



**CSDE**

**QUALITY REVIEW FINAL REPORT**

## **Danbury Public Schools**

# **Quality Review Report**

**Danbury High School**

**43 Clapboard Ridge Road  
Danbury  
Connecticut  
06811**

**Principal: Karen Rezendes**

**Dates of review: November 5 - 6, 2008**

**Reviewer: Cheryl Baker**

**Cambridge Education (LLC)**



**Cambridge  
Education**

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## Part 1: The School Context

### Information about the school:

Danbury High School serves 2,806 students in grades 9 through 12. Students comprise 52 percent White, 29 percent Hispanic, 10 percent Black, 8 percent Asian American and less than one percent American Indian. Among these nearly 40 languages are spoken, Spanish and Portuguese being the most prevalent. There are 16 percent English language learners and 9 percent students with disabilities. Approximately 15 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch which is low compared with other high schools. Attendance averages above 95 percent, higher than in most similar schools. Danbury High School is the only high school in the district.

The principal was appointed to her position in May 2008 after gaining administrative experience in a neighboring district. She was a teacher in the Danbury system for over three decades and achieved State wide recognition for her effectiveness in the classroom.

## Part 2: Overview

### What the school does well:

- Students are offered a broad array of interesting courses at several levels of challenge and these encompass career as well as academic focus. Extensive extra curricular opportunities serve to broaden academic and personal development.
- The school's attendance policies are effective and result in averages that are at or above those for the State.
- The climate and culture of the school are respectful, welcoming and conducive to learning.

### Areas for Improvement:

- Create and implement common curriculum maps and assessments across subjects to enable the horizontal and vertical alignment of curriculum. Ensure that the curriculum aligns with State and national standards.
- Introduce a system to record and report data that provides teachers and administrators with meaningful analysis to assist them in knowing what each student needs to succeed. Use this to plan and evaluate lessons and programs to enable students to improve their learning outcomes.
- Ensure that teachers receive regular formal and informal feedback provided by school-based instructional leaders, whose content expertise and knowledge of effective pedagogy are sufficient to improve teaching and learning.
- Provide teachers with professional development tailored to their identified developmental needs, monitor their implementation of agreed approaches rigorously and measure the success of these by analyzing student outcomes.
- Increase explicit expectations for all students' high academic achievement among all members of the school community and support this by increasing rigor, increasing graduation requirements and lengthening the school day.
- Improve the effectiveness of the current instructional delivery model for English language learners in relation to their overall academic success, their inclusion in all aspects of the school and their equal access to all of the school's offerings.
- Provide increased district support for the school's leadership, especially regarding timely access to data and school-based supervision and evaluation of curriculum and instruction.

## Part 3: Main Findings

### Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance

#### **This school needs improvement.**

Overall, student achievement at Danbury High School has not met expected targets in several years. Although there have been some modest increases recently, there are still significant disparities in outcomes between student subgroups. High achievers demonstrate acceptable levels of achievement while English language learners and Hispanic students do not progress as quickly as they could.

Curriculum and instruction are areas of substantial development identified by the new principal, who needs increased support for effectively monitoring teaching. She is moving deliberately to build collaboration and commitment among a staff used to considerable independence. In some classes, teachers prepare work carefully for groups and individuals; however, in most classes, teaching is not yet sufficiently differentiated to meet the needs of students. Common formative assessments are not developed to assess student progress in courses and, as a result, teachers are not able to identify or address specific student needs precisely enough. Many teachers have not adopted current instructional approaches into their teaching, even though professional development is provided. The curricular and co-curricular programs are broad and interesting. However, curricular documents are not sufficiently clear and are not aligned carefully enough to standards to ensure consistency of delivery. Curriculum modifications for high achievers are more effective than those made for English language learners, leading to variation in student outcomes.

The school's climate is conducive to learning and there are effective procedures in place to support good attendance and adherence to behavioral expectations. There are numerous opportunities for enrichment and students' personal development and many take advantage of these. Structures and activities support the development of sound relationships among students. The school is effective in setting expectations for developing character and focusing on the future but lacks clear high expectations for all students' academic achievements.

The school and its principal are welcoming to parents. While parents value the principal's accessibility, there are few avenues for parents to participate in the governance of the school. The Acculturation Center is effective in meeting the needs of students and families new to the country. However, not all school communications are translated into the different languages required to ensure full understanding among non-English speakers.

