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QUALITY REVIEW DISTRICT FINAL REPORT

Meriden Public Schools

Quality Review Report

Meriden School District

**22 Liberty Street
Meriden
Connecticut
06450**

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**Cambridge
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Part 1: The District Context

Information about the district

Meriden is a mid-sized urban district, located in New Haven County, Connecticut. It has twelve schools in which nearly 9,000 students are enrolled. Eight are elementary schools of which four have kindergarten through grade 5 students and four are pre-kindergarten through 5. The schools with pre-kindergarten are John Barry, which has 537 students enrolled; Benjamin Franklin, 433 students; Hanover, 584 students; and Roger Sherman, 586 students. The kindergarten through grade 5 elementary schools are Nathan Hale with 622 students; Thomas Hooker, 506 students; Casimir Pulaski, 733 students; and Israel Putman with 627 students. There are two middle schools and two high schools. They are Lincoln Middle which has 777 students enrolled in grades 6 through 8 and Washington with 868 students. The two high schools are Francis T Maloney which has 1,321 students in grades 9 through 12 and Orville H. Platt which has 1,199 students. In addition, an inter-district magnet school for science and technology, which has been developed in partnership with the towns of Madison, Middletown and a commercial organization, educates 600 of the district's students in grades 6 to 8.

The proportion of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, at 57 percent, is above that in similar districts, that is, those in the district's direct reference group (DRG*) and well above the state average. The proportion of students with special education needs, at nearly 14 percent, is higher than DRG and state averages. The district has an increasingly diverse student population. Currently, approximately 57 percent of the students are from minority ethnic groups. About 40 percent have a Hispanic heritage, 13 percent are Black and 43 percent are White. A further 2 percent are Asian American and less than 1 percent are American Indian. While 18 different languages are spoken in total, the main foreign language is Spanish. Twenty-eight percent of the students are English language learners. The district has a higher rate of transience in its student population than similar districts.

Eighty-two percent of the students enter school with pre-kindergarten experience.

** Districts with similar socio-economic contexts in regard to their student populations.*

Part 2: Overview

What the district does well

- The superintendent and her leadership team have developed a culture of sharing and collegiality in the district, which school principals and staff appreciate.
- The support for mathematics is good; the curriculum is aligned to state standards, good professional development is building teachers' confidence and there are signs of improved achievement in elementary schools. Some effective action has also been taken to raise the expectations in high schools by eliminating several low-level courses and providing more challenging curricula.
- Actions to improve the curricula in English are beginning to bear fruit in improved reading scores but there is more to do to sustain improvement.
- The interim assessments provided by the district (the Meriden District Assessments) are valued by teachers and parents. There is more to do to ensure these make real impact on improving student learning and achievement in the classroom.
- The superintendent has established strong relationships with community leaders, which are benefiting schools.
- The considerable investment in improving school buildings provides attractive learning environments and conveys a strong message of valuing the community.

What the district needs to improve

- Improve the achievement of key subgroups of students, in particular Hispanic students, by:
 - Providing more focused tracking of progress and monitoring of these students;
 - Increasing their numbers in higher level classes, including college level and honors classes, in the high schools; and
 - Improving guidance systems to ensure they are actively enabled to raise their aspirations, and achieve success, in all schools.
- Improve the district strategic leadership by:
 - Providing a strategic plan which addresses all of the district's key focuses and makes clear how grant and general budgets are aligned to support the key priorities. As part of this, provide a clear rationale and plan for special education and bilingual programs throughout the district;
 - Making better use of data at a macro level to chart *cause and effect* in learning and achievement. This should include triangulating different types of data to build a picture – for example in regard to why subgroups are underperforming. As part of this, carry out regular satisfaction surveys of key stakeholders; and
 - Reviewing the roles and responsibilities of the district leadership team to ensure more equity in workload and better linking of finance and improvement outcomes. In addition, making team meetings part of the formal accountability process.
- Increase the effectiveness of the board of education by:
 - Reviewing the decision-making processes, with the district leadership team, so that the board can adhere to agreed policies and strategies, while continuing to be responsive to constituents and stakeholders;
 - Ensuring members have a range of means to keep them well briefed about the school improvement agenda, both within and beyond the district. As well as induction, this should

- include regular training, development of a curriculum committee or other means by which issues can be explored in some depth, and visits to schools; and
- Engaging in an annual self-evaluation process which determines how far the board meets its own key objectives.
 - Further improve the conditions for learning in the middle and high schools, by:
 - Reducing the numbers of suspensions and expulsions overall, and particularly of special education and minority ethnic groups;
 - Changing the attendance policy in the high schools whereby students can miss 29 classes before losing credit; and
 - Reducing the number of program tiers, or tracks, in the high schools and ensuring greater equity for all students in access to courses.
 - Provide better oversight and accountability for pre-school students.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The district's overall performance

The district has increased the focus on improvement in the last two years. While achievement is still low overall, there are signs of progress. There are improvements at the elementary level, particularly in mathematics, as a result of concerted action. Three schools achieved their overall adequate yearly progress targets or safe harbor in 2007. Other assessments also show improvements in the younger grades. The achievement in the high schools is low and not enough attention has been given to improving standards there because the focus has been at the elementary level. The low achievement of key subgroups in particular is a concern. This is reflected in the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT), advanced placement course data, and other data.

