



CSDE

QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

Stamford Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Roxbury Elementary School

**751 West Hill Road
Stamford
Connecticut
06902**

Principal: Gloria Manna

Dates of review: November 17 – 18, 2008

Reviewer: Georgie Beasley

Cambridge Education (LLC)



**Cambridge
Education**

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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

Roxbury Elementary School has 650 students enrolled in grades kindergarten through 5. Student enrollment comprises 48 percent White, 23 percent Hispanic, 22 percent Black and 7 percent Asian American students. Around 15 percent are English language learners and receive English as Second Language services. This is below the district but above the State average. About 25 percent of students speak Spanish at home. The proportion of students with disabilities, at 10 percent, is above the district and around the State average. Approximately 37 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price meals, which is above the State and below the district average. At 97.2 percent, attendance is above the district and State averages.

The current principal started in August 2008, three months before the review.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The principal and assistant principal are committed to raising student achievement and have a clear understanding of the changes that are needed to improve student learning. They bring the opportunity for a fresh approach to building a more positive school culture.
- Students are well behaved and feel safe in the school environment.
- Many parents give the school good support in its endeavors to raise student achievement.
- The school data team is effectively building its expertise in gathering and using assessment data to inform instruction.

Areas for Improvement:

- Use assessment data, aligned to State standards to differentiate curriculum and instruction in classrooms to meet the needs of all learners, especially for Black students, students with disabilities, boys and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Establish the work of the professional learning communities to raise teacher expectations for student academic and personal achievement, to identify more challenging achievement goals and to implement strategies for students to reach them.
- Implement a school improvement plan that details precisely how the school will raise achievement, ensure curriculum continuity and measure and monitor its progress against long-term and benchmark goals in all grades.
- Ensure that teachers identify and share in student-friendly language what they want students to learn in lessons and then identify the resources, methods and classroom environments that best suit the learning needs of all students.
- Develop more opportunities for students to use their initiative, work collaboratively and take responsibility for their own learning in a way that helps students to know independently how to improve their work.
- Set up a differentiated process to improve teachers' professional development and build a more positive school climate.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school needs substantial improvement.

The new principal has quickly gained a clear picture of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. This is due to the honest feedback from the assistant principal and those staff and parents who are committed to the school's improvement. Nearly all staff value the clear vision and direction given by the new principal, which is enabling them to do a more effective job. The positive attitudes of many staff this year are enabling the principal to honor teaching expertise and use this as a basis on which to build and implement the necessary improvements. The school is now in a position to move forward. There is a school improvement plan that includes achievement goals for different student subgroups and the improvement steps each grade needs to take. However, goals are not yet challenging enough to close the achievement gap, especially for Black students, students with disabilities, boys and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and it is not clear how learning in the younger grades will contribute to raising achievement in the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) in grade 3. The principal, assistant principal and members of the data team are now in the process of identifying goals that are more challenging and the resources needed to effect the planned actions.

Student achievement has been too low for several years because of low expectations and a climate of blaming underachievement on external factors. The principal and assistant principal are now promoting the vision that "all students can and will learn." They still have to convince all of the staff of this view. Some staff still blame student behavior and a lack of parental support for this situation. As a result, too much effort is placed on finding excuses as to why new initiatives are not worth doing, rather than thinking positively about how to make them work, including how to use current assessment processes more effectively to focus instruction and improve student progress. In reality, students behave well, and most have positive attitudes. Parents are, overall, supportive of the school's work and do what they can to supplement the school's resources by giving of their time and raising additional monetary funds.

The quality of instruction varies too much. Students usually complete the same task in lessons with varying amounts of support. In the weakest lessons, they copy what the teacher writes or what the teachers tells them to do. As a result, students are not given enough opportunity to use their initiative, to work collaboratively or independently, and to take responsibility for their own learning. Teachers use rubrics to assess students' work, but feedback lacks focus in many classes and so students do not know for themselves what they need to do to improve. Lessons are generally taught to the whole class and so teachers cannot check carefully each student's knowledge, skills and understanding. The practice of regrouping by ability is a bigger barrier than a support. The higher groups contain mostly White students and lower groups Black students and so students feel segregated. Consequently, they tend to sit together at lunchtime in segregated ethnic groups because they like sitting with their classmates. Assessment data is not used sufficiently well to find alternative ways to differentiate instruction in class. Only a few teachers focus on what they want students to learn and plan lessons and organize learning that will engage and meet student interests and learning needs.

