

Minneapolis Public Schools

Quality Review Report

**Northeast Middle School
2955 Hayes Street NE
Minneapolis
Minnesota
55418**

**Principal: Dr. Padmini Udupa
Dates of review: Month from March 23 - 24, 2009
Reviewer: David Glick**

Cambridge Education (LLC)



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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

Northeast Middle School serves 500 students in grades 6 through 8. The student body comprises 44 percent African American, 27 percent White American, 18 percent Hispanic American, 7 percent Asian American, and 4 percent American Indian students. Thirteen percent are English language learners and 21 percent receive special education services. Seventy nine percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch which is significantly higher than the 67 percent eligible district wide. Sixty one percent of students reached the 95% attendance mark in 2007-08 compared with 67 percent in middle schools throughout the district.

A great deal of change occurred in the fall of 2006. Due to school closings elsewhere in the district, the school experienced a sudden change in student population. Many new students arrived and a large number of students also left for other schools. That fall also brought the newly appointed assistant principal and the current principal, who had other roles in the school during the previous decade.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- The principal's clear focus on the middle years program of International Baccalaureate provides direction for school improvement and professional development efforts.
- Multiple opportunities for staff collaboration help to create a supportive and collegial atmosphere.
- Students find their teachers caring and supportive.
- Newly implemented policies and procedures for attendance and tardiness are having the desired effect of increasing the rates of attendance.

Areas for Improvement:

- Develop specific, measurable school goals with clear benchmarks to close the achievement gap and accelerate student progress, and regularly assess progress using classroom-level data.
- Develop rigorous accountability systems and consistent criteria for instructional improvement.
- Expand the variety of techniques of instruction and assessment in all classrooms to more effectively reach students' multiple learning styles.
- Embrace the cultural diversity of the student body by integrating multicultural work in all content areas.
- Hold teachers accountable for implementing consistently all aspects of the school's behavior program.
- Accelerate the implementation of the International Baccalaureate program in order to increase student achievement in all subgroups.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

With a relatively new principal at the helm, Northeast Middle School is making progress in several areas. In the two years since Dr. Udupa has been the school leader, the school has been approved as an International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (IB MYP) school to give structure to curriculum planning. The school has begun implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) as a school-wide behavior plan, and specific strategies have helped improve both behavior and attendance to their current levels. However, the school continues to experience below-average test scores in many areas and significant variations in achievement between various ethnic groups because the quality of teaching is not of consistently high quality. Across all available measures of achievement, there are more flat or decreasing trends than there are positive trends.

The vast majority of instruction is whole-group, teacher-centered instruction that does not effectively differentiate for individual student needs. As a result, students and teachers are all unable to describe the progress of a given student against learner outcomes. Students often appear bored and disengaged. Although they say they like their teachers, few students could describe times when they felt challenged. Because not all teachers update the parent portal consistently, both parents and students are frustrated with a lack of timely information regarding each individual's performance. Students do not have the opportunity to set individual goals and monitor progress towards those goals.

Through the IB MYP initiative, the principal has been able to focus efforts on professional development and curriculum mapping. Collaborative planning teams are largely responsible for their own professional development, and as a result, growth opportunities are inconsistent in both their availability and effectiveness. The principal is aware that not all teams are effective and commented that the collaborative planning teams are "where professional development is *supposed* to happen." However, the teams are not yet held accountable for their activities, and so there remains an overall lack of accountability for instructional improvement. As a result, teachers are not yet teaching at the full level of rigor for the IB program.

Attendance at the school is improving, due to careful record keeping and timely phone calls home. Nearly all teachers support and use the x-ticket program for behavior incentives, and the students appreciate the opportunity to earn rewards. Not all teachers support or follow other aspects of the behavior plan however, and as a result, parents don't receive as many calls from teachers as they should and the main office deals with an excessive number of referrals for small offenses. Additionally, students miss more instructional time than necessary.

