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QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

New London Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Bennie Dover Jackson Middle School

**36 Waller Street
New London
Connecticut
06320**

Principal: Jaye Wilson

Dates of review: November 13 – 14, 2007

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**Cambridge
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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:

Bennie Dover Jackson is the only middle school in the district. There are approximately 700 students, across grades 6, 7 and 8. At 70 percent, the proportion of students eligible for free or reduced price meals is three times the proportion across the state. The proportion of students with a home language other than English is 21 percent, which is twice the figure for the state. Nearly all of these students receive English as a second language (ESL) services, a proportion which is six times higher than for the state. The predominant language is Spanish, although a number of other languages are also represented. At just over 14 percent, the proportion of students with special education needs is a little higher than the state figure, which is just under 12 percent. Student attendance is below that of other middle schools across the state, being 93 percent on October 1, 2007.

Approximately 45 percent of students are Hispanic and 34 percent are Black. A further 15 percent of students are White, with 3 percent Asian American and 2 percent American Indian students. The student population is more transient than across the state, with only 87 percent of students in grades 7 and 8 in the 2006-07 school year, having been present in the school the previous year. The figure across the state was over 92 percent.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The principal, ably supported by her administration team and with effective support from the district, has established a clear direction for the improvement of the school. There is some positive impact of recent initiatives on the classroom experiences of students.
- The development of a clearly structured curriculum, with common formative assessments, and subsequent discussion between teachers, provides an effective vehicle for driving instructional improvement. The role of department heads is positive in supporting this process and other changes occurring within the school.
- The school's climate supports and nurtures students, who welcome the relationships that they have with, and the support that they receive from, their teachers. The refocusing of behavioral expectations and responsibilities requires teachers to be more reflective of their practice.
- Parents appreciate the ease of access that they have to the staff, including the principal, and recognize that the staff work hard in the best interests of their children.
- Students appreciate the range of enrichment activities made available to them, including support for learning outside of the classroom, and the opportunities to work constructively within the community.

Areas for Improvement:

- Continue to develop the practice of common formative assessments to drive improvements in pedagogy, the curriculum and student achievement.
- Continue the practice started in using data to drive improvements in the school's behavior support systems and provide teachers with a wider range of skills and interventions to enable them to address student behaviors more effectively in their own classroom.
- Use the collective information gathered from administration walkthroughs to provide the staff with more information about the on-going strengths observed across the school, and to raise questions concerning the consistency of instructional practice and teacher expectations. Ensure that the administration shares a common understanding of what most effective instruction looks like to strengthen this work.
- Ensure that the impact of each initiative on student learning is carefully and systematically evaluated to ensure that each initiative provides good value for the resources attributed to it.
- Develop a longer-term improvement plan that captures the vision for the school's sustained growth, sets challenging but achievable performance targets for student achievement, together with the actions necessary to achieve them and the milestones to measure progress towards them.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school needs improvement.

The school is in year four of needing improvement under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Bennie Dover Jackson Middle School has initiated two main developments this year in order to improve the impact of its work and to raise student achievement. Most staff are embracing these changes wholeheartedly. They view the work as challenging, but see the potential benefits for the students. Teachers are beginning to work smarter, because they are increasingly using data to drive instruction and decision making.

Common formative assessments have been introduced across the school. Teachers are provided with the time to plan assessments collaboratively, as well as to review student responses to them. They also use this time productively to discuss how to develop their instructional practices to better meet the needs of their students. This work is being supported well by department heads, most of whom are shared with the local high school. This assessment practice builds upon previous work, through collaboration across the district, to better define the curriculum. These actions are ensuring that teachers have a better understanding of the end-point of their work and an ongoing evaluation of student progress towards that point. This is helping to add much needed focus and rigor to learning.

The second key development is targeted at better understanding and improving students' attitudes and behaviors. Data is also the key to this development so that the school has more direct evidence of where incidents are occurring, and why. A major overhaul of systems and expectations has placed more responsibility onto teachers to directly deal with issues in their classrooms. Most staff see a direct correlation between the quality of classroom experiences and the attitude, motivation and behavior of most students. However, some staff are finding it difficult to accept their responsibility for this. Some staff need greater clarity concerning their roles and responsibilities. Some staff are also concerned that inconsistencies in implementing expectations, including those for behavior and school uniform, are limiting the impact of this work.

Against the backdrop of very high referrals and suspensions, most students behave well and have positive attitudes to learning. They value the relationships that they have with teachers and other students. They appreciate the support for learning, informally through one-on-ones with teachers after school, as well as formally through homework club and Saturday school.