There has been more effective direction and support from the district in the last few years. The principal feels well supported through principal mentoring and regular meetings with members of the school excellence team. Teachers feel less well supported. The district has started to introduce programs for phonics, writing, math and, more recently, science to guide the school's curriculum more effectively. However, implementation is still new and there is no coherent alignment to State standards. Little professional development has been provided to develop important data analysis skills. Consequently, only a few have the expertise they need to use assessment data to align the curriculum to individuals

and groups of students' needs, especially for ethnic and gender groups and for students with learning difficulties. Some of the recently formed professional learning communities have a secure understanding of their roles and are beginning to use assessment data to reflect on student progress and plan more effective learning. The work is not yet consistent in all grades because of differences in teachers' understanding of their roles and purpose.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

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

The school is in its third year in need of improvement under the No Child Left Behind legislation because it has not made adequate yearly progress (AYP) as measured by the CMTs in reading or math for three years. The school met AYP in writing. The school standards in reading, math, writing and science are below district and State averages because its minority ethnic groups, English language learners and students with disabilities do not make sufficient progress to reach proficiency. While equal in math and lower in science, girls' achievement in reading and writing is higher than the boys. The school has until recently accepted this situation rather than finding the reasons why the same boys who reach proficient levels in math and science do not reach proficiency in reading, and why the girls who reach proficiency in reading and math do not in science. Similarly, until recently, the school accepted the fact that higher achieving groups contain mostly White students and lower achieving groups contain African American students, blaming this on social, economic and cultural reasons rather than identifying strategies to improve the situation. Now, due to the strong leadership of the principal and assistant principal, this attitude is changing. The school is more focused in stopping the lack of improvement in results by accelerating student progress.

This year, teachers are using a range of assessments including Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), CMT, rubrics and common assessments in reading and end of unit tests in math to measure student progress throughout the school. This is building a much clearer picture of each student's progress. This is enabling the school to set more challenging long-term and benchmark goals for improved achievement and identifying more focused support for its English language learners who make slightly better progress than other sub-groups. Nevertheless, student progress is not fast enough for more students to reach proficiency and for higher achievers to reach goal and advanced levels.

The goals in the current school improvement plan for raising student achievement aim for a ten percent increase in the number of students reaching proficiency in the math and reading CMT this year for all of its sub-groups in grades 3 through 5, but especially those that are failing. The school has yet to identify which students it will target to ensure that it reaches the goals. Consequently, it is not clear whether more students could be targeted and the goals increased so that they are more challenging. The goals are also whole school, rather than identifying what each grade from kindergarten through 5 should aim to reach and so detail each grade's contribution to CMT scores. Goals for higher achievers focus on proficiency rather than goal or advanced levels. A closer analysis of assessment data through the data team and professional learning communities highlights that many students are capable of higher achievement and so the school is starting to revise its goals so that they are more challenging.

The school knows that it is performing less well than schools with a similar student population. It has not yet visited any schools to learn about and put into effect the successful practices.

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

This area of the school's work needs substantial improvement.

There are a good number of teachers who want students to do well and they plan work that meets student needs closely. This is in every grade, but particularly in grade 5. They present learning through

meaningful and relevant contexts to help students relate new learning to previous lessons and to their personal experiences. The best teachers constantly check that students are familiar with new vocabulary, defining words carefully to help them understand. This helps them to build and use independently key vocabulary, reading comprehension and math problem-solving skills. Students in these classes are motivated and enthusiastic learners. Unfortunately, many teachers expectations of what students can do are too low, especially for Black students, boys, students with disabilities and those from poorer families. As a result, the level of challenge in too many classes is not high enough and students are not sufficiently motivated to learn. The introduction of Every Day Math is changing this a little, but teachers still complain too much that the work is too hard for students to master, rather than planning ways to enable them to succeed. A new phonics program is helping to structure learning in the younger grades, but there is no curriculum for teaching other reading skills and strategies to guide teachers' planning and raise expectations. The principal, assistant principal, instructional resource teacher and reading teachers give good support, which many teachers value. There has been too little time for the more targeted support to make an impact on student learning and achievement.