The use of achievement data has improved through the Meriden District Assessments and the development of data teams in each school. Together, these have brought sharper identification of weaknesses in learning and more targeted interventions and instruction to address deficiencies in mathematics and reading. There is more to do, however, to achieve consistent high quality teaching throughout the district. In addition, the district needs to be much more rigorous in analyzing data at a macro level, in regard to the performance of subgroups, suspensions and expulsions, attendance and student transience. Further, it needs to examine these data together to understand how they are connected and ensure it is clear about 'cause and effect' in student outcomes. Effective efforts have been made to ensure the curriculum in mathematics particularly, and English are aligned to the state standards. Work is starting on social studies and, to some extent, on science. At the high school level however, there are significant weaknesses in the curriculum, some of which the district has started to address, for example, by removing a number of low level mathematics courses. There are too few college level and honors courses overall, and too many ethnic minority students in lower level classes. Strategies to support the inclusion of students with special education needs in mainstream classes are beginning to bear fruit but further work is required. The Positive Behavior Support (PBS) program is making a difference in the elementary and middle schools in tackling challenging behaviors. It has not yet been extended to the high schools where there are high numbers of suspensions and expulsions. The arrangements for English language learners are not effective. At present, there is a lack of strategic planning to ensure the needs of these students are adequately met after the initial 30 month immersion in English.

The superintendent and her leadership team, in particular the associate superintendent, have created a good climate in the district. Despite the increased challenge to improve achievement, positive relationships between the district and the schools are maintained. Administrators feel the central office works in partnership with them to move things forward. However, as indicated above, the district leadership team needs to improve strategic planning processes. Further, the board of education, while very committed to the district, is not wholly effective at present. It does not have sufficient processes, apart from the scheduled meetings, to ensure members are kept well informed about the school improvement agenda. Further, at times its actions supersede agreed decisions, which can undermine strategic planning. The district's accountability processes are inconsistent. For example, the monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning in schools need to be enhanced and there is not enough oversight and accountability for pre-school students.

The district's fiscal control is good. There is strict accounting for expenditures against designated budgets. However, the strategic use of the budget is less effective because it is not closely tied to the District Improvement Plan and lacks a clear process to gauge 'value for money' in outcomes for students, including improved learning and achievement. For example, strategic use of budgets to support students with special education needs and bilingual students needs to be improved. Most of the district's operations are streamlined. The food service works well. There is good attention to ensuring families eligible for free school meals are able to access them easily. The transportation system is satisfactory but could be improved in regard to the youngest children and some aspects of after-school programs. Good strategic planning by the town council, in partnership with the board of education, has provided new buildings and facilities for most of the schools. The district has significantly enhanced its use of

communication technology although there is more to do to establish a good system for tracking individual student progress. Appropriate policies are in place for the recruitment and retention of teachers apart from some restrictive practices on teacher appointments which act counter to a policy for improvement, and should be reviewed.

The superintendent has established strong links with community groups which considerably enhance learning opportunities. This is paying off with some good after-school and extended programs to support learning in the district. Parents are positive about the district. However, more could be done to engage hard to reach families. The district does not undertake regular satisfaction surveys of parents (or other key stakeholders) to provide the qualitative data required, alongside the quantitative data, to gauge its effectiveness, and enhance accountability.

Domain 1: Attainment, Learning, Teaching, Curriculum and Assessment

This area of the district's work is at basic level and needs improvement.

Attainment

The district is identified as in need of improvement, year four, under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. In 2007, it failed to meet its adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets for the district overall in both reading and mathematics in the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT). In the CAPT, in the same year, the AYP district target was met in reading but not in mathematics. The 95 percent participation targets were achieved throughout except, in regard to the CAPT, by students with disabilities.

In the CMT, in 2007, the gap between the AYP targets and the actual results is greater in reading, where there is a 12 percentage point difference, than in mathematics (7 percentage points). The only subgroups of students who met the targets in both subjects were Asian American and White students. However, data shows an improving picture in mathematics with significant gain in 2007 in the proportion achieving at, or above, proficient on the previous year. This is linked to improved alignment of the mathematics curriculum to state standards and improved guidance for teachers through the work of the new district supervisor for mathematics. That gains are being made is born out by interim test data through the Meriden District Assessment (MDA) process.

In reading, the picture is not quite so positive or consistent. While there are some gains in the CMT from 2006 to 2007, there is variation across grades 3 to 5, and between schools. The district uses Harcourt Trophies materials as its source text for English language arts (ELA), amplified by other guidance materials for planning reading activities, but the links are not as seamless as for mathematics. There is, nonetheless, some good supervisory support for reading and actions to improve reading in the early grades. These actions are having impact on the improved Developmental Reading Assessments (DRA) and Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) scores.

The district can point to significant improvement in some of its schools. In 2007, two elementary schools, Thomas Hooker and Hanover, met their overall AYP targets for both mathematics and reading. Two further schools, Casimir Pulaski and Benjamin Franklin, also met their overall AYP targets for mathematics and achieved safe harbor for reading. At Thomas Hooker, which has a large proportion of bilingual students, their Hispanic subgroups of students also achieved their targets or reached safe harbor. Safe Harbor was also achieved by Hispanic students at Casimir Pulaski School. Performance varied in the other elementary and middle schools with lower performance overall in reading.

In the 2007 CAPT, the picture was better in reading than in mathematics. Both White and Black students reached the target in reading, while in mathematics only White students achieved it. Numbers are too small (fewer than 40) to provide reliable data on Asian American and American Indians but other key subgroups, that is, Hispanic students, those who are economically disadvantaged (which includes members of all ethnic groups) and students with disabilities did not achieve the targets. Overall AYP targets were met in reading in both high schools. The mathematics target was also achieved in Francis T. Maloney. However, as indicated, key subgroups did not reach the targets in both high schools and

more needs to be done to raise the achievement of these students. District data indicates there are too many of these students in lower level classes, and they rank high in suspension, absence and referral data.