#### **Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects**

##### **The students' achievement is at basic level and needs improvement.**

The school has not reached its overall targets for adequate yearly progress (AYP) in five years. AYP targets in math were not met by the school as a whole and subgroups did not reach targets in either math or reading. Scores on the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) have remained below State averages for several years although they did increase slightly in 2008 to begin to close the gap, which stands at approximately 10 percent. SAT Reasoning Test (SAT) scores in all areas are below State and national averages and have declined in recent years. Compared to similar high schools, as designated by the State's demographic determinations, Danbury High School's SAT scores fall into the lower third while CAPT scores are slightly above the median, overall. The school's CAPT scores have fluctuated over the last several years, indicating little overall improvement over time. The school does not track students' progress during their time in school, so there are few indicators by which to judge their progress. However, the school's graduation rate is higher than the State average and the dropout

rate has been lower than or similar to the State average. Approximately 80 percent pursue further education, indicating that most students make sufficient progress during their time in school. Advanced Placement (AP) tests are administered in 16 different courses and the school's high achieving students perform well on these examinations. Approximately 70 percent score at the level required to qualify for college credit while 23 percent score at the highest level. These scores are comparable or better than performance at similar and neighboring high schools.

The performance of students with disabilities on the CAPT rose in all tested areas except science in 2008 but their overall performance remains significantly below that of their regular education peers on most tests. Their average performance is also lower than that of their peers at similar high schools. The performance of English language learners is lower than all other groups and their scores declined in 2008 to widen the gap between their performance and English speakers to more than 60 percentage points. While the school has a relatively small percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch, the performance of this group is also below their classmates by more than 35 percentage points.

There are significant differences among the performance of the school's ethnic groups. Asian and White students are, historically, the highest performing groups and they made gains on 2008 CAPT in all subjects. Hispanic students' performance, traditionally the lowest performing group, declined in all subjects from 2007 to 2008. Conversely, Black students made very good gains in all areas in 2008 and while performance is still below that of White students, their performance is equal to that of the school, overall. Scores for males and females rose in all subjects. Males performed better than females in math and females performed better than males in reading and writing, a consistent trend at the school and across the State.

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

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

While recent professional development has focused on practices such as assessing student work, establishing formative and summative assessments and using rubrics, these practices are not yet a common feature of instruction at the school. Formalized goal setting for students' improved learning is not established, except for the attainment of the requisite number of credits required for graduation. These credits are lower than State averages in subjects like math, science, social studies and foreign languages and are higher than State averages for vocational subjects, thus communicating disincentives for students to be more highly motivated towards academic achievements. The school's instructional program is compromised by the relatively short school day, compared to high schools across the State. On a personal level, teachers, guidance and administrative personnel encourage students to do their best and slogans like "DHS, Where Graduation Happens Every Day" suggest a focus on future attainment of this goal, although presently there are no clearly delineated expectations for high academic achievement.

The teaching staff is more experienced and better educated than at many similar schools across the State, evidencing strong content knowledge. Many, however, have not changed their instructional styles to reflect current best practices. In some classes, largely those catering to higher achievers like AP courses, students are highly motivated and speak enthusiastically about their learning. However, in most lessons, whole class instruction with little opportunity for active engagement, coupled with a heavy reliance on worksheets and low level questioning, leads to a lack of enthusiasm and an absence of adequate differentiation. This is true even in collaboratively taught classes for regular education and students with disabilities where there is little differentiation evident to meet varied needs. English language learners are taught in self-contained settings until they reach proficiency in English. While this may serve that goal effectively, there is little differentiation based on their knowledge and understanding in other subjects. Few classroom environments foster learning through content rich displays or exemplars of student learning. Hallway displays are sparse even though bulletin boards and display cases are available. Overall, there is little celebration of student work to motivate learners and

demonstrate excellence. Classes in the vocational, arts, and technology areas are notable exceptions. In these classes, enthusiasm and engagement are high and samples of students' projects are displayed proudly.

Teachers' classroom management is satisfactory in most settings and students exhibit compliant behavior. Teachers do not always capitalize on student's readiness to learn by planning demanding, interesting, engaging and differentiated learning activities. They do not make use of assessments of student achievement to diagnose needs and plan for improvements. Rather, lessons are dictated more by curricular coverage than student's individual learning needs. The practice of developing, administering and analyzing common formative and summative assessments across commonly taught courses is not an embedded feature of instruction across the school, even though common points of measure like midterm and final examinations support this practice. Teachers, even of the same subject, deliver and assess the curriculum as they see fit, resulting in variable success rates for students. The lack of sustained professional development for improved instruction and assessment, coupled with a culture of individualism among staff, has resulted in a lack of progress for the school overall.

