Middletown Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Keigwin Middle School

99 Spruce Street
Middletown
Connecticut
06475

Principal: Tracey Koff
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Reviewer: Marta Reyes

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Content of the report

Part 1: The School Context
Background information about the school

Part 2: Overview
What the school does well
What the school needs to improve

Part 3: Main findings
Information about the school:

Keigwin Middle School is a 6th grade school in Middletown School district, serving 356 students. The formation of the single grade school was originally because of overcrowding in the district and a decision to house 6th graders at a single site. The majority of the students are White (58 percent), followed by Black (23 percent) and Hispanic (13 percent). Two Hispanic students qualify for English language learner support.

Thirty-five percent of students receive free and reduced meals, comparable to other district schools, but above the state average. Sixteen percent of the student population are students with special education needs, which is above the district and state averages.

The attendance rate of 96 percent is similar to the district and state rates. However, in-school and out-of-school suspension percentages are high, especially for the Black and Hispanic populations when compared with the White population.

Organizationally, the school is divided into three interdisciplinary teaching teams and one special area team, each reflective of the make-up of the school demographically, to support smaller professional learning communities. Each team has a team leader that facilitates the team’s use of and understanding of student data, and the development of systems for tracking student progress to inform teaching and improve student achievement. The district provides five highly qualified substitute teachers to cover core academic classes during the two possible release days each week. Release time is dedicated to professional development and student assessment analysis.
What the school does well:

• The school promotes an environment where students feel safe and are clear about school expectations, including the importance of regular attendance.

• The school staff is student-focused, mutually respectful and supportive.

• Parents have a high level of confidence in the school’s commitment to meet the needs of their children.

• The principal has fostered positive relationships with the staff, establishing a foundation to strengthen professional learning communities focused on student achievement.

Areas for Improvement:

• Establish a climate of shared collaboration between the district and the school to ensure a focus on teaching and learning to improve student achievement.

• Establish a coherent and transparent system for supervision and evaluation of teachers between the school’s administration and the district’s content supervisors that clearly delineates the roles and responsibilities of each.

• Increase instructional time and student achievement through an analysis of the time lost from "in-house" and “out-of-school” suspensions for all subgroups of students.

• Reallocate resources to address the needs of the most vulnerable students and to promote their academic success in the core content areas.

• Ensure that there is consistent utilization of common reading strategies to leverage improvement in student fluency and comprehension across the whole school program.

• Target professional development to focus on the understanding of and use of effective instructional strategies, including differentiated instruction, its effect on student learning, and the use of data to improve student achievement.
Overall Evaluation: The School's overall performance

This school needs improvement.

The school is in its first year of needing improvement as defined by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. In 2007, student achievement in the state reading tests did not meet the proficient standard overall for Black, Hispanic, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged student subgroups. Consequently, student achievement in these subgroups is at a basic level, and needs improvement. A variety of assessments are being used to track and monitor student achievement in reading and mathematics. The district tests students at regular intervals and provides immediate feedback to the school to inform instruction.

The quality of teaching and learning, and the use of data to promote learning are at the developmental stage and need improving. The school has set its professional and instructional goals to align with the district’s goals to raise student achievement in mathematics and reading by 10 percent per year. However, the lack of a complete English language arts curriculum and the amount of data available is causing teachers to feel overwhelmed. Despite this, teachers support the focus on reading in all content areas and are working with their site teams to improve instructional practice.

The school utilizes an ‘effective behavioral support’ program. The focus of the program is to identify expected school behaviors, help students recognize expected behaviors, and provide positive reinforcement to students exhibiting those behaviors. The school-wide student of the month program recognizes students who meet expected school behaviors. However, although the number of office referrals decreased by more than 50 percent last year, the 102 unduplicated suspensions represented over one-quarter of the school’s population and included some students with disabilities. The behavior support program, as implemented, is not having sufficient impact.

Focused on the whole child, the school strives to provide enrichment classes that extend experiential learning. At the same time, the school must give attention to using all available instructional time to meet the academic goals for all students.

