



Middletown Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Wesley Elementary School

**10 Wesleyan Hills Road
Middletown
Connecticut
06457**

Principal: Joseph Cassella

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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

Wesley Elementary School serves 344 students from kindergarten through 5th grade. The principal has been leading the school since 1998. The school population comprises 63.7 percent White, 26.7 percent Black, 6.7 percent Hispanic, and 2.9 percent Asian American students. The student body includes 0.3 percent English language learners, which is a much lower proportion than for the district or the state. At 10.2 percent, the proportion of students with special education needs is just below that of the district and of the state. The average monthly attendance is 97.9 percent, which is higher than that found in the district and comparable to the figure for the state.

Thirty-two percent of students receive free or reduced price lunch. This is a little lower than other schools in the district and a little higher than across the state.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The principal knows all students by name, responds to parent and teacher questions and does appropriate follow-up. This sets a positive tone for the culture of the school.
- Administration, teachers, and students have positive relationships that make the learning environment warm and welcoming.
- Good procedures ensure the attendance rate remains high.
- Behavior management strategies are automatic and effective. Students demonstrate a positive attitude towards learning.
- The Free to Be Club has helped the school to realize its aim to develop respect for diversity, and it is a sense of pride for staff and students.
- Regular review and analysis of student work, coupled with on-going discussions with the school leader, provide good opportunities for teachers to improve student achievement.
- Good curriculum meetings for parents focus on skills that parents and teachers work on in partnership. This positively supports student achievement.

Areas for Improvement:

- Refine staff efforts to close the achievement gap between the majority and the subgroups across all subject areas, ensuring teachers have a common understanding of the use and benefit of all support materials and resource staff.
- Establish on-site intervention support for struggling students before/after school.
- Further develop plans to increase parent involvement of students with the greatest need to support their academic achievement.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

This school exceeds minimum requirements.

The school exceeds the minimum requirements because it uses instructional methods that enable all students to learn effectively. All students have a positive attitude to learning and respond well to high expectations for achievement. Students are highly engaged in the classrooms and respectful to adults and to each other. The collection, analysis, and use of data in both classrooms and school-wide are effective. The school has a well-developed and established ethos, based around diversity, culture, and tolerance. Students at the school demonstrate a high level of responsibility and self-reflection due to the high standards that are being set for them. The students' high attendance, at 97.9 percent, reflects their enthusiasm and commitment.

Overall, students are achieving at goal level, and they make good progress during their time in school. All subgroups of students have shown improvement, although some achievement gaps remain. The principal is specifically monitoring approximately 100 students to ensure that they are on track to achieve their expected goals. New literacy and mathematics programs are supporting sustained growth.

The principal leads by example and provides clear direction for the improvement of the school. He makes effective decisions and takes well-informed actions. These are based on regular assessments and the focused use of data. The analysis of student performance data and the use of interim assessments are developing well in the school. The principal carefully monitors and evaluates the quality of teaching and its impact on learning. The principal is aware of the needs of the school's staff, as well as of its students. Teachers meet in grade level teams and with the principal monthly to discuss student data and goals.

The school is continuing to improve outreach to parents of struggling students and continuing to differentiate for students with specific needs. However, the school has no formalized on site tutoring. Springfield College graduate students will begin tutoring and homework support in a local housing development where some Wesley students reside.

Most parents are active in the life of the school and in supporting their children's learning. This year, the principal has intensified the school's outreach work to parents. Teachers target parents with low parental participation to increase their partnership to reinforce specific academic skills. The school is working with the parent teacher organization to develop creative ways to involve parents of students with significant needs.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

The students' achievement is at goal level and exceeds minimum requirements.

Overall, students make good progress during their time in the school. The proportion of students reaching proficiency on the state tests in mathematics and reading improved significantly in 2007. Results were stronger in mathematics than in reading, and were above those of the district in both reading and mathematics. The proportion of students reaching the state goal level was also above that for the district as a whole. The proportion reaching goal level in mathematics was above that of the state. Similarly, a higher proportion of students in grades 3 and 5 achieved the state goal level in reading and writing.

However, longitudinal data shows that scores dropped for some high achieving students. The principal attributes this fall to some teaching changes with guided reading and whole class instruction in upper grades. As a result, grade level teams are continuing to look at student work and going deeper with data

analysis during common planning time to tighten their teaching focus and further enhance learning. The curriculum specialist is also monitoring mathematics more intensely this year.

All student subgroups for which there is comparative data have shown progress. However, differences in achievement remain within the school. White students achieved higher outcomes than Black students did. The performance of economically disadvantaged students was lower than for other students, while results for these students in mathematics was just below that of the district. Three schools in the district with significantly more economically disadvantaged students are performing better. However, economically disadvantaged students have improved because of parental partnerships around specific academic skills. This was in conjunction with classroom differentiation.