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

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

The school has produced written curricula for most of its courses. These documents are inconsistent in their format, do not always align well with current State guidelines and frequently lack supporting scope and sequence documents to guide implementation. Thus, the curriculum is applied with great variance between teachers leading to inconsistent outcomes for students. Even where there is a logical progression of courses in subjects that build on prior knowledge like math and foreign languages, delivery of the same curriculum may vary depending on the teacher. The use of homework as an extension to learning is also variable, increasing in scope in more rigorous courses and diminishing for students at lower levels of attainment who are often those most in need of reinforcements. Some students with disabilities who are instructed in inclusive settings have access to the regular curriculum. Modification of their instruction is guided by individualized education programs. Within these settings, however, there is a notable lack of instructional modification by content teachers. Nonetheless, students with disabilities did make progress in most subjects on recent CAPTs. English language learners do not have full access to the regular curriculum in all subjects due to the perceived necessary attention given to their language acquisition needs. This leads to substantial deficits in their learning, as evidenced by CAPT scores. Regular education teachers are not provided with sufficient training in modifying instruction for English language learners in the regular education setting, further limiting these students' educational options. High achievers are well served through a range of challenging courses at the honors and AP levels that are effectively matched to their abilities and for the most able attainments are strong.

A notable strength of the school is the number and range of courses that students may take. In all disciplines, there is variety among topics and levels of difficulty. Extensive interesting electives serve to broaden students' exposure to new and interesting subjects. Vocational and school-to-career options are well developed, as is the school's Reserve Officer Training Corps. This broad curricular program is enhanced by an equally extensive extra curricular program that give students avenues for further development in athletics, the arts, civic engagement and further academic challenge. Students take advantage of these in good number and some speculate that the school's rich offerings contribute positively to student attendance. Some courses and activities reflect the school's diverse population, such as studies in multicultural issues and organizations like *Aspira*. Activities are not, however, proportionally representative of the school's ethnicities.

## **Criterion 4: Students' personal character development**

### **This area of the school's work meets requirements.**

Student behavior in the classroom is marked by courtesy and respect. Students interact with their peers and teachers in a positive manner as they adhere to rules and expectations, evidencing their adherence to the school's behavioral expectations. During passing time, the corridors are calm and orderly and students demonstrate timeliness in moving from one class to the next. Students report that their teachers know them well and most encourage them to do their best and achieve at the highest level. They note that their teachers care about their welfare as well as their academic successes. Students explain that they feel safe and secure in the building.

Students participate in the wide array of extra curricular activities, clubs and athletics that the school provides. These provide effective opportunities for students to develop their capacities for teamwork as well as nurturing individual pursuits. For instance, they volunteer at the annual blood drive, which is recognized by the Red Cross for the highest participation rate in the State. The school newspaper is an active voice for the students containing mature, and at times, controversial articles. Many athletic teams offer avenues for physical and personal development. Student advisories bring students together in small groups of twenty with an adult advisor. They meet weekly in a structured setting that promotes such topics as leadership, decision making and career and personal development. While still struggling to become an effective initiative, students note that they now have another adult in the school to assist them with problems and concerns through their advisory classes. Peer leadership classes for seniors provide them with the skills necessary to mentor the younger students in areas of social and academic issues, where they work successfully in pairs and small groups. Student leaders involve themselves in school governance through the Board of Governors, the school's student council.

Students respond positively to the school's attendance policy and attend school at an average daily rate of 95 percent, which is above the State average. Their graduation rate is above 90 percent and more than 80 percent of the graduates go on to two and four year colleges and universities. Newly arrived students from other countries appreciate that their fellow students welcome them warmly and encourage them to get involved in school activities.

## **Criterion 5: School Climate**

### **This area of the school's work meets requirements.**

There is inconsistency in the school's efforts to communicate high expectations for student achievement. Classroom instruction and supervision varies. The lack of curricular alignment and implementation undermines any attempt at a coherent approach to high student achievement. While the administration and faculty demonstrate an intention to set benchmarks and challenging goals, there is currently minimal analysis of achievement data, and the development of common formative assessments are at an early stage. However, the school's slogans and statements of purpose effectively communicate attitudes of evolving student development in the affective domain, and students respond in kind.

The school administration has established a clear and well-communicated discipline policy that is consistently enforced and monitored by the principal and assistant principals. Each student is required to carry a school planner that contains this policy, ensuring his or her understanding of expectations. It is posted in every room throughout the building. The school administration meets regularly among themselves and with support staff to ensure a proactive approach to promoting and acknowledging good behavior. Teachers promote positive attitudes through encouragement and courteous interactions with their students. Many lead extra curricular activities resulting in the development of positive relationships among students and teachers. Assistant principals are visible throughout the day and make every effort to know their students on a personal level.

The significant variety of extra curricular activities, clubs and athletics provide multiple opportunities for student involvement and students participate in good numbers. Many activities foster positive school climate and personal character development. For example, a community mentoring program connects business professionals with individual students to promote career and post-secondary opportunities. The student advisory program enables all students to connect with an adult in small learning communities. Several opportunities exist to promote cultural understanding and respect for others. The school's Acculturation Center greets and provides ongoing support to all students and families with limited English proficiency and those who are new to this country. Groups such as Inter-racial Councils and the Gay-Straight Alliance promote principles of equity and fairness, and peer leadership classes encourage leadership within both the school and the community.

