



## **Meriden Public Schools**

# **Quality Review Report**

**Washington Middle School**

**1225 North Broad Street  
Meriden  
Connecticut  
06450**

**Principal: Jean Privitera**

**Dates of review: October 29 – 30, 2007**

**Reviewer: Peter Lewis**

**Cambridge Education (LLC)**



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## Part 1: The School Context

### Information about the school:

Washington Middle School is located in Meriden, Connecticut. There are 876 students enrolled from grades 6 through 8. The student population is ethnically diverse. A high proportion, at just over 41 percent have Hispanic heritage, nearly 17 percent are Black and nearly 40 percent are White. There are a very small number of Asian students. Although the proportion of students with a non-English home language is increasing over time, the percentage receiving English language learner support in the school is just over 3 percent which is lower than in the district as a whole.

The school has a higher proportion of students with special education needs than is found in local and state schools. The number of students eligible for free school meals, at just over 62 percent, is higher than the district average and much higher than is found in the state overall.

The students' attendance, at just over 96 percent, is higher than the average for district and broadly in line with schools across the state.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well:

- The principal has been well supported in securing rapid improvements in the climate, safety and behavior at the school, which has established a sound foundation for learning.
- A good range of systems have been established which have been successful in enabling students to make good personal growth.
- A good start has been made in using data, particularly at senior level, in understanding the needs of students and in planning for improvement. As a result, the decline in student performance has been halted.
- Senior leaders and most staff are strongly committed to securing improvement for their students. Consequently, the school gives good consideration to improving the curriculum and aspects of teaching where data and other information identifies that this is necessary.

### Areas for Improvement:

- Continue to raise the performance of all students by ensuring greater consistency in teachers' lesson plans by increasing their confidence in using data, and by:
  - setting objectives for what will be learned so that students and teachers will know when success has been achieved;
  - ensuring greater consistency in the way in which different activities are planned to help students of different abilities reach the desired objectives; and
  - improving teachers' ability to plan and lead discussion that probes student understanding fully.
- Agree and communicate a set of criteria for effective teaching and learning and use this in establishing the focus for monitoring activities.
- Place a stronger emphasis on the evaluation of teaching and learning by the principal and assistant principals and use this in focusing developments more closely to the needs that are revealed.
- Ensure that leaders meet regularly in order to bring together information from a range of monitoring activities and use these in planning for further improvement.
- Refine whole school improvement planning to include clear actions, success criteria and timeframe for their completion.

## Part 3: Main Findings

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

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

While the school is in year four of requiring improvement under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, Washington Middle School has responded positively to the decline in its results in the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) and has secured improvements. The principal and assistant principals have been instrumental in this improvement. They have focused on building the school climate so that an effective culture for learning has been established. At the same time, the increased emphasis on the analysis of student data to help teachers plan lessons that meet student needs has met with early success. The school compares well with others in the district but acknowledges that its performance is lower in comparison with schools across the state. However, the decline in students' performance has recently been halted and there is evidence of gains in achievement, particularly in mathematics.

The principal has been well supported by her assistant principals in setting the scene for further improvement, particularly in the ways in which teachers make use of data. Students' personal development is well supported through the use of the Positive Behavior program and the establishment of regular meetings between 'mentor' adults and 'mentee' students. Because of the good relationships that are generally evident, students feel very well supported by teachers and other adults and know that difficulties will be readily resolved should they occur.

The school has carefully staged developments to its mathematics and reading curricula. Curriculum maps have been established so that there is a good understanding of the progression required within subjects. At the same time, the school is working to build links between subjects that will provide further opportunities for students to practice and develop their skills. These developments, along with the consistent use of the Reading Workshop Program, have the potential to make a difference to students' performance and their rate of progress. While there has been a strong and appropriate focus on improving the school's work in reading, writing and mathematics, consideration has also been given to maintaining a broad curriculum. Technology is used effectively to support both the arts and social studies, and the school is currently looking at ways in which assessment can be developed in science.

