



**CSDE**

**QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT**

## **Stamford Public Schools**

# **Quality Review Report**

**Cloonan Middle School**

**11 West North Street  
Stamford  
Connecticut  
06902**

**Principal: David Rudolph**

**Dates of review: November 19 – 20, 2008**

**Reviewer: Jean Mackie**

**Cambridge Education (LLC)**



**Cambridge  
Education**

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## Part 1: The School Context

### Information about the school:

Cloonan Middle school has 594 students enrolled in grades 6 through 8. The student body comprises 41.2 percent White students, 29.5 percent Hispanic, 22.2 percent Black and 7.1 percent Asian American students. Students with disabilities account for 15.7 percent of the school population and approximately 6 percent of students are designated as English language learners. The main language spoken by this group is Spanish. Forty-two percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price meals, which is almost twice the figure for the State.

The school's attendance on October 1, 2007 was 98.1 percent, which was above that of the district and State. The principal has been at the school for six years. There has been little staff mobility, resulting in a faculty with an average of well over 20 years' experience within education, mostly within Cloonan. The school has two houses, each containing sixth, seventh and eighth graders. Within each house, the students are tracked into four ability groupings.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well:

- There are positive relationships between students and between students and adults, which are reflected by a calm and purposeful atmosphere in classrooms and around the school.
- The school provides a safe and secure environment, with students comfortable about approaching adults in time of need.
- There are some good examples of group work where students are challenged to apply their knowledge and work collaboratively.
- The school is strengthening its analysis of data to understand student performance more accurately.
- The Achievement via Individual Determination (AVID) program has contributed to the progress that some students have made resulting in movement to higher achieving groups.

### Areas for Improvement:

- Ensure that the expectations of what all students can achieve is raised by reviewing the tracking system and taking steps to remove the barriers that students in the lower groups currently experience.
- Strengthen the quality of instruction by ensuring that:
  - all teachers use data about student progress and performance to inform planning and differentiated instruction;
  - there are more frequent and regular opportunities for paired and collaborative work to take place, especially for students in lower groups;
  - activities are planned to make maximum use of the time available during each class period;
  - the learning environment is more stimulating with relevant displays, including student work;
  - there is more active participation of students in their own learning, including goal setting; and
  - teachers use technology more frequently to underpin and reinforce learning.
- Use data more systematically to set challenging, measurable targets at individual, class, grade and whole school level which are firmly based on students' prior attainment and reflect high aspirations for all.
- Strengthen assessment practice by establishing common agreements about what standards look like at each grade level and create scoring rubrics to demonstrate competency so that students are aware of their current achievement levels and what they should be aiming for.
- Establish rigorous and regularly applied systems for monitoring and evaluating the quality of instruction to ensure that there is greater consistency and that the steps taken to develop staff are having the desired impact on improving student growth and achievement.

## Part 3: Main Findings

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

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

The principal, with effective support from his two assistant principals, acts as a good role model for this nurturing and caring school, where students feel safe and secure. Teachers are similarly concerned for the students' academic and personal well being and, as a result, there are positive relationships throughout the school. Students get on together well as reflected by their willingness to support each other in class and their demeanor around the building.

Despite these positive features, the school has not made adequate yearly progress (AYP) for some years now as a number of subgroups have not met their targets. Achievement levels are not as high as they should be as low expectations and shortcomings in instructional practice limit the growth and progress that students make. This is most notably the case for Black and Hispanic students who are, for the most part, tracked in lower groups.

The core curriculum is in the early stages of alignment to State standards. There are inconsistencies in implementation across grades and subjects which lead to a lack of clear vertical articulation as students move from one grade to the next. The AVID program is providing some valuable opportunities for targeted students to show growth academically and personally. Instructional practice is variable, with some examples of highly challenging lessons which motivate students and encourage collaboration. These examples do not happen often enough however, especially in the lower groups, to ensure that all students benefit and progress their learning. Teachers do not use data to inform their planning to ensure that lessons match the range of needs in the class and pace is sometimes slow. As a result, some students struggle with their work while others finish early and are not fully challenged.