Teachers rarely identify and share learning objectives with students so they know what they are expected to learn in lessons. In too many lessons, planning focuses on the task students will complete rather than on building the understanding of new concepts, the acquisition of new knowledge, or on the skills and/or strategies they will develop. As a result, not enough thought is given to the methods and materials, and the organization of classroom environments to best support that learning. Word walls are too high or do not exist, rubrics are not shared with students so they know independently how to improve, and there is little partner or collaborative group work. In too many classes, students listen while the teacher talks, and answer the direct questions teachers ask. On occasion the subject knowledge the teacher gives them is incorrect. Students rarely use computers to support their learning. A lack of up-to-date good quality reading material means that books are old and unattractive, and students sometimes read from black and white photocopies when the colors in the pictures are an important element of developing comprehension and inference skills. Classroom libraries are poor.

Teachers are beginning to collect a wider range of data from assessments about student learning in reading, math and writing. Most do not yet use this sufficiently well to plan and deliver lessons that meet students' specific learning needs. As a result, many higher achievers find the work too easy and many students who need extra support find the work too difficult. Most lessons rely on whole-class teaching rather than targeted group work, which makes it difficult for teachers to check that every student is able to complete tasks independently. The over-use of worksheets and graphic organizers gives students too much direction. In the weakest lessons, students copy what the teacher writes. The school regroups for math and reading in grades 2 through 5. This helps teachers to a small extent to match learning to student academic needs but students within these groups still have different skills and concepts that they need to develop and at different levels. English language learners benefit from working in small groups to build their vocabulary and develop important reading skills.

Although they receive professional development in their building, many teachers report that they have not attended good quality district led professional development on basic elements of classroom teaching for a number of years. As a result, many do not have the skills and expertise to understand fully the importance that assessment plays in planning, monitoring and measuring student learning and subsequent progress. Some do not have secure subject knowledge to teach accurately.

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

This area of the school's work needs substantial improvement.

Students experience a broad range of subjects but the curriculum lacks coherence and balance because content is based on programs purchased for each subject area. Little or no attention has been given to aligning instruction with Connecticut State standards or setting expectations for student performance consistent with grade level expectations and above. Teachers express frustration at the

lack of direction from the district as to what is expected in terms of an overall formal curriculum. In math, teachers think that the district mandates that the pacing guides must be adhered to strictly, and so they feel pressure to keep up with teaching the content, regardless of whether students have mastered the material. Parents, staff and students concur that the curriculum is weak.

There is some evidence that the school is starting to align assessments to State standards through end of unit math tests, the use of rubrics to grade student work, and the recently introduced common formative assessments. The rubrics are not yet aligned to the standards and so it is difficult for teachers and students to use them to measure achievement and progress towards CMT. This lack of alignment results in a curriculum that does not build systematically students' knowledge, understanding and skills.

There is little evidence of attempts to align the curriculum to meet the needs of students with disabilities, different learning styles, abilities, gender or cultures. Since special education services for students with disabilities are presented almost exclusively in a resource room setting, there is minimal opportunity for students to experience support for their specific needs in general education classes. The school is beginning to align the curriculum for English language learners. However, due to the regrouping arrangements, students usually work in small pull-out groups and so do not experience the richer vocabulary used by some of the more fluent students. Some general and cluster teachers relate art and music themes to special events such as Thanksgiving and to learning in class to make lessons more relevant.