The district's SAT Reasoning Test scores for 2006 in mathematics, critical reading and writing are well below the state figures. Further, the percentage scoring 600 or more has declined since 2001. The number of students entered for advanced placement (AP) or honors courses is low. In 2006, only 8 percent of graduates achieved at least one AP with a score of three or more, which is required for college credit and only 60 percent of all the AP examinations taken scored three or higher. The district acknowledges that its main priority in recent years has been to improve learning and achievement in elementary schools and that relatively little focus has been on the high schools. Recently, a positive step to begin to address the issues has been taken by the associate superintendent by removing several low level mathematics courses in the high schools and replacing them with college level courses, designed to raise expectations and achievement. Further concerted action is required on a number of fronts, however, to tackle the serious underachievement in the high schools. Although the district's drop-out rate declined between 2001 and 2006, the four year cumulative rate remains above the state figure. While the percentage of students pursuing higher education has increased in recent years, the proportion remaining unemployed after graduation increased significantly in the five years leading up to 2006.

The strategic profile shows the district's statistics on physical fitness to lag behind its DRG and the state. Currently, the district acknowledges that its focus is on academic achievement and that this area is not being addressed directly.

The district's goals are based on NCLB targets; that is, to increase by 10 percent the proportion reaching proficiency in reading and mathematics. The district does not yet have student level data which would enable it to provide realistic goals based on students' starting levels and aggregated to provide cohort targets for school and district.

Provision of Curriculum and Instruction

A key focus for the district in recent years has been to standardize the curriculum, starting with mathematics and ELA. A complete overhaul of mathematics was undertaken to align the curriculum with the state standards and provide support materials and guidance to teachers. Work was also undertaken in ELA, but not to the same intensive level as in mathematics, and the Harcourt Trophies program was used to provide a consistent framework for all schools, amplified by Readers and Writers Workshop models. This is further supported by district-developed guidance and support materials to provide a 'balanced curriculum'. Nonetheless, there is a need for further guidance on differentiation strategies. The MDA provides interim assessments which have correspondence with the CMT. Teachers appreciate the professional support provided by in-school consultant/coaches and see these developments as a significant improvement on the previous position.

Pre-school programs funded by Title I grant monies are located in four of the elementary schools. The district accepts about 200 children into kindergarten from the pre-kindergarten readiness program. A further grant supports the transition and a video has been developed to show kindergarten readiness expectations. Currently, there is a lack of clarity as to who has overall responsibility for the pre-kindergarten program in the district. This is reflected in weaknesses in the provision and in the district's ability to monitor how effective the programs are. The district acknowledges that pre-kindergarten has been a low priority. This is short-sighted because providing good foundations in early learning pays dividends later. A curriculum for pre-school students has not been agreed upon and teachers appear to be using Harcourt as the literacy program by default. Pre-school teachers attend some of the in-service professional development sessions for kindergarten to grade 5 teachers to familiarize themselves with Harcourt as well as meeting to review documents and work on curriculum. Five of the teachers have para-professionals, supervised by the special education department, to support them with the Early Intervention Program. The district is not clear whether there are students with special education needs in the regular education pre-kindergarten program.

Although the district's instructional time exceeds the state minimum, it is nonetheless below the DRG and state averages across all phases of schools. This is having impact on the quality of teaching and learning because there is less teaching time overall and there is less flexibility to ensure breadth in the range of learning experiences. The district has considered extending the school day but has not begun formal negotiations to do this for a variety of reasons, including economic factors. A lack of teaching time has impacted particularly on the high schools that have not been able to provide additional courses in order to raise achievement. In all schools, more time is needed to allow flexibility in the scheduling of key meetings. At present, teachers express frustration at the lack of common planning time. There is a case for the district, with the board and both unions, to strategically review the time available to ensure breadth in the curriculum, as well as sufficient time for the key meetings needed to support teachers and drive improvement.

There are weaknesses in the arrangements for students with special education needs and English language learners (ELL). See below, regarding weaknesses in strategy and funding. The district moved from self-contained classes for students with special education needs three years ago. It met with some resistance from teachers and other stakeholders. While it has made headway since getting the protocol accepted and supportive strategies and interventions established, more remains to be done. Teachers initially found the level of special needs, including disruptive behaviors, very challenging. A Positive Behavior Support (PBS) program was adopted to develop teachers' general behavior management strategies. Training was provided to develop teachers' skills in handling difficult behaviors. By and large, this strategy has been welcomed and found to be effective with most students in the schools. However, it is not effective with a small proportion (around 1 percent) of students with more severe challenging behaviors and the district does not have alternative provision to meet the needs of these students (beyond a small number of high school students) who are sent out of district at substantial cost. There is more to do to ensure that all board members, and some teachers and parents, are fully aware of the benefits of inclusion for all students. There is a need to demonstrate to these key stakeholders that general education students are not being disadvantaged in general education classes by a disproportionate diversion of the teacher's attention to the needs of students with special education needs. They need to see that support and interventions are strategically placed and adequate to ensure equity for all. Currently, although support and intervention programs are provided across all schools, a lack of clarity regarding the strategy for allocating extra resources for these students means that some areas appear to be under-resourced, while the overall funding is quite high. A further issue is that there is some lack of clarity in differentiating the needs of ELL from students with speech and language difficulties. As the district is aware, currently there is some misdiagnosis of ELL students after their 30 month mandatory access to bilingual teaching, partly owing to a lack of alternative means to access continued support for those who need it. There is also a lack of a cohesive system to target specific interventions to the needs of these students.

The schools' staff express concerns about the high school curriculum, which are supported by the general low levels of achievement. While the district recently made a good start in raising expectations by replacing low level mathematics courses with more demanding ones, key issues remain. The 45 minute periods limit the teaching of science in one of the schools and even though the results in science have declined, a suggestion to provide a block schedule to allow extended periods (so that more lab work can be undertaken) was not approved. The teacher union was resistant to the notion but if retaining the current situation is leading to reduced learning for students, it is incumbent on the district, board and the school, to revisit the issue. There are also indications that the curriculum in the high schools is restricted by the short length of the school day (as seen below, it is shorter than in comparable DRG districts).