Teachers establish clear expectations for behavior in class, which, for the most part are respected by students. They sit quietly even when the work is not fully engaging. Any incidents of inappropriate behavior around the school are dealt with promptly. When provided with the opportunity, students respond well and are eager to show initiative and take responsibility both within class and more widely. They raise funds and engage with a number of community groups.

The school improvement plan is appropriately focused on raising achievement but lacks realistic and challenging, measurable targets for subgroups, grades and subjects, which would be more helpful in underpinning the work of the school. Monitoring and evaluation procedures lack the rigor required to ensure that teachers are implementing strategies explored during professional development sessions. As a result, instructional practice remains inconsistent and is not improving quickly enough. While the majority of teachers are keen to develop their skills and expertise, some are reluctant to reflect on practice and to take the necessary steps to ensure students progress more quickly. The school keeps parents regularly informed about events in the school and important dates. Some do not feel that the data about the curriculum being covered and the progress that their children are making is sufficiently informative, however. The school has a suitable range of links with the community and outside organizations.

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

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

The school's results overall are below those of the State. The school did not make AYP in 2008 as only the White and Asian American subgroups met the targets set in both reading and math. The school is

now in its fifth year in need of improvement. In 2007, the school's results in the math tests were well below those of the State and below those of the district. Reading results, although lower than those of math, compared more favorably. Scores were below those of the State but in line with those of the district. The proportion of students at advanced level was actually above those of both the State and district.

Results over time have improved at a modest rate although the increases in performance in both math and reading in 2008 were recognized as the most significant within the district. There are variations in the results for each grade. Scores in grade 6 have increased more steadily than those in grade 7. The weaker progress over time is evident in the grade 8, where results have dropped across reading, math and writing over the last three years. Cohorts of students broadly sustain their level of proficiency as they move through the school, but the proportion of students at goal declines, most notably in math.

There is variation in performance between different subgroups within the school. The achievement gap between White and Asian American students and those from other ethnic groups remains wide. This is linked to the tracking system, where the White and Asian American students are, for the most part, in the top two groups while Black and Hispanic students are in the lower two groups. Expectations for what these students can achieve are not as high as they should be. Nevertheless, Black students, especially in grade 6, made considerable gains from 2007 to 2008, which the school attributes to the focused AVID program that has targeted this lower achieving group. Girls generally perform more strongly than boys, although the 2007 results for math are broadly similar. Students with disabilities make better progress over time in reading than they do in mathematics. Some well targeted support has enabled a number of English language learners to gain fluency during their time in school. Despite the promising gains shown in 2008, the inconsistencies in instructional practice and low expectations of some teachers result in progress for students, including higher achievers, that is not as good as it should be. More consistency and rigor for all is needed if the achievement gap is to close while sustaining high standards and progress for those at goal and advanced level.

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

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

Teachers in a number of classes set challenging and motivational tasks for their students to undertake. In these instances, the activities often include group work and hands on activities so that students can plan together and share their ideas. The students respond well and collaborate purposefully together. In a grade 8 social studies lesson, for example, the students were fully focused on a collaborative writing task. Grade 6 students were busy in a math class constructing a poster using percentages in a bar chart to display their findings from a peer survey. These group activities occur largely in the top two tracks, with very little evidence that students in the lower groups have such regular exposure to similar challenges. Where lessons are largely teacher centered, with limited opportunities for students to take more responsibility for their learning, the responses are more muted. Students will listen respectfully but do not engage cognitively with the work in hand. Teachers generally display confidence with the subject matter, and most use their knowledge to underpin clear instructions and questioning. However, questions are often directed at a small number of students, or at volunteers, allowing the rest of the class to take a passive role. In a few instances, subject knowledge is less secure and this hampers the teachers' ability to really challenge the students.

