



**CTDOE**

**QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT**

## **Meriden Public Schools**

# **Quality Review Report**

**Lincoln Middle School**

**164 Centennial Avenue  
Meriden  
Connecticut  
06450-3707**

**Principal: Leo Lavallee**

**Dates of review: November 1 – 2, 2007**

**Reviewer: Peter Lewis**

**Cambridge Education (LLC)**



**Cambridge  
Education**

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## Part 1: The School Context

### Information about the school:

Lincoln Middle School is located in Meriden, Connecticut. It serves some 770 students from grades 6 to 8. The student population is increasingly diverse. Just over 10 percent are Black, nearly 42 percent are Hispanic, and just over 47 percent are White. There are a small number of Asian American students. The proportion of students with a non-English home language has increased over time to slightly above 30 percent, which is broadly in line with the district, but considerably above state averages. The percentage receiving English language learner (ELL) support in the school has grown to around 10 percent, which is above both district and state levels.

The school has a slightly lower proportion of students with special education needs than is found in other district schools although the proportion is higher than the average across the state. Sixty percent of students are eligible for free or reduced school lunches, which is slightly lower than the district but above the state average. The students' attendance, at just over 90 percent, is slightly below the average for both district and state schools.

The school occupies a new, purpose-built facility completed in 2004. The administration is new, with the assistant principal having been appointed at the start of the 2006–07 academic year, and the principal having been appointed at the start of the 2007–08 school year.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well:

- The principal has established good relationships with a broad range of staff, students and parents, and has been successful in establishing a vision for the school's development.
- The school climate and student behavior have improved, although more remains to be done to secure improved achievement.
- Across the school, there is a willingness by staff to examine current practice in seeking improvements for students.
- Leaders' initial evaluations of the effectiveness of the school are accurate and have begun to result in actions being taken which have the potential to secure improvement.

### Areas for Improvement:

- Improve the rate at which students learn and develop in reading, writing and mathematics by:
  - Making more rigorous use of data in planning lessons that are matched to students' different personal and academic needs; and
  - Ensuring that the expected characteristics of teaching and class organization are agreed, communicated, and consistently applied.
- Improve the quality of instruction by:
  - Developing strategies for in-class grouping of students according to their needs and abilities and ensuring teachers' interventions with focus groups of students are implemented consistently; and
  - Ensuring lessons are planned with clear objectives for what will be learned, and that activities give all students access to those objectives, according to their needs and abilities.
- Review the curriculum with particular reference to its alignment with state standards and to the emphasis that is placed on practical and investigative learning.
- Define clear and achievable priorities for school development that include success criteria and timeframe by which planned change will be secured.
- Improve the frequency and impact of lesson monitoring so that
  - Strengths and areas requiring improvement are accurately identified; and
  - Feedback to teachers is provided promptly by administrators, and follow-up actions are agreed upon and undertaken.
- Improve opportunities for parents of all backgrounds to understand the work of the school and to be able to support their children's education in a more informed way.

## Part 3: Main Findings

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

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

This school is in year four of needing improvement under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal legislation. Test results, which vary between subjects and grades, are broadly in line with the district average, but well below that of the state. This pattern has been reflected in the school over the last three years. While some students make adequate progress, this is not the case for the majority. In particular, students with special education needs and those with a Hispanic heritage who are ELLs make slower progress than their peers. Weaknesses in teaching and in the curriculum mean that higher achieving students are insufficiently challenged and do not do as well as they should.

The principal has made a good start in establishing a culture in which learning can take place. Students have begun to show improvement in their personal development, due to the school focus on behavior management and as a result of expectations established by the principal and assistant principal. When students are appropriately challenged in lessons, they have very positive attitudes to learning and their behavior is generally good. Even in lessons where tasks are undemanding, the majority of students try to do what is required of them. The introduction of Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) has begun to have an impact although, at present, there is inconsistency in its application across the school.

The school has introduced modifications to its instructional programs as a result of its increasing analysis of data. As a result, there is a more coherent approach to mathematics and English teaching through the integrated language arts program. A focus on sixth grade achievement and teaching has begun to secure improvement in practice, although this is yet to be reflected in test outcomes. The principal and assistant principal have a clear but informal understanding of the quality of instruction across the school. Systems are being introduced to record observations of instruction and to feed back the outcomes to teachers, although the administration acknowledges that currently, lesson observations are neither as frequent nor as well focused as they would like. As a result, the impact on teaching and learning has yet to be realized. There are weaknesses in the teaching, for example, in the lack of appropriate learning objectives, which are not being adequately addressed.

The school has begun to work closely with the other middle school in the district. This is having a positive impact on the quality of professional and curriculum development. Parents value the improvements that have been secured in the tone and safety of the building and appreciate the commitment to their children demonstrated by the principal and assistant principal. Parents share the principal's concern that the school is not yet successfully reaching out to all parents.