The school faces a challenge of capacity if it is to successfully implement reading across all content areas and maintain student performance in mathematics, science and social studies. The school struggles with the lack of a complete curriculum and assessments, the amount of “new” work to monitor and track student progress, and how to differentiate instruction to meet the range of student needs.

The school requires more district support and training if it is to be successful. Leveraging the school system for improvement will require a partnership between the district and school. Currently, the structure for communication is one-way, and not inclusive of school staff or needs. Direction from the district comes in multiple forms to the school. Curriculum alignment is incomplete. The relationship between the school and district staff is strained and not conducive to a focus on improving instruction. As a result, teachers do not have a clear understanding of how to improve their practice.
Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

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

Academic performance in reading falls below the state average for Black, Hispanic and White student subgroups. Black, Hispanic, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged subgroups were significantly below the state average in reading. The Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) results for mathematics reflect well for most subgroups, with the exception of White students whose overall performance is below the state average.

The district is initiating a focus on reading for 2007-08 to concentrate their schools on improving fluency and comprehension across all grade levels and content areas. In response, the school is instituting a reading log and tracking system to monitor student progress. Blue Ribbon Assessments are being developed and will be used to provide timely data to teachers. Results of these assessments will determine focus areas for professional development. At this time, the program is too new to evaluate the impact on student achievement.

District reorganization resulted in a reduction of school staff that provides direct instructional support to low-performing students over the past two years. The district now supports district content supervisors working directly with school staff and up to two days of release time each week to support teacher training in the use and understanding of achievement data to improve teaching and learning. The district provides a specialized team of highly qualified contract or substitute teachers to provide classroom instruction during the release days to provide continuity of instruction. Teachers are struggling with the time out of class and its possible adverse impact on student achievement.

Divided into three instructional teams, staff works with team leaders to facilitate the working sessions. The principal is present at the most significant of these meetings. She reviews the minutes of various meetings daily, meeting with team leaders formally twice a month and has regular informal discussions with staff. There is, however, confusion at the school regarding the role of the principal as an instructional leader since she is not always made aware of the content of the information being disseminated by the content supervisors and district staff. Without the inclusion and expectation of the principal as a key instructional leader, coherence of effort may be at cross-purposes, lacking effectiveness and efficiency in improving teaching and learning.

This is a full inclusion school. There are four special education teachers assigned to each school team. Their role is to co-teach in the reading and English language arts classes and work with the regular education staff in differentiating instruction. At this time, it is a work in progress – still very much in development. Although this was the first school in the district to embrace the full inclusion model last year, the staff struggles with the sufficiency of available resources necessary to assure appropriate services for these students. Currently, collaboration between the special education staff and core content staff is informal and as time permits at the 45-minute daily staff meeting, or after school. Special education teachers are concerned that students with disabilities are not receiving adequate services, which is directly contributing to their poor performance in reading and mathematics.

Student progress over time is difficult to track at a single-grade school. Entry and exit articulation is in development but not such that each 6th grade cohort is tracked over time by the school. As a result, the school is not adequately assessing areas of strength or weakness to inform its instruction. Capitalizing on this information would greatly enhance the targeting of professional development to those areas identified as weak as well as providing subgroup achievement data for comparisons.
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.

District goals for 2007-08 are to increase reading and mathematics proficiency by a minimum of 10 percent per year for the whole school and subgroups, and to ensure that no student declines in reading or mathematics proficiency. To accelerate student achievement, the district has taken control of curriculum development in core content areas and is driving content and assessment benchmark testing. Development of the English language arts curriculum has been slow and is still not complete.

The school has created three small professional learning teams. Students are separated into three heterogeneous groups according to criteria such as numbers of students, gender, race and special needs which are reflective of the total population. Teachers are assigned to a team and have the responsibility for analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of its student group. Students scoring 1, 2, and low 3 on the CMT are explicitly targeted for assistance. Lowest performing students are divided among the team. Teachers are then responsible for developing individual learning plans for this special cohort.

Team leaders assist teams in understanding and using student data to inform instruction across all content areas, focusing on reading fluency and comprehension. They assure that students' progress in reading and mathematics is monitored and tracked and facilitate discussions at weekly meetings around the need for differentiating instruction. Currently, implementation of literacy and numeracy strategies is inconsistent across teams.