The majority of teachers establish a positive working atmosphere within their classrooms. Students settle down quickly and are usually prepared with the appropriate equipment for learning. Not all teachers fully explored this situation to provide a more varied and stimulating range of activities for the students. Desks arranged in rows limit opportunities for discussion and sharing, for example. Teachers do not regularly use the data available to them to plan activities that fully match the range of needs in a class. Although tracking reduces the range of capabilities and aptitudes within a teaching group, it is not in itself a solution to differentiation. As a result, some students struggle with the tasks, while others complete their work

early. Teachers provide extra help for those in need but sometimes allow the higher achievers who finish early to complete work from other subjects, which is not helping to extend and fully challenge them. In some instances, teachers use exactly the same material for all four tracks in a grade with very little modification for the classes at all. The comparatively small group of English language learners is appropriately supported through some specialist teaching. The co-teaching taking place in some lower groups shows promising signs of improving student learning. This was evident in a small grade 6 class where the two teachers were effectively encouraging students to talk about poetry so that they were eager to select their own poetry book for further study. In another grade 6 class, the teachers were encouraging the students to work collaboratively in book clubs. These are positive steps which need to be built upon and good practice shared.

The teachers have access to a wide range of data about student performance and professional development has focused on how to use it constructively to support student learning. Teachers share this data in collaborative groups, both at grade and subject level. Informal discussions also take place. Practice is variable, however. Teachers use tests and quizzes to gauge understanding and some use rubrics to underpin the assessment of projects and essays. Common formative assessments are not firmly in place so there is inconsistency in the standards expected by teachers. Opportunities are missed to display student work in class, with the standards and written feedback in evidence so that the students can see their achievement level at a glance and the goals that they should be aiming for. While there are attractive and lively displays in some classrooms, too many are drab, with little on the walls to excite interest or generate discussion about the topics being covered. The use of technology to underpin and extend learning is very limited.

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

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

The school is in the process of implementing a range of curriculum guidelines from the district. These do not, as yet, fully reflect State standards. Teachers in most subjects are disadvantaged during lesson planning and assessment by the minimal formal curriculum documents available to them. Literacy curriculum documents are better developed than other subject areas in that they refer to State grade level expectations and a collection of instructional strategies. The inconsistencies in the guidelines means that it is difficult to ensure that students' learning builds on prior experience and provides suitable progression as they move from one grade to the next.

The school is also trying to adjust to the recent move to an extended academic period, which has provided challenges for teachers. There is no system in place for the school to formally plan, review, and develop the curriculum among teachers and administrators. Nevertheless, the school provides the expected core curriculum which is enhanced by some, although not many, electives. Higher groups have more variety than do the lower groups, who generally receive additional literacy and numeracy. The delivery of these sessions is variable.

The school largely uses an inclusion model with targeted pull-out support for English language learners and students with disabilities. Better coordination between special and regular education teachers is required in order to further raise the level of learning of students with disabilities. Although there are few modifications to the curriculum per se, there is sufficient support in terms of the number of specialist staff to reinforce the curriculum for these subgroups.

Most teachers blend a combination of textbooks and support exercises with some project based work. Some teachers plan a wide range of exciting and practical learning experiences, although this practice is not consistent. Lower performing groups are routinely given fewer project based assignments and group work. Cultural identities of this diverse school are not systematically woven into instructional materials or specifically evident in the textbooks used. Students struggling in literacy or math utilize a tutoring program that is seen by many, including the students themselves, as effective.

School curricula do not help to promote the differential teaching and learning necessary given the use of tracking. Homework usually supports learning in class, while higher achieving students are given additional and different assignments/projects that allow them to develop advanced skills. The AVID program, designed to help targeted students prepare for and succeed in colleges and universities, offers a rigorous program of instruction in academic skills such as managing time and the use of Cornell notes, which are required to be successful in high school and beyond.