Leaders in the school are strongly committed to securing improvement. They recognize the lack of consistency in how teachers plan work that matches students' needs and, as a result, are working to strengthen and develop the ways in which teachers make use of data to plan lessons. However, more remains to be done, particularly in developing teachers' skills in planning lessons that have clear objectives for student learning and a range of activities that support these.

The principal and assistant principal have a sound understanding of what the school does well and where it needs further improvement. While this is particularly well informed by the analysis of student data, the monitoring of teaching, learning and the curriculum is comparatively underdeveloped. There is no widely shared view of the features that characterize the best instruction. Consequently, school development planning is insufficiently focused on aspects of classroom practice that need improvement. The staff are uncertain about which aspects of their work need to change, or when those changes are expected.

Parents recognize the improvements that have been made and value the degree to which the school communicates with them so readily when there are concerns about their children's progress. The school has tried to include more parents as partners in its development. However, the principal acknowledges that it has not achieved the success that she would like. Plans are in place to reach more parents through, for example, improvements to the school's website.

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

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

While test results for the whole school are slightly above those across the district, results remain below those of the state. Nonetheless, the school has secured improvements overall and, as a result, many students are now making year on year progress. This contrasts to the situation three years ago when student performance frequently declined through the school. Although the performance of subgroups is the main issue facing the school, the performance of White students, particularly in mathematics, has improved to a level above the district.

The school has worked diligently to improve the quality and range of its curriculum and of its instruction. Data is now used well and demonstrates improvement, particularly in mathematics as a result of the consistent application of the curriculum. Student results improved in all subgroups, with particular gains being made by students with disabilities. At the same time, results for all subgroups were above those across the district as a whole. This improvement is largely as a result of the school's efforts to improve the mathematics curriculum and teachers' confidence in using it, allied with the good understanding of subject performance data that has been developed.

While the school has achieved its goals for writing over the past two years, the principal acknowledges the need to improve results in reading. Results in 2007 were above district scores and approached those across the state. However, while some improvements were seen, these were less than the school had hoped for and, at the same time, lower than the gains achieved in mathematics. The greatest improvement was made by Hispanic students, and the school is working to capitalize on this success with the introduction of new programs, the planned acquisition of resources, and after school programs for target groups of students. Early data suggests that this is achieving success.

The school is very focused on securing further improvement for its students. Goals have been set for student achievement across all subgroups and the data indicating those students in greatest need of improvement provided to teachers. As a result, there is a good level of understanding across the school of the students who need to improve most, and the reading and mathematics strands on which teachers need to focus. Consequently, and allied to improvements in teaching, the majority of students are making at least satisfactory progress, particularly in mathematics. One consequence of the school's strong and appropriate focus on its lower-achieving students is that teachers too often fail to address the needs of higher performing students in their planning. This is evident in work planned for whole class groups with students who have already mastered concepts having to undertake the same work as their peers. Because of this, they often make slower progress than is possible. Particular attention has been given to improving the performance of English language learners (ELLs) and students with special education needs, with the result that they are supported effectively and, as a result, make satisfactory progress.

## **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 made good progress in developing its mathematics curriculum, which was rewritten by the school and backed by the introduction of the Connected Math Program. The success that has derived from this is seen in teachers' confidence in its use, and the improvements that have been secured in student performance. The school's analysis of data has led to the development of strategies to improve student reading with the recent introduction of the Readers' Workshop model. Monitoring by senior staff suggests that this is having a positive impact. Although the impact of this and other strategies to improve reading performance have yet to be reflected in test scores, interim assessments suggest that improvement is taking place. The school, rightly, places considerable emphasis on developing its mathematics and reading curricula, and, in addition, it aims to provide students with a broad range of experiences across subjects. The school's use of technology, for example, is effectively planned and

provides a good range of opportunities for students in the media suite and the technology labs. The technology teacher has made a good start in considering links between subjects. These are informal and have yet to be incorporated into the curriculum maps that the school has developed. The school has arrangements for supporting and enriching student learning outside school hours through extra-curricular activities and clubs held after school.