Students with special education needs are fully included. They receive differentiated services and push-in support from two special education teachers, as well as targeted instruction in a learning center. The school is aware that outcomes for students with special education needs lag behind other students. Individualized Education Program goals are effectively addressed. Students with special education needs are making steady progress.

The school has set rigorous growth targets for students on the state tests. The accountability plan includes appropriate timelines to monitor progress towards the goals identified. Each grade has specific goals with targeted skills to support the school's effort to improve all students' progress. As a result, all adults in the school understand how their work contributes to the planned improvement of student learning. Consequently, the data is used well by the school to inform interim and long-term goals to ensure that the school continues to develop and improve. The school is effectively including parents as partners in this process. Parents are being provided with more curriculum training and strategies to use at home to support the identified student goals. As a result, parents reinforce well the school's mission and goals.

The school plans to use Springfield College graduates to provide tutoring in a neighborhood housing complex. This is to target students who enter kindergarten with no previous experience, as well as those with weak language skills. The school intends this to have a positive impact on early student achievement that will transfer throughout the school.

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 exceeds minimum requirements.

The school's literacy and mathematics programs are implemented consistently across the school. In support of the new district reading initiative the staff has worked collaboratively to select new research-based reading strategies to better address the needs of students across the school. The effective use of new writing and mathematics programs provides a common language that supports cross grade articulation and collaboration. The technology teacher is working to integrate technology and writing. The mathematics program is literacy based, providing many opportunities for the students to develop their use and understanding of the language of mathematics.

The school offers wide-ranging professional development to teachers to support new initiatives, as well as to meet any needs identified through data analysis. For example, the data pointed to a need to intensify upper grade teachers' expertise in reading and science and so the principal provided training accordingly. The school's focused professional development ensures that teachers are confident about the curriculum. This allows them to adjust their lessons flexibly in order to address their students' needs more effectively. Professional development is embedded within the culture of the school. As a result, all teachers are reflective practitioners.

All staff assess their students' achievements in a range of ways, including through teachers' own assessments. The school is making good use of professional development interns and teacher release time for staff to meet and review student work, analyze data and plan collaboratively. Formal weekly and monthly meetings between the principal and teachers, effectively enable the discussion of data, assessments and information arising from teachers' own observations of students during the school day. These meetings are effective in leading to the timely development of appropriate academic interventions for students.

Teachers analyze data well to plan and adjust their instruction. As a result, differentiated teaching is targeted to individual students in need of more intensive support. Three students and two parents are identified for each teacher as a focus for differentiation and monitoring of progress. Teachers also carefully consider how each individual student can best be supported personally to enable them to effectively access learning opportunities. Teachers employ a good range of strategies to ensure that all students can learn. Teachers provide effective feedback to students so that they know how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve. The effect of this is that students set high standards for themselves and aspire to improve.

School-wide teams look at the school as a whole. They review student work and examine disaggregated data to ensure that appropriate support is in place for students, staff, and parents. To support students with special education needs, the principal and teachers discuss intervention strategies, plan co-teaching opportunities to provide support in small groups and design differentiated lessons. The school is a model for the district, with one of its special education teachers utilized for district wide professional development.

Behavior management strategies are rarely required in class, but are appropriate and successful when necessary. Occasional minor behavioral conflicts and disagreements are resolved with a few words of encouragement and redirection. As a result, instruction is not interrupted with distractions and time is used effectively to address the goals for achievement that have been established. The principal handles minor infractions in his office, with brief one-on-one discussions with students.

Criterion 3: Students' personal character development

This area of the school's work is excellent.

Student behavior throughout the school is excellent. Students look forward to coming to school and greet staff with excitement and sometimes a hug in the morning as they depart the bus. Student conversations with adults and other students display mutual respect. As a result, students form constructive relationships with their teachers and their peers. This also has a positive effect on the school's learning environment, which is warm and inviting. A close family atmosphere in which students feel safe and cared for characterizes the school. Students are on task and motivated to learn. The principal even had to persuade one student to enjoy his lunch and not rush to return to class to complete work left behind.

The school's 'six pillars character counts' program reminds students how to display good citizenship and the school provides positive reinforcement for this. The Free to Be Club, of which 80 percent of the students have completed the program, focuses on diversity, culture, and tolerance. Consequently, the school has minimal discipline issues and students learn in an environment free from oppressive behaviors. Higher grade students are supported well in making the transition to the positive behavior program employed in the district's middle school. The school had only three suspensions last year.