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

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

The school's welcoming environment reflects the good behavior and positive attitudes shown by the vast majority of students. There is a calm and purposeful atmosphere in classrooms and around the school. Students move sensibly along the hallways during changeovers. They treat the building and classroom equipment with respect. Students respond positively when given the opportunity to show initiative and take responsibility. They enjoy group work, for example, and like to make presentations to their peers. Unfortunately, these strategies predominate in the upper tracks so that students in the lower groups who are largely Black and Hispanic have fewer opportunities to display their initiative and develop a more independent approach to their work. Students in an AVID class, with a greater representation of these two ethnic groups, demonstrated good levels of personal confidence in articulating their thoughts and ideas.

Relationships throughout the school are positive. The principal and staff care greatly about the students and their personal well being. Students describe the school as 'one big family.' They get on well together and look out for each other both in and outside of the classroom. Relationships with staff are also secure, especially where teachers show an active interest in the students as individuals. Students say that they particularly enjoy those classes where teachers make the learning fun and have high expectations of them. They generally act with maturity, respect the values of others, and know when behavior is unacceptable. Where incidents of inappropriate behavior do happen, these occur mostly in classes which lack focus, motivation and challenge for the students. Although students know the school expectations for behavior, they are less clear about specific goals for improving their work as these are rarely discussed with them in detail.

Students contribute positively to the wider community through raising funds and collecting food parcels, for example. Those who belong to the student government gain further opportunities to broaden their leadership skills. Approximately one third of students are engaged in sporting activities and other clubs. Attendance remains high, reflecting the enthusiasm that students have for school.

#### **Criterion 5: School Climate**

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

The administration is seen by all as a key group in promoting a safe and nurturing environment within the school, where students and staff respect each other. This was particularly evident recently when the whole school was devastated by the loss of a very long standing teacher. The administration and counselors were commended on their efforts to support both students and staff alike during this most difficult time. This caring approach underpins the positive relationships that exist throughout the school.

The school promotes high expectations of work and behavior through its range of communications with parents and students. However, these are not always followed through in practice in every classroom. Expectations are generally much higher for those in the upper groups, although even this is not consistent across all subjects and grades. Expectations for the mainly Black and Hispanic students in the lower

groups are not high enough. As a result, they are not exposed to the same opportunities to develop their independent and collaborative learning skills through group and project work. The tendency for a more teacher centered approach and low level activities for these groups can lead to disengagement and, on occasions, some inappropriate behavior.

Despite the good relationships in the school, the administration recognizes the need to create more opportunities for the different groups to actively integrate so that there is a greater awareness of and respect for the range of cultures within the school. Although the school organizes some activities such as Hispanic dance evenings, for example, there is little within the building to reinforce and celebrate the different backgrounds of the students on a daily basis.

The practice of setting clear and precise academic goals for students is not well embedded in the school. Lessons have overall learning objectives but teachers do not set longer term, measurable goals so that they can regularly discuss with individual students their progress towards them and their next steps in learning. The school continues to promote good attendance and punctuality. Secure systems are in place to follow up absentees.

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

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

The principal and the two assistant principals are fully committed to securing improved outcomes for all students. They have a range of complementary skills and work well together as a team. They understand the need to ensure that more of the instructional practice is of the good quality demonstrated by some of the teachers in the school. There is a commitment from most staff to secure these improvements but there is also a group who are having difficulty in adjusting to the changing demands of the educational system and the subsequent need to reflect on personal practice.

The principal has taken some positive steps to improve learning experiences through, for example, the team teaching for students in the lower groups. Practice is still evolving but the students are generally responding well. The school has modified its schedule in line with district requirements and has still been able to create space for collaborative meetings for staff development. These facilitate both grade and subject level discussions. Many teachers, but not all, make good use of this time to reflect on practice and consider strategies for improving learning in the classroom. As a result, there are inconsistencies in implementing new ideas and programs. Some of the AVID approaches, for example, should be adopted more widely across classrooms so that all students can benefit from them.

The school improvement plan is appropriately focused on raising standards. The quantitative targets set are not firmly based on a thorough analysis of students' current levels of achievement and what subsequently would be a realistic but challenging expectation of growth for all subgroups in each subject and grade. There is some confusion in the plan between actions to be taken and how impact will be measured. The plan would also benefit from some interim benchmarks so that progress towards annual goals can be more easily monitored. The administration has made good strides in analyzing data and is well placed to take this step and to engage staff in meaningful conversations about expectations for progress in each class.