There are issues, too, in the guidance provided to students in the high schools; these vulnerable students are not being sufficiently encouraged to raise their expectations. The suspensions and expulsions in the high schools are substantial, unacceptably so. Currently, not enough is being done to address this issue. The Positive Behavior Support (PBS) strategy which is making a difference in other schools has not been implemented here. Further, the behavior statistics raise questions about how motivating (and matched to need) the curriculum is for key groups of students. There are too many students from ethnic groups, particularly Hispanic, placed in lower level class groups. Not enough is being done to raise their confidence and aspirations as learners. Part of the issue may be that guidance counselors have significantly more students to support than the New England Association of Schools and Colleges

(NEASC) recommended number. There is also some evidence that not enough support is provided for the high numbers of students with learning deficiencies in lower level classes. Some effective co-teaching in the high schools is supporting inclusion and there are classes which teach students transferable 'learning strategies,' although as yet there is no clear evidence of the impact of this. The district has developed an interdisciplinary team approach to teaching the 9th grade which has begun to make a difference, however, and is popular with parents.

Assessments Aligned with Curriculum and Instruction

Ongoing assessment is integrated with guided reading activities in kindergarten to grade 3 through the medium of, for example, running records. A balanced reading program which includes phonics instruction is also in place in grades 1 through 8. Further, in grades 3 to 8, reciprocal reading strategies are being introduced. In the high schools, there is increased focus on literacy and critical reading.

The MDA is a useful data tool developed in the district to provide interim assessments in reading and mathematics three times a year in grades 2 through 9. It is aligned with the CMT and provides a means of error analysis which teachers and administrators find helpful. One of its key strengths is that it provides rapid feedback on test scores which teachers can use readily to gauge what has been learned and what needs further work. Although there are also early childhood assessments for the younger students, they are not aligned to the state standards. Currently, the MDA is not used to provide targets for each student based on their starting levels or to track if they are making the expected progress. Such a process could be aggregated to provide class, grade and school targets, more realistically founded on expected growth linked to students' starting points. It could also improve the tracking of progress.

Teachers like using the MDA because it provides timely and detailed information regarding weaknesses in learning, providing an 'error analysis' of test strands. The data teams in some of the schools are using the error analysis well with scrutiny of students' work to help target their instruction to address weak areas. However, there is more to do to ensure the teachers are using the data routinely to differentiate the instruction and match it to levels of ability in the class. Currently, more guidance could be provided in the ELA materials to demonstrate how planning can be differentiated in particular units and topics so that teachers do not have to 're-invent the wheel' in each school.

Instructional Leadership and Capacity Building

Teachers feel that a lot of change and development has happened in a short time. Most understand the reasons why the district needed to align the curriculum with state standards and attain greater consistency and most feel ownership of the work in mathematics and the MDA. Some express concerns about the 'scripted' nature of the curriculum and believe that the pace of learning 'leaves some students behind.' Teachers have found the consultant support for the Harcourt materials to be helpful. Although schools comment that the district did not provide upfront training on the use of data, the data teams developed by the district in each school are now well established. They have improved teacher skills in analyzing and using data to identify weaknesses in learning. While progress is being made in raising achievement, there is still some way to go to ensure the data work translates into well differentiated instruction in the classroom.

Teachers confirm that the district provided 'numerous trainings' on differentiated instruction linked to inclusion. This has had an impact on teaching strategies which are benefiting not only students with special education needs but also regular education students who are struggling. However, teachers still find the teaching of classes with large numbers of students with special education needs a challenge when they do not have sufficient support by special education teachers or paraprofessionals. There is relatively little training provided for paraprofessionals. This is an oversight which should be remedied without delay since these are a significant element of a successful inclusion strategy.

The supervisory support for mathematics and literacy is valued by schools. There has been considerable professional development in both areas to support the implementation of new programs. The reading coaches in elementary schools also provide good support but the extent to which they can provide it is hampered by their teaching commitments (see below).

Domain 2: Leadership, Culture and Accountability

This area of the district's work needs improvement.

Vision, Culture and Action

The district leadership has accelerated the focus on raising achievement in the last three years. School administrators, teachers and other staff have appropriate understanding of the district's overall rationale and goals in raising achievement. This is also true to some extent for board members and parents although, as seen below, there are concerns regarding the inclusion of students with special education needs in mainstream classes. A systematic approach has been taken to developing curricula, and a sense of urgency has been conveyed in the rollout of programs and improvements to tackle weaknesses in elementary schools. Good relationships exist between the district leadership and school staff and care has been taken to create a climate where administrators and teachers feel prepared to cope with new requirements. The superintendent and the associate superintendent visit schools regularly and demonstrate understanding of the challenges facing schools, as well as a readiness to help and support.

There is good understanding of the use of data to improve learning and of key school improvement strategies in the district leadership team, and the associate superintendent in particular provides strong instructional leadership. The district has embraced the vision of inclusion, recognizing that it has the potential to provide greater equity overall and improve the social development and learning of students with special learning needs and disabilities. However, they could do more to convince the board of education and stakeholders of the efficacy of the inclusion strategy. While the board understands the principal of inclusion, some its members are not wholly committed to it because of concerns about the challenges for teachers and the impact on regular education students in mainstream classes. This is partly because the district has not provided an overall strategic vision and plan for inclusion which shows the range of strategies in use to support it and how funds are reallocated to ensure teachers can cope well. Additional strategies and interventions have been instituted but the rationale is not wholly transparent - see reference to special education in the fiscal section below - and there is not a clear process for monitoring the impact of the policy.

Strategic and Action Planning

The district leadership team is fairly small in terms of numbers; however, a good new appointment has been made to provide strategic oversight of special education, and recently the board rightly agreed to appoint two supervisors for ELA and mathematics. Currently, there is no supervisor for science and with the new science requirements for the CMT, further oversight and strategic planning are needed. The associate superintendent for instruction, who has taken on science in the interim, has a very broad role and is overloaded. The district leadership team works well together, but systems of accountability need to be more formalized in terms of tracking the progress of agreed actions and strategic planning through the meeting structure.