Most teachers present instruction in lecture-style to the whole class, and so all students receive the same homework assignments with little regard for whether students can successfully complete the tasks independently or whether the tasks are too easy. Teachers give insufficient thought to how homework can support or extend the specific learning needs of each student.

Criterion 4: Students' personal character development

This area of the school's work meets requirements.

Students' behavior is good overall. They behave well in class, at lunch and recess and when walking around the school. Nearly all students get along together well because they have positive attitudes and on the whole have good relationships with each other. They feel safe in school and feel able to talk to a teacher if they have a concern. Most want to learn and, when given the opportunity, they are happy to contribute ideas and show teachers what they can do. The Six Pillars give some opportunity for students to reflect on the values of respect, responsibility, fairness, trustworthiness, caring and citizenship, and so most follow school rules and are considerate of other students' feelings.

Students do not have enough ownership of their learning because too much is decided for them. While teachers use rubrics to measure student achievement, they rarely share these with their students so that they know how to improve independently. Some rubrics do not make it clear enough to teachers or students what needs to be done to score one or two points for a piece of work. When given the opportunity, students enjoy working collaboratively on a shared task or activity, and like the chance to engage in practical activities. Many students like music because it is lively, interactive and fun.

Students say they like and enjoy school. While attendance is satisfactory overall, some parents pick up their children early on too many occasions and so students miss valuable learning time.

Criterion 5: School Climate

This area of the school's work needs improvement.

Teachers use "Responsive Classroom" techniques and strategies inconsistently to build students' personal development. While all classrooms have students' hopes and dreams displayed, teachers tend to choose which aspects of the program to use. Consequently, some younger students are not clear about what is expected of them. A newly elected student government gives students some opportunity to express their views, and gives them a greater voice in evaluating and contributing to the school community. Many teachers have positive relationships with students, which builds conducive learning environments in classrooms. Nevertheless, relationships between some adults and students are not as positive as they should be. Parents and students report that sometimes teachers scream at students. This is totally unacceptable behavior and does not support a positive school climate.

Many teachers have low expectations of student personal and academic achievement. Students are not given enough opportunity to use their initiative and take responsibility for their learning in class, and so show teachers what they can do. Too often students are told what to do, when and how. Some teachers have classroom monitors who take responsibility for small jobs. However, too often adults give out resources and materials that students can easily get for themselves. With a few exceptions, students complete most tasks individually and record work on writing frames or visuals. This limits opportunity for them to set out and expand their ideas or to work collaboratively on a group task. While teachers use rubrics increasingly to assess student work, students rarely use them to assess their own or each other's work and so do not know independently what they need to do to improve.

The school's procedures for monitoring attendance are not rigorous enough in making sure that all parents follow the protocols for reporting their children's absence. The school does not make first-day phone calls when a parent does not call in to say why their child is absent. In the past, too many parents have been allowed too often to take their children out of school early.

Criterion 6: Effective Leadership and Management

This area of the school's work needs improvement.

The principal has made a positive start in turning around the school. She is an astute educator and leader who knows clearly what needs to be done and how to do it. She has the full support of her assistant principal and many of her staff and while the task feels overwhelming, the school has the capacity and commitment to bring about change. The first step is to agree and record a three-year strategic plan that details what actions will be carried out, when, who will do them and what resources are required to do the job. The next step is to share successes constantly and consistently with the whole school community and to seek their views in order to help evaluate whether the school is on track to reach its goals, making any necessary ongoing adjustments to its action plans.

Work has started to raise teacher expectations and improve the quality of instruction. This is being enabled due to the focused monitoring and evaluation of the school's work, and the commitment of many teachers to improve their craft. A complete review of student achievement and progress and an evaluation of many aspects of the school's day-to-day management processes are resulting in immediate changes to protocols and routines. The school is beginning to plan key supports and whole school and individualized professional development as a result of its evaluations.