## **Criterion 6: Effective Leadership and Management**

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

The principal has focused her early leadership on building trust and opening lines of communication and collaboration to ensure that the work necessary to move the school forward can succeed. She is demonstrating her expectations for the development of the school as a learning community through written communication, meetings with staff and administrators, and modeling her own understanding of effective leadership and instruction. It is too early to evaluate the impact of these efforts on teaching and learning but staff, students and parents express confidence in her capacity to lead and welcome her warm, respectful, inclusive and personal approach to all members of the school community. The school recently revised its mission and vision as part of its re-accreditation. The notion of an "evolving community of learners" is communicated through the frequent promulgation of the phrase, "with highest hopes for all learners." Collectively, these describe a desired state but fall short on defining clear high expectations for student achievement. The school's improvement plan is not reflective of all of the current needs of the school, does not reflect a robust analysis of data, and is not sufficiently detailed to effectively promote improvements. It was developed under former administrations and has not been an operational component of the school's steps towards improvement. The current principal has begun to revive the building leadership team in early efforts to institute data driven improvement planning. This fledgling committee is one step towards broadening shared leadership, and a few teachers have come forward to participate. However, a request for additional teachers to serve on the improvement committee resulted in just two responses from approximately 200 staff, indicating reluctance among staff to engage in the work of improving the school.

The principal has also increased the structure of her administrative team to include regular discussions of books and articles pertaining to effective teaching and leadership. This effort aims at establishing a common approach to instructional and school leadership, but again, its impact is unknown at present. The school and its leadership have not used data frequently or well in analyzing its needs and strengths or the needs of teachers and students. Therefore, there have not been clear links between student achievement data and instructional effectiveness. Clear, timely and understandable data is not always available as much of this is managed at the district office. However, even readily available school based records of student achievement are not used as a source of robust analysis of the effectiveness of the educational program. While the school tools for providing feedback on teaching are sufficient to inform teachers' developments, past observation practices have been variable in their regularity and impact. Currently, the district is restructuring its oversight of content areas and supervision of teachers and, as a result, feedback to teachers has come to a halt. Curricular leadership responsibilities are evolving and there is a current lack of clear lines of responsibility. This negatively affects assistance to teachers and inhibits the principal's goals for improvements to teaching and, thereby, learning. So, the impact of recent training in practices such as using instructional technology, data driven decision making and integrating instruction and assessment is severely restricted by the lack of support to teachers for implementation.

## **Criterion 7: Partnerships with Parents and Community**

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

The school creates and maintains effective partnerships with parents and the community in many aspects, but not all. The school is welcoming but does not actively seek out parental involvement. For parents who tend to be more active and participatory in their child's education, the school's practice in this area is notably strong. However, the school's efforts are inadequate in reaching out to less active parents and involving all parents in decision-making practices. The school's Acculturation Center makes the school welcoming to students and families whose first language is not English. This multi-faceted resource serves as a key point of contact for many students who are new to the United States.

There is a variable quality of information transmitted to parents about the school and their child's progress. The school uses a typical format of quarterly report cards and interim progress reports. These are accompanied by a schedule of upcoming events. Parents comment that the format of interim reports is insufficient to give desired detailed information about their child's progress. The school's newsletter is composed quarterly and is available only as an online document. Not all communication is translated into home languages and poorly addresses the school's growing English language learning population who are less likely to understand the text or to have ready access to the internet.

The school actively promotes respect for the diversity of the community. The Acculturation Center is the strongest example of this practice. There are several clubs, such as Aspira, that seek to engender school pride and inclusiveness across the ethnicities. However, the school does not ensure that all students are gaining equal access to rigorous curriculum and instruction.

The full-time health clinic provides supplemental support services to students. Several community partnerships support the school's career and business programs.

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

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

While the superintendent and other district office personnel have an adequate level of understanding of this school's strengths and challenges, they do not provide a good enough level of instructional and administrative support. The superintendent is knowledgeable and cognizant of the many struggles facing this school and its first year principal but has not, as yet, ensured that this very large school has access to instructional leaders that can support teaching and learning in the various departments. This leaves the school administration and teachers without the content area expertise necessary for the improvement of student achievement. The district does not provide interventions to raise student achievement.

There has been a recent initiative at the district office level to provide useful student achievement data to schools. However, this has only begun at the elementary and middle levels and has not yet extended to the high school. This practice leaves an unacceptable absence of data for the high school administration and teachers. Professional development directives issued by the district have not been well focused or sustained sufficiently to support improvement of student learning.

The Danbury High School curriculum is not adequately supported and the great majority of its curricular documents are insufficient to guide teaching and assessment. The district does not have a holistic accountability system and thus the principal is not held accountable for regularly reporting gains in student achievement. At the district level, there is a significant need to adopt an integrated, systematic, and focused set of high impact strategies to improve student achievement.