The principals meet with the district associate superintendent (instruction) and assistant superintendent (finance) annually to make their case for any extra staffing or resourcing, over and beyond those planned through class size allocations, they feel is warranted. While this enables schools to argue their case individually, in practice it leads to some lack of transparency and consistency in allocations to schools. In addition, the board will sometimes, in response to representations from interested parties, intervene and reverse or adjust decisions already agreed, which does not help the district to maintain its strategic focus and accountability processes. For example, because of competing funding issues, a decision was made to cut a gifted and talented program but following representations from some parents, the board reinstated the program. While it is understandable that the board wishes to listen, and respond to its constituents, including parents and teachers, amendments should be made through a due process when other factors can be taken into account and not on an ad hoc basis, as is sometimes the case now. It undermines the district's attempts to be strategic in their planning and implementation if they know decisions can be reversed without reference to the planning process.

The District Improvement Plan follows the requirements of the state and focuses on key outcomes in literacy, mathematics and school climate. There is alignment between school improvement plans and the district plan but there are weaknesses in the district plan because it does not reflect all key strategies, does not have a longer term element or indicate necessary funding and resources. There are weaknesses too in how the district accounts for its own effectiveness. The plan does not provide a good, or comprehensive, basis, with clear success criteria, by which the district can evaluate its performance. Not enough use is made of comparative benchmarks to monitor performance. While there is evidence that some strategies and programs are working well, exemplified by the improvements in achievement in some schools, processes are inconsistent and as seen below (fiscal section) the district does not determine value for money against key expenditures. The lack of clarity regarding the full extent of funding for students with special education needs (see below), and ELLs, and processes for gauging how effective the provision is, are examples of this. By and large, the district has sound systems for ensuring compliance with safety and legal compliance.

Governance

The board of education has several longstanding members who are very committed to the district. It is stringent in monitoring expenditures and ensuring fiscal integrity in the use of budgets. The relationship between the board, the superintendent and the district leadership team is positive. The superintendent and her team respond promptly to all requests for information from board members. The board is not balanced in terms of the demographic range in the community; at present there is only one woman and two members of Hispanic heritage.

Currently, the board is not wholly effective. It is not aware, or supportive enough of the inclusion strategy and of the significance of inclusion to the improvement agenda.

While the board, with the support of the assistant superintendent of finance, monitors expenditures closely, it does not make sufficient links to the impact of spending on student outcomes. Nor is the board a strong enough advocate for the achievement of key subgroups. For example, it is not following up rigorously enough on data, such as attendance and suspension statistics, which show high numbers of ethnic minority students absent or being suspended.

As seen above, the board sometimes undermines strategic decision-making when responding to points made by stakeholders, by superseding decisions without going through a due process with the district leadership. Although this is done with the good intention of being responsive to constituents, it is not helpful overall or in the longer term because it can skew policy and planning. It should be possible to take concerns expressed in public or other meetings and treat them seriously but with the understanding that no policy changes will be made immediately, unless there is a risk to safety. Rather, it should be clear that issues will be considered in light of planned strategies and while it may not be possible, or advisable, to make immediate adjustments, the issue will be reconsidered when plans are being revised through the normal cycle.

Although the board has recently requested regular curriculum updates from the associate superintendent, which has helped to develop its understanding, it does not have sufficient processes to enable it to be well informed about the current improvement agenda in schools, and the extent of the challenges for the district. The board's resistance to providing assistant administrators in elementary schools until very recently, illustrates some lack of awareness of what leading for improvement requires. Currently, the board does not have a curriculum committee which would allow it to explore in detail the implications of policies and enable members to track the impact of finance decisions on the achievement of students. The minutes of the board's public meetings show that pertinent questions are asked at times but the timeframe for the meetings does not allow for the in-depth discussion needed to ensure clarity about 'cause and effect.' A curriculum committee could enable a more rigorous process and better accountability for the outcomes of expenditure in achievement, as well as sharpening the understanding of key strategies. In addition, although some members visit schools, there is no formal process, or calendar, for ensuring members visit schools on a reasonably regular basis so that they are aware of issues from the ground up.

The board's governance and operations policy document indicates that it sees self evaluation as 'crucially important' as a strategy for leadership development and that it intends to undertake such a process on an annual basis. It has not done so in the recent past. Further, induction and training processes for members are not as systematic as they should be. The board dropped its membership of Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE), and should consider reinstating it. Membership is important to keep members abreast of local, state and national improvement strategies.

Site Management, Coherence and Accountability

The principals feel supported by the district overall and they believe that some aspects of training and support are strong. They feel senior district staff know the schools well, recognize their strengths and weaknesses and are responsive to their concerns. However, they are not as confident that the board understands the reality in schools. There are regular, bi-monthly meetings of principals and district superintendent and administrators. Principals' performance against agreed goals is evaluated by the district on an annual basis. Currently, there is no graduation of autonomy to schools based on performance.

There needs to be more emphasis on developing leadership roles in schools, as part of a key strategy of 'leading for improvement.' The elementary schools have been operating without assistant principals which has impacted significantly on self-evaluation and the monitoring of teaching and learning because too much of the principals' time is taken up with day to day management issues and in a reactive management of events. Teacher evaluations are carried out as required. In regard to self-evaluation of school effectiveness, there is some increase in the focus on lesson observations but 'walkthroughs' by principals and others are overly focused on compliance with programs rather than their impact on the learning of students overall and of subgroups. More training of principals and key staff is required on how to follow the 'data trail' from achievement data to the classroom in order to pinpoint what is affecting the learning of individuals and groups of students.

Leadership is distributed to the extent that there are 'middle leader' roles in the schools. However, the roles vary across the phases of schools, both in the time available to support colleagues and in the extent to which they include a formal responsibility for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning in specific areas. The department heads in the high schools have a reduced teaching commitment to enable them to take oversight responsibility for their subjects as well as a monitoring and evaluation role. In middle schools, the supervisors have an oversight role but are not responsible for monitoring quality. As it is, with a full teaching commitment, there is little time for their oversight role. There are reading coaches in the elementary schools but they also have class teaching commitments which impinge on their opportunities to support other staff.