The principal and assistant principals are visible around the school and undertake classroom walkthroughs. They know the strengths and shortcomings in teaching and learning across the classes. However, the current systems for monitoring and evaluating instructional practice lack rigor and regularity, so inconsistencies and weaknesses remain. The principal is aware of this and is, rightly, looking to improve this aspect of the school's work. At present, he is concerned that the increasing demands of the district and the need to attend meetings are having a negative impact on what he knows needs to be achieved in school. Union pressure is another potential barrier. Nevertheless, time must be created if practice is to improve and all teachers are implementing agreed strategies to at least an acceptable level,

as a minimum. With focused and timely support from the district, the school has the capacity to effect change more rapidly for the benefit of the students.

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

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

The administrative team forges a sound relationship with parents. They have worked closely with an established and supportive group of parents and the staff to increase parental involvement in the school. Parents feel that the administrative team is supportive and empathetic to their needs, but are not as accessible as parents would like due to their perception that district meetings keep administrators out of the building. Parental participation and attendance in workshops and parent-teacher meetings is slowly increasing. There is a strong group of parents who support the school's work on a daily basis. They help to organize student activities and provide support on field trips. However, there is no parent representation on formal school improvement discussions and data driven decision making.

Most teachers communicate regularly with parents about their children's achievements. Quarterly parent-teacher conferences are effective for those parents who attend, however greater parental attendance is needed and might be facilitated by different scheduling options. An assignment journal is designed to keep parents informed of academic expectations, but this tool is not consistently used from class to class. Mid-term student progress reports are checklist in nature and do not provide parents with sufficient feedback in the form of detailed commentary. Information about the school is available for parents in both Spanish and English.

The parent teacher organization (PTO) arranges fundraisers for various projects. Parents report concerns that school activities do little to enrich learning or to celebrate the school's diverse cultures, and also that there is an insufficient number and quality of extension or extra curricular activities to extend and strengthen the students' educational experiences. The issue of culture and social class and the broader community's perception around homogeneous groupings needs to be tackled. The school, with support from the district, must make every effort to build a shared vision with the community for the success of all students. Local businesses provide various supports for the school. General Electric has been a generous partner in enhancing curricular offerings, as has Panasonic. The UCONN Pals Program supports students who are the first in their families planning to attend college and Met Life provides mentors for students.

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

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

The administration would value more frequent visits from district personnel so that they could have a better understanding of the strengths and needs of the school. They are struggling with the number of new initiatives that they are being asked to implement at relatively short notice. Important decisions, new programs, the development of curriculum and policymaking appear to be overly top-down and not inclusive enough to meet the needs of the school. Data is available as the central office is able to provide data sets and reports, upon request from the school. A more proactive approach would be valued.

The school has made great strides in the past year of beginning to examine data to inform instruction. It now needs further district support to move to more advanced stages of data driven decision making and other good practices that emanate from a good school level data team. The district can help develop more creative scheduling options to allow for more school level and grade level data teams to meet. There is a concern that the district provides insufficient support for teaching and learning. Professional development is variable and not always in line with the teachers' needs. A comprehensive standards based curricula needs to be developed for all content areas. Formal curriculum documents are

inconsistent across curricular areas – some link to mastery test content strands, some do not. None of the curriculum documents fully reflect State curriculum standards. This leads to frustration among the administration and teachers within the school.

The school leadership would value more district support in the area of teacher evaluation and teacher accountability. In addition, the district driven policy of student groupings, or cogs, appears to perpetuate low expectations for lower performing students. Significantly, there has been a lack of district support to make the transition to longer academic periods more effective in maximizing teaching and learning time for its subgroups that are not making AYP. As the racial and ethnic diversity of the student population grows, the district needs to develop a plan that facilitates and builds the internal and external stakeholders' belief systems regarding diversity, school quality and student achievement.