Parents appreciate the school and its teachers, and feel that the school responds well to concerns that parents bring forward. When asked, the school is also willing to create individualized learning goals. However, parents and teachers both report that the teachers rarely initiate contact for either behavioral or academic purposes.

The principal builds relationships with local organizations effectively, which results in solid community support for the school. Parents and the community are noticing recent improvements and are appreciative of the school's efforts. However, the school does not effectively capture the cultural diversity of the school and use its richness for the development of students, teachers or the program.

Domain 1: Student Achievement and Progress

The students' achievement and progress does not meet expectations in many key areas and requires additional support.

By most measures, academic progress in the school is not improving as desired. The school has steadily reduced the number of subgroups for which it does not make adequate yearly progress (AYP). In 2008, only the math scores of Hispanic students had not met AYP. However, academic performance remains significantly below expectations in several areas for most students.

Overall in the 2007-08 academic year, fewer than half of the school's students made at least one year's growth in reading, and fewer than a quarter of the students made one year's growth in math, according to the Northwest Achievement Levels Test (NALT) test results. These results are below district averages. The math results represent a dramatic drop from just two years ago. At that time, nearly two-thirds of the overall school population achieved at least one year's growth. An influx of new students from schools that closed and a departure of other groups of students may be at least partially responsible for this sudden drop. At present, data does not yet show a reversal to a more positive trend. In fact, trends on the NALT math scores are flat or negative in both math and reading.

African American students, the largest ethnic group in the school, significantly underperform their peers. For example, in 2008, 70 percent of White American students met or exceeded State standards while only 29 percent of African American students did so. This gap is slightly less than the same gap in the district as a whole but is nevertheless too large.

On the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment – II (MCAII) tests, English language learners outperform their peers statewide in reading and writing and also outperform their district peers in listening/speaking. Similarly, special education students and those who qualify for free or reduced lunch at Northeast slightly outperform their district peers on the MCAII tests. However, there is little evidence of steady improvement in any of these populations. Trends in math scores are somewhat more encouraging. Overall performance is improving slightly, led by White American students who show the most definite positive trend.

The school does not identify gifted and talented students. Therefore it does not have a separate program nor does it track performance of those students on tests or in classroom performance. However, there is some evidence that some of the top students are improving on standardized tests. The proportion of both White and Asian American students who have exceeded State standards in math has almost doubled over the past three years to 30 percent. Scores of other subgroups are flat or decreasing.

Because the trends in so many measures do not show improvement, the school improvement plan (SIP) does not appear to be having the desired impact. Although the SIP includes several measurable goals, the goals are generally not met. Furthermore, a lack of measurable benchmarks has resulted in a plan that does not help the school to track its progress and thus close the achievement gap for many of its subgroup populations.

Domain 2: Quality of Learning, Teaching and Assessment

The quality of learning, teaching and assessment does not meet expectations and requires significant support.

Nearly all teachers post daily agendas for each class period, but they neither post nor describe their lesson objectives to students. When asked, teachers were able to describe learning activities, but not learning objectives. Teachers do not use a consistent format for lesson plans or consistently write detailed lesson plans. As a result, students are generally unclear as to what they are supposed to be

learning, why or how they will be able to recognize when they have achieved planned learning. Students most often explained that their reason for doing their activities was “because the teacher told them to.” For example, in one lesson students were confused as they tried to follow a step-by-step procedure that the teacher had provided and, because of this, several students were not even able to start the assignment. No mention was made of learning objectives or other ways of measuring how well students had learned the required knowledge and skills.

An English class with a drama component provided an instructional bright spot. The teacher was entertaining, the students were attentive, and the lesson was enjoyable. However, learning outcomes and expectations for achievement were unclear. Although there are some pockets of engaging instruction, the majority of the teaching is teacher-centered, whole-group instruction. As a result, students appear distracted, bored and disengaged in most classes. In several classes, although teachers quieted disruptive students, they did little to gain the attention of those who were not fully engaged in their learning.