The district has encouraged the development of leadership teams in schools to take a more strategic view of planning and improvement. These vary across the schools. Some have been generalized by data teams in an attempt to rationalize the meeting time. While the board has recognized the need for assistant principals in elementary schools, this does not go far enough. Further action is required to improve the quality of leadership in schools, not least by building in more time and training for middle leaders, to enable them to take responsibility for evaluating the impact of the programs and strategies being deployed.

While it has developed its processes for analyzing data to improve instruction, the district is less effective in using data at a macro level, that is, in *joining up* the range of statistical data to see 'cause and effect.' It is not sufficiently strategic in putting key data together to gain insight and build a picture of what is happening. For example, it is not tracking transience data stringently enough. Nor is it analyzing the significance of the suspension or expulsion data in regard to subgroups, considering how this information aligns with the proportion of these students in lower level groups and their overall underachievement. It is not focused enough on subgroups overall.

Domain 3: Management of Human and Fiscal Resources

This area of the district's work needs improvement.

Human Resources

The management of human resources is proficient overall. Administrators are positive about the support they receive from the department. The district has appropriate policies for equal opportunities, sexual harassment and minority teacher recruitment. It negotiated its recruitment and hiring policies for all personnel with the eight relevant professional associations and unions. In regard to the recruitment of teachers, a thorough process is undertaken. The human resources (HR) director posts the job advertisements and does the initial scrutiny of applications, after which the building principal sifts further and shortlists applicants. The associate superintendent sets up the interview process at building level with the principal and key staff. There are two or three interviews, the last of which includes the superintendent. A similar process is undertaken for district supervisors. For principal and other administration appointments, board members are involved appropriately.

In regard to student safety and child protection, the district undertakes state and federal background checks for all personnel, including substitute teachers and custodial staff. Finger-print checks are done prior to hiring.

However, there are weaknesses in the district's recruitment practices for teachers. For example, teachers are often hired late (i.e. June) in the school year, even though by about January the district has details of most intended retirees. Further, owing to teacher union restrictions accepted by the board, teaching positions must be posted internally first and if there are two qualified internal candidates, the district is required to appoint one of them without opening the position to a larger pool which includes those from outside the district. Increasing teacher effectiveness is key to raising achievement and as part of this, an effective recruitment policy should seek the best candidate for a position, regardless of other factors. The policy is short-sighted and acts counter to the district's main priority to raise achievement. It is also not in the best interest of teachers in the long term. In contrast, administrators' positions are advertised both internally and externally at the same time.

As well as advertising positions in various publications, the HR director attends a number of recruitment fairs annually. He is on the Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES) minority teachers' recruitment council and actively seeks to attract teachers to apply who are Spanish speaking and/or representative of the diverse minority groups in the district. Currently, the teaching body does not reflect, proportionally, the diversity in the student population. However, the policy is making inroads; 13 percent of teachers hired this year were from ethnic minority groups, which compares well with other local districts.

By and large, teacher retention is good in the district. Most moves are for retirement, personal reasons or promotion. The pay scale is competitive, especially at senior levels so the district is able to attract experienced candidates. Lateral moves to other towns are not a common feature.

Fiscal

The district has thorough processes for fiscal control. Successful financial audits and internal systems show tight control and monitoring of budgets. The assistant superintendent of finance, the business manager and other key staff work closely to ensure systems run efficiently. The board receives regular updates regarding expenditure and income, as well projections for future spending. However, the updates do not sufficiently focus on the 'value for money' aspects of spending, in terms of learning and achievement. Further, benchmarking key spending against other districts and the state is not a routine part of evaluation processes. Purchasing of resources for schools is stringently monitored and while this works well in terms of ensuring quality items are provided at reasonable cost, there is too much hands-on control from the district at times. For example, senior personnel inventorying resources in school closets is not the best use of their time. While the practice ensures resources are well used, it works against

school responsibility and autonomy. Supplies and textbooks are distributed on a per pupil basis; major textbooks adoptions are provided across the district.

The total expenditure per student is below similar districts although the district spends about the same proportion of its budget on instruction. The district's spending on salaries is considerably lower than for its DRG counterparts although the figure was increased this year. The spending on equipment has been severely reduced in the last two years with the result that schools, particularly the high schools, are having difficulties getting furniture and other items.

The district's main strategy for allocating funds to schools is reducing class sizes. As well as enabling overall reduced class sizes, the strategy is to provide the most generous staffing for the younger students while ensuring curriculum coverage in all schools. This is popular with teachers, and there is constant pressure to reduce classes further but there are weaknesses in the lack of a clear rationale for the strategy, as well as limitations in its use and the monitoring of its effectiveness. While this is a legitimate element to include in its strategy, as the district is aware, reduced class size of itself does not guarantee improved learning and achievement. To be effective, it needs to be aligned to levels of need, circumstances, and set within a range of strategies, including differentiated teaching, aimed at helping teachers be more effective in the classroom. Currently, there is no means of evaluating the effectiveness of what is, overall, a costly strategy. A clear rationale and more flexibility and autonomy for schools within the strategy are needed to improve accountability.

As is seen in Domain 2, the District Improvement Plan is not sufficiently strategic. Allied to this is the lack of costing of the priorities in the plan, which is a requirement if full accountability for the effectiveness of spending decisions is to be provided.

The district ensures its various grants funds, both public and private, are accounted for appropriately. It is less effective in its strategic overview of grant spending. Part of the problem is the plethora of additional funds and grants which are tied to different student groups and needs. Currently, it is unclear who is responsible for Title III funds and there is a lack of clarity regarding how effectively Title I funds are in improving achievement. As indicated above, a rationale and key principals for the general budget, which include how the various grant funds will augment and support improvement strategies, is required to guide expenditure, and enable evaluation of outcomes. The large number of grants and the high amounts involved increase the importance of seeing the big picture so that opportunities to combine and otherwise use funds creatively to empower schools in their improvement strategies are not missed.