Overall, the school has improved its use of data in informing teachers of the relative performance of their students and in planning interventions for those whose performance is causing concern. In mathematics and reading, teachers know the lowest performing students who have been specifically targeted for growth. At the same time, item analysis enables teachers to identify subject strands in which students are weakest in order to plan interventions. The increasing use of team teaching between general education and special education or specialist language teachers is having a positive impact and success is seen in the improved performance of Hispanic students and students with special education needs. In a social studies lesson, for example, the special education teacher was providing highly focused interventions for students which enabled them to succeed in interpreting information about colonial protest. In an 8th grade integrated language arts class, a former special education teacher demonstrated very high expectations of his students through a well-paced and differentiated discussion of a speech by Martin Luther King. Students in this lesson were fully and actively engaged and their responses demonstrated considerable maturity.

The school accepts that there is considerable scope for further improvement, particularly in the degree to which teachers differentiate work to match student need. Although teachers are now encouraged to share learning objectives with their students, this is by no means consistent practice. Too frequently, objectives are recorded in a superficial way, such as 'define culture and describe its elements,' which provide students and teachers with little help in assessing when success has been achieved. Students generally have a good understanding of the tasks that they are expected to complete, but across the school their understanding of how well they are doing, what they have learned or of the steps required to reach the next level is limited. At the same time, although teachers now have access to good quality data about their students' performance, this is not yet consistently used in planning work according to their different needs. As a result, classes generally undertake the same tasks at the same time. Considerable amounts of time are taken in completing worksheets which demand too little of students, either in their content or, more importantly, in the amount and quality of writing that is required. Those students who finish before the others are not provided with extension work to further develop their skills and, consequently, many refer to times when they are "bored." The principal and assistant principals recognize this and have planned further professional development in order to improve rigor and teachers' expertise in making use of performance data in their planning.

Although they are often insufficiently challenged, students demonstrate good behavior and positive attitudes to their learning. They concentrate well in the majority of lessons, even when their work is mundane. However, the lack of regular opportunities for active learning means that tasks are too frequently focused on listening, reading and recording.

The principal has been careful to stage developments in order to ensure that they are embedded consistently. She is well supported in this by the assistant principals who share her commitment to improving student performance. As a result, most teachers are ready to embrace change. The principal and senior staff have supported teachers well in planning to meet the new curriculum requirements. The teachers plan within grades and value this joint planning time. Lesson observations have been introduced using a common format, which has improved the leaders' knowledge of the quality of instruction across the school. The principal acknowledges, however, the need to observe teaching more frequently in order to establish a clearer view of the features that are working best and where improvement is required.

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

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

A major challenge facing the principal on her appointment was the high level of suspensions that were given, coupled with an unacceptable level of poor behavior in and between classes. Parents, students and staff refer to considerable differences between the culture of the school then and now. Suspensions have been dramatically reduced and a good climate for learning has, as a result, been established. The tone of the building is purposeful and free from any oppressive behaviors which demonstrates the success of the Positive Behavior Support policy. The principal and assistant principals have set out very clearly to staff what is expected and, as a result, expectations of behavior management are generally consistent. Staff have the trust of students who say that they know who to turn to should they experience difficulties and that these are readily resolved. Students appreciate the 'mentor/mentee' program that the school has introduced, in which they meet weekly in small groups with an assigned adult. These features are reflected in the comparatively high proportion of attendance, at just over 97 percent.

Although there are some examples of discussion in whole class lessons that is probing, teachers often ask closed questions which limit their ability to assess the depth of student understanding. In lessons where teachers challenge their students well through probing discussion, students are actively engaged and respond well to the expectation that they will be able to justify and expand on their answers.