Many students do make adequate progress during their time in school. However, there are too many inconsistencies in school practices to guarantee coherent and sustained progress for every student as they move from grade to grade. At the moment, too many classrooms lack the required rigor. The administration does spend time in classrooms, but their observations are not routinely fed back into school improvement plans and actions. Outcomes from their walkthroughs need to be reflected back to staff more systematically in order to support them in improving their practice, as well as establishing beyond doubt where instructional leadership lies within the school.

The school is improving and moving in the right direction to continue that improvement. The district has helped to ensure that the school has the capacity to sustain this growth, although much continued support will be required to guarantee this. Longer term planning, to establish a shared vision for the future of the school and how state goals will be met over time, would support this. In addition, the school must evaluate the impact of the many initiatives being undertaken to ensure that the time and energy devoted are having the intended impact.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

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

Bennie Dover Jackson Middle School is the only middle school in the district, and so comparisons with other local middle schools are not possible. However, the proportion of students reaching proficiency on the state tests is much lower than for the state as a whole in both reading and mathematics. Similarly, the proportion of students reaching the higher goal level on the tests is well below that achieved statewide. Consequently, state targets are not met and the students' achievement remains in need of improvement.

The proportion of students reaching proficiency in mathematics in 2007 was a small increase on that for the previous year. The proportion in reading was slightly lower in 2007 than in 2006. The students' performance in mathematics in 2007 was higher than in reading, as it was in 2006. However, test scores in both areas have not improved over the past five years. Female students have tended to outperform their male counterparts, especially in reading. However, in 2007 a higher proportion of male than female students reached proficiency in reading in grades 6 and 7.

There is no overall pattern in the performance of students from different ethnic groups, other than White students consistently perform significantly better than Black and Hispanic students in both mathematics and reading. This achievement gap has not closed significantly over time. However, as the proportion of English language learners (ELLs) has increased, so has their performance on the tests. Nevertheless, their performance remains well below that of their peers.

Students with disabilities achieved much lower than did other students in the tests. A structured reading program, with frequent checks on progress has been introduced to better support students with special education needs. The school has a class for students with autism, where they receive effective support so that their academic and personal progress is secure. However, students in co-taught classrooms do not always show the same rate of progress. Sometimes there is insufficient collaboration between the general and special education teachers, limiting their impact. More generally, the school has very limited access to programs to target interventions at those students not making, or at risk of not making, adequate progress. This year, the school is benefiting from a full-time literacy coach and two part-time tutors. The school has a number of ways in which it attempts to meet the needs of its higher achieving students. The use of an honor roll encourages them to strive to achieve their best. Some classes in grades 7 and 8 are leveled to produce more homogenous groups, so that teachers can more readily apply an appropriate challenge.

Many students do make secure progress in individual classes. Sometimes the coherence and rigor of their work over a grade produces secure progress too. However, too many inconsistencies remain in the experiences of students to guarantee progress in each grade, in each subject, that coherently builds over three years to provide secure progress throughout the school. Overall, students have made insufficient progress during their time in school.

The school has set challenging goals for this year. While there are signs that recent actions are strengthening the curriculum, instruction is becoming more focused and students are responding more positively, there is insufficient data to indicate that the school is on track to achieve these goals. However, the school is now better placed to use baseline academic data to produce growth expectations for individual students and cohorts. The outcomes from common formative assessments could then be used realistically to ensure that students are on target to achieve these goals.

Criterion 2: The quality of instruction through teaching, learning and curriculum, and the use of data to promote learning

This area of the school's work needs improvement.

The school has a clear framework from which teachers can plan their instruction. The school has worked with the district to develop a curriculum that is aligned with the state standards and represents a coherent progression for students from grade to grade. The exception to this is the curriculum for English language arts, which has yet to be completed. A 90-minute literacy block has been introduced in an attempt to boost student performance. Teachers also have collaborative planning time, which further enables them to adopt common methodology across teams. Nevertheless, inconsistencies in the practice of individual teachers weaken the overall effectiveness of these initiatives. This is the case for mathematics, as well as literacy initiatives.

There is much effective instruction, built around positive relationships between students and teachers. Many teachers understand what the school expects of them, and implement challenging lessons that interest and motivate the students. For example, students in a grade 7 class were using a commercial program to develop their keyboarding skills, before going on to develop their formatting and layout skills by producing publicity material for a tour company. The students were purposeful, engaged and, with the effective support of the teacher, progressing at an appropriate pace. Most lessons have a clear aim, which the teacher communicates verbally to students and displays visually as a constant reminder to them. Objectives are usually linked to a state standard and sometimes made specific so that the students know precisely what is expected of them. For example, in a social studies class, the students knew that by the end of the period they would have to provide two reasons why Europeans traveled to America at the time of Columbus.