The spending on students with special education needs is higher than in DRG districts and the state, and because the budget is not disaggregated, it is not possible to determine value for money in the spending on these students, in terms of progress or other outcomes. The fiscal breakdown shows substantial extra staff distributed across the schools to support these and other students, but there is no clear picture of the basis for the distribution. The budget allocations appear to be based more on historical precedent than strategic decision-making. Further, there is considerable spending, higher than DRG districts and state averages, on 'out-of-district' placements for students with challenging behaviors. This is an expensive strategy for which the rationale is not clear although there have been recent discussions about finding alternatives within the district. The special education strategic profile contains statistics which should raise questions. For example, the large numbers of Hispanic students with special education needs who drop out, and the high proportions of Black and Hispanic students in the absence, suspension and expulsion statistics. Currently, these issues are not being addressed. The district has appointed a new senior leader in the area of special education who is aware of the need for a complete review of strategy and expenditure.

The district is currently not doing enough to gauge stakeholder satisfaction or to ensure that the town council, parents and community are sufficiently clear about its strategic planning and the impact of its actions to raise achievement.

Domain 4: Operational Systems

This area of the district's work meets minimum requirements.

The district undertook a major review of information technology (IT) systems just under three years ago and set in place a strategic plan to build resources, hardware and internet access across all its schools. It has made appropriate headway with the plan, by and large, except in providing a system to track student progress. So far, all school networks are standardized to a common 'platform' and connected to the state network. Security systems are fully in place. The system now allows better tracking of student mobility since the student management system creates an individual 'account' once a student is registered. There is much more improved performance of IT systems with no 'crashes' of school networks this year. Together with the new and refurbished buildings, new hardware has been made available in schools. There are two computer labs in each elementary school, more in the middle and high schools, as well as mobile carts. Most of the schools have interactive whiteboards. Further upgrading of hardware is currently going on in the middle schools. The curriculum has been developed to ensure more systematic use of technology to support learning in key areas, as well as to develop technology skills. There is also a Math/Literacy/Technology (MLT) teacher in every elementary school with a focus to integrate technology into curriculum instruction. Students have one period of IT per week; in 6th grade, the students take a computer class. Specific grants are used to provide software to support students with special education needs in regard to their individualized education programs. There are after school sessions for teachers to see how software applications can support learning. This district does not have an automated library system, although this is in the technology plan.

Communication

The district has improved its use of IT to aid communication of key data but there is more to do to ensure it promotes links with all key stakeholders. Recently, a grant has enabled the district to implement a 'PowerSchool/Teacher' system which is intended to enable multiple viewers to track student information. While there are some glitches and teachers are still becoming familiar with the new system, once embedded, it has the potential to streamline attendance and other data processes. The district made good efforts to enable all schools and teachers to have opportunity to train and become familiar with the new system, including placing five trained practitioners in every school. However, a weakness in the district's IT system is that it does not yet have the means to provide tracking of achievement data over time. This is an important process to improve learning. There are other data 'silos' (food service, individualized education programs, grades) where stand alone data is available but must be accessed separately.

The district provides an IT help desk. While each school has a website which parents are encouraged to access, it does not currently include details of homework. This is a weakness which will be addressed next year when the parent portal of Power School comes on line.

Operations

Overall, the district's approach to, and organization of, operations is proficient although there are some weaknesses in regard to transportation.

Good efforts have been made to improve the food service and healthy eating in the district. The food service manager is a dietician and care is taken to ensure menus are balanced and meet nutritional standards. There is some reflection of cultural diversity in the menus provided. There has been a survey of students' likes and dislikes, the outcomes of which are considered in providing menus. The district has managed not to raise meal prices for five years. A breakfast club is offered in the elementary schools. Care is taken to ensure this is self-supporting to meet board expectations. Appropriate efforts are made to ensure those eligible for free or reduced lunches are enabled, and encouraged, to access them. Newsletters and the district website provide information regarding eligibility and how to apply. As well as applications directly to schools, social services provide lists of eligible families and guidance counselors also indicating where students may be eligible. A card system, to which points can be credited, makes

the process of accessing free meals anonymous and also enables parents to regulate what is purchased, if they wish to do so.

There is a growing awareness that promoting healthy lifestyles and good nutrition supports learning. A community health center provides various health services to schools, including work on behavioral health. There is a health and wellness curriculum and the high schools have a health class. Sex education begins in 5th grade. Nurses provide annual health checks and work with the health department to encourage community partnerships around health issues.

There has been encouragement of physical activity; the minimum of 15 minutes of physical activity per day is adhered to, but as seen above, the district lags behind others in this area and more needs to be done to develop physical fitness.

The district provides school transportation in accordance with state law. As well as the district's schools this includes transportation for the interdistrict magnet schools, vocational high schools, to which the district sends students, and pre-schools. The numbers of vehicles able to carry wheelchairs has been increased recently to meet the needs of students with disabilities. There are some issues in regard to transportation which need to be addressed. Because of routing arrangements, the shuttle is sometimes late in picking up students to be transported to an after school program. Currently, the arrangements require that pre-school students are met by a parent or caretaker when dropped off. Sometimes, when the parent is not present, the children are returned to the school. In some instances, because no one else is available, the bus driver has to provide care at the school until a parent or other adult is available. In addition, having very young children unaccompanied by an adult on the buses is not appropriate because of safety risks. There are often instances of boisterous behavior. In such cases, drivers' guidelines indicate that they should stop the bus and call the police, but further preventative measures are required. The district re-routes the buses every year to provide stops at the homes of pre-school students. Currently, maps do not provide sufficiently accurate information regarding footpaths and other features which determine where it is safe to stop. As a result, the assistant superintendent, together with the transportation manager, spends considerable time personally checking out bus routes each year. While retaining the focus on safety, the district could seek more efficient means of achieving this objective.