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

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

Results in the Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMT) show that achievement is below that in both district and the state. At the same time, the school acknowledges that weaknesses and inconsistencies in teaching are such that students in its key subgroups do not make the progress of which they are capable. Overall, the 2007 test results were slightly above those for the district in mathematics and above in reading. In both subjects, results were well below the state averages. Comparisons with the other district middle school show a more mixed picture. While results in reading and mathematics were above the other district middle school in both 6th and 7th grade, the reverse was true in grade 8. Analysis of the school results for the last two years shows that improvement has been limited. In reading, for example, while some improvement was seen in the performance of 7th grade students, the opposite was true of

performance in grades 6 and 8. Mathematics results demonstrate a similar pattern, with the largest gains made by 7th grade students between 2005-06 and 2006-07. The school has not yet looked at data in a way that would help administrators to understand the progress made by different cohorts of students as they move through the school. As a result, it is hampered in assessing whether students are progressing at an appropriate rate.

Results for general education students exceeded the school's targets in both reading and mathematics in each of the last two years. In contrast, the greatest shortfalls were seen in the performance of students with special education needs and ELLs who, in both reading and mathematics, performed well below the expected level. The school pays too little attention to monitoring the progress of different groups of students, including boys and girls and those from different ethnic groups. The principal is determined to ensure that improvements are seen in the performance of all students and recognizes that the lack of challenge in many classrooms slows the progress made by higher achieving students.

In collaboration with the district, the school has set challenging targets for its students. The principal acknowledges that these are unlikely to be met, although the school has introduced programs and initiatives that have the potential to secure improvement over time. While the school recognizes that students in all grades and subjects need to be making greater progress, it has sensibly decided to target its efforts into developing its mathematics and language arts curricula, in particular in grade 6. A good range of initiatives have been introduced, including the development of individual success plans for all students achieving at basic level, as well as adaptations to the mathematics and language arts curricula. It is too early, at present, to identify the impact that these initiatives are having on student achievement.

## **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 substantial improvement.**

When he joined the school, the principal rapidly identified the need to establish a solid foundation for learning with curriculum modifications and improvements. Since September, with the support of the assistant principal, he has undertaken a review of the curriculum and of the available data in order to establish priorities and begin to implement developments. The analysis of data revealed, for example, that the achievement of too many students is at basic level. As a result, individualized student success plans (ISSPs) have been established. These are designed to enable student progress to be tracked more carefully than has previously been the case in order to determine whether they are making the required level of progress to achieve the proficiency benchmark in the CMT. The initiative is in its very early stages and consequently has yet to impact on student achievement. The introduction of pacing guides and common assessments has begun to bring greater consistency to teaching, although teachers say they have had only limited training in their use. The introduction of integrated language arts (ILA) and the readers' workshop model have enabled the school to begin to develop reading and writing skills in parallel, although the lack of strategies for note taking, for example, is limiting their effectiveness. Mindful of the introduction of assessments in science in the spring of 2008, the school has begun to review the sequencing of its science curriculum. Although also at an early stage of development, the potential for establishing links across subjects so that skills learned in one area can be used to support learning in another, has been recognized. The school offers few opportunities for students to take part in enrichment activities during and after school.

Achievement data has only recently been supplied to teachers and training in its use is ongoing. Teachers do not consistently use data to plan work that meets the needs of individuals or groups in their classes. Senior staff have recognized that there is too much inconsistency in the teaching quality across the school. They are aware that teachers' expectations of students' capabilities are too low overall and have placed emphasis on establishing differentiated teaching approaches. But there is some way to go to establish these strategies as some teachers are resistant to the concept. At present, too many lessons

proceed at a slow pace with activities often geared to the slowest performing students. In an English language arts lesson, students were led by their teacher in a very relaxed discussion in which probing questioning was absent. In this, as in other lessons, the teacher's failure to crosscheck different students' understanding slowed the lesson, and meant that, for most of the time, many students were only passively involved. Teachers' interventions are often 'coincidental,' reflecting the principal's accurate recognition that instruction is insufficiently focused on what, precisely, the students are learning during the lesson. Guidance on setting objectives has been made available to staff, but not all teachers use it. As a result, learning objectives are often too broad to enable accurate assessment of students' understanding or skill development. In a mathematics lesson, which contained good features, the objective was recorded as; 'students will be able to solve problems.' As a result, the students and their teacher had no way of accurately assessing when they had achieved the learning planned for the lesson. However, the climate for learning in the school has improved. Although there are still examples of disruptive behavior, the emphasis that the school has placed on the consistent application of behavior management strategies has led to improvements in students' attitudes and behavior in lessons.

### **Criterion 3: Students' personal character development**

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

A major challenge facing the new leadership team last year was the high level of suspensions, coupled with an unacceptable level of poor behavior in class and outside of class. Students refer to considerable differences between teachers in their attitude to, and support for, the students and, consequently, in students' motivation and behavior.