The predominant use of teacher-centered, whole-group instruction does not provide students with adequate time for collaborative work, extended problem solving or authentic application of knowledge. Such critical thinking activities appear to be absent. It is clear that the full and successful implementation of the IB Middle Years Program will require dramatic changes in numerous teaching practices. On the few occasions when a teacher was seen trying to have a classroom discussion, only a few students participated and nothing was done to involve the rest of the class. Students report that although they like their teachers, they rarely feel challenged, which has a negative impact on their achievement and their motivation.

Instruction and assessments are not differentiated, and teachers are unable to describe how they match instruction to individual student needs. Students rarely have the opportunity to actively monitor their own learning or to develop individualized plans for improvement. As a result, students are unable to describe learning goals except in the most general terms. When asked about their learning goals, students answered with such phrases as “to learn a lot” or “to go to college.”

Domain 3: Curriculum

The quality of the curriculum does not meet expectations in many key areas and requires additional support.

The school is focused clearly on implementing the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program. The school has received its IB authorization, but has not yet fully embedded the program. However, once in place, this college-preparatory curriculum will give structure to the school and support high expectations for all students. Students give the right answer when asked if they want to go to college, but until IB is implemented more thoroughly, the curriculum is not sufficiently rigorous to effectively prepare a majority of students. The core curriculum encompasses Cornell notes and other study skills to assist students in developing appropriate study habits. This is particularly true in the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program that supports many individuals with college preparation content and skills.

Teachers have developed curriculum maps for all subject areas, and the maps are posted outside each classroom. They demonstrate a high degree of correlation with State and district standards. However, a more detailed analysis is necessary to ensure that the IB standards, State standards and district expectations are all completely aligned. Teachers use homework inconsistently, and as a result learning is not extended outside the school day as much as it could be.

The school has a substantial arts program including dance and theater. A wide range of students participate in such activities and value their inclusion in the curriculum. Teachers are allowed creativity and curricular freedom in many areas. In one class, an outside organization provides drama instruction

that integrates with the language arts curriculum. In physical education, the teacher brought in kayaks and used them in the swimming pool to introduce students to the boats and to develop their paddling skills. Students appreciate the classes in painting, cooking, fitness and music that broaden the curriculum.

Although the school is 73 percent non-White and in particular 44 percent African American, cultural variety in the lessons is limited. Although there are scattered exceptions, social studies, language arts, art and other classes focus on curriculum that represents a largely White, European and American approach. There is not a comprehensive or coordinated effort to address the cultural heritage of all students, and students are given few opportunities to explore cultural connections on their own.

Domain 4: Leadership, Management and the Use of Data

The quality of the leadership, management and use of data does not meet expectations in many key areas and requires additional support.

The principal's clear vision of instructional improvement based on the IB program is a highlight of the school. Dr. Udupa is extremely well-organized and creates numerous visual maps describing her plans for the school. There are still many more plans in her office that she is waiting to share for strategic reasons. Therefore, the staff is not aware of all aspects of her long-range goals. Nevertheless, they trust her plans enough that the instructional leadership team (ILT) and most of the teachers support her vision. They are excited about the IB implementation and recognize that the principal's thoughtful approach to school challenges will guide all aspects of her plans.

The school does not develop measurable performance benchmarks that might aid in setting and attaining goals that focus on raising student achievement. The leadership is generally aware of the school's test scores and AYP status. However, the ILT was quite surprised to see the very poor growth measures from the NALT tests. No one on the team had previously seen that data, and it served as an effective wake-up call.

Although the school identified some long-term goals in the SIP, parents, students and teachers are unable to describe the school's goals or benchmarks. The school and teachers do not track progress towards the goals and do not know where they stand from one year to the next until after the test results come back from the State or district. When the data becomes available, the school does not analyze the data deeply enough. For example, the school does not examine data by gender, teacher or other factors not included in the standard reports. The ILT acknowledged that they had never seen the NALT test report showing the big drop in the number of students making at least one year's growth.

