criterion 4: Students' personal character development

This area of the school's work meets requirements.

Students behave well because they know that teachers care about them. When they move around the building they are supervised closely, although most can manage without such focused support, as demonstrated when students go into school from the buses every morning. Students generally respond well to the behavior management strategies in class. They try their best to "stay in the green," although some students find it hard to accept when their card is moved to the yellow or red. Teachers do not differentiate the systems yet to meet the needs of individual students. For example, enabling students who consistently behave well to move up to a new color above green and use this as a positive reward and incentive rather than the more negative one of moving cards to the yellow and red. Also giving students the responsibility to move their card and then the chance to move it back quickly is a useful tool to encourage good behavior.

Students' enjoyment of school is reflected in their satisfactory attendance and punctuality. Students rise to the higher challenges when they are presented. They like lessons that make them think and say that, "the hard math is fun." They like the practical activities. In Life Skills classes, they talk sensibly about how to "stop and think" before making important decisions. They work well independently during reading center time and share resources amicably. However, in some classes, students do not have the opportunity to choose their activities and so are not able to demonstrate whether they could manage harder work.

There are only a few opportunities for students to take responsibility for their own behavior and learning. Students are sensible enough to offer their views about school improvement and to know their next-step learning goals so that they can improve their work independently. Students in kindergarten choose from a range of centers every morning and that starts to build their independence. This choice is not extended into other times of the day or to other grades to build on these important personal skills.

Criterion 5: School Climate

This area of the school's work meets requirements.

Parent, staff and students agree that the school is now a much more pleasant place to work and learn.

This is because the school has been successful in establishing a culture that is safe and calm and that runs smoothly every day. Clear rules and expectations are established and followed consistently. On arrival last year, the principal quickly evaluated all organizational practices in moving students in and out and around the building. New systems have been successful due to the consistent implementation by all staff. Everyone knows their role and follows this diligently. As a result, students transition quickly and safely to classes, and on and off the buses.

The Life Skills program is very effective in supporting students' emotional, social and moral development. Through special classes, students talk about various social and moral dilemmas that they may meet as they grow older. Classes teach them to "Stop and think" and so develop their ability to stay safe. The program teaches students how to take responsibility for their own behavior, and their health and safety when in school and at home.

The school does not yet give students enough opportunity to show initiative and take responsibility for their own learning. While some teachers give students good opportunity to solve problems in math or to work with a partner on a task, in other classes teachers still direct learning too much by telling students precisely what to do, how and when. In effective classes, teachers refer to rubrics so that students know clearly what they need to do to improve. In others, these are just posted on walls, often too high for students to see, and so students are not clear enough about the purpose of their task or what they need to achieve at the end of it.

Relationships in all classes are positive for most of the time. There are still occasions when students behave inappropriately in class, due partly to their particular emotional needs and partly because their behavior is not being managed effectively. Special services staff give good support to all students who need extra nurturing time by talking to them individually and in small groups about their feelings. Groups "R" Us allows students to share common experiences about their feelings, such as what is making them feel sad or angry, and to support each other in developing solutions together. This has helped most students to learn in general education classes with very little support needed. Suitable support is given to students who still display challenging behaviors.

Criterion 6: Effective Leadership and Management

This area of the school's work needs improvement.

The principal and assistant principal give strong and purposeful leadership. They have complementary skills and so the partnership is very effectively starting to result in improvements to the school's work. One of the greatest achievements in the first year is gaining the trust of nearly all staff members who see the administration as supportive and developmental, and not judgmental. As a result, staff are committed to the school's goals of raising student achievement. They recognize that their hard work has resulted in a school environment that supports student learning. Together, staff have created a building and classrooms that are welcoming and well-organized learning environments where student work and achievements are celebrated.

The school has worked closely with the district to create a district improvement plan. This has not yet been adapted to detail specifically what Prendergast School will do to raise student achievement and identify how it will know it has achieved what it set out to do through measurable long-term and benchmark goals. Although starting to take effect, the work of data teams at building and instructional levels is still developing. The objective use of data to drive instruction and decisions about school improvement is not yet established practice across the school. Teachers have met in vertical grade teams once. They would value the opportunity to meet more regularly so that they can better understand what their students need to know by the time they start in grade 3.