District content supervisors, responsible for the development of curriculum and strategies to improve teaching and learning, work exclusively with content specialists and teachers at the school in reading, mathematics, science or social studies. Monthly meetings provide content updates and some professional development. School representatives share information from those meetings during site staff meetings.

Communication has broken down between the district content supervisor in mathematics and the staff. Although communication between the district curriculum content supervisor for English language arts and schools is generally satisfactory, the curriculum and assessments are currently incomplete. Information and direction from district staff change too frequently, contributing to frustration and low morale in certain parts of the school.

Tension exists at the school, especially in mathematics, around the pacing of unit module tests and the need to provide extra time for struggling students. In general, teachers provide additional assistance to students informally during electives, homeroom and after school. However, it is teacher specific and not the result of a school-wide policy. Institution of a more formalized system that assures sufficiency of services to students needing additional help is a priority.

Most classrooms utilize direct instruction and guided practice. Instruction is whole class driven, with little to no differentiation noted. Classes of 18-24 students are organized into small group clusters of 4-5 students. In general, students engage and behave well. Students needing additional help are dependent upon access to the teacher during guided practice or from other students who finish their work early. Because lessons do not provide for the individual needs and abilities of the students, critical instructional time is lost.
Although early in the school year, insufficient student work is posted. Reading and language posters, daily agendas and homework assignments are evident in most of the classrooms. Lesson plan books reflect the objectives of the current class, although weekly or longer range planning is not readily apparent.

Teachers are overwhelmed with the new requirements from the district. Many teachers are not comfortable or skilled in teaching reading across content areas and are struggling to meet district expectations. More direct, on-site support, coaching and targeted professional development is required. Although the district provides instructional support via district content supervisors and some professional development, time for training and coaching at the school site is insufficient.

Teacher evaluation is not as effective as it should be. The site principal and district staff share evaluation of teachers. However, the evaluation process and how feedback is given to teachers is unclear and also new this year. Recent negotiations with the teachers’ union resulted in restricting teacher evaluations to new teachers for 2007-08.

Overall, a lack of clarity between the district and school is clearly impacting staff priorities and morale, again taking time and attention from the focus on improving student achievement.

**Criterion 3: Students’ personal character development**

This area of the school’s work needs improvement.

The school has adapted the Effective Behavioral Support program to reflect its school norms using an acronym called ROCKS – Responsibility, Organization, Cooperation, Kindness, and Safety. Posters reinforcing the expected school behaviors are evident throughout the school. Parents and students are aware of and supportive of the program. Students meeting expected school behaviors are recognized in a school-wide student of the month program which recognizes students’ efforts in meeting school standards. Incentives and personal recognition are key factors of this program.

Interactions between school staff and students are positive. Students appear happy and generally engaged. However, prior year school referral and suspension data highlight a high number of discipline suspensions. Over 100 unduplicated suspensions, out of 356 enrolled students, represent 28 percent of the school’s population. Of the 102 suspensions, 27 were students with special education needs, or 26 percent. Referrals and suspensions were most frequently for insubordination and disrespect, 40 in-school suspensions and 74 out-of-school suspensions, with males as the majority offender. Out-of-class days ranged from one day to 10 days per offense, representing significant loss of learning time as educational activities are not offered during these suspensions.

Evaluation of the impact on lost instructional time combined with poor student achievement for significant subgroups is of immediate concern at the school, especially those most vulnerable and academically challenged students. The majority of suspensions were from the poorest performing subgroups. Students with the most critical educational needs require more instructional time, not less. Increasing opportunities for staff training in differentiated instructional strategies and classroom management techniques to promote the engagement of all student subgroups is a priority. The goal is to reduce suspensions by 90 percent over three years. However, failure to analyze the factors contributing to the very high referral and suspension rates is significantly limiting the potential for their reduction and the opportunity to improve academic achievement.
The positive impact of the behavior support program requires consistent application throughout the school. However, new staff has not had the training required to have a full understanding and, as a result, implementation is not consistent. The principal has identified the program as a renewed focus for 2007-08 as a way to respond to the referral and suspension data. The high level of referrals and suspensions reflects a school community dependent upon the administration to respond to student behavior through a referral and suspension policy rather than effective inclusion strategies employed by instructional staff within the classroom.