The school uses a number of strategies in an attempt to enhance student learning. For example, grade 7 and 8 mathematics classes are more homogeneously grouped, so that teachers can provide targeted support more easily. The school is trialing single gender classes in grade 6. There are early indications that this is having a positive impact for female students. Unfortunately, some staff turnover has resulted in less consistency and continuity for the males. More generally, teachers do not deploy a wide range of strategies that require all students to engage at all times, provide differentiated support and challenge for students, or take account of individual learning behaviors. Consequently, instruction too often lacks the cutting edge that is required to ensure that students make the progress that they need to. The lack of rigor and sharpness in some classes contrasts with the clarity and productive use of time in others, reducing the overall progress that students make as they move from grade to grade.

The recent introduction of common formative assessments, together with the standards based curriculum, is already beginning to challenge this situation. Much needed clarity is starting to emerge. Teachers are developing a greater understanding of the progress students are expected to make. Pre-tests are focusing teachers much more into understanding what students know and can do as they enter a course of study. Post-tests are requiring teachers to consider the effectiveness of their work with students. As a result, teachers are having to consider more deeply how to meet the needs of individual students, or small groups, most effectively prior to summative testing. This in turn is leading to more focused discussion between teachers and more consideration of which strategies are having most impact for which students. Most teachers are finding this work challenging, but understand the impact that it is already having and the tremendous potential for improving student achievement. They are embracing it and working hard to ensure that it succeeds. However, a small number of staff are more reluctant, continuing to question why their creativity is being removed, or why they can no longer dwell on their favored aspects of their subject, regardless of the poor performance of students on state tests.

The degree of formal professional development available to implement such system-wide reform has been quite limited in the time available. However, on-going professional development through peer support and especially from the heads of the department, is more than compensating for this. This is also ensuring that teachers understand what they are doing and have ownership of the outcomes. They are

learning from their experiences. For example, they are ensuring that the second cycle of assessments will be more productive than the first.

Overt behavior management strategies are not required in most lessons. Often, teachers use subtle strategies that do not distract from the flow of the lesson or call undue attention to an incident. However, some teachers have not developed strategies that utilize students' learning behaviors, rather than constantly challenge them. For example, there remains many opportunities for teachers to provide more hands-on activities and paired and group discussions to channel student energy more productively.

In general, students find the curriculum sufficiently broad to maintain their overall interest. They especially appreciate the support for learning that they receive outside of the school day. This includes less formal support from teachers to help with a particular problem, as well as homework club and Saturday school. The school's enrichment program provides a range of experiences for students, and some are pleased with the opportunity to work within the local community.

Criterion 3: Students' personal character development

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

Students generally behave well, although they are often quite noisy and boisterous as they move around the school. The school has recently reviewed and revised its disciplinary procedures, based on an evaluation of the data, to indicate hotspots and inconsistencies in practice. This is reducing the previous very high level of referrals, although much work remains to be done. The refocusing of behavioral expectations and responsibilities is requiring teachers to be more reflective of their practice and that of their peers. However, there remain inconsistencies in the way that expectations are implemented and a few teachers find it difficult to take sufficient responsibility for student behavior in their own classroom. Most students respond positively to the new school uniforms, although again there are inconsistencies in the way that teachers reinforce the school's expectations. Some teachers would welcome further clarification of precisely what they are expected to do in response to behavior and uniform issues, but also acknowledge that some of their colleagues are weakening the overall impact through their lack of action.

Despite the high level of internal and external exclusions, the students do operate in an atmosphere that is free from oppressive behaviors. Most respond positively to the school's expectations for their academic progress, especially where these are consistently articulated to them. Students recognize that a minority of their peers causes most of the issues that arise. They believe that the majority of teachers are respectful to students, even when needing to discipline them. Students also understand that sometimes teachers are very challenging because they have their best interests at heart and want them to succeed. However, they are also clear that a minority of teachers lacks these qualities. Grade 8 students reflect that their attitudes to learning and behavior have improved as they have matured and responded to the school's expectations and procedures. Relationships, with adults as well as other students, are mostly positive and supportive. Most students respond well to the school's increasingly high expectations for their academic as well as personal progress. For most students, the school is a positive and nurturing environment.

When provided with the opportunity to do so, most students accept responsibility and make a positive contribution to the school community. There are opportunities for students to become peer mediators, for example. Enrichment activities provide opportunities for student leadership. The school has received various awards over the years for its work with the community. The school continues to work hard to get students to accept responsibility for their own actions and this is positively reinforced in one-on-one conversations through the dean's office, for example. However, there remain further opportunities to provide students with leadership responsibilities throughout the school, as the greater focus on student learning and improving behaviors has the intended impact.