The principal, very well supported by the newly appointed assistant principal, responded very rapidly to these challenges. The positive approach to behaviour management, although still developing, has already made a significant difference. Considerable success has been achieved, in a relatively short time, in the reduction in the numbers of suspensions and behavioural incidents, in the calm way the students move around the school, and, for some, in their increased motivation in lessons. However, students report that there remain inconsistencies between teachers in their application of the positive rewards scheme. One result of this is that students value the rewards less than they might. Due to the importance of needing to improve behaviour, the school has not yet put into place formal and regular opportunities for students to take responsibility and use their initiative.

Students are generally well behaved in class. When given appropriate opportunities in discussion, they respond thoughtfully. However, too often activities are mundane or repetitive and provide little challenge or stimulation for the students. Although the students describe some lessons in which they are expected to think and work hard, they also say that much of the work they are given is too easy. This can impact adversely on their motivation and behaviour. A contributory factor is the regularity with which all students in a class have the same task regardless of their ability or understanding. When some finish early, the lack of extension work means that they have to wait for the others to 'catch up' and, as a result are bored. Nonetheless, the students enjoy opportunities that are beginning to develop, particularly in the sixth grade, to engage in investigative and practical activities, which reflect the growing impact of the school's efforts to develop this aspect of learning.

Relationships between students and staff are generally positive. Senior staff model respect and high expectations very well, and students speak enthusiastically about the degree to which they are valued. Because of this, most students feel that they are able to turn to an adult if they are experiencing problems or difficulties at home or in school. The school has placed considerable emphasis on promoting good attendance and this has resulted in increased numbers of students who regularly attend.

## **Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management**

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

On his appointment, the principal had to tackle a number of issues as a matter of urgency. There were few organizational procedures in place, staff and student morale was low, and student behavior was poor. These features had a negative impact on student attendance and achievement. The principal recognized that organizational structures and a clear vision had to be established without delay. In regard to these aspects, much has been achieved in a comparatively short time. Student behavior has improved, and daily routines and procedures are in place to enable staff to focus much more on learning. Nevertheless, the principal recognizes that more remains to be done. For example, while behavior referrals to the school office have been reduced, there has been an increase in the referrals to guidance staff.

In his drive to improve student learning, the principal is very well supported by his assistant principal. Between them, the administrators have motivated the faculty well, improving morale and establishing a general willingness to embrace change. This also reflects the staff commitment to the students.

The district's support for the school requires improvement. The school follows the district model in planning for improvement. Priorities for development reflect, appropriately, the aspects of the school's work that require most improvement. The most urgent areas are the use of data to track student performance and the development of the curriculum to support teachers in planning appropriately challenging work. There is a lack of clarity, however, in identifying the expected changes in practice as a result of actions taken, how they will be evaluated and the timeframes within which change will be secured. Consequently, the school finds it difficult to track its progress towards improvement and, at the same time, teachers are uncertain about their part in ensuring that changes are effective. Administrators recognize that it would be easier to evaluate the impact of developments if planning included timeframes for the implementation of initiatives, as well as interim markers to show that developments were on track to achieve their objectives.

Although the principal and assistant principal monitor lessons and meet regularly to identify common features of instruction, they acknowledge that this aspect of their work requires further development. The administrators have established a recording system that has begun to be effective in reinforcing increased expectations of practice. Because of these activities, professional development is more appropriately targeted on key areas for improvement. There is now a need to ensure that both formal and informal monitoring of lessons focus more precisely on the identification of specific aspects of practice or outcomes. With only the principal and one assistant in leadership roles, this is an arduous task. A more effective leadership structure is planned, with more precise roles and responsibilities, once a second assistant principal has been appointed.

The principal and assistant principal are well respected by staff, parents and students. It is recognized that they have been responsible for providing the school with a clear direction, and that their actions have already brought about change and improvement, particularly in the school climate. Because actions are recently implemented, most have yet to bring about consistent impact on teachers' practice and on the curriculum, thus sustained improvement in student achievement has yet to be secured.

## **Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community**

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

Parents value the changes brought about by the principal. They know that he is accessible to them and that he welcomes their views. The assistant principal, in particular, provides a good point of contact for parents of different ethnicities. They know that much has changed in student behavior and in the expectations that the principal communicates clearly. They say that their children feel safer at school and, at the same time, that they feel more welcome. Although parents feel that the school is improving, they

also feel that more needs to be done to keep them informed of the school's work and in promoting greater parental involvement to enable them to support their children's learning more effectively. The practice of holding all meetings at the same time of day, for example, effectively excludes working parents. They echo the view of the principal that a more creative approach to attracting parents to meetings would be beneficial in helping parents understand the demands of the curriculum. This is particularly important as some aspects of the curriculum are changing. Although the students express mixed views about the value, challenge and consistency of homework, parents feel that it gives them a good idea of the work in which their children are involved and of how well they are doing. This view is reinforced by the appropriate quality of information that they receive.

The school has begun to work with the other district middle school in developing its curriculum and in establishing training opportunities. Training in the new mathematics and integrated language arts programs are undertaken jointly, which teachers value for the wider perspective that it brings to their work. Plans are being developed to share best practice, which is a sensible move given the similarities between the schools in their student populations, curricula and challenges. The school continues to look for ways of utilizing other community resources to support its work.