**Criterion 4: Effective leadership and management**

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

The school administration, beginning its second year, is relatively new. The role of the principal is to represent the district’s focus and initiatives, support the teachers in improving teaching and learning, and assist in the understanding and use of pertinent student data. Although the principal represents the district’s goals to the staff, there is an apparent struggle with the changing role of the principal as the district takes control of curriculum development and assessment.

The administration has developed a series of documents to assist teachers in distilling the data on student achievement, track and monitor student progress, and provide evidence reflecting improved student work through evaluation and teacher feedback.

The administration supports shared staff collaboration time to review student assessment data through weekly meetings and release time. However, at present, the meeting schedule is complex and disjointed. Communication linkages are not sufficiently in place, effective nor efficient to maximize the impact on instruction. The school supports a shared leadership model made up of the principal, team leaders, the counselor and special education teachers. The principal must ensure that her attendance at meetings and monitoring of shared leadership is targeting improved student achievement and does not lose focus.

At this time, a shared commitment is not fully in place and there is limited capacity to address the core content area of English language arts, specifically reading, without losing sight of mathematics, science and social studies. The amount of "new" work to monitor, track and differentiate instruction for all students to improve test scores by 10 percent in reading and mathematics while not allowing one student to regress is daunting for staff. The effective and efficient use of time and partnerships is critical to meeting the academic goals for all students. School leadership must ensure that instructional time and opportunity are maximized, so that all students will achieve proficiency in core content areas.

Although the district is providing content direction and support to the school through monthly meetings and limited on-site support, the school administration is not generally included in formative discussions or recommendations. Removing barriers to effective communication and improved instructional practices must be shared between the school and district.

In general, the staff is committed to students but not skilled in incorporating the district reading strategies into their individual content areas. Targeted and individualized professional development will be necessary to meet district goals. Several of the teachers exhibit strong skills in these areas and should be featured as models for others.

Students highlight the wasted time spent in the halls “lining up!” Both past and present students acknowledge that up to 10 minutes are lost on instruction after transition times. Some leadership
focus on reducing “time wasters” and the impact on teaching and learning could usefully include a student survey or interview of past and present students.

There is an immediate need for the administration to prioritize work with the whole school community to ensure the educational environment meets the needs, both academically and socially, of all students. The school uses a formal program called “Check and Connect” to engage parents as partners in their child’s academic program. This is used most commonly to support students who require interventions.

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

**This area of the school’s work needs improvement.**

The school has some excellent examples of successful partnerships with parents and the community. School information is mailed home each month to inform parents of upcoming activities, goals and programs offered to students. However, parents reflect a lack of knowledge about the new student individual learning plans to improve student achievement. Many parents feel that the school is on top of discipline, and appreciate the clean, safe and welcoming school environment. Parents commend both teaching staff and administration for their immediate response to calls or concerns. They appreciate the open door policy at the school and the monthly early morning coffees available with the principal.

Partnerships with a range of external organizations, including the YMCA, the Rushford Foundation and Wesleyan University, are supportive of the student body. However, the impact of the partnerships on student achievement in core content areas is lacking.

An extended day program and transportation is provided to students on Tuesdays and Thursdays to support enrichment activities. Although there is a class for accelerated mathematics, there are no options for remedial instruction in core academic subjects after school. A partnership with Wesleyan University provides some non-credentialed tutorial support. A Saturday mathematics class for struggling students is offered but without school transportation. Classes are coordinated and approved through a district administrator, again with little input from the site principal. A stronger and more focused connection between the academic instruction and after school classes is needed to provide both struggling students and accelerated students opportunities to deepen their learning.

The school recognizes that it is not effectively reaching families of its most vulnerable students. Although outreach to the district for assistance has been initiated, no immediate plans are available to address this need. An active parent-teacher-organization exists and supports many of the school’s programs that no longer receive school funding. However, participating parents are in general those parents involved and already active in the school. A more deliberate process is necessary to engage minority parents and those parents whose students are not achieving academic success.