Students take responsibility and show leadership. For example, upper grade students help monitor kindergarten students during recess and there is a successful program of cross grade level reading buddies. Upper grade students also assist adults with bus duty by escorting students when needed to the required places. Various teachers organize holiday and classroom activities that provide opportunities for students to contribute to the community through performances and letter writing to a range of community

members and organizations. As a result, students have a variety of opportunities in which they learn right from wrong and understand how to be a good citizen.

Students respond positively to the school's high expectations for attendance and timeliness. Daily attendance is very high, reflecting the strong relationships between home and the school. The school nurse personally calls the homes of students who are absent to ensure contact and communication. Procedures are in place and consistently used to ensure that attendance remains high.

Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management

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

The principal has created a good sense of teamwork, and built a community of learners. As a result, there is clear direction for the school, guided by carefully analyzed student data, with resulting actions that positively influence the school's goals for raising student achievement. Regular monitoring and evaluation of the impact of teaching on student learning is driving school improvement. Data evaluation resulted in new comprehensive reading strategies, as well as the introduction of grade level curriculum breakfasts for parents. The school is data rich and all staff use data effectively.

Students, staff, and parents hold the principal in high regard. He is hands-on, ensuring the school's effective day-to-day operation. He knows all students by name, and knows his teacher's well. He is visible at the arrival and dismissal of buses, greeting students and handling any potential discipline infractions. The principal has a presence throughout the building, throughout the day. He follows up on student, staff, and parent questions and makes real connections with them. A parent stated, "He is not behind a closed door." Students stated, "He is always out in the hallways at lunch." Teachers appreciate the principal's hands on approach and his praise of their work. As a result, teachers give generously of their time.

The principal has had long-standing one-on-one data chats with individual teachers to discuss student work and data. He knows the issues in the school and the strengths and challenges his staff encounters. The principal conducts walkthroughs, as well as formal classroom observations. The focus on the walkthroughs is the effectiveness of student learning and teachers receive feedback after each visit. As a result, teachers use the information gained to inform their planning and intervention strategies for students. The principal aggressively shapes professional development with teacher leaders to address student, staff, and parent learning needs. Hence, the school leader promotes consistent practice throughout the learning community.

The principal is building the capacity of the school to continue and sustain improvement by dispersing leadership and responsibility more widely through the staff and parental body. For example, teachers are supported with after school club advisory roles and parents are empowered and supported with publishing the monthly school newsletter. Good opportunities are provided for teachers to work and plan collaboratively. As a result, everyone feels a sense of ownership to achieve the school's mission.

The principal is reflective, open to new ideas, and willing to collaborate and rethink strategies to improve the learning environment to improve student achievement.

The school's vision reflects the district's core values and commitment to raising student achievement in reading. The principal is able to make full use of the district's resources and support because of his effective strategic planning. The school especially appreciates the support of the district's curriculum specialist. The district has a clear understanding of the school's strengths and development needs.

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

This area of the school's exceeds minimum requirements.

Parent involvement at the school is substantial. They see the school as very warm and welcoming. Many parents take an active role in school leadership opportunities, fund raising, parent teacher programs, and school beautification. Parents publish a school newsletter in collaboration with the principal. The principal provides parents with grade level updates, which improve parents' ability to support learning at home. Some workshops support parents directly. For example, some parents enrolled in General Education Diploma classes following a presentation from adult education services. This also has the potential to increase parents' capacity to support their children with the school's achievement goals.

The school holds a range of parent capacity building events to link families to students' learning. For example curriculum breakfast meetings, where teachers present to parents by grade level, as well as grade level literacy nights. Parent-teacher conferences are held at regular intervals to include parents as partners in the learning experience. As a result, parents are empowered to support learning at home and outreach to the families of students identified with the greatest needs is effective.

Communication with parents is well developed. Teachers keep parents updated with weekly classroom homework packets, BEAR Binders (Bring Everything Always Ready) and Friday folders. Parents are kept informed of academic progress through student progress reports and report cards. Some grades use parent surveys to gather information about the students' learning styles and home learning environment. Parents report that, because of this, teachers really know their child. Parents appreciate the efforts teachers take with each student. Over the summer, parents receive reading and mathematics packets and some teachers make home resource packets throughout the year. This further strengthens families as partners in the school's efforts to improve student achievement.

The school's reputation is drawing resources into the school to support its mission. Springfield College graduate students approached the principal to do some homework and tutoring support in their housing complex. The principal followed up on the proposal and acquired support from Wesleyan University with insurance assistance to legalize the off site support to Wesley students. As a result, the school expanded its community resources to support student learning.

The school has accessed grants and two higher educational institutions to support parent communication and intervention for struggling students. The principal collaborated with parents to produce a community resource brochure to ensure parents had access to community resources for homework, tutoring, social welfare issues and much more. As a result, many students identified with greatest needs are now getting support after school near their home and by skilled experts with specialized training.