The principal has already put together a school improvement plan that details goals for student achievement in reading and math, and how the school plans to develop partnerships with all parents. The plan follows the district format. As assessment data becomes more detailed and informative, so the school can adjust its goals to ensure they are as challenging as they need to be to raise student achievement. The school's overall goals are included in the plan, but its vision for the future and the

evaluation of all aspects of its work are not yet included as processes are too new. Similarly, the school has identified how the actions will be monitored but not yet when and by whom. The plan does not yet identify the resources of time, people and money needed to implement the actions identified.

The school's data team has already become familiar with assessment data and has identified key goals for improvement. They take this analysis to the grade-level professional learning communities. The effectiveness of these communities is inconsistent due to the different expertise of teachers in the grade and of the grade leaders. In the more effective communities, teachers look at student work and discuss how they can adjust the curriculum and instruction to improve student learning. Members of the data team are increasingly influencing the quality of discussions in all of the professional learning communities to ensure that teachers focus on data analysis and its subsequent use to plan tasks that effectively match student diverse learning needs. There are plans for teachers to meet more regularly to discuss student work and identify subsequent learning activities to accelerate progress.

Criterion 7: Partnerships with Parents and Community

This area of the school's work needs improvement.

The principal is attempting to structure parent and community involvement to focus on improving achievement for all students and to consistently enforce rules and practices in a fair and equitable way. Some parents support the school by volunteering time and providing materials for the school. The Roxbury Organization of Parents and Educators (ROPE) is effective in organizing various workshops and social events, and raising funds for the implementation of school programs and projects. Some parents come into school to help with learning in class. This is an informal arrangement between parents and teachers. There are plans to introduce a formal and structured system for parent volunteers to visit classes more regularly to support specific individuals and groups of students. Currently, the wider community plays only a small role in supporting student learning.

Parents feel that there is some inconsistency in the quality of information they receive at the school and classroom level about what is expected from their students. Classroom teachers use the agenda books and e-mails inconsistently and so parents are not always clear about homework expectations and what curriculum areas their children are currently studying. There is some uncertainty and confusion over basic school procedures and protocols such as when and to whom to report absence.

The school shows its respect for diversity through translating important documents and the principal's monthly newsletter into Spanish. The school has some strategies to try to engage all parents but its approaches are not fully effective. A multicultural committee co-ordinates cultural celebration and a Spanish reach-out program encourages Hispanic families to visit to enjoy a typical school day. Student cultural diversity is not honored in the everyday curriculum and instruction. Many parents believe that the current practice of grouping students by ability for reading and math instruction is appropriate even though few minority students and those receiving free and/or reduced lunch are in higher ability groups. This practice is counter-productive in building a school climate that celebrates diversity.

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

This area of the school's work needs substantial improvement.

The district knows that considerable work is required to build student achievement and is starting to give the school the support it needs to effect change. The assistant superintendent indicates support for the administrative team and a strong commitment to closing the achievement gap. Nevertheless, due to considerable changes in staffing, the district has not yet given effective support over time. The new principal feels well supported as she strives to tackle the substantial improvements required. The school excellence team is available to support with leadership training and with the monitoring of the

school's work towards its goals. The district provides some assessment information to help set goals for student achievement. However, assessments do not align to State standards and so significantly hinder the school's ability to evaluate accurately student achievement in comparison to others across the State. The district format for recording the school improvement plan does not enable the school to identify, in enough detail or over a long enough period of time, the strategic steps required to effect successful change.

Staff explain that better coordination and communication at the school level is now occurring with the support of central administration but feel less well supported by the district. There has been a lack of focused high quality professional development until very recently to help teachers to improve instruction, and thereby achievement, for all students. Interviews with staff reveal general frustration with the lack of a formal curriculum to support their work. Teachers report a plethora of new initiatives, many of which fade away with no planning, coordination or plans for training and professional development. Staff thus feel overwhelmed and ineffective. There is a perception among staff that policies are dictated from central office with little attention to what is realistic in practice because there has been too little direction and guidance for program implementation. For example, pacing guides that are handed down from district administration are viewed to be preventing mastery of skills and strategies necessary for effective learning. Teachers admit that this year students started the next grade achieving higher levels than the cohort before and that they are at last on course to start adapting their instruction to match the needs of all learners.