Although attendance remains some what below that of other middle schools across the state, it is improving. In part, this is the result of the school reaching out to families more effectively, as well as in more consistent action by school staff to encourage students to get to school in a timely manner.

Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management

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

There is a clear sense of direction within the school. Initiatives to strengthen the use of data to drive instruction and to address behavioral issues are providing a much needed foci for improvement. The principal has achieved this with good support from her administration team and the district. The district has been proactive in helping and guiding the school in these efforts and in providing some important resources to enable their success. The team of department heads is an important part of this framework. Their inclusion within the school has pushed its capacity to the point where it can sustain the recent growth. Nevertheless, the on-going support and guidance of the district will continue to be required if the challenges that lie ahead are to be successfully met. The assistant principal and dean are taking a positive lead in strengthening the impact of instruction and the school's behavioral systems, which is raising expectations for students and staff alike.

The administration, together with the department head, carry out the required formal evaluation of staff. The administration is also in classrooms less formally. To ensure that these walkthroughs support school improvement more effectively, they need to become a priority for all team members. Their collective findings need to be clearly communicated to the staff and used systematically to provide a snapshot of the progress being made towards the school's goals and objectives, its generic strengths and development needs. A common understanding of what most effective instruction looks like must act as support for this work.

Most staff share the commitment to improve the quality and focus of their work and thus raise student achievement. However, a minority of staff are finding it more difficult to embrace the school's changed priorities and raised expectations. Others remain wary of embracing current initiatives wholeheartedly, given the many changes in direction from the district in the past. Some would, also, want an even greater clarity on exactly what the principal expects of them. These concerns could be addressed constructively through a longer-term improvement plan. This should capture the vision for the school's sustained growth and set challenging but achievable performance targets for student growth. It should include the actions necessary to achieve the objectives, together with the milestones to measure progress towards them.

Many teachers are embracing the opportunities for leadership provided through collaborative activities and teamwork. Accountability is being strengthened through the focused use of data at team meetings. The focus is shifting from the process of instruction to the impact on learning. Department heads are positively reinforcing this systemic change. In this way, the school's increasingly explicit drive to improve student outcomes is becoming more visible. A number of recent initiatives have been introduced, all with the potential to raise student achievement. However, given the extent of the task, it is imperative that the impact of each initiative on student learning is carefully and systematically evaluated to ensure that each provides good value for the energy attributed to it.

The district understands the school well. It appreciates the school's strengths and has an accurate view of its development needs. There is a productive working relationship, so that support and guidance have been targeted where most needed. This has resulted in the positive work that has taken place in the school this year, especially with regard to curriculum expectations and assessment procedures. Support also includes a leadership coach for the school's administration. Consequently, the district is successfully helping to shape the future direction for the school and supporting improvements in student achievement.

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

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

Many parents are supportive of the school and its work. They appreciate the ease of access that they have to the staff, including the principal, and recognize that most staff work hard in the best interests of their children. Positive relationships with parents are supporting the school's drive to improve attendance and behavior. The principal is encouraging more teachers to have direct contact with parents, and team leaders are coordinating this to ensure that parents are not overwhelmed with telephone calls. Parents appreciate the positive feedback that they receive when students have done well. They also value the timeliness of contact when things are not working so well. There is a very strong bond between some families and the school, which is having a very significant influence on student attitudes and their progress. The school remains concerned to improve the proportion of parents with whom it has such effective relationships.

The school has introduced an electronic calling system. This is used to follow up on attendance issues and make parent teacher organization calls, as well as to provide reminders of events and calendar changes. The school takes every opportunity to keep its database of parent contact numbers as up to date as possible. Handbooks and information are provided in Spanish, as well as English. Report cards are sent home regularly, to keep parents up to date with the students' academic progress. The school is also ensuring that outcomes from the newly introduced common formative assessments are received at home. Parents are strongly advised to ensure that their child receives intervention support if the test results show them to be at risk of not making adequate progress. Parent teacher consultations are supported well by parents. They are organized well and run smoothly.

Some parents feel that they have been contacted for reasons that are too trivial. Sometimes they have raised concerns about the quality of instruction, or the amount of work that comes home. These concerns have usually been addressed appropriately and to the parent's satisfaction. The parent teacher organization meets monthly and focuses on providing support for the school. The building planning team also meets monthly, to discuss curriculum and resource issues.

The school takes appropriate advantage of the local environment to enhance the curriculum, which includes some interesting history and architecture. There are learning connections with the Coast Guard Academy, Mystic Seaport and Project Oceanology. The local community also supports some of the school's enrichment and after-school programs.