The principal and assistant principal work alongside the teachers to monitor the quality of the school's work. Through discussions with teachers, analysis of student assessment data, looking at student work, teachers' planning and observing classes, they have an acute knowledge of each teacher's strengths

as well as their areas for improvement. There has been some opportunity in the last year for teachers to work together to learn from each other's good practice. This has built and extended the expertise of many teachers who can see strong improvement in student personal and academic development as a result. As yet, this information has not been used effectively to identify personalized professional development for individual teachers. All staff are required to attend the same professional development regardless of their knowledge and skill level and subject responsibility. As a result, some training is not relevant and does not support personal and professional development sufficiently well.

Instructional resource teachers and facilitators, and the district literacy and math directors are starting to support the quality of instruction and learning more effectively this year. Nearly all teachers welcome the support and higher achievement in reading, writing and math is evident in many classes.

Criterion 7: Partnerships with Parents and Community

This area of the school's work needs improvement.

The school recognizes that it reaches mainly those parents who regularly attend the many school functions it holds. There is still some work to do to ensure that all parents are equally well informed about the school's work. The principal and assistant principal have implemented several necessary changes to improve student achievement, especially in grade 2. Due to time pressures, the reasons for these have not always been communicated quickly or clearly enough to parents so that they can understand the reasons for the change and be more supportive of the school's work.

Helpful hint leaflets give parents clear guidance on how to support their children's reading effectively at home. The leaflets value the role parents play as their children's first educators. They are available for parents to pick up when they come to the school. However, some parents do not regularly visit and so do not benefit from these useful guides. The school should find alternative ways to make these guides accessible to all parents perhaps by posting them on its website or sending them home by student mail.

The school consults and encourages parents to participate in parent/teacher organization events and so contribute to the identification of its improvement priorities. It ensures that specialists and staff meet regularly with the parents whose children have specific educational needs to plan further guidance and supports. The school values the diversity of its community, although it has only recently started to find ways to celebrate the many cultures in school.

The school is continually looking for ways to involve the community in its work. Students go into the community on field trips and visitors come into school to talk about their jobs which adds relevance and meaning to learning. Students learn from first-hand and widen their experiences to help them internalize new learning.

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

This area needs improvement.

The school has close relationships with the district and meets regularly with the district superintendent and assistant superintendent to discuss student progress and the quality of its work. As a result, the district knows the school's strengths and what it needs to improve. The district has a suitable number of supports for the school. A special education director, literacy and math director give appropriate support to curriculum and instructional planning. The quality of support is good in math. It is variable in special education and literacy because both directors' time is not focused to need. As a result, their time spent in school is spread too thinly to give ongoing and targeted supports to the school.

Administrators have completed the district improvement plan 2007-12. This outlines how the school will be held accountable for students' personal and academic achievement and contributes to the district

work to raise student achievement in reading and math, increase parental involvement, and reduce the number of suspensions. The plan includes clearly measurable and specific objectives for increasing parental involvement and reducing the suspension rates. There is a specific measurable objective for reducing the suspension rate for Black students and students with specific learning disabilities because data has identified that these are the school's most vulnerable groups. As a result, the school is able to measure whether it has been successful and to monitor progress towards achieving the goals.

There are weaknesses in the improvement planning for raising student achievement in this kindergarten through grade 2 school. The improvement plan outlines what actions the school will take to support the district's work to raise student achievement in reading and math, but does not have measurable targets against which to evaluate its success. All objectives are measured by Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) scores available only in grades 3 through 8, and so are not specific enough to Prendergast School. There is no objective for improving other subjects, especially writing and science, so that the school can see its contribution in setting the foundation for achievement in these aspects.

The district professional development plan does not identify clearly the specific supports individual teachers need to improve the quality of their instruction. Teachers are expected to attend the same training regardless of their skills and expertise levels, which is unsatisfactory.