The town council, in partnership with the district, has made it a priority in recent years to re-build and refurbish all of the school buildings. So far, all except the high schools have been upgraded to a high standard. Funding is now being explored to plan for improvements in high schools also. This very significant investment sends a strong message from the town council and the board of valuing education and of commitment to the local community. The district has appropriate arrangements in place for the care and maintenance of buildings and facilities. Currently, it is moving to establish the use of 'green' cleaning materials. All custodians have training in regard to health and safety, including public water supply, compliance with asbestos safety, radon checks, the use of hazardous materials and fire and life safety systems. Monthly fire drills are carried out and there are regular inspections regarding compliance with safety regulations. Pool maintenance at the high schools is systematic. There is also good attention to security. All schools have anti-burglar systems with motion and sound detectors and lights are also motion triggered. Currently, the district is writing a bid for a grant to add cameras at the high schools to provide further protection to buildings and occupants. Acting in partnership with the local police authority, the district has enabled each middle and high school to have its own police officer or school resource officer (SRO) on site. As well as keeping a close eye to security and maintaining community links, the SRO's add value by working educationally with students in regard to drugs misuse, personal safety and crime prevention, for example, 'gang resistance' awareness.

Service Culture

The district has an appropriate service culture. For the most part, there is good awareness of, and attention to, students' health and safety, although, as seen above, a review of some of the transportation arrangements is required. There is an understanding of the significance of healthy eating and lifestyles to learning and achievement, but more could be done to promote students' physical fitness.

Key workers, such as central office staff, custodians, paraprofessionals, nurses and others understand the role they play in ensuring students' well being and the prerequisites for learning. Some comments are, 'students are our job...' 'we're here to help the administration.' By and large, they feel their work is valued and they are supported by the district.

Criterion 5: Stakeholder Engagement and Satisfaction

This area of the district's work meets minimum requirements.

Internal Stakeholder Communications and Satisfaction

The district superintendent and her leadership team make considerable efforts to ensure good working relationships with schools at all levels. School administration and teaching staff feel that the district is 'incredibly accessible' and responsive. The associate superintendent for instruction is in schools very regularly. The teachers' union representatives appreciate the way the district communicates with them. They comment that the district is "always fair" there is "good, open and frequent communication" and they 'always listen.'

Key service workers in schools such as clerical staff, secretaries and custodians feel valued and that they make an important contribution to the educational process. Communication between district and unions is positive by and large and issues which arise in regard to roles are dealt with appropriately. All of the staff involved in the review identify with their buildings and seek to ensure standards are maintained. There is agreement that service staff "embrace the role of caring for students, beyond their specific role." Custodians comment that when "kids see you take pride, then they take pride...providing a clean, safe environment is our main priority." They confirm that the majority of students respect the building and facilities. Similar sentiments are expressed by clerical staff. Some have found the 'Power School' data system a challenge but feel it is a great system and that once they are confident with it, "it will be wonderful." All comment that there are more challenges in schools now and that parents need to be more supportive in regard to attendance and support for learning. While custodians receive annual training in regard to safety requirements, and clerical staff receive relevant training, for example in using key software, there has been no professional training for support staff in regard to positive behavior support (PBS) which is a major plank of the district's strategy to raise achievement and pertinent to their role.

External Stakeholder Engagement

The superintendent has made it a priority since her arrival to engage actively with, and draw commitment from, the community. She has succeeded in making good links with several key local voluntary and other groups. She is on the board of directors of a number of groups, including the Boys' and Girls' Club. This organization and other very committed community groups confirm the superintendent's commitment. They have established a number of focused programs which are extending provision in the district. For example, the Boys' and Girls' Club provides an after school program, the 21st Century Program, on their premises for around 60 students. There is an alternative program and a Venture program for designated students. The chamber of commerce has a Hispanic Community Outreach program. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) provides four student scholarships annually and enables youngsters to undertake community service. There is also a strong adult education program in the district.

There is a perception in the community that the district and the schools are serious in their efforts to reach out to Hispanic parents. Nonetheless, there is more to do to raise the level of involvement of these parents in their children's education. One successful program, 'Read with Me,' which provided resources and guidance to encourage parents to read with their children, was not sustained by the board of education when the special grant which funded it was removed. This indicates a lack of understanding of the significant potential long term impact of a successful program which has parents reading with their children.

The parents involved in the review expressed positive views of the district by and large. They feel the school administration and district staff are accessible and responsive. School parent groups work with the district parent teacher organization. Parents feel satisfied for the most part with the information provided through school newsletters, meetings, orientations and board of education meetings. However, while some communications have Spanish translations, not all do, and more should be done to engage and involve the parents of Hispanic students, especially those with little English. The parents like the MDA information on their children's achievement, which gives them clear information. Some parents express reservations about the inclusion policy, having concerns that it takes attention away from students who are more advanced. The district could do more to demonstrate to parents the strategies used, including differentiated teaching, to ensure this is not the case and that approaches are designed to provide equity for all.

The district does not undertake regular satisfaction surveys of parents and other key stakeholders. This is an omission of an important piece of qualitative data, which together with the range of quantitative data, should inform the district's self-evaluation of its effectiveness.

Political and Policy Alignment and Engagement

As seen above, the district has made strides in matching its curriculum to state requirements although there is more to do. With the focus on achievement in recent years, the advent of NCLB and inclusion, the district has increased its use of comparative data to track how it is doing in comparison with other districts and the state. However, it is not doing enough to rigorously track and explore the reasons for the underperformance of its key subgroups. It also needs to do much more to extend the understanding of both the board and the town council of key strategic thinking on school improvement and the systems and financing which are required to support it.