Students' self-confidence and independence are well developed at the whole-school level. They enjoy the opportunities that the school provides for them to use skills in a practical way, such as in the media classes, but would value more opportunities for this style of learning. The school recognizes the need to extend opportunities for students to take a more active part in their learning. In lessons where teachers set high expectations of their students, discussion is mature and makes a valuable contribution to student learning in groups. Students collaborate well and demonstrate initiative, for example, in the way in which many have prepared well for their lessons. Even in those lessons where less challenge is apparent, students concentrate well on tasks, although their engagement is more passive. They enjoy being encouraged to think and echo the principal's view that teachers are getting better at creating more opportunities for this in their lessons. However, students also say that there is a considerable variation in teachers' ability to get work that really challenges them.

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

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

The principal has a good understanding of the strengths and areas for development in the school's work. She is well supported by her assistant principals in promoting school initiatives, such as behavior management, which have had a significant impact on students' ability to learn. This, in turn, had a positive impact on student performance. The school's aims and values are clearly set out for the climate and culture of the school. The commitment of staff to do well for their students and adhere to the climate and culture are obvious throughout the school. The current focus on developments to improve teachers' use of data, and to refine their teaching strategies more in relation to student need are appropriate. The early impact of this is seen in key aspects of the school's work, such as in grade and common planning meetings in which the principal and her assistants provide a strong focus on data and its interpretation.

Although the principal and her assistant principals undertake both formal and informal lesson observations, this has not occurred as frequently as they would wish. This restricts leaders' ability to analyze the impact of actions and in planning to make use of best practice in securing further improvement. Consequently, while administrators work hard to establish a consistent pattern of data-driven learning, they recognize the need to sharpen their monitoring procedures to check the impact of developments on teachers' practice. Nonetheless, senior leaders have a broad understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their staff. Their initiatives are, to a degree, hampered by the lack of a shared understanding of what constitutes best practice in the classroom. At the same time, opportunities

for the administration to meet together and share common features from observations and other evaluations are limited.

The school's planning for improvement follows the district model and focuses appropriately on improving students' test scores as its primary objective. The plan accurately identifies the need to raise student achievement further and is well annotated following observations, the analysis of student work and test scores. However, many of the actions identified are difficult to evaluate as they are not sufficiently precise. For example, details of the planned intention of 'Implementing standard and common practices across subjects and grade levels,' are well understood by senior staff but omit the features of pedagogy that leaders expect to see. Consequently, not all teachers are certain of the ways in which their practice is expected to change. At the same time, the absence of timeframes within which change will be achieved makes it difficult for the school to determine its progress towards its strategic goals and to modify actions where necessary.

The district gives the school the support it needs to enable it to shape its future improvements and put into place strategies for improving student achievement.

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

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

Parents are supportive of the school and, in particular, of the improvements that have recently been secured alongside the increasingly positive reputation of the school. They say that their children enjoy coming to school, are cared for and well supported. School leaders and many teachers welcome parents as partners in their children's education. Parents value the degree to which staff are responsive to their concerns and are frequently proactive in contacting them should there be an issue involving their children's learning. Although the school has not systematically sought their views about its effectiveness, those who are more closely involved are pleased with the degree to which the principal demonstrates respect for parents. They say they are listened to and problems are resolved swiftly, should they arise.

The school is very aware of the need to further improve its contacts with parents, and has recognized the need to be more creative in attracting parents to school events and in communicating successfully with more of its families. Parents say, for example, that they rarely look at the school's website, as it is neither informative nor regularly updated. Plans are already in place that have the potential to address this issue. Parents value the information that they receive about the progress that their children are making, and guidance from teachers as to how parents might support their children. Translations of information are seen as helpful and demonstrate the school's commitment to its diverse population. While parents value contact from the school about issues affecting their children, they say that they would also value opportunities to contribute more to the school's development. They would welcome being asked more frequently about their view about their child's education or developments that the school is planning.

The school's connections within its community are well established and, through grant applications and external programs, are used effectively in broadening the opportunities available to students. The school has recently begun to develop a close liaison with the other district middle school. Training opportunities are increasingly shared, which provide good opportunities to share skills and expertise, as well as gain a perspective on the school's work. A particular impact has been in the development of the newly established elements of the English and mathematics curricula. The two schools are looking at ways in which this good initiative can be expanded further.