The school's approach to professional development allows each teacher or collaborative planning team to choose their particular area of focus. Department heads facilitate the teams. The principal readily acknowledges that it is these collaborative teams that are mainly responsible for professional development in the school and that the quality of team effectiveness is variable. There is little accountability with the administration for what happens in the teams. The principal has plans for implementing additional accountability practices next year, focused on improving the usefulness of the collaborative planning time.

Domain 5: School Culture

The quality of the school's culture does not meet expectations in many key areas and requires additional support.

Although the school's culture has improved dramatically from the time when it was considered one of the roughest schools in the city, significant challenges remain. Suspensions for both safety concerns

and disrespectful behavior are above district averages for similar schools. Occasional hallway fights disrupt learning and impact on students' perceptions of safety.

Attendance remains below the district average, but significant gains in the past two years are the direct result of focused efforts by the administration. An automated calling system ensures that all absences are reported quickly to parents. All adults in the school, including the nurse, social worker and other support staff, report attendance so that student whereabouts are tracked closely.

The school is implementing the PBIS system to address behavior concerns, but currently the system is inconsistent. A significant proportion of the staff dismisses students from class for infractions that should be handled internally. When students are sent to the office, the teacher rarely calls home as PBIS expects them to do. As a result, the office deals with more minor behavior issues than necessary and students miss out on more learning than they should. The school is struggling to communicate the PBIS system to teachers and to hold them accountable for implementing it fully. Only the x-ticket component, in which students earn tickets for positive behavior, is consistently used by all teachers.

The school's philosophy is to establish a positive model of student behavior support, and this is effectively modeled by many teachers. There remain some, however, who lean towards an authoritarian approach to discipline. This results too often in confrontations that are highly detrimental to the overall school atmosphere, and which leads some teachers to adopt a defeatist approach, characterized by one who said, "It doesn't matter what you do, if they don't want to be here, they're not going to learn." The inconsistent application of agreed procedures has the result that not all students know and follow the school's behavioral expectations. However, in spite of these inconsistencies, the majority of students know that most teachers care about them, and their welfare.

In order to make space in the schedule for all components of the IB MYP program, the school eliminated an advisory period for students. Although the overall academic impact may be advantageous, doing so eliminated the primary means of delivering general behavioral support and educating students about behavioral expectations. Each teacher establishes expectations and shares them with students, but currently the primary school communication regarding behavior expectations takes place only at the beginning of the school year and through morning announcements. These are not effective in improving behavior. Students have the opportunity to show leadership through service learning projects that the school coordinates.

Domain 6: Links with Parents and the Local Community

The quality of the school's links with parents and the local community does not meet expectations in many key areas and requires additional support.

The school publishes a bimonthly newsletter to keep parents up to date on various school announcements. The newsletter focuses on school events and projects and generally provides little information regarding school goals. The newsletter, website and other materials are readily available, but only in English.

Although the school has a website, information on it is outdated, and the school does not have a system for maintaining its accuracy. Parents noted, for example, that it still has last year's band teacher listed. Many teachers' phone numbers are not listed. Although the website system has areas for individual classroom websites, most teachers do not maintain such a site. Only one grade 7 teacher and two grade 8 teachers appear to have attempted to use the system.

The school also has a web-based parent portal. However, teachers' use of this is inconsistent so that, for example, completed assignments are sometimes not recorded for many days or weeks. Grades in the portal are inaccurate and little other useful information is available. One parent reported that despite the fact that they check the portal frequently, they were unaware that their student was failing a course

until they came to parent-teacher conferences. Parents lamented the loss of the academic planners that were prevalent several years ago. They reported that these were useful communication tools that the portal has not yet been able to replace.

Teachers rarely call parents, but both teachers and administrators respond promptly to parent inquiries or concerns. As one parent stated, "You have to be proactive or you don't find out anything, but they're all very responsive."

Several partnerships with companies and community organizations support the school. A grant from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History allows for a Saturday Academy enrichment program. Honeywell, Graco and Cargill donate money and tutors for MCAII test preparation. The Wade Park Community Council provides funding for the annual school musical and a local community newspaper supports the school with announcements and articles about school events.